

“TRUE IMAGE PICTUR’D”: METAPHOR, EPISTEMOLOGY,
AND SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

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In this dissertation, I examine the influence of Pyrrhonist skepticism over Shakespeare's sonnets. Unlike academic skepticism, which begins from a position of doubt, Pyrrhonist skepticism encourages an embrace of multiple perspectives that, according to Sextus Empiricus, leads first to a suspension of judgment and ultimately to a state of tranquility. The Pyrrhonian inflection of Shakespeare's sonnets accounts for the pleasure and uncertainty they cultivate in readers. By offering readers multiple perspectives on a given issue, such as love or infidelity, Shakespeare's sonnets demonstrate the instability of information, suggesting that such instability can be a source for pleasure. One essential tool for the uncertainty in the sonnets, I argue, is the figurative language they draw from a variety of fields and discourses. When these metaphors contradict one another, creating fragmented images in the minds of readers, they generate a unique aesthetic experience, which creates meaning that transcends the significance of any of the individual metaphors.

In the first two chapters, I identify important contexts for Shakespeare's sensitivity to the pliability of figurative language: Reformation-era religious tracts and pamphleteers' debates about the value and function of the theater. In Chapter 3, I examine Shakespeare's response to the Petrarchan tradition, arguing that he diverges from the sonneteers, who often use figurative language in an attempt to access and communicate stable truths. Shakespeare creates epistemological instability in sonnets both to the young man and to the dark lady, and, as I argue in Chapter 4, this similarity offers readers an opportunity to think beyond traditional divisions between the two sonnet subsequences.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Chesley Franklin McPhatter, Jr.: "Think how I loved your Music, / Not for itself alone, / But for the hands that played it / The mind that felt its tone."

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I approach the concept of Shakespeare's skepticism from a new perspective, which benefits from the more nuanced approach to skeptical thought made available through the study of Pyrrhonist philosophy. Over the past thirty years, scholars have written extensively on early modern epistemology, focusing on Shakespeare and his response to the problem of knowledge. Stanley Cavell argues that Shakespeare's plays "find no stable solution to skepticism, in particular no rest in what we know of God."¹ Paul Kottman extends Cavell's representation of skepticism as destabilizing when he claims that "reflection on the inadequacy of our inherited ways of making sense of our shared words and deeds" leads an audience "to learn, through the endurance of suffering, just what it means to live with the breach, with an irreparable split."² Robert Watson depicts skepticism as a profoundly disruptive force by chronicling the late-Renaissance search for an "epistemological solution" to the philosophical crisis spurred by the reintroduction of the skeptical writings of Sextus Empiricus, an "ancient ghost who returned to haunt the Renaissance with rumors of a death of meaning."³ These scholars consistently represent responses to skepticism as attempts to resolve the problem of knowledge by searching for ways to repair the "irreparable split" between appearance and reality. While these and similar works on skepticism have made readers sensitive to the epistemological anxiety in Shakespeare's corpus, the modern emphasis on skepticism as a

¹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

² Paul Kottman, *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 14.

³ Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2006), 28, 20.

problematic, destabilizing philosophy is inconsistent with the original practices of Pyrrhonist skeptical philosophy, the tenets of which, I argue, inform Shakespeare's works.

To regard skepticism merely as an epistemological problem, a source of anxiety that prompts resistance, is to overlook the constructive possibilities of Pyrrhonist philosophy in Shakespeare's works. Shakespeare takes from Pyrrhonism the notion that epistemological uncertainty can be a productive state. For Shakespeare, individuals confronted with the limitations of their own knowledge may work together to construct new realities absent of empirical truth, a process I call meaning-making. Shakespeare's emphasis on the meaning-making potential of uncertainty is an important framework for understanding his sonnets, the ambiguity of which continues to puzzle and captivate readers. Readers of the sonnets may have to acknowledge the imperfection of human expression and interpretation; however, the sonnets demonstrate that imperfect understanding can still be a source of creativity, intimacy, and pleasure. Epistemological uncertainty in the sonnets is not a problem to be solved or an unstable foundation from which to seek refuge. It is the basis from which meaning-making begins.

I argue that Shakespeare's skeptical outlook correlates to that of the Pyrrhonists, and that his use of uncertainty in the sonnets therefore contributes to a Pyrrhonian argument about the epistemological and social value of uncertainty. I will focus primarily on Shakespeare's figurative language, especially metaphor and simile, which simultaneously emphasize the inability of readers to access empirical truth and offer a model of collective meaning-making in the place of epistemological stability. In the introduction I first offer an overview of the significant scholarly works concerning Shakespeare's skepticism, which I argue have not sufficiently identified the nuances of early modern skepticism. By focusing primarily on the sonnets, where Shakespeare's complex and sustained examination of metaphors associated with

the Petrarchan tradition provides the readers with a unique experience of multiple perspectives, I identify a positive, edifying strain of skepticism in Shakespeare's corpus. I provide a brief overview of Pyrrhonist philosophy, describing early modern engagement with its conception of epistemological uncertainty as a productive state. Having established this important context for my argument, I conclude the introduction by outlining the structure of my dissertation and briefly detailing each chapter.

Skepticism—the impulse to regard inherited or perceived truths as unreliable—was subject to an enthusiastic revival during the early modern period, when the policies associated with the Reformation generated interest in and anxiety about the uncertainty of appearance or “outward show.” Richard Popkin offers an influential account of how the religious writing of the Reformation contributed to a renewed interest in the Greek school of Pyrrhonist skepticism, the philosophers of which argue that, because multiple perspectives exist on a given issue and none can be proved correct, individuals should avoid claims about the truth of their own beliefs. Both Catholic and Protestant sympathizers drew on Pyrrhonist philosophy to bolster their claims and undermine the authority of their rivals. Erasmus, for instance, wrote that he preferred to rely on the experience of the church officials since he could not always determine the certain truth of a given passage from the Bible.⁴ While such an acknowledgment of the uncertainty of biblical truth was unacceptable to Luther and Calvin, dissident voices within the Reformation movement expressed concern for the limitations of human knowledge. The scholar Sebastian Castellio did not embrace the Calvinist doctrine that religious certainty was available to God's chosen. Castellio's “faith in our rational ability to decide questions was coupled with a skepticism about our employment of this ability in practice,” and this skepticism prompted him to argue that,

⁴ Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 78.

though individuals have the ability to reason about divine truths, their reasoning is affected by a host of internal and external circumstances.⁵ As Catellio's objections show, Pyrrhonist philosophy recognizes that meaning is affected by the unique circumstances of each individual.

Skepticism and phenomenology (the emphasis on the role of the perceiver in determining and generating meaning) offer significant insights into early modern and Shakespearean conceptions of epistemology because these philosophical practices privilege the first-person perspective. They require poet and reader, for example, to consider what they can know through the experiences of their own bodies. While relatively little has been written about Pyrrhonist skepticism and phenomenology in Renaissance poetry, a number of scholars have argued convincingly that skepticism more broadly defined provides an important context for understanding Renaissance drama.⁶ Katharine Maus regards the theater as a particularly useful site for interrogating the correlation between spectacle and fact, since inwardness in the theater is merely a self-destructive display, "an inwardness, in other words, that has already ceased to exist."⁷ Similarly, Millicent Bell sees the complex characters of Shakespeare's tragedies as the results of struggles to maintain an "independent self" while also presenting an identity—an "interpretable life"—to the world.⁸ By drawing a distinction between the abstract notion of the self and a concrete, visual representation, Maus and Bell emphasize the early modern skeptical tendency to express uncertainty about perceived truths. While both Maus and Bell situate Shakespeare's skepticism within religious and juridical contexts, Benjamin Bertram argues that

⁵ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 12.

⁶ The most notable example of scholarly work on skepticism and the sonnets is Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: the Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), a work about which I will have much to say in Chapters 4 and 5.

⁷ Katharine Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 32.

⁸ Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 27.

the economic instability of the early modern period inspired skepticism in the dramatic works of Marlowe and Shakespeare; and David Bevington regards Shakespeare's career as a record of the playwrights forays into various philosophical questions, where the plays from 1599-1601 represent "theatrical experiments in a more disillusioning and philosophically interrogating spirit than he had previously employed. New and more sceptical questions opened up for him new avenues of thought about the human condition."⁹ Bevington's characterization of Shakespeare's skeptical inquiries as "disillusioning" points to a common phenomenon in scholarly work on early modern skepticism: the tendency to regard skepticism primarily or solely as a source for religious doubt. To avoid such oversimplifications, John D. Cox prefers to regard Shakespeare's epistemological response as suspicious, rather than skeptical, claiming that "the models Shakespeare's culture offered for suspecting human motives and actions were more pervasive, sophisticated, and compelling than contemporary skepticism, and the source of suspicion was not primarily skepticism but faith."¹⁰ Cox's assertion accounts for by Castellio's philosophical doctrine, which does not encourage skepticism about the existence of God, but, rather, about the ability of individuals to know God's truths with certainty. Cox's depiction of suspicion (offered as a substitute for skepticism) limits the range of emotional responses to skepticism. Substituting suspicion—even a "sophisticated and compelling" form of suspicion—for skepticism continues to link skeptical thought with anxious uncertainty. When Shakespeare engages the Pyrrhonist strain of skepticism, he is not uniformly creating suspicion in the minds of his readers; instead, he enables them to embrace a variety of interpretive possibilities.

⁹ Benjamin Bertram, "'And that's true too': Skepticism in *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*" in *The Time is out of Joint: Skepticism in Shakespeare's England* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2004), 133-66; David Bevington, *Shakespeare's Ideas: More Things in Heaven and Earth* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 144.

¹⁰ John D. Cox, "Shakespeare's Religious and Moral Thinking: Skepticism or Suspicion?" *Religion & Literature* 36, no. 1 (2004): 43.

Shakespeare's Pyrrhonian model, as I will characterize it, also helps explain how individuals aware of their own separation from one another continue to value other people and function as a community. Sarah Beckwith discourages against too narrowly defining the interior/exterior divide as Maus and Bell have, for example. For Beckwith, a clear-cut division between the mind/soul and body is problematic because "when the body stops being granted the capacity to express the mind and the soul, in Shakespeare's understanding, we don't so much protect that 'inner' space (even if that's what we think we are doing); instead, we lose touch with it all together." Beckwith uses faith-based skepticism to trace the evolution of Shakespeare's theatrical career, which concludes with the "post-tragic" works that, she argues, offer a solution to the disjointed oaths of the earlier plays.¹¹ Like other scholarship on skepticism, Beckwith's work highlights the profound impact Reformation-era religious practices had on the English Renaissance *zeitgeist*. Building on Beckwith's argument, my work problematizes narratives about the skeptical religious outlook of the period which characterize Reformation-era believers as immobilized by the disjunction between external appearance and abstract truths. Beckwith locates the antidote to the disjointed oaths of Shakespeare's early works in communal practices, such as forgiveness, and I build on her work by proposing a communal approach to meaning-making, which benefits from the Pyrrhonist appreciation of a multiplicity of viable perspectives.

The return to historical criticism and the rise in theoretical methods of literary criticism have generated diverse and abundant arguments about Shakespeare's relationships to history, religion and philosophy. My project continues the important work of scholars like Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti, whose recent essay collection proposes that new forms of literary criticism

¹¹ Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 9-11.

must find ways to combine historical and theoretical contexts.¹² One fruitful approach to this challenge, I argue, is to focus on how writers and their contemporaries employed aesthetics. For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, metaphor was a valuable tool for exploring and communicating truths; Shakespeare, however, also recognized that language, and metaphor in particular, posed its own challenge to knowledge acquisition. While I identify a particular philosophical underpinning for Shakespeare's works, I also place his ideas about identity and perception in the aesthetic and historical contexts that impacted his writing. For Shakespeare, exploring the question of how identity can be determined or presented to others involves a sustained engagement with philosophical, religious, and historically pressing questions about the nature of truth. Seeking to define truth and determine its availability to humans, many early modern thinkers turned to the ancient writings on Pyrrhonist skepticism.

The Renaissance experienced a revival in the Greek philosophy of Pyrrhonist skepticism, a field named after the philosopher Pyrrho of Elis and first formulated into a theory by the Greek philosopher Aenesidemus circa 100-40 B.C.¹³ The only surviving work of the Pyrrhonian movement, that of Sextus Empiricus, was available in Latin translations starting in 1562, with English translations printed in 1590 or 1591.¹⁴ Pyrrhonist philosophy was popular with English writers like Thomas Nashe and continental thinkers like Michel de Montaigne, who carved

¹² Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti, eds. *Shakespeare and Religion: Early Modern and Postmodern Perspectives* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 3.

¹³ For an overview of the prevalent interpretations of Pyrrhonism, see Markus Lammenranta, "The Pyrrhonian Problematic" in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-33. Lammenranta outlines three possible interpretations of the Pyrrhonian Problematic, ultimately suggesting that the dialectic interpretation (in which individuals cannot resolve disagreements without begging the question) is the most viable.

¹⁴ Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, xv, 19.

sayings from Sextus's work into the rafters of his study.¹⁵ Given Shakespeare's voracious reading habit and his evident familiarity with Montaigne's writing, the influence of which scholars have noted in *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, Shakespeare would have likely understood the Pyrrhonian model, possibly having read Sextus's work for himself.¹⁶ At the very least, as William Hamlin argues, there is a "synchronic affinity" between the Pyrrhonian elements in the works of Montaigne and Shakespeare.¹⁷ Scholars have also argued for a diachronic affinity, identifying Sextus's direct influence over Shakespeare's works. Anita Gilman Sherman suggests that *Midsummer Night's Dream* likely includes a paraphrase of Sextus's fifth mode for suspending judgment, and Kent Cartwright finds in the ambiguity and uncertainty that pervades *Macbeth* echoes of Pyrrhonist argumentation.¹⁸ The popularity of Pyrrhonist skepticism among early modern thinkers, as well as the distinctly Pyrrhonian style of suspending judgment that pervades Shakespeare's theatrical and poetic works, suggests that Shakespeare was familiar with Pyrrhonist philosophy.

As Popkin demonstrates, an all-encompassing acceptance of doubt is the model set out by Pyrrhonists, but scholars who have written about Shakespeare's skepticism have often presented this philosophical category inadequately, limiting it to religious doubt, or presenting skepticism

¹⁵ For Nashe, see John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 8; Montaigne's engagement with Sextus is discussed in Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, 43.

¹⁶ For Shakespeare's reading habits, see, e.g. Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford, 2001), 145-62; Alice Harmon discusses the influence of Montaigne over *The Tempest* in "How Great was Shakespeare's Debt to Montaigne?" *PMLA* 57, no. 4 (1942): 988; Kenneth Muir identifies Montaigne's influence in *King Lear* in *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1977), 206; Cox makes an argument for the potential direct influence of Pyrrhonism on Shakespeare's texts in *Seeming Knowledge*, 228.

¹⁷ William M. Hamlin, "The Shakespeare-Montaigne-Sextus Nexus: A Case Study in Early Modern Reading," in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook: Shakespeare and Montaigne Revisited*, ed. Graham Bradshaw, Tom Bishop, and Peter Holbrook (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 29.

¹⁸ Anita Gilman Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory in Shakespeare and Donne* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 5-6; Kent Cartwright, "Scepticism and Theatre in *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Survey* 55, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 220.

as a debilitating, anxiety-provoking recognition of the unknown. Literary critics have identified the early modern revival of skepticism as a focal point for the creative energies of many Renaissance thinkers. However, as Rob Carson demonstrates, critics frequently generalize about skepticism, collapsing not only different schools of skeptical thought (academic and Pyrrhonist skepticism, for instance), but also collapsing skepticism with other patterns of thought, such as pragmatism and constructivism. Modern conceptions of skepticism are filtered through the work of Descartes, who, like an Academic skeptic, begins from a position of doubt.¹⁹ Pyrrhonist skepticism takes the opposite stance, where “instead of doubting every position imaginable, the investigative Pyrrhonist entertains them all at once...balancing knowledge claims against one another in such a way that we can neither assent to nor deny any of them.”²⁰ By overwhelming the reader with a multitude of viable interpretations or attitudes, the Pyrrhonist encourages the cultivation of doubt: if a number of theories exist as possibilities, then no single theory can be obviously and undeniably true.

Pyrrhonists argue that, because multiple perspectives exist on many issues and none can be definitely proved correct, individuals should avoid claims about the truth of their own beliefs. In order to come to such a revelation about truth, the Pyrrhonists instruct their readers to seek equipollence, “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing.”²¹ Adopting such a philosophical mindset leads Pyrrhonists “first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to

¹⁹ Rob Carson, “Hearing Voices in *Coriolanus* and Early Modern Skepticism,” in *The Shakespearean International Yearbook: Shakespeare and Montaigne Revisited*, ed. Graham Bradshaw, Tom Bishop, and Peter Holbrook (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 140-41.

²⁰ Carson, “Hearing Voices,” 152.

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 5.

tranquility.”²² Having a skeptical mindset did not necessarily result in anxiety or religious despair; rather, it offered the potential for a tranquil acknowledgment that truth is subjective.

The Pyrrhonists distinguish themselves from philosophers who regarded the truth as entirely unknowable. In his writing on skepticism, Sextus draws a distinction between the Pyrrhonist philosophical outlook and that of the Academics. Where the Academics (a school Sextus associates with Clitomachus and Carneades) argue that truth “cannot be apprehended,” the Pyrrhonist skeptics are “still investigating.”²³ Sextus regards Pyrrhonist skepticism as significantly different from the New Academy and Medical Empiricists, because, he argues, both these groups make “affirmations about the inapprehensibility of unclear matters.”²⁴ Because it discourages definitive claims about unknowability, the model touted by Sextus does not inspire the kind of panic-inducing epistemological anxiety invoked by descriptions of Pyrrhonist skepticism as “corrosive.”²⁵ Shakespeare’s predilection for creating uncertainty in his audience would suggest that his engagement with skepticism included not only academic skepticism (in which the skeptic asserts that nothing can be known for certain), but also Pyrrhonist skepticism, which responds to uncertainty by entertaining multiple interpretive possibilities and suspending judgment.

A notion antithetical to skepticism, but one to which Shakespeare’s poetry also responds extensively, is the idea that a person’s body can be read as an indicator of his or her interior state. This internal/external correlation was and is a common trope in literature; it accounts for Morgan la Faye’s unsavory appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hairy wart on the nose

²² Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 4.

²³ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 3.

²⁴ Sextus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 62.

²⁵ Thomas O. Buford, *Know Thyself: An Essay on Social Personalism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 76.

of Chaucer's Miller, and the beauty of Griselda (whose story maintained its popularity throughout the Seventeenth Century), which transcends even her peasant's clothes. This trope had particular influence over the sonnet tradition. Petrarch, for instance, "saw compassion shine upon [Laura's] face" (11.7).²⁶ This hope or belief that abstract states of being are accessible through external signs is one of the driving forces of the poetic tradition; it led sonneteers to adopt or develop a variety of metaphors that use the body to render abstractions concrete (Sidney sees "Virtue's great beauty in [Stella's] face" (25.13), for example, while Thomas Wyatt, imitating Petrarch, complains that his "fear and hope" cause him to "burn and freeze like ice").²⁷ The impulse to identify external traits as markers of internal states points to a desire to know the truth about other people completely and with certainty, to locate and communicate empirical truth by reading concrete objects.

Popular metaphors, like the one that imagines the eyes as windows to the soul, are a manifestation of this epistemological desire: an attempt to know the unknowable. Shakespeare's use of Pyrrhonist philosophical conceits constitutes, in large part, a critique of this tradition. Scholars have identified an anti-Petrarchan strain in Shakespeare's sonnets.²⁸ I extend the important line of critical inquiry that examines Shakespeare's response to Petrarchan conventions by identifying a new strategy for critiquing the Petrarchan tradition: an embrace of

²⁶ Francesco Petrarch, *Sonnets & Songs*, trans. Anna Maria Armi (New York: The Universal Library, 1968). All references to Petrarch's works are from this edition. Lynn Enterline reads Petrarch's sonnets as depicting an eroticization of words themselves. As I will argue, Shakespeare pulls away from the impulse Enterline locates in Petrarch, reminding his readers of the distinction between the words themselves and the object of desire, creating pleasure in the uncertainty caused by words. *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96.

²⁷ Sir Philip Sidney, *Sir Philip Sidney's An Apology for Poetry and Astrophil and Stella*, ed. Peter C. Herman (Glen Allen, VA: College Publishing, 2001); Sir Thomas Wyatt, "I find no peace," in *Sir Thomas Wyatt: The Complete Poems*, ed. R. A. Rebholz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 80.

²⁸ For more on the conventional arguments concerning Shakespeare's relationship to the Petrarchan tradition, see Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 119-21.

the uncertainty that many Petrarchan tropes seek to mask, avoid, or overcome. While Shakespeare is not the only early modern thinker to show an interest in the uncertainty present in human interaction (such a concept, I argue in Chapter 3, is also apparent in Sidney's poetry), his awareness of this issue accounts in part for the pleasure and the uncertainty readers have experienced when taking up the sonnets.

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the fictions of epistemological revelation in the poetic tradition were under increased scrutiny. Montaigne, for instance, had the following to say about the nature of the relationship between internal and external identities:

We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game. And there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others...a sound intellect will refuse to judge men simply by their outward actions.²⁹

Montaigne questions the notion that the internal state of a person is static and consistently available for interpretation.³⁰ His discouraging individuals from judging each other based on outward actions is apropos of the sonnet tradition (where appearance is often regarded as a source for information about character) but also for the theatrical tradition. Shakespeare, like Montaigne, is aware of the changeability of individuals, who are not always what they seem to be. Shakespeare demonstrates the challenge of creating, maintaining and interpreting identity in his plays and poetry, where he exposes the difficulty of reading external traits as the marks of inward character.

²⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 244.

³⁰ Taking up a similar argument from the perspective of the agent, rather than his audience, Machiavelli teaches his hypothetical prince that "Men are so simple-minded and so controlled by their immediate needs that he who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived." Consequently, "it is not necessary for a prince to possess all of the above-mentioned qualities, but it is very necessary for him to appear to possess them." Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 61.

In a time when skepticism was becoming an increasingly popular method for thinking about the world, Shakespeare developed a Pyrrhonian appreciation for uncertainty, informed by his own experience as a writer and actor. Shakespeare reveals that, while metaphoric language is one of the primary methods people use for dealing with epistemological anxiety, metaphors, too, are a source of uncertainty and epistemological instability. He uses figurative language to think about abstract issues, and his writing—despite its reliance on Petrarchan tropes and metaphors, as well as literary, cultural and religious traditions—demonstrates an awareness of the separation between the image invoked by figurative language and the abstract concepts it is intended to communicate. Like a painter whose art highlights the canvas or a pianist whose composition features the metronome, he refers persistently to his own creative process and to the creation of poetry more generally. Shakespeare reminds his readers that, out of the uncertainty that results from human interactions (both oral and textual), individuals can still derive meaning and pleasure from acknowledging the constructed nature of truth and the existence of perspectives other than their own.

Truth and perspective were, indeed, pressing issues for many of Shakespeare's contemporaries. I examine genres in which early modern writers meditate on truth and perspective in the first two chapters of this dissertation, which situate Shakespeare's deployment of Pyrrhonist skepticism in two important historical contexts, Renaissance theater and the Reformation. Informed by these historical contexts, the final chapters provide a more sustained analysis of the sonnets and their cultivation of uncertainty in the reader. Both the sonnets to the young man and the dark lady enumerate Shakespeare's own concerns about the role of the sonnet—and literature more broadly—in the production of truth or knowledge.

Chapter 2, “Metaphor Wars” revisits the oft-noted connection between skepticism and the Protestant Reformation. Building on the arguments scholars such as Maus and Beckwith have made about religion in Shakespeare’s dramas, I argue that the sonnet tradition was also impacted by the epistemological questions raised by the religious upheaval of the Reformation. Religious pamphlet writers created metaphors to undermine the authority of both Protestantism and Catholicism, and they often borrowed from and responded to the tropes of their rivals. The metaphors employed in the preponderance of religious tracts contributed to the growing suspicion about the function and value, not only of appearance, but also of metaphor. Shakespeare’s poetry benefits from his awareness of the metaphors of the Reformation, as well as from his sensitivity toward their inability to signify consistently and reliably for their authors and readers. He uses some of the figurative language of Reformation-era religious discourse in his sonnets, highlighting the instability of its meaning by developing sequences of metaphor in which the images do not create a clear picture in the minds of readers, who are therefore unable to regard the figurative language as an avenue to truth. While such a practice often denies the reader access to the stable meaning that Reformation writers hoped they would invoke, Shakespeare’s metaphor sequences offer new forms of significance. The complex, fragmented figurative language provides an experience akin to the sublime (as described in David Sedley’s analysis of Montaigne’s Pyrrhonist skepticism), where the insufficiency of any single image gives way to an experience greater than the sum of the individual images.³¹ The style of Shakespeare’s figurative language, therefore, makes meaning for the reader out of the uncertainty the sonnets often generate.

³¹ David L. Sedley, *Sublimity and Skepticism in Montaigne and Milton* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005). Sedley’s description of Montaignian sublimity and its correlation to Shakespeare is discussed at length in Chapter 2.

Renaissance ideas about the nature of truth were influenced by the crisis in religious identity that marked the Protestant Reformation. This religious turmoil also spurred an anti-theatrical tradition that regarded playhouses as sites of corruption and deception. In Chapter 3, “The Poet ‘Never Lieth,’” I examine some representative arguments about the virtues and vices of the Renaissance theater. Shakespeare participates in these debates in his plays and poetry, reminding his readers that performance can have an array of effects on the audience, not all of which are corrosive. For anti-theatrical texts, the theater represents a threat because its false representations create tangible results in the audience; Anthony Munday explains, the authors’ “wanton speeches do pearse our secret thoughts, and move us thereby unto mischief, and provoke our members to uncleanness.”³² Despite Sidney’s position as the dedicatee of Stephen Gosson’s antitheatrical text, he offers a response to such allegations that presents literature not as insidious, but as instructive through its ambiguity. Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry* claims for poets a unique position that transcends the notions of truth and deception with which anti-theatrical texts were occupied: for Sidney, the poet “nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth.”³³ Both Sidney and the anti-theatrical writers recognize that the theater represents a challenge to embodied forms of knowledge, though they disagree on the utility of that challenge.

Like Sidney, Shakespeare recognizes that authors, because of their engagement with literary devices and conceits, have an exceptional opportunity to meditate on the relationship between truth and seeming truth. In his dramatic works, Shakespeare demonstrates how theatrical staging (a form, I argue, of intentionally misleading the audience) can be generative. In plays like *The Winter’s Tale* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare includes meta-theatrical scenes that

³² Anthony Munday, *A Second and Third Blast of Retrait from Plaies and Theaters*, ed. Arthur Freeman (Boston: Boston University Press, 1973), 107-8.

³³ Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, 98.

remind the reader how misconstrual and even deception can be valuable sources for both information and communal development. This trend continues in the sonnets, where Shakespeare, taking his cue in part from Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, seeks to make the sonnet tradition new and personal. Shakespeare reinvigorates the Petrarchan tradition by incorporating both theatrical metaphors and orchestrated moments like those in his plays—moments where the audience is misled or confused and, consequently, experiences a revelation or undergoes a change—in order to emphasize the epistemological value of uncertainty. Thus Shakespeare does not merely acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives, but offers them to his readers in order to heighten the dramatic effects his sonnets often include.

In Chapter 4, “Pyrrhonist Uncertainty in the Sonnets,” I argue that Shakespeare's sonnets expose the fiction of epistemological certainty that is frequently reinforced by the works of other sonneteers. Some metaphors closely linked to the sonnet tradition, including metaphors that imagine the eyes as a window to the soul or the heart as inscribed with the name or image of the beloved, perpetuate a fantasy of epistemological certainty. By drawing a link between the heart or soul and the concrete, physical conditions the poet can observe and describe, such metaphors suggest that empirical truth is available to individuals: that the body can be read as a source for information about the beloved. Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works demonstrate a thorough understanding of such metaphors, and often—as he does in *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (two plays examined in this chapter)—he responds to the efficacy of such truth-determining devices with doubt.

Like the plays, the sonnets are rife with metaphors common in the Petrarchan tradition. Such metaphors are present in each of the subsequences, and Shakespeare often uses them to show that metaphor is an imperfect means for discovering empirical truth. In the place of

epistemological stability, he offers a model of subjective, collective meaning-making, perhaps best illustrated in the paradox of sonnet 138: “When my love swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her though I know she lies” (1-2). The sonnets to the young man and dark lady often requires the speaker, his subjects, and the audience to recognize that a given issue has multiple interpretive possibilities and that the absence of definitive truth can generate both meaning and pleasure.

Just as Petrarchan poets often sought epistemological stability by using metaphors as if they were a source for empirical knowledge, scholars of the sonnets have frequently attempted to construct stable narratives out of Shakespeare’s sonnets, particularly those concerning the dark lady. In the final chapter, “Mask of Blackness,” I highlight some of the most pervasive and long-standing interpretations of the dark lady—that she is a whore, for example, or that she is the primary source for corruption, confusion, or unhappiness in the love triangle—arguing that, while they have sometimes been presented as certainties, they constitute only some of the many perspectives available on the dark lady and her relationships to the other characters of the sequence. Scholarly attempts to find an historical figure for the dark lady (such attempts almost always propose a prostitute or infamous mistress for this position) fail to appreciate the intentional ambiguity of Shakespeare’s two subjects. Responding to some of these dominant narratives about the nature and identity of the dark lady, I propose alternative perspectives informed by an understanding of Pyrrhonist philosophy. The dark lady’s ambiguity is, in fact, an important asset to the philosophical underpinnings of the sonnets: she is a major source of uncertainty for both the speaker and the audience. That uncertainty does not merely cause anxiety. It is also a state that can cause pleasure and make meaning.

Though Chapter 5 focuses to a large extent on the dark lady, the kinds of empirical uncertainty and collaborative meaning-making it describes exist throughout the sequence. In particular, the speaker's fixation on the relationship between the young man and dark lady offers Shakespeare several opportunities to think about the difficulty of uncovering truth with any certainty. Like Lars Engle, I push against Joel Fineman's clear-cut division between the types of knowledge experienced in the young man sonnets and those of the dark lady series. Fineman argues that, "where the young man sonnets consistently develop a mute poetic anxiety out of their perception of the way true vision might be false, the dark lady sonnets instead develop, and very explicitly *say* that they develop, an account of a discursive speech that, speaking against vision, says both more and less 'than niggard truth would willingly impart.'"³⁴ While Fineman and Engle emphasize the disparities between the sonnets to the young man and those to the dark lady, suggesting that each is preoccupied with different questions of and methods for knowledge acquisition (in Fineman's case) and social economy (in Engle's case), Chapter 5 identifies similarities between the speaker's experiences of his two loves. By deemphasizing the divide between the young man and the dark lady, this dissertation offers a reading of the sonnets in which characteristics like truth, richness, and darkness are not associated uniformly with a single sonnet subject. Such characteristics exist throughout the sequence and are assigned (though perhaps unevenly) to any number of subjects or situations. Recognizing the mobility of

³⁴ Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 164-65. While Engle recognizes that scholars should "avoid this dualistic contrast between nostalgically remembered certainty and an exciting but disconcerting new science of indeterminacy," his reading also draws a distinction between the two subsequences. He contrasts the "two... dominant moods with respect to the availability of value" in the sonnets: "one of copious abundance (in which the young man, given his relation to the poet and to others, generates social value and ennobles even bad relations with him) and one of poverty, irony, and negation (in which the dark lady, given her relation to the poet and to others, consumes social value and casts doubt even on the relation with the young man)." My Pyrrhonist reading of the sonnets assigns value to the dark lady sonnets, whereas Engle's work, exchanging Fineman's dichotomy for another, continues to devalue the dark lady. *Shakespearean Pragmatism: Market of his Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50-51.

metaphors in the sequence, rather than attempting to assign them to a particular subject, enriches the sensation of instability one experiences when reading the sonnets.

Shakespeare's dramatic works have been mined for skeptical themes by scholars, like Sherman and Bevington, who have enriched the nuanced, philosophical debate about Shakespeare and performance. If Shakespeare's theatrical works are so engrossed with questions of identity, it behooves scholars to examine similar themes in his poetry more thoroughly, because studying Shakespeare's lyrics with an eye toward Pyrrhonist skepticism generates a fresh set of questions about both aesthetics and early modern culture. Shakespeare excelled at creating multiple perspectives on a particular concept (revenge, for instance), and his poetry allowed him to make diverse and unique arguments about epistemology and skepticism. His sonnets enabled him to examine the relationships among speech and writing, performance and representation, empirical truth and collective meaning-making.

CHAPTER 2

METAPHOR WARS

For early modern polemical writers, the body was a metaphor for many disparate concepts. Questions about what constituted the head of the Christian body of worshippers; what weakness plagued that body with disease; and whose corruption infused that body with poison figure prominently in Polemic discussions about the English church, and writers often respond critically to each other's metaphors, revising or disproving the rhetoric of their rivals. With an unprecedented availability of printed texts, the Renaissance exposed its readers to variety of metaphors. Figurative language is a useful tool for communicating knowledge; it is, after all, easier to understand the relationships among God, his religious officials, and the laity, when one imagines a human body, a stone building, or a river leading to an ocean. The preponderance of polemical writing that examines metaphor critically invites similar critical reception from early modern thinkers, like Shakespeare, who recognized metaphor as a tool for generating and communicating meaning. Shakespeare, however, also regards metaphor as unstable and imperfect, a tool that can be manipulated to amass and contain power. His use of religious metaphors in the sonnets demonstrates the malleability of figurative language, which is available for differing interpretations based upon the unique position of the reader. Shakespeare's sonnets experiment with religious metaphors, allowing them to pile up and confront one another, so that they do not function as tools for interpretation, as the pamphleteers and religious spokespeople of Reformation design the metaphors to function. Unlike the figurative language of religious writers and officials, which sought to overcome uncertainty by evoking images in the minds of an audience, that of Shakespeare's works posit that a Pyrrhonist outlook (an acknowledgement that

multiple perspectives exists for a given argument) could function as a productive aesthetic and epistemological category: that not knowing lends itself to a form of knowledge.

The inconclusiveness of the sonnets results in large part from Shakespeare's use of figurative language. The metaphors he employs create meaning that is simultaneously vivid and unstable. They evoke clear, striking images—the canker in the rosebud, the bare tree, the crumbling monument—in such great numbers that they confuse and contradict one another. Shakespeare seems particularly cognizant of the disparate effects of metaphor, which sometimes resolves, but sometimes creates, problems of knowing. In this chapter I argue that Shakespeare's sensitivity toward the constructed and unstable nature of knowledge is partly a response to the rhetoric of the Reformation.

In addition to engaging primarily with the written medium of the sonnets rather than the staged experience of the theater, my work diverges from that of other scholars by focusing on how the use of figurative language in Reformation religious texts made Renaissance thinkers particularly sensitive to the instability of metaphor and related poetic devices. Shakespeare, in turn, exposes his audiences (both playgoers and readers) to this instability, highlighting for them the disparity between the image invoked by metaphors/similes and the original object or concept these metaphors are designed to communicate. In this chapter, I first examine a selection of Catholic and Protestant polemical writings which borrow from and respond to the metaphors of their opponents. Paired with questions about the performative, representative, or metaphorical significance of religious rituals (particularly communion and transubstantiation), such figurative language inadvertently exposes the unreliability of communication and the difficulty of interpretation. Shakespeare was certainly familiar with the instability of such polemical metaphors, since he highlights their unreliable signification in his plays and poetry. For instance,

Measure for Measure's Duke Vincentio, whose use of figurative language, paired with his disguise as a church official, invites the audience to reflect on the use of figurative language as a tool for amassing power and manipulating others. With this knowledge of how religious rhetoric can function in the dramas to obscure meaning and create embodied effects, I turn toward the sonnets to examine their religious content. In particular, sonnet 146 (the most overtly religious of the series) responds to the boilerplate metaphors of devotional literature to demonstrate the diverse interpretive possibilities implicit in them. Metaphors, such as those that imagine the body as a mere casing or ornament for the soul, are longstanding in Christianity, but Shakespeare's sonnets use them to respond to and meditate upon epistemological questions raised by the religious debate surrounding the Reformation.

How and if Shakespeare's sonnets respond to the Protestant Reformation are questions that have garnered scholarly attention for years, but many scholars now recognize, as Andrew Hadfield does, that "Poems exist within a complex web of discourses, both literary and non-literary, and it is hard to extract them and then read them back against what we might like to see as unchanging and fixed series of beliefs."³⁵ Like Hadfield, I am not interested in Shakespeare's biographical engagement with Catholicism or Protestantism; instead, I focus on the effects generally created by the turbulent religious experiences of the Renaissance and how they may have helped shape Shakespeare's literary imagination.

In thinking more broadly about the effects of Reformation polemic, which may have contributed to Shakespeare's appreciation for aesthetics and epistemological collaboration, this chapter complicates the work of scholars who have limited the scope of Renaissance skepticism by focusing too exclusively on the relationship between the religious crisis of the Reformation

³⁵ Andrew Hadfield, "Poetry, Politics, and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 175.

and conceptions of the split between appearance and reality. For instance, Stephen Greenblatt, argues that theatrical performances of defunct religious practices highlight the fraudulence of religious and political rituals. In his analysis of Catholic exorcisms—which many individuals in the Renaissance regarded as mere spectacle—Greenblatt identifies a link between the awe of religious spectacle and the desire for performance. Greenblatt responds to his own question, “Why has our culture embraced *King Lear*’s massive display of mimed suffering and fraudulent exorcism?” with the following explanation:

Because the judicial torture and expulsion of evil have for centuries been bound up with the display of power at the center of society. Because we no longer believe in the magical ceremonies through which devils were once made to speak and were driven out of the bodies of the possessed. Because the play recuperates and intensifies our need for these ceremonies, even though we do not believe in them, and performs them, carefully marked out for us as frauds, for our continued consumption. Because with our full complicity Shakespeare’s company and scores of companies that followed have catered profitably to our desire for spectacular impostures.³⁶

When represented by playwrights as mere theatricality, such ritualistic actions appear to the audience to be performances of power. As such, they encourage the audience to consider how outward shows relate to a reality to which they do not clearly and completely correlate. These theatrical displays also invite the audience to acknowledge that rituals, performances, and outward displays absent of deeper religious significance can still be a source of satisfaction or pleasure; Greenblatt ultimately concludes: “Evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning, are preferable to no rituals at all.”³⁷ Such “evacuated rituals” illustrate how pleasure and value exist in a performance, even when it lacks religious significance. Richard Strier, however, objects to Greenblatt’s reading of *King Lear*, arguing that “Greenblatt might well be right that it would flatten the play out to deprive it of mysteries, but I would argue that to say this does not

³⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 128.

³⁷ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 127.

necessarily involve any assertion of the ontologically transcendental.” The critical work of both Greenblatt and Strier offer too narrow a view on skepticism, using the term to refer to the belief or disbelief in some divinity.³⁸ While skepticism about the existence of God and the nature of Christian faith may be an important facet of the Reformation, literary analysis that uses the term skepticism broadly, encompassing both Pyrrhonist and secular elements, creates more nuanced accounts of Shakespeare’s skepticism. The impact of religious discourse, not merely rituals, offers an important context for early modern skeptical thought.

Early modern plays, as many scholars have noted, offer audience members opportunities to consider the split between physical appearance and the reality to which it might not always correlate. Both Greenblatt and Katharine Maus identify the theater as a space in which playwrights and spectators alike could meditate on the proliferation of performances—political, religious or otherwise—outside the theater by viewing spectacles within it. While Greenblatt’s work demonstrates how the theater exposed the emptiness of performances of authority, Maus argues that early modern religious authorities contributed to a growing interest in the difference between inner and outer identities: “Renaissance religious culture...nurtures habits of mind that encourage conceiving of human inwardness, like other truth, as at once privileged and elusive, an absent presence ‘interpreted’ to observers by ambiguous inklings and tokens.”³⁹ Both scholars argue that the disparity between truth and appearance/performance is heightened by shifts in attitudes toward devotion and legitimate displays of religious authority. Written and printed texts from the period provide a unique perspective on the split between perceived truths and reality, which can enrich scholarly understanding of Shakespeare’s theatrical and poetical skepticism. As readers undergo changes in their perspective (by, for instance, rereading a sonnet or undergoing a

³⁸ Richard Strier, “Shakespeare and the Sceptics,” *Religion and Literature* 32, no. 2 (2000): 187.

³⁹ Maus, *Inwardness and Theater*, 11.

personal event that changes their emotional reaction to a character or concept), they are able to see the flexibility of written texts, which are constructed partly from the experiences of the reader.

By examining the unique influence of Pyrrhonist skepticism over the sonnet form, I am building on Anita Gilman Sherman's analysis of Pyrrhonist philosophy in Shakespeare's plays and Donne's poetry. Sherman examines how Shakespeare and Donne use various philosophical and literary strategies (for instance, typology, pastoral, and countermonuments) to manage their dissatisfaction with imperfect human knowledge.⁴⁰ Sherman argues that Shakespeare and Donne both participate in "skepticism's imaginative reshaping of memory," either by casting doubt on memory as an epistemological tool or by celebrating memory/nostalgia as a respite from the intellectual and philosophical burden of skepticism. The nostalgia generated by Shakespeare's plays and Donne's poetry strives for the Pyrrhonist state of equipollence, in which one is neither convinced nor unconvinced. By reminding scholars that Renaissance skepticism was not limited solely to religious thought and that it was sometimes considered a reprieve from epistemological anxiety, Sherman offers an important contribution to scholarship on skepticism. Sherman details Shakespeare's aesthetics and his response to skepticism, suggesting that "Shakespeare uses simile and metaphor, not to expose the comic inconsistency of Stoics, but to evoke the fluctuations of the mind in the seconds before an important event or decision."⁴¹ Sherman's argument, which focuses only briefly on poetry (she reads sonnet 81 as an illustration of Shakespeare's skepticism about the memorializing capacity of verse) can be extended to consider the way aesthetics work in Shakespeare's poetry.⁴² The reader, compelled by the spectrum of

⁴⁰ Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 39.

⁴¹ Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 9.

⁴² For Sherman's reading of sonnet 81, see *Skepticism and Memory*, 171-73.

figurative language Shakespeare employs, feels the fluctuations of the mind Sherman sees acted out by Shakespeare's characters.

As Sarah Beckwith's return to the topics of skepticism and theatricality has demonstrated, scholars often misrepresent the effect Pyrrhonist philosophers felt skepticism would have on readers. Earlier arguments, Beckwith observes, frequently regard humans as immobilized in the face of skepticism, unable to know anything for certain. In response to such generalizations, Beckwith posits that Shakespeare recognized this tendency toward oversimplification about skepticism and that his plays seek to overcome a distinction between interiority and exteriority that leaves humans isolated from one another.⁴³ Beckwith argues that Shakespeare's late plays propose a solution to the skeptical split between inner and outer by staging reconciliation and forgiveness as meaningful, communal activities. I agree with Beckwith that Shakespeare sought to complicate narratives in which skepticism creates an immobilizing anxiety, and I will demonstrate in later chapters how Shakespeare allies himself with Pyrrhonism to avoid such conflicts. First, however, it is important both to examine sources for Shakespeare's skepticism that move beyond shows and performances of power (like those identified by Greenblatt) and to establish, through an analysis of the sonnets, that Shakespeare's skepticism functions through and is a function of his use of figurative language.

Print, Rhetoric, and the Transubstantiation Debate

The rapidly growing practice of publishing pamphlets to defend or critique religious groups provided a new medium through which Renaissance people could communicate and evaluate arguments, but this medium may have also contributed to the destabilizing of

⁴³ Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 33.

metaphorical language that aided in the spread of skepticism. My reading of figurative language among the polemicists builds on the work by Peter Lake and Steven Pincus. They suggest that a “post-Reformation public sphere” emerged from the Elizabethan regime’s response to the threat of Catholicism, through which “accordingly [the Elizabethan pamphleteers] elicited from a variety of Catholics replies in kind.”⁴⁴ One common topic of dispute for Reformation writers was transubstantiation.⁴⁵ In asking its participants to believe something (this drink is the blood of Christ) despite empirical evidence that suggests otherwise (this drink does not taste like blood and appears similar to other drinks), transubstantiation must be categorized as either a miracle or a metaphor. Witnessing transubstantiation, an individual encounters irreconcilable contradictions: “bread that is not bread and...body that is not body,” and these “riddles” can only be solved by a miracle.⁴⁶ The writers of the Reformation sought to discredit Catholic doctrine by denying that transubstantiation was miraculous; instead, they emphasize its function as a sign of sacrifice and remembrance, or a metaphor for Christ’s covenant with faithful Christians. When they depict a sacred practice as merely metaphorical, Reformation-era writers devalue their own rhetoric by highlighting the distinction between the thing itself and the images used to manifest it in the minds of readers.

⁴⁴ Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, “Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England,” in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 4.

⁴⁵ Recently, Katherine Eggert has sought to correct what she regards as an oversimplification in the work on Renaissance attitudes toward transubstantiation as represented in the works of Greenblatt and Beckwith. Eggert argues that such work incorrectly characterizes medieval individuals as entirely satisfied with the authenticity of their sacrament: “The physics of the Eucharist...means that to believe sincerely in transubstantiation means also to believe sincerely in something one knows to be manifestly untrue.” “*Hamlet’s Alchemy: Transubstantiation, Modernity, Belief*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 51. Eggert’s argument employs the same logic as sonnet 138 (“I do believe her though I know she lies”), which—as I will argue in Chapter 4—constitutes an impossible paradox; concurring with Theodore Levin, I regard Eggert’s category of conditional belief in transubstantiation to be an impossibility: “Response to Katherine Eggert,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 58-59.

⁴⁶ Douglas Burnham, “The Riddle of Transubstantiation,” in *The Poetics of Transubstantiation: From Theology to Metaphor*, ed. Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 8.

The metaphors used by Reformation polemicists are designed to communicate abstract truths to their readers—to render complex philosophical debates visible and therefore easier to understand. Similar characterizations of metaphor appear in the writings of Aristotle and Quintilian, whose works on rhetoric and aesthetics were popular in the early modern period, reprinted in many of the rhetoric and grammar books of the day.⁴⁷ Quintilian describes metaphor as a device which “succeeds in accomplishing the supremely difficult task of providing a name for everything.”⁴⁸ According to Quintilian, metaphor is “designed to move the feelings, give special distinction to things, and place them before the eye.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Aristotle argues in *Poetics* that “the metaphor should be drawn not from remote things but from those with affinity and of the same species, to name things without name, which on being spoken immediately reveal their affinity.”⁵⁰ According to these classical authorities, writers can use metaphor to clarify their arguments, to create an image in the minds of their readers that renders their abstract concepts concrete and available for consumption. For many early modern thinkers, like Erasmus, metaphor “brings [the author’s point] before one’s eyes better than anything else.”⁵¹ Such arguments suggest that metaphor is a source of knowledge, which can visually manifest truth for a reader.

Some Reformation-era writers, however, doubted the epistemological function of figurative language. The growing uncertainty about metaphor’s ability to communicate clearly

⁴⁷ See McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, 43.

⁴⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, vol. 3 (London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922), 303.

⁴⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 311.

⁵⁰ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. H. C. Lawson-Tancred (New York: Penguin, 1991), 220.

⁵¹ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 131.

and without manipulation is apparent in George Puttenham's work. In *The Arte of English Poesie*, Puttenham describes figures of speech, not only as ornament, but also as:

in a sorte abuses or rather trespasses in I, because they passe the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the eare and also the minde, drawing it from plainnesse and simplicitie to a certaine doubleness, whereby our talke is the more guilefull & abusing, for what els is your Metaphor but an inversion of sence by transport; your allegorie but a duplicitie of meaning or dissimulation under covert and darke intendments.⁵²

Contrasting the straight-forward clarity of “common utterance” with ornamental language, Puttenham argues that figures of speech, like metaphor and allegory, have a doubling effect, complicating a concept rather than clarifying it. In fact, Puttenham's description, as Louis Montrose has argued, typifies the instability of signification that I also locate in early modern religious pamphlets. Montrose argues that “Puttenham presents...a rhetoric of self-presentation and courtship that repeatedly illuminates the analogy between sacred and secular modes of worship and supplication.”⁵³ Montrose attributes some of the cross-referential nature of Puttenham's work to the unique conditions surrounding Elizabeth's reign: “If relationships of power and dependency could be metaphorized in amorous conventions, it was because the sexual politics of the Elizabethan court so thoroughly conflated the public and private domains.”⁵⁴ The array of secular, sacred, and pagan metaphors used to describe Elizabeth—by both Puttenham and many other early modern writers—also highlights the possibility that such metaphors can signify inconsistently. While Puttenham ultimately concludes that both metaphor and allegory can have “much conveniencie,” he is also aware of their more inconvenient possibilities: not

⁵² George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. G. D. Wilcock and A. Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), 154.

⁵³ Louis Montrose, “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form,” *English Literary History* 50, no. 3 (1983): 436.

⁵⁴ Montrose, “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds,” 441.

only can a speaker use figurative language to dissemble, but the figures may also create doubles that confuse or invert the senses.

The following examples from Renaissance polemic attempt to use metaphor for clarity and convenience, but the way that metaphors are recycled and reimagined—doubled and trebled—in this system makes the images and meanings they communicate inconsistent. As the referents of these metaphors become less clear, readers like Puttenham and Shakespeare are better able to question the epistemological quality of figurative language. While the polemicists may have used metaphor in the Aristotelian tradition, as a way to make arguments stronger and clearer, their attempts to undermine the Catholic church's authority by labeling its practices as figurative rather than literal contributed to the instability of the rhetorical strategies the polemicists themselves used. Throughout the Renaissance, debates about communion persisted in sermons and in print, with many critics of the Catholic sacrament attempting to reinscribe the practice, not as a miracle, but as a metaphor. For instance, Edward Dering's sermon (published in 1569 and reprinted in 1597 and 1614) offers such a critique of transubstantiation—a practice promoted by “the Pope, a sicke head of an ill disposed sinagoge”—labeling it an attempt to read a biblical metaphor literally: “I am sayth Christ, the bread of lyfe. He that commeth unto me shall not hunger. Yf Christe had spoken still properly, according to the metaphore, he had sayd thus: I am the bread of lyfe, he that eateth me, shall not hunger.” Dering derides advocates of Catholic doctrine for misinterpreting what he considers a fairly obvious metaphor, of failing to recognize Christ's figures of speech. Instead of attaching material value to the practice of consuming bread during communion, Dering encourages an abstract understanding of the Christ-as-bread metaphor.

Moreover, anti-Catholic writing, like Dering's, often mitigates the significance of the outward show of devotion integral to the Catholic sacrament of confession. Rather than a public ritual, Dering explains that Christ's body can be metaphorically eaten "whether it be in your inward fayth, when secretly and with your selfe you feede upon his body."⁵⁵ The Protestant version of communion articulates little distinction between the display of faith exemplified in the ritual of eating bread and drinking wine in church, and the personal experience of religious devotion. Both taking communion and "secretly feed[ing] upon his body" are suitable expressions of faith, which sustain the participant and strengthen his relationship with the divine. Such a claim downplays the significance of actually participating in the sacrament by rendering its benefits available to anyone with "inward fayth." By employing metaphors of inwardness and exteriority, Protestant discourse draws attention to the difference between unnecessary or superfluous display and the internal process that may or may not accompany it: if the devoted may experience the communion separate from the ritual of consuming bread and wine, then the ritual may take place absent the authentic devotional experience.

John de L'Epine's critique of transubstantiation illustrates the complexity of the internal/external dichotomy characterized in Dering's work. L'Epine concludes, "For, a Sacrament (as [Catholic authorities] themselves cannot denie) is a signe of a holie thing, so that the signe is not the thing it selfe. There is a very great difference betweene the Truth, and the signe of the same Truth."⁵⁶ L'Epine's argument not only interprets the biblical context for the Eucharist metaphorically, but it also distinguishes between "the Truth" and "the signe of the same Truth." L'Epine depicts the "holie thing" as analogous to "Truth." His analogy relies on a

⁵⁵ Edward Dering, *A Sermon preached at the Tower of London, by M. Dering the xi. day of [December]. 1569* (1569). This speech was reprinted in 1597 and 1614 in *M. Derings works*.

⁵⁶ John de L'Epine, *A Confutation of the Popish Transubstantiation*, trans. Peter Allibond (1592), 10.

fiction of epistemological certainty, where concrete holy things communicate abstract truths, but this argument breaks down because of L'Epine's conflicting claims about the relationship between the concrete and the abstract. In the sacramental context, it is easy to understand the relationship between the holy thing (Christ's body) and its sign (bread), but it is harder to imagine the difference between truth and the sign of truth. Are holy things equivalent to "the Truth"? If there is a "great difference" between the truth and the sign of truth, does that make signs of truth inferior? If so, L'Epine's claim about truth undermines his argument against transubstantiation by acknowledging that signs are insufficient replacements for the thing itself. In a proto-structuralist attempt to assert a stable correlation between sign and signified, L'Epine belies his own claims about transubstantiation.⁵⁷ Though arguments like L'Epine's are designed to resolve the epistemological crisis caused by philosophical disagreements about transubstantiation, they instead expose the instability of the language their authors use to communicate and clarify their positions.

Dering's description of the Catholic church as "a sicke head of an ill disposed sinagoge" illustrates another significant side effect of Reformation era religious discourse, in which metaphors are adopted and recycled by writers in conflict. For example, in employing metaphors of illness to describe opposite or incongruous concepts, writers highlight the malleability of figurative language. The religious disputants from varying factions imagined the Christian church or the collective of religious practitioners as a body that suffers from a malady or injury. Martin Marprelate's *Epistle* refers to the "poisoned...priests" of the English Church, accusing

⁵⁷ Some arguments against transubstantiation, conversely, anticipate post-structuralist conceptions of the split between signifier and signified. John Jewel insists that "we put a difference between the sign and the thing itself that is signified," and Edwin Sandys writes in 1576, "In this sacrament there are two things, a visible sign and an invisible grace: there is a visible sacramental sign of bread and wine, and there is the thing and matter signified, namely the body and blood of Christ." Both qtd. in Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England from Cranmer to Hooker: 1534-1603* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 120-21.

them of “in the ears of her Majesty, affirm[ing] all to be well, where there is nothing but sores and blisters, yea where the grief is even deadly at the heart.”⁵⁸ Not only are the priests poisoned with sin and false doctrine, but their failure to intervene has also caused a disease to spread throughout the church. Using a similar metaphor, Dudley Fenner characterizes his response to critics of his religious writing as a “counter-poyson.”⁵⁹ The criticism levied by these Puritans were also used against them. Martin Marprelate, for instance, was described by Thomas Nash in *An Almond for a Parrat*, as a man “whom Lucifer hath furnisht to infection, with the painted poison of snout-holy devotion,” asking “...didst thou so much malign the successeful strivings of the Gospell, that thou shouldst filch thy selfe, as a new disease into our government?”⁶⁰ Both supporters of the English church and its Puritan critics used metaphors of sickness and poison to undermine the authority of their rivals, suggesting that the rhetoric of the other side was damaging to the well-being of English Christians. Each writer claims earnestly to work for the health and betterment of Christians, but each is also accused of poisoning or infecting the group. These shared metaphors make it difficult for a reader to determine which writer or faction communicates the truth about Christianity. The metaphorical language appearing in these differing texts offers readers images as if they were stable truths, but the critical responses constructed by opposing writers illustrate how disputed such metaphors were becoming.

The Marprelate *Epistle* offers an instance of how attentively the pamphleteers of the Reformation responded to one another’s metaphors, a process that contributed to the variability of their meaning. In refuting John Bridges’ assertion that “one priest or elder...may have a

⁵⁸ Joseph L. Black, ed., *The Martin Marprelate Tracts: A Modernized and Annotated Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 7, 30.

⁵⁹ Dudley Fenner, *A Counter-Poyson, modestly written for the time, to make aunswere to the objections and reproches, wherewith the aunswerer to the Abstract, would disgrace the holy Discipline of Christ* (1584).

⁶⁰ Thomas Nash, *An Almond for a Parrat or Cutbert Curry-knaves Almes* (1589), 5, 3.

superior authority over the clergy, that is, over all the universal body of the church, in every particular or several congregation, and so not only over the people, but also over the whole order of ministers,” the Marprelate writer uses the church-as-body metaphor to discredit Bridges’ claim as treasonous:

1. It is treason to affirm her Majesty to be an infidel, or not to be contained in the body of the church. 2. It is treason to say that one priest or elder may have a lawful superior authority over her Majesty. Take your spectacles then, and spell your own words, and you shall find that you have affirmed either of these two points. For you affirm that a priest may have a lawful superior authority over the universal body of the church. And you dare not deny her Majesty to be contained within the universal body of the church.⁶¹

The church is described by Bridges and the Marprelate writer as a body. This metaphor is, of course, not an invention of the Renaissance pamphleteers. Its pervasiveness in Christian writing stems from its prevalence in Pauline theology.⁶² In his Epistle to the Ephesians Paul describes the relationship between Christ and the church, where God “hath made [Jesus] head over all the church, which is his body.”⁶³ It is on the basis of this metaphor, however, that Marprelate attempts to discredit Bridges’ argument. Bridges deploys the metaphor in a fairly conventional way, imagining the body of the church as having diverse, hierarchical content that includes the faithful and the ministers; in doing so, he implies that a particular minister or collection of religious officials might function as the head or governing faction over the body.⁶⁴ Marprelate responds to this argument by revealing the metaphor to be an inaccurate description of the

⁶¹ Black, ed., *The Martin Marprelate Tracts*, 16.

⁶² While the notion of the body politic precedes Paul’s writing, his use of the body metaphor was popularized and reified by the Medieval church. In the Renaissance, the “anthropomorphic image of the commonwealth” reached its heyday, “but rather than contributing new meanings and forms to the analogy, the English writers consolidated the classical and medieval visions with new imaginative force.” Leonard Barkan, *Nature’s Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 75.

⁶³ *Ephesians 1.22-23. King James Bible.*

⁶⁴ Many such questions and claims about the power dynamics among the church, the body politic, and the sovereign stem from the reign of Henry VIII. For more on the debate about the body of the church and Henry’s position in it, see John Guy, “Scripture as Authority: Problems of Interpretation in the 1530s” in *Reassessing the Henrician Age: Humanism, Politics and Reform 1500-1550*, ed. Alistair Fox and John Guy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 207-210.

church: if all English Christians are considered part of “the universal body of the church,” then that group must include the queen, and the queen is not to be governed by Anglican church officials. Part of this interpretive difficulty stems from the parliamentary decision to alter Elizabeth’s title from “supreme head” of the church (as her father was called) to “supreme governor as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal.”⁶⁵ This new title, besides being less catchy, meant that Elizabeth, “ruled the Church from outside, through her archbishops and commissioners.”⁶⁶ The queen, as the Marprelate/Elton debate illustrates, is both a part of and separate from the religious body, a challenge to the church-as-body metaphor that had not previously existed.⁶⁷

By critiquing Bridges’s argument on the grounds of his problematic use of an age-old figure for the church, Marprelate draws attention to the insufficiency of a metaphor almost certainly familiar to all his readers. Marprelate does not discard the body of the church metaphor; he merely argues that this body does not have a single, religious governor. But how does one separate the body metaphor from its head? In reimagining the metaphor for his own purposes, Marprelate exposes the epistemological problem of the metaphor generally, suggesting to the reader that the head/body description of the church may have been insufficient all along.

Because of the new print technologies, readers during the Reformation had unprecedented access to pamphlets like those surrounding the Marprelate debate, which supplemented more traditional methods (such as sermons and books) of communicating

⁶⁵ G. R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 273.

⁶⁶ Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, 275.

⁶⁷ For more on the conflict between the Anglican “one-kingdom” and the Puritan “two-kingdoms” doctrine, see Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, 61-62.

knowledge about religion and the church.⁶⁸ This uptick in textual access made religious debates more widely available to the reading public, which was able to evaluate Catholic sacramental practices, such as transubstantiation, as well as Anglican church practices, such as those criticized by Martin Marprelate.⁶⁹ These debates drew additional attention to the function and truth value of metaphor, bringing into question the ability of metaphor to generate and communicate effective arguments. Rather than making it easier for a reader to ascertain the truth, to visualize an argument in order to understand it, metaphor may create additional layers of interpretive difficulty. Growing up in the midst of these religious conflicts, Shakespeare was particularly aware of the malleability and capacity for manipulation of figurative language. This awareness of the instability of language manifests itself not only in his poetry, but also in his plays.

Epistemological Instability and Figurative Language in *Measure for Measure*

The sacred and profane powers of figurative language are especially apparent in *Measure for Measure*, where Shakespeare uses Duke Vincentio's language to accentuate the epistemological problems generated by metaphor. While *Measure for Measure* does suggest the popular notion that appearances can be deceiving, the delivery of this common moral frequently stresses the integral role language plays in creating and manipulating knowledge. The duke's actions and the language he uses to describe and defend them emphasize, as Puttenham explains,

⁶⁸ For more on the development and reception of the pamphlet in Sixteenth Century England, see Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), esp. 4-26.

⁶⁹ As Peter Lake suggests, the state's management of the Reformation created a series of "overlapping 'popular' audiences." "The Politics of 'Popularity' and the Public Sphere: the 'Monarchical Republic' of Elizabeth I Defends Itself," in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 85.

the “doubleness” of figurative language can render it “guilefull & abusing.”⁷⁰ Vincentio wears the habit of a friar, taking his attire directly from the monastery, but his speech throughout the play is “*like* a true friar.” Through Vincentio’s linguistic dexterity and his willingness to use figurative language to achieve his will, Shakespeare emphasizes the disparity between truth and the metaphors employed to represent or misrepresent it. *Measure for Measure*, moreover, examines the problematic relationship between figurative language and the category of religious truth. Christian doctrine, discourse, and practice often draw authority from symbolic or metaphoric expressions of power, but the duke’s language—coupled with his misleading habit and the redescription of his authority—undermines the religious and sovereign potency it seeks to wield.

Vincentio’s appropriation of religious habit blurs the boundary between figurative language and the concepts it is meant to describe. Vincentio is unique among Shakespeare’s disguised characters in costuming himself as a religious authority, a position that riffs on a common trope, found in many early Reformation morality plays (like Bale’s *King Johan*) and in *I Henry VI*, where a corrupt Catholic figure uses his position and his attire to achieve ungodly means. Preparing to enact his plans for testing Angelo’s sovereign virtue and repairing his debased kingdom, Vincentio informs the friar:

I will, as ‘twere a brother of your order,
Visit both prince and people. Therefore, I prithee,
Supply me with the habit and instruct me
How I may formally in person bear
Like a true friar...Hence shall we see
If power change purpose, what our seemers be. (1.3.44-54)

⁷⁰ For Puttenham, the duplicity of figurative language, especially allegory, links it to the political sphere, so figurative language is an appropriate device for the duke. Montrose explains that dissimulation is “the very nature of discourse and conduct at court,” so that “indirection and dissimulation are the rhetorical techniques of poetry and policy; they are put to use not only by Elizabethan poets and courtiers but by ministers and ambassadors, and by the Queen herself,” Louise Montrose, “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds,” 439.

Vincentio reveals his intent to dress in the robes of a friar in order to evaluate Angelo.⁷¹ Just as, according to the old adage, it takes a thief to catch a thief, the duke will become a “seemer” in order to root out “seemers,” and to do so, he must rely on costume. In post-Reformation England, an actor dressed in the robes of a Catholic religious official (which may have been real sacramental robes taken from religious institutions and sold or donated to the theaters),⁷² participates in the process Greenblatt describes, through which, “a sacred sign, designed to be displayed before a crowd of men and women, is emptied, made negotiable, traded from one institution to another.”⁷³ Vincentio’s robe thus constitutes a particularly rich stage property: a sacramental artifact, separated from its original meaning by the state and appropriated by the playhouse, appears onstage as a sacred garment appropriated by the state to amass power.⁷⁴ This simultaneous undermining and appropriation of power echoes the Protestant polemic that sought both to render communion a metaphor and, consequently, to democratize the practice, so that individuals could feed undergo communion inwardly and secretly. Moreover, the monastic garment develops meta-theatrical significance in the hands of Vincentio, who is unable to

⁷¹ Friars and seeming friars on the early modern stage would have worn either a gray or brown robe, tied with a cord, and a hood. Robert I. Lublin, “‘A Comely Presentation and the Habit to Admiration Reverend’: Ecclesiastical Apparel on the Early Modern English Stage,” in *The Sacred and Profane in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. Mary A. Papazian (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 60.

⁷² In the midst of the controversy concerning which garments were appropriate for church officials to wear, many churches sold or rented their garments to be used in theatrical performances. Peter Stallybrass, “Worn Worlds: Clothes and Identity on the Renaissance Stage,” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia et. al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 305.

⁷³ Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 112.

⁷⁴ While monasteries and the monastic garb disappeared from England under the supervision of Thomas Cromwell, other church vestments were not entirely separated from their religious context during Elizabeth’s reign. Edward’s regime had confiscated and sold church robes by 1553. Ronald Hutton, “The Local Impact of the Tudor Reformations” in *The English Reformation Revised*, ed. Christopher Haigh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 126. However, Elizabeth’s revision of Edward’s prayer-book, published in 1559, permitted priests to wear the previously banned copes during communion. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 567. Additionally, churches frequently altered their vestments into other, more acceptable church décor (such as cloths for the communion table) to avoid spoliation. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 492. Elizabeth’s more conservative stance on priestly garments, coupled with their continued—if altered—presence in the church, suggests that Catholic costuming may have continued to hold some religious significance, even to a Protestant audience.

accomplish his goals dressed only in the robes of state. The actor playing Vincentio dons the costume of a duke for theatrical purposes, and Vincentio's costuming and performance as a friar highlight his role as a performer of power.

Additionally, Vincentio's choice of costume alludes to the strategies for amassing power espoused by Machiavelli.⁷⁵ Vincentio literally takes up the "cloak of religion," described by Machiavelli as an effective tool for amassing and maintaining power. Machiavelli cites Ferdinand Aragon's use of "pious cruelty, always employing religion for his own purposes."⁷⁶ While, as John Roe argues, it is clear that Machiavelli's "pious cruelty" is meant as a criticism of Ferdinand, the performance of power espoused by Ferdinand is consistent with Machiavelli's suggestions that rulers should seem virtuous even if they cannot always act accordingly.⁷⁷ In *The Prince*, piety constitutes a useful performative tool because of both the unreliability of appearances and the people's unwillingness or inability to discern the truth. Machiavelli instructs, "the princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have thought little about keeping faith and who have known how cunningly to manipulate men's minds."⁷⁸ This allusion to the cloak of religion connects Vincentio to Machiavellian rhetorical manipulation; his

⁷⁵ Vincentio's moral ambiguity, which incites interpretations ranging from Christ-like sovereign to manipulative exploiter of power reinforces the narrative proposed by Hugh Grady, who argues that Shakespeare's engagement with Machiavelli develops from hypocritical characters like Richard III to a less concrete "implied intellectual framework or discourse," and finally to an ambivalence, where political power is neither entirely evil nor completely redemptive. Vincentio, I suggest, would fit into the final category. *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 46-47.

⁷⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 76.

⁷⁷ John Roe, *Shakespeare and Machiavelli* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 128. As Roe argues, Machiavelli's contempt for Ferdinand illustrates an ethical dimension of *The Prince* that is often overlooked. While Ferdinand is an effective ruler, Machiavelli does not approve of his strategies (130).

⁷⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 60. *The Prince* was not printed in English until 1640, but manuscript copies in English, along with printed copies in Italian, French, and Latin were available to an English audience. Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli: A Changing Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1965), 53. It is also probable that Shakespeare read Innocent Gentillet's "Anti-Machiavel," which was published in English in 1602 (one year before *Measure for Measure*). Norman N. Holland, "Measure for Measure: The Duke and The Prince," *Comparative Literature* 11, no. 1 (1959): 17.

appropriation of religious authority to dictate other characters' responses signals his participation in a skeptical understanding that power is constructed and performed. Just as Vincentio's costuming discloses multiple layers of symbolic significance, his use of similes highlights the slippery, unstable quality of language.

Vincentio's figurative language illustrates the uncertainty of communication generally, and metaphorical language specifically. In the initial description of his plan, the duke attempts—like the polemicists writing against Catholic communion—to render a literal religious practice metaphorical by suggesting that he will only perform as a friar. His use of similes emphasizes the gap between a real, ordained friar and the disguised duke.⁷⁹ He will act “as ‘twere a brother of your order” and appear “like a true friar.” While Vincentio claims merely to be “like a true friar,” however, the unique authority he receives from his new habit enables him, like that other “seemer” Angelo, to change purpose. Vincentio does not adopt merely the aspect of a friar. He claims for himself a great deal of religious power as well. Even his introductory speech provides an inkling of Vincentio's intended abuse of power: he must try the virtue of a man who “scarce confesses / That his blood flows” (1.3.51-52). The duke will eventually use his new costume to compel Angelo into a confession, but he will also engage in other priestly practices with a variety of characters. For instance, he instructs Julietta how to undergo penance (“I'll teach you how you shall arraign your conscience / And try your penitence, if it be sound / or hollowly put on” [2.3.21-23]). Moreover, the duke's final remarks about Mariana indicate another overstepping of his position: “I have confessed her, and I know her virtue” (5.1.530). Given the

⁷⁹ Dubrow's analysis of the moon-as-step-mother similes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* points to a similar phenomenon: “Because this allusion to stepdames and dowagers appears in a simile, the line rhetorically enacts their roles as substitutes, as people who are both like and unlike, who both fill and draw attention to absence.” Heather Dubrow, “‘I fear there will a worse come in his place’: Surrogate Parents and Shakespeare's *Richard III*,” in *Maternal Measures: Figuring Caregiving in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Naomi J. Miller and Maomi Yavneh (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 348.

overlap between Vincentio's rightful sovereign power and his usurpation of religious authority—his willingness to confess, pardon, and marry various individuals in the play and to declare the state of their virtue—the distinction between being a true friar and being “like a true friar” becomes almost impossible to sustain.

At first blush this reading implies that similes and the commonality they promise between the thing itself and the descriptor are powerful and reliable: the duke gains plenty of influence, it seems, from being like a friar. However, as Beckwith shows, Vincentio's actions undermine the sacred authority they invoke because “the disguise...changes the nature of the actions they have undertaken and violates [the other characters'] consent.”⁸⁰ Ultimately, the duke's performance disrupts all his sanctified actions by “violat[ing] the very principle of consent in the confessional and in marriage, two areas where the voluntary movements of the heart were historically regarded as completely central.”⁸¹ Vincentio's disguise draws upon the agency and reputation of the church, but, in doing so, he lessens the sacred authority of the “true friar.” His figurative language mirrors the costuming phenomenon scholars such as Beckwith have observed, because Vincentio's similes lend him power that is weakened by its use. Shakespeare invites the audience to confront the problematic question Vincentio's language creates: do figurative expressions make communication and comprehension easier, or do they add another level of interpretive difficulty to the process? If metaphor is susceptible to interpretation, then it also presents opportunities for rhetorical manipulation.

The manipulative capacity of the duke's similes is nowhere more obvious than in his final appeals to Isabelle, which include unreliable metaphorical language that grates uncomfortably against the action of the play. When the duke promises Isabella “As I was then / Advertising and

⁸⁰ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 69.

⁸¹ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 60.

holy to your business, / Not changing heart with habit, I am still” (5.1.384-86), he claims the change he has undergone is solely one of costuming. He argues that he will continue to act as a friar, attentively devoted to Isabella’s “business.” Vincentio’s witty play on the word holy, however, emphasizes the space between the holy father he has appeared to be and the devoted, amorous prince and husband he intends to become. Even if, from Vincentio’s perspective, he may continue to perform the same role toward Isabella, the linguistic appeal breaks down once Isabella hears it, so that the “pardon” (5.1.386) she must beg has sovereign, rather than religious or personal consequences.

Moreover, when Vincentio reveals the still-living Claudio to Isabella, he uses similes to manage her response and coerce her into a marriage she has not sought. In this scene, carefully orchestrated by the duke, the provost tells the crowd he spared a prisoner “as like almost to Claudio as himself” (5.1.492). Vincentio constructs the following, subtle argument to convince Isabella to marry him:

If he be like your brother, for his sake
Is he pardoned, and for your lovely sake,
Give me your hand and say you will be mine,
He is my brother too (5.1.493-96)

The provost’s language (echoed here in Vincentio’s proposal) has obvious theatrical value: in promising to produce a prisoner like Claudio, the provost builds suspense, but the similes also serve as a reminder of the instability of language. Shakespeare invites his audience to consider this exchange in relation to the duke’s earlier discussion about masquerading as a religious official: Vincentio’s remarks about Claudio’s likeness to Isabella’s brother echo his earlier promise to behave like a brother of the religious order. Additionally, Vincentio’s proposal is manipulative, implying that Claudio’s pardon is contingent upon Isabella’s willingness to marry. The duke’s rhetoric again confounds the distinction between figurative language and actual

circumstances; he says that Claudio is like Isabella's brother, despite the fact that Claudio is, in fact, Isabella's brother. Shortly thereafter, Vincentio claims that Claudio "is my brother too," though Claudio and the duke have no familial connection at this point. The duke's move from figurative "like" to the definitive "is" may increase the likelihood of his marriage by amassing his authority and subtly veiling a threat (Vincentio seems to hint: "it is not, perhaps, enough for Claudio to be like my brother. If you want me to pardon him, he must be my brother"), but this tactic may feel calculating and unsavory to audience members who meditate on the duke's manipulation of figurative language. If the audience regards Isabella's match as coerced, imposed upon her by the duke's power, they may notice how his cunning use of rhetoric has helped him achieve all his desired ends. Vincentio's figurative language does not always provide his audience with access to empirical truth; instead, like the metaphors of the Reformation polemicists, it demonstrate both how language can be employed in a way that either creates or obscures meaning and that language is an effective method for consolidating authority.

Vincentio's decision to dress as a friar is a sign not only of the constructed nature of his power, but also of his skeptical predilection for redescription. This process "thwarts or bypasses available stabilizing hierarchies of description, raises the possibility that of dialogic redescription there can be no end, and thus forces one to think of truth as a mutable human commodity rather than a natural or God-given certainty."⁸² Lars Engle identifies a series of such redescriptions concerning sex and morality, spoken by a number of characters in *Measure for Measure*.⁸³ I would add that the duke's language and actions throughout the play often function as redescriptions. His costume change allows him to redescribe his own power, from that of a

⁸² Lars Engle, "Measure for Measure and Modernity: The Problem of the Sceptic's Authority," in *Shakespeare and Modernity: Early Modern to Millennium*, ed. Hugh Grady (New York: Routledge, 2000), 88.

⁸³ Engle, "Measure for Measure and Modernity," 89-92.

divinely appointed sovereign to that of a divinely appointed church official. Moreover, his figurative language re-describes the authority and significance of religious officials, by suggesting that being like a friar generates the same power as truly being a friar.

In addition to this predilection for re-description, the duke's response to his role as an authority figure and a law enforcer suggests that he has doubts about the source and potency of his authority. The duke regards truth as malleable and his own power as mutable. This knowledge that power is negotiable likely accounts for the duke's hesitance to stage himself and his authority.⁸⁴ Engle ultimately claims that Shakespeare uses Vincentio to demonstrate the difficult negotiation a skeptic experiences when he must be involved in "social enforcement."⁸⁵ The employment of Angelo allows him to enforce a political position which he feels is necessary, even as he experiences reservations about it. Similarly, Vincentio is able to re-describe his power to achieve his end goal: a stable Vienna with citizens who recognize his authority and participate in the marriage economy. However, just as his figurative language and costuming compromise the sources of power he seeks to exploit, the duke's final staging of his authority emphasizes the rights and roles of everyday citizens. The duke's decree that citizens may meet him at the gates with any complaints against the law, "on the one hand...magnifies the sovereignty of the Duke, evoking his sublime embodiment of a quasi-divine justice," but, "also begins to call forth a political sense of citizenship, as a formalized set of political rights, including rights of petition and assembly."⁸⁶ The duke's attempts to amass power also expose the instability of power, and Shakespeare underscores this important facet of the play—not only

⁸⁴ Jeffrey S. Doty, "Measure for Measure and the Problem of Popularity," *English Literary Renaissance* 42, no. 1 (2012): 43.

⁸⁵ Engle, "Measure for Measure and Modernity," 102.

⁸⁶ Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 151.

through the duke's costuming—but also through the figurative language he uses to express and enact his divine and political authority.

Approaching the sonnets through *Measure for Measure* makes one particularly aware of metaphor's potential to disguise, rather than reveal, meaning and motivation. Just as the duke's monastic attire alters the way his audience within the play responds to him, his use of figurative language changes the responses generated by his speeches. Onstage, costumes (and especially disguises) are a fairly obvious sign of the unreliability of a given perspective. In speeches and printed texts, there are more subtle signs of this same phenomenon, and in the sonnets, the metaphors of disguise, façade, and clothing encourage readers to regard the images invoked by figurative language as dense and multi-faceted: an opportunity for interpretation and misinterpretation, rather than merely a sign of the truth or knowledge the author wants to communicate. Moreover, *Measure for Measure*'s religious content and monastic costuming suggest that Shakespeare was concerned with the devices that allowed religious officials both to establish their authority and to communicate complex spiritual and philosophical concepts to their audiences. Like *Measure for Measure*, the sonnet sequence borrows from the rhetorical devices of Reformation-era religious officials; the sonnets are unique, however, in the particulars of this usage since they allow Shakespeare to present a variety of brief interpretations of the tropes and images of religious discourse. Because the devices are often contained within a single sonnet (or within two sonnets, as in 64 and 65), and because of the sheer number of sonnets, Shakespeare can offer his reader a variety of perspectives on and experiences related to the tropes of the Reformation.

Unstable Religious Metaphors in the Sonnets

One example of how the sonnets engage with the rhetoric of the Reformation is the use of architectural metaphors interspersed throughout the sequence. Questions about the nature of God's "house" figured prominently in arguments and decisions about the religious authority structure of Reformation England. For instance, Thomas Becon represents the "church of Christ" as:

The whole number of the faithful believers in Christ's coming, sufferance, and resurrection; members of the mystical body of Christ, grains to make one loaf, grapes to make one wine, lively stones to build on a spiritual house, in Christ to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through the same Christ Jesus, which is the head of the said body, the corner-stone of the said house.⁸⁷

Becon's analysis figures the body as a house or temple for God. His metaphors (the church as body, the faithful as a temple) offer two familiar images in order to describe the relationship between Christ and his believers. In the Protestant model of the church, espoused by Becon, Christ is the head or cornerstone for his faithful, all of whom are depicted as equals; they are barely, if at all, distinguished from one another as the blend to make a single entity (bread, wine, house, body), which is lead or supported by Christ.

The sonnets recycle such metaphors of the Reformation, describing the plight of the sinful soul in architectural, corporeal, and gustatory terms. Polemicists like Becon sought to keep such metaphors distinct from one another. The readers are supposed to envision each image, separated by a comma, which selectively or collectively lead them to a better understanding of the concept Becon describes. Perhaps a particular reader will be familiar with all the metaphors to which Becon alludes, but perhaps not. If she has never seen a cornerstone, another, more familiar, image will serve in its place to communicate the same concept. Becon's metaphors are

⁸⁷ Thomas Becon, *The demaundes of the holy scripture* (1577).

designed to invoke a series of commonplace images in order to render an abstract concept concrete and consumable for his reader. In contrast, Shakespeare invokes similar images in his sonnets in a way that highlights their multiplicity of meanings; while Bacon uses a series of metaphors to support and sustain a single meaning, Shakespeare uses variations on the same metaphor to render its meaning more complex and uncertain.

In some of the sonnets, architectural metaphors are designed to encourage procreation by likening ancestry and progeny as a family home, or, similarly, by using the house to represent the physical characteristics passed from one generation to another. Sonnet 10 is an example of the latter practice. The speaker accuses the young man of “Seeking that beautiful rooffe to ruinate, / Which to repaire should be thy chiefe desire,” asking “Shall hate be fairer log’d than gentle love?” (10.7-8, 10). The architectural metaphor draws the skeptical distinction between appearance and internal or abstract concepts, suggesting that there should be (but is not) a fair emotional expression and a kind heart lodged inside a beautiful personage. Like sonnet 10, sonnet 13 represents the fading youthful looks of the young man as a decaying building, asking,

Who lets so faire a house fall to decay,
Which husbandry in honour might uphold,
Against the stormy gusts of winters day
And barren rage of deaths eternall cold? (13.9-12)

In these instances, the “house” the speaker imagines is the lineage of the young man’s family. In order to maintain such a house in spite of time and the elements, the young man must procreate. In both of these instances, architecture is represented as both mutable and able to remain static in the face of time and change. The young man’s house is subject to ruin and decay caused by death and weather, but it may also defy such limitations through repair and husbandry. Within the procreation sonnets, buildings are threatened with destruction but are capable of transcending it.

In other sonnets, the architectural metaphors do not suggest durability, serving instead to remind the subject and reader of the impermanence of seemingly stable monuments. Sonnet 64, for instance, uses the razing of “lofty towers” (64.3) to ruminate on mortality. In response to the deterioration and demolition of man-made structures, Shakespeare represents poetry as a viable replacement for such monuments. Shakespeare responds to his confrontation of mortality in sonnet 64 hopefully: “Or who his spoile or beautie can forbid? / O none, unlesse this miracle have might, / That in black inck my love may still shine bright” (65.12-14). As sonnet 55 famously does, sonnets 64 and 65 invoke images of architecture not to inspire the reader with a sense of stability and permanence; rather, such metaphors offer the opposite perspective, representing the purported stability of man-made structures as vulnerable, crumbling, or fading.

As the images of stability and instability in earlier sonnets demonstrate, building metaphors spread throughout the sequence encourage the reader to consider the different functions and values of a device commonly used in the religious discourse of the day. Some sonnets go beyond offering different perspectives on a single religious image. Combining the architectural with other religious metaphors alters their meaning and effect on the reader. For example, sonnet 125 compounds its architectural images with a set of allusions related to the Eucharist:

Were't ought to me I bore the canopy,
With my extern the outward honoring,
Or layd great bases for eternity,
Which proves more short then wast or ruining?
Have I not seene dwellers on forme and favor
Lose all, and more by paying too much rent
For compound sweets; Forgoing simple savor,
Pittifull thrivors in their gazing spent.
Noe, let me be obsequious in thy heart,
And take thou my oblation, poore but free,
Which is not mixt with seconds, knows no art,
But mutuall render onely me for thee.

Hence, thou subbornd Informer, a trew soule
When most impeach, stands least in thy controule.

The sonnet's first architectural metaphor harkens back to those of earlier sonnets, where the speaker acknowledges that the man-made structures, or "bases" like those at the bottom of a column, intended to last forever ("for eternity") are only short-lived. In addition to this decaying structure of the opening quatrain, sonnet 125 includes a housing metaphor that generates questions about cost and value. Once the "dwellers" of line five are coupled with "rent" in line six, it becomes clear that Shakespeare is engaging a building metaphor that contrasts the expense of outward show with the value of true emotional or devotional expression. The dwellers, like the young in sonnet 10, forsake positive characteristics ("simple savor") for audacious display. They subject themselves to financial loss for the sake of "gazing," prizing the appearance of their house without accurately considering its cost.

Such criticism about the value of surface appearances extends beyond mere vanity and foolishness, condemning the penchants for display many polemicists associated with Catholicism. The speaker confesses that he has often "bore the canopy," as Catholic priests would have done during with the procession of the Eucharist, and he associates this action with pomp and vanity. This allusion to a Catholic ritual is paired with several more general religious references: in addition to the most obvious "trew soule," "obsequious" suggests a willingness to perform obsequies, or funeral rites, and "oblations" were often gifts to the church.⁸⁸ The speaker contrasts his own devoted offerings with those of the dwellers and his former self, where his new oblation lacks the ostentation and corruption of those offered by people more concerned with appearances.

⁸⁸ "obsequious, adj.". OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/129863?redirectedFrom=obsequious>; "oblation, n.". OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/129667?redirectedFrom=oblation>.

These Catholic and religious references, intertwined with a description of the bodies devoted to outward show, reflect the complexity of post-Reformation discourse, which had much work to do in separating the excess of Catholic “temples” from the human body as “temple.” This tension is present in Tudor homilies, where authors are at great pains to separate the metaphors and distinguish the accurate from the misleading:

Although the eternall and incomprehensible majestie of God...can not be inclosed in temples or houses made with mans hande...Muche lesse then be our Churches meete dwelling places to receive the incomprehensible majestie of God. And in deed, The cheefe and special temples of God, wherein he hath greatest pleasure, and moste delyghteth to dwell and continue in, are the bodyes and myndes of true Christians, and the chosen people of GOD, accordyng to the doctrine of the holye scripture, declared in the firste Epistle to the Corinthians...Knowe ye not that your body is the temple of the holye ghost dwelling in you, whom ye have geven you of God, and that ye be not your owne? for ye are dearely bought. Glorifie ye nowe therefore God in your body, and in your spirite, whiche are Gods.⁸⁹

Similar to that of the transubstantiation debate, the rhetoric of this homily is designed to devalue the physical appearance of the church in favor of a metaphorical substitute. Moreover, as Jennifer Waldron argues, this passage articulates the charged and changing function of the religious body.⁹⁰ Waldron analyzes Bottom’s paraphrase of the same passage from Corinthians explicated by the homilist, suggesting that he experiences his “dreamed” encounter synaesthetically, or across the senses. Bottom confounds his senses when he proclaims, “The eye of man that not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was” (4.1.207-210). This synaesthesia “redirects the Pauline epistles towards a post-Reformation performance theory that is centered on the body even as it is strikingly de-centered by the body’s distributed functions and collective properties.” It also emphasizes the separateness of each physical experience (hearing, seeing), but suggests a

⁸⁹ *The second tome of homilyes* (1563), 4-5.

⁹⁰ Jennifer Waldron, “‘The eye of man hath not heard’: Shakespeare, synaesthesia, and post-reformation phenomenology,” *Criticism* 54, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 412.

unique form of knowledge is available from the collective experiences.⁹¹ Sonnet 125 offers a similar experience, not with the body, but with its diverse religious metaphors. Out of these isolated, contradictory images, which both borrow from and condemn the displays associated with Catholicism, new experiences emerge. Moreover, the sonnet sequence as a whole generates a synaesthetic experience from its varied architectural metaphors. Taken together, the different significations of the metaphors do not merely confuse one another, they offer a sublime representation of their diverse capacities to make and communicate meaning.

A comparable recognition of the isolation or insufficiency of a single image, paired with a subsequent experience of the sublimity of images in collaboration exists in Montaigne's *Journal de voyage*. David Sedley argues that, by using an extensive catalogue of metaphors and descriptors to communicate the concept of the Roman ruins to his reader, Montaigne generates an experience of the sublime:

The frenzied multiplication of efforts to refer to Rome belies the success of any one of them. The very abundance of errant references, however, points to the true dimensions of ancient grandeur insofar as they indicate the magnitude of the exertion involved in trying to wrap the meditative mind around Rome. Admiration that pretends to succeed in this effort manages only to reduce Rome to the dimensions of the human mind. Montaigne's praise orients itself not away from but toward skepticism, which in turn elevates the object of praise, since the confusion that results from trying to comprehend Rome lifts Rome above the ceiling of comprehension.⁹²

In Sedley's reading of Montaigne, skepticism does not constitute merely an absence of knowledge, an immobilizing awareness of the imperfection of human understanding and communication. Instead, the insufficiency of any single image used in the past to reconstruct the glory of ancient Rome drives Montaigne to an array of metaphors that generates a new and productive experience. Montaigne does not reconstruct the ruins for his reader, but he does

⁹¹ Waldron, "The eye of man hath not heard," 413.

⁹² Sedley, *Sublimity and Skepticism*, 41.

appeal to “the sublime...through a series of impasses to grandeur erected by skepticism.”⁹³ Sedley’s reading of Montaigne’s work illustrates how Renaissance skepticism could serve as a source for meaning-making. Shakespeare recognizes this aesthetic value of skepticism in his sonnets, where jumbled metaphors may prevent the reader from developing a static, coherent understanding of the subject in favor of an emotionally charged, dynamic response to the sublime. As the architectural metaphors which occur throughout the sonnet sequence demonstrate, Shakespeare has a talent for revealing the existence of multiple viable perspectives. Acknowledging and recording such a variety of perspectives enables poet and reader to generate new sensations and understandings.

By creating new experiences for the reader out of isolated and confused descriptors, the sonnets become epistemologically generative. The text produces knowledge, the nature of which is dependent in part upon the reader’s unique reaction. Shakespeare utilizes metaphors to enable a novel experience of potentially familiar tropes, one that necessarily depends upon the reader’s previous experiences with those tropes. As sonnet 18 acknowledges—“So long as men can breath or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14)—the poem’s function depends in large part upon the continued existence of a reading audience, which gives life to the poem as the poem gives life to its subject. The correlation between textual and sexual production overtly present in, for instance, sonnet 17 (“But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice in it and in my rhyme”) exists throughout the sequence, where new or revisited tropes and images give rise to new concepts and sensations. Shakespeare’s tendency to recycle and revisit is especially obvious when he works with religious tropes, as he does in sonnet 146.

⁹³ Sedley, *Sublimity and Skepticism*, 42.

Shakespeare's sonnets almost never engage the topic of religion directly, choosing instead to borrow more subtly from the vocabularies of eschatology, penitence, and other sacraments. Sonnet 146, a straightforward devotional sonnet (much like those popularized by John Donne), is one exception. In examining the differences between the internal state of the soul and external display, sonnet 146 is overtly epistemological. The sonnet's deployment of religious metaphors highlights their malleability, and the critical tradition surrounding this sonnet demonstrates the instability of commonplace tropes and images:

Poore soule the center of my sinfull earth,
My sinfull earth these rebbell powres that thee array,
Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth
Painting thy outward walls so costlie gay?
Why so large cost having so short a lease,
Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
Shall wormes inheritors of this excesse,
Eat up thy charge? is this thy bodies end?
Then soule live thou upon thy servants losse,
And let that pine to aggravat thy store,
Buy tearmes divine in selling houres of drosse;
Within be fed, without be rich no more,
So shalt thou feed on death, that feeds on men,
And death once dead, there's no more dying then.

Much of the religious content of this sonnet comes from familiar Christian metaphors. These metaphors, like those in many of Shakespeare's works, are distinctive in the way they are blended together. Here Shakespeare borrows not only from the religious discourse on the soul/body split, but also from legal and economic vocabularies, using metaphors related to architecture, clothing, and master-servant relationships. On the surface, at least, the poem clearly encourages an ascetic lifestyle, through which the body is deprived of pleasure or overindulgence in order to strengthen the soul. However, the diverse vocabulary—paired with the paradoxical, apocalyptic conclusion—renders the poem difficult to interpret.

Rather than offering a single, sustained metaphor or a series of distinct metaphors to assist his reader in better understanding his ascetic argument, Shakespeare represents these common images so that they sometimes interrupt and conflict with one another. For instance, the notion that an individual might inherit his father's excessively decorated mansion is fairly easy to imagine, but Shakespeare separates these complementary metaphors by the disparate image of the worm, which not only inherits excess, but also consumes it. This unconventional trope of feeding on wealth becomes a recurring theme in the sonnet, which uses metaphors of feeding without any mention of food. Instead, the feeder sustains himself on excess, servant's loss, or death itself.

Compacted by the short space of the sonnet, the metaphors create a unique perspective on the vexing process of making and communicating knowledge, similar to the process a Pyrrhonist skeptic might undergo. As Robert Pierce explains "The sceptic repeatedly leads his or her pupil...from a familiar premise to the conclusion that for any one cherished belief there is another equally likely belief...The rational position is not to choose between the two equally likely verdicts."⁹⁴ The critical response to this poem, where scholars suppress certain metaphors and connotations in favor of those that confirm their own reading, is evidence of the interpretive struggle incited by a careful examination of this poem. Though sonnet 146 has fallen out of fashion and the conversation about Shakespeare's religious sonnet has died down, scholars continue to read this poem as an indicator of Shakespeare's personal convictions.⁹⁵ Rodney

⁹⁴ Robert B. Pierce, "Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Skepticism," *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1993): 146.

⁹⁵ Since the debate about the religious content of the sonnet died down in the 1970s, relatively little has been written about Sonnet 146, though perhaps the tides are changing. In her argument that the sonnets hold allegorical, alchemical significance, Margaret Healy labels this sonnet the "climax" of Shakespeare's meditation on different kinds of "stores." For Healy, the sonnet illustrates the principle of Hermetic ascent, through which worldly fortune is eschewed in favor of the store of intellectual memory, through which "spiritual capital is accrued." *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: The Sonnets and A Lover's Complaint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37.

Stenning Edgecombe has recently argued that sonnets 123-25 and 146 may express Catholic sentiments (which, in Edgecomb's reading, would account for the necessary opacity). He regards sonnet 146 as a call for a deathbed display of Catholic faith. Though I do not find Edgecombe's reading particularly convincing, it is the latest permutation of a long critical tradition, in which the religious content of sonnet 146 provokes uncertainty and religious fascination.⁹⁶

The instability and multiplicity of the metaphors creates a great deal of confusion, which is manifest in the scholarly work on sonnet 146. John Crowe Ransom experiences an uneasy response to the sonnet's metaphors of consumption, suggesting that lines seven, eight, and thirteen are "cannibalistic...Taken literally, the notions in these lines are horrid and to me very painful."⁹⁷ A careful reader may initially resist the religious message of the sonnet because the figurative language either prevents her from visualizing the scenes described in the sonnet or creates an unsavory image for those, like Ransom, who try to take the sonnet's descriptors literally. Shakespeare's contemporaries, however, may have found in the unconventional eating metaphors a reference to transubstantiation. A frequent argument against this Catholic sacrament, here represented in L'Epine's version, claims that "if then the bread were chaunged into his bodie, and the wine into his blood (as many affirme) then shoulde Jesus Christ have eaten himself, which is a monstrous absurditie to say."⁹⁸ Within the rhetoric of the Reformed church, the Catholic process of transubstantiation changes a sign of devotion into "a carnall eatinge."⁹⁹ Even if the "cannibalistic" lines obliquely refer to the transubstantiation debate, this

⁹⁶ Rodney Stenning Edgecombe, "Three Notes on Shakespeare," *Ben Jonson Journal* 19, no. 2 (May 2012): 127-41.

⁹⁷ Qtd. in Donald A. Stauffer, "Critical Principles and a Sonnet," *The American Scholar* 12 (1942-43): 61.

⁹⁸ L'Epine, *A Confutation*, 8.

⁹⁹ Lewys Evans, *A Shorte Treatyse of the mysterie of the Euchariste* (1560).

fact only creates more epistemological difficulty for the reader, who must reconcile these images and allusions with the other religious and secular content of the sonnet.

The scholarly debate surrounding this poem, though sparse, illustrates the multiple perspectives available on sonnet 146. As Stephen Booth notes in his analysis, the scholarship on this poem “exhibit[s] the debilitating effects of insisting that anything that is true must be exclusively true and that the presence of one implication necessarily diminishes the force of counter implications that are also present.”¹⁰⁰ This debate is best represented in two articles that appeared in *Shakespeare Quarterly* in the 1960s. First, B.C. Southam suggests that Shakespeare uses sonnet 146 to critique the religious practices he describes. In particular, Southam argues the notion that the soul would benefit upon the loss of a servant (146.9) is “perverted.”¹⁰¹ He characterizes the poem as an ironic humanist response to a doctrine of rigorous asceticism.¹⁰² Such a reading, Southam suggests, elevates the poem beyond its widely accepted position as “merely an endorsement of Christian asceticism.”¹⁰³ In response to this argument, Charles Huttar published a defense of the Christian undertones of the sonnet, concluding that Shakespeare was writing safely within the confines of Christian orthodoxy. Huttar, in fact, argues that “It is not necessary...to discover in this sonnet a humanism which avoids the supposed contradictions of Christianity. For Christianity itself avoids these contradictions. The critics who for decades agreed in calling this a Christian poem were not mistaken.”¹⁰⁴ Huttar claims the Southam oversimplifies and overstates the complex mandates given by Christian doctrine.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 508.

¹⁰¹ B.C. Southam, “Shakespeare’s Christian Sonnet? Number 146,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 11 (1960): 70.

¹⁰² Southam, “Shakespeare’s Christian Sonnet?” 71.

¹⁰³ Southam, “Shakespeare’s Christian Sonnet?” 68.

¹⁰⁴ Charles A. Huttar, “The Christian Basis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 146,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (1968): 357.

One source for the dispute exemplified in Southam and Huttar's debate is Shakespeare's own use of metaphor. The poem avails itself of such a variety of figurative language, some that is conventionally religious and some that is decidedly secular. This abundance of metaphors accounts for the uncertainty about its meaning. Southam's entire argument hinges upon his response to the figurative language. While he acknowledges that "the feeling, thought, and expression, are in perfect harmony" and confirm a Christian ascetic reading, he argues that "the technical imagery [of the second quatrain], derived from the fields of law, real estate, and architecture, creates a curiously cold, analytic air" that makes way for the "indignation" readers experience in the octave.¹⁰⁵ Critics of Southam's reading bristle at this suggestion, proposing different responses to metaphor. Huttar is in awe of the second quatrain's ability to elevate a fairly ordinary sentiment through its "remarkable condensation."¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Robert Hillis Goldsmith's refutation of Southam's argument offers a different response to the variety of images: "Human compassion is not blunted by use of matter-of-fact language and imagery (as Robert Frost has so ably demonstrated in our time); instead it acquires a keener edge by such juxtaposition."¹⁰⁷ This critical impasse cannot be resolved. Readers bring their own experiences and expectations of how metaphors work to the poem. Shakespeare's contemporaries, unlike Goldsmith, could not filter their response through the poetry of Robert Frost, but their responses were certainly governed by some context, religious, personal, or otherwise. Goldsmith and Huttar, for instance, read the poem through their religious experiences, regarding Shakespeare's selection of images as generally commonplace. However, something about the coexistence and organization of these images has driven scholars of the poem to write entire paragraphs about,

¹⁰⁵ Southam, "Shakespeare's Christian Sonnet?" 69-70.

¹⁰⁶ Huttar, "The Christian Basis," 362.

¹⁰⁷ Robert Hillis Goldsmith, "Shakespeare's Christian Sonnet, Number 146," *Studies in Literary Imagination* 11, no. 1 (1978): 100.

for instance, the nature of an effective siege.¹⁰⁸ Proving that Shakespeare's metaphors draw on the Bible does not provide a definitive interpretation of the sonnet; doing so merely provides one perspective from which many readers have read and will read it.

The longstanding challenge to epistemological certainty present in sonnet 146 stems from the metaphorical content of the sonnet. At the conclusion of a debate, held among five literature scholars and recorded by Donald Stauffer, about sonnet 146, Daniel Aaron offers a frustrated response to the group's inability to come to a consensus about the sonnet: "I wonder whether we have decided anything. Perhaps each of us simply created Shakespeare in his own image."¹⁰⁹ As in Aaron's comment, Southam, Huttar, and Goldsmith err in trying to use Shakespeare's metaphors to come to a definitive decision about the religious qualities of the poem. Booth's characteristically insightful explication of the scholarly debate surrounding this poem declares both Southam and Huttar's arguments flawed by reductive reasoning. Offering the difficulty of reading sonnet 146 as a model for reading generally, he argues:

Nothing one says or thinks about a poem can change it. What one says about a poem can sometimes change the angle of a reader's perception of it, but one cannot stop the poem from doing all that it does or argue it into doing what it does not. No interpretive description of a poem can nullify any of the actions the poem performs upon a reader's understanding...An interpretive description can even convince a reader that some of his experience of a poem does not or should not occur, but that is not at all the same thing as actually doing away with those responses.¹¹⁰

Booth's analysis describes a fundamental experience of reading Shakespeare's poetry: multiple interpretive possibilities exist, and those interpretations are fluid—conflicting with one another, rising or falling in significance given a particular context, and developing through the process of rereading. Huttar accurately identifies the source for many of these metaphors as Christian texts

¹⁰⁸ Huttar, "The Christian Basis," 361.

¹⁰⁹ Qtd. in Stauffer, "Critical Principles and a Sonnet," 61.

¹¹⁰ Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 514.

and doctrine, but Shakespeare combines these images so that they jar with one another. Consequently, they invoke a complex visual experience for the reader, who sees conflicting metaphorical images like a theatergoer might see Catholic regalia worn by an actor: while some of the significance initially attached to the image lingers, it overlaps with new meanings that reveal the instability of any meaning associated with an image. Ransom and Southam are warranted too, then, for expressing discomfort with the sonnet's religious content. Such limited interpretations undermine the poem's Pyrrhonian project, which invites readers to acknowledge conflicting readings and resolve not to choose among them.

Despite sonnet 146's waning interest among scholars, it offers a uniquely pleasant experience that typifies Shakespeare's perspective on Pyrrhonist philosophy. Like the Pyrrhonists, Shakespeare regards uncertainty as a generative state that can invoke positive or neutral emotional responses, rather than merely anxious, negative ones. The interpretive block depicted in the Southam/Huttar argument springs from Shakespeare's skeptical engagement with a series of metaphors, which may lead the reader to a sublime experience of the sonnet's religious message. In addition to its possible appeals to the sublime, the poem functions like an old-fashioned secretaire desk or a Shakespearean revenge tragedy, appearing as something familiar and straightforward. Upon further interrogation, however, the sonnet unfolds and reveals secret drawers, layers of hidden potential. It is through its surprising depth—the thrill in discovering new possibilities that confound one's theory—that the poem generates pleasure. An appreciation for such subtlety may be what inspired the five scholars Stauffer records to focus so much attention on this particular sonnet. I have used it as my own case study because it demonstrates the connection between Shakespeare's skepticism about figurative language and the metaphors of the Reformation. As he does in *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare uses his

sonnets to highlight the instability of metaphorical language. While polemicists use architectural and corporeal metaphors in the hopes of communicating stable truths to their readers, Shakespeare's poetic and theatrical works demonstrate the ability of language to signify differently in varying contexts and for diverse purposes.

I argue in the coming chapters that this project of examining and critiquing metaphorical content occurs throughout the sonnets. Shakespeare consistently calls the familiar to his reader's minds, invoking popular metaphors related to religion, theater, and the sonnet tradition, in order to make them feel unfamiliar or insufficient. In doing so, he encourages his audience to look past the fiction of epistemological certainty espoused by, for instance, religious authorities and sonneteers. Rather than merely encouraging them to read skeptically, Shakespeare invites his readers to engage in a Pyrrhonist embrace of the unknown, to remember that uncertainty and critical inquiry can be sources for both meaning-making and pleasurable reading experiences. Shakespeare's contemporaries may have been much more attuned to the potential for delight that, I argue, stems from the unknown and the practices of developing and altering interpretations because of their experiences with the burgeoning theater culture. The disputed role of the theater, which was variously regarded as a source for sinful corruption or edifying entertainment, functions as an important theme in Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic works.

CHAPTER 3

THE POET “NEVER LIETH”

The crisis in religious identity that marked the Protestant Reformation exerted a shaping influence over Renaissance ideas about the nature of truth. This religious turmoil also spurred an antitheatrical tradition that regarded playhouses as sites of deception and sinful corruption. For antitheatrical writers, the theater constitutes a threat because its false representations create negative, tangible results in the audience. Conversely, early modern literary advocates like Sidney and Shakespeare regard literature as one facet in a process of meaning-making that can be both a source for pleasure and an edifying experience. The works of Sidney and Shakespeare celebrate both the power poets can exert over their readers, and the unique perspective of the reader, which is integral to the process of meaning-making. Benefitting from Sidney’s insights on the embodied effects of literature and the value of destabilizing Petrarchan conceits, Shakespeare moves beyond the Pyrrhonists embrace of uncertainty. He offers a new form of epistemology, not dependent upon empirical truths, but rather upon communal experiences. Shakespeare’s sonnets privilege the kind of collaborative epistemology Sidney acknowledges in his poetry and prose.

This chapter examines how ideas about truth were complicated by the early modern interest in impact of literature on the minds and souls of its audience members. I begin with an overview of antitheatrical texts that use metaphors to correlate experiences of the physical world with abstract concepts about the brain and soul (where images of the theater or the experience of eating delicious food, for example, can impact not only the body, but also the mental and spiritual state of the participants). Like the antitheatrical writers to whom he responds, Sidney recognizes that the literature can cause embodied effects, but the nature of those effects depends

upon a more complex process of epistemological collaboration, where the concept an author seeks to communicate (such as a moral truth) is not transferred into the brain of the reader, but adopts a specific significance that depends upon context. Consequently, Sidney appreciates the important role perspective plays in creating knowledge, as I demonstrate in the second portion of this chapter, where I analyze Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* and some of his sonnets for representations of collective meaning-making. In his sonnets, Sidney struggles to write meaningfully within a tradition whose conventions are familiar and well-established. Influenced by Sidney's works, Shakespeare grapples with similar issues in his plays and poetry. Because this chapter examines popular attitudes about the effects of the theater, the third section analyzes the epistemological function of performance in some of Shakespeare's plays. Performance, a form of willful deception, often works as an epistemological tool for Shakespeare's characters, including Hamlet and Paulina, who use the theater to create and share experiences rather than to communicate stable empirical truths. Many of Shakespeare's plays emphasize that the ability to acknowledge multiple perspectives, a tenet held by the Pyrrhonists, enables individuals to strengthen their relationships and communities. While such themes are particularly easy to identify in Shakespeare's plays, their unique treatment in the sonnets offers important insight into both Shakespeare's response to the Petrarchan tradition and his Pyrrhonian predilection for embracing uncertainty. In my final section, I examine Shakespeare's allusions to theater in the sonnets, demonstrating how these metaphors make Shakespeare's sonnet unique in their response to the Petrarchan tradition; faced with the same difficulty as Sidney, Shakespeare makes meaning by investing his sonnets with theatrical metaphors that highlight the constructed nature of epistemology.

Embodied Knowledge and Antitheatrical Polemic

Criticism of the Renaissance theater is linked, not only to the religious discourse I outlined in Chapter 2, but also to the questions about meaning-making and knowledge acquisition implicit in that discourse. Compelling arguments have established the interdependence of religious reformation, antitheatrical polemic, and the theater, demonstrating how these fields exerted a shaping influence over one another. Huston Diehl, for instance, examines how the antitheatrical polemic developed its criticisms in response to anxiety about image and idol worship. Placing her claims in opposition to those of Colin MacCabe and Jonas Barish, Diehl argues that antitheatricalists attacked the stage, not primarily because of the sexual licentiousness of both performances and audience members, but because of the “Protestant culture’s iconophobia.”¹¹¹ In response to this iconophobia, through which “the antitheatricalists conclude that all forms of theater are polluted and should be forbidden,” the playwrights “seek to reform the stage, developing rhetorical strategies that disrupt older modes of sight and producing plays that conform to Protestant theories of art and representation.”¹¹² Diehl demonstrates that polemicists and playwrights alike were concerned about how audience members would understand and interpret the images and performances they experienced at the theater; for polemicists, this uncertainty was justification for closing the theater, but playwrights seized the unique opportunities of the Reformation to create a new aesthetic. Though Diehl regards this aesthetic as “Protestant,” I argue for its Pyrrhonist influence.¹¹³ Disrupting “older modes of

¹¹¹ Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 175. MacCabe argues that “the Puritan attacks on the theatre are perhaps the best introduction to understanding what Elizabethan theatre was actually like. Far from being incoherent or inconsistent they indicate clearly what is socially and sexually at stake in the new symbolic spaces created by Burbage and his fellow entrepreneurs.” “Abusing Self and Others: Puritan Accounts of the Shakespearian Stage,” *Critical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1988): 4.

¹¹² Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 66.

¹¹³ Diehl, *Staging Reform*, 66.

sight” is an inherently skeptical exercise, and the works of Sidney and Shakespeare are invested, like the Pyrrhonists, in exposing inherited perspectives for being limited and confining.

In addition to historical arguments about the religious causes and social effects of antitheatrical polemic, scholars have looked to the antitheatrical texts to determine how early modern writers and thinkers conceived of selfhood. Jonathan Crewe, for instance, argues that in William Rankins’s polemic “the inwardness of the moral or ‘carnal’ condition of pride has given way to a corresponding external condition belonging to the theater.” As a result of Rankins’s projection of the abstract onto the theater, “the substance of the self, capable of being infected by evil but also of being healed, dissolved in the Elizabethan theatrical world of magnified appearances.”¹¹⁴ Contradictory to Crewe’s notion of the dissolving self, Barish attributes anxiety over the theaters to “the fears of impurity, of contamination, of mixture, of the blurring of strict boundaries, which haunted thousands in the Renaissance.”¹¹⁵ Barish, citing the writing of William Prynne, argues that the antitheatricalists conceived of the self as a discreet unit, which the actor threatens, not by dissolving into other selves, but by taking on another self entirely.¹¹⁶ While Barish identifies a fairly stable notion of selfhood in polemicists like Stubbes and Prynne, their anxiety about the potential for the theater to alter an individual—to contaminate, corrupt, or even change his gender or class—would suggest that the polemicists harbored fears about the constructed nature of truth and identity.

Laura Levine’s argument examines the antitheatrical notion of selfhood primarily from the perspective of gender, but her description of the self as malleable, and therefore a source for uncertainty, confirms my argument about the way knowledge and identity are formed by

¹¹⁴ Jonathan V. Crewe, “The Theater of the Idols,” in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Sallibrass (New York: Routledge, 1991), 55.

¹¹⁵ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 87.

¹¹⁶ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 92.

performance. Levine offers an important correction to scholars like Barish and Greenblatt, who assume polemicists imagined the self as a stable construct founded upon “the primacy of the will.”¹¹⁷ Such conceptions of selfhood fail to account for the perceived threats of outside, malevolent influence over the self:

In fact, the model of the self implicitly held by antitheatricalists is profoundly contradictory, for, according to its logic, the self is both inherently monstrous and inherently nothing at all. To manage this contradiction, the men who held this model of the self seemed to project it outward. And from this point of view, the actor became the ideal repository for such a projection: the male actor, dressed in women’s clothing, seemed to lack an inherent gender, and this seemed to make him monstrous. In this way, the fantasy of effeminization which came to dominate antitheatrical tracts became a repository for a profound contradiction in the way a certain segment of the English Renaissance saw the self.¹¹⁸

Levine accounts for the allegation, common in the antitheatrical literature, that the theater feminizes its participants by identifying a fear in the polemicists about the nature of selfhood.

Antitheatrical writers regarded the self as vulnerable to influence, especially to negative influence.¹¹⁹ According to such formulations, the theater becomes particularly threatening, since the self (because it is wayward, undefined, and susceptible to vice) is easily corrupted by displays of sinful activity. While polemicists regarded the shaping influence of performance as grounds for criticism, Shakespeare’s works represent this same influence as a key component to making and communicating knowledge.

In part, polemicists objected to the theater because they believed that the fictions depicted on stage could provoke physical, embodied reactions, or even outright change, in their viewers.

¹¹⁷ Laura Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing: Antitheatricality and Effeminization, 1572-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 11.

¹¹⁸ Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Not only was the self of a theatergoing person subject to change, but the changes in social rank that antitheatrical polemicists linked to the theater could alter the identity of others by devaluing their social rank. Jean Howard argues that the theater “becomes connected with the loss or confusion of identity, but also with usurpation, seizing a social position which one does not, by one’s birth, deserve, aspiring to an identity which can therefore be discredited as illusory, counterfeit, deceptive.” *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 27.

Such an argument draws a correlation between the abstraction of the performance and the reality of the audience reaction, suggesting that speech and show can manifest change in the hearts and bodies of a captive audience. For instance, Anthony Munday claims that playwrights' "wanton speeches do pearse our secret thoughts, and move us thereby unto mischief, and provoke our members to uncleanness."¹²⁰ While this metaphor does suggest the possibility of keeping some thoughts and desires "secret," it also represents such thoughts as permeable. The communication between the mind and body in Munday's description illustrates the early modern belief, informed by humoral theory, in the interconnectedness of the mind and body. "According to Galenic doctrine," Tanya Pollard explains, "a change in emotion brings about a corresponding change in the body, and vice versa; in treating one, the theater treats both." In particular, the imagination "understood to be a part of the body and capable of exerting a material impact on it" was regarded as a source for physical change.¹²¹ By corrupting the imagination of the individual, anti-theatrical writers asserted, the theater could change the mind, the imagination, and, ultimately, the body.

Humoral conceptions of the body as impacted by its environment inform metaphors of epistemological certainty, common in both the sonnet and antitheatrical traditions, that draw a connection between the physical world and the mind or soul. Munday asserts that the theater poses a particularly potent threat to the soul because:

The eyes are two open windows to the soul. Nothing entereth more effectually into memory than that which cometh to seeing. Things heard pass lightly away, but the tokens of that which we have seen stick fast in us, whether we will or no.¹²²

¹²⁰ Munday, *A Second and Third Blast*, 107-8.

¹²¹ Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theater in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

¹²² Munday, *A Second and Third Blast*, 95-96.

Like those of the sonnet speakers and their subjects (discussed at length in Chapter 4), the audience members' eyes form a passage from the concrete to the abstract, or, in humoral terms, an exchange between body and the environment. Such metaphors develop a fiction of epistemological certainty because they attribute the sometimes-inexplicable actions of individuals to an identifiable source. The confounding processes, through which individuals' thoughts become actions and the actions of other individuals affect the actions of people around them are demystified by such metaphors, where the translation of physical reality to thoughts, hopes, and plans occurs in familiar or conceivable spaces: the eyes, and the passage of the eyes to the heart or soul. The brain (characterized here as a memory, rather than the seat of secret thoughts) is imagined in physical terms, as an accessible, even readable, entity. The notion that the eyes communicate directly with the mind or soul would suggest that meaning is stable and transmitted from the agent to his audience. Such black-and-white conceptions of meaning are received critically by Sidney and Shakespeare. As Sidney's famous assertion that the poet "nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth" indicates, texts do not necessarily offer their readers certainty.¹²³

In addition to their specific concerns about the effects of the theater's visual and aural appeal, the antitheatrical writers argue that the theater helps create a society too concerned with pleasure and entertainment. Stephen Gosson's *Schoole of Abuse* contrasts the theater-going English society to which he wrote with the "olde discipline of Englande":

English men could suffer watching & labor, hunger & thirst, & beare of al storms with head & shoulders, they used slender weapons, went naked & were good Soldiours, they fedde upon rootes and barks of trees, they would stande up to the chinne many dayes in marshes without victualles...But the exercise that is nowe among us, is banquetting,

¹²³ Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, 98

playing, pyping, and dauncing, and all such delightes as may winne us to pleasure or rocke us in sleepe.¹²⁴

Like Shakespeare's sonnet 146 ("Within be fed, without be rich no more" (12)), which I discuss in Chapter 2, Gosson's complaint alludes to the lost practice of religious asceticism. Gosson collapses society's love of entertainment ("playing, pyping, and dauncing") with their excessive consumption of food.¹²⁵ He goes on at great length, describing the old Englishman's capacity to eat only his share of "pease" and not to "gape after meat" or "long for the cuppe."¹²⁶ Gosson's contemporaries are made indolent by what they consume, unlike their ancestors, who entertained themselves with martial endeavors and who survived on minimal victuals. Gosson's rhetoric linking banquets with performances, like Munday's eyes-as-windows metaphor, represents the effects of theater as if they are physical. Books and words, like food, alter the balance of the humors, thereby creating physical effects on the bodies of their readers and audience members. Just as the results of too much banqueting and too much "long[ing] for the cup" often manifest physically Gosson suggests that the results of too much pleasure appear on the body lacking the ascetic exercise and diet regimen. In response to the asceticism Gosson contrasts with the life of the theatergoer, Sidney's defense of poetry argues that "the operations of desire and the function of pleasure counters the specter of ethical failure and licentiousness offered in the *School of Abuse*."¹²⁷ Sidney regards pleasure not as an impediment to the manhood Gosson values in his ancestors, but as a tool necessary for developing responsible, intellectual men.

¹²⁴ Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (1579), 16.

¹²⁵ Howard identifies the source for the antitheatrical conventions present in Gosson's complaint—"nostalgic longing for a lost and better past; fear that the popularity of 'playing' reveals an erosion of cultural discipline and a legitimation of 'idleness'"—as John Northbrooke's *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes or Enterluds...are reprovved*, which was published in 1577. *The Stage and Social Struggle*, 26.

¹²⁶ Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse*, 16.

¹²⁷ David Glimp, *Increase and Multiply: Governing Cultural Reproduction in Early Modern England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 43.

Sidney's Collaborative Meaning-Making

When Gosson dedicated *Schoole of Abuse* to Sidney, he probably did not imagine that Sidney would write a work that defends poetic writing—including plays—with fervor and eloquence.¹²⁸ Sidney's *Defense* presents literature not as insidious, but also as instructive in its ambiguity. Sidney wrote the *Defense* around 1579, when he was exiled from the court of Queen Elizabeth I, but, like his sonnets, the work was not published until 1595, after his death. Contrasting the work of poets with that of philosophers and historians, Sidney posits that poets maintain an ideal position from which to instruct readers toward virtue. Admittedly, Sidney writes that contemporary English tragedies and comedies are “not without cause cried out against” because they observe “rules neither of honest civility nor skillful poetry.”¹²⁹ His criticism of the Renaissance theater is primarily concerned with playwrights' inability to adhere to the precepts of drama laid out in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In other words, Sidney's objection is chiefly stylistic, rather than moral.¹³⁰ Unlike the polemicists, who object to the theater's potential to impact negatively the religious fortitude of its audience, Sidney's does not regard the theater (or any form of literature) as necessarily morally corrupt; instead, he regards early modern plays as aesthetically inferior, a judgment he makes based on the failure of such plays to adhere to the conventions of ancient drama. His conception of the theater does not exclude it from offering the

¹²⁸ Howard argues that Sidney's *Defense* “implicitly...surrenders into the hands of an elite the authority over this power of constructing what might and should be.” While Howard may be correct that Sidney's work manifests an aristocratic, “uneasiness about the class affiliations of those practicing their craft in and attending the public theater,” I am more interested in Sidney's conception of the epistemological value of the theater. Moreover, I contend that Sidney's anxiety, as well as similar anxieties about class that Howard identifies in the antitheatrical polemicists, indicates that they were aware of the theater's power to shape meaning. See *The Stage and Social Struggle*, 42-43.

¹²⁹ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 113.

¹³⁰ As Cox points out, such “literal-mindedness” about theatrical performance is exactly what Shakespeare satirizes in the rude mechanicals' performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Seeming Knowledge*, 206.

edifying effects he identifies in poetry, so his writing, while condemnatory of contemporary playwrights, does not criticize them on the grounds of immorality.

Like the antitheatrical polemicists, however, Sidney claims that imaginative literature can have a tangible impact on its reader. He differs from the polemicists by suggesting that the epistemological uncertainty that stems from literature can provide pleasure for and encourage positive change in the reader or audience. In the *Defense*, Sidney claims that while authors do not necessarily present the truth what they write cannot be considered lying.¹³¹ It is precisely the ambiguity of the author that keeps him from immorality. Sidney's explication of this claim illustrates the constructed nature of truth: "For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false. So, as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can in the cloudy knowledge of mankind hardly escape from many lies." His position as one who neither affirms nor denies the truth allies Sidney with the Pyrrhonist skeptics, who seek to reach equipollence, "equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing: none of the conflicting accounts takes precedence over any other as being more convincing."¹³² Adopting such a philosophical mindset leads Pyrrhonists "first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility."¹³³ Contrasting the poet with the historian, Sidney argues that what makes poetry uniquely valuable is its tendency toward uncertainty and ambiguity, which—even if it does not lead to a complete Pyrrhonist suspension of judgment—encourages readers to entertain the possibility that other viable perspectives exist. Sidney devalues direct access to empirical facts in favor of a more Platonic appreciation for collaborative epistemology, where truth is constructed from the experience of the author and his or her readers. Such a model varies significantly from

¹³¹ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 98.

¹³² Sextus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 5.

¹³³ Sextus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 4.

that of antitheatrical metaphors suggesting a direct link between the physical surrounding and the mind or soul. In Sidney's representation of literature, facts, ideas, and vices (or virtues) are not merely transplanted into the brain; they are the product of a series of collaborations.

The author's deception, Sidney argues, is justified by the excellent ends it can accomplish. Unlike the antitheatrical writers, who condemn playwrights for driving their audience to corruption, Sidney imagines that literature causes the opposite effect. The poet "doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way as will entice any man to enter into it."¹³⁴ While this positive effect is born in part from the charming presentation of poetic works, some of the effect derives from the poet's use of ambiguity, as Sidney's response to those who call poets liars indicates: "as in history, looking for truth, they may go away full fraught with falsehood. So in poesy, looking but for fiction, they shall use the narration but as an imaginative groundplot of a profitable invention."¹³⁵ Poets, Sidney argues, should not, as historians do, seek to provide empirical truths. Instead, fiction should serve as a basis for meaning-making, where the readers and the writer can engage in a collaborative process of invention. Out of ambiguity and uncertainty develops meaning and moral, which can effect actual change in the audience. Moreover, that audience affects the meaning of ambiguous texts, so that the processes of establishing and communicating significance benefit from the participation of both the author and the reader.

Sidney's *Defense* champions the poet in part by celebrating his use of ambiguity; such ambiguity can be generative, creating positive change in the lives and attitudes of the reader. In Sidney's reading, poetry, like Pyrrhonist skepticism, alters readers' states of mind by enabling them to view an issue from more than one viable perspective. Sidney diverges from the

¹³⁴ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 83.

¹³⁵ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 83.

Pyrrhonian model because he clearly believes that moral truths can exist and be communicated. However, Sidney's conviction that an individual who views his actions from a new perspective can thereby alter his beliefs or practices emphasizes the importance of multiple perspectives which Shakespeare will later take up in his poetry and drama. Sidney argues that tragedy "maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humors, that with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration teacheth the uncertainty of this world."¹³⁶ Rather than providing empirical truth, the poet should offer his readers a series of experiences that will shift their understanding on a given issue. In this way, one might consider what the poet does a form of Pyrrhonist bracketing; information can be re-bracketed or recontextualized to make different readings possible. Such an activity drives the reader to acknowledge the existence of multiple interpretations for a given set of circumstances.

The practice of re-bracketing occurs frequently in Sidney's own poetic works, especially in *Astrophil and Stella*. The form of the English sonnet lends itself to the re-bracketing Sidney and Shakespeare use to alter their readers' responses to a given argument. Not only can the three quatrains present three slightly related versions or interpretations of an argument, but the turn, or volta, can also create a significant shift or complication in the argument, which encourages the reader to rethink his or her response to the information presented in the quatrains. Sidney and Shakespeare both frequently use the turn in this way. Such a process is at work in Sidney's sonnet 5, in which the turn undermines the argument presented in the first fifteen lines.

It is most true that eyes are formed to serve
The inward light, and that the heavenly part
Ought to be king, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to Nature, strive for their own smart.
It is most true what we call Cupid's dart
An image is which for ourselves we carve

¹³⁶ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 90

And, fools, adore in temple of our heart
'Til that good god make church and churchman starve.
True that true beauty virtue is indeed
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade
Which elements with mortal mixture breed.
True that on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our country move.
True, and yet true that I must Stella love.

For the most part, Sidney adheres to the traditional English sonnet form by using three quatrains containing the rhyme scheme *ababcdcdefef*. Each of these quatrains offers an affirmation (“It is most true” in lines one and five, and merely “True” in line nine) that a virtuous soul should be prized above love and physical beauty. However, this sonnet diverges slightly from the standard English format because the volta does not occur until just before the final line. Lines twelve and thirteen offer another affirmation, echoing the “true that” which begins in the final quatrain. This departure from convention is heightened by the repetition of “True” in the final line, which may cause the reader to expect another affirmation to end the sonnet. The delayed shift in perspective is therefore sudden and surprising. In spite of his best efforts to suppress it, the speaker must ultimately acknowledge his divergence from the original argument of the sonnet, in which reason should overcome passion.

The re-bracketing accomplished by the closing line of AS 5 encourages the reader to reflect on the meaning and significance of the sonnet. The sonnet’s conclusion is sufficiently vague that one experiences uncertainty about the nature of Sidney’s admiration for Stella. He must love Stella despite his acknowledgment that true beauty is only found in virtue, and this argument would imply that Stella’s form of beauty does not necessarily derive from her virtue. The implication that Stella is not entirely virtuous—that the source of her beauty is something else—distinguishes this sonnet from the Petrarchan tradition that often depicts a correlation between inner and outer beauty. This sonnet indicates that physical beauty might be enough for

the speaker. Confronting a conclusion that abruptly undercuts the sonnet's claim, readers experience the pleasant uncertainty that stems of interpretive difficulty and the subsequent opportunity to reflect upon the changing meaning of the sonnet.

For Sidney, as for Shakespeare, re-bracketing in the sonnets offers an opportunity to interrogate the metaphors of epistemological certainty common to the Petrarchan tradition. Both write sonnets that begin with traditional Petrarchan tropes (with no or only slight variations), but use the turn, located somewhere in or near the closing couplet, to undercut such metaphors and destabilize their familiar meaning. This practice exposes the sonnet tradition—one in which most of Sidney's and Shakespeare's readers would have been steeped—to a re-bracketing process that reveals the unreliability and malleability of information presented in the sonnets. While Petrarchan conventions may have been well-established by the time these authors took them up, they constitute only a portion of arguments on issues like love, beauty, and reason that can also be viewed from other equally viable perspectives.

Sidney's critique of sonnet conventions is clear in *AS* 5, where the figure of Cupid is available for multiple interpretive possibilities. For Sidney, the arrow Cupid shoots at lovers is not a symbol for the agony of unrequited love or the experience of love at first sight.¹³⁷ Instead, it is "An image...for ourselves we carve / And, fools, adore in temple of our heart." Cupid is not a symbol of love, but an object of idolatry, an accusation that links him with both pagan and

¹³⁷ Such interpretations of Cupid are common in the sonnet tradition. For instance, Petrarch's second and third sonnets describe love's sudden assault, where love is figured as Cupid: "Determined to...punish in one day a thousand wrongs, / secretly Love took up his bow again / and chose the proper time and place to strike." In *Idea*, Drayton represents Cupid in his traditional role as a source for painful, unrequited love:

By all true lovers' sighs, vows and desires,
By all the wounds that ever thou hast given;
I conjure thee by all that I have named
To make her love, or, Cupid, be thou damned. (36.11-14)

Catholic worship. Sidney's claim that Cupid is an ineffective or insincere metonymy for love corresponds to his criticism of sonnets in the *Defense*:

But truly many of such writings as come under the banner of unresistable love, if I were a mistress, would never persuade me they were in love, so coldly they apply fiery speeches, as men that had rather read lover's writings, and so caught up certain swelling phrases, which hang together like a man that once told me that wind was at northwest by south because he would be sure to name winds enough, than that in truth they feel those passions, which easily, as I think, may be bewrayed by that same forcibleness, or *enargia*...of the writer. But let this be a sufficient, though short, note, that we miss the right use of the material point of poesy.¹³⁸

Sidney accuses love poets of borrowing too much from the writings of one another; more than this, however, such poets are guilty of using their borrowed material in a dishonest way, merely applying the speeches of others to articulate what could be more effectively communicated through original expression that relies less on popular devices ("swelling phrases"). This argument also underlies the opening sonnet to *Astrophil and Stella*, where the speaker, complaining that his study of other poets' inventions has not caused him to write effectively, is checked by his muse: "'Fool,' said my Muse to me, 'look in thy heart and write.'" Sidney's resentment for Cupid as a disingenuous, over-used trope relates to his critiques of love poetry in both the *Defense* and Sonnet 1, but he is, after all, writing love poetry, despite his claim that many sonneteers "miss the right use of the material point of poesy." And, though sonnet 5 critiques the sonnet tradition's use of the Cupid trope, it also adheres to another familiar Petrarchan conceit, wherein the mind/reason is pitted against or captured by desire/love.¹³⁹ Thus

¹³⁸ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 119.

¹³⁹ David Kalstone notes Sidney's conflicted relationship with the Petrarchan tradition he frequently seeks to criticize, arguing that Sidney's "straining after sincerity suggests an uncertainty about the inherited vocabulary of love poetry." *Sidney's Poetry: Contexts and Interpretations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 130. Building on Kalstone's argument, Dubrow regards Sidney's anti-Petrarchan strain as a way to "mediate his preoccupations with social behavior as well as his concerns about literary style." By isolating certain traditions as corruptions of language, Sidney can celebrate his preferred writing styles. Also, Dubrow regards Sidney's complex response to Cupid as a manifestation of his "ambivalences about authority and dependence." *Echoes of Desire*, 112-13.

the sonnet calls attention to the insincerity of one sonnet trope, but ultimately conforms to another. Sidney's self-conscious critiques of contemporary love poetry contain an acknowledgement that authors must struggle with the knowledge that crystalizes within any genre.

Sidney's frequent allusions to sonnet conventions reveal both his frustration with making meaning within a familiar system and his understanding that audience knowledge is an essential facet of the meaning-making experience. The interpretation of Sidney's criticism—in both sonnet 5 and the *Defense*—depends upon his audience's familiarity with the tropes he employs and criticizes. The mistress Sidney imagines in *Defense*, for instance, could only have the response Sidney describes if she were familiar with love poetry in general. While Sidney's claims about the positive effects of literature on an audience highlight the impact texts can have on readers, this hypothetical response to love poetry suggests the shaping influence readers can have on a text, and the ways that meaning is generated, not only from an individual's poetry, but from its place within a tradition. This sensitivity to collaborative epistemology appears in sonnet 5 as well, where Sidney advances his argument by employing and alluding to the conceits sonnet readers would have recognized.

In Sidney's poetic works, the practice of rebracketing helps distinguish his sonnets from those of other sonneteers, because the shifts in perspective he creates emphasize the insincerity of the Petrarchan conception that external beauty is an indicator of virtue or chastity. Like sonnet 5, sonnet 71 casts suspicion on this notion by undermining its initial assertions about the epistemological value and stability of Stella's physical appearance. While the opening quatrain characterizes Stella's beauty as a book that can be read in order to find and attain virtue, Sidney employs a similar reframing strategy to that of sonnet 5, and this strategy complicates the

reader's understanding of Sidney's attitudes toward Stella and the moral significance of her beauty.

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How Virtue may best lodged in beauty be,
Let him but learn of love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.
There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from whose light those night-birds fly,
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.
And not content to be Perfection's heir,
Thyself dost strive all minds that way to move
Who mark in thee what is in thee most fair.
So while thy beauty draws the heart of love,
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.
"But ah," Desire still cries, "Give me some food."

As in sonnet 5, the first fifteen lines of sonnet 71 contribute to a unified theme, in this instance, concerning the virtue inspired by Stella's goodness. The famous final line rebrackets the argument by undermining the claims presented earlier in the poem. The poems are also thematically linked. In both sonnets, the experience of physical love or desire is metaphorically linked to starvation. The lover of sonnet 5 idolizes Cupid until "church and churchman starve," and the Petrarchan conceits of sonnet 71 are challenged by Desire, whose appetite will not be suppressed by Stella's virtue. Finally, in both sonnets, the speaker is attempting to overcome his baser feelings for his beloved through rationality. While sonnet 5 concludes by suggesting that Stella is an impediment to virtue, sonnet 71 argues conversely that Stella is an ideal source for virtue. In both cases, however, Stella turns out to be a stumbling block on the speaker's path to "serve / The inward light" (5.1-2).

In both sonnets 5 and 71, gustatory metaphors demonstrate Sidney's belief that pleasure and desire can have ambiguous (and sometimes positive) effects on the body. Unlike Gosson, whose description of the old English asceticism advances depravation as an important character-

building exercise, Sidney argues that the lack of pleasure (characterized as both food and affection for/from Stella) can be destructive. The gustatory metaphors in each of the sonnets links eros to the states of consuming or lacking food. In sonnet 5, Cupid allows the “church and churchman” devoted to his worship to starve. Similarly, Sidney articulates Desire’s objection to Stella’s virtue as a cry of starvation (“Give me some food”). Sidney’s representations of starvation and cries of hunger do not invoke images of healthy men standing for days in the marsh, eating only their daily allotment of peas. Instead, self-denial causes decline and distraction in the mind of its subject. Sidney uses a similar food metaphor in his *Defense*, explaining how literature can be instructional and encounter less resistance than history or philosophy: “even as the child is often brought to take most wholesome things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant taste.”¹⁴⁰ Countering arguments (like those made by Gosson) in favor of a society less invested in seeking out pleasure, Sidney argues that pleasure is valuable because it can be edifying. The poet, Sidney proposes, is in a unique position to create and communicate knowledge, because he can both deliver his argument in a pleasant way, like delicious food at a banquet, and deliver wholesome arguments his audience might otherwise resist. Though Sidney does not offer a strong endorsement of contemporary theater in the *Defense*, the theater, as Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic works illustrate, is like a banquet hall, where authors delight and confound their audience members in ways that can often be wholesome for individuals and communities.

Theatrical Epistemology

Sidney’s reflections on the collaborative process of meaning-making that occurs between authors and their audience members parallel the kinds of dynamic epistemological practices at

¹⁴⁰ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 84.

play in the Renaissance theater, particularly in the works of Shakespeare. While Stanley Cavell's analysis of Shakespeare's tragedies offers helpful perspectives on the modern theatergoers' experience of watching an early modern play, his conception of the theater reflects a more contemporary understanding of performance practices, which does not account for audience participation and interaction that would have been standard at Renaissance performance venues. Cavell's claims about the audience's relationship to the characters they confront, for instance, describes a theater inhabited by contemporary theatergoers rather than the groundlings who frequented the early modern Globe:

A character is not, and cannot become, aware of us. Darkened, indoor theaters dramatize the fact that the audience is invisible. A theater whose house lights were let on (a possibility suggested, for other reasons, by Brecht) might dramatize the equally significant fact that we are also inaudible to them, and immovable (that is, at a *fixed* distance from them). I will say: We are not in their presence.¹⁴¹

The distinction Cavell draws between the actor, who is capable of audience awareness, and a character, who is not, is clouded by his conception of a theater where audience members sit quietly in an assigned seat, either in the dark or uncomfortably aware that they are not in the dark. This description does not reflect practices at the amphitheatres and hall theaters in early modern England, which offered more opportunities for interaction between audience and actors. In the amphitheatres particularly, audiences would have been louder and more mobile than Cavell's, standing, clapping, roaring, hissing, and throwing projectiles. Additionally, cues from early modern plays suggest that actors interacted directly with members of the audience, who would have likely responded. Given the more aggressive, physical presence of early modern audiences, not to mention the practice of gallants paying to sit directly on the stage at hall theaters, there would have been little recognition that the actors were isolated from the audience,

¹⁴¹ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 103.

portraying characters completely unaware of audience members' actions. Moreover, the "house lights" of the early modern theater were always on, since amphitheatres' performances took place during the day and hall theaters left their lights on for the duration of the play. For Brecht, leaving the lights on is a distancing effect, denying the audience the conventional theatergoing experience they expect; for early modern audience members, however, leaving the lights on was a fact of performance. The isolating effects of the theater that Cavell identifies may be a reality for a 21st Century audiences, but Shakespeare's contemporaries would not have experienced so profound an isolation when watching a play.

The more collaborative experience of the early modern theater is particularly apparent in the convention of direct address to the audience. Asides are spoken solely or primarily to the audience, who thereby take part in the epistemological development of the play. They may not be able to impact the actions that will inevitably take place in a performance, but, as Andrew Gurr explains, "The audience, as an active participant in the collective experience of playgoing, had no reason to keep its reactions private."¹⁴² They were much more a part of the experience that Cavell's analysis would suggest.

By emphasizing theatrical and Shakespearean skepticism as an experience primarily of isolation, Cavell overlooks the potential for collaborative epistemology that Shakespeare makes available in many of his plays, including some of the tragedies. Shakespeare's use of Pyrrhonist tenets renders the skeptical outlook of his corpus more varied than Cavell's reading of, for instance, *Hamlet* posits. As Mark Reschke notes, *Hamlet*, like the antitheatrical tracts, constitutes an "ideological site where...two thematic concerns, theater and fear of dissolution, also come

¹⁴² Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 53.

together.”¹⁴³ Shakespeare diverges from the antitheatrical polemicists, however, to suggest that the theater can be epistemologically generative—a solution rather than dissolution. Performance, in *Hamlet*, does not so much inspire a wicked act as reveal one. The Mousetrap scene, for instance, is designed to root out an evil deed, since Hamlet has heard:

That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
Thy have proclaimed their malefactions;
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
With most miraculous organ. (2.2.576-583)

The “organ” or instrument through which murder will out is the play, which will provoke a reaction on the guilty party’s body.¹⁴⁴ If Claudius reacts with even a “blench,” Hamlet argues, he will reveal his guilt and expose himself to vengeance (2.2.586). If a scene is played expertly, or with “cunning,” Hamlet believes it can reveal murderers by holding a mirror up to their deeds. Hamlet’s hope that Claudius will react to the “cunning of the scene” harkens back to Sidney’s description of tyrants watching a tragedy. Like them, Hamlet hopes that Claudius will “manifest [his] tyrannical humors.”¹⁴⁵ The lore of plays driving tyrants and murderers to confess reflects the collaboration necessary for meaning-making, because three parties are necessary to make such an interpretation possible. First, the performers must interpret a script in a way that renders murders visible to their audience. Then, the murderer must interpret the performance in a way that causes an emotional reaction, likely remorse, and finally, the witnesses to his proclamation of guilt (other audience members, as well as the actors likely interrupted by a confession of guilt) must read the murderer’s confession as incited by the performance. Such an outburst would not

¹⁴³ Mark Reschke, “Historicizing Homophobia: *Hamlet* and the Antitheatrical Tracts,” *Hamlet Studies* 19 (1997): 49.

¹⁴⁴ *Hamlet*, by virtue of its Mousetrap and the poison in the ear, is representative of early modern concerns about the effects of words and performances on the body. See Pollard’s chapter on *Hamlet* in *Drugs and Theater*, 123-43.

¹⁴⁵ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 90.

adhere to Cavell's depiction of the theater as an isolating entity, since Claudius's reactions and the subsequent halting of the play demonstrate that the audience is not always "inaudible" and "immovable." In this instance, the significance of the play depends to a large extent upon the audience and its reactions, a fact that reinforces that audience members contribute to the creation and interpretation of meaning, even at a play.

Cavell's conception of the theater as a countermeasure to skepticism causes him to regard the *Mousetrap* as a tool for expressing Hamlet's own existence. He claims that "to exist is to take your existence upon you, to enact it, as if the basis of human existence is theater, even melodrama. To refuse this burden is to condemn yourself to skepticism – to a denial of the existence, hence of the value, of the world."¹⁴⁶ While I agree with Cavell's conception of the theater as a positive force for asserting meaning, the sharp contrast he draws between performance and skepticism puts these two related issues at odds in a manner that mischaracterizes the nature of Shakespeare's Pyrrhonian tendencies. In Cavell's configuration, theater and skepticism both become burdens, or negative states, where the individual must choose to engage in one or the other. Skepticism must be staved off by the melodramatic because engaging in skeptical thought leads consistently to denial that the world exists. The Pyrrhonists would resist such definitive claims, instead choosing to entertain all conceivable possibilities. Hamlet's speech and action at many moments in the play—including his plot to stage *The Murder of Gonzago*—do link human existence with theatrical performance, but this does not, as Cavell's reading proposes, free him from his skepticism. His reflections on theater and epistemology are not mutually exclusive, but symbiotic. Hamlet values the meaning he can extract from performing, witnessing performance, and watching others witness performances,

¹⁴⁶ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 187.

because he believes that out of the fictions of players spring the “abstracts and brief chronicles of the time” (2.2.514).

Though the Mousetrap does not, as many scholars have noted, provide Hamlet with certainty about the murder, it does serve an epistemological function by permitting Hamlet to make meaning out of that uncertainty.¹⁴⁷ Hamlet attributes significance to the event, regardless of the empirical facts concerning the nature of old Hamlet’s murder. Paul Yachnin’s analysis of Mousetrap overlooks this important distinction; Yachnin asserts that, for Hamlet, the staged murder “should be able to cut through both the ideological contradictions...and the attendant universal condition of secrecy and deceit, cleaving the general ear, revealing everyone to everyone in each one’s true moral condition, and disclosing the true meaning of every action and utterance.”¹⁴⁸ This registers as a hastily generalized version of Hamlet’s motivation. He does not claim that his Mousetrap will reveal “everyone to everyone,” but that it might reveal Claudius’s guilt to him. What the scene reveals to each character, including Hamlet, is dependent in large part upon his or her position within the narrative. The varied responses to Claudius’s reaction to the Moustrap do not, as Yachnin argues, “suggest that a theater that has no control over what it means is in no position to be able to influence its audience toward any particular political

¹⁴⁷ Many scholars have taken pains to emphasize that the Moustrap does not prove that Claudius is guilty of fratricide. Like Paul Yachnin, Graham Bradshaw points to the multiple interpretations of Claudius’s reaction to the play, arguing that Claudius does not seem to believe, in subsequent scenes, that he has revealed his guilt to Hamlet. *Shakespeare’s Scepticism* (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1987), 116. Alison Thorne asserts that Hamlet’s foiled attempt to reach a conclusion about Claudius’s guilt results only in “varying degrees of bafflement.” Paired with Hamlet’s other techniques designed to reveal inward experience, Thorne argues, the Mousetrap produce “heterogeneous images of the self” that cast doubt on “Hamlet’s presumption that there is a heart to his mystery,” an interior to be exposed. *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare: Looking through Language* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 129-33. Moreover, Cavell (elaborating on the argument of W.W. Greg) points out that, even though we know Claudius is guilty because of his confession, it is never confirmed that he killed old Hamlet by pouring poison in his ear. *Disowning Knowledge*, 180, 190-91.

¹⁴⁸ Paul Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Value* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 10.

viewpoint.”¹⁴⁹ Rather it demonstrates, like Pyrrhonist skepticism, that the interpretation of an event or performance depends upon both the author and the perspectives of his audience members. Each character interprets the event in ways that are informed by his or her unique context within the play and in Claudius’s plots. Theatrical representation does not necessarily reveal empirical facts for its audience, but it can help them make meaning out of their uncertainty. Hamlet’s actors, like Sidney’s poets, offer “an imaginative groundplot of a profitable invention.”

The Mousetrap is one of the most sustained reflections on performance and epistemology in *Hamlet*, and the play reinforces several times the generative epistemological effects of the theater. Though Hamlet uses the word “monstrous” to describe the performance of actors, it is clear that *Hamlet* regards acting as a practice that can significantly impact both actors and audience members.¹⁵⁰ Hamlet’s belief in the ability of acting to affect real change on the performer informs his advice to Gertrude:

Assume a virtue if you have it not.
Refrain tonight;
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence. (3.4.156-59)

If Gertrude were to take Hamlet’s advice and put on, like a costume, a virtue she does not have, the disingenuous performance could eventually cause physical changes in her, so that her acting might change something fundamental about her character. Such a change would not instantly communicate itself from eyes or skin to brain or soul (as in the antitheatrical metaphors), but it

¹⁴⁹ Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights*, 11.

¹⁵⁰ Hamlet’s remark “Is it not monstrous that this player here / ... Could force his soul so to his whole conceit” is not so much a condemnation of acting, as of his inability to perform his mourning and vengeance in a conventional manner. Citing Alexander Schmidt’s explanation (“it is not this faculty of the player that Hamlet means to call monstrous, but his own lethargy so different from it, which, however, by a kind of logical anacoluthon, he forgets to add.”), G. R. Hibbard glosses this line “does it not show how outrageously unnatural my conduct has been?” *Notes to Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 233.

would work slowly over time to alter Gertrude. Finally, the potential for theater to make meaning for a community is clear in Horatio's response to the carnage of the final scene. Horatio promises to deliver his own performance of the tragedy for both the English ambassadors and Fortinbras; he asks the warring factions to "give order that these bodies / High on a stage be placed to the view" (5.2.330-31) so that he can deliver the tale "Even while men's minds are wild, lest more mischance / On plots and errors happens" (5.2.347-48). Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster's assertion that "Like *The Mouse-trap*, then, *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is a play within a play, the truth of which will be told by Horatio in a further play..." reinforces the epistemological function of the Mousetrap and Horatio's final performance. *Hamlet*, as a play-within-a-play may not mean the same thing to all members of its audience (it is likely that Fortinbras and the English ambassadors will extract something different from it), but out of its performance the audience will have an opportunity to make meaning.¹⁵¹

Sidney identifies literature as a source for collaborative epistemology in the *Defense*, and Shakespeare's plays include a number of scenarios beyond Hamlet's Mousetrap that demonstrate how performance, fiction, and misconstrual, particularly in a theatrical or meta-theatrical vein, can be both valuable and productive. Such scenes frequently include meta-theatrical elements, where characters take on different roles in order to mislead one another. One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon in Shakespeare's theatrical canon is the instigation of Beatrice and Benedick's romance in *Much Ado about Nothing*. While these characters begin the play by asserting an aversion, not only to each other, but to the entire institution of marriage, the machinations of their friends quickly unite the couple in what, for many readers, becomes the play's most interesting and desirable match. The fictions created for Beatrice and Benedick are

¹⁵¹ Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster, *Stay, Illusion!: The Hamlet Doctrine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013), 225.

not based on the facts they purport to know, but the couple makes meaning from those fictions, creating new truths and ultimately changing their world, which, as Benedick solemnly declares, “must be peopled” (2.3.238). Performances like those featured in *Much Ado about Nothing* have the ability to change the communities in which they are received.

Particularly in the romances the qualities Sidney attributes to the poet are at work in Shakespeare’s characters in a way that is both positive and productive to them and their communities. While in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Hamlet* manipulation and misconstrual of information create physical reactions in the bodies and the worlds that they encounter, the later romances incorporate confusion and deception, not merely as a useful plot device, but as practice necessary for affecting positive change in characters and their communities. Out of the frequently engineered misunderstandings of the romances, the characters and audience members develop an appreciation for important qualities like divinity, forgiveness, love, justice, and loyalty. Without Paulina’s careful orchestration in *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes would likely still be a tyrant. Without Belarius’s decision to conceal the young princes, Cymbeline’s kingdom would not benefit from the moral lessons Belarius offers both father and sons. And of course, without Prospero’s directorial prowess, the characters of *The Tempest* would not have resolved their conflicts in a fashion at least resembling justice. Theatricality becomes an essential tool for the collaborative epistemology that enables the romances to resolve in celebrations of love, faith, and community.

Most notably, the theatrical end to *The Winter’s Tale* illustrates the benefits that stem from the sorcery-like devices of the theater, which antitheatrical writers believed would have a corrupting influence over audiences. Paulina worries that her final act will be considered witchcraft:

I'll make the statue move indeed, descend
And take you by the hand—but then you'll think,
Which I protest against, I am assisted
By wicked powers (5.3.87-90).

Paulina is not assisted by wicked powers; in fact, she has been concealing the living Hermione and is now prepared to reveal this truth to the unsuspecting Leontes. What Hermione and Paulina have planned is not magic, but theater. Their concern that their drama will be misconstrued as witchcraft probably alludes to the frequent claims that actors were governed and assisted by the devil. Rankins, for instance, writes that players are “sent from their great captaine Sathan (under whose banner they beare armes) to deceive the world, to lead the people with inticing shewes to the divell, to seduce them to sinne.”¹⁵² Shakespeare is careful to distinguish Paulina’s drama from the seduction described by polemicists like Rankins. Instead, he emphatically allies her with Christian faith. In addition to her name, which critics have argued links her to the apostle Paul,¹⁵³ Paulina’s command “It is required / You do awake your faith” (5.3.93-94) also distinguishes her performance from the witchcraft she fears she will be accused of. Paulina’s efforts to frame her performance as an act of faith supply “the interpretive framework” for Hermione’s miraculous return.¹⁵⁴ Paulina and Hermione’s play serves as an analogy for the theater, where the unexpected or the misleading can both provoke strong emotional reaction and, more significantly, encourage audience members to reflect on religious and philosophical questions about the nature of love, truth, and faith. Rather than a source for anxious responses to

¹⁵² William Rankins, *A Mirroure of Monsters* (1587), 4.

¹⁵³ See, for instance, Huston Diehl, ““Does not the stone rebuke me?”: The Pauline Rebuke and Paulina’s Magic in *The Winter’s Tale*,” in *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance*, ed. Paul Yachnin and Patricia Badir (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 70; Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Pauline Edifications: Staging the Sovereign Softscape in Renaissance England,” in *Political Theology and Early Modernity*, ed. Graham Hammill and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 226-27.

¹⁵⁴ Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 72. Whereas Sherman regards Paulina as “the antithesis to skepticism” because she “is a confident knower” (72), it is clear from her choices to conceal and dramatically reveal Hermione that she understands the epistemological value of misconstrual and dramatic staging.

counterfeits and uncertainty, ambiguity in Shakespeare's plays can also be epistemologically generative, a source for resolving differences and constructing (or reconstructing) communities.

The effects of Paulina and Hermione's theatrics, contrasted with that of the oracle's statement, demonstrate that the collaborative meaning-making made available by performance can be more productive and compelling than the delivery of empirical truth. Paulina's intervention throughout the years, culminating in Hermione's final performance as a statue, shows Leontes what the oracle could not. In response to the oracle's definitive claim for Hermione's innocence—"Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless...Leontes a jealous tyrant" (3.2.130-131)—Leontes reacts defensively and dismissively: "There is no truth at all i'th'oracle. / The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood" (3.2.137-38). Whereas the oracle, like the historians described in Sidney's *Defense*, adheres to the unornamented truth by calling Leontes a tyrant, Paulina's final scene shows Leontes (as in a mirror) his tyranny and suspicion. In the stone of his wife's statue, Leontes sees a reflection of his own hard heart (5.3.37-38). Paulina's play for her tyrannous king echoes Hamlet's Mousetrap and Sidney's description of the tyrant viewing a tragedy. Given the unique perspectives of these tyrants, the imaginative groundwork supplied by the theater can manifest a change in them, sometimes (as is the case for Leontes) a lasting change for the better. Leontes's revelation occurs, not as a result of the empirical truth delivered by the oracle, but through an artistic representation of his greatest transgression.

In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare argues that performances encourage characters to undergo ethical and personal development. In some instances, as in encounters between Paulina and Leontes, the misinformation that characters provide serves as a mirror for princes, what Sidney describes as "the application most divinely true, but the discourse itself feigned, which

made David...as in a glass see his own filthiness.”¹⁵⁵ Paulina and Hermione create two fictions for the king: first, that Hermione is dead, and second, that the figure presented in 5.3 is merely a lifelike statue of the queen. The theatrical qualities, particularly of the second fiction, are pronounced. Hermione’s performance in the final scene, narrated by Paulina, takes place on a stage, complete with a curtain and the musical accompaniment characteristic of Renaissance theater. The pathos, experienced by both the witnessing characters and the audience, is largely generated from the staging choices Paulina has made. Consequently, the revelation that Hermione is not dead feels miraculous: through the careful staging of their final scene, Paulina and Hermione suppress the “simple truth” (sonnet 138.8) that Hermione has concealed herself from Leontes. As this scene demonstrates, theatrical performances can manifest change in the perceptions that audience members have of reality. This is exactly the power antitheatrical polemicists often claim for their own writing. Rankins describes his antitheatrical writing as a “Mirror...Wherin is contained the perfect description of such enormities and heinous offences, that these monsters continuallie carrie with them.”¹⁵⁶ The mirror Rankins creates, which he hopes will drive actors and theatergoers from their sinful occupations, functions similarly to the mirrors constructed by Paulina and Sidney’s playwrights, which create fictions that can alter the attitudes and actions of audience members.

Moreover, Hermione’s tableau fulfills an epistemological function. Not only does it reinforce and heighten Leontes’s grief and penitence—“I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?” (5.3.37-38)—but it also enables Hermione to witness her husband’s grief. The couple, Sarah Beckwith argues, is “brought to new life through this new

¹⁵⁵ Sidney, *Defense of Poesy*, 86. The mirror is a popular metaphor in theatrical writing. Hamlet, paraphrasing Cicero’s remarks on comedy, counsels the actor to “hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature” (3.2.20).

¹⁵⁶ Rankins, *A Mirrour of Monsters*, 6.

presencing [sic],” because “in being able to see her, he must be able to bear being seen by her.”¹⁵⁷ Though Paulina and Hermione’s actions after Hermione’s supposed death are misleading and cause both confusion and uncertainty in the king, they ultimately provide Leontes and Hermione with access to truths about each other that would have otherwise remained concealed, as Hamlet believes the theater reveals truths about his uncle. The couple is brought into one another’s presence in a way that emphasizes their vulnerability and that reminds them of Leontes’s transgression. Confronted with the likeness of the wife he persecuted, Leontes comes to remember and understand a truth about himself, that he has been “stone” to his beloved wife. Her apparently stone visage serves as a mirror for him, not because she is actually stone, but because he believes her to be so and draws significance from this belief.

The revelations that Hermione and Leontes have about each other at the close of *The Winter’s Tale* suggest that truth- and meaning-making are collaborative processes. Beckwith refers to the penance/forgiveness process of the final scene as “religious theater,” emphasizing the necessary collaboration of art and religion to develop “a new community and a new kind of self in which memory can be redeemed, not through the counting and recounting of sin, but through a new form of intersubjectivity.”¹⁵⁸ Though I agree with Beckwith that the resolutions of the romance plays, particularly *The Winter’s Tale*, benefit from the Christian doctrine of repentance and absolution, I am arguing that the theatrical element of this “religious theater” is equally significant to the religious elements Beckwith emphasizes. For Shakespeare, one key method for recognizing and developing intersubjectivity is through performance, and through the manipulation of events and appearances that are integral to the theater.

¹⁵⁷ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 141.

¹⁵⁸ Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 140, 138.

Out of Paulina and Hermione's deceit springs the possibility of new and better worlds. The confusion and uncertainty fostered by Paulina not only offer important corrections to Leontes, but also render a sterile, aging population fruitful again. In addition to the resolution between Hermione and Leontes, Paulina is awarded a new husband. Though these matches may not generate children, the marriage of Perdita to Florizel reconciles the two sovereigns, supplies Leontes with a surrogate for his lost son, and promises future offspring that could unite and strengthen both kingdoms. On a literal level, therefore, the world of the characters is shaped by Paulina and Hermione's fiction, just as it is shaped by Leontes's tyranny at the beginning of the play. More abstractly, the world is also shaped by the characters' new appreciation for intersubjectivity, a change in Leontes that occurs through the performances of Hermione and Paulina.

The theatrical intervention that Paulina orchestrate is, therefore, wholesome, in the same sense that food and pleasure (to Sidney's mind) nourish individuals. In response to Paulina's concern that her audience will think she is "assisted by wicked powers," Leontes says he is "content" to look upon and hear whatever Hermione's statue will do or speak (5.3.91-93). Once Paulina moves Hermione, the king exclaims "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating." (5.3.110-111). The king's simile linking Paulina's actions to eating connects her theatrical performance to those described by Sidney. Eating is not only lawful, it is necessary and often pleasurable. Paulina's performance is not just a mirror to show Leontes his fault, it is a "wholesome" lesson delivered, as Sidney describes, through the "pleasant taste" of literature. Drama, like eating, creates a response in its audience, an emotional reaction that can lead to physical manifestations. The final scene of *The Winter's Tale* illustrates that such a response can build communities and help the participants create and transmit knowledge.

Collaborative Epistemology in the Theatrical Sonnets

Throughout his career as a playwright, and especially once he begins writing the romances, Shakespeare poses questions about the function of the theatrical in building community, creating truth, and communicating knowledge. The ambiguity present in drama is a valuable tool for thinking about epistemology, and Shakespeare brings both his interest in questions of knowing and his understanding of theater to bear on his sonnets. The influence of Pyrrhonist philosophy over Shakespeare's conception of literary forms, including the theater, is especially apparent in the sonnets, where the reader is able to encounter figurative language in two ways that diverge significantly from the theater. First, the shaping influence of the reader's perspective is especially pronounced in the sonnets, where the effects of rereading, for instance, with the new perspective provided by the volta or other sonnets, allow readers to recognize the malleability of a given argument or image and to understand their own important role in creating and communicating meaning for a work of literature. This quality of the sonnets clearly informed Shakespeare's writing on the immortality of the sonnet subject, whose existence depends upon the existence of the reader ("So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." (18.13-14)). Second, the figurative language of Shakespeare's sonnets responds, like Sidney's sonnets, to the conventions of the Petrarchan tradition, and he encounters the difficulty of making meaning in the midst of the constraints and trappings of the English sonnet.

The significance of Shakespeare's struggles with and responses to Petrarchan conventions are only clear to readers who recognize them, so this particular facet of Shakespeare's sequence emphasizes the importance of reader perspective, where readers benefit from coming to Shakespeare's sonnets after encountering the works of other sonneteers.

Chapters 4 and 5 will offer more sustained examinations of Shakespeare's response to the Petrarchan tradition and his celebration of ambiguity. In the meantime, my analysis of theatrical tropes at the end of this chapter offers one answer to the question of how to make meaning out of literature. If literature does not (as some polemicists would argue) communicate itself directly to the mind or soul, and if the conventions of the sonnet are (as Sidney observes in his prose and poetry) cold and insincere, Shakespeare must find new ways to make and communicate meaning. One solution he poses to this challenge is to employ metaphors of theatricality, which remind the reader that—as is the case in the interactive world of the early modern theater—poetry is a performance, the significance of which is generated in part by context and the reactions of the audience.

Though they do not pose an outright defense against the antitheatrical writers, Shakespeare's sonnets, like Sidney's works, respond to the allegation that the theater is a source for lies and corruption. By demonstrating the positive, meaning-making effects of acting, Shakespeare links the theater to the world of print, representing each genre as a potential source for collaboration and edification. In sonnet 23, the speaker links his opening analogy about an actor with stage fright to the process of detecting or generating truth where it is not apparent, a practice described in the final couplet.

As an unperfect actor on the stage,
Who with his fear is put besides his part,
Or some fierce thing replete with too much rage,
Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart;
So I for fear of trust forget to say
The perfect ceremony of love's rite,
And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
O'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might.
O let my books be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
Who plead for love and look for recompense
More than that tongue that more hath more expressed.

O learn to read what silent love hath writ.
To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

The interpretive difficulties manifest in sonnet 23 contribute to its meaning-making potential. In particular, the ambiguous reference to the presaging books serves as a metaphor of collaborative epistemology. Scholars have struggled with the problem of Shakespeare's presaging books, often electing to emend "books" to "looks."¹⁵⁹ For instance, G. Blakemore Evans argues that "looks" is the more probable reading, "since Shakespeare's 'books,' already written (or printed), cannot properly be said to prophesy or foretell."¹⁶⁰ Such readings are reductive because they overlook several instances in Shakespeare's poetry and drama where books prophesy. Patrick Cheney points to one example of this phenomenon in the sonnets, where "antique" authors write "praises [that] are but prophecies" (106.7-9).¹⁶¹ Another instance occurs in the final scene of *Cymbeline*, where the tablet Jupiter leaves with sleeping Posthumus foretells the conclusion of the play (though this interpretation is not presented to the audience until the resolution has occurred). The soothsayer interprets Jupiter's text, concluding that it foreshadowed the reunion of Cymbeline with the three children he had presumed dead (5.4.444-59). The presaging quality of Jupiter's text is not clear until the soothsayer, benefitting from the actions he has witnessed, is able to render the images in Jupiter's text relevant. Jupiter's text, like Shakespeare's books (and, indeed, his sonnets more generally), depends upon the ability of his readers to make meaning out of his words.

While scholars have objected to the seeming inconsistency of time that would be required for the poet's books to presage in sonnet 23, the manipulation of time is a device Shakespeare

¹⁵⁹ Patrick Cheney, *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 222.

¹⁶⁰ G. Blakemore Evans, ed. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 136.

¹⁶¹ Cheney, *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright*, 222.

was likely to use, given its prominence in the theater. On the unconventional timing of sonnet 23, Cheney argues, “the young man’s beauty warrants the time-bending conceit” in which the poet “asks that his books function as presagers, foreshadowers, of his current poems celebrating the young man.”¹⁶² Despite Sidney’s objection to playwrights that fail to adhere to Aristotle’s rules of theatrical representation, a number of Shakespeare’s plays, including *The Winter’s Tale* and *Pericles* include instances of the sort of time-bending scholars have objected to in sonnet 23. Perhaps the instance most related to the presaging book problem is presented by the chorus of *Henry V*. Before Act 5, the chorus transports its audience back to England for the triumph of the king. Shakespeare describes the celebrated return of King Henry as a possible foreshadowing for Essex’s victory over Ireland:

The Mayor and all his brethren...
With the plebeians swarming at their heels,
Go forth and fetch their conqu’ring Caesar in –
As, by a lower but high-loving likelihood,
Were now the General of our gracious Empress –
As in good time he may – from Ireland coming,
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword.
How many would the peaceful city quit
To welcome him! Much more, and much more cause,
Did they this Harry.

The chorus interprets the return of Henry, optimistically, as a prophecy of an event that would have been unfolding for Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. The text of the play hopes to presage the triumphant return of Essex, the general of Elizabeth, “our gracious Empress.” Moreover, the introduction and conclusion of the Essex tangent enact an experience of time-bending for the audience. Out of the historical event they have been witnessing, the audience is jolted with no warning into a contemporary and then a future event, reminded first of the “General” and then presented with the prediction that he will end the Irish rebellion. Equally

¹⁶² Cheney, *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright*, 222.

jarring is the return to King Henry's story, where the audience is prompted to imagine first the celebration that would occur during Essex's homecoming, and abruptly returned to the past with the repetition of "much more." The presaging books of sonnet 23 are not unique in Shakespeare's canon; texts and events in Shakespeare's works are available for future interpretations, and such interpretations depend upon the contexts in which the audience encounters the texts. Like Sidney's sonnet recipient, who reads the love poetry she receives through the lens of her experience, Shakespeare's works are shaped by the perspectives of their readers or viewers.

Through his emphasis on the participation of his subject and his audience, who must "read" his looks and books for significance, Shakespeare uses the collaborative epistemology of the theater as a response to the challenge of Petrarchan conventions. He cannot "say / The perfect ceremony of love's rite," a phrase that harkens back to Sidney's failure, in *AS* 1, to follow in the meter and footsteps of other love poets. In place of effective Petrarchan execution, Shakespeare proposes a more organic form of expression, which will change over time based on the perspectives of his audience members. Like Jupiter's presaging book, Shakespeare's dumb sonnets will depend upon the reader to make them speak, and their readings will be affected by their development. This much is implied by Shakespeare's command that his addressee "learn to read what silent love hath writ." The slow process of learning will alter the interpretation; as the reader learns more, he will be a better reader. The sonnet will therefore presage differently, even for the single reader the speaker imagines, as time passes.

Shakespeare also highlights the important role of audience interpretation by employing synaesthesia in sonnet 23. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Jennifer Waldron identifies Shakespeare's use of synaesthesia in Bottom's transposition of a Pauline epistle. Synaesthesia

demonstrates that, while the senses are distinct from one another, they collectively generate a unique form of knowledge.¹⁶³ Shakespeare's final line, "To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit" underscores the collaborative process of meaning-making, not only between people, but among the sensory experiences of an individual. In order to understand an abstract concept like love, the speaker argues, the subject must be willing to create and experience truth across the senses. Watching or reading the manifestations of the speaker's love, the subject has to supply the accompanying soundtrack, making meaning by inputting his own details into an otherwise "imperfect" expression of love. Like the prophecy in *Pericles* and the presaging books of sonnet 23, human expressions depend upon context and audience interpretation to make meaning.

The context- and reader-dependent nature of meaning in sonnet 108 also highlights the correlation between poetic and dramatic works. Cheney notes that sonnet 108 incorporates both theatrical and poetic metaphors, and the conflation of these two metaphors, paired with the poem's interest in the difficulty of expressing one's feelings and desires, encourages the reader to recognize the function representation, both textual and theatrical, has in meaning-making.¹⁶⁴

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

¹⁶³ Waldron, "The eye of man hath not heard," 413.

¹⁶⁴ Cheney, *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright*, 227-28.

The poem's opening questions, asking first what is left to say and, second, what is new to say about love occur at a significant moment in the sonnet sequence. As Katherine Duncan-Jones observes,

Reaching 108, the total number of sonnets in Sidney's [*Astrophil and Stella*,]...the poet takes stock of his achievements. He can find no new way of representing either himself or the youth in words, but is compelled to reiterate what he has often said before; in so doing he continually rediscovers his first love and the young man's beauty, revived in language though vanished in nature.¹⁶⁵

Duncan-Jones aptly draws the comparison to Sidney's sonnet sequence, and her summary of the argument of sonnet 108 expresses the process of meaning-making communicated by the speaker. Despite outward appearances ("show"), the nature of the speaker's love benefits from a continual source of renewal. The poem's use of literary metaphors for recording and expressing love suggests that love is a process generated and confirmed by rhetorical devices.

One such rhetorical device is the rhetorical question with which Shakespeare begins sonnet 108. By posing an epistemological question in the opening lines, Shakespeare enacts a rebracketing experience for his readers that heightens the pleasure of the sonnet and emphasizes the instability of meaning. When the speaker asks, "What's in the brain that ink may character," the enjambment creates a momentary pause, during which the reader may think generally about how and if thoughts can be recorded or communicated. Even after line two, in which the question becomes specific to the speaker's feelings about his beloved, the phenomenological implications are still present. Is it possible for the reader to express his "true spirit" with words and ink alone? The first couplet invites readers to consider how, using a language and a poetic tradition in which there is nothing "new to speak," the reader can express his own true feelings. Such a sentiment allies Shakespeare's speaker with Sidney's *Astrophil*, whose opening sonnet articulates the

¹⁶⁵ Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed. *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 326.

difficulty of making new meaning out of a well-worn poetic tradition. For Shakespeare, one way to make the epideictic tradition new and to emphasize its intersubjectivity is to infuse it with images and language from the theater.

The theatrical elements of sonnet 108 invest the sonnet tradition with new meaning, while also suggesting that performance can be an epistemologically productive process. The metaphors of the sonnet draw a correlation between the “show” of line fourteen and the surface that protects and preserves love. Love exists in “love’s fresh case” (108.9) and on the book of antiquity (108.12), and love is bred “Where time and outward form would show it dead” (108.14). If outward form is the protective case for love, shielding it from dust, age, and wrinkles, the speaker suggests that performance or show helps couples stay in love, just as Sidney regards other vices that create pleasure (like eating or watching plays) as morally edifying. Paulina’s performance in *The Winter’s Tale* also serves a protective function, shielding Hermione and her truth from the potential wrath of a jealous tyrant by allowing her to observe Leontes and determine if he is truly penitent. As in sonnet 138—“Love’s best habit is in seeming trust”—there is a suggestion in sonnet 108 that performance constitutes an important, protective facet of love. The additional assertion that love exists on an antique book underscores the integral role creativity plays in affection.

Sonnet 108’s references to performance and prayer highlight the meaning-making role of context or framing, two key facets in Pyrrhonist philosophy. Though the speaker engages in the same acts repeatedly—saying over his love for the young man just as he says over his prayers each day—these acts are made different by the context in which each exists. The process whereby old information is made new is best expressed by the paradox in line twelve, in which eternal love “makes antiquity for aye his page.” Love—figured as either a writer or reader—rests

on the same page forever, as if it were always new, always a source for “the first conceit of love there bred” (108.13). Like the repeated prayers, the page on which the speaker reads or writes is antique, but always new. Given the variety of references to writing in this sonnet, readers are likely to interpret “page” in a textual sense, but the word also connotes that antiquity is love’s page, or serving boy. This reading is paradoxical, depicting antiquity as a young man, and it also contributes to the theme of meaning-making present throughout the poem. Though antiquity, as well as the love the speaker feels for the young man, are both old, the creative process love undergoes daily makes them young and new again. Like the speaker of sonnet 138, who performs youthful naiveté in hopes that it will shape him into a youth in the eyes of the dark lady (1-4), love as a maker and consumer of texts shapes the meaning of the subjects he writes about.

Sonnets 23 and 108, by virtue of their depiction of the collaboration that takes place between an author and his audience or subject, represent how significance is constructed through a communal process that depends in large part upon the audience or witnesses. Such collaboration accounts for sonnet 23’s “time-bending” books, which depend upon future readers to invest them with significance; in sonnet 108, it accounts for the continual newness of love’s antique book, where it can read the same expressions of love with fresh perspective each day; and it accounts for Hamlet’s Mousetrapp, by no means a new play (even with the addition of Hamlet’s lines, the players are prepared to perform *The Murder of Gonzago* the very next day), but one that offers new meaning to its audience because it constitutes Sidney’s “imaginative groundplot,” a source for “profitable invention.” Across genres, Shakespeare rejects empirical truth in favor of a Pyrrhonist interpretation of meaning as dependent upon perspective and context.

Like Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence self-consciously adopts metaphors and tropes that are well established in the minds of the reader, and both authors draw attention to the ways in which the texts they write struggle to make new meaning out of an old set of conceits. Sidney's sonnets 5 and 71 incorporate Petrarchan devices in order to press against (71) or succumb to (5) them, but Sidney's opening sonnet—like Shakespeare's sonnet's 23 and 108—observes that love poetry can still be a source of original expression for a sincere heart. Shakespeare builds on Sidney's claims by demonstrating how performances in both sonnets and drama produce meaning. Such performances require the interpretive skills of an audience. His use of synaesthesia to account for the ways that lovers make meaning out of each other's imperfect expressions emphasizes the phenomenological quality of expression. Love cannot merely be inked onto a page. Lovers must learn to interpret each other's performances of love and to develop meaning out of their dialectic expressions of affection, rather than succumb to isolation, as Cavell's model of Shakespearean skepticism implies. An acknowledgment that abstract concepts like love, community, and faith are performative underlies Shakespeare's theatrical works and substantiates Sidney's claims about the positive influence the author has over his audience. Defending the theater against antitheatrical polemic, Sidney acknowledges that the theater can have a powerful, embodied effect on his reader. Sidney and Shakespeare both recognize that such effects can be generative, building community by making and communicating meaning for performers and audience members alike. While Shakespeare's appreciation for performance as an epistemological tool stems from his work in the theater, for him, the individual's capacity for embracing multiple perspectives and making meaning is not limited to the pleasure of the theater. It is also a source of pleasure and intimacy in the

relationships among the sonnet speaker and his two subjects, as well as between the sonnets' characters and their readers.

CHAPTER 4

PYRRHONIST PETRARCHANISM

Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrate that Shakespeare's heightened interest in knowledge acquisition comes in part from the religious turbulence of the Reformation and the subsequent religiously motivated criticism of the theater. These anti-theatrical texts often employ epistemological metaphors (some common to the sonnet and theatrical traditions) to communicate the perceived dangers of exposure to the theater. The overlap in metaphors in these distinct genres is due in part to the overlapping careers of anti-theatrical writers, like Anthony Munday or Stephen Gosson, whose ethos was constructed in part on the fact that they were reformed playwrights themselves. In Munday's version of the "eyes as windows" metaphor, discussed in Chapter 3, the eyes not only make the soul accessible to the public, but—more pressingly—leave the soul particularly vulnerable to corrupting influences ("the tokens of that which we have seen stick fast in us, whether we will or no").¹⁶⁶ The windows metaphor is a common and useful one for Renaissance authors and thinkers because it illustrates both the susceptibility of the soul to temptation and the power and authority of the eyes.¹⁶⁷ Looking into the expressive eyes of a lover, for instance, might offer insight into her soul, revealing otherwise unavailable evidence about her character or feelings. Petrarchan epistemological metaphors create inadequate representations of empirical truth, which Shakespeare eschews in favor of a model of collaborative, subjective meaning-making.

¹⁶⁶ Munday, *A Second and Third Blast*, 107-108.

¹⁶⁷ The quote "the eyes are the windows to the soul" is sometimes incorrectly attributed to Shakespeare (one could buy a t-shirt on many popular websites featuring this misattribution). Shakespeare—of course—did not create this metaphor, which I will suggest he regarded as problematic; Leonardo da Vinci was already using this metaphor a hundred years before Shakespeare began writing. Liana De Girolami Cheney, "Leonardo da Vinci's theory of vision and creativity: The Uffizi Annunciation," in *Renaissance Theories of Vision: Visual Culture in Early Modernity*, ed. John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 103.

To describe Shakespeare's response to the Petrarchan tradition most accurately, this chapter begins by examining major epistemological metaphors employed by Petrarch and the earlier English sonneteers. Petrarchan metaphors, especially those that imagine a connection between the soul and the eyes or face, subscribe to a fiction of epistemological certainty, suggesting an apparent and accessible correlation between external appearance and internal thoughts or feelings. Shakespeare's Pyrrhonist sensitivity to the disparity between truth and seeming truth is inspired in part by scientific developments in optics and other related technologies. These developments yielded telescopes and more accurate mirrors, for example, but such technological improvements also made Renaissance thinkers more aware of the fact that all knowledge acquisition is mediated in some way. With the increasingly sophisticated understanding of vision and perspective, afforded by recent discoveries, Shakespeare can reimagine the notion that metaphor offers insight into a speaker's experience in his plays, as I demonstrate in my reading of *Twelfth Night*. In both his plays and poetry, Shakespeare undermines metaphors of epistemological certainty, offering in their place the process of collaborative meaning-making that stems from accepting that empirical truth is nearly impossible to identify. While in plays like *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare uses performance conditions (doubling, costuming, staging confusion) to expose the audience to uncertainty, the sonnets offer readers a particularly linguistic experience of uncertainty. Shakespeare critiques the sonnet tradition by using its metaphors of epistemological revelation in a way that both problematizes these metaphors and extracts new significance from them.

Perspective and Epistemological Certainty in the Petrarchan Tradition

The impulse to identify external traits as markers of internal states points to a desire to know the truth about other people completely and with certainty. In one particularly familiar epistemological metaphor, the poet speaker imagines the eyes as windows to the heart or soul.¹⁶⁸ Because the metaphor accommodates the desire for empirical truth, Renaissance writers employ it frequently. Laura's eyes, for instance "show...so much sweetness / it makes Love careless with the reins of reason" (141.6-7). They are so expressive that they become the very source of judgment when Petrarch anthropomorphizes them: "...I can see how much her eyes disdain me, / and I am certain I will die from it" (141.9-10). Petrarch fancies (like the friar in *Much Ado About Nothing*) that he can read Laura's expressions, using her eyes as indicators of her emotional response to him. Petrarch further emphasizes this imagined connection between the eyes and the soul when he laments "...my soul, blind, consents to its own death" (141.14). Not only do the eyes express the content of the soul, but the soul itself is linked to the power or failure of sight.

English sonneteers also regard the eyes and face as essential tools for accessing concealed information. One of the first poets to popularize the sonnet in English, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, describes how his own desire manifests on his face:

Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,
And built his seat within my captive breast,
Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought,
Oft in my face he doth his banner rest. (1-4)¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ I have included the phrase "poet speaker" to acknowledge that Renaissance writers—as Anne Ferry demonstrates—did not have a hard and fast understanding of the difference between the poet and his persona. The inconsistency of the relationship between poet and speaker that Ferry defines contributes to the multi-faceted practice of identity making that, I argue, Shakespeare illustrates in his sonnets. *The "Inward" Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 17.

¹⁶⁹ Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, "Love, that Doth Reign and Live within My Thought" in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, ed. Joseph Black et al. Vol. 2. (Buffalo, NY: Broadview, 2006), 118.

Love (or its embodied form, Cupid) expresses itself to the world through the lover's countenance. Moreover, Surrey's Love reigns in his breast and his mind, so that the banner appearing on his face reveals his thoughts and feelings. Both Munday and Surrey suggest a link between the face and heart that cannot be regulated (or perhaps one that can only be regulated with difficulty). For Munday, the eyes cannot keep sins out of the breast; for Surrey, the breast cannot keep love from displaying itself in the face. Because face, mind, and heart communicate so freely, in spite of the person (as Surrey would have it), poets often suggest that emotional displays in the face and eyes provide a genuine, unregulated expression of thoughts or feelings.

In popularizing the sonnet in England, both Thomas Wyatt and Surrey exerted a shaping influence over the motifs, like the eyes-as-windows, that would become prevalent in English poetry generally and the sonnet specifically. Wyatt's poetry emphasizes the threat that stems from the perceived link between the eyes and the "Truth of the heart," casting the eyes as a betrayer of secrets. In his poem "That the Eye Bewrayeth Always the Secret Affections of the Heart," he disputes with a friend who—upon offending the speaker with a harsh look—claims that the look does not reflect any negative feelings toward Wyatt. Though the speaker accepts his friend's explanation ("But I your Friend shall take it thus, / Since you will so, as stroke of chance"), he undercuts the truce by ending the stanza, "but for my part, / My eye must still betray my heart," and uses the final stanza to advise his friend:

And of this grief ye shall be quit,
In helping Truth steadfast to go.
The time is long that Truth doth sit
Feeble and weak, and suff'reth woe;
Cherish him well, continue so;
Let him not fro' your heart astart;
Then fears not the eye to shew the heart.

The speaker describes Truth as located directly within the heart, where it has long remained captive. He suggests that the subject has suppressed his true feelings at length, so that suffering truth has become “feeble and weak.” The subject could avoid “grief” by acknowledging the truth and communicating it freely. This stanza, however, offers contradictory advice. While the speaker urges his friend both to help and cherish truth, he also argues that one may only prevent unwanted displays of truth by keeping it captive, so that it may not “fro’ your heart astart.” This conclusion reinforces the inevitability of physical displays of truth: though the friend has tried, as the speaker counsels, to conceal the truth, the poem itself is a response to his or her inability to do so. There is, therefore, no sure way to prevent truth from escaping to show itself in the eyes.

The imagined communication between the eyes/face and the heart/soul exemplifies the Petrarchan anxiety about and desire for epistemological certainty. If such a connection between the eyes and soul exists, then writers, lovers, and people generally can gain access to hidden truths about their friends, sonnet mistresses, and acquaintances. Metaphors that depict an inevitable connection between the face and the heart offer the possibility of epistemological certainty by drawing a correlation between exterior shows and interior states of being.

In a motif closely related to Surrey’s description of his “captive breast” and Wyatt’s “traitor to the heart,” sonneteers sometimes describe the image or name of the beloved as residing in or being engraved upon the heart. Spenser, for instance, claims that his sonnet mistress’s image exists within him when he proposes that his “inward selfe” is a more reliable representation of his lady than her “glasse of christall clene” (45.1-3). This inscribed heart trope indicates the devotion the speaker feels for his subject, by creating metaphorical, internalized versions of the fashionable miniature portraits that were worn at court as a sign of love or devotion. Moreover, these images infer a degree of epistemological certainty by suggesting that

the poet can speak his “inward self” or represent his true feelings using poetic devices such as description and imagery. Through the use of this metaphor, that is, the author creates a symbol for the strength of his devotion, assuring his lady not only that he loves her, but that he understands and represents her more accurately than her mirror reflection can. Like the eyes-as-windows metaphor, this inscription metaphor attempts to render physical (on the written page, through the visualization of the familiar image of the miniature portrait), and therefore more certain, that which is abstract and unclear to the audience.

These sonnet tropes are examples of literary attempts to manifest love or virtue physically. Shakespeare’s mastery of the sonnet indicates that he was familiar with the impulse to use images—particularly blazons and other interior/exterior correlation metaphors—like the Dogmatists, who “think that they have discovered the truth” (Sextus 3). In his complex response to the Petrarchan tradition, Shakespeare borrows the metaphors of epistemological certainty from his fellow sonneteers, but his revised versions demonstrate that such metaphors are unproductive compared to the sublime, meaning-making experience of unknowability.

Early Modern Technologies of Representation

Renaissance scientific advances in optics revealed the distorted, unreliable nature of vision. Renaissance subjects were already aware that images could be manipulated, but, as Elizabeth Spiller suggests, scientific developments such as the telescope “shifted this discussion by revealing how distortion is the basis for all acts of perception.”¹⁷⁰ Inspired by advances in ocular and visual studies, Renaissance thinkers became increasingly aware, that images were necessarily misleading. While the technological advancements in astronomy (such as Hans

¹⁷⁰ Elizabeth Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature: The Art of Making Knowledge 1580-1670* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 103.

Lippershey's primitive telescope, through which Galileo would peer) provided scholars and their audiences with new information, they also revealed the impossibility of discovering pure, unmediated truth. As Galileo's work in *Starry Messengers* suggests, information in virtually any form, including both telescope and text, is filtered through a real or figurative lens.¹⁷¹ The increasing awareness that all information is mediated undermines motifs, like those presented in many sonnets, which link physical appearance to transcendent, abstract truths about the speaker or subject.

Like the telescope, the mirror also underwent technological advances that created more accurate reflections. The Renaissance mirror provided a larger and less distorted image than its predecessors, which had been made from small pieces of concave or convex glass or from polished metals.¹⁷² But, these advanced mirrors also generated skepticism about the reliability of representation or communication in any form, as one may observe in the increasingly self-conscious use of mirrors in literary and artistic representations. Self-portraits in particular offered artists an opportunity to depict the unreliability of vision and reflection. For example, in his famous *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, Parmigianino (née Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola) presents an inaccurate image of the author in which his hand, by virtue of its placement in the foreground of the picture, appears larger than the rest of his body. As Parmigianino's work highlights the skewed perspective available through early modern mirror technology, Johannes Gump's *Self-Portrait* meditates on appearance and reflection by showing the artist at work on his self-portrait.¹⁷³ Gump's painting represents the artist's back, flanked on each side by a

¹⁷¹ Spiller, *Science, Reading, and Renaissance Literature*, 115.

¹⁷² Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), 37.

¹⁷³ For more on Parmigianino's and Gump's self-portraits and Renaissance mirror technology, see Faye Tudor, "'All in him selfe as in a glass he sees': Mirrors and vision in the Renaissance," in *Renaissance Theories of Vision*:

mirror showing his reflection and a canvas is which Gump is recording that reflection. The viewers' inability to see the original, whose back is turned to them, paired with the slight disparities between the reflection and the painting (the shape of the eyes, for instance, and the width of the lips), indicates that Gump, like many of his contemporaries, was interested in the way information is mediated by its representations, including images available in mirrors and works of art. By presenting a distorted image (in Parmigianino's case) or illustrating the differences between reflected, painted, and actual, physical appearances (as Gump's work does), artists who were inspired by technological advances expressed doubt about the veracity of images that were received through such technology.

Paired with early modern advances in technologies of representation, the reviving interest in Pyrrhonist skepticism would have heightened awareness about the subjective nature of images. For the Pyrrhonists, human observation, altered by visual technologies or not, was a source for evidence impossible to confirm and must, therefore, be regarded as only one possible perspective. In his extensive proof of the first mode of skepticism—that “animals, depending on the differences among them, do not receive the same appearances from the same things”—Sextus uses mirrors to illustrate the existence of multiple perspectives dependent upon the construction of the eye.¹⁷⁴ Mirrors, Sextus argues, show viewers an array of images, sometimes showing “external objects as minute (e.g. concave mirrors)...as elongated and narrow (convex mirrors).” Drawing on the information about how image is mediated by the shape of the mirror, Sextus concludes:

Since, then, some of the vessels of sight protrude and project beyond the body because of their convexity, while others are more concave and others are set level, it is likely that the

Visual Culture in Early Modernity, ed. John Shannon Hendrix and Charles H. Carman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 171-86.

¹⁷⁴ Sextus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 13.

appearances are altered by this too, and that dogs, fish, lions, humans and locusts do not see the same things as equal in size or similar in shape; rather, what they see depends upon the kind of imprinting produced in each case by the eye which receives what is apparent.¹⁷⁵

For the Pyrrhonists, the differences in mirror images illustrate how different eyes might perceive images differently. Consequently, that humans cannot know if their perspective accurately reflects “what [the objects they perceive] are like in their nature.”¹⁷⁶ Such a philosophy correlates to the artistic representations of Parmigianino and Gump, who use the mirror—not merely to expose mirrors as an imperfect technology—but to remind viewers that their self-portraits are mediated by personal perspective.

Like the Pyrrhonists and the self-portrait painters, Shakespeare also uses mirrors as a tool for exposing the unreliability of appearances. Shakespeare’s Bolingbroke presents this increasingly popular attitude toward mirror technology when he issues his uncharacteristically pensive corrective to Richard II, who has shattered a mirror: “The shadow of your sorrow hath destroy’d / the shadow of your face” (4.1.2284-85). Mirror images may provide some information, but that information is only a shadow. Unlike Surrey and Wyatt’s poetic selves, Richard cannot (according to Bolingbroke) physically manifest his sorrow; he can only show outward signs of it, and when he views his reflection, those signs are rendered increasingly unreliable because they are reflections from another shadow. Inspired by the changes in technological—as well as religious and philosophical—worldviews, Shakespeare’s dramatic and poetic works frequently explore how individuals gain knowledge and how much of that knowledge is subject to perspective. Given his awareness of multiple perspectives and their

¹⁷⁵ Sextus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Sextus, *Outlines of Skepticism*, 17.

virtual incompatibility with empirical truth, Shakespeare's skeptical outlook correlates to that of the Pyrrhonists.

Perspective and Epistemological Uncertainty in Shakespeare's Drama

Shakespeare's plays emphasize the value of collaborative epistemology by undermining metaphors of certainty and representing, in their place, the value of acknowledging multiple perspectives. For example, Shakespeare employs a version of the inscribed heart trope in *Twelfth Night*, where Olivia's treatment of the metaphor highlights its instability. The trope's appearance in a courtship scene between Olivia and Viola demonstrates that Shakespeare regarded such epistemological metaphors as unable to provide certainty; when Viola intimates that the "text" she has been sent to deliver lies "in Orsino's bosom," Olivia responds by literalizing the popular courtship image:

Olivia: In his bosom? In what chapter of his bosom?

Viola: To answer by the method, in the first of his heart.

Olivia: O, I have read it, it is heresy. Have you no more to say?

Viola: Good madam, let me see your face.

Olivia: Have you any commission from your lord to negotiate with my face? You are now out of your text. (1.5.216-22)

Olivia shifts "text" from an abstract concept (beliefs or underlying principles) to its concrete meaning by asking for a specific chapter. Viola acknowledges Olivia's "method" of regarding the image literally, but her response attempts to return to the abstract by referring back to her metaphor for Orsino's devotion. Olivia, however, meets the second claim of Orsino's heart-as-text with the same literalizing force, asserting that she has read the text and judged it as heretical, and effectively halts this courtship strategy: Viola's next response is not to pursue the metaphor, but instead to ask Olivia to show her face. By imagining the metaphorical text as an actual book, Olivia encourages Viola and the audience to reevaluate the popular metaphor, to reconsider the

familiar relationship between a heart and a book. The metaphor is thus exposed as merely a clever and aesthetically pleasing rhetorical device, rather than a tool for communicating the truth about Orsino's state of devotion.

Moreover, Viola's subsequent request to see Olivia's face hints at the epistemological function she attributes to appearances; when it becomes difficult to communicate with Olivia—when she refuses to remain within the same metaphorical register—Viola hopes that Olivia's face will offer clearer insight into her feelings about Orsino and her responses to Viola's arguments. Olivia's response draws a final distinction between the heart and the face by suggesting that, in seeking to “negotiate with [Olivia's] face,” Viola has strayed from her original “text,” the heart.

Shakespeare also takes pains to demonstrate that, just as metaphors about the heart cannot communicate empirical truth, appearances do not reveal concealed inner realities; instead images, like those in mirrors and paintings, are available for interpretation and manipulation. As a result, the most intense efforts at scrutiny can yield only a subjective set of observations. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, for instance Claudio reads Hero's blush as confirmation of her infidelity:

She's but the sign and semblance of her honour.
Behold how like a maid she blushes here...
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear—
All of you that see her—that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none.
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed.
Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (4.1.33-42)

Claudio regards Hero's blush—a traditional sign of modesty—as evidence of her deception.¹⁷⁷

She is cunning because she performs chastity, deceiving onlookers with her blush. Claudio cites another circumstance in which flushed cheeks are common, suggesting that Hero's blush is reminiscent of the "heat of [the] luxurious bed" she has experienced. Claudio invokes the instability of appearance (noting the difficulty of interpreting Hero's "sign" and "shows" of maiden virtue), while simultaneously using these signs to confirm her guilt.

Shakespeare reminds the audience that interpretation is an individual experience by also staging the friar's reading of Hero's flushed complexion:

I have marked
A thousand blushing apparitions
To start into her face, a thousand innocent shames
In angel whiteness beat away those blushes...
Call me a fool,
Trust not my reading nor my observations,
Which with experimental seal doth warrant
The tenor of my book. Trust not my age,
If this sweet lady lie not guiltless here (4.1.158-69)

The friar uses Hero's blushes to confirm what the audience knows: that the lady is innocent.

Moreover—by offering his skill with moral philosophy in support of his interpretation—he draws an analogy between looking at a woman and reading a text. Both texts and bodies, the friar believes, offer signs that lead to a correct interpretation, and his skill with the imagery and metaphors of the written text renders him an expert on reading women's bodies. At the same time, however, the friar's language subtly undermines his argument. Hero's blushes are

¹⁷⁷ Danielle Clarke offers an excellent description of the problem of interpreting blushes in the Renaissance: "Whilst the meaning of the blush is always more than double, some poetic texts incorporate this dual aspect into the meaning of the blush itself. It becomes a part of wooing, a sign simultaneously of innocence and knowledge. It is the woman's proof that she is innocent and that she has been unfairly taken advantage of, at the same time as it is read by her male wooer as a sign of her compliance with his designs. Thus the duality central to the blush can signify either way—it can attest to a woman's guilt or to her virtue. Which way depends upon the interpretation of this bodily 'language' which is woman's response to imposed silence." "The Iconography of the Blush: Marian Literature of the 1630s," in *Voicing Women: Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Writing*, ed. Kate Chedgzoy, Melanie Hansen, and Suzanne Trill (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 119.

“apparitions,” not manifestations, of her guiltlessness, and “innocent shames” sounds like a paradox. His conclusion—like many of the sonnets—invokes the various meanings of “lie” (Hero may be laying down on stage, but she may also tell a lie or lie with a man), so that the audience hears first that “the sweet lady lie[s],” before the friar confirms his belief in her innocence. As a result of Claudio and the friar’s diverse interpretations, Hero’s blushes become an unreliable indicator of her chastity, and Shakespeare invites his audience to recognize the ambiguity of physical signs. This instability of signs and the subjectivity of experience that *Much Ado* introduces to its audience was an increasingly popular philosophical topic for Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

It is clear from both the plays and the sonnets that Shakespeare considers the shape of a person to be subject to perspective and interpretation; as Duncan acknowledges, “There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face.” Using strategies similar to those I have outlined in *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado* in his sonnets, Shakespeare expresses an interest in the potential for empirical truth to be unstable and unreliable. This sensitivity toward epistemological instability stems in part from the scientific field, the developments of which both generated knowledge and exposed areas of ignorance and uncertainty. The technologies of vision function for Shakespeare as they did for the Pyrrhonists: to illustrate how observed information is subject to personal experience.

Productive and Unproductive Meaning-Making in the Sonnets

Like the Pyrrhonist philosophers, Shakespeare eschews objective truth in favor of collective meaning-making, and this philosophical stance distinguishes his sonnets from much of early modern English poetry. His strategy of both criticizing and utilizing Petrarchan

conventions stems from Sidney, who (as I argue in Chapter 3) adopts many tropes common to the English sonnet in order to complicate and enrich them. Expanding on Sidney's project, Shakespeare unpacks some of the preeminent metaphors of the sonnet tradition in order to critique the Petrarchan tradition, which his sequence generally represents as reliant on fictions of epistemological certainty. In the dark lady sonnets, especially sonnet 130, Petrarchan epistemological metaphors create false, inadequate representations, and the procreation sonnets suggest that Petrarchan metaphors are figuratively and biologically unproductive.

Many of the sonnets to the young man read the attributes of his traditional Petrarchan beauty as symbolically significant, thereby linking them to the poetic impulse to seek epistemological certainty in appearance. Such is the case in sonnet 14:

But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
And, constant stars, in them I read such art
As truth and beauty shall together thrive
If from thyself to store thou wouldst convert.
Or else of thee this I prognosticate:
Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date. (14.9-14)

The speaker regards his beloved as a source for knowledge. The eyes are "constant stars," which can predict the future, but can also function as a guide. The speaker does, in this instance, imagine that the beloved's eyes are prophetic: he reads in them that the young man must "convert" his store by reproducing. If the young man fails to have children, the speaker predicts, truth and beauty will meet their doom. In this sonnet, Shakespeare, like other Petrarchan poets, imagines the eyes as a source for guidance and greater truths.¹⁷⁸

Following this appeal to reproduce, which draws on a familiar epistemological trope, Shakespeare completes the procreation series with three sonnets that correlate the physical

¹⁷⁸ For instance, Spenser describes his lover's eye as a source of guidance: "my Helice the lodestare of my lyfe / will shine again, and looke on me at last, / with lovely light to cleare my cloudy grief" (34.10-12).

reproduction of the young man to the speaker's production of sonnets. While sonnet 15 claims that the speaker can "engraft" the young man "new" (15.14), both 16 and 17 suggest that poetry is an inferior substitute, contrasting the unproductive sonnet with the reproductive potential of its subject. Though it is clear in phrases such as "my pupil pen" (16.10) that Shakespeare is exercising a degree of poetic humility, the final procreation sonnets link attempts at communicating truth through poetry with barrenness (16.4) and death. The sonnet "is but as a tomb / Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts" (17.3-4), where the reference to the "parts" of the beloved invokes the blazon. Not only do the procreation sonnets represent the metaphors of certainty associated with the sonnet tradition as unproductive, but many other young man sonnets also expose the inability of such metaphors to signify reliably.

One of Shakespeare's most powerful methods for critically examining the epistemology of the epideictic tradition is to take up its popular metaphors and reimagine or problematize them.¹⁷⁹ In sonnet 24, for instance, Shakespeare illustrates the difficulty in using metaphors to communicate interior states-of-being. Shakespeare imagines the eyes not merely as the figurative entrance to the soul, but as the literal window into the shop of the speaker's heart. By literalizing the windows metaphor (as Olivia literalizes the inscribed heart metaphor), Shakespeare complicates the fantasy of accessible knowledge, ultimately destroying the conceit by demonstrating—through a dizzying series of images—that knowledge of another person's soul is

¹⁷⁹ While Shakespeare's sonnets are particularly interested in critiquing its inherited traditions, these critiques—as Booth and Fineman variously argue—are in some ways a part of the sonnet tradition. Booth is correct in labeling the sonnet tradition as one of indecorum, suggesting that, "In all stages of its development, the courtly love tradition relies upon a reader's sense of the frame of reference in which the writer operates and the writer's apparent deviation from that pattern in a rhetorical action that both fits and violates the expected pattern." "The Value of the Sonnets," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 20. Fineman, meanwhile, argues that "the orthodox tradition of epideictic poetry controls in advance its own transgression, predetermining and, to some extent, anticipating the character of its own undoing," *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 3.

hard to discover, and that learning the empirical truth of a poem or poet is difficult, if not impossible.

Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath steeld,
Thy beauties forme in table of my heart,
My body is the frame wherein ti's held,
And perspective it is best Painters art.
For through the Painter must you see his skill,
To finde where your true Image pictur'd lies,
Which in my bosomes shop is hanging stil,
That hath his windowes glazed with thine eyes:
Now see what good-turnes eyes for eies have done,
Mine eyes have drawne thy shape, and thine for me
Are windowes to my brest, where-through the Sun
Delights to peepe, to gaze therein on thee
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art
They draw but what they see, know not the hart.

The poem's reference to "perspective" in art (24.3) underscores the subjectivity of representation and perception. Perspective painting, while it may seem more lifelike from a single viewpoint, often seems misshapen or out of proportion from other views. This existence of multiple, more-or-less reliable viewpoints highlights the uncertainty of knowledge acquired through the senses. Though the speaker may feel that he has a complete understanding of the young man, the perspective from which he sees the young man is only one of many viable perspectives. Its recognition of the existence of multiple perspectives allies this sonnet with the Pyrrhonist skeptical model. The speaker's willingness to regard his own understanding of the subject as a singular perspective, and one—as the final couplet indicates—that is perhaps incorrect, encourages readers to move toward a state of equipollence. Readers cannot know if their own perceptions, of either the subject as a beautiful, loving individual or the speaker as a faithful but inaccurate artist, are reflections of reality.

Sonnet 24's reference to perspective could also allude to the poet's role in constructing an identity for his subject. The sonnet, by offering only a singular perspective filtered through the

emotion and experience of the speaker, correlates to the painted self-portrait, which is necessarily altered by its creator. By virtue of their sensitivity toward the construction of meaning and the instability of image, Shakespeare's sonnets are like the self-portraits of Parmigianino and Gump, whose self-conscious work creates meaning for its audience by showing them how unreliable their representations are. As Dympna Callaghan argues:

As a genre, sonnets constitute the fruits of an encounter between the poet, or the poet's persona, and the object of his address on the one hand, and, on the other, the elusive identity of *the beloved*, the *inamorata* who conforms to the specifications of type precisely because she is *like no other*. The disjunction between 'actual identity,' even where such an identity is explicitly assigned, and the lyrical construction of the beloved reveals the poet's...fantasy about the object of his adoration.¹⁸⁰

Shakespeare frequently depicts this process of creating a literary identity, emphasizing that such an image is subjective, like a "painted counterfeit" (16.8), filtered through the experiences of the speaker, as in sonnet 31: "Their images I loved I view in thee" (31.13). The speaker's perception of his object is unique, informed by his affection and his past experiences.

In sonnet 24, Shakespeare's reference to framing connects the literary image-making process to Pyrrhonism. The speaker claims, "My body is the frame wherein 'tis held, / And perspective it is best painter's art." The frame is an important image in Renaissance discourse not only on perspective painting, but also on Pyrrhonist skepticism. The ten modes of skepticism espoused by Pyrrhonists—particularly the fourth and fifth, which emphasize the role of condition and position/perspective in meaning-making—encourage readers to acknowledge the existence of multiple viable interpretations. Sherman explains, Pyrrhonists, "use frames, not as an instrument of mastery, but as a bracketing device conducive to perspective and multiple points of view."¹⁸¹ In sonnet 24 the speaker constitutes only one frame through which to regard his

¹⁸⁰ Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 19.

¹⁸¹ Sherman, *Skepticism and Memory*, 17.

subject. The fact that this picture hangs in a “shop” reiterates the possibility of alternative frames and alternative viewers, since the image could be sold and reframed by its owner, as Shakespeare’s sonnets are sold and reframed by the experiences and knowledge of his readership. The image of the beloved is not etched in stone or marble, substances which, as sonnet 55 famously argues, are subject to more decay than the organic meaning-making process that takes place “in the eyes of all posterity” (55.11) and “in lovers’ eyes” (55.14); Shakespeare’s sonnets create malleable images, which engage in the process of bracketing or reframing.

Like the Pyrrhonists, Shakespeare encourages his readers to suspend judgment through his rhetorical reframing. Until the final couplet of sonnet 24, the speaker delivers a relatively cohesive argument, which benefits from the epistemological metaphors familiar to many readers. The final couplet, however, 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. By rebracketing the sonnet, Shakespeare denies his reader access to empirical truth about the nature of the beloved. Rather, the reframing enables a suspension of judgment that may ultimately lead to new meaning-making opportunities. This rebracketing is also potentially a source for pleasure. The final couplet, like many *volta*s, gives the reader an unexpected conclusion. Such a surprise does not uniformly cause anxiety, even if it does destabilize and resituate the argument. Out of the uncertainty generated by the turn stems an opportunity for pleasant reflection on the nature of truth making and truth communicating in art, and in the sonnet in particular. Such invitations to rethink and reread exist throughout the sonnet sequence, where previous information may be filtered through new claims or understandings. As he does with the opening line of sonnet 115—

“ Those lines that I before have writ do lie”—Shakespeare often provides new interpretive possibilities that enrich the series and encourage reframed readings of previous poems.

Additionally, Shakespeare’s revision of the windows metaphor in sonnet 24 complicates his readers’ responses to the poem. The young man’s eyes do not, in fact, provide a window to his own soul; instead, the speaker intimates, they “are windows to *my* breast” (emphasis added). Unlike, for instance, Sidney’s description of Stella’s eyes as “The windows now through which this heavenly guest / Looks o’er the world” (9.9-10), the young man’s eyes offer a reflection of the speaker. This transposition complicates the common Petrarchan metaphor by denying its epistemological significance. The young man’s eyes are not windows through which he is exposed, but mirrors by which his heart is concealed. Admittedly, Spenser offers a precedent for the mirror metaphor, declaring in his *Amoretti*, “Fayre eyes, the myrrour of my mazéd hart, / What wondrous virtue is contaynd in you” (7.1-2). While the relationship—a lover who sees his reflection in the eyes of his beloved, a beloved whose eyes have access to the heart or soul of the lover—is fundamentally the same, Spenser’s sonnet does not break with the tradition of epistemological certainty because it privileges the speaker’s ability to interpret the mistress’s looks and the effects of their interactions:

For when ye mildly looke with lovely hew,
Then is my soule with life and love inspired:
But when ye lowre, or looke on me askew,
Then doe I die, as one with lightning fyred. (7.5-9)

Shakespeare presents a similar motif in sonnet 24, but differs from Spenser by offering no concrete interpretation. While Spenser reinforces that empirical truth derives from the lovers’ eyes, Shakespeare’s transposition leaves its significance unexplained. Shakespeare diverges from the mirror trope in order to open up its interpretive possibilities and underscore the existence of multiple perspectives. The speaker sees inside his breast through the beloved’s eyes; the beloved

sees into the speaker's breast through the speaker's eyes, and the sun, also, peeps in. If each body, like the speaker's, is its own frame or context, then each set of eyes also holds a different and equally viable perspective.

The skeptical claims of the sonnet are further amplified by its subtle theatricality. While the sonnet does not overtly reference the theater in the way sonnet 23 does, it does ask the reader to imagine a scene and to understand it through the interactions of the two bodies engaged in it. By visualizing the scenes and characters, readers successfully bring themselves into the present of the poem. They cannot, however, be in the presence of the speaker or characters. Readers can witness the interaction between the two lovers, who stare into each other's eyes, but they are incapable of intervening (they cannot, that is, access the perspective painting of the young man from another angle). As a result, they must accept the premises, claims, and resolutions of the poem; they participate by reading and visualizing, but they are powerless to alter the exchange the poetry describes. The poems highlight the disparity between the impressions of the reader and the realities of the text, just as they emphasize the separation of the physical bodies of the characters from the figurative language used to describe them.

Reading sonnet 24 feels a bit like standing in between two mirrors that reflect increasingly smaller images from one another. The beloved's eyes reveal the soul of the speaker; inside the speaker's soul, the beloved's picture hangs upon the wall, whose small, painted eyes reveal a smaller soul. Shakespeare imagines these two common tropes—the beloved's picture concealed inside the heart and the eyes as windows to the soul—physically, and compels his reader to confront the difficulties of such a literal reading. The final claim that eyes “know not the hart” leaves the reader unable to reconcile the romantic, abstract conceits with the reality of human interaction. Regardless of the talent of the artist—painter or sonneteer—all that he can

communicate about his subject is the seeming truth. The two epistemological metaphors—seeking truth in the lover’s eyes and finding the image or name of the beloved on one’s heart—grate against each other, and they are further complicated by the new frame created in the final couplet. Because it incorporates so many devices that produce uncertainty and highlight the existence of multiple perspectives, sonnet 24 is one of the clearest representations of Shakespeare’s Pyrrhonist project. However, Shakespeare uses these Pyrrhonist devices throughout the sequence to deny readers access to empirical truths.

The existence of multiple viable interpretations and unreliable Petrarchan tropes, for instance, manifests in sonnets 92 and 93. The speaker concludes sonnet 92 with a revelation of his uncertainty, “Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not” (92.14). Sonnet 93 begins by accepting this uncertainty (“So shall I live supposing thou art true”), acknowledging that Petrarchan sources of empirical truth—like the sweet appearance of the face (93.9-12)—do not always signify reliably. Facing such pervasive ambiguity, the reader must make meaning from the fragmented and conflicting information the speaker records. Instead of a consistent, biographical narrative about the speaker’s devotion to his subject, readers are left with Montaigne-esque sublime impressions of the speaker’s experiences, cobbled together from the diverse images and arguments offered throughout the sequence.

By creating new sensations for the reader out of isolated and conflicting descriptors, the sonnets become epistemologically generative, enabling readers to translate “errors...To truths...and for true things deemed” (96.7-8). The speaker undergoes this process himself, turning his confusion and uncertainty into emotional significance. Out of his confession that he has “looked on truth / Askance and strangely” (110.5-6)—a confession that highlights the possibility of multiple perspectives regarding truth—the speaker retrieves, not empirical

certainty, but meaningful experiences nonetheless. The speaker believes that his strange and askance perspective “gave my heart another youth, / And...proved thee my best love.” The “askance” glances of the speaker—like the convex mirrors of Sextus and Parmigianino—serve as proof that multiple perspectives exist. Out of this acknowledgment of differing perspectives in sonnets 96 and 110 develops an opportunity to make meaning and create tangible effects (like the speaker’s “another youth”). The uncertainty and inconsistency of the sonnets, therefore, presents opportunities for knowledge creation and acquisition based in personal experience, rather than access to empirical truths.

Collaborative Meaning-making between Speaker and Reader

The sonnets produce new knowledge, the significance of which is dependent in part upon the reader’s unique reaction. As he does with the eyes-as-mirrors transposition in sonnet 24, Shakespeare utilizes metaphors throughout the sequence to encourage new experiences of potentially familiar tropes, which necessarily hinge upon the reader’s familiarity with those tropes. Thus Shakespeare depends upon the intellectual engagement of the reader, acknowledging its shaping influence over the poetry he writes; this is most famously the case in sonnet 55, where the survival of the sonnet and the perpetuation of the young man’s legend depends partly upon the talent and efforts of the speaker but also upon the eyes of the lovers who continue to read the sonnet. For Shakespeare, the potential for collaborative epistemology exists both between the author and his audience and among the subjects of the sequence, whom Shakespeare frequently depicts in the process of making meaning together.

The speaker of the sonnets often uses his personal experiences with his subject to alter or create information, reminding the reader that information is subject to interpretation and

mediated by both internal and external factors. Sonnet 62, for example, deploys a strategy similar to that of Sextus's, demonstrating that mirrors do not provide unmediated access to truth or information. Like Gump's self-portrait, sonnet 62 represents the speaker in the process of interpreting the information he learns by glancing at himself in the mirror.

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 chop'd with tann'd 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.

A first reading of this sonnet gives the reader an experience of reframing, where the information presented in the first twelve lines must subsequently be viewed from the new perspective made available by the couplet. Though Joel Fineman argues that in the octave of sonnet 62 the speaker relates himself to the young man, suggesting that "It is understood, of course, from the very beginning of this sonnet, that the poet here praises himself...only because he here identifies himself with the young man," the sonnet does not mention the young man until the couplet, a characteristic that renders the first reading of the poem unique. In their initial encounter with the poem, readers are likely to believe that the speaker genuinely expresses his own vanity until it is checked by his confrontation with the mirror. For Fineman, sonnet 62 typifies Shakespeare's struggle with the epideictic tradition in which poetry of praise functions as praise of poetry. In the sestet of sonnet 62 "when he looks into his mirror what he sees are the ways in which his

identification [with the young man] and his identity do not coalesce.”¹⁸² In addition to its meditation on the nature of epideictic poetry, however, sonnet 62 can also be read as a series of problems of perception.

As if to reinforce this notion, even the introduction of the mirror does not provide certainty. The mirror (like those in *Richard II* and many Renaissance self-portraits) creates another occasion for interpretation, encouraging the speaker to “read” differently. The reader, too, experiences uncertainty caused by the introduction of the mirror, because the sestet (which begins with the first reference to the “glass”) becomes difficult to understand through its repeated and varied use of the word “myself.” The interpretive challenges of the sestet highlight the malleability of knowledge: the speaker represents himself to the audience in conflicting and inconsistent ways that emphasize the constructed nature of truth.

Additionally, despite Fineman’s suggestion to the contrary, one does not necessarily begin the poem assuming the speaker is referring to the young man, but the poet’s conflation of himself with the young man in the final couplet does reframe the reader’s understanding of the entire poem. Upon rereading the poem, therefore, the reader experiences a change in interpretive possibilities (where Fineman’s reading of identification with the young man becomes possible) that illustrates how unstable knowledge can be. Sonnet 62 does engage with, as Fineman suggests, the notion that sonnets (and other praise poetry) elevate the author through his admiration for a worthy subject, but this sonnet does not consistently identify the speaker with the young man. As he does with a number of Petrarchan tropes, Shakespeare examines the concept of self-elevating praise by altering it. In doing so, Shakespeare alienates his audience from these common tropes, exposing their inability either to signify reliably or to generate

¹⁸² Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye*, 52.

consistent and self-evident meaning for a reader. In place of such metaphors, Shakespeare encourages readers to see the pleasure and epistemological potential that may result from acknowledging the existence of multiple perspectives.

Collaborative Meaning-making between Speaker and Subject

Sonnet 138 offers one of the most poignant representations of collaborative epistemology within and beyond the sequence; as the poem's subjects work to make their own truth, the audience must also generate meaning from a conflicted narrative. The sonnet interrogates the speaker's capacity for knowledge acquisition while also offering a critique of traditional Petrarchan conceits. Many of the sonnets include references to multiple perspectives in order to emphasize the collaborative nature of knowledge communication and perception. A viewer of perspective painting, like the one described in sonnet 24, must be proactive—positioning her body to view the painting from the desired viewpoint. While some sonnets focus on collaboration between the speaker and reader, in sonnet 138, the two dishonest lovers collaborate to generate both intimacy and knowledge. Sonnet 138 represents the uncertainty that stems from human separateness, deriding the existence of universal truths in favor of a model of collective meaning-making.

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
I do believe her though I know she lyes,
That she might thinke me some untuterd youth,
Unlearned in the worlds false subtilties
Thus vainely thinking that she thinkes me young,
Although she knowes my dayes are past the best,
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue,
On both sides thus is simple truth supprest:
But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
And wherefore say not I that I am old?
O loves best habit is in seeming trust,
And age in love, loves not t'have yeares told.

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

Shakespeare compels his readers to imagine an exchange between two lovers, where the speaker, presumably incited by jealousy or suspicion, has asked his lady to defend her honor. The readers enter a scene of which they have only limited knowledge: they are present for the encounter, but they cannot discover the details from which it results. Though the sonnet includes no direct reference to the theater, it is clear that the two lovers are participating in a performance: the speaker performs youthful naiveté as the lady takes on selected characteristics of the conventional Petrarchan mistress. The lovers' performances have a twofold effect, on both the self and the other. The speaker, for example, attempts to shape his mistress's response to himself, but he must shape his own response in the course of these attempts. He acts naïvely in order to appear naïve, filtering his experience of the lady through his perception. In this way, sonnet 138 mirrors sonnet 62: "'Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise" (62.13) illustrates how the speaker's personal interests inform his perception of both himself and the young man, just as the speaker's performance in 138 presents the speaker's self-motivated interpretation of the dark lady and their relationship.

Shakespeare creates a paradox that requires the reader to acknowledge the impossibility of certainty. For the poem to function—for it, that is, to be comprehensible—the reader must accept the speaker's initial claim that he "believe[s]...though I know she lyes." From its outset, the poem asks its reader to accept one of the speaker's false claims as truth: either he does believe that the dark lady is faithful (and therefore does not know with certainty that she is lying) or he does not believe her because he knows, or suspects, for that matter, that she is false. To continue to read the poem is to accept both of the speaker's claims as truth though they cannot

exist together.¹⁸³ Unless the audience stops after the opening quatrain, therefore, they must undergo a conflict analogous to that of the speaker, believing what they know to be untrue. Accepting the impossible premise of the poem reminds readers of their own uncertainty about both the speaker and the exchange the poem records. Though they can have a similar experience to that of the speaker, they cannot know which, if any, of the speaker's statements are true. They must acknowledge the limits of their own perspective.

This sonnet, in which the speaker intentionally misreads his mistress or willfully believes her performance, also criticizes frequently deployed Petrarchan tropes which imply that a lady's virtue has external, physical signifiers. Even love, touted by so many poets (preceding and following Shakespeare) as an emotion that manifests on the physical body, is subject to the uncertainty that, for the Pyrrhonist, characterizes all social interactions. As he does in sonnets 93 and 138, Shakespeare frequently utilizes Petrarchan metaphors, but in a way that undermines their stability and authority. Helen Vendler argues that the speaker "is well aware of the received topoi of his culture, but he subjects them to interrogation...Shakespeare's awareness of norm is as complete as his depiction, in his speaker, of experiential violation of those norms."¹⁸⁴ Like the speaker of the procreation sonnets and sonnet 24, the dark lady avails herself of Petrarchan rhetoric. To plead her innocence, the dark lady suggests that she is "made of truth." The word "made" (in addition to punning on maid and thereby invoking the innocence of chastity) implies that her internal truth or faithfulness is apparent from her appearance: it is her very substance and therefore available for her beloved to experience with his senses.

¹⁸³ Margreta de Grazia regards this conflation of truth and lies as part of "a whole range of epistemological distinctions" that are collapsed by the lust of the dark lady sonnets. Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 104.

¹⁸⁴ Helen Vendler, "Formal Pleasure in the Sonnets," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 29-30.

Though the claim that she is “made” from her virtue is jarring in the opening line of this poem, the dark lady’s claim borrows from a long-standing poetic tradition. It was common practice among the sonneteers to describe the sonnet mistress as constructed out of parts that signify her virtue. In a blazon from Spenser’s *Amoretti*, for instance, the beloved is:

Fayre when the rose in her red cheekes I,
Or in her eyes the fyre of love does sparke.
Fayre when her brest lyke a rich laden barke,
With pretious merchandize she forth doth lay (81.3-6)

Spenser employs metaphors such as the blush as a red rose and the fire of the gleaming eyes to signify the reciprocated affection of his mistress. They are the “sparke[s]” of her love. Spenser describes his mistress’s breast as like a heavily laden ship, a simile that invokes not only the fullness of her breast, but also suggests her virtue: the “pretious merchandize” she carries is her heart. The mistress’s body, therefore, is constructed out of the signs of her love and kindness—her rose cheeks, her nautical bosom—so that she is made of her virtue. Shakespeare’s dark lady wants to make similar claims for herself, offering her body as a physical sign of her fidelity. Sonnet 138, however, is a poem of habits and seems—of costume, that is—not a blazon that seeks epistemological certainty in the beauty and countenance of the beloved.

Sonnet 138 suggests that the tropes so often used by traditional Petrarchan poetry to describe the character of the sonnet mistress are not made of truth. They are merely constructed from pieces of evidence that can, as the Pyrrhonists argue, be understood from multiple perspectives. Additionally, the sonnet’s acknowledgement that “loves best habit is in seeming trust” suggests that intimate relationships function most successfully when the participants engage in such willful misunderstandings. Even the term “habit” demonstrates the constructed dynamic of human interactions: either “habit” refers to the attire or disguise worn by love (in which case, like any clothing, it is easily removed, changed, or worn out), or it refers to habits in

the modern sense of commonly repeated actions. Either way, the poem argues that lovers must make a habit out of deception/being deceived. Like Gertrude's "assumed virtue" (see Chapter 3), an individual's performances can create lasting change in their minds and bodies. Even love—touted by so many poets (both preceding and following Shakespeare) as an emotion that manifests on the physical body—is subject to the uncertainty that characterizes social interactions. Readers of the sonnets are exposed to the imperfection of human expression and the changeability of humans and human emotion, but, Shakespeare argues, uncertainty about the beloved can still be a source of intimacy and pleasure. Shakespeare acknowledges the impossibility of complete understanding but also regards limited understanding as necessarily sufficient and potentially gratifying.

Most significantly, sonnet 138 compels its readers to consider the very nature of truth and the process of meaning-making. Though the speaker and the dark lady are engaged in deception, the sonnet does not condemn them outright. Fineman suggests that the poetic self of sonnet 138 is "unambiguously unhappy," but the speaker and the dark lady have, in fact, settled on a process that creates intimacy and offers an admittedly imperfect form of satisfaction for each.¹⁸⁵ The final couplet has a sort of charm: the lovers lie *with* each other, and are happy, or at least gratified by being displayed in a positive light ("flattered"). Shakespeare chooses twice to use the preposition "with" to describe the lying process, rather than the more apparent "to." The intimacy implied in the phrase "lying with" suggests that entertaining others' perspectives, as the Pyrrhonists encourage, can be a source of equilibrium and perhaps intellectual or erotic pleasure.

Additionally, the shift from singular pronouns that govern the entire poem ("I lie with her, and she with me") to first person plural ("...by lies we flattered be") in the couplet positively

¹⁸⁵ Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 64.

represents the union generated by deception. The lovers are not merely lying to each other; they are engaged in the collaborative process of meaning-making, as they lie together. The pun on the phrase “lie with,” which implies a sexual act, suggests that deception generates intimacy for the couple, creating what Richard Strier calls “a kind of grim utopianism...one that emerges in the poem’s insistence on intersubjectivity and (if there is a difference) either cooperation or collusion.”¹⁸⁶ While Strier is correct that sonnet 138 generates intersubjectivity, his descriptor “grim” is characteristic of an interpretive tradition that finds the dark lady’s infidelity reprehensible. The sonnet does not depict a hypocritical or dysfunctional relationship; rather, it displays the uncomfortable intersection of human interaction with objective truth. As Schoenfeldt demonstrates in his reading of sonnet 94, “The kinds of disjunction between inner and outer that we might construe as hypocrisy frequently function for early modern England as the foundation of civility.”¹⁸⁷ Social conventions often highlight the process of manipulating or misreading appearance for the sake of flattery or as a potentially edifying experience, one that can flatter and generate a kind of intimacy, a “seeming trust.”

By suppressing simple truths, the two subjects of sonnet 138 work toward a Pyrrhonist understanding that one must seek to accept the world, rather than know it completely. In his reading of *King Lear*, Stanley Cavell posits a question that pertains to the sonnets as well: how do people come to understand that, rather than more knowledge, what they need is a willingness to accept unknowability? For Cavell, skepticism suggests, “that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the

¹⁸⁶ Richard Strier, “The Refusal to be Judged in Petrarch and Shakespeare,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 83.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Schoenfeldt, “The Matter of Inwardness: Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 317.

presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged.”¹⁸⁸ With the layers of uncertainty it creates for readers (How does the speaker know the lady lies? How can he believe something he knows to be false? What is the difference between belief and willful ignorance? What is “simple truth,” and what takes its place when it is suppressed?), sonnet 138 encourages its readers to forgo knowledge or truth in favor of acceptance. Demonstrating how a relationship with an imperfect sonnet mistress functions by accepting the potential for deception and uncertainty, Shakespeare reflects on a sonnet tradition that seeks to know or understand a lady’s virtue through the use of idealized metaphorical representations. This is the same process the speaker claims the lovers undergo. The complex and conflicting accounts of their love, their loyalty, and their identities serve as a foundation on which they can create.

In sonnet 24, the speaker concludes with the revelation that knowledge is limited by the senses, and many of the other sonnets demonstrate how knowledge is mediated through the experience of the author and the reader. Facing the malleability of information presented in the sonnet sequence, the reader has an opportunity to acknowledge that multiple perspectives on a given topic exist and, therefore, that various interpretations are possible. Having highlighted the absence of empirical truth, Shakespeare encourages, in sonnets including 110 and 138, an embrace such uncertainty, positing it as a potential source of pleasure and intimacy.

By emphasizing the constructed nature of his relationships with the sonnet subjects, Shakespeare offers a critique of the Petrarchan tradition, in which authors make their subjects out of ideals. Callaghan argues that while the identities of sonnet subjects may be informed by historical figures, they are nonetheless literary inventions. She suggests “there was a pervasive belief that poetry might draw readers toward a higher order of truth, one that transcended the

¹⁸⁸ Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 95.

distinction between an objective reality and an imagined one.”¹⁸⁹ Certainly the sonnets I have referenced encourage readers to imagine information as constructed by creative processes in which the two lovers engage, much like Sidney, who suggests that the interpretation of the sonnet is dependent, in part, upon the recipient’s understanding of the sonnet tradition. However, Shakespeare’s sonnets also imagine “simple truth” as “supprest” by this process. While Callaghan is correct, therefore, to propose that “the shape and form of the sonnet makes it more important to establish the history of sonnet identity than to speculate about historical identity,” Shakespeare diverges from the sonnet tradition by lauding the uncertainty that stems from this process, rather than providing his audience with “a higher order of truth.”¹⁹⁰ Instead of granting his readers access to transcendent truth, Shakespeare invites his readers both to be aware of skeptical uncertainty and to accept such uncertainty as a necessary and productive condition of human interaction.

Throughout his sequence, Shakespeare interrogates the Petrarchan tradition and the metaphors that belong to it. By literalizing these metaphors and requiring his audience to imagine actual moments of interaction between lovers, Shakespeare compels his readers to acknowledge the actual reality of the human experience. Cultures generate metaphors that connect a woman’s body to her virtue or a beloved’s eyes to his soul in order to cope with anxiety over the question of knowing. While Shakespeare is intensely interested in such metaphors, he ultimately urges his readers to see them for what they really are: fictions, which are subject to manipulation, change, and misunderstanding. Encountering these sonnets, therefore, encourages the reader to distinguish between metaphor and the reality of bodily experience, and see the value and limitations in each. By acknowledging the difference between

¹⁸⁹ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 14.

¹⁹⁰ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 14.

a rose and a lover's skin, for example, readers have the opportunity to think about the function of metaphor in society. The realities of both knowledge acquisition and human interactions are subject to change, manipulation, and misconstrual. Accepting the uncertainty of metaphor can inspire not only an equipollent state in which judgment is suspended, but also the pleasure of the unexpected and the unknown, which so many readers of the sonnets have experienced.

In a time when skepticism was becoming an increasingly common method for thinking about the world, Shakespeare capitalized on his knowledge of Pyrrhonism to encourage his readers to suspend judgment. Shakespeare reveals that, while metaphoric language is one of the primary methods people use for dealing with epistemological anxiety, the tranquility that can result from accepting uncertainty is also pleasurable. Many scholars have noted the negative consequences of epistemological uncertainty, regarding skepticism as a source for anxiety or instability that authors sought to overcome, but Shakespeare saw generative potential in the absence of empirical truths. Many other sonneteers try to avoid uncertainty by designing metaphors, too, that create and extend problems of knowing. Ultimately, Shakespeare poses a Pyrrhonist resolution to epistemological uncertainty, urging his audience to forgo the pursuit of certain knowledge and accept the potential pleasure of imperfect understanding.

CHAPTER 5

MASK OF BLACKNESS

Shakespeare works throughout his sonnet sequence—in both the sonnets to the young man and those to the dark lady—to develop, expand, and complicate his reader’s skeptical responses. Following the Pyrrhonist imperative, Shakespeare’s sonnets, by denying the reader access to epistemologically stable metaphors and interpretive certainty, encourage the reader first to suspend judgment and ultimately to recognize the pleasure that results from accepting and enjoying the unknowability of the sonnets. The sonnets consistently frustrate readers’ attempts to develop a coherent narrative, and this phenomenon is a consequence of Shakespeare’s placing value on constructed emotional experiences in the place of empirical truths. As this chapter demonstrates, noting the similarities between the young man and the dark lady sonnets, as well as the way the sonnets collaborate to make meaning, helps enrich scholarly debates that regard gender as the ultimate source for identification.

This chapter highlights the commonality between Shakespeare’s two sonnet love objects, thereby responding to the growing critical practices of emphasizing the distinction between the young man and the dark lady. Scholars read the sonnets as dichotomous either by creating narratives valuing one character and his/her relationship with the speaker over the other, or by focusing on the gender of the sonnet object as the primary source of significance in the series.¹⁹¹ While analysis of the homoerotic elements of the sonnets by scholars like Eve Sedgwick and Valerie Traub has contributed invaluable to scholars’ understanding of early modern conceptions of gender and sexuality, there is also value in noticing other forms of identity formation and

¹⁹¹ For an overview of narrative privileging the young man (many of which I will analyze throughout the chapter), see Ilona Bell, “Rethinking Shakespeare’s Dark Lady,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 293-95. On the debates concerning gender and desire in the sonnets, see Douglas Trevor, “Shakespeare’s Love Object,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 225-27.

meaning-making, beyond the questions of gender and sexual desire.¹⁹² Linking the two subsequences together, I argue that Shakespeare uses metaphors of darkness throughout the sonnets to encourage a Pyrrhonist embrace of uncertainty. While this chapter focuses primarily on the dark lady, in order to avoid the kinds of oversimplifying dichotomies I have described above, I also examine the young man's role in making meaning in the sonnets where both objects are mentioned. I begin with the sonnets that have contributed to the dark lady's reputation for literal and metaphorical darkness. Scholars have assumed that darkness is an epistemologically stable metaphor, linking the lady's potentially physical darkness to her moral corruption. In order to problematize inherited truths about the dark lady's character, I first reread some of the sonnets most often cited to support claims about her promiscuity, her corruption, and her unattractiveness. Like the Pyrrhonists, I offer alternative interpretations that render the dark lady in a more positive light by emphasizing her important role in creating pleasant and constructive ambiguity. I conclude the chapter by looking at darkness metaphors throughout the young man and dark lady sonnets, suggesting that, like the interior/exterior correlation metaphors discussed in Chapter 4, Shakespeare uses the concept of darkness as a malleable signifier. Just as it is impossible to draw a clear distinction between the young man and the dark lady, lightness and darkness within the sequence do not consistently signify, and therefore offer a range of interpretive possibilities.

Many scholars continue to read the dark lady with in the least flattering available terms. David Bevington regards the speaker's "response to the Dark Lady, both before and after her desertion of him" as "distinctly unhappy," rehashing the standard evidence used against her

¹⁹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 28-48; Valerie Traub, "Sex Without Issue: Sodomy, Reproduction, and Signification in Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland, 1999), 431-52.

(especially sonnet 129), in order to conclude: “Sex is dirty.”¹⁹³ Stephen Greenblatt perpetuates the conventional roles of the two subjects when he contrasts the “beautiful young man” with the dark lady, who “is everything that should arouse revulsion in [the speaker]. Dishonest, unchaste, and faithless, she has, according to the last sonnets in the sequence, given him something more than revulsion; she has infected him with venereal disease.”¹⁹⁴ Duncan Salkeld refutes previous suggestions that Aemilia Lanyer, the “serial mistress” could be Shakespeare’s dark lady, by claiming that “there is no escaping the fact that Shakespeare describes this woman as a prostitute.”¹⁹⁵ Though Salkeld is the most recent scholar to claim that the dark lady is the prostitute “Lucy Negro” or “Black Luce,” he is not the first. The theory already had several proponents when, in 1987, Hugh Calvert declared her a “better candidate” than Lanyer.¹⁹⁶ Salkeld’s new contribution to the debate concerning the dark lady’s biography is a connection to an historical record, which Salkeld believes draws a direct link between Black Luce and Shakespeare, through Philip Henslowe and through a shared location, Clerkenwell. Salkeld believes that, given Black Luce’s notoriety throughout and beyond Clerkenwell, Shakespeare is likely to have encountered her visiting residents of that neighborhood that included his collaborator George Wilkins and a Matthew Shakespeare, potentially, Salkeld claims, a relative.¹⁹⁷ Salkeld’s analysis illustrates the unfortunate practice of glossing over the subtleties of the dark lady sonnets in order to arrive at biographical or historical conclusions. Salkeld observes, for instance, that the dark lady “believes [the speaker] to be younger than her,” citing

¹⁹³ Bevington, *Shakespeare’s Ideas*, 36.

¹⁹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), 255.

¹⁹⁵ Duncan Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans: Prostitution Literature and Drama 1500-1650* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 129. For versions of the Lanyer reading, see Rowse, *Shakespeare the Man*, 92-97; René Weis, *Shakespeare Unbound: Decoding a Hidden Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), 169-70, 184.

¹⁹⁶ Hugh Calvert, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Problems of Autobiography* (Wiltshire: Merlin Books, 1987), 206, 220.

¹⁹⁷ Salkeld, *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans*, 141-42.

138.5 as evidence for this claim. However, there is little reason to suspect that the woman truly believes Shakespeare to be younger than her. In fact, there is no indication of comparative age in the sonnet: the speaker wants to be thought young, not necessarily younger. Such attempts to render indefinite information from the sonnets certain and therefore available for historical correlation point to a cultural fascination with learning more about Shakespeare's biography, even when he has not provided sufficient information for such readings. Attempts to rewrite the ambiguities of the sonnets into empirical truths by searching for an historical equivalent to the characters have been consistently dubious, because they attempt to create epistemological certainty where none exists.

While readings like Salkeld's depend upon insufficient evidence to assign an identity to the dark lady, as David Schalkwyk compellingly argues, they do help readers "flesh out the obfuscations and imposed silences that a certain reading of the sonnets encourages." The reading practices Schalkwyk criticizes are those, like Schoenbaum's, which reduce the dark lady to a moral or poetic symbol, where she is "reduced to a whore."¹⁹⁸ Schalkwyk's solution to the textual/biographical scholarship divide is to read the sonnets with the plays in order to embody their characters, assigning the subjects value beyond the rigid categories of "friend" and "whore" in which they are often placed. Even if Rowse is incorrect in identifying Emilia Lanier as the dark lady, Schalkwyk argues, by assigning a body to her he overcomes the limitations of symbolic categories like whore in order to invest her with a more complex set of characteristics.¹⁹⁹ Schalkwyk's call for scholars to embody the dark lady without assigning her a specific historical body is an innovative and insightful solution. This chapter builds upon

¹⁹⁸ David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 88-89.

¹⁹⁹ David Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance*, 89-90.

Schalkwyk's work by demonstrating how a focus on aesthetics can also be a source for embodiment. Figurative language (such as metaphor) and the experience of uncertainty it creates permit readers to develop context-specific meaning, so the sonnets provide their own solutions to the interpretive challenges they pose. I locate a resolution for the sonnets, not in the plays, as Schalkwyk does, but in the sonnets themselves, where Shakespeare enables willing readers to accept ambivalence and complexity in the place of empirical truths about identity.

Scholarly analysis of the skepticism in Shakespeare's sonnets has characterized the sonnets as epistemologically stable by imposing a narrative upon them. Because Joel Fineman's work continues to function as a point of departure for other scholars, the dichotomy he emphasizes has become the standard on which other scholars build their critiques. Fineman creates a narrative arc within the sequence that privileges the young man by associating him with identification and epistemological certainty. Fineman's efforts to label the representation of knowledge acquisition in the young man sonnets as distinct from (and superior to) that of the dark lady exaggerate the epistemological certainty of the sonnets to the young man. For instance, Fineman describes Shakespeare's experience of moving from the young man to the dark lady sonnets as a change from likeness to difference:

As a result, but as a highly paradoxical result, no longer joined to a sameness which is the same as itself, the poet is joined instead to an irreducible difference, to an essential otherness, whose power consists in the way it thus disrupts the logic and erotics of unified identity and complementary juncture. The poet-lover of the dark lady in this way identifies himself with difference. He identifies himself—but how can this be?—with that which resists, with that which breaks, identification.²⁰⁰

Fineman reads Shakespeare's shift from the young man to the dark lady as a violent, traumatic break from idealized sameness to a difference that resists and destroys the process of identification and knowledge acquisition. His characterization of the dark lady as the "essential

²⁰⁰ Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 22.

other” places an undue emphasis on gender as the primary carrier of difference, and therefore the primary source for identity. While gender is certainly a significant and oft-remarked-upon source of identification or difference in the sonnets, it is not the only identity-making characteristic Shakespeare examines.

In the young man sonnets, the speaker also recognizes the “otherness” of the young man, and the differences between the speaker and his subject constitute important thematic and aesthetic categories for the author and reader. Men in the early modern period did not uniformly identify with other men. Alexandra Shepard argues that men conceived of their identity and their relations to one another in “enormously varied” ways “contingent upon age, status, and context...which often competed with each other.”²⁰¹ Because men had so many categories, related to wealth, age, character, and social rank, on which they based distinctions between themselves and other men, Fineman’s reductive argument oversimplifies the process of identification by regarding gender as the primary source for identity in the sonnet series.

The speaker’s descriptions of the young man as different from him in several other significant ways demonstrates the complex processes through which individuals relate to or recognize difference in one another. The young man’s youth contrasts to the sonneteer’s age. He is also success to the sonneteer’s failure: “So I, made lame by fortune’s dearest spite, / Take all my comfort of thy worth and truth.” (37.1-4). Sometimes the speaker depicts the young man as roving and indifferent (characteristics scholars often reserve for the dark lady), contrasting his attitude with the sonneteer’s devotion: “So true a fool is love, that in your will, / Though you do anything, he thinks no ill” (57.13-14). The speaker’s recognition of and trepidation about the inconsistencies in the young man’s affection contribute to the emotionally charged instability of

²⁰¹ Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15-16.

the sonnet sequence while also drawing an important connection between the young man and the dark lady (both of whom excite fear and jealousy in the speaker). Finally, the speaker uses the distinction between the young man's beauty and his own fading appearance to reflect on how the poet is elevated by the beauty of the subject he selects. This is the case in sonnet 62, for instance, where the speaker both highlights and collapses the differences between himself and his subject: "Tis thee, myself, that for myself I praise, / Painting my age with beauty of thy days" (13-14). Gender is not the only similarity from which differentiation can spring; the similarities and differences present across the young man and dark lady sonnets facilitate opportunities for both identification and uncertainty.

Additionally, while the speaker does frequently engage in the "logic and erotics of unified identity" in the young man sonnets, recognition of difference within these sonnets is also a source for pleasure. Describing his waning years in sonnet 73, for instance, the speaker suggests that it is specifically a difference in age that inspires affection in the young man: "This [the speaker's age and its effect on his appearance] thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong / To love that well which thou must leave ere long" (13-14). The speaker and the young man may share their masculinity, but their relationship is nonetheless fraught with uncertainty and divisions. Gender should not be so overwhelmingly the characteristic through which scholars filter their reading of the sonnets because such readings overlook the multi-faceted, meaning-making richness that comes from noticing all the forms of identity that not only separate the speaker from the young man, but also link the speaker to the dark lady.

Beyond her obvious femininity, the dark lady does not consistently represent "irreducible difference" since the speaker sometimes likens himself to her. For example, though positions within the love triangle are fluid, at times the speaker intimates that he and the dark lady compete

for the affection of the young man as two (traditionally male) lovers would compete for their (traditionally female) beloved. Sonnet 134 in particular articulates the complexity of the speaker's identification with his subjects.

So now I have confessed that he is thine,
And I myself am mortgaged to thy will,
Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still.
But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
For thou art covetous, and he is kind;
He learned but surety-like to write for me,
Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
Thou usurer that put'st forth all to use,
And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me;
He pays the whole; and yet am I not free.

Though the young man is “that other mine” (3), it is the dark lady—not the young man—who becomes the speaker's equivalent as a rival: the speaker describes the young man as being possessed by both himself and the dark lady—“he is thine” (1). In sharing their object of desire, the speaker and the dark lady share a significant characteristic. The speaker can identify with the dark lady's attachment to the young man, and the young man, the topmost point of the love triangle, maintains comparable relationships with the speaker and the sonnet mistress, rendering them analogous as the two lower, relatively equal points on the love triangle.

The dark lady shares traits with both the men in the sequence that offer opportunities for identification. The speaker does not mention any disparities in terms of class or age between the dark lady and himself, suggesting that, in terms of these two identity-constructing traits, the speaker is more like the dark lady than the young man. Moreover, the dark lady shares significant connections to the young man; the sequence, as Melissa Sanchez observes, “aligns her even more with the young man than critics have recognized, and not just because both have

been unfaithful to the speaker, but also because both have refused his advances.”²⁰² Just as the romantic relationships among the subjects and the speaker are fluid and fraught with uncertainty, their moral and theoretical relationships to one another are also unstable and changing. The dark lady cannot fairly be regarded as the universal source of difference, just as the young man and the speaker are not consistently depicted as identifying with one another.

Fineman’s reading continues to underpin the works of many scholars writing about the sonnets today, with the result that analysis of the sonnets continues to create or widen a split between the two subsequences. Fineman’s influence may be felt even in Brian Boyd’s recent work on Shakespeare’s sonnets, which emphatically asserts that there is a lack of narrative in the sequence, refuting claims that the sonnets depict a chain of events (in Fineman’s case, the development of subjectivity). While in this respect Boyd differs from Fineman, Boyd also creates narratives about the writing and production of the sonnet sequence that characterize the young man sonnets as superior. According to Boyd the relatively unsuccessful dark lady sonnets serve as groundwork for the young man’s: “one imperfect solution may provide the elements and the impetus for much richer success.”²⁰³ Boyd’s reading of the sequence reverses the traditional order, in which the ideal relationship between the speaker and the young man is problematized by the presence of the dark lady, but his revised claim (the young man is an answer to the difficulties Shakespeare encounters when writing about the dark lady) endorses Fineman’s view that the dark lady and her sonnets constitute a problem for writer and scholars alike.

²⁰² Melissa E. Sanchez, “The Poetics of Feminine Subjectivity in Shakespeare’s Sonnet and ‘A Lover’s Complaint,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Jonathan F.S. Post (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 518.

²⁰³ Brian Boyd, *Why Lyrics Last: Evolution, Cognition, and Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 82.

While it is important to acknowledge and overcome bias in critical accounts of the sonnets, the solution to this bias cannot be to articulate a different binary, privileging the dark lady in the place of the young man. Even Ilona Bell, whose analysis works to expose and disrupt the deep-seated misogyny in scholarship on the dark lady, focuses too narrowly on such a binary in the two subsequences, emphasizing the distinctions between the subsequences in a way that values the dark lady over the young man:

The dark lady sonnets draw us into a world where passion distorts judgment, where duplicity and role-playing are a mark of sophistication, and where it is difficult to distinguish truth from lies. Whereas sonnet 1-126 idealize and eternize the man, covering up or excusing his moral lapses, the dark lady sonnets set out to be honest about the woman's attractions and limitations. But Shakespeare's attempts to see and represent her accurately are foiled by his recognition that nothing she says to him and nothing he says about her can be trusted.²⁰⁴

Bell's argument, like Fineman's, draws a sharp distinction between the sonnets to the young man and those to the dark lady, though Bell's dichotomy takes the reverse approach of valuing the dark lady sonnets over those believed to be written for the young man. Bell claims that sonnets 1-126 "idealize and eternalize" the young man, contrasting them with the paradoxically truthful dark lady subsequence: while the speaker must recognize that he and the dark lady cannot be trusted to tell the truth, Bell argues, these sonnets endeavor to be "honest," attempting to "represent her accurately." Bell's reading of the sequence counters biased assumptions about the dark lady, but her characterization confirms commonplace readings of the young man, who is not uniformly idealized in his sonnets. Further, "to represent [the dark lady] accurately" implies an attempt on the part of Shakespeare to privilege an empirical approach to women versus a linguistic/poetic approach to men. The notion that the dark lady can be accurately represented

²⁰⁴ Bell, "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady," 299.

attempts to create a biography for her as if she were a real person about whom Shakespeare tries to convey truth.

The confused scholarly discourse surrounding the dark lady would suggest that Shakespeare is not trying to “be honest about the woman’s attractions and limitations.” Just as the young man is virtually impossible to visualize, despite the manifold lines of poetry devoted to him, it is also impossible to gain a clear image of the dark lady. As Richard Meek observes of sonnet 130, the poem “conspicuously fails to provide the reader with any explicit description of the woman herself: despite the impression that the sonnet creates of a real woman divested of the trappings of metaphor, she remains curiously absent.” While Meek is right to observe that the mistress of 130 is “left for the poem’s readers to imagine for themselves,” in my reading, rather than being divested of metaphor, she is constructed out of fragmented metaphors in a way that sacrifices empirical truth about the mistress in favor of a sublime experience of her.²⁰⁵ If the dark lady sonnets use metaphor to create an experience of the sublime, they are also poetic and effective, rather than merely more accurate. The pleasure conveyed by their uncertainty rivals the sophistication scholars have located in the young man sonnets. Shakespeare discloses a great deal about each of his subjects, frequently by incorporating Petrarchan metaphors in unconventional ways, as I demonstrate in Chapter 4, but he maintains the readers’ interest and encourages the suspension of judgment by steeping such confessions in uncertainty.

Analysis of the sonnets often glosses over inconsistencies in them for the sake of biographical certainty or empirical truth, creating narratives in which the dark lady disrupts an idealized relationship between the speaker and the young man. For example, A. L. Rowse, reading the sonnets biographically, describes the dark lady’s role in the sequence and in

²⁰⁵ Richard Meek, *Narrating the Visual in Shakespeare* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 60.

Shakespeare's life as "a serious complication," that threatens Shakespeare's relationship with the Earl of Southampton (whom Rowse believes to be the young man): "The snake had already entered Paradise, and destroyed its pristine innocence, with a woman."²⁰⁶ Such interpretations must ignore conflicting claims in each of the sonnet groups, and also assume that the sonnets to the young man and the dark lady are both clearly separated and written to only a single man and a single woman. Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells argue that it is entirely possible that the sonnets to the "friend" and the woman could address a variety of friends and women.²⁰⁷ The sonnets are not designed to present a coherent narrative; instead, as Dympna Callaghan observes, "we are shown the contours of a deep impression made by the individual on the mind of the poet."²⁰⁸ Their ambiguity creates a pleasurable reading experience that derives from exposing readers to a multitude of interpretive possibilities which they can entertain. The heightened anxiety caused by uncertainty in the dark lady sonnets culminates in a blissful acceptance, a pleasant resolution into equipollence.

"From hour to hour, we rot and rot": The Dark Lady's Legacy

Given early modern pronunciation, Jacques's lament in *As You Like It* would suggest to listeners not only the decay of age (from hour to hour, we rot) but also decay caused by contracting venereal disease from a prostitute (from whore to whore, we rot). Scholars have constructed a similar account of Shakespeare's dark lady sonnets, arguing that the speaker experiences certain unhappiness and profound anxiety in the face of his waning years (his hour) and his tyrannous mistress (the whore), and research on the sonnets has often moved from whore

²⁰⁶ A. L. Rowse, *Shakespeare the Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin's, 1988), 74.

²⁰⁷ Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40-45.

²⁰⁸ Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 4.

to whore, attempting to identify the dark lady as any number of prostitutes and kept mistresses believed to have crossed paths with Shakespeare. Such claims, however, often take for granted the promiscuity of the lady and underplay the equally explicit fact that both the speaker and the young man are also promiscuous. Moreover, the dark lady is almost always regarded as the source of the rot, or venereal disease that readers like Stephen Greenblatt have discovered in the sequence.²⁰⁹ The sonnets most cited as examples of the speaker's unhappiness and the lady's promiscuity include 129, 137, and 138. As my analysis of sonnet 138 in the previous chapter demonstrates, the dishonesty between the couple does not mean that they are "unambiguously unhappy," since the sonnets exploit ambiguity for the sake of the readers' pleasure, while also asserting that the subjects have found union.²¹⁰ Nor does the sonnet require that the equipollence they reach must be "grim."²¹¹ Instead, the dishonesty in the poem could represent the process of meaning-making that romantic partners frequently undergo. Significantly, sonnet 138 does not argue that one lie is worse than the other: the dark lady's alleged infidelity is analogous to the speaker's attempts to appear youthful, and out of the lies they both tell, the speaker and the dark lady reach a kind of intimate equilibrium. Arguments about the unfortunate situation of the speaker assign value to the lies, regarding a woman's infidelity as a particularly offensive transgression.

Readings of sonnets 129 and 137 often feature value judgments on the part of the reader. Such readings may be a consequence of a traditionally masculine perspective stemming from patriarchal anxiety. Such a perspective assigns more blame to the dark lady than to the other characters, identifying her as the source for the grotesque, bodily realities of sex, associating her

²⁰⁹ "Dishonest, unchaste, and faithless, she has, according to the last sonnets in the sequence, given him something more than revulsion; she has infected him with venereal disease." Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 255.

²¹⁰ Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, 64.

²¹¹ Strier, "The Refusal to be Judged," 83.

primarily her with temptation and with the regret of succumbing to such temptation. I have already argued for the collaborative meaning-making of Shakespeare's sonnets, where the significance of a poem derives in part from a reader's unique experience and understanding. As Schalkwyk observes, "it strikes me as odd that critics have almost universally taken Shakespeare at his word [concerning the duplicitousness of the dark lady]. Why do we invoke the moral weight of the word 'whore' (duplicitous in its own way) to the dark woman, but fail to use anything like that language of the young man [sic] of rank or the player-poet himself?"²¹² In order to regard the dark lady as a whore because of the second-hand accounts of her promiscuity—to judge her, for instance, for possibly being unfaithful to her spouse—one would also have to call the speaker (if the speaker is Shakespeare, the married man) a whore, and to consider the possibility that the young man, too, is a whore.²¹³ Despite the similarities among the three characters, only the alleged indiscretions of the dark lady have consistently earned her such damning descriptors.

In rereading sonnets 129 and 137, I write, like an anthropologist, to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. Scholars have relied on gendered assumptions about the speaker, the dark lady, and the young man for a great while, and many disputable claims have been repeated so often that they have become too familiar. The inherited wisdom suggests that sonnet 129 depicts not merely the shame and disappointment that may result from consummating

²¹² Schalkwyk, *Speech and Performance*, 87.

²¹³ For Shakespeare and his contemporaries, men would almost never be labelled as whores. In her extensive research on insults and early modern masculinity, Shepard found only one instance of a man (who was 60 years old) being accused of "whoredom." Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood*, 240. The word "whore" never appears in the sonnets. The sexual indiscretions the sonnets describe, moreover, involve all three of the main characters.

a long-desired relationship but specifically the anxiety and unhappiness that characterizes the speaker's relationship with the dark lady.²¹⁴

Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action, and till action lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despised straight,
Past reason hunted, and no sooner had,
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme,
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe,
Before, a joy proposed, behind, a dream.
All this the world well knows, yet none knows well
To shun the heav'n that leads men to this hell.

Evidence linking this sonnet to the dark lady is fairly weak. The sonnet offers no clues to the object of desire it describes, aside from its position in the sequence. While some scholars dispute the order of the sonnets, arguing that the errors they include and the lack of narrative proves they were printed without Shakespeare's consent, there is also compelling evidence to suggest that the sonnets were ordered by the poet.²¹⁵ Callaghan, for instance, argues that—given Shakespeare's supervision of his earlier narrative poetry and the thematic placement of some poems (sonnets 12 and 60, for example, which deal with hours and minutes, respectively)—suggest that

²¹⁴ Harold Bloom regards the “superb” sonnet 129 as “a lament that only hints at betrayal by the famous and nameless Dark Lady,” suggesting that “The reader may hear...an intimation of venereal disease in that ‘hell.’” *How to Read and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 113-14. Elsewhere, Bloom references this same poem when claiming, first, that “Shakespeare, as we should know from the plays, was as ferociously heterosexual as Robert Browning or W.B. Yeats” and, second, that he is persuaded that the dark lady was Lucy Negro. Harold Bloom, introduction to *The Sonnets*, ed. Brett Foster (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2008), xiv. Narratives linking sonnet 129 are also widely available in introductory material on the sonnets; *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, for example, uses sonnet 129 as evidence in support of its narrative arc concerning the dark lady: “The poet, aware of the delusions of lust but unable to avoid its trap (129), woos his mistress regardless with a series of sexual puns” Stanley Wells and Michael Dobson, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 440.

²¹⁵ For a thorough outline of the history of the critical debate surrounding the authorization and order of the sonnets, see James Schiffer, “Reading New Life into Shakespeare's Sonnets: A Survey of Criticism,” in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York, Garland, 1999), 9-11.

Shakespeare “did exercise some considerable authorial control over the printing of the poems.”²¹⁶ However, while its position makes it more likely that it focuses on the dark lady, there is no indication that the subject is female. The sonnet, therefore, could be read as less of a biographical confession about the speaker consummating his relationship and more of a general reflection on sex and its aftermath.

Arguments that derive from the text of the sonnet (rather than from its position in the sequence) most likely regard the final couplet as an indication that the subject is female. Hell is, of course, a slang term for the vagina, so that the final line has been read: despite knowing better, men are led to women’s vaginas. Such a reading is a bit strained, however; if hell represents the vagina, it is unclear what heaven leads men to it. “A bliss in proof” would suggest that, at least during the act of intercourse, the speaker derives pleasure from the vagina, or that he associates the vagina with heaven. Callaghan regards the hell of sonnet 129 as linked to the dark lady, in part, because the dark lady is linked to hell in sonnet 147: “Who art as black as hell, and dark as night.”²¹⁷ Such an interpretation, though viable, would not be available to an individual reading the sonnets through for the first time, and is only one possible explanation for such an ambiguous sonnet, which—as Callaghan observes—is “the only sonnet devoid of both possessive adjectives and personal pronouns.”²¹⁸ If the reader has read straight through the sonnets, in fact, the “mad...pursuit” at this stage in the sequence would have been almost entirely focused around gaining and keeping the affections of the young man. The lack of personal pronouns and references to a subject make sonnet 129 only tenuously related to the dark lady.

²¹⁶ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 11-12.

²¹⁷ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 51.

²¹⁸ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 145.

In contrast to this most common reading, in which hell represents the vagina, and the dark lady's vagina specifically, the hell described is perhaps entirely figurative (the experience of guilt linked with sexual consummation). It is also possible that sonnet 129 could refer to sex with the young man. Other sexual puns in the poem, such as the one on "waste" and "waist," do not necessarily preclude a male sexual partner. A homoerotic reading is possible even if hell does suggest an orifice for intercourse, even the vagina. If the sonnet did take the young man as its subject, it would not be the first of the sonnets in which Shakespeare associated a euphemism for the vagina with the young man. Sonnet 20, for example, puns on "acquainted" and "nothing" so that the young man's anatomy is linked to that of a woman, even if by contrast. Sonnet 20's assertion that nature "By adding one thing to my purpose nothing" (20.12) could also link the young man to the female anatomy by claiming that the young man's "one thing," will serve as the speaker's "nothing." Given the ambiguity of euphemisms in other sonnets and the lack of pronouns in sonnet 129, the speaker could be reflecting generally on intercourse, regardless of the sex of the partner, and on the subsequent emotional experiences.

Arguments about the misery and anxiety in the relationship between the speaker and the dark lady depend to a large extent upon a poem which makes no reference to her, or definitively to any woman. Sonnet 129 has been taken up as a centerpiece of the dark lady subsequence, but, in terms of its content and its subject, it bears more resemblance to sonnet 146 ("Poor soul, center of my sinful earth") than to sonnets 130 or 138. Like sonnet 146, it describes the guilty fallout that results from a sinful action. Both sonnets are placed within the dark lady sequence and neither includes a specific reference to a woman. It strikes me as rash, therefore, to omit one

from discussions on the dark lady entirely, while regarding the other as a strong piece of evidence about the relationship between the speaker and the woman.²¹⁹

In the absence of definitive textual evidence linking sonnet 129 to the dark lady, it would be more fruitful to consider the sonnet's epistemological function, rather than its potentially biographical (and biological) function. As I argued in Chapter 2, sonnet 146 generates a multifaceted description of sin and repentance that defies scholarly explanation. It offers a variety of metaphors that coexist uncomfortably, denying the reader a stable, single image in favor of an emotional experience which I likened to the sublime. Sonnet 129 employs similar strategies to impel readers toward an even more complex process of meaning-making, which requires the reader to develop an understanding of the speaker's experiences through time. The sonnet displays the flurry of emotions surrounding a sexual encounter. This flurry is caused in large part by the way Shakespeare uses a series of conflicting metaphors to describe an individual before, during, and after long-desired intercourse, as his perspectives on his love object and the consummation of their relationship evolves.

As he is wont to do, Shakespeare takes advantage of the multiple meanings of words that can confound the readers of sonnet 129. While much scholarly ink has been spilled over possible meanings of "spirit," the sonnet is driven by other, equally ambiguous words (like "hell") and by repetition with a difference. Shakespeare's use of repetition reminds his readers that multiple interpretive possibilities exist, even for a single word or phrase. For example, the line "Is lust in action, and till action lust" (2) initially suggests that no change occurs "in action." The act is lust both prior to and during its accomplishment. In the third line, however, the reader begins to

²¹⁹ Analysis of sonnet 146, including that of Booth, Vendler, and Callaghan, makes no reference to the dark lady. The correlation between 129 and 146 was proposed by Brents Stirling, whose emended version of the sonnet sequence places these two poems in a discreet group. *The Shakespeare Sonnet Order: Poems and Groups* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 223-25.

understand the dynamics of the speaker's experience. The enjambment of lines 2-3, paired with repetition, adds to the interpretive difficulty of sonnet 129's opening quatrain. Moreover, the compacted tautologia of lines 3-4 ("perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust") conveys not only the frenzied emotional response of the speaker, but also the insufficiency of any single phrase or image to describe his feelings. The emotional experience of these lines comes not so much from understanding any one of them, but from the confusing and conflicting uncertainty deriving from the adjectives in concert and from the frantic way they are piled onto one another. Like the sublime experience of the Roman ruins Montaigne describes, sonnet 129 generates meaning for its reader out of fragments, the sum of which exceeds the meaning of the individual elements.

Sonnet 129 takes up traditional Petrarchan metaphors and, by representing them in original and fragmentary ways, complicates and enriches them. Popular sonnet metaphors and tropes appearing in 129 include the heaven/hell motif, hunting, love as madness, love as pain, and love's conquest over reason. None of these metaphors is a Shakespearean invention. Petrarch's Rima 190 popularized the hunting metaphor translated in Wyatt's "Whoso List to Hunt" and Spenser's "Lyke as a huntsman;" Drayton claims that he uses "giddy metaphors" because "I'm a lunatic" (*Idea* 9.3-5); and in *Diana*, Henry Constable argues that to love is "To live in hell, and heaven to behold" (6.2.1). However, Shakespeare's renditions of these metaphors differ from those of his predecessors because he imagines them before, during, and after coitus. The span of time and mood covered in sonnet 129 emphasizes the instability of human relationships, which are susceptible to change. Given the disparity in the speaker's desires and opinions before and after consummation, the sonnet could function as a cautionary tale, a warning that readers are dealing with an unreliable narrator. The speaker experiences the

kind of inconstancy Montaigne describes: “there is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others...a sound intellect will refuse to judge men simply by their outward actions.”²²⁰ In the place of stable and consistent declarations from the speaker, Shakespeare deploys a medley of metaphors, invoking unstable images that communicate something beyond the parts of each individual metaphor: they represent the frenetic emotional responses to love and lust in flux.

Recognizing the inconstancy of the speaker can remind readers that many of the commonplaces about the dark lady do not stem indisputably from the sonnets. The reader must construct meaning around fragmented images that illustrate the complexity of the speaker’s attitude toward her. This principle is perhaps clearest in sonnet 137. If one begins, as the Pyrrhonists counsel, by suspending judgment about the infamous sonnet, it becomes clear how circumstantial the evidence of the dark lady’s status as a whore really is. The sonnet also presents important connections to the epistemological questions raised in the young man sonnets, and such questions are encouraged by the sonnet’s synaesthesia, as well as its ambiguous revisions to the popular eyes-as-windows metaphor.

Thou blind fool love, what dost thou to mine eyes,
That they behold and see not what they see?
They know what beauty is, see where it lies,
Yet what the best is take the worst to be.
If eyes corrupt by over-partial looks
Be anchored in the bay where all men ride,
Why of eyes’ falsehood hast thou forged hooks,
Whereto the judgement of my heart is tied?
Why should my heart think that a several plot,
Which my heart knows the wide world’s common place?
Or mine eyes seeing this, say this is not
To put fair truth upon so foul a face?
In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,
And to this false plague are they now transferred.

²²⁰ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 244.

In place of a definitive claim about the nature of the speaker's relationship with the lady, the sonnet offers an unstable and confusing representation of the experience of doubt and, perhaps, dissatisfaction. The synaesthetic transposition of the senses in lines 11-13—where the speaker's eyes can speak and his heart can think—represents both the confusion of the lover, no longer guided by reason, and the constructed nature of information gathered from the senses and emotions. Helen Vendler suggests that this synaesthesia signifies that “both heart and eyes can be said to *err*...here, in its full moral meaning of ‘being errant,’” and that this “usurping” of mental faculties by the eye and heart also highlights the role perspective plays in making meaning.²²¹ The eyes and heart do, as the speaker demonstrates, exert influence over what he thinks and says. The knowledge the speaker gains and transmits, therefore, is subject to his perspective and to the interpretations of his “errant” eyes and heart.

Moreover, the rapid shuffling-through of metaphors makes sonnet 137 a poem that communicates a deeply complex sensory experience that transcends the value or meaning of any of the individual metaphors Shakespeare deploys. As Vendler argues:

To have invented a frantic discourse of unrest is one of Shakespeare's chief accomplishments in the Dark Lady subsequence. This discourse is formed not only by the rhetorical, syntactic, and referential confusions...but also—and chiefly, in 137—by the catachresis, or mixed metaphor, in Quarto 2, where the ‘philosophical’ discourse of Quarto 1 is suddenly submerged in an incoherent mixture of gazing, corruption, judgment, and iron-forging.²²²

The catachresis Vendler identifies, I argue, adds pleasure and aesthetic value to the sonnet. Not only does it create the same harried, anxious response in the reader that the speaker claims to experience, but it also encourages the reader to reach a state of equipollence. In order to understand the conflicting metaphors of the sonnet, the reader must suspend judgment, refusing

²²¹ Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 581.

²²² Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 582.

to dwell on any single metaphor and showing a willingness to move from one perspective to another. The speaker's situation, as sonnet 137 demonstrates, could be regarded using any number of metaphorical registers—legal, medical, and philosophical—but the ultimate experience exceeds the meaning of these individual elements.

The emotional charge of sonnet 137 comes from the uncertainty and instability these rapidly shifting metaphors generate. They create a heightened sense of awareness, the irony of which can be found in the fact that its resulting equipollence is sedating. Ultimately, the speaker does not answer any of the questions he poses to Cupid; in contrast to the series of questions presented in the three quatrains (which add to the aggressive, emotional tenor of the poem), the final couplet displays the author's acknowledgment that he cannot know why he has erred. Instead, he can only acknowledge that the error has occurred and that it has resulted in the transference of his love to "this false plague." The sonnet does not offer a solution to the problems posed in the quatrains, but it does end on a note of resolution that compels the audience to accept the speaker's desire, which they cannot understand. This resolution, which is accomplished by the rapid listing of images and expressions in the quatrains, impels the audience toward a state of acceptance of uncertainty, like the Pyrrhonist state of equipollence.

Many scholars of the sonnets accept as truth that the dark lady is the "bay where all men ride" and use this metaphor as evidence that she is sexually available to everyone except the speaker. Mark Jay Mirsky, for example, declares "Fair and foul, the cry of Macbeth's witches, is appropriate to the idea of [the dark lady] as both prostitute and witch."²²³ Mirsky's description

²²³ Mark Jay Mirsky, *The Drama in Shakespeare's Sonnet: "A Satire to Decay"* (Plymouth, UK: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 229. In the same sentence, Mirsky claims that "the opposites are bitterly referred to as [the speaker] sees himself deliberately lying to himself." This claim overlooks the long tradition of sonneteers lying to themselves in matters concerning their beloveds. Mirsky also cites the reference to plague in line 14 as a hint at the lady's venereal disease, but such a reading is strained; the speaker describes his eyes and heart as being "transferred," or transformed, to the plague, and it is difficult to imagine how venereal disease could apply to such a statement. To offer a few more important examples of readings of sonnet 137 that exaggerate the certainty of the

of the dark lady as a witch is baffling and unexplained, but his reference to the dark lady's prostitution is commonplace. The bay comment on which such readings depend, however, is posited as a hypothetical in the poem ("If eyes corrupt"), and this hypothetical, moreover, follows the observation that love tends to "what the best is take the worst to be." The metaphor is, consequently, more ambiguous than scholars have often proposed. If the speaker's eyes are "anchored" in line six, then they are the metaphorical boat placed in the bay. Scholars assume, however, that other individual's metaphorical boats are not their eyes, but their genitals. Only in the third quatrain does the lady's status as "a several plot" and "the wide world's common place" become clearer. The sonnet changes upon rereading, where the bay metaphor can be invested with the elaborations and variations the speaker offers later in the poem.

Scholars' efforts to use the representation of the dark lady in sonnet 137 as definitive evidence of her status as a whore are manifestations of the process the poem describes. Like the speaker, they "behold and see not what they see." Such is the case for several of the dark lady sonnets. As Bell observes, sonnets 135 and 136 are also frequently cited as evidence of the lady's promiscuity, "but the only explicit reference to her multiple lovers is a question about her future behavior."²²⁴ Like sonnet 137, the conditional nature of which leaves its meaning ambiguous, sonnet 136 introduces a hypothetical situation for the reader to examine. Moreover, the speaker's experiences in 137 are also apparently available to the dark lady in sonnet 136, whose "blind soul" may stop her "will" from getting too close. The eyes-as-passageway metaphor typifies the

lady's indiscretion: Samuel Schoenbaum insists, "About her sexual appetite and promiscuity...there is no question; she is 'the bay where all men ride.'" *Shakespeare and Others* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985), 224; Richard McCoy describes the dark lady in sonnet 137 as "reduced to a degraded cliché as well as a slut" *Faith in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 103; and Peter Holbrook, most problematically, argues not merely that the bay metaphor is an indication that the dark lady is a whore, but that her promiscuity, as revealed through the metaphor, renders her valueless: "In the *Sonnets* Shakespeare portrays himself...as the abject erotic slave of a fickle Young Man and a worthless, unattractive woman ('the bay where all men ride' (137))." *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 193.

²²⁴ Bell, "Rethinking Shakespeare's Dark Lady," 298.

situations of the speaker and the dark lady, as both are misled by love through the eyes. Where the speaker in 137 has his eyes compromised by Cupid (the “blind fool love”) the lady in sonnet 136 has a blind soul that can perhaps be tricked: “If thy soul check thee that I come so near, / Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy will” (136.1-2). Deploying the same trope in consecutive sonnets, Shakespeare highlights the flexibility of meaning and the multiplicity of perspectives on a given image or metaphor, while likening his involvement in love to the dark lady’s. The similar experiences of the speaker and the dark lady offer another piece of evidence against characterizations of the dark lady as fundamentally different. Like the speaker, the dark lady is represented as experiencing ambivalence about her will. The tongue and cheek reference to Shakespeare’s name and the ironic claim that the speaker is “thy will” might also remind readers that the speaker is not hers, at least not hers entirely, just as she is not entirely his. Though the dark lady is silent in the sonnets, the correlations Shakespeare draws between her, the speaker, and the young man offer alternative perspectives on the nature of the relationships shared among the speaker and his two subjects.

The aesthetic value of the sonnets derives, in part, from their ability to offer multiple interpretations on a topic. Rather than examining the sonnets either for empirical truth or—even more misguidedly—for signs of biographical significance, readers can embrace the uncertainty they create, drawing conclusions but being reminded of their instability. The uncertainty Shakespeare fashions for his readers derives in part from his use of blackness and darkness throughout the sonnet sequence, so that, just as readers experience the dark lady as an ambiguous character, they also conceive of the categories of dark and light—so prevalent in the sonnet tradition—as unreliable signifiers.

Multiple Perspectives on Darkness

When Shakespeare introduces the dark lady in sonnet 127, he argues that, because the meaning of beauty has been destabilized through use, the sonnet tradition must select a new subject.

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were it bore not beauty's name.
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame;
For since each hand hath put on nature's pow'r,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bow'r,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.
Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black,
Her eyes so suited, and they mourners seem
At such who, not born fair, no beauty lack,
Sland'ring creation with a false esteem.
Yet so they mourn becoming of their woe,
That every tongue says beauty should look so.

Given the instability that has resulted from poets' attempts to crystallize beauty, the speaker proposes that beauty is no longer a suitable topic for sonnets. "Therefore," he suggests, "my mistress' eyes are raven black": Shakespeare proposes blackness as an alternative to the malleable category of beauty, implying that blackness will prove a more constant sign. However, the dark lady sonnets reveal that blackness, too, is complicated and unstable, available to describe corruption (the black deeds of sonnet 131.13), physical appearance (130.4 and 132.13-14), and the ritualistic performance of mourning (127.10 and 132.3). Additionally, as is the case in sonnet 127, even the aesthetic value of darkness is unstable. Ultimately, readers of the dark lady sonnets are pressed to acknowledge that even descriptors like "black" are as subjective as abstractions like love and beauty. By virtue of its multiple registers—its ability to take on both concrete and abstract, both physical and philosophical forms—darkness is a particularly suitable concept for engaging Pyrrhonist skepticism. The multiple perspectives available on darkness

throughout the sonnets highlight the malleability of knowledge, discouraging attentive readers from identifying a single truth about darkness or the sonnet mistress so frequently associated with it.

While the light/dark motif is apparent in the dark lady sonnets, Shakespeare also incorporates it into the young man subsequence, using metaphors of darkness to complicate and disrupt the images of lightness with which the young man is often associated. For example, the paradox of sonnet 43 is that it attributes both darkness and light to the young man, whom the speaker best perceives in sleep when his dreams “darkly bright, are bright in dark directed” (43.4). As the sonnet explains, the young man’s “shadow shadows doth make bright” (43.5). Shadow can mean not only the ghostly, dreamy replicas in the speaker’s mind, but also the darkness of shadows, lacking the original brightness and color of the objects they represent. The young man’s likeness in the dark, therefore, cancel out the other forms of darkness caused by dreaming. While the sonnet does associate the young man with brightness and lightness, it is, paradoxically, through the darkness of night, dreams, and shadows, that this “darkly bright” light is communicated. Shakespeare similarly represents this paradox in sonnet 27, where “thy shadow... Which like a jewel hung in ghastly night, / Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new” (10-12). Darkness does not have entirely negative connotations, since the young man is associated with the darkness of shadow. The young man’s shadow, in fact, is subordinated to darkness, serving as an ornament. The shadow does not contrast with darkness, where darkness emphasizes the brightness of the young man. Instead, the young man’s shadow is a facet of the darkness, rendering black night beautiful.

Just as the contrast between dark and light works throughout the sonnet sequence, so too do many of Shakespeare’s other Pyrrhonist-inflected rhetorical choices. While the shift between

the young man and the dark lady sonnets is both obvious and significant, this division should not entirely govern the narratives readers and scholars generate about the sonnets. There is much to be said (and much has, indeed, been said) about the differences between the young man and the dark lady sonnets, but it is equally productive to note the themes that work across this divide. In the final portion of this chapter, therefore, I attend to the break in the sequence, examining sonnets 126 and 127 for the elements that bind them together, rather than separate them, and offer a reading of sonnet 144, the most infamous of the poems contrasting Shakespeare's two subjects, as an invitation to place the young man and the dark lady sonnets into conversation.

Reading across the Gender Divide

As the introduction to the dark lady subsequence, sonnet 127 marks the continued interest in the themes of skepticism and uncertainty manifest in the young man sonnets. The shortened sonnet 126 invites readers to see this connection, both acknowledging the shift in focus and recognizing the similarities between the two subjects.

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy pow'r
Dost hold time's fickle glass, his sickle hour,
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st—
If nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,
As thou goest onwards still will pluck thee back,
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
May time disgrace, and wretched minute kill.
Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure;
She may detain but not still keep her treasure.
Her audit, though delayed, answered must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.

Like many of the sonnets I have described, 126 incorporates a set of conflicting metaphors relating to sovereignty, horticulture, and economics in order to revisit some of the preeminent metaphors of the previous sonnets. The catachresis of sonnet 126 also creates understanding out

of its conflicting metaphors, helping the reader perceive the frustrated, last-ditch efforts of the speaker. The sonnet reintroduces an important theme that will reappear throughout the dark lady sequence: the young man's subordination to the pleasure of a strong female character. Nature "pluck[s the young man] back" to demonstrate her ability, and the speaker somewhat derisively calls him the "minion of her pleasure." This motif is present in the young man sonnets, as well, as in sonnet 27, where the young man's shadow is a mere jewel around the neck of night, a female character whose aged appearance is made more beautiful by the presence of the young man. If readers move through the sonnets in order, they do not yet know that the dark lady is about to become the primary focus of the sequence (though her brief introduction in sonnets 41 and 42 ensures that readers are aware of her existence). The subtle thematic and aesthetic links—the question of male subordination and catachrestic experience of emotion—to the dark lady sequence may linger in the minds of readers as they turn to sonnet 127.

Though sonnet 127 does, by setting up the light/dark contrast, offer a distinction between the light typically associated with the young man and the "dun" features of the dark lady, it also invites its reader to consider the way such contrasts are constructed subjectively and therefore susceptible to change and interpretation. The lines marking the shift toward the dark lady underscore the vexed, entangled relationship of empirical truth and perception. Claiming that writers both "put on nature's pow'r" and borrow "art's false...face," Shakespeare simultaneously attributes to poets the tremendous ability to record nature and chides them for merely presenting art in its place. Sonnet 127 manifests two of the concerns that haunt the young man and the dark lady sonnets: the superficial expression of art ("art's false borrowed face") and the collaborative nature of meaning-making. The poetic tradition—while it may offer only an inaccurate, artistic recreation of nature's beauty—intervenes so profoundly that it alters the perception and nature of

beauty, which now “hath no name” (7), is “slandered with a bastard shame” (4), and perhaps “lives in disgrace” (8). By over-representing beauty and by representing it from diverse perspectives, writers who may regard beauty as a stable sign highlight its instability and leave it free for usurpation, making way for its “successive heir” (3). In sonnet 127, Shakespeare offers a critique of the sonnet tradition by suggesting that its popular metaphors have become old-fashioned and that the poetic tradition itself has relied so heavily upon its fictions of epistemological certainty (in which beauty is a source for truth and guidance) that it has permanently and conspicuously destabilized one of its favorite motifs.

While it may articulate the differences between the conventional beauty of the young man and the literal or metaphorical darkness of the lady, sonnet 127 more importantly illustrates that Shakespeare’s two loves enable him to meditate on similar issues of knowledge creation, communication and acquisition. In his sequence, the young man is variously associated with contrasting and conflicting metaphors related to, for instance, beauty and darkness; the number and nature of the metaphors highlight the insufficiency of any single figure to glimpse the truth of the speaker’s affection for the young man. While the figurative language in the dark lady subsequence is often portrayed more negatively, it makes a similar argument about how individuals make meaning out of diverse and contradictory experiences. In the sonnets to the young man and the dark lady, Shakespeare echoes Pyrrhonism by suppressing empirical truth in favor of a multi-faceted representation of human relationships. The collaboration of the young man and the dark lady creates an uncertainty for the speaker and readers that is illustrative of Shakespeare’s complex conceptions of human interactions.

The collaborative epistemology that takes place between the young man and the dark lady appears most clearly in sonnet 144, a sonnet which includes one of the strongest pieces of

evidence in support of readings (like Fineman's) that regard the dark lady as a negative and corrupting presence, who disrupts the ideal relationship and the practices that characterize the relationship between the speaker and the young man. Sonnet 144 does condemn the dark lady as a morality-play-style demon and rehash the speaker's suspicions about the illicit relationship between his two loves, and, certainly, analysis of the sonnet focusing on these narrative details are significant and valuable. However, this sonnet is only partly about infidelity, sex, and corruption. Equally pressing to the speaker are the matters of suspicion, uncertainty, and proof. This sonnet, so invested in the question of epistemological certainty, brings together Shakespeare's two subjects, inviting the reader, once again, to think across the young man and the dark lady for what they each (and both) reveal about the nature of truth.

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 turn'd 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.

Sonnet 144 is perhaps the quintessential piece of evidence cited to demonstrate the dark lady's moral corruption. Callaghan advances the common narrative, arguing: "Certainly [sonnets 138 and 144] published in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 – presenting the 'dark lady' as a liar and a whore – do not easily conform to the adjective 'sugared.'"²²⁵ However, sonnet 144 does not, exactly, present the dark lady as a whore (nor does sonnet 138, as I argue in Chapter 4). In a later

²²⁵ Callaghan, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 9.

description of this sonnet, Callaghan acknowledges that “the woman is tempting the man into sexual congress with her, and the poet is tormented by this suspicion because he cannot verify it.”²²⁶ If “whore” means, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, one who prostitutes herself for hire or one who is unchaste, then even the attempts to corrupt the good angel do not make her a whore.²²⁷ Certainly there is no evidence anywhere in the sequence that the dark lady is a hired prostitute, and the question of her unchaste behavior with the young man is central to sonnet 144.

Readers are therefore uncertain about the dark lady, sharing the experience the speaker is at pains to describe. The speaker can only guess about the relationship between the two subjects of this sonnet, and the reasons he suspects them of betraying him are fairly weak: “being both from me both to each friend, / Suspect I may.” The speaker claims that the dark lady has tried to coax the young man away from him, but beyond this his only reason to believe they have slept together is that they are apart from him and friends with each other. Moreover, the final couplet emphasizes that the speaker can only experience certainty if the sexual activity creates physical markers on the body—in this instance, the physical marker would likely be a venereal disease passed from the lady to the young man. The argument of the sonnet is not, as Greenblatt and others have read it, to demonstrate that the dark lady is a whore who corrupts the young man. Instead, the sonnet represents a problem of unknowability, and it seems that such a problem would actually be resolved by the lady “fir[ing] out” the young man, because such an occurrence would put an end to the speaker’s doubt. The conclusion of the sonnet contrasts suspicion with the presence of empirical truth (here, imagined as physical signs on the body) which would still require interpretation. If the young man does contract a venereal disease, the speaker cannot

²²⁶ Callaghan, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 149.

²²⁷ “whore, n.”. OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/228780?rskey=bU3Tqj&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

know for certain that it comes from his worser spirit. The conclusion the speaker imagines, which he posits would give him closure about the nature of the relationship between his two loves, would only be another piece of evidence from which he would have to make meaning.

Taking a step back from dominant scholarly narratives about the love triangle it describes, one can better appreciate the complex and nuanced developments in the sonnet's argument. The sonnet simulates the experience of uncertainty for the reader by creating ambiguity. Reading the opening line for the first time, one could understand "Two loves I have of comfort and despair" to mean that the two loves are both responsible for the speaker's experiences of love and despair. The same interpretation is available in line two, especially given the negative connotations of the word "suggest." In early usage, "suggest" meant not only to encourage thoughts or actions in another, but also to prompt another toward evil.²²⁸ Until line three, therefore, the sonnet provides no reason to distinguish the loves who both drive the speaker toward an undifferentiated (and probably sinful) act. There is a sudden shift in perspective that may be missed by readers who have established the dark lady/young man hierarchy, but the speaker does not draw a distinction between the two subjects until he labels them the better and worser angels in lines 3-4. Beyond this point, essential information about the subjects and their relationship is provided only haltingly. For instance, the extent of the speaker's knowledge about their relationship is only apparent in lines 9-10, with the speaker's acknowledgement that he may only "suspect" that the two subjects are sexually involved. Absent criticism, the sonnet is difficult to read and the argument unfolds slowly and ambiguously. The sensation of being unsure, of watching a puzzle unfold and only partially resolve, may cause

²²⁸ "suggest, v.". OED Online. December 2013. Oxford University Press, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/193659?rskey=EQ8hXN&result=2&isAdvanced=false>.

more pleasure than linking the poem definitively to moral judgments about the characters it describes.

By placing the two subjects in conversation, Shakespeare emphasizes the importance of perception in meaning-making. Examined together, the young man and the dark lady become even less clear, each taking on attributes typically associated with the other. They are indistinguishable in the opening lines of the poem, and though the distinction between the young man and the dark lady becomes clear in lines three and four, the two subjects continue to move up and down a continuum of evil. The dark lady's status fluctuates from the undifferentiated "love" to a "worser spirit," then a "female evil." In the last three lines, she is an angel and, finally, a "bad angel." These shifts in the dark lady's characterization enact upon her the same corruption she is accused of causing in the young man. The metaphors for the lady become increasingly hostile until they are slightly alleviated by the speaker's acknowledgement of his own uncertainty. From the "foul pride" of line eight, the lady rebounds to more equal footing with the young man: they are "both from me both to each friend" and once again, undifferentiated as angels in line twelve. As the speaker imagines the dark lady corrupting the young man, the speaker drags the dark lady down as well. This is another example of how the speaker is like and may identify with the dark lady (rather than, as Fineman suggests, solely identifying with the young man).

The dark lady, as I have demonstrated, shares characteristics with both the young man and the speaker in sonnet 144, and these similarities highlight the instability of the distinctions the speaker tries to make. Though the speaker attempts to draw increasingly pronounced difference between the two subjects, the exact nature of their differences is unclear and unstable. They are entirely undifferentiated until the third line, and the space between the lady's foul pride

and the young man's purity is in flux, each being described in more or less condemning terms. Moreover, the indiscretion they may have committed is mutual and the speaker experiences uncertainty about both the characters: they are confounded and confounding. Like their relationship with the speaker, the relationship between the dark lady and the young man exists along a continuum and cannot, therefore, be stably and consistently defined.

Sonnet 144 represents the sensations of love, jealousy, and uncertainty, rather than a factual or biographical account of the love triangle. Edmundson and Wells argue:

In spite of recurring themes of servitude, self-abasement, self-loathing for sexual obsession for a woman he knows to be unfaithful, self-blame for his own faults...the attitudes to love in these poems are so diverse and self-contradictory that it would be wrong to yield to the temptation to try to form from them a pattern in which true love, at first unrequited, passes through slow disillusionment, acknowledgement of folly, discovery of infidelity, sexual nausea, to total rejection. The poems constitute not a story of love corroded and denied, but a series of episodes, like snapshots taken at different times, some independent, some linked, that bear witness more to the suffering that love can inflict than to the joys it can confer.²²⁹

Edmundson and Wells offer an insightful criticism of scholarly traditions that seek to turn the sonnets to the dark lady into a coherent narrative or even a biographical sketch of Shakespeare's relationship with a mistress, his wife, or a prostitute. Their metaphor of the snapshot is particularly compelling, and it corroborates my own claims about the existence of multiple perspectives on a given concept—in this case, a relationship. The romantic experience between the speaker and the dark lady is so diversely and inconsistently described that attempts to render it a coherent story from lust to love to disappointment, though they may be tempting, seek to establish truth or epistemological certainty where Shakespeare has intentionally denied it. As my earlier analysis would suggest, I regard Edmundson and Wells's assumptions about the quality of the relationship to be problematic; they take for granted that Shakespeare depicts more suffering

²²⁹ Edmundson and Wells, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 80-81.

than love, and their description of the dark lady as “a woman he knows to be unfaithful” is unclear (unfaithful to whom, the speaker or her alleged husband?). However, like Callaghan, they offer a compelling description of the effects of the sonnets, which create a multi-dimensional experience for the reader, rather than establishing a coherent image of the speaker or his dark lady.

Shakespeare’s sonnets offer a sustained and Pyrrhonist examination of the sonnet tradition, as well as religious and political discourse in the early modern period. Withholding definitive evidence about the details of his life and personal relationships, Shakespeare creates instead a paradoxical milieu, in which readers are invited to observe and experience the intensely personal encounters the speaker has with his two subjects, while simultaneously being denied stable and coherent details in support of these encounters. This paradox accounts for much of the long-standing scholarly effort to attribute human characteristics and historical identities to the subjects of the sonnets. Attempts to make the sonnets reveal a hidden, coded, or covert meaning, however, fail to acknowledge a great source of intellectual engagement and delight in the sonnets. The absence of certainty in Shakespeare’s sonnets provides readers who first suspend judgment—about the moral code of the dark lady, for instance—the opportunity to recognize the equilibrium and pleasure that derives from acknowledging how many interpretations and perspectives exist on a relationship, a philosophy, or even the established constraints of the sonnet tradition.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

...we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.

-George Eliot, Middlemarch

With her characteristic insight concerning the effects of language, Eliot articulates a great problem of metaphor: it is separate from an individual and her thought, but it exerts, nevertheless, a powerful force over the individual. Eliot's comment is helpful in reflecting on this dissertation, which has examined the complex nature of figurative language and its function in the process of meaning-making. Eliot draws a distinction between reality (characterized as "our thoughts") and metaphor, but that distinction, by virtue of the metaphors' strength, collapses. The space between a metaphor and the thing it describes was contested in the early modern period, where access to information, especially in the form of polemical pamphlets, grew exponentially. While some writers use figurative language as if it would overcome the gap between the speaker's mind and the reader's, Shakespeare opens up the space between the metaphor and the thing it describes, locating in the uncertainty of that space both pleasure and significance.

Shakespeare's sonnets, which benefit (as I argued in Chapter 3) from the epistemological sensitivity of Sidney, create unprecedented opportunities for writers to consider meaning-making in the sonnets. For instance, diverging from a conceit of devotional literature in which the individual speaks as a medium for God, John Donne's stunning Holy Sonnets depict the uncertain breach between the divine and the understanding of the faithful by placing God in the position of the sonnet mistress. Shifts in perspective also define the poetry of Lady Mary Wroth,

who reframes the sonnet tradition by placing herself, the spurned mistress, in the role of the speaking subject, rather than that of the silent object of desire. The celebration of multiple perspectives I have outlined in Shakespeare's sonnets thrives in the work of the sonneteers who follow him, revealing more complex perspectives on love and desire.

Shakespeare's sonnets—the effects of which are clear in the generations of sonnets that follow his—thrive in part because of his tremendous talent and his “W.H.” mystery, but they are also a continual source of fascination because their multiple perspectives give readers a chance to make meaning from the sonnets, without ever arriving at definitive truth. The fact that sonnets create significance for contemporary readers is apparent in the widespread practice of reading sonnets, especially 116 (“Let me not to the marriage of true minds”) at weddings. In such contexts, the brides and grooms view the poem in isolation, within the context of their romantic views on love, ignoring or remaining ignorant of the changing and sometimes painful depictions of love throughout the sequence. The continued popularity of Shakespeare's sonnets in the genre of love poetry attests to the organic process of significance he describes, where poetry remains relevant because it “dwell[s] in lovers' eyes” (55.14). The lovers who cite sonnet 116 as a sign of their own love contribute to the process of collaborative epistemology that Shakespeare's poetry celebrates and encourages.

The meaning-making potential of the sonnets is also clear, as I have argued, in the works of scholars, who seek to create stable narratives out of a sequence that will forever thwart such attempts. When scholars regard history as a key for reading the sonnets, or, conversely, the sonnets as a key for uncovering Shakespeare's history, they impose upon them the type of limited empirical truth that the sonnets evade. For many readers, myself included, Shakespeare's poetry is a source of pleasure because it is baffling and because it makes room for divergent

views. Instead of insisting that the sonnets provide definitive answers, as scholars do when they claim the young man can only be Shakespeare's friend or that the dark lady is clearly a prostitute with venereal disease, I have looked at the sonnets through the lens of Pyrrhonism. Many readings of the sonnets are possible, and all viable readings should be recognized and entertained. Reveling in the aesthetics of the unknown—in the sublime experiences created by conflicting metaphors, for instance—readers can locate pleasure outside of a conventional desire to know with certainty and to feel that one is right. In the place of such certainty, Shakespeare offers a distinct sensation, where the reader is aware that significance is constructed and that she plays a central role in making meaning for the text.

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