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# LOVES OF COMFORT AND DESPAIR: A READING OF SHAKESPEARE'S SONNET 138

BY EDWARD A. SNOW

Lying holds an honorable place in  
love; it is a detour that leads us to  
truth by the back door.

(Montaigne, *On Some  
Verses of Virgil*)

Sonnet 138 ("When my love swears that she is made of truth") is one of those sonnets that seem to have served as touchstones for Shakespeare's dramatic imagination.<sup>1</sup> Its paradoxes and its elusiveness of tone locate a crucial threshold within the world of the plays: on the one side *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Othello*, with their disgust with sexuality, their distrust of women, and their cynical, disillusioned, and/or subjectively isolated male protagonists; on the other *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its intermingling of male and female selves, its acceptance of the realities of sexual relatedness, and its chastened yet visionary reaffirmation of the romantic idealism of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is one case, then, where a close reading should open on the largest Shakespearean horizons, and on the basic forces that contend there.

There is another reason for paying close attention to how the poem works. For in addition to locating the threshold that separates *Othello* from *Antony and Cleopatra*, the sonnet passes over it, to achieve something of an epiphany. We come upon it, within either the sonnet sequence or Shakespeare's work as a whole, not as a field of conflicts but as a moment of repose. The grounds for cynicism and despair in Shakespeare's romantic vision are the stuff of the poem, but it manages to transform them into something workable, even strangely affirmative and idealistic. And this transformation is accomplished through the minutest semantic and syntactic adjustments. Indeed, if one can generalize from the sonnet, then no more separates what is most negative from what is most positive in Shakespeare than a subtle distinction in tone.

The following line-by-line commentary is largely an attempt to make this distinction palpable.<sup>2</sup> The differences between the versions of the sonnet published in the 1599 *Passionate Pilgrim* and

the 1609 Quarto will be accorded a place of central importance, for they unfailingly bring the special quality of the latter into focus, and illuminate the nature of the “crossing” that is its achievement. The earlier version still hesitates at the threshold in question, and in the end relapses into metaphors that evoke the repressive, claustrophobic atmosphere of *Othello* (“Since that our faultes in love thus smother’d be”); while the 1609 version passes over into the lucid, accommodating, fully manifest space of *Antony and Cleopatra* (“And in our faultes by lies we flattered be”). Obviously, then, the assumption will be that 1599 is an early Shakespearean version, and not an imperfectly remembered transcript; the ensuing discussion will hopefully become in turn an argument for the validity of that assumption, or at least for its fruitfulness as a working hypothesis.<sup>3</sup>

ll. 1-2: When my love sweares that she is made of truth,  
I do beleeeve her though I know she lyes,<sup>4</sup>

In the mouth of Hamlet, Troilus, or Othello, these lines might easily express cynicism or desperate confusion; yet the tone they establish here—and the sonnet as a whole manages to sustain—is gentle, resolved, lovingly acceptant. The note of affection tends to come through even more strongly, in fact, in “though I know she lyes” than in “I do beleeeve her.” The intimate, almost complacent tone is simultaneously a seduction and a provocation: what should be a logical contradiction is presented as if it were matter-of-factly intelligible; what seems an obvious piece of self-deception communicates lucidity and peace of mind.<sup>5</sup>

Yet beneath the sonnet’s apparent offhandedness, fine and crucial distinctions are continually being made. The mistress swears that she is *made of truth*, not that she is “true” or “telling the truth”; and the speaker believes *her*, not her vows or her lies. The continuing life of a relationship can depend on, may even consist in the recognition of the gap between what one is and what one says, or what one says and what one means in the saying of it. And—as if really to take her at her word, more literally even than she intends—if she is *made of truth*, even her lies must be true, or manifest her truth; such lies, properly understood, may elicit belief rather than undermine it. Enobarbus obscurely makes this case for Cleopatra’s “passions” (the word is used with metaphysical tact, alluding as it does to both the actor and the man of conviction) in one of *Antony and Cleopatra*’s many reminiscences of Sonnet 138:

Enobarbus: Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying.

Antony: She is cunning past man's thought.

Enobarbus: Alack, sir, no, her passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love. We cannot call her winds and waters sighs and tears; they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can report. This cannot be cunning in her; if it be, she makes a show'r of rain as well as Jove.

(1.2.137-48)

In answer to the question of whether Cleopatra's "deaths" are spontaneous reactions to the prospect of Antony's absence or calculated deceptions designed to keep him in Egypt, Enobarbus replies that such distinctions do not apply in her case—and that love, whose essence is the stuff of her passions, is not the best place to try to make them. It is this capacity to defeat the mind's attempts to distinguish spontaneity from calculation, truth from pretense, that *is* her truth—the truth that elicits Antony's love, in spite of his frustrations ("But that your royalty / Holds idleness your subject, I should take you / For idleness itself" [1.3.91-93]), and Enobarbus's belief, in spite of his ironical defenses. The speaker of Sonnet 138 is both Antony and Enobarbus in this respect: for him belief *is* a matter of love, or at least presupposes it (the introductory "my love" suggests that the issues of the sonnet have been settled long in advance), and it has to do with the person of his beloved rather than her professions. The antithetical situation is dramatized in *Othello*, where we witness the disastrous consequences (and in a sense the substancelessness) of a love anxiously, idealistically predicated on belief ("My life upon her faith!" [1.3.294]).

The paradoxes of Sonnet 138 are even more directly recalled near the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, in a piece of comic dialogue that once again seems to be concerned with the integrity of Cleopatra and her many "deaths":

Cleopatra: Remember'st thou any that have died on't?

Clown: Very many, men and women too. I heard of one of them no longer than yesterday, a very honest woman—but something given to lie, as a woman should not do but in way of honesty—how she died of the biting of it, what pain she felt.

(5.2.249-54)

The speaker of the sonnet may similarly choose to believe that his mistress lies “in way of honesty”: “When she swears her truth to me, and lies in doing so, that very lie proves her truth, since it demonstrates that she loves me enough to keep the truth from me, cares enough about preserving our relationship, and protecting my feelings, to conceal her infidelities within it.” “I do beleieve” suggests something closer to a pledge or an enactment than a passive acceptance (it answers to her vows in a marriage of similarly devious minds), as if her truth were contingent on his investment in it. Although the folly of Troilus’s self-willed delusion is not far off the horizon, there is a peculiar clarity and ethical strength about such a train of thought. Its positives come into focus when we realize that such a piece of casuistry is exactly what a non-tragic Othello would have to become capable of, regardless of Desdemona’s actual “guilt” or “innocence” (the play goes to painful lengths to show that no objective proof—whatever that might consist in—would restore his faith). We are actually closer to a more complaisant version of Juliet’s passionate realism:

Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say “Ay,”  
 And I will take thy word; yet if thou swear’st,  
 Thou may prove false: at lovers’ perjuries  
 They say Jove laughs.

(2.2.90-94)

In Sonnet 138 the laughter of the gods has been internalized (cf. Hubler’s description of its tone as “amused contentment”),<sup>6</sup> not without a tendency to look on truth askance and strangely, but miraculously without cynicism or disillusionment.

There is yet another, entirely different side to the issue of lies and the belief in them in the sonnet, as the passage from *Romeo and Juliet* suggests: it has to do not with infidelity but with the burden of experience, and not with calculated deception but with the passionate untruths of love itself. The lover’s vows in *As You Like It* that so closely echo those of Sonnet 138—“It is to be all made of faith and service / And so am I for Phoebe” (5.2.89-90)—are elicited by the exuberance of being in love, not by an accusation of infidelity. Rosalind’s skepticism about such vows is based on a general knowledge of how the world goes (“Say ‘a day,’ without the ‘ever.’ No, no, Orlando, men are April when they woo, December when they wed; maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives” [4.1.146-49]); and what makes her such a positive force in the play is her ability to give herself to love in spite

Antony:        Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch  
Of the rang'd empire fall! Here is my space,  
Kingdoms are clay; our dungy earth alike  
Feeds beast as man; the nobleness of life  
Is to do thus—when such a mutual pair  
And such a twain can do't, in which I bind,  
On pain of punishment, the world to weet  
We stand up peerless.

Antony: But stirred by Cleopatra. (1.1.33-43)

Thus it may be that the speaker of Sonnet 138 “knows” that his mistress lies not because he possesses empirical evidence of actual

infidelities (the example of *Othello* should put us on the alert here), but because of what his own experience (or “age,” as he euphemistically puts it) in love tells him about the nature of lover’s vows: “When she pledges her truth to me, I believe that she is sincere, and that the love she expresses for me is real; yet I know from experience that such vows are by their very nature lies—especially in the case of the two of us, who are both too ‘old’ in love to be made of truth.”

From this point of view, what threatens the relationship is the speaker’s own self-doubt and its potential for cynicism and disillusionment rather than his mistress’s potential for actual betrayal. Here again, the dialectic between *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* clarifies what is at stake in the sonnet. In *Othello*, a preoccupation with past and future loves, with mutability, with a series of betrayals in which the present love is inextricably implicated, is merely the necessary obverse of the brittle idealism that must disavow it; suppressed from within, it returns in the external world as a paranoid, persecutory, randomly embodied voice preying on the insecurities that are its real substance:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;  
She has deceived her father, and may thee.

(1.3.292-93)

It cannot be that Desdemona should long continue her love to the Moor—put money in thy purse—nor he his to her. It was a violent commencement, and thou shalt see an answerable sequestration—put money in thy purse. These Moors are changeable in their wills—fill thy purse with money. The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as acerbic as the coloquintida. She must change for youth: when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice. She must have change, she must; therefore put money in thy purse.

(1.3.341-52)

In all such passages we hear *Othello*’s own inner voice as well as that of the hostile elements in his external world.

In *Cleopatra*, however, the life force is able to triumph over what experience “knows,” and achieve in the process a heightened, all-inclusive lucidity. Her first scene with Charmian is a perfect gloss on Sonnet 138’s “And age in love, loves not t’have years told”:

Cleopatra:

Who’s born that day  
When I forget to send to Antony,  
Shall die a beggar. Ink and paper, Charmian.

Welcome, my good Alexas. Did I, Charmian,  
 Ever love Caesar so?  
 Charmian: O, that brave Caesar!  
 Cleopatra: Be choked with such another emphasis!  
 Say, "the brave Antony."  
 Charmian: The valiant Caesar!  
 Cleopatra: By Isis, I will give thee bloody teeth  
 If thou with Caesar paragon again  
 My man of men.  
 Charmian: By your most gracious pardon,  
 I sing but after you.  
 Cleopatra: My salad days,  
 When I was green in judgment, cold in blood,  
 To say as I said then. But come, away,  
 Get me ink and paper.  
 He shall have every day a several greeting,  
 Or I'll unpeople Egypt.

(1.5.64-78)

What is being celebrated in this passage is Cleopatra's capacity to be rich in memory yet young in love, to will through her passions (and her sense of humor) a present enhanced rather than burdened by the past. Although the speaker of Sonnet 138 gently, wryly acquiesces where Cleopatra passionately transcends, it is *Antony and Cleopatra's* mood of time-bound acceptance rather than *Othello's* mixture of cynicism and despair that his attitude ultimately resembles.

The troubled feelings about sexuality that are in a sense the crux of the sonnet come to the fore in the puns of line 2. In the absence of the preposition and its object, "she lyes" can imply either "lies to me" or "lies with me" (for the latter, after all, are the lies the speaker *knows*). These alternatives tend to imply and become equivalent to each other (with "lies with other men" merely an internal, wholly subjective middle term—just as the fantasy of an adulterous liaison that Desdemona lies to him about serves to mediate Othello's own repressed sense of what lying with her involves for him)—as if what the speaker had to overcome were not his awareness of her promiscuity but his own "knowledge" of her sexually.<sup>8</sup> The attitude that sex itself is illicit and corrupting, and that to have intercourse with a woman is to know her for a whore and a liar, is a demon upon which the critical force of much of Shakespeare's canon is brought to bear. The 1609 version of the sonnet manages to sustain throughout the gentle ascendancy of "I do beleeve her" over "I know she lyes" (the lies of line 2 have, in fact,



by line 14 been converted into the grounding, consoling truth of the relationship). In doing so, it achieves a triumph similar to that of *Antony and Cleopatra* over the darkest, most compulsive forces in Shakespeare's world.<sup>9</sup>

ll. 3-4: That she might thinke me some untuterd youth,  
Unlearned in the world's false subtilties.

Here the two versions begin to diverge: 1599 reads "unskillful" instead of "unlearned" and "forgeries" instead of "subtilties." "Unlearned" implies a more benign attitude toward an ironically-regarded self-image than "unskillful"; sexual inexperience becomes a matter of innocence rather than awkwardness or incompetence. The substitution of "subtilties" for "forgeries" shifts the issue of true versus false toward the more ethically neutral (or elusive) one of simple versus complex, and opens the possibility of an epicurean rather than a puritanical consideration of "lies." (Forgeries are always strongly negative in Shakespeare, as in Adonis's "Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies" [*Ven.*, 804]; subtilties more often call for aesthetic appreciation, as in *Beowulf's* "Subtle as Sphinx, sweet and musical / As bright Apollo's lute" [*LLL.*, 4.3.339-40], or Prospero's "You do yet taste / Some subtilties o' th' isle" [*Tmp.*, 5.1.123-24].

The musical patterns established in the first three lines clearly demand "subtilties" rather than "forgeries" (note especially the interplay of t's, l's, d's, and s's that keeps the verse on the tip of the tongue, and the fluid elision of "false" into "subtilties")—a fact that might seem to argue for 1599 as an imperfect transcription rather than an early version of 1609. Yet the very thing that makes the variants in 1609 compelling when considered as authorial revisions is that they seem not so much to change the original into something else as bring to light what has been there, half-suppressed, all along—as if the poet were finally realizing the affirmative core of his situation and relinquishing his defenses against it.<sup>10</sup> That revisions which make for a more complex, humane breadth of vision should also make for a more beautiful, logically coherent poem is symptomatic of the level at which the poem's affirmations reside. For once aesthetic value inheres naturally in the unembellished texture of human realization, instead of becoming something created and imposed in its despair.

The grammatical and syntactical ambiguities of ll. 3-4 reflect the complicated intersubjectivity of the relationship they describe.

“That she might thinke me” can express an intent on the part of the speaker either to deceive his mistress or to grant her wish, cooperate in her own self-deceptions. The latter possibility is made more plausible by the syntactical ambiguity which allows “That” to modify either “I do believe her” or “she lyes.” The more esoteric argument would thus run: “My love lies to me by way of ridiculously exaggerated lovers’ vows not primarily in order to deceive me but in order to believe that she is in love with someone young and foolish enough to believe them; and understanding these motives, I willingly assent to them, so that she might allow herself the naive enthusiasm of a Juliet, and feel young in love herself. In doing so I enter into complicity with an image of myself that it flatters me to see held by her. And there is something of truth in all this: I don’t merely pretend, I *do believe* her.” As an explanation of a beloved’s actual infidelities, the casuistry of this may be painful to reflect upon. Yet the calm, lucid tone, the strength and ease of address, create the opposite effect from the lonely, desperate rationalizations of Sonnet 42 (“Loving offenders thus will I excuse yee, / Thou dost love her, because thou knowst I love her, / And for my sake even so doth she abuse me, / Suffring my friend for my sake to approve her”). The speaker’s convoluted reasonings and quixotic generosity on the question of intent arrive at a truth, a reality, that may be closed to a more “realistic” view of things; they communicate to us not an isolated consciousness but a relationship, a mutuality, in which (I think) we believe.

ll. 5-6: Thus vainely thinking that she thinkes me young,  
Although she knowes my days are past the best,

Line 7 will establish that it is the speaker who is doing the “thinking” here; but when we reach the end of line six we are still not sure whether it is his or his mistress’s state of mind that is being described. Somewhere in the course of the first six lines we lose our sense of which side of the relationship we are on, and enter an area of radical intersubjectivity. The rest of the sonnet draws back into a simpler, externally situated mutuality (“On both sides thus,” “I lye with her, and she with me”), but without really annulling what has gone before. The “I,” “she,” and “we” take their special resonance from their situation within the (prior?) intersubjective field, while the vertiginous mix of consciousnesses gains a merciful embodiment in the flawed unions of two separate, physical selves.

The whole poem thus hinges on the change from 1599’s “Al-

though *I* know my yeares be past the best” to 1609’s “Although *she* knowes my days are past the best.” The 1599 version stresses the gulf between what she thinks and what he knows, and between what he gives her to know of him and what he knows to be true of himself. The radical dialectic of selves set in motion in the first five lines comes unhappily to rest in the isolated, divided subjectivity of the speaker, with the mistress a distant object of concern outside the poem’s actual field of consciousness.

But the 1609 version reaffirms the essentially intersubjective nature of that field. The substitution of “she” allows the secondary train of thought that takes the mistress rather than the speaker as the subject of predication to extend more plausibly through line 6: “She may think (such is the power of her vanity) that she thinks me young (and that I believe her), but she really knows full well how old I am (and that I know she lies).” And at the primary level of discourse, it transforms the speaker’s preoccupation with what goes on in the mind of his mistress from what isolates him to what saves him from solipsism. In place of 1599’s “I thus self-conceitedly hold on to the thought that I have made her think I am young, even though that thought is in vain, since here inside my thoughts I know how old I really am (to think of her thinking of me as a youth only intensifies my cynical awareness of myself as old, and vain),” 1609 gives us something closer to “I thus flatter myself with the thought that she thinks me young (and believes that I believe), yet that thought is a mere vanity on my part, since I know that she knows quite well how “old” I am (and thus knows that I know).” It is the difference between “I may be able to deceive her but I can’t deceive myself,” and “I might be able to deceive myself if I weren’t aware of how well she knows me, how obvious the truth of me is to her.” In the former version, “knowledge” is just the furthest extension, and the ultimate despair, of the speaker’s “thinking”; in the latter, it refers to the experiential, time-bound actuality of their relationship together (on the one hand, Othello’s “By heaven I’ll know thy thoughts” [3.3.161]; on the other, Cleopatra’s “Not know me yet?” [3.3.161]). With the change in 1609, the mistress enters constitutively into the speaker’s subjectivity: his consciousness of her perspective on him mediates his own reflection on himself (“she knows” condenses “I know that she knows,” and carries the force of a *self*-realization.) The speaker gains a saving distance from himself and moves emotionally nearer his mistress, as the note of self-contempt in 1599 becomes something closer to self-

bemusement in 1609, and the implied contempt for the mistress (for being fooled by him) shifts toward an affectionate, if similarly bemused respect (for seeing through him). The earlier version makes us feel the impossibility of the relationship; the later one, its fittingness, its inevitability.

Throughout the first six lines of the sonnet, the wordplay on “think” and “know” works to undermine the psychological and epistemological distinction they appear to define. In every instance, both can be paraphrased as “believe”: “think” in the weak sense (supposition, conjecture, delusion), “know” in the strong sense (assurance, conviction). What establishes the difference between “strong” and “weak” belief, meanwhile, is left entirely unexplained—as if it were the assumption, or the achievement, upon which the poem as a whole is founded. The one actual use of “believe” is self-consciously, challengingly paradoxical—the poem insists on “*do believe*” where logic would seem to demand “*pretend to believe*.”<sup>11</sup> In place of a rational, clearly demarcated hierarchy where thought leads to knowledge and knowledge to belief (or a religious order where belief dictates knowledge and knowledge contains thought), the sonnet establishes an emotional continuum where everything is ultimately a matter of “belief,” and the distance between suspicion and trust a matter of quantities that cannot be rationally measured or sustained. In this respect its language works to the same ends as the remarkably similar wordplay of *Othello*:<sup>12</sup>

Othello:	What dost thou say?
Iago:	Nothing, my lord; or if—I <i>know</i> not what.
Othello:	Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?
Iago:	Cassio, my lord? No, sure, I cannot <i>think</i> it, That he would steal away so guilty-like, Seeing your coming.
Othello:	I <i>do believe</i> 'twas he. (3.3.35-40; italics added)
Othello:	Honest? ay, honest.
Iago:	My lord, for all I <i>know</i> .
Othello:	What dost thou <i>think</i> ?
Iago:	<i>Think</i> , my lord?
Othello:	<i>Think</i> , my lord? By heaven, thou echo'st me, As if there were some monster in thy <i>thought</i> Too hideous to be shown. . . . . . . If thou dost love me, Show me thy <i>thought</i> .
Iago:	My lord, you <i>know</i> I love you.

Othello: I *think* thou dost;  
And for I *know* thou'rt full of love and honesty,  
...  
Iago: For Michael Cassio,  
I dare be *sworn* I *think* that he is honest.  
Othello: I *think* so too.

(3.3.104-26; italics added)

Yet the speaker of the sonnet resides comfortably in the language that destroys Othello's faith; his paradoxes convey not confusion but an almost Montaignian lucidity and composure. The discoveries upon which all of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists come to grief—the opacity of the self, the otherness of others, the absence of immediate relation, either with the self or the other—are the givens of the sonnet's world, the conditions for "belief" rather than impediments to it.

ll. 7-8: Simply I credit her false speaking tongue,  
On both sides thus is simple truth suppress:

Again, the language expresses an ambivalence while giving the feel of having resolved it. "Simply" can mean "naively" or "foolishly" (thus paralleling "vainly" in line 5), but also "straightforwardly," "candidly," "absolutely," "without reserve" (in which case "Simply I credit" will be heard to parallel and clarify "I do believe" in line 2).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the "simple truth" can be suppressed in favor of either multiple lies or a more complex truth.<sup>14</sup> Contradictory perspectives are acknowledged, yet tonally it is the positive meanings that achieve priority: the feel of the line conveys not cynicism or inner division but an ethically-invested clarity.

The affirmative thrust of the line becomes characteristically more emphatic in comparison to the 1599 version. In "I smiling, credit her false speaking tongue," the speaker is cut off from the mistress and his act of "crediting" her by the smiles he interposes between them ("outfacing" in line 8 reinforces the hypocritical, defensive quality of these smiles). It is the world of *Hamlet* and *Othello* that is evoked: intentionality is hidden behind its actions; the truth is what remains within, passing show, the false what is given to the other to know. The prevailing mood here is one of cynicism and self-contempt; to the degree that the speaker is claiming to control or be satisfied with his situation, his despair and impotence within it become only the more painfully apparent. In the 1609 version, however, the "I" is grammatically, syntactically, and metrically im-

plicated in its predicates by its middle place in the strongly linked unit “Simply I crédit”; the forward thrust of the line moves the speaker toward the mistress and into the relationship between them. The self here actively invests itself in, relinquishes itself to its act of crediting and the paradoxical bond it thereby creates.

In the 1599 version, the two sides of the relationship are doubly isolated from each other, she behind her lies and he behind his smiles. But 1609’s “On both sides thus is simple truth suppress” implies, and achieves, a mutuality; the two lovers cooperate in creating and sustaining what lies between them, and they are but its opposite aspects, its two “sides” (or so at least the quixotic generosity of the poem would have it). The speaker takes what is given, and, without illusion (it is a “false speaking” tongue, though again it is the tongue itself and not what it says that he credits), defines it, simply credits it, as the truth that is between them. Whatever he perceives of her (and of himself as well) he chooses to take as existing on the surface of the relationship, as tacitly given him to know rather than withheld from him in a place his understanding violates. Lucidity is taken to its limits in such a gesture, but it leaves its object intact—even becomes, *contra* Eliot, a source of indiscriminate forgiveness, a place of rest.

Again, it is the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* into which we have moved. The beautiful reconciliation scene between Antony and Cleopatra after the defeat at Actium (“Forgive my fearful sails”) might be but a dramatic fleshing out of the mood and ethos of Sonnet 138. The tacit agreement to suppress the issue of Cleopatra’s motives in running from the battle (and there may not be a more striking instance in Shakespeare of a situation in which the “simple truth” may be utterly problematical, or perhaps not even exist) involves an acknowledgment on both sides of their irrevocable investment in their relationship, their need for it to continue, apart from and beyond all other considerations.

ll. 9-12: But wherefore sayes 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.

The discourse of the sonnet operates not unlike that of myth as analyzed by Levi-Strauss: as a strategy for making the unthinkable thinkable, the unworkable workable (the poem thus serves the relationship it describes in the way that myth serves culture). The

difficult issue of the mistress's infidelity is silently displaced by the more manageable one of her failure to tell the truth about it. Likewise, the potentially humiliating lack of correspondence between her lies and his silence, her "injustice" and his "age," is transformed into an equivalence, and an implication of reciprocal awareness. In the 1599 version, line 11 answers line 9, and line 12 line 10; but in 1609 both answers apply equally to both questions: line 12, for instance, "And age in love loves not t'have yeares told," may explain that she lies to him out of concern for his feelings as well as that he remains silent in order to keep his age a secret. Finally, the focus is shifted from the lies that are *told* to the truths that are *not spoken*, from his smiles and her false-speaking tongue to the tacit realm they share by means of their silences (a process that remains incomplete in the 1599 version, where in spite of the forced similarity between her lies about her "youth" and his silence about his "age," it is still a matter of what she says versus what he keeps to himself).

The euphemisms of lines 9 and 10 acquire an unwonted precision and richness of suggestion in the context created for them by the complexity of the octet (and the relationship it describes). "Unjust" leaves the exact nature of the mistress's fault appropriately unstated and open to question,<sup>15</sup> and displaces the language of "true versus false" with a more subtle and humane ethical vocabulary. "Old" may refer us in a relatively straightforward manner to subjectively isolated male anxieties about performance and sexual desirability (as in Othello's "the young affects in me defunct" [1.3.263-64]), but it may, just as easily, recalling the example from *Antony and Cleopatra* mentioned earlier, allude to a reluctance on both sides to have past affairs recalled (and past "injustices" within the present relationship: "age in love" can be taken to refer either to someone in love who is past his prime, or, more wonderfully, to a love of long standing).<sup>16</sup>

The word-play of line 11 once again condenses the cynical view of the relationship with its benign opposite (although it is difficult to hear the *tone* of the line as other than poignant and heartfelt). The image of clothing evoked by "habit" is itself two-sided. Booth remarks that "Shakespeare customarily associates clothes with deceit, concealment, and pretense—with trying to seem other than one actually is";<sup>17</sup> but this ignores Cleopatra's "Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have / Immortal longings in me" (5.2.280-81), and all the merciful gestures of clothing and covering that counter-

balance the obsessions with *both* disguising *and* stripping bare in *King Lear*. The line can just as easily express an altruistic concern with protecting and enhancing the relationship as it can a self-serving strategy of concealment within it. The difference between the two versions again underscores the thrust in 1609 toward psychic health. In 1599's "O, Love's best habit's in a soothing tounge," the "Love" referred to is an individual posture, and its personification as part-object reinforces the sense of unhappy investment in it; but 1609's "O loves best habit is in seeming trust" refers primarily to the whole, inclusive relationship.

The same ambiguity extends to the non-metaphorical connotations of "habit": either "habitual," with the negative suggestions of tiredness or jadedness, or "habituation," "*habitus*"—in the latter case again expressing concern for the continuation and well-being of the relationship. "Seeming trust" can mean either "appearance of trust" or "trust in appearances" (the trust itself an appearance to be trusted). Even if the former, the emphasis only *may* be on the falseness, the pretense of trust; it may just as plausibly be on the importance of trust *appearing*, manifesting itself in the relationship, quite apart from all private, subjective considerations (as in the similarly elusive yet genuinely committed ethos stated at the end of Andrew Marvell's "Mourning": "I yet my silent judgment keep, / Disputing not what they believe; / Yet sure as oft as women weep, / It is to be supposed they grieve"). "Seeming trust" may be love's "best" habit not just because it is the most practical and serviceable strategy available, but because it represents an *ideal* of magnanimity, is the truest and most faithful form that love is capable of assuming. Indeed, that the poem offers us a form of love that might be "best" in both of the supposedly antithetical senses of the word is the very heart of its affirmative strength.<sup>18</sup>

ll. 13-14: Therefore I lye with her, and she with me,  
And in our faultes by lyes we flattered be.

Booth's comments on this final couplet are especially acute:

The complementary actions announced in line 13, their presentation in urgently parallel constructions (*I lie with her* and *she with me*), and the fact that each of the two clauses asserts the same necessarily cooperative action, all prepare the way for line 14, a line that sums up the speaker's grounds for cynicism, bitterness, and despair, and also one in which the unity of the two lying lovers, whose syntactic independence wanes as the poem



progresses, reaches a compensating completion in the triumphantly mutual pronouns, *our* and *we*.<sup>19</sup>

I would only want to argue that the speaker's grounds for cynicism, bitterness, and despair are not only summed up but *transformed* in the couplet: they become the very substance of its triumph. The final couplet of 1599 gives an especially compelling version of the negativity that is largely overcome in 1609. "Therefore I'll lye with Love, and love with me" absents the mistress and isolates the speaker with an abstraction in which he seems to have little real conviction. "Therefore" seems to deduce a plan of action to be projected into the future, with the "I" characteristically behind its gestures, willing them and at a distance from them. In 1609, conversely, the mistress becomes fully present in the poem (the word "love" disappears into the immanent texture of the relationship), while the poem achieves a sense of presentness that is itself a value, on both the aesthetic and existential planes (by now inextricably fused in the poem). Its "lies" take place here, now, in the openness of the poem, rather than in an imagined future projected out of the speaker's loneliness. Unlike the speaker of 1599, who confides to his audience almost like Iago in his asides, the speaker of 1609 accepts his manifestness within the space of the relationship (and the poem) that discloses him. His "Therefore" introduces neither purpose nor logical conclusion; it merely recapitulates, and settles into, the situation unfolded in the previous lines, confirming in the process the lucidity and openness to a perspective from beyond the self that have been achieved there.

The intricate differences between the final lines of the two versions make the most compelling argument for a Shakespearean revision. The language of 1599 ("Since that our faultes in love thus smother'd be") works subliminally to evoke the negative feelings supposedly suppressed within the "ill rest" it describes. "Smother'd" is violently overdetermined—it carries much the same psychic charge as Othello's smothering of Desdemona.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, it conveys the speaker's sense of being isolated "in" love and constricted "by" it; on the other, it makes his own embraces into sardonic, self-contemptuous acts of aggression both on the mistress, on "Love," and on himself "in" love. The implied equivalence between "lye[s]" and "love" is dark and perverse; it combines with the syntactical ambiguity of "faultes in love" to undermine any sense of conviction in the virtue or the workability of the arrangement apparently embraced in these final lines.

“Faultes” may be incurred *in* love (may, indeed, be the fault of love, in both senses of the preposition), and thus be what must be suppressed by the very lies (sexual or epistemological) that manifest love’s imperfection. Or love may exist to cover over faults that are intrinsic to prior, separate selves—yet those faults manifest themselves in love as lies (again, both sexual and epistemological), and those lies define what “Love” is between the lovers at least to the degree that they mar it. Either way, sexual guilt and a strong sense of original sin reinforce a hopeless circularity, in which one’s acts of covering both expose and immerse the self in what they attempt to suppress (thus a mode of coping that is at the same time an “outfacing” and “smothering”).

The deft changes in 1609 lift the burden of introverted guilt and shame that weighs so heavily upon the lovers in the 1599 version, and create instead the sense of an actual physical space in which the relationship can breathe. Indeed, one of the things that makes the prepositional structure of 1609 seem so natural and intuitively satisfying (even though it is more difficult grammatically than 1599’s version) is its subliminal evocation of the lovers’ carnal situation: when we hear “*in* our faults *by* lyes” we think of the speaker and his mistress lying *in* bed *beside* each other (whereas the speaker of 1599 remains locked within his own dark embraces). The physical reality of the relationship grounds a difficult syntax, just as the sexual connotations of “lyes” subsume the falsehoods that are the word’s primary referent at the beginning of the sonnet. That the faults of the speaker and his mistress subliminally correspond to the bed in which they make love (especially given that the end result is now flattery instead of smothering) suggests how profoundly self-forgiving and acceptant the poem has become. The faults of 1609 are less objects of conscience/consciousness than ontological givens—preconditions “in” which relation (even if “lying” is its mode) and being (even if “flattery” is its attribute) are sustained.

Whatever connotations of moral culpability that remain are further lightened by the alliteration with “flattered”—a word whose appearance in the place of “smother’d” comes as a final clinching grace bestowed on poem and relationship alike. It facilitates the current running from “she,” “me,” and “we” into the final “be,” and brilliantly condenses the key musical elements of the entire final couplet—thus acquiring a purely intuitive feeling of rightness as the culmination of the poem’s discourse. And at the

explicitly discursive level, it preserves the wry, delicate balance of the sonnet's ethos at the very moment the speaker appears to pass final judgment on the relationship. "Flattered" is, like the ordinary language of the sonnet as a whole, a transparent but semantically dense term whose secondary reverberations tend to counteract its superficially apparent meaning. It may denote a state of delusion—although even at this level ambiguities arise, depending on whether one thinks of the lovers as narcissistically deluded by their own and each other's deceptions, or as ethically moved by the demonstration of love they choose to discern in each other's consent to "lye" together—but the speaker's use of it conveys not only a generous, good-natured lucidity, but something like tenderness and humility. And the connotative state it evokes is primarily one of pleasure and gratification rather than moral blindness, manifest reality rather than groundless illusion (the image of the two lovers "lying" together interacts beautifully with the caresses that are etymologically implicit in the word).

Finally, to the degree that it remains a matter of "faults," "flattered" locates them in the realm of the natural, the humanly inevitable, rather than in that of the morally corrupt. The sonnet leaves us with the impression of the two lovers no longer laboring under but resting upon, even buoyed up by the deceptions they practice on each other, and of an author finally acquiescing to what is acceptant and sustaining in his vision (whereas with the intrusive "smother'd" of 1599, all his withheld frustrations get the better of him).

Sonnet 138 thus takes its place in the sequence as the "realistic" opposite of the high-minded Sonnet 116 ("Let me not to the marriage of true mindes / Admit impediments"), but in doing so it brings about a subtle realignment of values. Rather than expressing a cynicism that complements the despair of Sonnet 129 ("Th' experience of Spirit in a waste of shame") and opposes the idealism of Sonnet 116, it sets against both an idealism of its own—against sexual disgust ("Injoyd no sooner but dispised straight") an acceptance of the sustaining, ongoing force of "lyes"; against a mode of affirmation that must be desperately, distantly asserted ("Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration findes") another one that can be realized, and comfortably inhabited. Sonnet 116 can only maintain its values through a series of denials and disavowals, and thus for all practical purposes creates Sonnet 129, as its necessary

obverse; Sonnet 138, “admitting” everything, settles into a relationship that really does “bear it out,” in a present for which apocalyptic metaphors have become entirely inappropriate.

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### Sonnet 138

1599 (PP)

When my Love sweares that she is made of truth,  
I do beleeeve her (though I know she lies)  
That she might thinke me som untutor'd youth,  
Unskillful in the worlds false forgeries.  
Thus vainly thinking that she thinkes me young,  
Although I know my yeares be past the best:  
I smiling, credit her false speaking tounge,  
Outfacing faults in love, with loves ill rest.  
But wherefore sayes my love that she is young?  
And wherefore say not I, that I am old:  
O, Loves best habit's in a soothing tounge,  
And age in love, loves not to have yeares told.  
Therefore I'le lye with Love, and love with me,  
Since that our faultes in love thus smother'd be.

1609 (Q)

When my love sweares that she is made of truth,  
I do beleeeve 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 days are past the best,  
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue,  
On both sides thus is simple truth supprest:  
But wherefore sayes 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.

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the classic discussion of how the themes and language of the Sonnets find their way into the plays, see William Empson's analysis of Sonnet 94, "They That Have Power," in *Some Versions of Pastoral*.

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen to approach the poem by way of a line-by-line commentary because it seems to me the only way to respect the way its meanings build. The sonnet is largely made up of discrete, self-sufficient units of discourse that are connected and retrospectively qualified by a series of logical connectives ("That . . . Thus . . .

Although . . . thus . . . Therefore"). Meanings accumulate which the logical structure of the poem subsequently rejects, but not until they have made their presence felt. "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do beleave her though I know she lyes," for instance, is a self-contained paradox that opens on the most complex issues of love and fidelity, and suggests a similarly complex attitude toward them; but the subsequent conjunction appears to negate the humanly complex aspects of the paradox by revealing it to be a mere purposeful façade. Only a line-by-line reading can do justice to the meanings that accumulate in the interstices of the strictly logical, discursive backbone of the poem, and reveal the larger structure which absorbs and unifies rather than retroactively cancels these meanings.

<sup>3</sup> The arguments for both hypotheses are summarized by Hyder Rollins in his *New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, (Philadelphia, 1944), I, 354; see also Stephen Booth, *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven, 1977), pp. 476-81. Historical and bibliographical considerations of the 1599 text have not been able to settle the issue either way. It should be emphasized that the present discussion takes place entirely within the hermeneutic circle; it attempts merely to present the strongest case that can be made for the authenticity of the 1599 text at a strictly heuristic level.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations from the Sonnets are from the *New Variorum*. Quotations from the plays and longer poems are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Not all critics would agree with this description of the sonnet's mood. More often than not, it has been regarded as jaded, cynical, or despairing—an account, I will later argue, that fits the 1599 but *not* the 1609 version of the poem. Patrick Crutwell, for instance, finds it "perhaps the most terrible poem of the whole sequence [to the mistress] . . . the most terrible, and also the nakedest, since it confesses things that are not easily confessed," and speaks at length of the "grim seriousness" of the pun on "lyes" (*The Shakespearean Moment* [London, 1954], pp. 13-14). James Winny's disdainful commentary is the most formidable for being the less melodramatic; whereas Crutwell misses the tone of the sonnet altogether, he offers a grotesque, spiteful caricature of it:

The sonnet is an enjoyable *jeu d'esprit*; a witty variation on the main theme of the sequence too shallow in feeling to be closely associated with its neighbors. The disdainful mistress has declined into a complaisant courtesan, prepared to accept a middle-aged lover on her own fickle terms; and the speaker reveals himself as a limp *roué* who would be glad to be thought young, and who adapts himself unprotestingly to the false relationship which both find congenial. The situation has a logical place in the development of the sequence, as it moves away from Petrarchan orthodoxy towards a cynically realistic presentation of love as this tired, insincere liaison of partners too indifferent even to lie convincingly to each other. But Shakespeare treats the situation wryly, and without inviting his reader to become emotionally involved, as he does in the charged writing of Sonnet 129. For the moment, lust remains a subject only for mockery (*The Master-Mistress: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* [London, 1968], p. 101).

The present essay is offered as an extended argument against this view of the sonnet.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Hubler, *The Sense of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Princeton, 1952), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Cleopatra's "I'll seem the fool I am not. Antony / Will be himself" might seem to place her in the same relation to Antony that Iago is to Othello. But her profession of seeming is not meant to be taken at face value, as an isolated aside; Antony is *supposed* to hear it, and he responds by folding it back into the dialectic of selves in which their relationship consists. Everything that is hidden in *Othello* is manifest in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cleopatra is fully invested in the appearances others know

her by; the folly she here calls her pretense (in order to goad Antony) she just as often admits to be her reality—e.g., “Your honor calls you hence, / Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly” (1.3.97-98); “Wishers were ever fools” (4.14.37).

<sup>8</sup> This reading is reinforced by the pun, noted by Booth (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 477), on “maid” of truth.

<sup>9</sup> Sonnet 138's acceptance of “lyes” is comparable to *Antony and Cleopatra*'s celebration of the generative force of the “slime” that in *Othello* “sticks on filthy deeds”:

By the fire  
That quickens Nilus' slime, I go from hence  
Thy soldier . . .

(1.3.68-70)

The higher Nilus swells,  
The more it promises; as it ebbs, the seedsman  
Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain,  
And shortly comes to harvest.

(2.7.20-23)

<sup>10</sup> It scarcely matters that the 1599 version may have been written in the midst of the relationship, and the 1609 revisions not made until years later, long after it was over. In poetry as well as life the achievement of the present is more often than not a retrospective process—a matter of casting out remorse, of accepting *past* selves.

<sup>11</sup> Gerald Willen and Victor Reed (*A Casebook on Shakespeare's Sonnets* [New York, 1964], p. 140) gloss “believe” by claiming that it “clearly means ‘pretend to believe,’” although they are driven to admit that “we know of no other instance of this usage in Elizabethan English.”

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the interplay between “think” and “know” in *Othello*, see Paul A. Jorgensen, “‘Perplexed in the Extreme’: The Role of Thought in *Othello*,” *SQ*, 15 (1964), 265-75.

<sup>13</sup> W. G. Ingram's and Theodor Redpath's gloss of “Simply” as “In assumed simplicity” (*Shakespeare's Sonnets* [London, 1964], p. 318) is an instance of the editorial tendency to come to terms with Sonnet 138's difficult claims by making its key words mean the opposite of what they say, and asserting pretense where it claims authenticity.

<sup>14</sup> Sonnet 138 thus inverts the stress placed on the dialectic in the much “simpler” Sonnet 66: “And simple-Truth miscalde Simplicities.”

<sup>15</sup> The usual glosses of “unjust” as “unfaithful in love,” “deceitful,” or “a liar” again reveal an editorial impatience with the moral complexity of the poem's outlook.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Martin, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love, and Art* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 53-54, finds this line to hint at “the lover's self-dramatization and self-pity.” But as usual with this sonnet, the closer one attends to matters of tone, the more a negative impression tends to yield to its opposite—here a wryly humorous, self-effacing concern for the well-being of the relationship itself.

<sup>17</sup> *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, p. 480.

<sup>18</sup> The ambiguity of “best” is noted by Booth, p. 480.

<sup>19</sup> Booth, p. 481.

<sup>20</sup> F's stage direction has Othello “smother” Desdemona; in Q he “stifles” her. I hope the reader who feels this comparison to be based on no more than a verbal accident will still agree that what follows applies to *Othello* as well as to the 1599 version of Sonnet 138. My own feeling is that there are very few “verbal accidents” in Shakespeare. “Smother” is certainly a key word in his imagination: it almost

always carries connotations of a brooding, involuted consciousness, and usually appears in a context of repression heavy with a sense of sexual impotence and impending violence. The word sets the dominant tone of *The Rape of Lucrece*:

Men's faults do seldom to themselves appear,  
Their own transgressions partially they smother:  
This guilt would seem death-worthy in thy brother.  
O how are they wrapp'd up in infamies  
That from their own misdeeds askaunce their eyes!

(633-37)

"With rotten damps ravish the morning air;  
Let their exhal'd unwholesome breaths make sick  
The life of purity, the supreme fair,  
Ere he arrive his weary noontide prick,  
And let thy musty vapors march so thick  
That in their smoky ranks his smoth' red light  
May set at noon, and make perpetual night."

(778-84)

I would argue that such words carry their own memory in Shakespeare, and that as a result these two passages, as well as the final couplet of the 1599 version of Sonnet 138, are keys to the imagination that seizes on the aptness of smothering Desdemona in her wedding bed.