

“That Thereby Beauty’s Rose Might Never Die”:  
Preservation and Mortality in Shakespeare’s Sonnets  
by  
Trista D. Doyle



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For my father, Daryl Doyle



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## Abstract

The concepts of mortality and immortality pervade the sonnets of Shakespeare, especially as the speaker contemplates how he might preserve his beloved young man. For the poet, writing the sonnets offers an opportunity to contemplate the nature of death and how one might prolong life. By exploring these issues in the sonnet form, he contains them within a set structure – much as time contains the life of a man with a set lifespan. In this thesis, I argue that Shakespeare's awareness of this parallel makes the form highly significant. What the poet does to break from the sonnet form takes on particular importance in relation to his struggle to obtain immortality for his beloved. The speaker's defiance of the mortality involves proposals of how to thwart Time's destructive force, yet he complicates each idea without allowing even one to stand unquestioned. Although the poet doubts the strength of his verse in immortalizing the young man as much as any other method, the sonnets do remain in existence 400 years after their publication. Therefore, these poems stand as evidence to support Shakespeare's suggestion that writing might have the power to preserve in spite of mortality.

After I demonstrate at the onset Chapter I how the form of a typical Shakespearean sonnet can reinforce the content of the words contained therein, I explore the ways in which the poet departs from the well-established sonnet form in three specific poems: Sonnet 99, Sonnet 126, and Sonnet 145. In each case, the manipulation of the form relates to the speaker's attitude toward mortality and immortality at that moment. When he adds a line in Sonnet 99, he tries to enact his desire to prolong the young man's life; when he ends two lines too early in Sonnet 126, he shows the power of Time to cut a life short; when he uses tetrameter instead of pentameter in Sonnet 145, he emphasizes the dichotomies between love and disregard, between life and death. Since Shakespeare adheres to the set form so strictly in 151 of his sonnets, the variance in the form of these three poems indicates intentional experimentation by the poet.

Following the study of form in relation to content, I focus on the themes of mortality and immortality in Shakespeare's sonnets in Chapter II. Instead of providing a simple, broad survey of the topic, I examine the sites where contradictions arise and where the focus defies readers' expectations. At these cruxes, Shakespeare reveals insights into the psyche of his speaker. Although the speaker exhorts his beloved to have children to live on in them, he also expresses distress at the fact that he cannot have a role in procreation with the young man. Likewise, the poet proposes that his beloved might find refuge in the verse written by the poet himself, but he doubts his own abilities as well as the reception his words might evoke. Surprisingly, even when all else seems dubious at best, the speaker resists easy assuagement of his anxieties through a religious conception of an afterlife. One explanation for this is that the state of death does not concern the poet as much as the threat of Time. Except for the anomaly of Sonnet 146, the poet remains focused on earthly, mortal existence. Therefore, he finds the destructive capability of Time to inflict ruin and decay on all worldly entities more threatening than Death itself.

In his efforts to discover how he might forestall Time's power, the poet employs the sonnet form, which entails similar constrictions. Yet over these formal, poetic limits, he has some control; when he exploits that clout and still succumbs to despair, his poems disclose the uselessness of combating Time for one man's life. Instead of immortalizing the identity of the young man, Shakespeare's sonnets serve a greater purpose by preserving the potent, affective connections between two individuals and by offering to readers the chance to think through the nature of mortality and what can remain in the world throughout time.



## CONTENTS

Short Titles	i
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Form	6
Sonnet 99: Flowers Lengthening to Fifteen Lines	9
Sonnet 126: Time Shortens to Twelve	13
Sonnet 145: Constrictions of Tetrameter	20
Chapter II: Theme	25
Procreation Sonnets: Promoting Perpetuation Through Progeny	26
Publication, Writing, Poetry: The Poet's Agency	29
Resistance to Religiosity: Christian Concepts in the Sonnets	33
Against Time: Language Opposing Tyranny	39
Conclusion	45
Works Consulted	47



Short Titles

BE: Blakemore Evans, G., ed. *The Sonnets: Updated Edition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

CB: Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. In *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Edited by Colin Burrow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

SB: Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Edited with Analytic Commentary*. Edited by Stephen Booth. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.

VA: Shakespeare, William. *Venus and Adonis*. In *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*. Edited by Colin Burrow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.



## Introduction

But if the while I think on thee (dear friend)

All losses are restored, and sorrows end.

- Sonnet 30<sup>1</sup>

When regarding the possibility of losing a loved one, a writer might resort to the preservation of the beloved in words. Often, such an effort may be limited by memory. Elegies, for example, can only capture the essence of an individual as he comes to be perceived after he has already died. Such is the nature of elegy; it comes *after* a death. In my own experience, death has been a transformative force that alters the state of the deceased from a reality to a memory, which is always inflected by the mind of the one who remembers. When I was seventeen years old, my father died of colon cancer. Although I know he had various flaws, the way I remember him wipes away those stains so that he can remain my role model, my precedent, my ideal advisor. Because the first time I ever wrote anything – of significance – about my father came only the day before he died, I have represented him only through reflecting on his life. What I write about my father will always be some form of elegy. For me, no alternative now avails itself.

What would my writing have looked like if my father had become the subject of my writing at an earlier point? Would I have been able to preserve his essence as it really was during his life? Although I cannot answer these questions directly, these concerns drive my efforts in

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 30.13-14. Hereafter, the book, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* will be cited in the text as "CB." All sonnets included are from this edition unless otherwise noted. All citations give sonnet numbers unless otherwise noted.

this thesis. Assuming that the beloved in Shakespeare's sonnets represents an actual person in the poet's life, Shakespeare tries to preserve, to immortalize, that individual *during* the young man's living days. He anticipates the possibility of losing the loved one and takes what action he can to try to prevent the totality of that loss. This action takes the form of writing the sonnets. In other words, Shakespeare tries to forestall death's transformative powers through writing, which I was too young and imperceptive to even consider during my father's illness.

Now, after the fact, my writing almost inevitably revolves around my father's life and death; the impulse to write about issues connected to my dad drives most of my intellectual and emotional endeavors, if only subliminally. Indeed, the death of my father stands – thus far – as the “axle of my life.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, as I reflected on my reasons for focusing on immortality and mortality in Shakespeare's sonnets, I could not ignore the fact that I had unintentionally selected and formulated my topic as part of my ongoing efforts to cope, grieve, and process the loss of my father. In exploring the ways that death and life interact in Shakespeare's sonnets, I have an added personal motivation to relate the findings to my own experiences. As I write this thesis, I take the advice given by Francie's teacher in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*: “In the future, when something comes up, you *tell* exactly how it happened but *write down for yourself the way you think it should have happened*. Tell the truth and *write* the story.”<sup>3</sup> I confess to you, my reader, the truth of my failure to adequately preserve my father as he truly was, but I also write now the story of how I might have been able to do so properly... if Shakespeare's attempts prove to be a successful model.

Even as I confront my personal investments in immortality and mortality by addressing them herein, however, these concepts stand as universal issues, touching each mortal in some

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2 Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain* (New York: Grove Press, 1997), 71.

3 Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 199.

way. Perhaps not all of my readers will know the pain of losing a parent to cancer as I do, but most everyone has (or will have) an intimate encounter with death as it strikes a loved one. Consequently, the concerns I have picked for in-depth consideration will prove to be pertinent to any reader. The wide-reaching nature of these matters, therefore, is not just made manifest in my personal reasons for selecting them for study but also in Shakespeare's insights into the troubling dichotomy of life and death as demonstrated throughout his 154 sonnets.

These thematic concerns of mortality and immortality transcend the persistent opacity caused by the ambiguity of address in Shakespeare's sonnets and the obscurity of their publishing history. The mysteries surrounding the first printing prevent simple, reliable conjectures about either narrative or characters in the sonnets. Summarizing scholars' uncertainties about Shakespeare's sonnets, Colin Burrow writes,

[I]t is impossible to be entirely sure that Shakespeare wished them to appear in exactly the form in which they were printed and at exactly that time, and whether he saw them as the culmination of his career as a poet. . . . We do not know certainly when they were written, whether or to what extent they might spring from actual relationships which Shakespeare may have had, or whether Shakespeare wished them to be printed and dedicated to the mysterious Mr W.H. (CB p. 91)<sup>4</sup>

In centuries of critical responses to these sonnets, however, a well-worn configuration has been established: the poet-speaker writes these poems about the beloved young man (Sonnets 1-126) and the dark lady (Sonnets 127-154). Some scholars resist such constructions on the basis that

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<sup>4</sup> Where "p." is used, it indicates the page number from CB for either Burrow's introduction or his notes.

they limit interpretive possibilities.<sup>5</sup> Yet the said structure remains useful because it provides specific reference points and terminology so that overarching issues in the sonnets might be discussed on common ground.

In keeping with most scholars who have written on Shakespeare's sonnets, I employ the aforementioned arrangement for the sake of clarity, while always keeping in mind the tenuousness of the assumptions it entails. For instance, throughout most of my thesis, I refer to the ways in which the speaker-poet concerns himself with immortalizing the beloved young man. My main purpose is to emphasize the relationship between two people and how one of them deals with that relationship. Therefore, if a reader opposes the assumptions I make regarding characters and direction of address, he or she might still understand my point about what Shakespeare says in relation to anxieties surrounding death and the brevity of life. With the mysteries surrounding coherence, order, and address in the sonnets, disagreements will always be possible. Some might argue that certain sonnets appearing early in the sequence actually address a woman or that the sonnets were never intended to be read as a cohesive group at all. By focusing on issues that pervade a great number of the sonnets, though, I offer an implicit argument for the appropriateness of regarding Shakespeare's sonnets as a group and – in doing so – set my area of concern beyond the limitations of irresolvable debates.

Although I must acknowledge that vast regions of critical interest in Shakespeare's sonnets – such as whether or not the individuals in them correspond to people who really lived – are rendered impassable by the sonnets' complicated and ambiguous publishing history, I avoid such zones by focusing on thematic and formulaic matters. These foci distinguish Shakespeare's

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<sup>5</sup> For one extensive argument against narrative and character structures, see the following: Heather Dubrow, "Incertainties Now Crown Themselves Assur'd': The Politics of Plotting Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, ed. James Schiffer (New York: Garland Pub., 1999), 113-133.

sonnets without relying too heavily on any concocted narrative or set of characters, which have weighed down and weakened cases set forth by certain other critics.<sup>6</sup> I agree with John Roe, who writes of moments within sonnet sequences: “It is the emotion of the thing that matters and not its contiguous causes.”<sup>7</sup> The speaker’s explicit vocalization of his anxiety regarding the fact of mortality makes that an issue worth pursuing – as well as its counterpart, attempts toward immortality. Shakespeare’s treatment of these thematic concerns of death and life remains the crux of my thesis. Form also figures prominently in my argument, especially where a sonnet’s line length and stanza structure contribute to the message offered by the content of the poem. Form and content reveal one man’s take on the possibility of immortality and the nature of human mortality.

By tracing the speaker’s ideas about immortalization and the pursuant successes and/or failures, I hope to uncover for my readers what Shakespeare’s sonnets conclude about such efforts. If Shakespeare’s representation resonates with us, then it might be helpful as we – modern readers of these poems – continue our own grappling with the concepts of life and death. Even if Shakespeare’s preservation techniques prove futile, the humane and loving impulse that inspires them makes the undertaking honorable.

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<sup>6</sup> Again, I use the most common arrangement and the associated terms of naming in my thesis only for convenience and clarity.

<sup>7</sup> John Roe, “Rhetoric, Style, and Poetic Form,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Patrick Cheney (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49.

Chapter I: Form

We are time's subjects, and time bids be gone.

- 2 *Henry IV*, I.iii.109-110<sup>8</sup>

Like human lives, sonnets too have proscribed ends, which become particularly significant when the poems focus so intently on life, death, and agency. That parallel would not have been lost on Shakespeare. With 151 of these poems adhering to the norm of fourteen lines of pentameter verse, Shakespeare rigorously establishes the standard for his sonnets.

Following the set form, Sonnet 64 provides an example of how Shakespeare encapsulates unease about mortality and immortality into his standard sonnet form itself:

When I have seen by Time's fell hand defaced  
 The rich proud cost of outworn buried age,  
 When sometime lofty towers I see down razed  
 And brass eternal slave to mortal rage;  
 When I have seen the hungry ocean gain  
 Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,  
 And the firm soil win of the wat'ry main,  
 Increasing store with loss, and loss with store;  
 When I have seen such interchange of state,  
 Or state itself confounded to decay,  
 Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare,

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 935.

That Time will come and take my love away.

This thought is as a death, which cannot choose

But weep to have that which it fears to lose. (CB 64)

Generally, the poem dwells on the fact that everything will be lost to Time, including the beloved. More than in most of his sonnets, Shakespeare draws attention to the regularity and structure of this one by beginning each quatrain with “When” (CB 64.1, 5, 9). That pattern, when conjoined with the content pertaining to the inevitability of ruin and loss, reinforces the sense that one cannot evade Time’s effects. Just as the speaker thinks that “Time will come and take [his] love away,” so the sonnet form ends the course of the poem precisely as formulaic expectations dictate (CB 64.12). Interestingly, in a poem that documents entities that are or will be lost to the world, the final word enacts that process; by closing this sonnet with “lose,” Shakespeare emphasizes that the train of thought in this piece is lost and ended due to the constraints of duration – Time measured by line length and number (CB 64.14). Here, limiting the range of the words to the established sonnet form significantly reiterates the ideas of the limited lifespan that they elucidate.

Following the reiteration of Time’s overwhelming power through both theme and structure in Sonnet 64, the next sonnet (as published in 1609) questions the possibility of escaping Time in the face of the destructibility of objects in the material world yet posits poetry as one potential avenue of escape. The acknowledgement of the “mortality” of “brass, . . . stone, . . . earth, . . . sea” raises troubling questions for a man concerned with preserving his beloved from utter death (CB 65.1-8). How can sweetness and beauty survive when the strongest physical entities cannot? The speaker posits that the young man might find protection if he is concealed from Time; the poet asks, “where, alack, / Shall Time’s best jewel from Time’s chest lie hid?”

Since physical barriers between Time and the beloved offer no hope for immortality, any plausible answer to this question must stand as an alternative to tangible memorials. Elsewhere, in a gesture marked by particular confidence, Shakespeare writes of the lasting capabilities of poetry in relation to such traditional structures, stating:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
 Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme,  
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
 Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time. (CB 55.1-4)

Returning to the imagery of the beloved's ability to "shine bright" (CB 55.3), the speaker answers the questions of Sonnet 65 with less certainty. "That in black ink [his] love may still shine bright" becomes the only "miracle" by which the young man might hide from Time (CB 65.13-14). Although the poet lacks confidence in the efficacy of preservation through poetry at this point, he brings together the concepts of a hiding place beyond the reach of Time and the possibility that what is written might endure time without diminishing. Through this conflation of a haven and verse, poetry emerges as a sort of intangible protective structure; the ideas – and individuals – presented in verse might find shelter in the very form. The rigidity of the sonnet form establishes distinct bounds within which Time's effect on the young man differs from that without, from how Time affects mortals in the physical realm.

What, then, when the poet tampers with the anticipated form? If the sonnet form marks off boundaries that change how Time can interact with the beloved, then aberrations of form might indicate sites of conflict between the poet's preservation efforts and mortality. Even as the iambic rhythm adds a certain vivacity since it has the same pulse as a heartbeat, the line length and the number of lines contribute to a sense of duration or lifespan. Only three of Shakespeare's

sonnets break from the formula of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter: Sonnets 99, 126, and 145. If we assume that the sonnets were all purposefully crafted, close readings of these atypical poems reveal how Shakespeare stretches or contracts his poems to support his discourse on mortality and immortality.

*Sonnet 99: Flowers Lengthening to Fifteen Lines*

Sonnet 99, with its fifteen lines, attempts to push beyond the constraints of the form. Hypothetically, that pressure against restrictions might correlate to efforts to extend the life of the beloved.

The forward violet thus did I chide:

‘Sweet thief, whence didst thou steal thy sweet that smells,

If not from my love’s breath? The purple pride,

Which on thy soft cheek for complexion dwells,

In my love’s veins thou hast too grossly dyed.’

The lily I condemnèd for thy hand,

And buds of marjoram had stol’n thy hair.

The roses fearfully on thorns did stand,

One blushing shame, another white despair,

A third nor red, nor white, had stol’n of both,

And to his robb’ry had annexed thy breath;

But for his theft, in pride of all his growth,

A vengeful canker eat him up to death.

More flowers I noted, yet I none could see

But sweet or colour it had stol’n from thee. (CB 99)

Throughout this sonnet, the poet draws parallels between flowers and the young man that contradict the function of flowers in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. Since *Venus and Adonis* appeared in print before these sonnets, the precedent had been set that a mortal man might be made immortal by metamorphosing into a flower; such is Adonis's fate in Shakespeare's version of that myth (VA 1165-1170).<sup>9</sup> While the idea that a life might be perpetuated in the guise of flora offers possibilities, the speaker in Sonnet 99 actually resents the violet and its companions. He accuses the flowers of stealing traits from his beloved (CB 99.2, 7, 10-12, 15). Instead of immortalizing the young man, the flowers seem to have acquired his characteristics to his detriment. Beyond repeated charges of robbery, for instance, the speaker indicates that the violet first takes its "sweet that smells" *from* his "love's breath," and then the pink rose "annexed" the beloved's breath *itself* (CB 99.2, 11). The escalation from stealing a part to stealing the whole implies that the thieves' victim loses some aspect of himself with each flower listed. Yet, starting in line 6, this sonnet is addressed to the beloved who apparently still lives. So, not all has been lost.

With the young man alive and the model of Adonis immortalized as a flower in death, Sonnet 99's added line can be read as analogous to the added time the poet would like to append to his beloved's life. As Stephen Booth notes, not one of the lines in this sonnet seems extraneous to the whole:

Formally, Shakespeare's extra line is number 5, but it is syntactically indispensable; substantively, line 1 is introductory and thus distinct in function

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<sup>9</sup> Where "VA" appears before line numbers, I am citing the version of *Venus and Adonis* from CB.

from 2-5, but, since it identifies the object of the following four lines, it cannot be considered extra either.<sup>10</sup>

Adding to Booth's commentary, G. Blakemore Evans argues that he can explain this formal and syntactic entanglement most convincingly as a simple lack of revision by Shakespeare, though he also mentions the possibility of direct intentionality.<sup>11</sup> The evidence that Blakemore Evans provides for the former explanation does not adequately support his claim that it is more likely. For instance, in describing the second line as "weakly plodding and tautological," he fails to take into account the duality of meanings offered by "Sweet," which he notes later (BE 195). The twofold use of that word, which Blakemore Evans dubs a tautology, can just as easily be read as a concerted conflation of charm and fragrance. In accordance with the alternative explanation – that Shakespeare intended this poem to last fifteen lines – every line has significance.

By extension, the poet's efforts to prolong the life of the young man through lengthening the poem stand as attempts to add something useful and worthwhile. Nonetheless, a reader might question whether all the different flowers inventoried augment the speaker's cause or just create excess. Indeed, although both lines 6 and 7 help complete the rhyme scheme and indict more types of flowers, the poem requires neither one syntactically. Furthermore, their relation to each other has stymied certain readers because of the confusion about which line provides the other with a bit of syntax. "The lily I condemnèd for thy hand" might mean either that the lily is condemned because it stole its whiteness from the young man's hand or that the lily is condemned because its whiteness does not compare to the excellent whiteness of the young man's hand (BE 196). While G. Blakemore Evans argues that the lack of clarity supports the

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10 Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Edited with Analytic Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 321. Hereafter cited in the text as "SB."

11 G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Sonnets: Updated Edition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195. Hereafter cited in the text as "BE."

claim that Shakespeare did not refine this sonnet, the fact that Sonnet 99 inverts the conventional trajectory of courtly love compliments in poetry – as I will discuss in a moment – indicates that those two lines might demonstrate simultaneous acknowledgement of, and frustration with, typical routes to praise and memorialization (195). Do the additional examples increase the chances of immortality? If not, why does the speaker take such pains to list them all?

The couplet begins to answer these queries. Shakespeare writes, “More flow’rs I noted, yet I none could see, / But sweet or colour it had stol’n from thee” (CB 99.14-15). Often, comparisons between lovers and flowers compliment the beloved in traditional courtly love poetry by stating that he (or she) has flowerlike qualities. The poet, however, reverses that compliment in Sonnet 99 and tells his beloved that the flowers are improved when they acquire qualities from *him*, the young man. This transformation then more closely parallels that in *Venus and Adonis* where the similarities between the bloom that emerges and the body of Adonis, which it replaces, show transference from Adonis to the flower:

A purple flower sprung up, chequered with white,

Resembling well his pale cheeks, and the blood

Which in round drops upon their whiteness stood. (CB VA.1168-1170)

In the same way, the flowers of Sonnet 99 have taken on aspects of the speaker. Although the likeness between Adonis and this purple and white flower allows some fragment of Adonis to live beyond the physical death incurred by the boar, the process seems to have a different effect in the sonnet. Instead of commenting on the flowers’ potential to immortalize the beloved, the speaker rebukes them. He reveals a critical source of this anger when he talks of the third rose. In spite of all the good that that rose had stolen from the young man, “A vengeful canker eat him up to death” (CB 99.12-13). All the resentment directed toward the flowers takes root in the

knowledge that the flowers themselves might sicken, decay, and die. The susceptibility of flora to destruction also emerges in Sonnet 65, as the speaker asks, “How with this rage [of mortality] shall beauty hold a plea, / Whose action is no stronger than a flower?” (CB 65.3-4) Such mortal vessels have little hope for carrying out the immortalization of a man.

Given the ineffective nature of floral routes to everlasting life, the poem’s length – along with the assertion of the speaker’s agency – implies another way to keep the beloved alive, namely writing. The simple statement, “I noted,” indicates a gesture of writing and memorializing (CB 99.14). Likewise, the length of the poem, extending one line beyond the expected fourteen lines, suggests a purposeful expansion. Although the implication is not concretely established here, if the speaker has the power to bend formal restraints in poetry, he might also have the agency to tweak the limitations of mortality by writing a memorial. Even here, though, the general reference to “[m]ore flowers” reveals the insufficiency of human efforts toward total immortality when pitted against the power of structured ends, whether that end is the final couplet of a sonnet or death itself. While the speaker manages to stretch the space in which he can comment on and memorialize his beloved, he cannot enumerate or describe these “[m]ore flowers” he claims to have noted nor the “sweet or colour” they took from the young man (CB 99.14-15). The logic of Sonnet 99 indicates that writing might preserve a beloved entity to a certain extent, but something will always be lost to time and mortality.

*Sonnet 126: Time Shortens to Twelve*

In opposition to Sonnet 99’s focus on extending life, Sonnet 126 – with its twelve lines in rhymed couplets instead of the usual Shakespearean sonnet rhyme scheme – offers commentary on a life that gets cut short.

O thou my lovely boy, who in thy power

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 minutes 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.

( )

( ) (CB 126)

The form of this sonnet and its placement in the 1609 edition draws the attention of countless critics. Many assume the bipartite, sequential structure of the sonnets as they discuss the significance of this poem, dwelling on how this sonnet might offer a transition from the young man to the dark lady. To avoid the leaps of faith that such an approach requires, I will focus on arguments that take root in Sonnet 126 itself.

Since the italic parentheses and use of couplets stand out so prominently in the 1609 edition and differ so blatantly from the form of Shakespeare's other sonnets, I agree with the many scholars who regard this poem as written in a way that evokes an "abrupt termination" (CB p. 632). Although he does not believe Shakespeare crafted that effect purposely, Booth states: "The poem's sudden *quietus* after twelve lines is—probably accidentally—an illustrative analogy

that demonstrates the justice of the warning the poem offers” (430). He assumes that the final two lines have been lost and that the printer added the curved brackets to indicate that lack (SB 430). Consequently, Booth maintains that whatever response the reader feels is incidental, not intentionally designed. Because the couplets of Sonnet 126 differ so greatly from the rhyme scheme used in the rest of Shakespeare’s sonnets, Booth’s assumption that two lines have been lost seems hasty and unsubstantiated. One can take the couplets as an indication that Shakespeare means to try something different with this poem, freeing it from the expectations to which other sonnets adhere. Since early modern printers notoriously took liberties with their texts, certain editors since 1609 – including Booth himself (108) – omit the parentheses in an effort to restore the poem to what Shakespeare might have written. Rayna Kalas writes of some possible reasons for this editorial decision: “the first is that any short lyric would have qualified as a ‘sonnet’ in the sixteenth century; the second is that the curved brackets are most likely to have been added by a compositor who mistakenly thought the poem was incomplete” (262). While I agree that Sonnet 126 can stand on its own, I find the second conclusion somewhat presumptive. I concur that the parentheses were probably not Shakespeare’s addition, yet I feel the printer might deserve more credit. Indeed, instead of denoting missing lines, the printer may have added brackets in the 1609 edition to demonstrate his own awareness that this poem differs from the others in format. He may even have meant to draw attention specifically to the way the form of Sonnet 126 reinforces the content. Whatever the truth behind the curved brackets, the point remains that this poem – as it has been transmitted to us from the first printing of Shakespeare’s Sonnets – ends in a way that reiterates the fact of mortality and the power of Time.

After Booth makes his claim that Sonnet 126 likely had fourteen lines originally, other critics pick up where he leaves off and supply alternative theories, particularly about the order of

the sonnets. They read the piece as demonstrating formally the relationship between cutting short a poem and cutting short a human life, the life of the beloved. Those who read Shakespeare's sonnets as divided into two parts distinctly addressed to the young man and the dark lady typically assume that this poem brings an end to the section dedicated to the beloved young man. More precisely, scholars such as Dover Wilson and John Kerrigan call Sonnet 126 an "envoy" to the young man sonnets, indicating that it summarizes the preceding 125 poems' themes, including the destructiveness of Time, the fragility of beauty, and the surety of death (as cited in SB 430, BE 226). Other critics reject assumptions about the division; Heather Dubrow, for instance, agrees that the "stanzaic irregularities" and "emphasis on termination" evoke closure, but she resists the conviction that it must be read as a follow-up to Sonnets 1-125 (117). Whether Shakespeare intended this poem to conclude a series of sonnets to the beloved or a group of procreation sonnets or something else entirely, the abnormal brevity of the piece and its discussion of Time's inescapable power emphasize human susceptibility to death.

Critics' inclinations to theorize about the unusual shortness of this poem pervade commentary on it, yet the internal structure of the poem deserves notice as well. Whereas the typical structuring of rhyme, *abab cdcd efef gg*, permits space for the establishment of strong and effective rhetorical moves, the couplets of Sonnet 126 result in more concise and limited movements of thought, which implies limited agency of the poet and his beloved. Compare this poem with the layout of Sonnet 30, for example. Matching the rhyme scheme of almost all the rest of Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet 30 divides both syntactically and structurally into three quatrains and a couplet. Every quatrain contains a full thought. Each begins with a word indicating the rhetorical force of the stanza: "When," "Then," and "Then" (CB 30.1, 5, 9). And each ends with punctuation – whether colon or period – indicative of the completion of an idea

(SB 30.4, 8, 12).<sup>12</sup> Following these twelve lines, the couplet turns Sonnet 30 on its head. At this volta, the word “But” signals the shift away from past sorrows, and the rhyme of the heroic couplet adds a potent punch to these final two lines: “But if the while I think on thee (dear friend) / All losses are restored, and sorrows end” (CB 30.13-14). The quick simplicity of the couplet makes the speaker anticipate relief from the many grievances that plague him through the three quatrains; it emphasizes that the thought of the young man alone can disproportionately remedy hosts of other pains. While the single couplet in Sonnet 30 gives emphasis and strength to the words it contains, the six couplets in Sonnet 126 result in a different effect. Since these couplets do not stand in contrast to quatrains as in the rest of Shakespeare’s sonnets, they risk losing their empowering effects by repetition. Instead of succumbing to lists or reiterations, however, Shakespeare complicates the structure of this poem syntactically. He does not clearly outline the flow of thought. The first word of each couplet does not obviously mark the rhetorical progress of Sonnet 126. Nor does the punctuation at the end of each line fit any clear pattern; in fact, a wide range of punctuation concludes these lines, including everything from colon to comma to exclamation point (SB 126.2, 6, 10). This mixture of punctuation indicates variations in logic that move the poem from one line to the next. Instead of the straightforward rhetorical logic of Sonnet 30, Shakespeare complicates the transitions here, thereby avoiding repetitiveness. Because the couplets of Sonnet 126 break the poem into smaller segments than usual and differ so obviously from the typical four quatrains plus a couplet, the poet builds in complexity to avoid the trap of triteness while still drawing attention to this poem within the context of all 154 sonnets.

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12 Where Stephen Booth’s book is cited accompanied by line numbers, refer to the copy of the 1609 Quarto text in *Shakespeare’s Sonnets: Edited with Analytic Commentary*.

As part of the complexity of this poem, the unclear transitions from one thought to the next obscure the poet's logic, leaving the reader with an impression of the senseless inescapability of death. Although the speaker begins the poem with the possessive address, "O thou my lovely boy," the beloved comes into Nature's grasp midway through the poem, and the poet's claim evaporates inexplicably. Similarly, the sonnet starts with a declaration of the beloved's handle on Time's devices; he "[d]ost hold Time's fickle glass, his sickle hour." Yet in the final two couplets, the poet confesses Time's ultimate power over Nature – who tries to preserve the boy, "her treasure." He reveals that the cost of the debt Nature owes Time is "thee," the beloved. By the end of the poem, the seemingly active role of the beloved as he "[d]ost hold" becomes marred by servility. He becomes a mere "minion" to Nature, who moves him according to her fancy. Finally, the young man functions as nothing more than the tender by which Nature makes a payment to Time. Because Shakespeare does not incorporate clear and adequate signposts, the disjunction between the early strength of the young man and the subsequent confession of his fragility, his lack of agency, remains unresolved. Sonnet 126 leaves readers with a sense of the inevitability of mortality without providing any logic behind the conclusion; human weakness in the face of Time's power stands as an undeniable, inescapable truth that does not need substantiation. (All quotes in this paragraph – CB 126.)

Just as the illogic of this poem complicates its flow, the tangled syntax of Sonnet 126 muddles referents. For instance, the phrase, "Who hast by waning grown," seems at first to refer to the nearest preceding proper noun, which is Time personified (CB 126.2-3). Yet Time functions as neither subject nor object here, only as a possessive adjective of "glass" (CB 126.2). Therefore, upon a second glance, "Who" appears to refer all the way back to the poet's "lovely boy," who was introduced two lines earlier (CB 126.1, 3). To some extent, though, both Time

and the young man grow by waning. Burrow – since he assumes that the referent is only the young man – notes that the speaker tells his beloved that “by growing old you have become more” (p. 632). In the same way, however, Time becomes greater overall by the diminishment of each hour and day; even if the beloved becomes more as years pass, Time’s power over humanity also increases through that same process. If Shakespeare means to indicate – as several critics have suggested – an hourglass when he writes “Time’s fickle glass” (CB 126.2), then the image of sand waning from the upper half and growing in the lower half completes this multivalent interpretation (BE 227, SB 431, CB p. 632, Kalas 262).<sup>13</sup> Because of the complex syntax, ambiguity in pronoun reference builds layers of meaning into Sonnet 126.

Adding to these obfuscations of reference and logic in Sonnet 126, the roles established by the personifications of Time and Nature bend conventions. Although writers often associate the figure of Time with the summoning of Death, here the poet casts Time as the being that enforces mortality instead of Death itself. The weapon of Death and a unit of time converge in Time’s “sickle hour” (CB 126.2). By presenting Time in this way, the speaker suggests that the temporal limits to life engage his concerns more than the state of death does.<sup>14</sup> As for Nature, she represents more than just the origin of humans. Throughout his description of her actions, intentions, and motives, the poet maintains ambivalence. Burrow notes this instance of ambiguity: “As *sovereign mistress over wrack* Nature can prevent the ageing process; but the same phrase admits the pessimistic interpretation ‘sole monarch over what is no more than ruins’” (CB p. 632). Similarly, the verb “pluck” carries dual meanings; though the movement of this word indicates an effort to wrench the beloved from Time’s influence, the connotation of

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13 Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Croatia: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 366. Hereafter cited in the text.

14 For more on the poet’s anxieties regarding Time, see the subsection titled “Against Time: Language Opposing Tyranny” in Chapter II of this thesis.

“pluck” implies a more destructive uprooting (CB 126.6). Enamored of her own creation, Nature becomes aggressively dictatorial over the young man, subjugating him as the “minion of her pleasure” (CB 126.9). The poet warns that his beloved ought to “fear her” even though she tries to preserve him (CB 126.9); that fear takes root either in her implied violence or in her inability to defeat Time – or both. Since Time and Nature possess such strong agency, the beloved functions as little more than an object, and the speaker does little more in Sonnet 126 than remind the young man of his mortal condition.

Ultimately, that sense of termination that critics have noted overpowers the temporary agency the speaker tries to bestow upon his beloved at the beginning of Sonnet 126. This poem reverses the tentative hope that emerges in Sonnet 99; instead of positing the possibility of immortalization through writing, the speaker succumbs here to the futility of resisting Time. After the poet admits that “[Nature’s] *quietus*<sup>15</sup> is to render [the beloved],” he falls *quiet* before the proscribed end of the sonnet, unable to settle Nature’s debt to Time in any other way (CB 126.12, emphasis added). Even though the speaker strives throughout Shakespeare’s sonnets to stave off death, he cannot constantly maintain optimism on the topic.

*Sonnet 145: Constrictions of Tetrameter*

Since Sonnet 145 varies in line length instead of number of lines, it speaks to the themes of mortality and immortality differently than Sonnets 99 and 126. The imposition of restraints on a smaller level constrains the poet to “restricted possibilities.”<sup>16</sup>

Those lips that love’s own hand did make  
Breathed forth the sound that said ‘I hate’

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15 Burrow defines “quietus”: “*Quietus* is the technical term to mark the settling of a debt, at the time of an *audit*” (p. 633).

16 From a conversation with Linda Gregerson, 28 September 2009.

To me that languished for her sake;  
 But when she saw my woeful state,  
 Straight in her heart did mercy come,  
 Chiding that tongue, that ever sweet  
 Was used in giving gentle doom,  
 And taught it thus anew to greet:  
 'I hate' she altered with an end  
 That followed it as gentle day  
 Doth follow night, who, like a fiend,  
 From heaven to hell is flown away.

'I hate' from hate away she threw

And saved my life, saying 'not you.' (CB 145)

A poem typically understood by critics as one of the so-called “dark lady sonnets,” Sonnet 145 narrates an exchange between the poet and a woman and deals with the speaker’s own life expectancy instead of his beloved’s. Of all Shakespeare’s sonnets, this one has gained notoriety for its apparent pun on the surname of Shakespeare’s wife, Anne Hathaway, in the words “hate away” (CB 145.13). Indeed, editors of these sonnets often give more space in their notes to Hathaway than to the unusual meter; many editors draw attention to the peculiarity of the tetrameter without offering significant explanations for it (BE 247, SB 500-501, Duncan-Jones 406). Relaying a suggestion made by Andrew Gurr, Burrow notes, “The octosyllabic form of this poem combined with the surface simplicity of its wordplay has led many to believe that it is early work” (CB p. 670). Too often, scholars have dismissed this poem with extraordinary distaste for its simplicity. Even if Shakespeare wrote Sonnet 145 early in his literary career, the

sonnet still merits serious consideration because it might indicate how particular concepts developed through the course of Shakespeare's writing.

When read with a more generous eye, the tetrameter of Sonnet 145 emphasizes dialectical relationships, including that between the absolutes of life and death. The four stresses in each line create a space in which comparisons of opposites can be made. The content of the poem pairs various entities: love and hate, day and night, heaven and hell, life and death. This pattern echoes in the form as the evenness of the lines readily permits the possibility of dichotomy. Since Shakespeare emphasizes the nature of polarities, readers ought to consider whether and how opposite extremes balance in this poem. For instance, although day replaces night in the metaphor of the third quatrain, the poet allots two lines of description to night whereas day only gets one:

[...] as gentle day

Doth follow night, who, like a fiend,

From heaven to hell is flown away. (CB 145.10-12)

The weight of night here imitates the despondency the speaker seems to feel when he hears the woman say, "I hate" (CB 145.2-4). Likewise, the fact that the poet dwells on the nature of night even after he mentions the arrival of day implies lingering effects of the dark; even though the woman may have altered her statement to relieve the man's grief, he still feels enduring, if muted, pain. With the opposition between hate and love, Shakespeare captures the tension between the realization of love and the delayed offering of that love. The speaker begins telling of the woman's relenting as early as line 4, saying, "But when she saw my woeful state, / Straight in her heart did mercy come" (CB 145.4-5). Yet the vehicle by which she enacts that "mercy" does not appear until the final line, when the poet relates the soothing addendum that

makes the woman's complete sentence, "I hate... not you" (CB 145.13-14). In fact, the speaker repeats the hurtful phrase, "I hate," three times before he comes to "not you" (CB 145.2, 9, 13; 145.14). Through the arrangement of his words, the poet discloses his bruised emotions in spite of his relief at the turn the woman takes mid-sentence.

Although the speaker might seem melodramatic when he says that the reversal "save[s] [his] life," the implication of the threat of death links to the themes of mortality and preservation of life that Shakespeare pursues with more finesse in other sonnets (CB 145.14). For the poet, the woman's hatred is compared to night and hell (CB 145.11, 12). Furthermore, while he doesn't name death directly, his profession that she rescues his life implies that she rescues him *from death*. Presumably, Shakespeare does not intend his reader to conclude that the speaker would actually die if the woman hates him. Yet the primal fear inherent in thoughts of disregard and mortality certainly connect in powerful ways. Indeed, in Sonnet 139 the speaker struggles with the thought that the addressee might "lov'st elsewhere"; he begs, "since I am near slain, / Kill me outright with looks, and rid my pain" (CB 139.5, 13-14). While the speaker prefers death to ongoing torment in Sonnet 139, he considers himself saved from both in Sonnet 145.

Through the speaker's final expression of relief in this poem, Shakespeare articulates a different sort of preservation of life that relies on "mercy" and the withholding of destructive words (CB 145.5). The female in Sonnet 145 has complete control over the fate of the poet; he would be ruined if she says she hates him, and he is saved when she instead says, "not you" (CB 145.14). Compare this woman's power to that which the speaker has over the preservation of the young man. Instead of the speaker's active search for ways to immortalize his beloved, the dark lady's last-second evasion of inflicting pain determines the course of the poem. Both the poet and the dark lady make motions to preserve another, but they do so from significantly different

positions. Whereas the poet works to forestall the destructive external forces of Time and Death, the woman of Sonnet 145 simply foregoes causing the speaker to suffer from her own potentially malicious words. If Shakespeare did write Sonnet 145 earlier than most of his other poems, then his sonnets demonstrate a shift of interest from a woman's individual self-control for the sake of mercy to a man's grappling with mighty, destructive forces for the sake of love. Indeed even the move from tetrameter to pentameter would indicate a transition that opens the poems to consider possibilities beyond the ordinarily unequivocal options of life or death. In the tetrameter of Sonnet 145 the poet remains limited to either living or dying, while he can contemplate alternatives to the typical absolutes of human mortality in the pentameter of his other sonnets.

## Chapter II: Theme

Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time.

- Sonnet 16 (CB 16.2)

As I have demonstrated through an exploration of Shakespeare's manipulation of the sonnet form and how that effort struggles with the temporal constrictions on a man's life, the themes of mortality and immortality figure prominently in these poems. To readers of these sonnets, the import of preservation to the speaker will be self-evident. The paths to immortality that the poet proposes in the content of the poems – via progeny and writing – stand out even without critics drawing attention to them. Indeed, the most direct discussion of these themes I found took place not in a work intended specifically for the community of scholars studying Shakespeare's sonnets but in a lecture series loosely focused on the concept of immortality.<sup>17</sup> George Herbert Palmer's discussion of this theme supplies curious readers with a worthwhile overview, but he does not delve into the particulars. For our interest, the particulars matter. While Shakespeare's suggestions on how to preserve a life bear their own great significance, the speaker's ambivalence and insecurity regarding those methods reveal more about the personal neuroses of the poet. Therefore, instead of simply providing a summary of Shakespeare's comments on death and time, I address *how* the speaker discusses these issues. In sites of the poet's apparent self-contradiction and confusion, I flesh out the underlying anxieties and hopes; in sites of unusual use of language – particularly when the poet refers to religion or Time – I consider the belief system that might drive such choices of words.

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<sup>1</sup> George Herbert Palmer, "Intimations of Immortality in the Sonnets of Shakspeare," Ingersoll Lectures on Immortality (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912). Hereafter cited in the text.

Fearing the utter loss of his beloved young man, the poet of Shakespeare's sonnets struggles against the overwhelmingly destructive forces of Time and Death. Since he must contend with such mighty powers, the speaker does not invest all his rhetorical energy and active efforts in just one method of handling the themes of mortality and immortality. Instead, he posits various ways of immortalizing his beloved. Not all of these ideas remain accessible throughout Shakespeare's sonnets; some are dismissed after further consideration, even as others are reasserted. Interestingly, the poet does not readily employ religion to ease his mortality panic. Where religious references arise in Shakespeare's sonnets, the poet usually uses them to speak about ongoing, earthly lives instead of about an afterlife. Sonnet 146 stands as the exception to the rule, and I will address its anomalous religiosity later in this chapter. Most prominently, the speaker pursues progeny and poetry as the most viable routes to immortalizing his beloved – neither of which escapes complication in the sonnets. The perspective of the poet as he considers modes of preservation in the face of Time constantly shifts. In spite of moments of disappointment and doubt, he persists because the fear of losing his beloved compels him.

*Procreation Sonnets: Promoting Perpetuation Through Progeny*

Several of the poems at the beginning of the 1609 printing of Shakespeare's sonnets urge the young man to marry and have children. The reasons given for this advice vary. In Sonnet 1, for instance, the speaker calls the beloved to beget so he might satisfy the "world's due" (CB 1.14). Instead of admitting his own individual interest in seeing that "beauty's rose might never die," the poet says that a general "we" wants the young man to perpetuate his line (CB 1.2, 1). Yet the speaker offers himself as particular motivation in Sonnet 10, where he concludes, "Make thee another self *for love of me* / That beauty still may live in thine or thee" (CB 10.13-14 –

emphasis added). This self-reference juxtaposes the poet's acknowledgement that the young man "art beloved of many," with his own statement that the young man "none lov'st" (CB 10.3-4).

In addition to offering both public and private motivations for producing progeny, the poet phrases his argument through several categories of language and reasoning as if trying to find terminology the young man will comprehend. He employs financial language, accusing the beloved of improperly handling his ability to generate, "Profitless usurer, why dost thou use / So great a sum of sums yet canst not live?" (CB 4.7-8). He then emphasizes the worth of marriage through a musical parallel:

If the true concord of well-tunèd sounds  
 By unions married to offend thine ear,  
 They do but sweetly chide thee, who confounds  
 In singleness the parts that thou shouldst bear. (CB 8.5-8)

Even in the midst of this argument for matrimony, the speaker reiterates the call to have children; the multiple possible readings of "parts that thou shouldst bear" bring together musical harmonies, expected familial roles, and characteristics that ought to be passed on to offspring (CB p. 396, SB 146). In case these exhortations prove ineffective, the poet even plays into the young man's narcissistic tendencies in Sonnet 13. Throughout this poem, the speaker repeats various forms of the word "you." Shakespeare packs seventeen of these into only ten of the lines, leaving the entirety of the third quatrain free of "you" (CB 13.9-12). The noticeable absence of the word "you" in the third quatrain merits further consideration. The effect of the omission is two-fold: the speaker avoids directly implicating the beloved in letting his "house fall to decay," yet the preceding reiterations of "you" imply that very accusation as they remain ringing in the ears of the audience (CB 13.9). Throughout the procreation sonnets, the speaker juggles his

desire not to offend the young man and the task of forcefully prodding the young man into action.

While the speaker's emphasis on progeny seems to be a viable way of extending the beloved into the future, other sonnets of Shakespeare reveal complications. In the procreation sonnets, the poet glosses over the key requirement to having children, namely heterosexual intercourse. Sonnet 41 exemplifies the sense of betrayal and anxiety the speaker feels when he contemplates his beloved wooed by a woman. Not seeing past the violations wrought upon him, the poet talks bitterly of "wrongs" and broken vows (CB 41.1, 12); the act of the young man and his seductress gains no merit in this sonnet as a way of producing offspring. The poet finds himself torn between wanting his beloved to have children and hating that his own relationship with the young man cannot generate progeny. Indeed, the speaker gives a fairly direct lament in Sonnet 20 for his position as dictated by normative sexual and gender relations, which are composed of heterosexual procreative interactions. The poet imagines that his beloved is male because Nature made him so to indulge her own fancies:

... Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,  
 And by addition me of thee defeated,  
 By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.

But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure,

Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure. (CB 20.10-14)

With the euphemism of "thing" and pun on "prick," which both referred to the "penis" in Shakespeare's time, these lines openly address the incompatibility and compatibility of genitalia based on genders. The beloved's maleness does "nothing" to serve the poet's "purpose," his sexual agenda (CB 20.12); it instead serves "women's pleasure" and is their "treasure" and

delight (CB 20.13-14). Burrow notes that women “win the ability to multiply [the young man’s] image (alluding to the association between sexual reproduction and usury already explored in the sequence)” (p. 421). The prospect of offspring then becomes tainted by the speaker’s frustration with the inherently unproductive, agenerational nature of male-male relations. The speaker’s wish for his beloved to be immortalized via progeny wanes when he considers the fact that progeny cannot come from his own erotic love for the young man.

*Publication, Writing, Poetry: The Poet’s Agency*

Instead of lingering on the possibility of preserving the beloved’s essence in children, the speaker regains control by presenting another potential method of immortalizing the young man wherein he will maintain agency. That tactic is writing. Even in certain procreation sonnets, Shakespeare links the concepts of progeny and publication. For instance, in the final couplet of Sonnet 11, he writes, “[Nature] carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die” (CB 11.13-14). Here, the idea set forth by the poet still focuses on having children, but the poet phrases it in terms of reproducing a text. The analogy emphasizes the likeness between children and parents by comparing them to facsimiles, but the ability of children to carry on their parents’ traits seems to indicate only a partial immortalization. Even though this metaphor obliquely suggests that only an image and not the original can be preserved through progeny, it offers a site for the poet to begin thinking in the terms of his own profession. Similarly, as critics indicate, the last line of Sonnet 15 might contain a pun on “engraft” and “graphein,” the Greek word for “to write” (CB 15.14, p. 411; SB 158). If Shakespeare intended this cross-lingual play on words, then the speaker asserts his ability to preserve the beloved as he states, “I engraft you new” (CB 15.14). Since this poem is situated near the hub of the procreation sonnets in the 1609 printing and since it dwells on the fragility of beauty, the turn to

the speaker's own literary agency instead of progeny indicates a critical shift in his strategy against the mortality of the young man.

Yet as significant as the move to preservation through writing may be, Shakespeare refuses to allow a surefire remedy for mortality; specifically, Sonnet 17 questions the lasting effectiveness of poetry as a refuge against Time and even reinstates progeny as a bolstering force.

Who will believe my verse in time to come  
 If it were filled with your most high deserts?  
 Though yet, heaven knows, it is but as a tomb  
 Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts.  
 If I could write the beauty of your eyes,  
 And in fresh numbers number all your graces,  
 The age to come would say 'This poet lies:  
 Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces.'  
 So should my papers (yellowed with their age)  
 Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,  
 And your true rights be termed a poet's rage,  
 And stretchèd metre of an antique song.

But were some child of yours alive that time,

You should live twice, in it, and in my rhyme. (CB 17)

In this sonnet, the speaker struggles with the nature of writing and how effective poetry might be for the preservation of a man's essence. He acknowledges that his words lack the vitality of the young man and can only present a partial image of him (CB 17.3-4). Even when he considers

theoretically what would be if he did have the capability of properly documenting his beloved's traits, he glumly realizes that future generations would never believe that such a man once lived (CB 17.5-12). In these lines, the poet answers the question he sets forth at the beginning of the sonnet: "Who will believe my verse in time to come / If it were filled with your most high deserts?" (CB 17.1-2). The answer, he finds, is no one. Yet instead of perpetuating this despair in the final couplet, the speaker turns once again toward progeny – this time as a bolstering force; the beloved might survive if he is preserved in *both* offspring and poetry.

As optimistic as the last two lines are, the logic contained in them does not quite work as the speaker assumes it does. The three preceding quatrains boldly state the powerlessness of words to keep the young man alive in any accurate or believable sense. The transition away from that hopelessness defies logic. The poet seems to posit that the presence of a "child of [the young man's]" in the world would not only stand as a manifestation of the beloved but also somehow make poetry a viable method for immortalization. While readers might seek the speaker's argument for the former claim in other sonnets by Shakespeare, the latter claim remains unsubstantiated. Perhaps the poet means that the truth of his written words would be made evident by the representative figure of the child, but he does not explicitly state this as his reasoning. If this line of thinking does underlie the volta, then does the offspring's ability to reinforce the truths of the poet's writing offer sufficient recompense for his anxiety and jealousy regarding the heterosexual intercourse required for procreation, which he raises elsewhere (as in Sonnet 20 and Sonnet 41, discussed above)?

Even though such questions about the unvoiced logic at the end of Sonnet 17 cannot be sufficiently answered, an earlier assumption made by the speaker in that poem matters deeply, though it receives little critical attention. From the beginning of the sonnet, the poet assumes that

his works will survive into “time to come” (CB 17.1). As he catalogs the potential failures of his verse, the possibility of destruction or even obscurity does not factor into his concerns. Granted, when he describes his “papers (yellowed with their age),” the speaker draws attention to the fragility of the medium on which he writes (CB 17.9). However, in this sonnet, the destructibility of paper does not hinder the transmission of the poet’s rhyme to the “age to come” (CB 17.7). The unswerving assurance that poetry will last through the years implicitly speaks to the prolonging effects of publishing and the authorial expectation of future printings.

While the phrasing of the concluding idea in Sonnet 17 confounds reason, the speaker’s reworking of a similar idea in Sonnet 18 begins to reprioritize, so that poetry takes precedence over offspring. The poet writes:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st;  
Nor shall Death brag thou wand’rest in his shade,  
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (CB 18.9-14)

The word “ow’st” recalls the financial language used for progeny in some of the procreation sonnets, suggesting that children might factor as the preserving force here too. However, the ambiguity of “eternal lines” opens the poem to interpretations in support of either bloodlines or written lines (CB 18.12). Only in the couplet do Booth and Burrow locate concrete evidence that the poet actually puts his faith in immortalizing verse here; they identify the referent of the pronoun “this” in “So long lives *this*, and *this* gives life to thee,” as the sonnet itself (CB 18.14, p. 416; SB 161). The shift in emphasis from progeny to poetry allows the speaker to garner

agency in his own realm instead of assigning it to the realm of procreation – in which he cannot partake with the young man.

In several of Shakespeare's other sonnets, the speaker's hope and reliance on verse for the sake of the young man return. Writing, after all, remains the one direct action that the poet can take to try to protect his beloved from the destructive forces of time and death. Indeed, the sonnets themselves figure as the products of the speaker – whether or not the reader chooses to identify that character with William Shakespeare. In the efforts toward immortalizing the young man, the sonnets represent simultaneously the argument and the evidence, the theory and the enacting. To some extent, then, these poems can be judged in the very terms of what they propose.

*Resistance to Religiosity: Christian Concepts in the Sonnets*

Throughout the majority of his sonnets, Shakespeare resists falling back on religious conceptions of immortality. In his lecture on the topic, Palmer claims that “Spiritual Immortality” stands as a third route, in addition to progeny and poetry, but how closely he connects spirituality with religion remains unclear in his lecture (20). Regardless, a consideration of spirituality and religion in Shakespeare's sonnets reveals a conspicuous resistance to religious methods of easing mortality anxieties. Since ideas about a spiritual afterlife would have been readily accessible in the Christian setting of Early Modern England, readers might expect the tenor of Christianity to ring through these poems. Except in Sonnet 146, which seems anomalous for its distinctly Christian message, Shakespeare subverts theological terms, restricting them to metaphors for mortal and sensual entities. Although the speaker uses religious terminology, it is never to establish a surefire spiritual route to immortality.

Where such religious language appears, the speaker often refers to entities in the mortal world. For instance, Sonnet 129 ends as follows: “All this the world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the *heaven* that leads men to this *hell*” (CB 129.13-14 – emphases added).

Following a dozen lines rife with raw sexual anguish, this mention of heaven and hell cannot aspire to spiritual import. Instead, the speaker employs these words as euphemisms – heaven as sexual climax and hell as either the postcoital state of “shame” or the vagina (CB 129.1; CB p. 638). Likewise, the poet speaks of his female devil and male angel in Sonnet 144 in such a way that precludes interpretations that connect these labels with lofty, spiritual concepts from Christian doctrine. The speaker’s concerns about the degeneracy into which the woman might lead the young man stem not from the questions of damnation but from the possibility of infidelity. Any attempts to read this poem as a battle over the spiritual purity of the “man right fair” must be reconsidered at the impetus of the last six lines (CB 144.3). Shakespeare writes:

And whether that my angel be turned fiend  
 Suspect I may, yet not directly tell,  
 But being both from me, both to each friend,  
 I guess one angel in another’s hell.

Yet this shall I ne’er know, but live in doubt,

Till my bad angel fire my good one out. (CB 144.9-14)

In this conclusion to Sonnet 144, Shakespeare again makes use of euphemisms and indirect speech. The speaker considers the potential for an affair between the young man and the dark lady while both are away and states his supposition, “I guess one angel in another’s hell” (CB 144.12). As in Sonnet 129, “hell” functions as slang for the vagina. The physicality of the poet’s suspicions continues into the couplet where he states the one sure way he might discover whether

or not he is right: when his “bad angel fire [his] good one out,” the sexual relationship between the young man and dark lady will be made known by the presence of venereal disease (CB 144.13-14). Shakespeare does not merely use religious figures and ideas in secular ways; he associates what would be eternal in other contexts to speak of intensely sensual, mortal concerns.

While the Christian vocabulary for what is hellish and demonic marks the speaker’s poems about the dark lady, certain sonnets about the young man reframe Christian doctrine with the beloved at the center. In Sonnet 31, the poet pulls away from traditional mourning for deceased friends and turns instead to the young man for consolation. He explicates the realization that prompts this shift:

How many a holy and obsequious tear  
Hath dear religious love stol’n from mine eye,  
As interest of the dead, which now appear  
But things removed that hidden in there [in your bosom] lie? (CB 31.5-8)

In these lines, the speaker does not make a severe judgment about the worth of the “holy and obsequious tear[s]” he shed or the “religious love” that called for such weeping. Only the verb “stol’n” intimates negative feelings toward religion due to what the speaker has given up through lamentation. Still, when the speaker recognizes that he has not actually lost anything, that all exists within his beloved, he forsakes crying and dedicates himself to the young man. This commitment reaches its apex in Sonnet 105. Although the poet claims innocence, he commits the very sin he disclaims, saying,

Let not my love be called idolatry,  
Nor my beloved as an idol show,  
Since all alike my songs and praises be

To one, of one, still such, and ever so. (CB 105.1-4)

As Burrow notes, “The conceit underlying the sonnet is that the poet has one god only, the friend, who embodies a Trinitarian unity of *Three themes in one*.... This aspiration [to describe the friend] is necessarily idolatrous, however, since its object is not God but the friend” (CB p. 590). In this poem, the speaker recasts religion so that the young man supplants the conventional trinity as god. However, the poet fails to capitalize on this apotheosis; he does not use the elevation of the young man to this state of divinity to assert immortality.

Whereas Shakespeare disjoins religious concepts from their eternal aspects in most of his sonnets, he maintains the religiously inflected tension between the body and the soul in Sonnet 146.

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,  
 Spoiled by these rebel powers that thee array,  
 Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,  
 Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?  
 Why so large cost, having so short a lease,  
 Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?  
 Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,  
 Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?  
 Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,  
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;  
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;  
 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. (CB 146)

Here, the speaker does not speak directly of either his beloved or the dark lady. The only reference he gives to orient the reader appears in the first line when he writes, “the centre of *my* sinful earth” (CB 146.1 – emphasis added). Indeed, the pronominal adjective functions as a mere misdirect. Since the poet seems capable of imagining the core of his life being occupied by the soul of his beloved, the speaker might not refer to his own soul; the possessive does not actually identify to whom the soul belongs. It only signifies location, emphasizing the relevance of the welfare of this soul to the poet. By and large, the sonnet remains abstract. Although the speaker does not specifically state that his beloved's existence is at stake here, he addresses the paramount issues of mortality and immortality – typically linked to the young man – through generalized terms.

If the soul in question throughout Sonnet 146 potentially belongs to the young man, this poem might offer him the religious immortality that the speaker generally does not turn to. Traditionally, readers have understood this piece as “a Christian exhortation to reject transient pleasures and gain eternal life” (SB 516). When read with the rest of the sonnets, however, this message seems anomalous except for its interest in the struggle between life and death. Accepting the conventional reading of this sonnet for the sake of argument, I propose that Sonnet 146 pertains specifically to the poet's anxieties about his beloved's mortality. A question posed by the speaker reiterates time limits in a way that would be fitting for the procreation sonnets: “Why so large cost, having so short a lease, / Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?” (CB 146.5-6) Indeed, Shakespeare uses the imagery of a house in Sonnet 13 to emphasize the value of maintaining a family line. He writes,

Who lets so fair a house fall to decay,

Which husbandry in honour might uphold  
 Against the stormy gusts of winter's day  
 And barren rage of death's eternal cold? (CB 13.9-12)

In both cases, a structure stands subject to ruin; in Sonnet 146, the building represents the body, and in Sonnet 13, it represents the physical manifestation of the beloved in his descendants.

Although Sonnet 146 has connections to poems about the young man, the mention of paint also links this sonnet to issues of cosmetics and paint that arise in relation to both the beloved and the dark lady. Here, the speaker asks the soul, "Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth, / Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?" (CB 146.3-4) The poet criticizes concern with external appearances because of the detriment to what lies inside. Similarly, when discussing the uselessness of written words when one tries to represent the beloved, the speaker states, "And their [the words'] gross painting might be better used / Where cheeks need blood: in thee it is abused" (CB 82.13-14). When the reader does get the sense in Sonnet 127 that the subject there *is* an example of someone whose "cheeks need blood" and whose appearance might be improved by cosmetic paint, the poet does not condone such artificiality. Instead he begins an implicating tirade against the paint employed by his "mistress" (CB 127.9). In a moralizing tone, the poet describes the impact of cosmetics:

For since each hand hath put on Nature's power,  
 Fairing the foul with Art's false borrowed face,  
 Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,  
 But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace. (CB 127.5-8)

The speaker regards "Art's false borrowed face" as a sort of usurper, taking the role of the face given by Nature. The hands of the woman craft an external appearance that contradicts her

natural form. With the same attitude toward paint, the speaker chides the soul in Sonnet 146 for tending to the outward aspects of the body instead of cultivating itself within the body.

Casting the Christian ideal of putting the soul before the body in terms he used elsewhere in his sonnets, Shakespeare brings Sonnet 146, anomalous in its religiosity, into dialogue with the rest of the collection. The images in this poem echo those employed by the speaker to express his anxieties about his beloved's mortality and misuse of time. Although the final couplet anticipates a time when Death will have been defeated, the concentration of words relating to death in those two lines belies the purpose of the poem: "So shalt thou feed on *Death*, that feeds on men, / And *Death* once *dead*, there's no more *dying* then" (CB 146.13-14 – emphases added). When contemplating the nature of humanity with Christianity in mind, the speaker suddenly dwells on death. The final statement in this religious sonnet focuses not on the life of a man but on the nature of death. The human – body and soul – gets displaced by the figure of Death even as the poet proposes a potential victory over Death. In the act of stating his concerns in religious terms, the poet focuses on Christian piety, which leads him to linger on the very entity he tries desperately in other poems to forestall; the one clear attempt in Shakespeare's sonnets to use Christianity to find a way to everlasting life demonstrates that the recourse to religion for immortality calls for a near obsession with defeating Death. While the litotes of the last line, "there's no more dying then," could be used to underscore the wondrous outcome of a life well-lived, here it continues the chant of terms relating to death and obscures the speaker's real hope for continued *life*.

*Against Time: Language Opposing Tyranny*

In the course of Shakespeare's sonnets, whatever the proposed defense, the poet's fear and distress remain focused on one entity: Time. Although the figure of Death appears

occasionally in these poems and repeatedly at the end of the religious Sonnet 146, the persistence of the figure in that poem differs from the norm; typically, the speaker seems far more concerned about Time whenever he thinks about mortality. Instead of contemplating the finality of mortality, he rues the fact that Time can destroy the youth and beauty of his beloved. The speaker's overriding fear of ruin and decay renders the recourse to the idea of an afterlife in the face of mortality ineffectual. The mild neuroses of the poet indicate that he would not be content with the reassurance that his beloved would regain his highest qualities upon entrance into heaven; he would insist that the young man ought not to suffer diminishment in any way at any moment.

Consequently, the language with which the speaker regards Time reveals the bitterness and resentment he holds toward its destructive forces. In his lecture, Palmer provides a catalogue of some of the more vehement references to time and notes,

The word "time" occurs in the Sonnets seventy-eight times; "death," twenty-one; "age," eighteen. The few denunciations here given will be sufficient to mark the foe against whom Shakspeare [*sic*] contends. (17-19)

Rightly, Palmer characterizes Time as a "foe." The very language Shakespeare uses against Time describes the interaction between the speaker and Time as a military conflict. In Sonnet 15, they battle over the beloved as the speaker states that he is "all in war with Time for love of you" (CB 15.13). Indeed the next poem in the 1609 edition reiterates that idea as the poet urges his beloved to join the fight against the enemy. He asks,

But wherefore do not you a mightier way  
Make war upon this bloody tyrant Time,  
And fortify yourself in your decay

With means more blessed than my barren rhyme? (CB 16.1-4)

In this quatrain, Shakespeare merges several ideas that suffuse his other sonnets. By using terms like “bloody tyrant” and “fortify,” the poet constructs a metaphorical war that parallels the battle for supremacy between the speaker and the dark lady. Similarly, the poet mentions his one weapon against Time, his “rhyme,” but does not retain any confidence in its efficacy. In turn, this mistrust of the power of his verse ties in with his inability to procreate with the young man because the poet describes his poetry as “barren.” The specter of Time reminds the poet of his own futile efforts to immortalize his beloved.

The impotence of the speaker reveals itself most blatantly when he addresses his poems to Time. Although the young man remains his primary concern, he directs his words at Time itself. For instance, Sonnet 19 addresses “Devouring Time” and attributes destruction to that entity (CB 19.1). Yet the poet tries to take the upper hand to “forbid ... one most heinous crime,” the ruination of his beloved (CB 19.8). While many of Shakespeare’s sonnets contain only one turn in them, this poem has two. After telling Time not to attack the young man, the speaker shifts his tone once more in the final couplet: “Yet do thy worst, old Time: despite thy wrong, / My love shall in my verse ever live young” (CB 19.13-14). Here, Sonnet 19 concludes with an air of defiance as the poet places the power of his words in direct competition with Time’s destructive force. Connecting the speaker’s active role with the hope for effective immortalization, Michael Schoenfeldt writes, “The dual possessives – my love and my verse – declare a desperate faith in the ability of versified affection to function as a possible bulwark against the ruination of time.”<sup>18</sup> When the speaker directly addresses Time again in Sonnet 123, he remains resolute throughout but does not specifically aim for the immortality of his beloved.

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2 Michael Schoenfeldt, “The Sonnets,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Patrick Cheney (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 140.

From the first line, the poet asserts his unwavering position in spite of Time: “No! Time, thou shalt not boast that I do change” (CB 123.1). He makes a promise, still talking to Time, “This I do vow and this shall ever be: / I will be true despite thy scythe and thee” (CB 123.13-14). In this poem about how Time affects perception, the poet surprisingly does not argue that his beloved remains the same – young and beautiful. Instead, he focuses on his own part of the relationship, vowing to remain faithful regardless of Time and its fatal power, represented by the scythe. The fact that the poet’s consideration of time goes beyond the immediate effects on his beloved shows the extent of his preoccupation with time.

Even in Sonnet 100 when the poet pauses to remind himself of his main subject – the young man – he expresses that the pressure of Time hastens him to refocus. In recalling attention to his beloved, the speaker accuses his Muse of wandering from the proper topic. The poet asks, “Where art thou, Muse, that thou forget’st so long / To speak of that which gives thee all thy might?” (CB 100.1-2) For the speaker, no other being could be as worthy of poetic art than his beloved, and he argues that the young man alone provides the Muse with adequate abilities. Consequently, when the poet reintroduces the urgent matter of Time, he directs the Muse to deal with the effects of Time on his beloved. He orders:

Rise, resty Muse, my love’s sweet face survey,

If Time have any wrinkle graven there;

If any, be a satire to decay,

And make Time’s spoils despisèd everywhere.

Give my love fame faster than Time wastes life,

So thou prevent’st his scythe and crookèd knife. (CB 100.9-14)

According to this imperative, the Muse must gather incentive from the young man's appearance before reacting. However, the poet does not allow the Muse any power to reverse Time's negative impacts. Instead, he requires that the Muse publicize the villainy of Time – at least in the sense of making it known publicly if not through actual printed text. Just as “satire” and “make ... despisèd everywhere” imply an audience for the Muse's message, the call for “fame” suggests a sort of immortality for his love that would be established only through general, public acknowledgment. This renown must be built up quickly before Time can strike the beloved down with “his scythe and crookèd knife.” Just as Shakespeare ascribes the power usually associated with Death to Time in the “sickle hour” of Sonnet 126, he arms Time with the power to enforce mortality through the weapons in the final line of Sonnet 100 (CB 126.2, 100.14).<sup>19</sup> The hendiadys accomplished by naming one tool twice – as scythe and as knife – amplifies Time's destructive potential even as the speaker urges his Muse to forestall the fatal blow of that instrument.

While the speaker calls on the Muse to act in Sonnet 100, he more directly acknowledges his own part in the creative act of writing and in opposing Time in Sonnet 60. Contemplating the nature of passing minutes, the poet states the inevitability of falling to Time's arms, but he immediately expresses his tentative anticipation of protecting his beloved anyway. He writes,

And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow.

And yet to times in hope my verse shall stand,

Praising thy worth, despite his cruel hand. (CB 60.12-14)

The poet's meditation on the passage of time leads him to hope he can defend the young man from the “scythe” and “cruel hand” of Time. The speaker only reveals the reason for considering

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Sonnet 126 and the portrayal of Time, see the subsection titled “Sonnet 126: Time Shortens to Twelve” in Chapter I of this thesis.

how Time acts in the final line when he indicates that he directs this sonnet to his beloved through the words, “Praising *thy* worth” (emphasis added). Again, the poet’s anxiety about Time and his beloved’s mortality motivates the creation of verse. Significantly, the speaker does not invest his poetry with the ability to keep the young man alive here. Instead, he simply hopes that what he has written about the admirable and praiseworthy young man will survive, cheating the usual limitations of Time. For the sake of the memory of his beloved, the poet desires that his “verse shall stand” in a world where “nothing stands but for [Time’s] scythe to mow” (CB 60.13, 12).

\* \* \*

### Conclusion

When a person fears Time as much as the speaker of Shakespeare's sonnets does, writing in the sonnet form becomes a risky endeavor. The restrictions of that form parallel the limitations on the length of a lifetime. Just as Time ends an individual's life at a specific point, so the sonneteer concludes his verse at the fifth iambic foot of the fourteenth line. Even if a poet tampers with this formal expectation, he implicitly acknowledges temporal constraints. Although Shakespeare's speaker manipulates the sonnet form, ultimately he does not adjust the bounds of Time for the young man thereby. The beloved remains entirely mortal even as the poet contemplates ways to preserve him.

Although the speaker in Shakespeare's sonnets takes many different positions in relation to Time and mortality, he reveals that the likeliest – though not guaranteed – way to successfully immortalize a person is through written words. The presentation of these poems serves as ongoing evidence supporting such an understanding of immortality. In his dedication preceding Shakespeare's sonnets, the printer, Thomas Thorpe, demonstrates his awareness of this message in the sonnets. He writes,

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.

THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.

M<sup>r</sup>.W.H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.

AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.

PROMISED.

BY.

OVR.EVER-LIVING.POET.

WISHETH.  
 THE.WELL-WISHING.  
 ADVENTVRER.IN.  
 SETTING.  
 FORTH.

T.T. (CB p. 381)

“T.T.” assumes that the work establishes the immortality of both “Mr. W.H.” and the author. However, knowledge of who exactly “Mr. W.H.” was has been lost to time – hence the endless speculation on his identity, which bogs down criticism on Shakespeare’s sonnets. Still, the publisher’s appellation of Shakespeare as the “ever-living poet” has yet to be disproved, even after 400 years of his sonnets’ existence. Ultimately, though, these poems demonstrate that the act of preserving potent, affective connections between human beings matters hugely in its own right. While individuals might take delight in the thought of preserving their names for centuries after their death, the emotions and relationships of a person tell far more than a name ever could.

Just as the import of Shakespeare’s sonnets takes form in the intense, authentic feelings he so expertly captures, the significance of this thesis remains – for me – the process of thinking through the human condition of mortality. By considering the ways in which the speaker vents, pleads, struggles, and relents to the overwhelming force of Time, I continue to come to terms with the death of my father. The anxieties the poet expresses mirror my own, and – like my own – do not come to a settled resolution. Still, the very act of writing commemorates the loved one, acknowledges the value of the relationship, and offers a bit of catharsis for the writer.

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