“It hath no bottom” and is “beyond beyond”: Shakespeare on the Mystery of Love

by

Marilyn Dorothy Simon

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate English Department
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Marilyn Dorothy Simon (2016)
“It hath no bottom” and is “beyond beyond”: Shakespeare on the Mystery of Love

Doctor of Philosophy

Marilyn Dorothy Simon

Department of English
University of Toronto

2016

Abstract

This thesis examines how Shakespeare represents love. Love is resistant to definition because its experience is entirely subjective, yet Shakespeare does not retreat from any attempt to represent selfless love, which contrasts to the more easily comprehended mechanisms and effects of desire. Shakespeare’s works suggest that love can be both eros and agape at the same time. The experience of being in love constitutes one’s subjectivity: these works show that to know oneself is to know what is worth dying for, and in this regard love is stronger than death. This thesis argues that Shakespeare views love as a mystery, yet also as something profoundly real and revolutionary. Shakespeare intersects Christianity’s belief in the mystery of divine love with the experience of romantic and sexual love; he uses theology and the experiences of religious faith to express the possibilities of secular love. Shakespeare makes the sacred secular: he reinvents spiritual love as a human experience, and in turn his works elevate human love and characterize it as a religious experience. Further, these texts suggest that secular love can be an access point for the experience of divine love; that is, human love participates in the divine mystery of God’s love. The transformative possibilities that accompany moments of love are communicated through the mystery of poetry and theatrical performance: it is through artifice and illusion that we are able to understand the experience and meaning of love. In his construction of subjectivity, Shakespeare’s texts suggest that radical selflessness is paradoxically the pathway to becoming most fully the self. This thesis considers both Shakespeare’s dramatic works and his poetry. This dissertation contextualizes Shakespeare’s writing within the larger Christian culture of early modern England and also considers contemporary theory and criticism. The mysteries of love, of faith, and of the possibilities of the imagination do not merely intersect in Shakespeare’s works; these ideas gain meaning and are understood precisely through their intersections.
Acknowledgments

A thesis project is a courageous undertaking, and since I alone am not that brave, this project has only been successful because of the support and encouragement of friends, family, and faculty. First of all, I would like to thank Jill Levenson who, although she did not get to see this project through to its completion, had faith in the idea from the start and was instrumental in guiding the thesis through its muddy middle years. I would also like thank David Galbraith for taking the helm in the eleventh hour and working with me through the final revisions and edits. And I would like to thank Paul Stevens, of course, whose exceptionally clear way of seeing assisted me in seeing the clarity of my own thoughts. I would like to thank Ryan Simon for agreeing to join me in Toronto as I began this degree; that in itself was an act of generosity and bravery for which I will forever be grateful. To my many friends in Toronto who not only encouraged me with feelings of solidarity and determination, but who also hosted me as I returned to the city for meetings, I thank you, most particularly Lara Okihiro, Jacqueline Wylde, Marlee Ross, and Gretchn Hitt. And a special thank you to Jenny O’Kell, who patiently walked me through the formatting hiccups and frustrations that accompanied the final days of this project. Thank you to John Fedoruk, who fixed, and then broke, and then fixed again my computer so that I could write this project on a reliable machine. And a big thank you to Angela Earl, whose insights into my project helped me to see what I was saying. To my two daughters, Natasha and Bianca, I am sorry that I have so busy with writing and that your earliest memories will include “Mama working on Shakespeare,” but I think that one day you will be proud of my accomplishment, even though you do not understand it now. I did this for you: be brave, girls, and find the courage to start a project and find the strength to finish it. And finally, to my parents, Victor and Elvira Lysack, who not only supported me emotionally through my years of study, but financially and pragmatically as well: you picked up the slack in childcare when I could not be there myself to mind the little ones, and you kept me from abject poverty while I toiled and toiled in study. Mom and Dad, this project is for you.

This dissertation was generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.......................................................................................................................... iii

Table of Contents............................................................................................................................ iv

1 Introduction “The bottom of God’s secrets”: The Transcendent Moment in Shakespeare................1
   1.1 Spiritual Transcendence, Falling in Love, and the Possibilities of Theatre......................... 1
   1.2 Rational Contradiction: Reason, Emotion, and Subjectivity............................................. 18
   1.3 Love, Self-Shattering, and Death....................................................................................... 23
   1.4 Joy: The Release of Self in the Fullness of Love............................................................... 31
   1.5 Chapter Summary............................................................................................................. 35

2 “Mutual render”: Love and Subjective Fullness and Loss in Sonnets 125 and 126.................... 38
   2.1 The Subject is the Subject............................................................................................... 38
   2.2 Sonnet 125: Love and Sacrifice...................................................................................... 45
   2.3 Sonnet 126: Love and Eternity....................................................................................... 54
   2.4 The Dark Lady: Lover Versus Will.................................................................................. 62

3 “Love-devouring death”: Love and Spirituality in *Romeo and Juliet*.................................... 70
   3.1 Eros and Agape.............................................................................................................. 70
   3.2 “Either was the other’s mine”: The Phoenix and Turtle................................................. 73
   3.3 “Star-crossed lovers take their life”: Romeo, Juliet, and Subjectivity............................... 85
   3.4 “Love-devouring death” or Love Devours Death?........................................................... 101
   3.5 “As they kiss consume”: Love as the Authentic Act..................................................... 114

4 “Less without and more within”: Love, Death, and Redemption in *Cymbeline*..................... 128
   4.1 Romance and the Impossible......................................................................................... 128
   4.2 “Such stuff within”: Inwardness, Selflessness, and Love.............................................. 131
   4.3 “Beyond beyond”: Grace, Redemption, and the Christian Advent............................... 145
   4.4 “The powers above”: Reality, Fantasy, and Theatre..................................................... 159

5 Conclusion Towards *King Lear* and Seeing Feelingly.......................................................... 168

Works Consulted........................................................................................................................... 181
1 Introduction
“The Bottom of God’s Secrets”: The Transcendent Moment in Shakespeare

1.1 Spiritual Transcendence, Falling in Love, and the Possibilities of Theatre

Perhaps the most well known review of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* belongs to Samuel Pepys: “we saw *Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” he writes, “which I had never seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life” (208). Clearly Pepys did not see in this play any exploration of religious or philosophical issues; instead, his remark broadcasts that he saw it as a silly and utterly trivial play. This view of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* as a frivolous play that teeters on the edge of madness is a sentiment echoed, as Peter Holland points out, by the Swiss weaver Ulrich Braker, who in 1780 wrote: “I don’t want to run down your dream, but I just can’t make it out. The whole tone of the piece doesn’t appeal to me. […] A certain Theseus, a certain Lysander, every fairy in fact, is busy spouting his own wooden verses” (qtd. in Holland, “Introduction” 1). Based on these comments, this play seems to have little or nothing to do with anything serious, in either religion or philosophy. The principal characters, after all, are concerned only with their love triangle, the fairy Robin with his mischief, and the mechanicals with their comic rendition of a classic tragic love-story.

The plot may indeed be ridiculous, yet the play has much in it that reveals how Shakespeare thought about and responded to philosophical and theological issues of the early modern period. Of special interest to my project is how the play treats biblical echoes and allusions, the most famous of which is perhaps Bottom’s reaction to his fantastic encounter with the fairy queen:

    God’s my life! Stolen hence, and left me asleep? – I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was – there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had – but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say
what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream. It shall be called “Bottom’s Dream,” because it hath no bottom, and I will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke. Peradventure, to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death. (4.1.203-219)

This passage alludes to 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, verses in which Paul describes the joys that God has prepared for each Christian believer: “The things which eye hathe not sene, nether eare hathe heard, nether came into man’s heart, are, which God hathe prepared for those that love him. But God hathe reveiled them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deepe things of God” (Geneva Bible 1560).

Bottom’s passage has conventionally been understood as a parody of both the experience of religious love and that of erotic love; that is, since this soliloquy belongs to Bottom, quite literally the comic “ass” of the play, in one move Shakespeare vulgarizes the holy rhetoric of Paul in describing divine love and exposes the foolishness of erotic love.

Indeed, the relationship between Bottom and Titania is grotesque in its intermingling of the beautiful with the base. However, a more nuanced reading of this play as a whole, and of Bottom’s passage in particular, suggests that Shakespeare is doing something quite complex with this moment of erotic-divine love, for just a few verses above those Bottom so famously misquotes, Paul writes that, “God hathe chosen the foolish things of the worlde to confounde the wise, and God hathe chosen the weake things of the worlde, to confounde the mightie things” (1Cor. 1:27). In other words, rather than a parody of Paul and of Reformed Christian belief, Bottom’s speech functions in some ways as a literalization of a Christian’s encounter with grace, while at the same time keeping its topical hilarity. Instead of exclusively humbling holy love, Shakespeare also elevates secular and erotic love to a transcendent level. By aligning Bottom’s waking moment with divine grace, Shakespeare shows that the experience of love is best explained by not explaining it, or as Paul wrote, its experience is impossible to understand unless it is experienced. Ultimately, the wisest
thing Bottom does is to leave off his explanation by saying that love is something more suited to art, to music – the unwritten ballad “Bottom’s Dream” - than to the ponderous and inadequate vehicle of language to express. Except for an elusive remark made to his friends upon returning from the woods, Bottom does not make reference to his experience with the queen of the fairies again, and this omission perhaps is most fitting considering that the transcendent heights, or rather the bottomless depths, that the weaver experienced were just momentary and fleeting, so outside the everyday world that even their memory, apparently, could not be sustained in it.

In the concluding section of 1 Corinthians 2 Paul speaks of the “Spirit of God” in contrast to the “Spirit of the worlde”:

> For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of a man, which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the Spirit of the worlde, but the Spirit, which is of God, that we might knowe the things that are given to us of God. Which things also we speake, not in the wordes which mans wisdome teacheth, but which the holie Gost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual things. But the natural man perceiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: nether can he knowe (them,) because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual, discerneth all things yet he him self is judged of no man. For who hathe knowen the minde of the Lord, that he might instruct him? But we have the minde of Christ” (1 Cor 2:11-16).

Here Paul is contrasting man’s reliance on his own intellect, on reason and philosophy, with the “Spirit of God” that transcends reason and is instead a mystery and wonder. Yet although Paul indicates that it is only through the “Spirit of God” that people can come to an understanding of God, he does not suggest that the “Spirit of God” works in opposition to the “natural man,” but rather that reason is inadequate for discerning spiritual truths. The tension Paul outlines between the “natural man” and the “Spirit of God” functions in the same way as the imagination’s relationship to
reason; it is the imagination that illuminates things of a higher order of understanding than reason alone can perceive.

In the Defense of Poetry, Philip Sidney writes that the faculty and power of imagination is a divine gift that itself enables an individual to engage with the divine: “give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when with the force of divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings […] since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it” (79). Of this idea, Francis Bacon writes, “we see, that in matters of faith and religion our imagination raises itself above our Reason” (406). In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Shakespeare connects the strangeness of love to the divine, and he shows that both of these mysteries are understood through the imaginative world of the theatre. Bottom does not guide us into this insight; he is a concrete thinker and not a clever man. But the play as a whole does “discourse wonders”: the strangeness and wonder of romantic and sexual love is akin to the mystery and the subjective experience of divine love, and the imaginative power of theatre links these two together in a tangible way.

I am introducing this discussion of Shakespeare, grace, and secular love with Bottom’s short passage from A Midsummer Night’s Dream to illustrate that Shakespeare is drawing upon specific Christian concepts about divine love when he writes about earthly and human love. Specifically, it is my argument that the overwhelming effects of love, even for Bottom, the silliest of characters, are mysterious and inexplicable; and that these kinds of transcendent experiences, though fleeting, still have an eternal quality to them.¹ Shakespeare demonstrates that there is

¹ Slavov Zizek writes of the Absolute that “the Oriental notion of the Absolute Void-Substance-Ground beneath the fragile, deceptive appearances that constitute our reality is to be opposed to the notion that it is the ordinary reality that is hard, inert, stupidly there, and the Absolute that is thoroughly fragile and fleeting. That is to say, what is the Absolute? Something that appears to us in fleeting experiences – say, through the gentle smile of a beautiful woman, or even through the warm, caring smile of a person who may otherwise seem ugly and rude: in such miraculous but extremely fragile moments, another dimension transpires through our reality” (The Fragile Absolute 128, italics original).
something transformative and redemptive to romantic and sexual love, and that there is an irrationality to love that surpasses and is superior to reason and logic. In short, it is my argument that Shakespeare appropriates the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries’ religious culture of grace and uses it for dramatic effect. Shakespeare aligns the strangeness of love with the mystery of sacred grace and with the transformative power of art and the theatre. Though Bottom remains a fool even after his transcendent night with Titania in the forest, the play itself accomplishes “something of great constancy, [...] strange and admirable” (5.1.26-27). Hippolyta suspects that there is truth to the impossible narrative of the four young lovers. What the play as a whole demonstrates is that she is correct: the “tricks of strong imagination” are, on the one hand, not tricks at all but quite real, and on the other, are the vehicle for redemption: Bottom’s dream “is far more important than ordinary experience” (124 David Young). Shakespeare’s orchestration of Bottom’s fumbling of scripture leads us to consider a conflation of the transformative power of sexual love with sacred love.

This secularization of religious concepts in Shakespeare is a familiar position. Writing about The Winter’s Tale, Paul Stevens suggests how Milton may have read Shakespeare: “Now it is difficult to imagine a reader as learned and alert as Milton not perceiving in The Winter’s Tale its secular displacement or appropriation of the language of religious regeneration, its creation of what might appear to a mind whose reference points are primarily religious as a secular analogy of the process of faith” (“Subversion and Wonder” 386). Following Stevens’s lead, Charles Whitney writes: “Milton responded particularly to Shakespeare’s secularization of religious elements which he re-situated according to his more religious orientation. Reading Shakespeare and apprehending divine wisdom are analogous, if not related” (260). Unique to this study is my exploration of how moments of love function in the same way a Christian conversion does: Shakespeare’s characters are “born again” after they experience the overwhelming force of this emotion. The “mystery” or “secret” of love lies not just in the fleeting feelings of wonder that overwhelm these characters; rather, Shakespeare shows that moments of extraordinary love, moments of grace, that is, transform an individual’s identity. Falling in love allows the lover to see the
beloved from the perspective of God: the lover is at once selfless and experiences the fullness of being.

This is not to say that Bottom undergoes any radical life-altering transformation as a result of his encounter with Titania. In fact, as soon as he rejoins the other mechanicals that are rehearsing the play for Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding, the weaver’s “most rare vision” seems to evaporate just as suddenly and inexplicably as it began, for his focus shifts back onto immediate and practical things even as he hints at the wonders he so recently experienced:

Bottom: Masters, I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what. For if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything right as it fell out.

Peter Quince: Let us hear, sweet Bottom.

Bottom: Not a word of me. All that I will tell you is that the Duke hath dined. (4.2.26–31)

While Bottom characteristically gets on with the business of the play, there is, in even these few lines, as well as in the more substantive soliloquy he delivers upon waking, a great deal in Bottom’s speech that speaks to our reliance on art in order to make sense of the natural world. Bottom is and remains a fool, yet even he intuits that there is a tension between ordinary experience and the ineffable quality of love. “Bottom’s awe at this vision ‘past the wit of man’ is enormously suggestive in terms of our normal contempt for the shadowy, irrational world of dreams,” writes Young, “for, all things considered, he is right, and his healthy respect for his limitations gives him a more accurate sense of what has passed than is possessed either by the lovers or by Theseus. It is also significant,” Young continues, “that in his wordless confusion, in his discovery that his dream is not reportable by normal means, Bottom’s instinct is to have it turned into art” (David Young 124). There are, essentially, three spheres operating distinctly yet overlapping and informing each other in these moments of transcendent love: love, art, and the sacred. Shakespeare suggests that these three things are all mysteries, yet somehow to experience one via the others is the appropriate way to understand each mystery more fully. Theatre is the grammar Shakespeare uses in order to apprehend the mystery of love. Love, art, and the sacred
inform each other, and at each intersection, we are capable of experiencing a transcendental moment: Shakespeare seems to expect the impossible to happen.

While there is still no doubt that Shakespeare chose Bottom to be the messenger of a muddled Pauline speech for comic effect, it is clear that Shakespeare knew that what he has Bottom attempt to describe is not the “wisdom of man,” but instead the foolishness of the “wisdom of man” when it comes to understanding what many in the early modern period believed were spiritual truths. Shakespeare’s insistence that love is super-rational rather than irrational is accomplished through the medium of the theatre itself. Shakespeare repeatedly draws attention to the illusion of art and the theatre as a means of closing the gap between art and reality. The key to understanding what occurs to Bottom in the forest rests not with the weaver himself to make sense of, but with the audience. “If we shadows have offended,” says Robin to the audience at the curtain,

Think but this, and all is mended:
That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear;
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream. (5.1.414-19)

By calling the play itself a dream, Shakespeare aligns illusion and reality together. The lovers in the woods labeled their experience a dream when in fact the audience knows it was real. If Puck labels the theatre as dream, does the same logic apply? Saying that the audience members have “slumbered” while in fact they have—presumably—been quite awake suggests that they too have experienced “strong imagination.” Hippolyta’s words hold as true for the audience members as it does for the lovers in the woods: “But all the story of the night told over, / And all their minds transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy’s images, / And grows to something of great constancy; / But howsoever, strange and admirable” (5.1.23-27).

Shakespeare reworks and focuses this idea much later in his career in The Winter's Tale, the conclusion of which has one gentleman observing that with “[e]very wink of an eye some new grace will be born” (5.2.110). And indeed when Paulina unveils
Hermione’s statue at the close of the play, the onlookers experience wonder that is “strange and admirable.” As much as Paulina’s unveiling of Hermione is a sleight of hand, it is also an instance of art awakening real emotion and transformation in Leontes and the onlookers, and it is an instance of art being linked to the spiritual: “It is requir’d you do awake your faith,” says Paulina before Hermione turns from stone to flesh (5.3.95). In The Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare collapses the distinction, once again, between imaginative possibility and reality: what he demonstrates is that what is imagined is possible. The Third Gentleman, when describing Perdita’s reunion with Leontes remarks that, “Who was most marble there chang’d color” (5.2.90). By having the actual onlookers to Hermione’s transformation first metaphorically enact her own transformation from marble to flesh, Shakespeare suggests that there is no gap between art and reality. “We are mock’d with art,” says Leontes as he gazes in wonder at his wife’s statue. But he is in fact neither gazing at art nor experiencing a mockery: all of it is real: metaphor made literal turned concrete reality.

These two instances of Shakespeare conflating art and reality both share a sacred quality. Yes, it is true that “Bottom’s Dream” attempts to describe an unexpected sexual encounter in the woods; yes, it is true that Hermione is not resurrected from the dead, but rather that she had been living, ordinarily, for two decades. Shakespeare chooses, however, to infuse these events with biblical overtones and transcendent significance in order to make strange to us the redemptive possibilities of the everyday. It is not that Bottom’s physical encounter makes the weaver any more spiritual, but the language Shakespeare gives to him suggests that it has the potential to. It is the audience who needs to heed Hippolyta’s words – Theseus certainly does not – and consider the “strange and admirable” that in fact was entirely real, just as theatre itself presents something impossible that can become a transformative “dream.”

Debora Shuger, in her study of the early modern period’s sacred rhetoric, writes that “even the basest things, if pertaining to salvation, acquire the utmost magnitude. Christian preaching therefore admits an intermingling of the low and contemptible with the lofty and serious” (Sacred 226). She goes on to state that there exists within
Christianity a “sublimity of lowliness” and a “grandeur of Christian humility” (*Sacred* 226). By having Bottom deliver the play’s most biblical speech, Shakespeare gives the lowly Bottom lofty and serious subject matter precisely to treat the transcendent with earnestness. Bottom, significantly, is not straining towards God but is intersecting his strain to apprehend his night with Titania with Paul’s strain to apprehend the mystery of a Christian’s union with God.

It would be wrong for us to assume, then, that just because Bottom is confusedly describing a sensual and eroticized moment of pleasure with Titania, that this is all his language connotes; nor is this just a simple parody of a believer’s love for Christ. There is a way for the audience to see that Shakespeare is speaking above his character’s understanding – he does this again shortly with Theseus – and is talking seriously about divine and eternal mysteries. The weaver’s speech starts out, after all, with the expression “God’s my life,” and ends, curiously, with a reference to death – a reference, no less, to a “gracious” death. Of course, this is a reference to Thisbe’s tragic death, which occurs at the end of the play the mechanicals intend to perform at the marriage celebration of the Duke and Hippolyta, yet this ending still seems to be out of place in a description of the inexplicable experience of love and reveals much about how Shakespeare thought about and represented such moments of emotional and sensual rapture. Bottom’s soliloquy is framed by two references to eternal things: to God and to death, and what we see in the body of this speech is Bottom using transcendent language and abstract theological ideas to express the very concrete and sensual experience he has just had.

Bottom’s speech, then, represents the super-rational and topsy-turvy experience of love, the same sort of thrilling experience the Christian believer feels during his or her initial encounter with God’s divine love. Bottom, whether he knows it or not, is describing grace, though in a dramatically different context than is Saint Paul. But what is the nature of this grace? Eric S. Mallin, in his provocative book *Godless Shakespeare*, argues that this grace is purely material: “Bottom’s memorial deconstruction of Paul not only refuses to consider future glories ‘which God hathe prepared for them that loue him’; but the weaver also radically excises God and belief
from his otherwise referential moment” (106). While there is much in Mallin’s work that is insightful and thought-provoking, when he states that in this speech Bottom refuses to consider the “future glories” promised to a Christian convert, he seems to have ignored Bottom’s reference to Thisbe’s death in the play-within-the-play. Clearly, Shakespeare’s reference to such a moment of self-obliteration (Thisbe herself is a tragic lover) suggests that he was not foreclosing the possibility of achieving the fullness of love in life after one’s death. This is something that Richard C. McCoy notes as he analyses Shakespeare’s sonnets. “Shakespeare’s conception of love,” he writes, “remains bound by Christian ideas of altruism, but suffering and sacrifice hardly assure salvation. His lovers are generally doomed to become ‘love’s martyrs,’ caught in what Miri Rubin calls ‘the terrible logic of martyrdom’ which enforces ‘the raw convergence of Love and Death [and …] the terrible claim that death is […] the truest token of love’” (203). Yet missing from Rubin’s equation – and, I would add, equally from Mallin’s – notes McCoy, “is the celestial reward promised by the Christian system of salvation” (203); that is, life after one’s death.

There are two distinct ways of looking at what Shakespeare is suggesting here and both are at play within his texts: there is of course the death to self that occurs through love, and the hope of a celestial life after death that is the expectation of the Christian. In fact, the verse from Corinthians which Shakespeare gives to Bottom speaks about the rewards of God’s love that are awaiting the believer in heaven, not on this earth; it is the “things prepared for those that love him” that will confound the believer. Many in Shakespeare’s audience would no doubt have known this verse’s place in scripture, and known that it speaks about the end of one’s earthly existence and the blessings awaiting one in the world to come. They also would have been familiar with its liturgical context; it is cited in one of the Certain Sermons that composed the Anglican Church’s collection of authorized sermons and homilies. “For death shall be to him no death at all,” the sermon titled “Against the Fear of Death” states, but a very deliverance from death, from all pains, cares, and sorrows, miseries and wretchedness of this world, and the very entry into rest, and a beginning of everlasting joy, a tasting of heavenly pleasures, so great,
that neither tongue is able to express, neither eye to see, nor ear to hear them; no, nor any earthly man’s heart to conceive them. (83)

Moreover, this sermon goes on to argue not only that the believer will receive God’s blessings in fullness after his or her death, but also that these “everlasting joys” are the direct result of the believer’s love: “So exceeding great benefits they be, which God our heavenly father by his mere mercy, and for the love of his son Jesus Christ, hath laid up in store, and prepared for them that humbly submit themselves to God’s will, and evermore unfeignedly love him from the bottom of their hearts” (83).² The point I am emphasizing here is that in the early modern period, God’s love and a believer’s love are ultimately fulfilled in death, or more precisely in one’s triumph over death, which occurs, paradoxically, after one has died: as Donne says, “Death, thou shalt die” (Sonnet X).

There are hints of something distant or delayed in Bottom’s speech – his frequent interruptions of himself; the fact that this dream is “past,” beyond and out of range, “the wit of man” to describe – but they do not gloss over the fact that what Bottom experiences in the woods is an immediate, real, and very physical encounter with the fairy world. In his study of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Mallin goes on to state that “something marvelous has indeed occurred” to Bottom in the woods. The curious thing about it is, though, that “in edging towards disclosure, Bottom moves from desire to triumphant inability – from a wish to speak, to an unembarrassed muteness” (107). This conclusion is true, of course, but Mallin’s interpretation of what this signifies is less convincing. He argues that “tempting as it is to call his a religious experience – Paul and Mustardseed lure us there – Bottom’s dream forecloses religion, in that it checks the aggressive certainty of the proselyte” (107). Yet Bottom’s description of his experience is not as anti-religious as Mallin claims; or

² Thomas B. Stroup suggests that Bottom’s name has its locus in earlier English translations of this Epistle, especially in William Tyndale’s translation that reads, “yea, the bottom of God’s secrets.” I am not going to make any emphatic claims about the origin of Bottom’s name, but I do think it is important to note just how frequently the word “bottom” occurs in discussions of a convert’s love for God. Frequently in Tyndale, for instance, the phrase “love from the ground and low bottom of the heart” is repeated (see “A Prologue to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans”). And Tyndale’s emphasis on humility here, of course, also resonates with Bottom’s humble intellect and social status. It seems quite reasonable that Shakespeare chose this name to both make fun of Tyndale’s enthusiasm for this humility, but also to draw upon this lowness and take it seriously for his own purpose.
rather Mallin’s argument needs to be qualified. Bottom is a fool and his iteration of Paul does foreclose religion, yet the play itself emphasizes the strangeness of love and engages sexual love with a sacred moment. By not recounting his experience to his friends, Bottom in fact does communicate something of the ineffable to the audience, for the inability to put into words what one feels and knows when one is touched by grace is one of the only things of which Paul and the Reformers are certain. Neither Paul, Luther, nor Tyndale are able to express the love of God, but that inability is precisely the point: it is only when one experiences grace for oneself that he or she understands what it is. In the very chapter from Corinthians to which Shakespeare alludes, Paul calls God’s love a “mystery”: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mysterie, even the hid wisdom, which God had determined before the world, unto our glorie” (1Cor. 2:7). Indeed, when it comes to understanding God’s grace, one cannot even trust what one senses in her or his own hearts if the search for God’s love is based on reason without imagination and faith.

Richard Hooker, the great author of the *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, unpacks the objections of an “unbeliever” to show how unbelief actually constitutes real faith:

> I have thorowly considered and exquisitely sifted all the corners of my hart, and I see what there is, never seek to perswade me against my knowledge, I do not, I know I do not believe. Well, to favor them a little in their weaknes, let the thing be graunted which they do imagine. Be it that they are faithles and without belief? they are. Do they not wish it might and also strive that it may be otherwise? wee know they do. Whenc cometh this but from a secret love and liking which they have of those things that are believed? No man can love the things which in his own opinion are not. And if they thinke those things to be, which they show that they love when they desire to believe them, then must it needs be that by desiring to beleev they prove them selves to be true believers. (“Of the Certaintie…” 76)³

³ This is reminiscent of the tension expressed in the gospel of Mark about the believer who at once believes in Christ’s power and does not believe in it, a paradox that remains unresolved in scripture:

> “And Iesus said vnto him, If thou canst beleue it al things are possible to him that beleeeueth And
Hooker’s reasoning shows that when it comes to deciphering and expressing God’s love – even when it comes to recognizing its presence – we will inevitably fail. Grace is both “a mysterie” and a “hid wisdom,” just as a believer’s faith in God is a “secret love” hid even from himself. Bottom lacks the “aggressive certainty of the proselyte,” yet the play as a whole does not. Bottom, of course, is both a materialist and an idiot, yet Shakespeare engages with Paul because he expects more from his audience than he expects from Bottom: the “strange and admirable” mystery “of great constancy” still occurs in the play as a whole and is, moreover, experienced by the audience. In the end, Mallin’s book on the godlessness of Shakespeare’s writing is provocative and insightful, yet at times his understanding of Christianity seems lacking. Shakespeare’s does not.

My research aims to show that Shakespeare uses a Christian model when he writes about love, yet I am making no claims about his personal religious convictions. It is my contention, however, that these experiences are modeled on Protestant ideas. In her book *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance*, Debora Shuger outlines how English Protestant ministers, Lancelot Andrewes and Richard Hooker, embraced the illogical grounds of their faith, the “mystery” that Paul speaks of so often in his Epistles. “We cannot come to God by reason,” writes Andrewes, “since ‘the principles of reason are from the sense, but God is above sense and reason, and beyond both’” (qtd. in Shuger, *Habits* 64). In a similar manner, Brian Cummings writes that “grace is nothing if not ‘outrepasse’: it is the definitive expression of what is beyond experience, and even beyond language” (48). While Bottom understands that his night with Titania was a “dream,” he lacks the capacity for poetic imagination that would allow him to apprehend the spiritual resonances that he himself engages with as he describes his mysterious sexual encounter with the fairy world. Shakespeare plays the same kind of game when his own poetic voice speaks above Theseus: “Such tricks hath strong imagination, / That if it would be apprehend some

straightway the father of the childe crying with teares, saide, Lorde, I beleue: helpe my vnbeliefe” (Mark 9:23-24). Indeed, even William Perkins’ Predestination Chart has states of mind such as “despair” and “doubting of faith” as on the outer corner of the Table, but yet still within sphere of salvation (Perkins).
joy / It comprehends some bringer of that joy” (5.1.18-20). Imagination, here, is the faculty that apprehends joy which in turn enables understanding. Similarly, it was Martin Luther’s embrace of the inexplicable that enabled him to bring together the paradoxes of the Christian faith. “Luther’s triumphant embrace of paradox,” writes Cummings, “is a rational defence of irrationalism rather than an irrational attack on rationalism” (182).

Bottom’s moment in the forest can be better understood by looking at the early modern conception of imagination. Imagination, writes Stevens, “is a God-given faculty which has a specific purpose in assisting man toward knowledge of his maker” (“Milton and the Icastic Imagination” 44). When Shakespeare has Bottom speak of Titania’s love in the same language that Paul spoke about Christ’s love, he is showing us how Bottom’s imagination – his fancy, his ungoverned senses – connects his spirit to the divine. Yet although Bottom’s encounter with Titania opens up this connection with the divine, it is not sustained or transformative since Bottom does not take the further and necessary step of uniting imagination with higher cognitive thinking.

Stevens goes on to demonstrate that “imagination divorced from judgment, fancy uninformed by reason, leads to delusion. But the educated imagination is the peculiar instrument of grace. It provides the psychological mechanism by which we come to see and believe the evidence of things not seen; it provides the psychological mechanism by which we come to faith” (44). What Shakespeare is showing us by aligning Bottom’s speech with Paul, and with the early reformers who took their cues from the Epistles, is that Bottom’s intuitive knowledge transcends the Duke of Athens’ wisdom, though this is accomplished by the play as a whole, not through Bottom’s “wisdom.” Theseus is the embodiment of rationality and order in the play; his speech that outlines the power of reason demonstrates this clearly: “Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends,” he declares. “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1. 4-8). Yes, lovers do indeed apprehend more than reason can comprehend; this is precisely the point. Imagination “‘raises itself above our reason,’” Francis Bacon writes, “‘divine grace uses the motions of the imagination as an instrument of illumination’” (qtd. in Stevens, “Milton” 44). This is
not to say that the reason Theseus so values is unnecessary for a believer, but rather that it is in itself incomplete. Grace first happens in the heart, and then belief is affirmed in the mind.⁴

Shuger, in her discussion of early modern sacred rhetoric, uses part of Theseus’s monologue here to reinforce what Christian preaching should do. “People disbelieve in God and spiritual truths because these things are invisible,” she writes. “By giving them a ‘local habitation and a name,’ the poet or preacher strengthens faith, making its objects intelligible to us” (Sacred 209-210). The whole section of this part of the Duke’s monologue reads:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (5.1.12-17)

What is curious here is that Shuger knowingly inverts Theseus’s meaning: while he condemns the poet’s “strong tricks” of imagination because they have the ability to make insubstantial things real and present to an audience, Shuger shows how this is precisely what a successful Christian orator should do. “Renaissance theories of sacred discourse grow out of this conception of the image allowing the mind to move from the seen to the unseen and the heart to embrace what is invisible under corporeal similitudes,” she writes (Sacred 201).⁵ The need for such visual, or metaphoric,

⁴ In Paradise Lost, Milton reworks this idea of the imagination and reason. As Eve recounts her Satanic dream to Adam, he outlines the relationship between fancy and thought: “But know that in the soul / Are many lesser faculties that serve / Reason as chief; among these fancy next / Her office holds; of all external things / Which the five watchful senses represent, / She forms imaginations, airy shapes, / Which reason joining or disjoining, frames / All what we affirm or what deny, and call / Our knowledge or opinion; then retires / Into her private cell when nature rests. / Oft in her absence mimic fancy wakes / To imitate her; but misjoining shapes, / Wild work produces oft, and most in dreams, / Ill matching words and deeds long past or late” (V:100-113). It is hard not to think that Milton had A Midsummer Night’s Dream in mind as he wrote these lines. Yet his thinking is clearly more in line with Theseus’s than with Bottom’s. The distinction is that Eve and Adam already know God’s love, so it is not something that needs to be awakened in them by the heart, and, perhaps more importantly, Eve’s dream is literally Satanic: it does not inspire love but pride.

⁵ “Fayth is,” in the words of scripture, “that which causeth those things to appeare in deed that are hoped for, and sheweth evidently of thinges that are not sene” (Heb. 11:1).
representations is especially crucial when it comes to portraying God’s love for humanity. “The routes laid down by Hooker and Donne of love (or emotion in general) and sensuousness are fundamental to Renaissance rhetoric,” Shuger argues. Emotions, particularly love, are moved by the union “of the greatest object with the most vivid representation” (Sacred 199). In other words, she later states, “the problem of religious cognition and that of religious discourse both hang on the capacity of images to depict that which is knowable in itself in the sensible forms knowable by us” (Sacred 205). Bacon also expresses this point: religion gains “access to the mind by similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams” (406). The paradox is one of intuition versus cognitive and linguistic ability: “while the concrete objects of sensation are most knowable to us, that which is clearest and most knowable in itself lies furthest from perception” (Sacred 195). That is, as Shakespeare writes elsewhere, man is “most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d / (His glassy essence)” (MM 2.2.119-120).

Bottom’s “most rare vision,” is, of course, an occasion for laughter and is an instance of an individual who is entirely ignorant of his “glassy essence.” Yet Shakespeare’s inclusion of the Pauline verse that alludes to God’s eternal love leads us to connect Bottom’s encounter with the fairy world with something that is “knowable in itself,” but which is difficult to put into words that can be known and understood by us. Thus, when Bottom returns to his friends who are rehearsing the play, he at once announces that he will tell them all about his experience and that he will not utter a word about the “wonders” in which he has just participated: “I am to discourse wonders; but ask me not what. For if I tell you, I am no true Athenian. I will tell you everything right as it fell out. […] Not a word of me” (4.2.26-28, 30). Even the language here evokes the sacred rhetoric of theology: to “discourse wonders” is exactly what a preacher or theologian does. It is not a stretch either to see in Bottom’s waking moment a similar allusion to theological discourse: “Man is but an ass if he go about to expound this dream,” he states. The word “expound” here, coming out of Bottom’s mouth, seems curiously out of place, but it is not surprising given the

---

6 See also Paul Stevens, “Milton and the Icastic Imagination” (44).
overall context of this speech, since at the time that word was used almost exclusively as a verb for interpreting and analyzing scripture. The word “vision,” too – “I have had a most rare vision,” says the weaver – is equally tinged with sacred connotations, for on the surface level it denotes the “dream” he has had, yet it also suggests, as the Oxford English Dictionary states, “something which is apparently seen otherwise than by ordinary sight; esp. an appearance of a prophetic or mystical character, or having the nature of a revelation, supernaturally presented to the mind either in sleep or in an abnormal state. *beatific vision*” and “the action or fact of seeing or contemplating something not actually present to the eye; mystical or supernatural insight or foresight” (definitions 1.a and 2.a.).

Bottom’s experience with Titania is linked, and linked fairly explicitly, with what Shuger outlines as the “greatest objects” of Christian thought (*Sacred* 199). Moreover, what Bottom utters upon waking is in direct contrast to what Theseus argues about the value of “cool reason” as opposed to the “shaping fantasies” of lovers, madmen, and poets. In this scene, we even see the word “strange” used in two different ways: first by Hippolyta in the sense of “Unfamiliar, abnormal, or exceptional to a degree that excites wonder or astonishment” (definition 10.a *OED*), and then by Theseus, who uses it in a derogatory sense to express something that is unusual and unfamiliar. Of course what the royal couple is discussing here is the tale of confused, irrational, yet overwhelming and life-altering experiences of love that the four young lovers had in the forest. So here again we have a link back to Bottom and his own inexplicable love-encounter with Titania. What both Bottom and Hippolyta suggest about the experience of love substantiates what Cynthia Marshall, in her book *The Shattering of the Self*, argues about this most intense emotion. “My argument assumes,” she writes, “that love – as emotion, experience, and trope – remains for several reasons structurally resistant to analysis. Partly this is the result of the displacement noted above, the way love decenters the subject by involving emotional investment in another person and perhaps identification with that other” (57). Of

---

7 Macrobius’ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* links dreams with prophetic visions: “visio” (88) and also with the supra-rational faculties of the mind: of the gods he writes, “when they wish to assign attributes to these divinities that not only pass the bounds of speech but those of human comprehension as well, they resort to similies and Analogies” (86).
course, by analyzing love in her study, Marshall demonstrates that it is not entirely resistant to analysis, yet in the experience of love there is something ineffable that resists explanation, though it can, significantly, be expressed through art.

The indefinable experience of love that I have been focusing on is apprehended through theatre and is related to Protestant theology. “During the Renaissance,” writes Shuger, “images play an especially vital role in sacred rhetoric because of their capacity to make what is unseen accessible to both thought and feeling, [...] it is by love that man moves from an initial confused apprehension to the full knowledge of union” (Sacred 211). Love, in other words, is the way to understand the sacred; and the sacred in turn, can only be experienced through love. Further, if Bottom is unable to express to others what his experience meant to him, it matters little to the audience, since we witnessed his initial encounter with the fairy queen in the woods. In this way, Shakespeare did “body forth the forms of things unknown” in the very real and immediate world of the theatre.

1.2 Rational Contradiction: Reason, Emotion, and Subjectivity

The strangeness of love in A Midsummer Night’s Dream that Bottom fails to articulate, like faith in God, is an idea that is profoundly real from a subjective point of view, but which cannot be communicated in a way that elicits full understanding in another, except through the imaginative power of fiction and theatre. In the same way, an individual himself cannot reason faith in God without a struggle of rational disbelief. The Protestant theologian Hooker, writes Shuger, does not speak of the will commanding the intellect to believe; rather, he alters “will” to “heart,” giving the process of adherence an emotional and also sensuous dimension absent in its source. The certainty of adherence is engendered “when the heart doth cleave and stick unto that which it doth believe.” A person believes in God because “his spirit having once truly tasted the heavenly sweetness thereof, all the world is not able quite and clean to remove him from it; but he striveth with
himself to hope against all reason of believing.” (Habits 43)

Hooker’s writing about grace illustrates what Shuger terms a “subjective contradiction”: “the simultaneous experience of doubt and intense, illogical desire, characterizing religious belief. […] He trusts in God despite the evidence and believes ‘against all reason,’ because he ‘tastes’ God’s goodness and falls in love” (Habits 43). There it is: the believer “falls in love,” against all reason and against all evidence.\(^8\) This paradox is what Shakespeare expresses through Bottom in his waking speech – indeed, it is the paradox Bottom expresses even before he wholly enters into this magical moment, for his reply to the fairy queen immediately following her unexpected appearance and her sudden declaration of love is, “Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays” (3.1.135-37).

Bottom is, unwittingly, successful in expressing how he feels by not expressing it. “Conversio,” writes Brian Cummings, “defies the ordinary usages of language to express it, for it is a moment without preposition, even without syntax” (413). This is a sentiment also described by Marshall when discussing Petrarchan poetry: “since love offers the most intensely personal of experiences and yet finds form and expression in the terms of a shared and recycled language, a gap opens between the individual subject and the world of words. Petrarchanist poetry is situated in this gap” (Shattering 58). Elsewhere in Shakespeare, this same linguistic failure occurs during moments of extreme joy. “Increasingly in the later Shakespeare,” writes Stevens, “this wonder, this extremity of emotion, is registered in figures of speech that seem paradoxically to deny the very thing they extol, as though the wonder were too much. The story of Perdita’s recognition is so wonderful, we are told, that it ‘lames report to follow it and undoes description to do it’ ([Winter’s Tale] 5.2.55-56), that is, it undoes description to describe it” (“Subversion” 385).

Undoubtedly, Bottom’s encounter defies logic and transcends language. This is something that Protestant theologians constantly emphasize: “None knoweth, but he

---

\(^8\) The further paradox is that once the believer does experience grace against all evidence, he or she then sees the evidence of God’s love in his or her own heart.
that hath felt them,” Lancelot Andrewes asserts about God’s comforts (that is, grace). And Martin Luther asks how anyone can know what faith means until he has experienced it himself: “Many people have considered Christian faith an easy thing, and not a few have given it a place among the virtues. They do this because they have not experienced it and have never tasted the great strength there is in faith. It is impossible to write well about it or to understand what has been written about it unless one has at one time or another experienced the courage which faith gives a man when trials oppress him” (1). The point is that these transcendent moments, like love, can be understood only intuitively; they are a matter for the heart to know in its own way and not something that the intellect can comprehend. Again, we see how Shakespeare undermines the “wisdom” that Theseus preaches. The Duke asserts that “Lovers and madmen have such seething brains, / Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend / More than cool reason ever comprehends” (5.1.4-6). It is important to note the subtle distinction between “apprehend” and “comprehend”. Of the two words, “apprehend” connotes a fuller understanding of a concept, one that is felt emotionally as well as grasped cognitively. Curiously, another meaning of “comprehend” is to “enclose or to include in or within limits” (definition 9). This, too, works against the kind of transcendent, otherworldly encounter Shakespeare articulates through Bottom, and furthermore it suggests that lovers and madmen, and poets, have access to eternal concepts and experiences that those who rely solely on “cool reason” cannot access. After all, it is the “poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,” that glances “from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven” (5.1.12, my emphasis). This reference to “heaven” further underscores the fact that imagination works as the instrument of Christian grace.

Elsewhere in his book, Brian Cummings states that “Sixteenth-century protestant theology seems constantly to risk the impossibility of grace. It attempts to place grace somewhere almost beyond language, to wrest some sense from those places where syntax apparently breaks beneath its unbearable lightness” (322). In Cymbeline, this
linguistic failure is expressed by Innogen as she anticipates her reunion with her beloved Posthumous: “Then, true Pisanio,” she says to Posthumous’ servant, “Who long’st like me to see thy lord, who long’st-- / O let me bate – but not like me – yet long’st / But in a fainter kind – O not like me, / For mine’s beyond beyond” (3.2.52-56). Her halting speech and self-interruptions bump up against the limits of her ability to communicate her feelings, which is ultimately expressed as a kind of transcendent and infinite – beyond infinite – interior longing. Even Bottom himself circles around this impossibility of language, not only by his own self-interruptions before he misquotes Corinthians, but again when he cancels out his own narrative. He at once promises to “discourse wonders” and yet refuses to give up “a word” of his experience – an experience during which he was, according to Starveling, “transported.” It matters not that neither Starveling nor Bottom are cognizant of the fact that their language engages with a sacred discourse. We are supposed to laugh at their silly adoption of elevated rhetoric for comic purpose.10 Yet the play as whole speaks to “something of great constancy” as it continuously conflates the “strange and admirable.”

While this play is most definitely a comedy, in it there are hints of darker things. In particular, Robin repeatedly references death, corpses, and ghosts. In Act 3 scene 2, Robin speaks of the “ghosts” and “damned spirits” who haunt the night at the very moment that Oberon is orchestrating peace and concord for the Athenian lovers and a personal reconciliation with Titania. More striking is Robin’s epilogue:

   Now the hungry lion roars,
   And the wolf behowls the moon,
   Whilst the heavy ploughman snores,

---

10 Yet Bottom’s “dream” with Titania does not end tragically for the weaver because his experience with the queen of the fairies does not change who he is. This is in part because from the start of his escapade, Bottom does not pause to acquaint himself with any reason for this encounter. Nor does he take the further and necessary step in integrating his fantastic experience with Titania into his rational mind; that is, Bottom’s experience is “fancy ungoverned by reason” (“Milton” 45). Bottom has a flexible identity, one that is unique in the play, and so his capacity to accept Titania’s love for him is another example of the weaver’s dynamic sense of self. We see this flexibility at play not only in the way he accepts without question his role as a fairy’s concubine, but also in his eagerness to play every role in the mechanicals’ production of “Pyramus and Thisbe.”
All with weary task fordone.
Now the wasted brands do glow
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,
Puts the wretch that lies in woe
In remembrance of a shroud.
Now it is the time of night
That the graves, all gaping wide,
Every one lets forth his sprite
In the churchway paths to glide;
And we fairies that do run
By the triple Hecate’s team
From the presence of the sun,
Following a darkness like a dream,
Now are frolic. (5.1.362-77)

Puck’s “dream” here is remarkably different from the midsummer “dream” that the four lovers experience, and from the “rare vision” that Bottom recounts upon waking. Robin’s vision is of a natural and a spiritual world that flees the light. These are the same spirits and ghouls which Puck references in Act 3, and which Oberon assertively distinguishes himself from: “But we are spirits of another sort,” Oberon reminds Puck – or perhaps this is even an admonishment, since it is Robin Goodfellow who is allured and delighted by the chaos of these “tricks.” And it is Oberon who brings order to the fairy and natural world and who reigns in Puck’s frolicsomeness.¹¹

Puck’s epilogue expresses the danger of imagination out of control; “frolic” connotes both playfulness and pranks, like the “tricks of strong imagination” that Theseus warns us about. Moreover, Robin’s ghoulish references are included in this work in part because they demonstrate just how closely love and death are linked together, not because love and death are similar in kind of experience, but because both push the subject against something ultimate. It is the fullness of being experienced through love that is worth dying for. Indeed, the whole tension of the play hinges upon the

¹¹ If imagination causes one to suppose a “bush a bear,” Robin’s speech suggests that that fear may not be entirely unfounded – there is perhaps more danger in ignoring the unlikely possibility that a bear is a bush.
fact that Hermia is threatened with death if she persists in her relationship with Lysander.

1.3 Love, Self-shattering, and Death

Love and death are, of course, if not opposites, at least two entirely different categories of the human experience. Love is worth dying for, and the certainty of death makes love all the more meaningful in its fragility. Yet to an individual’s sense of self and subjective control, love and death do sometimes look eerily similar. In the early modern period, writes Marshall, passion or lovesickness had the capacity to “disrupt personal autonomy” (56). “The vogue of Petrarchanism,” she goes on to argue, “together with early modern concerns about lovesickness documents the currency in the Renaissance of a conception of love involving a loss of self, an emotional economy acknowledging, however painfully, an undercurrent of desire for suffering in the erotic experience” (57). The loss of self experienced through love, she goes on to demonstrate, refers to “an unsettling of the self” (68). Passion in love names “something more than and other than pleasure”; Marshall connects this to Lacan’s reading of joiussance because Lacan describes the experience of passion as ‘beyond the pleasure principle’ […] because it ‘implies precisely the acceptance of death’” (98, original italics). My interest with Marshall has less to do with her use of psychoanalytic theory and more to do with how she connects love with the experience of something that is inexpressible – though something that poetry constantly attempts to express. Marshall makes an important theoretical movement when she defines subjectivity by looking at the subject through the lens of death and love. Throughout this project, I focus primarily on moments when lovers die, and based on Marshall’s Lacanian reading one could see love as being “beyond the pleasure principle,” just as it is “beyond beyond.” Love, however, is the antithesis of death; it is the fullness of being. The power of Shakespeare’s tragic lovers – including the potential tragedy of the sonnet speaker’s love for the young man – is that they are willing to die for their love. Their plentitude is experienced in dying for the right reason, not, as Marshall

---

12 “Personal autonomy” in the renaissance is an admittedly fraught concept. Marshall’s study responds primarily to the New Historicism conflation of subjectivity and power, and contests the idea that literary texts are congruent with culture (56).
argues, in an acceptance of the void of death itself. And by overlaying these moments of love with sacred language, Shakespeare, like Hooker following Augustine, makes the unseen interrelation between love and understanding a symbiotic relationship.

Like Bottom, Hermia awakes from her own dream – this time a real one – in the woods and is entirely bewildered for a moment. Her dream reveals the unsettling of the self that occurs in love:

   Help me, Lysander, help me! Do thy best
   To pluck this crawling serpent from my breast!
   Ay me, for pity. What a dream was here?
   Lysander, look how I do quake with fear.
   Methought a serpent ate my heart away,
   And you sat smiling at his prey.
   Lysander – what, removed? (2.2.151-57)

What a strange dream for Hermia to have at this time: she is in the woods with her lover, escaping the threats of both death from her father and of marrying Demetrius, yet her dream has nothing whatever to do with these real and imminent threats. Instead, she dreams that her demise is connected to her beloved. And at this point in the play, Hermia still believes that Lysander is her true lover, so the image of him smiling as a serpent preys on her heart is truly unsettling. Yet this illustrates exactly the tension between love and loss of self: her innermost self is eaten away, devoured by an other. True, one could argue that since it is a serpent that eats Hermia’s heart and not Lysander himself, the intersubjective exchange that I am arguing is at the heart of love relationships may seem indeed tenuous. An “unsettling of the self,” however, is clearly at play, as is a brush with death. It is striking that Lysander – who was not on stage to hear Hermia report her dream – also uses the same image of a serpent at his breast when he later speaks to Hermia: “Hang off, thou cat, thou burr; vile thing, let loose, / Or I will shake thee from me like a serpent” (3.2.260-261). Of

---

13 But also, how appropriate this dream is: it is prophetic in that her unconscious seems to have anticipated the drugged Lysander’s betrayal and desertion of her because of his newfound “love” for Helena.

14 Peter Holland notes that this verse alludes to St. Paul’s exploits in Acts 28:5: he “’shook off the beast [‘viper’ in Bishop’s Bible] into the fire’” (Holland, footnote 202).
course here Lysander is under the love-potion’s influence, so the metaphor is of him attempting to extricate the “serpent” from himself, not of it overcoming him. The connotations, though, are the same: Hermia has her teeth in Lysander, just as the serpent in her dream had its fangs inside of her. In both cases, the image is disturbing. And in both cases, the image suggests the risk of living surrendering to the beloved.

Bottom – again, unwittingly – articulates this idea in his waking speech: “it shall be call’d Bottom’s Dream,” he says of the song he intends Peter Quince to compose about his experiences, “because it hath no bottom” (4.1.211-212). In a single line Shakespeare has Bottom both assert and negate his subjectivity, and Bottom himself connects it to something eternal and unfathomable: “it hath no bottom.” Here even the silly weaver apprehends that he experienced an ineffable mystery in the forest. By giving embodiment and voice to these moments in the theatre and by speaking about love through sacred rhetoric, Shakespeare “bodies forth the forms of things unknown” and communicates something of love and something of divinity through poetry and the stage.

It is not my argument, however, that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is in any way a Christian play. It is not a divine love, after all, that bewilders Bottom, but the eroticized and physical love of Titania; and it is not “every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” that Bottom craves for daily bread (Matt. 4:4), but rather just some “good dry oats,” “sweet hay,” and “dried peas.” The play is triumphantly material. “From Shakespeare’s point of view,” writes Stevens, Christian ideas and allusions are integrated into the play “not because the play conceals a hidden religious meaning but much more likely because Shakespeare simply wants to enlist the potent emotional association of the biblical language in intensifying a theatrical effect” (387 “Subversion”). My project is to show how this is evident in representations of love: Shakespeare uses the ecstasy of religious devotion to suggest the intensity of secular love. This is a theoretical connection that Marshall explores in her own work: “Burton’s perception that the psychic emotional and physical experiences of lovesickness and religious despair were similar indicates an early modern sense of the congruency between erotic and religious jouissance” (81). Marshall’s way of
thinking informs my reading of love and Shakespeare, but her focus is limited when she links only erotic love to this type of transcendent moment; the relationship between Lear and Cordelia, for instance, is characterized by intense pleasure, wordless emotion – both pain and joy – and something sacred and ineffable without ever being sexualized.

I want to leave my specific discussion of Bottom here, since what interests me in this project has to do with otherworldly experiences of love that are in many ways akin to Bottom’s moment, but unlike what happens with Bottom, what I shall be working to show is what this type of experience does to a character’s subjectivity. Shuger writes that the Protestant believer experienced a “participatory rather than a rational and objectifying link between the self and reality. […] The fact that all men desire infinite happiness, a happiness not given in this world, itself guarantees the existence of something ‘above the capacity of reason,’ something ‘divine and heavenly’ capable of satisfying that desire” (Habits 44). She goes on to write:

the focus on subjectivity in fact intensifies precisely insofar as intellectual assent, the sort of consciousness that can be expressed propositionally, becomes drained of significance. The intellectual “contents” of faith become subordinate to affective inwardness – to the longings, griefs, anxieties, appetites that constitute life lived in the absent-presence of God. To the extent that faith is not propositional belief but a theocentric emotionality – an overriding need for God that may subsist with conscious disbelief in His existence or His love – it incorporates desolation as it incorporates joy. (Habits 81)

Bottom is not inward-looking enough to go through these types of longings, though he does, seemingly unconsciously, express what Cummings calls a “conversio” moment by negating himself – “it hath no bottom” – at the very moment he reaches for a way to reaffirm his encounter through some sort of narrative, that is, Quince’s ballad “Bottom’s Dream.” Marshall argues that “various discourses give evidence to a concept of the self in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century England as not merely volatile but paradoxically affirmed in its moments of self-canceling or shattering. […] In fact, the contradiction between autonomy and instability defined the
emerging subject” (14). “In its strongest form,” she writes, “dissolving the self through submission to God is actually constitutive of identity” (20). As Marshall analyzes the popularity and purpose of John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, she goes on to argue that “John Foxe encouraged readers to identify with martyrs in their acts of personal dissolution, as a strategic means to redefine identity in terms of religious devotion. […] Not only are grief and pain transformed into glory, but the martyrs achieve their identity through this paradoxical act of submission” (21).

For Lancelot Andrewes, one of the period’s most powerful Anglican bishops and influential preachers, one’s self-identity must be dissolved and incorporated into God, for it is only then that one can experience grace. Knowledge of God “becomes possible,” writes Shuger, “only when subject participates in its object, eradicating the distance between them. […] God cannot be known as an object external to the knower; only when He is inwardly present can He be perceived without” (*Habits* 64). We see intersubjective inwardness clearly in a sermon Andrewes preached on Good Friday, 1597. In it, Andrewes’s logic shows first how the spear which pierced Christ’s heart served the double purpose of showing that his flesh was wounded and, more importantly, how Christ’s spirit was pierced, too:

> the *Speare-point*, which pierced and went through his very *heart* it selfe: for, of that wound, of the wound in his *heart*, is this spoken (*Jo. 19.34.*) Therefore trans, in heer a *transcendent*; through and through: through skin and flesh; through hands and feet; through side an heart and all: the deadliest and deepest wound, and of highest gradation. […] So that, we extend this *piercing* of CHRIST further, then to the visible gash in His side, even to a *piercing* of another nature, whereby, not His *heart* onely was stabbed, but his very *spirit* wounded too. (125, original italics)

---

15 What Marshall is really contesting here is the assumption that the early modern period witnessed the emergence of the modern subject that Stephen Greenblatt outlines in *Renaissance Self-fashioning*. The omitted section of this passage reads: “The degree to which early modern subjects were conflicted in their emergent selfhood, not just unstable structurally but dynamically and often simultaneously pulled toward opposite extremes of dissolution and coherence, has been downplayed by humanism’s developmental emphasis” (14).
This spear, significantly, has two points according to Andrewes’s formulations, for when a believer looks upon Christ’s broken body and apprehends that it is metonymic for his spirit, the believer’s heart (read: spirit) is pierced itself:

But now then, if we look in Eum, into Him, we shall see yet a greater thing, which may raise us in comfort, as farre as the other cast us downe. Even the bowels of compassion and tender love, whereby he would and was content to suffer all this for our sakes. […] Recogitare, to thinke upon it, over and over againe, as it were to dwell in it for time. Looke upon Him that is pierced; and with looking upon Him, be pierced thy selfe. (130-131)

There are a number of ideas and metaphors that deserve careful attention in this passage. Andrewes, first of all, emphasizes the fact that we should look not just at Christ, but into him. Further, we should dwell in this moment, in this penetrating posture for a time. In a sense, then, we become the spear that pierces his heart and pierces his spirit; we are to enter into even this inner space of Christ’s being, even as it was because of our sinfulness that Christ had to be pierced in the first place. The paradox that Andrewes articulates is that as our gaze penetrates Christ’s heart, the spear in turn penetrates us, so that as a believer dwells in Christ’s heart, Christ in turn comes to dwell in his or hers. And it is this indwelling of Christ in the believer that transforms the believer’s inward-curving subjectivity: “Look upon him, and his heart opened, and from that gate of hope promise thy selfe, and looke for all manner of things that good are. Which our expectation is reduce to these two: The deliverance from the evill of our present miserie: and the restoring to the good of our primitive felicitie” (133). There is a paradox, too, of course, that the very thing that “casts us down,” that is, the image of Christ crucified, also “raises us in comfort,” that is, the knowledge that Christ died because of his compassion and tender love. And this supra-rational folding-in of seemingly self-canceling ideas links us back to the fact that “love and reason keep little company together.”16 Indeed, Christ’s sacrifice

16 This connection back to Bottom brings up another aspect of Andrewes’s language in this sermon. Just as Tyndale repeatedly writes “from the Bottom and low ground of our hearts” in his commentaries on the Epistles, more than once in this sermon does Andrewes use the phrase “the bowells of compassion and tender love.” Indeed, at one point Andrewes goes so far as to conflate Christ’s
defies reason, for this quintessentially selfless act was a moment at once of profound sorrow and profound love: “He was pierced with love, no less than with grief: and it was that wound of love, made him so constantly to endure all the other” (132).

This is a long way from Bottom, but a short span to Leontes. As the king gazes in amazement at the “statue” of his wife, his inward state becomes what he feels hers to be: “Let be, let be. / Would I were dead but that methinks already –” (5.2.61-62). Yet as Leontes continues to stare at his dead wife’s statue, which is the cause of this inward death, he begins to experience restoration through the same medium: “this affliction has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort” (5.2.76-77). In essence, Leontes is inwardly healed because of his looking upon this statue of Hermione; her statue is a remembrance both of how much he deserves to be cast down, and of the tender compassion and love he has for his wife. Significantly, Leontes’ salvation is accomplished through art. Indeed, as he gazes on the statue, Leontes says, “Let no man mock me” (5.2.79), which hearkens back to his statement just a few lines prior where he says, “we are mock’d with art.” Just as the death he believes his wife has suffered enters into his subjective experience, followed by being raised up in comfort – the cordial received by gazing upon her – now that he is aligned with art, he is the potential recipient of others’ mockery.

There is nothing funny about this moment, however. All of the witnesses to Paulina’s “magic” are filled with amazement, not mockery.

Music! Awake her! strike! [Music]
’Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach;
Strike all that look upon with marvel, Come;
I’ll fill your grave up. Stir; nay, come away;
Bequeath to death your numbness; for from him
Dear life redeems you. (5.2.98-103).

physical intestines with this “gut-feeling” of love: “The point of the Speare serves us instead of a key, letting us, through his wounds, see his veerie bowells, the bowells of tender love and most kind compassion” (133). I find the reference to the lower bodily functions curious because it is another example of how something so humble – and low – something, that is, from the “low bottom” (in all meanings of that word) of one’s being is used to describe the most glorious and transcendent moment of self-sacrifice in the Christian story.
Paulina’s speech expresses the abundance of life due to love and redemption – the overabundance of life after death. “I’ll fill your grave up” speaks to the fullness of life in love and its antithesis to death. It is not entirely clear who the “your” is in this sentence. On the one hand, Paulina is clearly referring to Hermione who is now coming back to life; on the other hand, this equally expresses Leontes’ circumstance since he is now returning into life more than Hermione is, for presumably the queen has been living healthily, though in hiding, for the past twenty years, and Leontes, who felt himself responsible for his innocent wife’s and daughter’s deaths, living in a living death. Leontes has been numb and stony-hearted, not Hermione. It is she who redeems Leontes by her life. My reading of these lines is to again illustrate the interplay between love, the sacred, and art, and the ways in which Shakespeare uses each mystery to illuminate our understanding of each of the others.

If we compare what art accomplishes at the end of The Winter’s Tale to how it functions in Act 5 of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the interplay between love, art, and transcendence becomes clearer still. The play that the mechanicals perform for Theseus is in every way ridiculous primarily because the actors in it take their roles literally and because Bottom repeatedly breaks the fourth wall of the theatre in order to disabuse Theseus of any expectations he might have of the performance. Yet equally uninspired are the Duke’s, Lysander’s, and Demetrius’s mean-spirited insults of the players. The point is, Shakespeare gives his audience an example of theatre done wrong – its purpose in the play is more than just to be funny (though it is!): Theseus refers to the title of the play as “wondrous strange”; his language engages with “strange” events that took place during the night in the woods and thus refers to the theme of “great constancy” that Hippolyta intuits. Indeed, Theseus asks of the

---

17 While I do not want to give Bottom undue credit for cleverness, the fact that he responds boldly to Theseus’ banal comments about the play reinforces Shakespeare’s intolerance for the Duke’s response to theatre as well as underscores his mockery of those who cannot enter into the imaginative space of the theatre with a willing suspension of disbelief. Indeed, though Theseus and the other men interrupt the players rudely throughout their performance, he is given no opportunity to retort to Bottom’s defiant correction of his assumptions: “The wall, methinks, being sensible, should curse again,” says Theseus. “No, in truth, sir, he should not,” Bottom responds. “‘Deceiving me’ is Thisbe’s cue. She is to enter now, and I am to spy her through the wall. You shall see, it will fall pat as I told you.” (5.1.180-185). Both the Duke and the weaver miss the point of a play. The audience, one hopes, does not.
title of the play, “How shall we find the concord of this discord?” (5.1.60); Hippolyta understands that when “minds are transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy’s images, / And grows to something of great constancy”: *Midsummer’s* engagement with imagination, love, and enchantment is “strange and admirable.” Hippolyta’s “concord” of minds transfigured together is the response to the role of the theatre. The mechanical’s farce of the sublime and tragic love story of Pyramus and Thisbe throws into relief the power that art can have when approached with imagination. When Puck enters the stage again and delivers the epilogue that reaffirms the “dream” of the theatre, Shakespeare asks the audience to think intentionally about the power that “the lover, the madman, and the poet” have to create a new perspective of the material and rational world.

### 1.4 Joy: The Release of Self in the Fullness of Love

Surrender to the beloved through love, like surrender to God in faith, entails a death of the self, and yet this is the pathway towards the other which then opens a space for profound joy. Shuger writes of Christianity that “participation presupposes a radical disenchantment; it functions precisely as a response to feelings of distance. The need to affirm some contact, some interpenetration of self and divine other, arises from the perception both of inner desolation and the forsakenness of history” (*Habits* 87). That is, she goes on to say, “the boundaries of self are experienced as fluid and permeable, so that God or Christ or the Kingdom or Satan seems to dwell within the heart, but the heart is also conscious of its solitude” (*Habits* 90). Here, of course, Shuger is speaking of one’s experience with an absent God rather than of a transcendent conversion moment, and it is moments of joy, not despair, that I am interested in exploring in this project; but the point I would like to emphasize is that Shuger writes of the Protestant religious experience as an “interpenetration of self and divine other” (*Habits* 87). In love, one loses oneself in the other. The mystery of salvation, writes Paul, is “Christ in you” (Col. 1:27) which, of course, simultaneously means that you are “in Christ,” as Paul repeatedly says throughout his letters. In Cumming’s words, “God’s justia is not something which objectively judges man but something which
subjectively enters and redeems him” (68). Shakespeare uses this model to show us what happens in the moment of profound human, not divine, love; that is, these ideas are interesting in Shakespeare’s works because they show that these “holy” moments do not need to be “godly” at all. In instances of astonishing and transformative love, such as Leontes’ love for Hermoine; Romeo and Juliet’s love and the “mutual flame” of the Phoenix and Turtle; and Innogen and Posthumous’ love; even Lear’s love for Cordelia, Shakespeare takes the religious and makes it secular; he takes the divine and makes it human.

The reformers, writes Shuger, “constantly speak of Christ (or the Spirit) as being ‘in’ the soul, as the radical center of personality and Holy Ghost in the machine, a notion that both defies spatial location and disclaims the sense of individual autonomy traditionally ascribed to the Renaissance” (Habits 11). This is distinct, she argues, from the physical indwelling of Christ in the believer that results from participation in the Eucharist. Hooker uses “the traditional language of mystical participation, indwelling, and real presence” but it suddenly reemerges – yet not with reference to mediated sacramental action but to God’s direct contact with the individual soul. Hooker thus apparently retains mystical participation but, by a slight shift, interiorizes it […] a “participation of the grace, efficacy, merit or virtue of his body and blood”; he “inhabits” and “dwells” in the recipient. A “divine and mystical kind of union…maketh us one with him… there ensueth a kind of transubstantiation in us.” (Habits 40)

Brian Cummings writes of Donne’s religious conceits that they “conjure up the bizarre metaphysics of this most orthodox of conversions. They reveal the submerged, impossible metaphor in the concept of conversion, of an alteration in chemical state, an alchemy of person” (371). Love destroys one’s identity, but it also creates a new one.

Of course, I am not suggesting that in Shakespeare’s imagination perfect, transcendent love is some sort of idealized and attainable experience. Frequently, as is the case with the Phoenix and Turtle, with Romeo and Juliet, and with Lear and Cordelia,
selfless love ends in death. Yet this death of self, too, as I have shown, is modeled on the Protestant experience. Shuger writes that “for both Hooker and Andrewes the central problem of faith is not sin but absence” (Habits 73). That is, the believer may have an initial experience of grace, but this moment is not sustained for the convert. The everyday experience of the Christian is that of an absent, even an unloving, God. “Faith is structured,” writes Shugar, “by deferment and contradiction, but the logic of deferment does not eddy out into a vortex of endless expectations, but circles back on itself to declare that what is deferred is also present” (Habits 86). The same can be said for these moments of profound love; even the longing for such a moment works to constitute one’s identity (as is the case, for instance, with Hamlet, who becomes one of the most human of humans precisely through his longing to uncover his own identity as he wrestles with what “being” is). But more importantly, what Shakespeare’s characters show us is that if these moments are to be sustained and find a conclusion, they have their end in another world. This is something that Fernie also writes about in his Introduction. Spirituality, he states, is distinct from religion: “[t]hough it is religion’s heart and inspiration, spirituality precedes religion and may well take place outside it. Spirituality is an experience of truth, and of living in accordance with truth, but it is concerned with the truth not of this world but of a world that has not yet and perhaps never will come to be. Spirituality is a mode of opposition to what is” (9). While I am skeptical of Fernie’s idealized notions of spirituality and truth and find his notion of subjective “truthiness” unconvincing, the point that he makes about a spiritual moment occurring outside this world is one that holds true for instances of transcendent love in Shakespeare. The main idea here, however, is that since a conversion/spiritual experience so wholly transforms an individual and links him or her with the divine, it is only fitting, as Shakespeare so often shows, that this link is made perfect in not in death, but through death to eternity. This not only gives weight to my argument that Shakespeare models moments of love on a Christian paradigm, but also helps to achieve dramatic unity since it offers such a fitting conclusion to the tragedies that deal with these issues.

As I have mentioned above, A Midsummer Night’s Dream closes with Robin’s references to death, which is a curious way to end such a “ridiculous” story. My
suspicion, though, is that Puck references the grave because the resolution of the play, though tidily closed with marriages, is unsatisfying. I am thinking in particular here about how Hermia and Helena are treated after their beloveds have been restored to them. “Methinks I see these things with parted eye,” says Hermia upon waking, “When everything seems double” (4.1.188-89). Helena expresses a similar sentiment: “And I have found Demetrius like a jewel, / Mine own and not mine own” (4.1.190-91). Both women reveal that the quality of their love has been changed as a result of the confusion during the night. Hermia’s “parted eye” suggests that there is some division now between her and Lysander. Moreover, this could be read as “parted I,” which would connote in even stronger terms how Hermia’s identity was once constituted by her love for Lysander, but now is ruptured because of his betrayal of her in the woods. In like manner, Helena’s tentative “Mine own and not mine own” shows us that her relationship to Demetrius falls quite short of the transformative potential that love relationships can hold. Demetrius is at once hers and not hers, so she is at once linked with him and not. And remarkably, during the entire fifth Act, after the conflicts have all been resolved and the marriage rites performed, both Hermia and Helena are silent, though they are on stage for the entire Act. This silence, more than anything, suggests that their identities have been taken from them, and not in the manner described by the early Reformers where one is shattered by Christ’s love in order to be made whole and perfect again in a union with him. Instead, here there is seemingly no whole and perfect reconstitution of themselves: their husbands have silenced their voices. Yet this unequal relationship, this submergence of the wives’ voices into their husbands is why the play has a happy ending, an ending, that is, which reestablishes the status quo through a subversion-containment maneuver.

In Cymbeline, however, something new happens. The final scene of Cymbeline sees the start of a whole new era because the subversion-containment paradigm is transformed into a subversion-expansion paradigm: the play moves from an economy

---

18 This calls to mind the unity that Lysander asserts exists between Hermia and himself before Robin’s interference: “One heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth” (2.2.48). The contrast between this unity and seeing things with “parted eye” is striking.
of power to an economy of grace. Further, the interplay between love, the sacred, and art that I have discussed above comes full circle in *Cymbeline* where the poet’s eye – Shakespeare’s play itself – not only glances from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, but also brings the two worlds into a celestial conjunction. The play’s conclusion, that is, brings the paradox of Christianity’s “now/not yet” into fulfillment as grace is offered to all offenders in the play just as Christ’s nativity occurs offstage during the historic moment of the play.

### 1.5 Chapter Summary

The arc of my research moves from a discussion of Shakespeare’s Sonnets and how the sonnet speaker’s subjectivity is constituted through his desire for the beautiful young man, and how, specifically, in Sonnets 125 to 126 his voice transitions from being located within the self of the sonnet speaker to a transcendent and eternal perspective that can perceive the drama of love within the frame of the cosmos. Sonnet 126, in other words, enacts the movement from earth to heaven when the speaker moves beyond his own desiring self to a full expression of selfless love. This movement, I argue, is a terrifying one for the speaker since it necessitates a radical self-sacrifice, but it also brings about a fuller, less anxious, expression of love and self-identity. If we take the Sonnet Sequence as authorial, however, Shakespeare does not end it with this ideal selflessness but rather returns to embodiment, desire, and gratification in the Dark Lady sonnets. Significantly, some of the dark lady sonnets are framed in more explicitly Christian terms than are the sonnets to the beloved young man. The desire – yes, even the love, too – the speaker feels for the dark lady is aligned with Hell, not with anything celestial or transcendent, though they do indeed evoke a spiritual response. More important, though, is how Shakespeare constitutes self-identity in the Dark Lady sub-sequence; in these sonnets he becomes more and more “Will” as he moves into relationship with the dark lady because their union is characterized by gratification, not by selflessness. It would seem, then, that the Sonnets privilege love that is not sacred because the speaker desires his subjectivity to be located in himself. Perfect love requires the surrender of selfhood in
order for it to achieve its fullness, and that is a terrible price to pay. Desire, on the other hand, endlessly constitutes the self through the posture of endlessly desiring.

This dissertation looks next at the short poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and *Romeo and Juliet*. I put these texts into conversation with each other because they achieve the same transcendent fullness of perfect love. Of course, in both instances this moment is fleeting. Indeed, part of the power in these two instances of selfless love is their temporal brevity. Another part of the power of Romeo and Juliet’s and the Phoenix and Turtle’s love is its eternal nature. Shakespeare integrates the explosive moment of self-sacrifice with the infinitude of time and space in which this moment continues to occur. This is a paradox, obviously. In both texts Shakespeare provides a crowd of witnesses to the lovers’ tragedies, and it is in part incumbent upon these mourners to make meaning of the loves and the deaths of these lovers. That is, within his art, Shakespeare incorporates a crowd whose purpose it is to interpret the events: in the case of the Phoenix and Turtle, the procession of mourners gather around the urn itself to offer their prayers for the birds and to meditate on the inadequacy of reason to apprehend “the truth of love”; at the conclusion of *Romeo and Juliet*, a similar thing occurs with the Montague and Capulet families and with the Prince who are left to make sense of the tragic deaths of Verona’s youth. The prince has them gather around the dead bodies of lovers in a way that is similar to avian mourners who gather around the urn. Moreover, the surviving family members promise to create a statue with the intent to honour and commemorate the hapless lovers. In this way, the experience of making meaning out of the self-sacrifices of these lovers is crystallized in a form of ritualistic and artistic ceremony. Shakespeare incorporates the artistic form within his artistic form and shows that it is a way of apprehending the ineffable. The mystery of the “truth of love” – its embodied-temporal and its spiritual-eternal nature – is known through the mystery of art.

I conclude the body this dissertation with a careful examination of *Cymbeline*. Above I have discussed how this play collapses the distinction between what Shugar terms the “deferment and contradiction” of Christianity. This is a critical aspect of the play that I explore in great length in what follows. Also critical is how Shakespeare
achieves this unity of theatre and reality: to this end, the genre of the romance itself comes under examination. I argue that Shakespeare moves his play away from the grittiness of reality and towards the fantastic in order to move it closer to the ineffable. *Cymbeline*, as a self-consciously artistic play – indeed, even the language and poetry itself is both more sophisticated and more elusive than other plays – comes closer to communicating the mystery of love because it is self-consciously artistic.

The couple that is at the heart of this play, Innogen and Posthumous, both move through love to the experience of self-sacrifice for their beloved, yet in this play Shakespeare continues the trajectory of love and locates the lovers “beyond beyond.” Love still requires a terrifying self-sacrifice that wholly undoes one’s identity, yet the person that one becomes after turning away from one’s desires is more complete, richer and more authentically the self than before it is sacrificed. That is, in this play Innogen and Posthumous – through a divinely ordered plot – are gifted the abundance of life after death. And their love is the catalyst for the outpouring of grace that occurs in the final scene. Thematically and stylistically, *Cymbeline* brings the ideas I have outlined in this introduction into redemption and fulfillment.

A reading of *King Lear* concludes this research project. In *Lear* Shakespeare contrasts the magnitude of power and authority with the humble materiality of human frailty, and he suggests that the scope of human feeling is grander than international statecraft, more absolute than worldly authority. I discuss *Lear* in brief and only in my conclusion because, first of all, an in-depth analysis of *Lear* would have handily overwhelmed the concerns of my research inquiry, and secondly – and more importantly – unlike the other plays I analyze, *Lear* does not focus on romantic love, but rather on the bonds between parents and children. *Lear* reflects back upon the intersections between love and subjectivity I analyze in the body of my research, and it looks forward to new conceptions of humanity, grace, and the world as it could be.
2 "Mutual Render": Love and Subjective Fullness and Loss in Sonnets 125 and 126

2.1 The Subject is the Subject

“Love offers the most intensely personal of experiences,” Cynthia Marshall writes, “and yet finds form and expression in the terms of a shared and recycled language, a gap opens between the individual subject and the world of words. Petrarchist poetry is situated in this gap” (Shattering 58). The Sonnets, perhaps more than other work by Shakespeare, explore the intersections between love and subjectivity. Indeed, Joel Fineman argues that “the subjectivity in the sequence is already its literary subject matter” (83, italics original). The poet-lover’s subjectivity is constituted through his love for his beloved, the young man, yet ultimately the Sonnets suggest that such ideal and perfect love is too all encompassing, too overwhelming, to be sustained. The intersubjective exchange that is at the core of the mystery of love is the subject of many of the Sonnets, and here again Shakespeare meshes love and the divine with each other in his poetry. Yet the speaker in the Sonnets steps away from the type of subjective expansion towards which A Midsummer Night’s Dream gestures; the Sonnets do not accomplish salvation or an experience of something that transcends the ordinary for the poet-lover. More precisely, what Shakespeare’s Sonnets illustrate is that transcendence, the experience of something “beyond beyond,” is something to be longed for, but only to be longed for; that is, the actual experience of perfect love is wonderful but also terrible since it culminates in communion with the beloved, and through this communion the self is lost in the oblivion of love’s bliss.

In this chapter I refer extensively to both Fineman and Marshall in order to frame my argument concerning the speaker’s subjective identity that is formed in the Sonnets. My argument rests on the fact that Shakespeare at once upholds this ideal of mutual subjective indwelling to show how the speaker is drawn into a blissful state of “not being” and at the same time doubts the very foundation the bliss is built upon; that is, he questions the value of transcendent love. In my reading, Shakespeare both is and is
not orthodox when it comes to the desire to dissolve the self into the identity of the Ideal. The poet-lover desires to experience the bliss of a subjective consummation with his beloved, and so his identity is formed through this desire for self-dissolution, but this goal must remain desire and wish. “For Saint Augustine,” writes John Freccero, “consciousness begins in desire. To discover the self is to discover it as in some sense lacking, absent to itself, and desire is the soul’s reaching out to fill the void” (35). The subject, in other words, is constituted not through self-shattering or through conjoining himself with his beloved, but through the dynamic place of doubt and insecurity, of agony and of joy, that characterizes the condition of being in love. I shall start my analysis, then, with a more orthodox view, one based on the assumption that, as Fineman says, the consummation of this relationship, the entry into a state of bliss, is a mystery “devoutly to be wished,” followed by a deeper exploration of the Sonnet’s ambiguities that problematize this orthodox view. The more nuanced reading does not discount the orthodoxy that upholds the mystery of love as something that is desired; rather, I believe it calls the whole foundation of love into question by suggesting that, perhaps, bliss should not be achieved.

Since my argument hinges upon the claim that Shakespeare models his representation of secular love in part upon a Christian’s relationship with God, it is important to establish the connections between the Sonnets and the Protestant faith. There are many biblical and liturgical allusions that punctuate the Sonnets, both in the young man and the dark lady subsequences. Some deal explicitly with questions of faith, such as Sonnet 146, “Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,” or Sonnet 62, “Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye.” Others use Christian references to speak about love in a more nuanced manner; Sonnet 108, for instance, references Protestant corporate worship and the nature of the Godhead to characterize the poet-lover’s relationship to the young man:

like prayers divine,
I must each day say o’er the very same,
Counting no old thing old, thou mine, I thine,
Even as when I first hallowed thy fair name.
So that eternal love in love’s fresh case
Weighs not the dust and injury of age. (108.5-10)

Here the beloved is cast in the same role as God, for, obviously, it is God’s name that is “hallowed” in the Lord’s Prayer. Thus in this poem the poet-lover says prayers to his beloved in the same way that English parishioners would have repeatedly recited the same corporate prayers from *The Book of Common Prayer*. With the phrase, “thou mine, I thine,” Shakespeare expresses the kind of mutual indwelling that occurs when a believer is “in Christ,” which happens at the same moment that Christ enters into the heart of the believer, which I have discussed at length in my Introduction. Moreover, this love is characterized as being “eternal,” a quality that carries with it the full weight of a divine, heavenly experience. In fact, this short passage nicely illustrates the central argument of this project: that Shakespeare uses Christian discourse and theology to represent the experience of human love.

Other examples abound: “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,” Sonnet 105 reads, “Three themes in one, which wondrous scope affords. / Fair, kind, and true have often lived alone, / Which three till now never kept seat in one” (105.1-4, 12-14). Here Shakespeare invokes the mystery of the Trinity, “three themes in one,” to characterize his beloved. In addition to this, Stephen Booth points out how the poem’s diction and repetition of “Fair, kind, and true” and “To one, of one, still such, and ever so” are “litany-like” and are modelled on “forms of Christian devotion.” “Line 4,” he goes on to argue, “echoes the *Gloria Patri*: ‘Glory be to the father, and to the sonne, and to the holy ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shal be: worlde without ende’” (337). In this poem, the beloved is the poet-lover’s Trinity, and so to praise him is, for the poet, a “wondrous” thing. Booth outlines exactly how this poem is in fact idolatrous – even sacrilegious: “the same rhetoric that strengthens the argument for innocence of idolatrous polytheistic beliefs not only testifies to the idolatrous nature of the speaker’s allegiance to the beloved but sharpens the evidence with overtones of active sacrilege” (337). Booth thus highlights precisely the point I make throughout this project: that Shakespeare represents secular love as sacred. Shakespeare’s repeated use of religious language, ideals, and even the felt insecurities inherent in a faith of inward and invisible grace
adds depth and value to the experience of human secular love. Booth is right, then, to argue that Shakespeare flirts with sacrilege since the poems emphasize the divine, but they do so in a way that is atheistic: God is entirely absent from the equation as the beloved holds the place of the divine. There is no referentiality outside of the poem.

John Freccero’s essay on idolatry in Petrarch’s poetics asserts that the poet’s love for Laura is what creates the poet’s identity. That is, the reaching out towards the fulfillment of desire turns inward to the self as desire becomes the creation of the self through poetry: “Petrarch makes of it [the poetic laurel, which is the property of its creator] the emblem of the mirror relationship Laura-Lauro, which is to say, the poetic lady created by the poet, who in turn creates him as poet laureate. This circularity,” Freccero argues, “forecloses all referentiality and in its self-contained dynamism resembles the inner life of the Trinity […]. One could scarcely suppose a greater autonomy. This poetic strategy corresponds, in the theological order, to the sin of idolatry” (37). The idolatry of Laura-Lauro is accomplished by worshipping the reified sign of Laura, who is the creation of the poet: “Petrarch sought to reify his signs, objectify his poetic work, by making his ‘god,’ the lady Laura, the object of his worship” (38). In the end of Petrarch’s Canzoniere, Freccero claims that “Laura’s eyes […] are ‘homicidal mirrors’ in which her narcissistic lover finds spiritual death” (39).

I bring in Freccero’s reading of Petrarch to frame Shakespeare’s “idolatrous” relationship to the young man. The sonneteer’s god, Shakespeare’s speaker repeatedly says, is his beloved: “A god in love, to whom I am confined. / Then give me welcome, next my heaven the best, / Even to thy pure and loving breast” (110.12-14). These lines are intentionally grammatically and thematically dense, but even a superficial reading of them would link God, heaven, and the beloved’s heart together. Further analysis reveals the literariness of 110’s couplet: “the construction of the epithet supports its substance by making the phrase a piece of evidence for the literal truth of the hyperbolic metaphor it asserts: the construction actually confuses the beloved and heaven […] The epithet does not assert the speaker’s idolatry but demonstrates it” (Booth 358). In short, the poet-lover has found religion: it is his
beloved. When we compare this to Freccero’s frame for his reading of Petrarch’s idolatry, the overlaps are clear: “Idols, as the Jews understood them, like fetishes, were a desperate attempt to render presence, a reified sign, one might almost say a metaphor” (37). The difference between Petrarch and Shakespeare is in how the two conceived of this idolatry: while Petrarch’s Canzoniere “ends with a prayer to the Virgin for forgiveness” because Laura “turned him into a man of stone” by being unattainable and a false divinity, Shakespeare ends his subsequence to the young man in a posture of continued faith. That is, in Shakespeare, even though the speaker’s love is framed as idolatry, it is not a sin. Shakespeare’s poetics do not posit an alternative to divinity; they demonstrate that love participates in the same mystery as the divine, and that poetry is the way to communicate desire and love, which is how identity is constituted before it is abandoned in love’s “mutual render.”

A great many of the poems in the Sonnets contain rich grounds for a discussion of love, faith, and identity, but I am choosing to focus my analysis on Sonnet 125, a poem that is relatively unexplored in relation to Shakespeare’s other Sonnets. Like Sonnets 105 and 108, this poem also achieves a kind of thematic trifecta when it comes to the argument of this project: it at once expresses the intersection between love and self-identity, and expresses how love constitutes subjectivity by representing itself through the paradigm of Protestant conversion theology. Sonnet 125 is particularly intriguing, not just in the manner in which it equates love with a sacred phenomenon, but in the way it wrestles with the ramifications of this all-encompassing love. Positioned at the end of the young man sub-sequence, Sonnet 125 performs an experiment in subjective brinkmanship, the end result of which is apparent in Sonnet 126. This end is, specifically, the subjective absence of the poet-lover, which resonates with a theological understanding of identity since in

---

19 The speaker’s faith in his love for the young man is not without its complexities and contradictions, of course, just as the Protestant faith made room for doubts, uncertainties, and hesitations.
20 I am aware of the contention that surrounds the ordering of the Sonnets (see, for instance, Heather Dubrow, “‘Incertainties’” and Katherine Duncan-Jones Shakespeare’s Sonnets). For the purposes of my argument, and because we have no authoritative alternate order, I trust that the sequence as it was published reflects the order and sequence that was given to the original printer.
Christianity a believer’s union with God is experienced through the death of the self. It is my argument, though, that the poetic speaker steps away from this bliss by asserting his own voice through the hesitations and insecurities embedded within the poem, and that this self-doubt is particularly evident in the jarring couplet that closes Sonnet 125. If we take the order of the 1609 quarto as authorial, the sequence ends with an address not to the young man, significantly, but to the dark lady, a figure who clearly is not “fair, kind, and true,” but who is, at least as far as the poet’s own identity goes, a safer love object than the young man – safer, that is, precisely because she is “black,” “cruel,” and “false.” The dark lady, in fact, offers a kind of material resistance to the sacred intersubjective bonds the poet-lover forms with his ideal beloved, the young man. Shakespeare certainly expresses hesitations about loving another so completely and perfectly that one loses oneself in the other, but by engaging in religious discourse he also, more provocatively, questions and challenges Protestant theology which upholds perfect communion with God as an ideal; that is, Sonnets 125 and 126 in particular show that, perhaps, total immersion in the divine may not be such a wonderful thing – or rather that this is a wonderful thing, but wonderfulness itself is a terrible thing to experience.

“In the traditional sonnet,” writes Fineman, “the lover is drawn to his beloved by the force of her ideality. The lover’s goal is a kind of narcissistic identification or unification of subject with object, the identity or unity of which is already prefigured for him in the compact wholeness of the beloved herself. […] This is the logic of Aquinas’ prayer, the way, as Psalm 49 puts it, ‘The sacrifice of praise shall glorify Me, and there is the way by which I will show him the salvation of God’” (18).

Fineman here is concerned with the origin of desire, since it is his central argument that in Shakespeare’s Sonnets the poet-lover gives voice to a new subjectivity, one in which subjective depth is located in the difference between the ideal as it is represented in the poetry of praise and this self-aware speaker who writes after the

---

21 Slavov Zizek writes that the space of the subject as constituted in Pauline theology occurs “‘between the two deaths’ as one who is, as it were, among the living dead”; that is, Zizek locates a Christian’s relation to the symbolic law as a place of tension that “marks the subjectivity of those in Christ, a subjectivity that is a suspension between his death and his resurrection” (qtd. In Holsclaw 164-65, 172, original italics).
poetry of praise: “because the poet identifies himself with this retrospective identity, both a space and a time will open up within the poet for subjective introspection. It is not too much to say, therefore, that the subject of Shakespeare’s sonnets experiences himself as his difference from himself” (25, original italics). Fineman goes on to explain the basic narrative of this intersubjective unity typical in most Petrarchan poetry:

In sacred or in natural terms the motive of desire remains a Mystery. Second, however powerful the power of such a desire, however urgently or painfully experienced is the distance between the subject of desire and the object of desire, nevertheless, in principle, the want of such a desire can be fully satisfied. Defined as need, desire will be answered or requited whenever it is given whatever it might want. For this reason, because it can be satisfied, such desire can cease to be desire: it can become a state of bliss. Again, therefore, we encounter a logic of desire that leads inexorably to what are familiar Christian and Neo-Platonizing idealizing themes: the end of desire conceived as the joining of erotic subject to erotic object; the end of self deriving from a perfect identification of ego with ego ideal. With regard to desire or with regard to the self, this describes a consummation that, necessarily, is devoutly to be wished. (19, original italics)

Marshall, in the *Shattering of the Self*, locates her entire project within the tension that Fineman identifies in this passage, framing it in Christian terms: “the concept of ‘self’ carried a distinctly negative valence in the early modern era; ‘selfhood was a token of the spiritually unregenerate individual’” (20, quoting Jonathon Sawday). Indeed, it is Marshall’s project to demonstrate how personal dissolution was, as Fineman says, a goal that was “devoutly to be wished”: “Both humoral theorists and antitheatricalists conceive of a fearfully unstable subjectivity and invoke the principles of Christian theology to guide and uphold the wayward subject” (*Shattering* 20). Fineman and Marshall identify the subject as formed through desire, and yet the goal of desire is to end desire; its consummation is the obliteration of the subject in the fulfillment of love.
“Yet by a peculiar paradox that bears investigation, the idea of dissolving or destroying selfhood was a desirable goal within orthodox religious discourse” (Marshall 20). Marshall focuses her attention on how, as I discussed in my introduction, the subject was actually *constituted* through the desire for self-destruction; and it is this desire, this posture of reaching towards oblivion, that I see at play within the final sonnets to the young man. The Sonnets create the poetic subject, yet this subject is constantly reaching towards a freedom and transcendence of selfhood that is the desired perfect state of bliss. Shakespeare uses this rigid form, however, to best express the tumult of the speaker’s emotions and psychological agony. Focusing specifically on the couplets, Heather Dubrow writes that they are “another symptom of the anguish and confusion” that the poet’s feelings have caused. “[T]hose couplets that abruptly reverse the ideas in the quatrains and thus disturb the way the sonnet form generally functions reflect the process by which troubling new thoughts disturb the speaker’s emotions. Such couplets are the formal equivalent to the turmoil in the lover’s heart” (“Shakespeare’s Undramatic Monologues” 64). Within the format of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence, Shakespeare gives subjectivity to the lover as he explores the divine character of love. The feelings of love that can take the lover outside of himself are most fully expressed through the most artificial *and artful* poetic form.

### 2.2 Sonnet 125: Love and Sacrifice

Sonnet 125 reads,

> Were ’t aught to me I bore the canopy,
> With my extern the outward honoring,
> Or laid great bases for eternity,
> Which proves more short than waste or ruining?
> Have I not seen dwellers on form and favor
> Lose all and more by paying too much rent,
> For compound sweet forgoing simple savor,
> Pitiful thrivers in their gazing spent?
No, let me be obsequious in thy heart,
And take thou my oblation, poor but free,
Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art,
But mutual render, only me for thee.
Hence, thou suborned informer: a true soul
When most impeached, stands least in thy control.

In this, the penultimate sonnet to the young man, the speaker asserts that his love is authentic in contrast to the “gazers” whose regard for the young man is merely external, superficial and false. It takes up the theme of the poetic speaker’s profound inward relationship with the young man; specifically, the subsequence argues that because of their love for each other, the poet-lover and his beloved live in each others’ innermost hearts. “As easy might I from myself depart, / As from my soul which in thy breast doth lie: / That is my home of love,” reads Sonnet 109 (3-6); “thou mine, I thine, / Even as when I first hallowed thy fair name” the lover states in Sonnet 108 (7-8); “I love thee in such sort / As thou being mine, mine is thy good report,” he asserts in Sonnet 36 (13-14). There are other examples of this “mutual render,” but the way it is described in Sonnet 125 resonates with my project because of its explicitly Christian undertones. These Christian undertones occur most strongly in the third quatrain: “No, let me be obsequious in thy heart, / And take thou my oblation, poor but free.” Booth highlights how the word “oblation” means offering, specifically an offering to God, and “poor but free,” he writes, “suggests the standards of value embodied in the story of the widow’s mite” in which the widow gives the temple only two coins, yet Christ shows that this poor gift was actually of wealth beyond measure since in giving these two coins, she gave all she had (Booth 428). Of crucial importance to my argument here is that the lover’s offering, his self-sacrifice, is no less than his whole self. Thus the story of the widow’s mite which is used by Christ to illustrate the paradigm of holy self-sacrifice is couched in even stronger terms in this poem than it is in the original gospel: the poor widow gives all she has to God, the speaker gives all he is to his beloved: “only me for thee.”

What is more, this self-sacrifice occurs within the beloved’s heart: “let me be obsequious in thy heart.” Booth notes that the “the syntax of the completed
construction in thy heart suggests that in indicates location and is used metaphorically. The sum of the various signals is likely to be a vague understanding of the line that includes being cherished in the beloved’s heart and being concerned with inner essence rather than external physical incidents” (427). Booth rightly highlights the way “the poem’s incidental exercise in different kinds of in has a non-signifying pertinence to the ongoing contrast between externals and inner essence” (428), but I am unconvinced that these repeated “ins” do little more than draw attention to the difference between the lover’s and beloved’s “extern” and “outward” selves. Richard C. McCoy also comments on the focus on inwardness evident in this Sonnet, and his analysis of this theme goes beyond Booth’s observation of the striking interplay of internal and external aspects of the beloved’s character: “the pronoun [thy] is startling because, rather than moving within himself, the poet moves into the beloved, becoming ‘obsequious in thy heart,’ and his devotion is as invasive as it is intimate” (200). McCoy does much to highlight the self-sacrificial, the martyrological, aspects of this poem, yet his analysis leaves a space open to discuss the intersection between self-sacrifice, which is couched in sacred terms, and the subjectivity that the speaker finds through his experience with this transcendent love.

The self-sacrifice that the lover performs occurs in his beloved’s heart. There are Protestant analogues here that should be fleshed out in greater depth. The “oblation” that the lover offers to his beloved, the one that occurs within the beloved’s heart, is reminiscent of how Lancelot Andrewes describes Christ’s and the Christian’s mutual pierced hearts which I discussed in my introduction: “to thinke upon it, over and over againe, as it were to dwell in it for time. Looke upon Him that is pierced; and with looking upon Him, be pierced thy selfe” (131). Further, Booth notes how aspects of this poem allude to the Eucharist:

many of the particulars of this sonnet pertain to Holy Communion (although they pertain to the Eucharist in ways that are independent of their relation to one another in the logic of the sonnet). […] The desired effect of communion is “that we may evermore dwell in him [Christ], and he in us” (BCP, p. 194). […] More significantly, just before the consecration of the host, the minister prays to God the Father, who gave
his only son to suffer on the cross, “who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient Sacrifice, Oration, and Satisfaction for the sins of the whole world” (BCP, p. 194).

In view of the mutual render of line 12, note that communion not only commemorates Christ’s oblation on the cross, but is itself “a sacrifice”; the prayer just quoted is balanced by this prayer immediately after communion is received: “O Lord and heavenly Father, we thy humble servants entirely desire … [thee] to accept this our Sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving … [and] to grant that by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ … we … may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion. And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls, and bodies, to be a … Sacrifice unto thee … (BCP, p. 195). (429)

These references to the Holy Communion that Booth highlights serve to underscore both the sacred and intersubjective quality to the poet-lover’s relationship with the young man. In the end, though Booth’s discussion of the many parallels that exist between this Sonnet and the Eucharist are insightful, he is almost dismissive of these allusions’ thematic weight: “Communion could have been highly efficient in the poem; the contrasts between external accidents and internal essence and between mixed and pure substance have an obvious analogy in the paradoxes of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and impanation, but, though the analogy is apparent if one totes up the various potential Eucharistic references in the sonnet, the analogy is never applied or activated while the poem is in process” (430).22

Yet the extent to which this poem speaks to the fact that the poet dwells within his beloved, has sacrificed his self, his soul, to the young man, shows that the metaphor of

---

22 Critics of Booth often find his exhaustive footnotes “deadening” rather than insightful. Indeed, one of the first reviews of his Edition noted that “[I]t is not that the annotation is deficient or wrong […] But that the total experience was disappointing, deadening in every case. Booth has managed to reduce the meaning of Shakespeare’s sonnets to a cypher” (Roche 443). Similarly, Schallkwyk writes that Booth shows “how the sonnets mean rather than merely what they mean, but was in itself self-defeating” (122, original italics). The observations of Schallkwyk and Roche reflect what I experience when analyzing the Eucharistic elements of Sonnet 125: Booth cites many overlaps between Shakespeare’s word choices and their Christian meanings, but he does not push his historicizing further to discuss meaning.
the Eucharist is actively at play within the Sonnet, though not in the symmetrical or tidy way that Booth seems to be seeking. As I have mentioned above, the theme of mutual indwelling runs throughout the young man subsequence, and it harks back to Nicolas Coffeteau’s assertion that love “‘causeth the soule of him that loves, to be more where it loves, than where it lives’” (qtd. in Marshall 57). As with Sonnet 105’s “let not my love be called idolatry” or the “hallowed” name of the beloved in Sonnet 108, the references to the Holy Eucharist in Sonnet 125 are to a wholly secular, though no less sacred, experience. The “Mystery” of communion with the divine is translated into this very human relationship, a relationship that touches transcendence. Thomas Greene, in his analysis of the lovers’ exchange within this poem, also comments on the sacred overtones this Sonnet connotes: “ironically and pathetically, the word ‘oblacion’ is mixed with a transcendent ‘second,’ the deity of the communion service, so that the metaphor can only be regarded as a very strange, and somewhat ambiguous, compound. The use of the sacramental term leaves the reader uncertain just how much weight to accord it, and by introducing the unbridgeable hierarchy of human and divine, would seem to annul in advance the pure reciprocity of the ‘mutual render’” (240). Greene is wholly correct to argue that Shakespeare mixes something sacred into the secular relationship the speaker has with the young man, but he fails to see how this transcendence, this divine quality, can translate precisely into the secular realm, constituting something beyond a mixing of the two. In fact, what Greene reads as “strange,” “ambiguous,” “uncertain,” and even “unbridgeable” I read as the heart of and the purpose of Shakespeare’s representation of secular love. The movement of transferring the divine into the secular gives the human-human relationships a profundity and depth that is achieved through activating Christian sacramental indwelling.

My reading of this Sonnet is based on the idea that Shakespeare builds this poem’s meaning on the profound and sacred mystery that occurs within the experience of love, and that this is underscored by Shakespeare’s many gestures towards the Eucharist. In this economy, “‘a pleasure in losing the self,’” as Marshall notes, referencing Leo Bersani, “‘is in no way equated with loss,’ since the subject is initially formed through a dissolution or shattering ‘but comes rather through
rediscovering the self outside the self.’ An aesthetics of masochism involves self-shattering that is also ‘self-accretion,’ the ‘effect of reaching toward one’s own “form” elsewhere’” (42). This perspective on both the poem and on the phenomenon of being in love is decidedly positive: it is in one’s self-sacrifice to God where one encounters the great and transcendent holiness of love. This is something that C.S. Lewis sees positively occurring within Shakespeare’s Sonnets: “the greatest of the sonnets are written from a region in which love abandons all claims and flowers into charity […]. The self-abnegation, the ‘naughting,’ in the Sonnets never rings false [… effecting a] transference of the whole self into another self without the demand for a return” (505).

The poem, however, does not encourage such an optimistic outlook. Many critics have noted the pessimistic tone of this and of the other sonnets that close the subsequence. “In the final sonnets to the young man, the volatile mixture of violence and the sacred, of cruelty and altruism, of annihilation and redemptive sacrifice that lurks just beneath the surface of the eucharistic imagery — and the eucharist itself — blows up in our faces” (McCoy 201-202). Certainly the tone of Sonnet 126 is negative, the significance of which I shall discuss later in this chapter, but Sonnet 125 has its own bleakness as well, not the least of which is located in its angry and abrupt thirteenth line, “Hence, thou suborned informer.” The couplet indeed casts a shadow over the poem as a whole, and this, too, is something which I shall discuss later in this chapter since the couplet outburst has its own logic. Yet there is still much within the body of the Sonnet itself that reveals a darker impulse within the poem, which reveals, in short, that transcendent love perhaps is not something that should be wholeheartedly desired.

To begin with, Sonnet 125, like so many in the young man sub-sequence, deals with the ultimate demise of the young man. “There is something necrophiliac,” Fineman remarks, “in the way the young man’s poet regularly looks forward to the time in which ‘your monument shall be my gentle verse’” (157). In this Sonnet, however, even this monument of the poet-lover’s “black ink” (65.14) will fail: the “great bases for eternity” will prove “more short than waste or ruining” (3-4). Moreover, the
beloved is “obsequious” in his lover’s heart, which, as Booth points out, connotes funeral rites: “through its relation to ‘obsequy,’ ‘funeral,’ obsequious had the specialized meaning ‘dutiful in performing funeral rites’ [compare Ham I.i.92: ‘To do obsequious sorrow’], and invites a reader to think of the canopy as borne in a funeral procession and to think back on lines 2-8 in relation to the distinction between mortal externals and immortal essence” (427, Booth’s parentheses).

The idea of death that both casts a shadow on and gives meaning to the love expressed in this Sonnet and in its successor, 126, is a topic I will return to later; I mention it here in passing to demonstrate the undertones of grief in a love poem which professes to announce the undying, eternal nature of the poet-lover’s feelings for his beloved. Of more pertinence to my discussion of the intersubjective, inward concerns of this Sonnet is that the “mutual render” is, apparently and in direct contrast to its Eucharistic analogue, one-sided: “only me for thee” (12). The phrase “mutual render,” writes Joseph Pequigney, “would suggest a ‘reciprocal rendering-up or surrender’ were it not qualified by ‘only me for thee,’ which can be construed as ‘simply me for you,’ and, secondarily, as ‘me alone and no one else for you,’ but in both cases the flow of the rendering goes from ‘me’ to ‘you’ without the counterflow of you for me. The mutuality seems to be of one’s giving and the other’s accepting” (200). This is the moment in which the speaker goes beyond the point, not just of self-shattering, that is, of locating oneself in the heart of another, but of sacrificing oneself totally to another. The “poor” sacrifice, is no less, as I have argued, than the speaker’s whole self, and it is both “poor” in that the poet is now totally abject and humble before his beloved, saying, in essence, that “I am of little value,” and also, as Booth points out, “pure,” which suggests that the lover is so selfless, so wholly in his beloved, that he requires nothing in exchange: a sacrifice that defies economic exchange is indeed pure and poor. The interpretive weight Pequingey gives to the word “only” does much to highlight the complexity of the poem, yet he could have gone further in his analysis and drawn out even more of the ambiguities and meanings contained within this little word. For in addition to “simply” and “I am the only one who loves you in this way, unlike the ‘gazers’ or ‘thrivers,’” the “only” in “only me for thee” serves to heighten both the humility involved in this self-sacrifice – “it’s
only me, and I’m not worth much. That is, I am a poor gift” – and the singular quality of the sacrifice – “this is the one and only thing I offer to you, and it is a pure and fine sacrifice.” Additionally, this “only” could be applied to the “you,” the object of the clause. In this reading, the singular gift of the speaker’s “me” is emphasized, for he will give himself only to his beloved, and to no one else. The tone of this Sonnet, save for the couplet, is important to consider, especially as we keep in mind the self-naughting the speaker accomplishes through his “mutual render.” Few other sonnets in the sequence express such single-minded certainty about the feelings of the speaker. And the tone throughout the quatrains is remarkably calm. The sonnet reads as a gentle and entirely heartfelt offering of the speaker’s heart to his beloved. The gift of himself – as radical and as all-encompassing as this oblation is – is given for free. Part of the humility of the speaker here is his quiet surrender of himself, almost as though it is “no big deal,” which makes the giving up of the self to the beloved an even more beautiful act of love.

The poet-lover’s “oblation” is celebrated as the culminating action of love, and it is imbued with the masochistic pleasure Marshall investigates in her work. “Jouissance,” writes Marshall, as she references Lacan,

is an overwhelming experience of shattering pleasure/pain that cuts through the orders of Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real, although Lacan associates it particularly with the Real. For the Petrarchanists, the fantasy, the jouissance, is about the lovesick pleasure of pain, not only as a thematic situation but precisely as a challenge to poetic utterance. When Lacan observes that “to speak of love is in itself a jouissance,” he does not refer to an orgasmic pleasure but to an unsettling of the self, as the collision of language and love in Petrarchan poetry allows us to see. […] With its sadomasochistic conjunction of pleasure and pain, lovesickness undoes the constructed self, dissolving symbolic certainty and creating a challenge for linguistic utterance. (68)

The linguistic impossibility expressed in line 12 enacts this jouissance: it is and is not a “mutual render,” since the lover in essence dissolves himself into his beloved without any return, “only me for thee,” but at the same time, as all the hints of funeral
rites suggest and as the subsequence as a whole makes clear, there is a temporal slippage, the beloved is already dead – or at least that is in part what the poet-lover fantasizes about – already eclipsed by the “great bases for eternity, / Which proves more short than waste or ruining” (3-4).

Earlier in this chapter, I cited Fineman’s discussion of desire as Mystery, a “state of bliss […] the end of self deriving from a perfect identification of ego with ego ideal […] a consummation that, necessarily, is devoutly to be wished” (19). Fineman views this total communion with Christ as orthodox Christianity. A reading of Sonnet 125 that engages the Eucharistic imagery and allusions finds its end in the intersubjective mutual exchange and in the speaker discovering his purified self through the act of self-submission. “The initial emphasis,” writes McCoy, “in sonnet 125 on the lovers’ almost holy communion and ‘mutual render’ strikes many as profoundly and positively religious. Through a combination of Christian and humanist eschatology and a belief in poetry’s sacramental potency, the sonnets’ echoes of Scripture prove truly redemptive. In the words of sonnet 16, ‘To give away yourself keeps yourself still,’ while ‘all losses are restored’ as miraculously as they are in the conclusion of sonnet 30” (202). McCoy views this interpretation as too idealistic; similarly, he views Fineman’s analysis of the Sonnets as too hollowed out of signification: “They are ineffactual [in Fineman’s view] because they have no sacramental potency, having dwindled from a quasi-liturgical form of incantation to an enfeebled commemoration of an all too familiar absent presence” (202). McCoy, instead, treads a middle path between these two interpretive poles: “Relics,” he writes, “are signs of a spiritual victory over physical dismemberment and destruction, of blissful immortality over excruciating pain. […] In ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’ and the sonnets, love’s martyrs are more vulnerable to the ravages of time, but they believe that love is not time’s fool and their devotion unto death makes their faith compelling” (204). My understanding of the Sonnets, and of Sonnet 125 in particular, leads to a different conclusion: certainly the line “mutual render, only me for thee” encourages one to see the speaker dissolving into a state of bliss, but this bliss is in essence a state of non-existence: he will literally cease to be a “me” if he is rendered into the “thee” of his affections.
There is a way in which this state of non-existence is even more radical, for the beloved, as Fineman demonstrates, is himself a construction of poetry. What ends up happening, then, is that “by means of a diffusion or slippage of deictic and epideictic indication, the poet gives all being over to a demonstrated ‘thee,’ but in a way that makes identity into a way of being that is in essence foreign to the poet’s self” (Fineman 203). “The force of this pointing to the first person of a second person [that is, a “thou mine, I thine” economy (108.7)] is to make subjectivity into something that occurs in the objective case, something to be indicated from a point outside itself precisely because it is the object of an epideictic gesture” (203). In essence, Fineman argues that the subjectivity of the speaker, which is itself the subject of the Sonnets, is constructed through the poetic construction of the beloved young man. Taking this into account, one finds that the “me for thee” makes the beloved evaporate into a kind of potential nothingness, into the linguistic emptiness that his poetic density reveals. The Sonnets have become an “unhappy, ineffective simulacrum” which no longer evokes “either mimetically or metaphorically, the things toward which it gestures,” writes Fineman (218). This is to take the view, however, that poetic creation itself is somehow less real than an actual young man would be. Yet Shakespeare’s works dispute this way of thinking: poetry itself is the mystery that is used to access the mystery of love; love is the mystery used to unlock the fullness of being one’s self; and the Christian ideal of mutual self-sacrifice makes love and poetry sacred.

2.3 Sonnet 126: Love and Eternity

Love in its most self-sacrificial and selfless form, in its purest and poorest essence, leads one to be so turned away from oneself that the experience of the fullness of being and the opposite experience of non-being almost meet. Within Shakespeare’s canon, the idea that love takes one momentarily to a place of eternity, to a temporal space that operates independently of this world, is not unique to the Sonnets; as I have shown in my introduction with regards to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, it is something that is even at play within one of the most light-hearted comedies. This longing not to be is expressed in the final sonnet to the young man, Sonnet 126:

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.
(                                                )
(                                                )

Many critics have noted the melancholy tone of this final poem in the sub-sequence. Helen Vendler states that “rarely has a speaker’s voice so altered toward its love-object in the course of twelve short lines” (537), and McCoy notes how the mood shifts in these two poems “from intimate reciprocity” to “cold detachment” (201). One can see this “cold detachment” even in the number of first person pronouns used by the poet-lover: while Sonnet 125 has seven (“me,” “I,” and “my”), which underline the fact that that poem is primarily about the speaker’s subjectivity, 126 has only one: “O thou my lovely boy” is the opening phrase of the poem, and it is the only time the poet-speaker’s “self” is present. The rest of the poem reads as though spoken by a third person narrator, a narrator who can see, apparently, temporally into eternity and spatially into all of Nature’s domain. In Sonnet 126, it is the beloved who is directly referenced seven times (“thou,” “thy,” “thee”). The poem itself is about the death of the young man. Time will inevitably take the young man to herself: “Her audit (though delayed) answered must be, / And her quietus is to render thee” (126.11-12). These are the last words spoken to or about the young man. And since Sonnet 126 deviates remarkably from the conventional sonnet form Shakespeare strictly follows

---

23 Note, too, how this first-person pronoun is located between two references to the young man, “thou my lovely boy.” Thus even the placement of the self is literally embedded in the beloved.
in the rest of the sequence – the Sonnet is formed all of couplets and is only twelve lines long – it is a marked farewell to the young man. Moreover, in the original quarto edition the place where lines thirteen and fourteen should be are marked by two sets of empty ellipses. Critics disagree about the significance of this blank space. Booth writes that “the Q printer appears to have expected a sonnet to have at least fourteen lines whatever its rhyme pattern; he bracketed two final blank lines, apparently to indicate that he thought something was missing. (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). If this was merely accident, it was a happy accident indeed, for it illustrates precisely the pregnant absence of death. In this way, the poem is perfectly complete in its very incompleteness.

The final Sonnet to the young man ends with the “mute effigy” of his “rendered youth” (Vendler 538); the Sonnets to the beloved begin with pleas for him to procreate and thus triumph over mortality. With specific reference to these opening procreation sonnets, Fineman writes that it is “thematically significant that the “being” of the poet’s “thee” is […] grounded in a death that might be thought to be its opposite,” by which he means that the beloved is conceived retrospectively, as though the poet inhabits the space of death and sees the beloved through the veil of mortality. “[T]he poet’s second-person characterization of the young man,” continues Fineman, “seems negatively to rebound back upon the poet’s first-person self, so that for the poet to highlight the former is also for him to erase the latter. […] these sonnets work to emphasize the way the poet is himself without an indicated self” (202). I quote this large section from Fineman to show what he argues is true, not only in the rhetorically and linguistically dense manner he outlines with regard to the poetry itself, but additionally in the rendering that occurs in the final two sonnets. Shakespeare’s use of the word render is critical to understand. Its many definitions include, “[T]o give up or relinquish (something owned or in one's control). Also: to surrender (one's life, soul)” and, more directly “to give oneself up” (OED 6.a, c). It also means its opposite: “[T]o restore, return, give back” (16 a). In Sonnet 125, its apparent meaning is for the lovers to mutually surrender themselves to each other (and then this is
qualified by the speaker saying the rendering is one-sided, “me for thee”). In Sonnet 126 it is Nature who must relinquish the lovely boy to Time, and thereby pay her debt, so the sense of the word “render” also means “to give in return; […] requite; […] remuneration” (16.a, c, d). Here is where it gets interesting: if Nature must return the lovely boy to Time, and the speaker has already been rendered unto the beloved, and the position of the speaker is in the eternal, then the sonnet sub-sequence gestures towards eternity as the consummation of love. Further, to render additionally means “to cause to become; to make” (18.a). It is the “quietus” of Nature to render the boy to Time, where the poet is already residing; if this is what also “makes” him, then love is linked to unbecoming, which is paradoxically the way through which one becomes fully oneself. Shakespeare represents this idea itself through the Petrarchan sonnet form, and yet another definition of the word render is to “represent or reproduce, esp. artistically” (3.b). The subsequence does not solely suggest, then, that love alone renders one into his truest self, but that this self is itself a result of being created through the linguistic density and movement of poetry.

Fineman reasons that the Sonnets demonstrate that “the ‘being’ of the poet’s ‘thee’” is grounded in death, and that the poet-lover’s characterization of the beloved “rebounds back” on the poet so that the poet is “without an indicated self.” But this is not merely what occurs within the language of the poetry, it is the explicit theme of these final sonnets: if the beloved is dead, then so too is the lover, since he is wholly dissolved into his beloved’s heart. There is already a suggestion of this dissolution in the couplet of Sonnet 22: “Presume not on thy heart when mine is slain: / Thou gav’st me thine not to give back again.” This poem as a whole in many ways enacts the reciprocity that the “mutual render” of Sonnet 125 exalts as love’s culmination: “my heart, / Which in thy breast doth live, as thine in me” (6-7). There are some important distinctions, however, between this reciprocal indwelling and the type of self-sacrificial love that is expressed in Sonnet 125. First of all, Sonnet 22 is concerned more with the external effects of love than with this internal indwelling: “My glass shall not persuade me I am old,” the poem begins, which highlights the outward perspective of this poem. More curious still is how the beauty that covers the beloved is the “raiment” of the lover’s heart: “For all the beauty that doth cover thee / Is but
the seemly raiment of my heart” (5-6). What is described here is the clothing of the lover’s heart on top of the beloved, which contrasts dramatically with the disdain of Sonnet 125 for outward and external signs of one’s identity: “Were ‘t aught to me I bore the canopy, / With my extern the outward honouring, […] Have I not seen dwellers on form and favour […] Pitiful thrivers in their gazing spent.”

Moreover, though Sonnet 22 professes to celebrate what Booth terms “the fanciful fusion of identities” (171), it in fact has for its focus, on the one hand, the poet-lover’s self-preservation: he looks after his beloved’s heart because his own heart is embedded within it. On the other hand, the poet-lover describes how he, in fact, creates the beloved’s heart through his verse, which is suggested in the lines “thou art” – you are artistic expression – and “Bearing thy heart” – as I give birth to, I bear – your heart. Yet Sonnet 22 is about possession: this poem keeps the beloved away not only from Time, “So long as youth and thou are of one date” (2), but also, unhelpfully, from himself: the poet-lover will not return the beloved’s heart, even when the poet-lover himself is slain. Indeed, love and mutual indwelling get more complicated in this poem when we consider that the speaker is in fear of having his heart slain by the young man in the first place. The poem is coloured by an insecurity that the beloved is going to be careless with himself, and thereby tarnish and break the speaker’s heart. The end result would leave the beloved heartless and would leave the slain speaker clutching a heart that belongs to a dead man. Vendler emphasizes that the “fantasy of mutual care for the other’s heart is exploded in the asymmetry of the described caretaking; the young man, bearing the speaker’s heart, is to take good care of himself for his own (not the speaker’s) sake. Nobody is caring for the speaker’s heart for the speaker’s sake” (134-135).

Vendler also notes that this Sonnet is told in reverse chronological order; that is, the giving of the speaker’s heart is presupposed, the reciprocal giving of the young man’s heart occurs in the couplet, and then the care-taking and threat of death follow from that initial exchange of hearts. If we read Sonnet 125 in the same manner, with the couplet giving its own backward glance to the quatrains, we see the reverse occurring: doubt and insecurities are voiced by the speaker in the couplet – “Hence, thou
suborned informer!” – as he rejects the fear of losing his heart that he has relinquished to the beloved. The final line, “A true soul / When most impeached stands least in thy control,” circles back to the confidence the speaker feels about his inward self-sacrifice of his own heart, “let me be obsequious in thy heart,” and underscores the peace the speaker feels about his quiet dismissal of the inevitable ravages and wastes of time, “the great bases for eternity” which come to dust. Sonnet 125 is the answer to Sonnet 22’s angst: in Sonnet 22, the speaker clutches the beloved’s heart, even through death; in Sonnet 125, the speaker gives himself away freely, and through this transcends death precisely by viewing it as the fullness of both Time and Love.

Many of the sonnets within the young man subsequence enact the “mutual render” of Sonnets 125 and 126. Many also explore how eternity is achieved through art. Sonnet 63, in particular, describes how the beloved’s beauty can be preserved in verse: “His beauty shall in these black lines be seen, / And they shall live, and he in them still green” (63.13-14). In Sonnet 125, however, the “great bases for eternity” prove “more short than waste or ruining.” Vendler writes that the speaker “pays a price” for his poor and free gift of himself: “he willingly forfeits his eternizing habit, laying great basis for eternity, because he has lost faith in that eternity. […] He thereby forgoes eternizing art, placing it among other memorial monuments, and relinquishes the consolations of art’s eternal summer” (532). In Sonnet 126, the culmination of the speaker’s expression of love, we see the end result of the poet-lover’s attempts to both preserve his beloved in verse and to achieve a “fusion of identities.” Vendler sees this as the speaker losing faith in eternity, but there is another way to look at Sonnet 126: the speaker experiences the realization of his faith in eternity. He is wholly given over to the selflessness of freely offered love so that even his verse, his last bulwark against the wastes of Time for both himself – the “black lines” would record his voice his voice for eternity – and for the boy – the lines immortalize his beauty – is rendered to the eternal space. It is important to note that there is no horror in this action. I wrote in my introduction that to love perfectly is to see the beloved from the perspective of God; Sonnet 126 in part offers us this perspective. The speaker has given himself freely to his beloved, so that there is no subjective position left from which to see the lovely boy.
In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul explains the perspective that the Christian finds within Christ: “mortality might be swallowed up of life. [...] For the love of Christ constraineth us: [...] he dyed for all, that they which live, shulde not hence forthe live unto them selves, but unto him which dyed for them, and rose againe. Wherefore, hence forthe know we no man after the flesh, yea thogh we had knownen Christ after the flesh, yet now hence forthe know we (him) no more. Therefore if anie man (be) in CHRIST, (let him be) a newe creature Olde things are passed away: beholde, all things are become newe. And all things are of God” (2 Cor. 5:4, 14-18).

In this passage, Paul’s view of death is exactly the view Shakespeare’s poems of perfect love take: that though the “olde things” – oneself – are passed away, real life begins after eternity consumes mortality, and that, moreover, the Christian now sees Christ and others not as from this world, which passes away, but from the perspective of God. In this chapter, Paul unfolds what it means to be “constrained” by the love of Christ: it means to be rendered “in Christ” and dead to the self, which is precisely how to experience the fullness of life and the self. It is not difficult now to see how the ideas Paul outlines in this passage are the framework that Shakespeare uses to describe secular love. Sonnet 126 is written from the point of view of one beyond this life in the quietus of eternity.24 Here desire is absent from the act of loving because desire is what creates the subject, and perfect love, though it enlarges the speaker limitlessly, ends the selfishness of desire so that there is no self. If to love perfectly is to love selflessly, this is exactly what Sonnet 126 gives us.

The ultimate end, then, for both Christian theology and for the poet-lover’s relationship with the young man is bliss that literally takes one out of oneself.25

---

24 The only other time Shakespeare uses the word “quietus” is in Hamlet’s iconic “To be or not to be” speech where it is used as a synonym for suicide: “he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin” (3.1.74-75). Hamlet’s quietus is the “consummation devoutly to be wished.” This word, then, links Hamlet’s existential longing to “not be” with the Sonnet speaker’s final render of, first, himself for the beloved followed by the beloved and the Sonnets’ “black lines” themselves to the empty silence of eternity: “( ) / ( ).”

25 In Plato’s Phaedrus Socrates describes the out-of-body experiences of a lover: it is “the madness of the man who, on seeing beauty here on earth, and being reminded of true beauty, becomes winged and, fluttering with eagerness to fly upwards like a bird, and taking no heed of the things below, causes him to be regarded as mad: the outcome is that this in face reveals itself as the best of all the kinds of divine
Sonnet 126 enacts this in its final silence, yet I do not think that the sub-sequence as a whole *celebrates* this orthodox Christian view of agape, even though it-upholds it as love’s perfection and ideal. The same kind of paradox can be said about Sonnet 94, which venerates individuals who have cold hearts, who “are themselves as stone, / Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow: / They rightly do inherit heaven’s graces” (94.3-5). The poem is ambiguous, and so it attracts much critical attention and debate, but it is difficult not to hear a sarcastic tone come through the lines that praise the stony-hearted individuals, especially since this poem is positioned within a subsequence which expresses the joys and the heartaches occasioned by being in love. Michael Schoenfeldt recognizes the central theme within the Sonnets of a poetic self who is dislocated, undone, and repeatedly tormented by his emotions for the young man, yet Schoenfeldt almost glosses over the fact that it is this “struggle with inconstancy and variability” (Schoenfeldt 315) which formed the early modern subject. Schoenfeldt goes on to argue that “Sonnet 94 is part of this effort to locate a site of constancy amid inexorable flux within the self, even if the rigid control it prescribes leaves little room for the emotional bonds of love that other poems postulate as effective bulwarks against the ravages of time” (315) – and, I would add, against the emotions and relationships which ravage the self. The “rigid control” against love that this poem upholds as ideal is, like loving too perfectly, unattractive. Indeed, it is even terrible, since “They that have the power to hurt” are inhuman in their stony self-command.  

It is precisely within the struggle, within the *reaching*, where these poems find their deepest subjectivity and most heartrending emotional intensity. This is true of 

possession” (30). Indeed Socrates, like Shakespeare, views the right kind of madness as a sacred blessing: “the greatest of goods come to us through madness,” writes Plato, “provided that it is bestowed by divine gift” (23). “The lunatic, the lover, and the / Are of imagination all compact,” writes Shakespeare, and it is the madness of the poet that gives us the vision of the gods: “the poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to earth, earth to heaven” (5.1.8-9, 14-15).  

Many commentators have focused on the Christian undertones within Sonnet 94, particularly with regards to the Sermon on the Mount and to the epistle to the Romans’ injunctions against judgment (see, for instance, Booth 306—308). However, repeatedly in the Christian scriptures to have a hardened or stony heart was a decidedly negative trait, a trait that prevented one from engaging in a relationship with God. “Holding onto one’s autonomy,” writes Marshall, “suggested sinful pride. To convey the undesirability of self-assertion, both Catholics and Protestants used the bodily image of a hard or stony heart as emblem of spiritual deadness” (21).
Petrarch as much as of Shakespeare: the “extraordinary innovation in the Canzoniere,” writes Freccero, is “found in what the verses leave unsaid, in the blank spaces separating these lyric ‘fragments’” (34). If it were not for the separation, the longing of the poet for his beloved, “the Sonnets would never have come to exist,” writes George T. Wright; “in a sense, there would be no subject, for these sonnets, unlike many others by other writers, are more about absence than presence, more about the absence – experienced, feared, or forecast – of their radiant center than about the enjoyment of its presence, though there is enough testimony about its presence to make its absence seem all the more poignant” (136). Though Wright glosses over the “blank spaces” of Petrach’s poems to Laura, his observation still resonates keenly with my work, for it is my contention that if the poet-lover were to enjoy the full presence of his beloved, he would necessarily lose himself in object’s “radiant center,” as he does in the final sonnet to the young man. Living within the “radiant centre” is living without the self: it is silence and oblivion and bliss.

2.4 The Dark Lady: Love Versus Will

Up until this point, I have neglected to comment on the couplet of Sonnet 125, a couplet that is both startling in its vehemence and shocking in its hostility. Immediately after the poet-lover speaks of the selfless act of “mutual render, only me for thee,” comes the angry, “Hence, thou suborned informer: a true soul / When most impeached, stands least in thy control” (13-14). Critics disagree over the individual to whom this outburst is directed. Booth writes that

the informer now addressed by the speaker may be inferred from the defensive tone with which the poem opens, but, although his sudden presence can be explained, the suddenness is real; like the closing platitude, the dismissal feels unrelated to the argument of the first twelve lines. In terms of the relationship between speaker and beloved, the informer would seem to be a straw man addressed in the character of a self-serving toady who has accused the speaker of some breach of the beloved’s faith; however, since thy and thee in quatrains 3 indicate that the poem addresses the beloved, the couplet can also seem to be
addressed to the beloved – which makes it even more disconcerting for a reader. (429)

Disconcerting indeed, for if this “thou” is truly the young man, then everything the subsequence works to achieve – its professions of selfless love, its expressions of identification with the beloved, its stated ability to forgive all transgressions, “Mine ransoms yours, and yours must ransom me” (120.14) – is undone in this single moment: if the poet-lover demands that his beloved leave him, then there is no possibility whatsoever for mutual render. I would like to submit a third option that resonates with the emotions expressed within the poem and within the subsequence as a whole. Specifically, it is my contention that this sudden outburst is directed inwards towards the poet-lover himself. This reading fits into the internal logic of the Sonnet primarily because the poem itself is about the poet’s self – remember, first person pronouns occur seven times within this poem. Moreover, the opening lines suggest that the poet is considering the value of outward actions versus internal authenticity within himself; that is, he is interrogating his own beliefs about this issue. “Were ’t aught to me,” the poet asks… asks whom? Why would the poet-lover ask the question “What is it to me?” to anyone but himself?27 It would make sense, then, that since the poem is addressed to himself, since it is an instance of his own internal musing, that the outburst at the end is also addressed to the “me” of the opening question. Booth’s suggestion that the “thou” of the couplet connects this exclamation back to the “thy” and “thee” of the third quatrain is not without validity, however, since the poet’s subjectivity is constituted, paradoxically, through his dissolution into his beloved. “Having given all his being to a duplicated ‘thee,’” argues Fineman, “the poet will himself be broken when he identifies himself with duplication” (219). This is all a very roundabout way of saying simply that the “suborned informer” is a part of the poet-lover’s own person, an idea that is believable when one considers the psychological depth that Shakespeare has given to the poetic speaker. This is an

27 The whole line reads “Were ’t aught to me I bore the canopy”; in this line I see Fineman’s thesis played out in microcosm: the subjective-objective cases of the “me I” within this line demonstrate what I have already discussed, that “the force of this pointing to the first person of a second person is to make subjectivity into something that occurs in the objective case, something to be indicated from a point outside the self precisely because it is the object of an epideictic gesture” (203). Fineman writes elsewhere, to put it another way, “that it is in the split that thus emerges […] within the poet’s ‘eye’ and ‘I’ that the novelty of the subject or subjectivity of Shakespeare’s sonnets is initially revealed” (140).
argument supported by Thomas Greene’s reading of the poem. “The poet’s real enemy,” he writes, “is not the ‘informing’ as slanderer, but the voice within himself through whose forming action feeling comes into being” (24). Pequigney, too, views this outburst as directed towards an aspect of the poet-speaker’s own self: “The point of the view of the poem is saved from incongruity if this ‘false witness’ is taken to be apostrophized as a rankling presence in the persona’s mind throughout the discourse and against whose censures it is largely directed” (200). In my reading, this is the poet-lover’s retreat from the abyss of oblivion, his own betrayal of himself that casts doubt upon the value of self-sacrifice and of “not being.”

Whether or not critics agree over the subject to whom this couplet is directed, all note the suddenness of the outburst. I am not going to contest this point, but rather show that the couplet, even in its hostility and abruptness, has analogues to Christ’s forceful command, “Get thee behind me, Satan,” directed towards Peter (Mark 16:23). Clearly, “Hence, thou suborned informer” and “Get thee behind me” share the same general meaning; it is not, however, merely because of this superficial likeness that I draw attention to the biblical echoes of the couplet, for in the gospel, too, Christ’s outburst towards Peter is uttered because Peter tempts him into not sacrificing himself:

> Then Peter toke him aside, and began to rebuke him, saying, Master, pitie thy self: this shal not be unto thee. Then he turned backe, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me, because thou understandest not the things that are of God, but the things that are of men. Jesus then said to his disciples, If any man wil followe me, let him forsake him self, & take up his crosse, and followe me. For whosoever wil save his life, shal lose it: and whosoever shal lose his life for my sake, shal finde it. For what shal it profite a man thogh he shulde winne the whole worlde, if he lose his owne soule? or what shal a man give for recompense of his soule?” (Matthew 16:22-26).

I quote the whole section of this passage here to show how closely it is thematically linked to the “oblation, poor but free” of Sonnet 125. The paradox that Christ here outlines, “whoever shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it,” is precisely the type of
between the believer and Christ that the poem’s many Eucharistic images suggest. Further, in this instance from the gospel, Christ emphatically speaks of losing one’s own life – of dying to himself, of “forsaking himself – in order to find the bliss that is promised when one dissolves his whole self into the divine. I point out these striking overlaps not to suggest that Shakespeare necessarily had this exact biblical source in mind as he wrote the Sonnet, but to show that he undoubtedly characterized profound love-relationships in the same terms as the sacred, eternal, self-sacrificial, and intersubjective relationship a believer has with Christ.

There is another biblical allusion in this couplet, though it is present in a way that cannot be tidily aligned with the internal logic of the poem. The “true soul” who “when most impeached, stands least in thy control” has resonances with the story of Christ’s trial before the Sanhedrin (Christ was brought before the council in the first place because of Judas, a literal “suborned informer,” who was infamously paid thirty pieces of silver to betray Christ). The “witnesses” who come against Christ in this trial are all emphatically “false witnesses,” “informers,” who attempt to impeach Christ. However, as I said, the line is too ambiguous for one to be able to align the Judas figure or the high priests to symmetrical analogues in the Sonnet. What is striking, though, is that Christ answers the priests’ accusations with “I am he, and ye shall see the Sonne of man sit at the right hand of the power of God, & come in the cloudes of heaven,” a response which has the force of revealing his own claim to

There is also a resonance between this biblical passage and the reference to the “true soul” of the Sonnet, though I put this only in a footnote because the words and ideas that connect them are more tenuous than the links between “forsaking oneself” in order to “find one’s life.” Specifically, in the gospel Christ asks “what shall it profite a man though he shulde winne the whole worlde, if he lose his owne soule? or what shall a man give for recompense of his soule?” These ideas have echoes in the Sonnet’s “dwellers on form and favour” who “lose all and more by paying too much rent […] pitiful thrivers in their gazing spent.” Those who “pay too much rent” are clearly those who are interested in personal gain, in personal displays of wealth in this world – displays that are, moreover, inherently empty since the word “rent” suggests these “thrivers” do not actually own anything. These dwellers on form and favour “lose all and more,” implying, as Booth posits, that they go into debt because of their vain investment in external signifiers of honour and devotion. Yet Booth also suggests another more profound link between those who “lose all and more” and the focus of lines 3 and 4, “which assert[s] the existence of things that last longer than eternity” (426). The “whole worlde” Christ says, will not outlast a human soul and is thus of infinitely lesser value. The point is that Shakespeare takes up this orthodox Christian belief and translates it into the speaker’s relationship with the young man. The stakes are the same: in both cases, investment in the external, in the “world” is vain. Only, as both the poet-lover and Christ state, the unseen, inward self-sacrifice of the heart has value.
divinity (harkening back to Yahweh’s I Am That I Am) and of addressing the
decidedly otherworldly framework within which he moves (Mark 14:62). What is
more, it is in this moment that Christ exposes the futility of the high priests’ attacks
against him, for though they hold the power of torture and death in their hands, Christ
unflinchingly defies their accusations by responding with silence.\textsuperscript{29} Though the high
priests desperately attempt to ensnare – to impeach – Jesus, he stands “least in their
control” in this moment: his posture and words illustrate that his concerns are not of
this world, that he has a greater agenda than their attempts to control and contain him
can comprehend.

There is a significant departure from orthodox Christianity, however, in how
Shakespeare responds to this holy self-sacrifice. Not only does he give a picture of a
self-forsaken soul that is cold and detached in Sonnet 126, as McCoy has noted, but
the “Hence, thou suborned informer” of Sonnet 125 reveals that there exists within the
poet himself the temptation, the desire, not to sacrifice and render himself to the
young man.\textsuperscript{30} There is a sense of panic expressed in this outburst, a panic that the
logic of the poem suggests is linked directly with the poet-lover’s willingness to
sacrifice himself completely for his beloved since “mutual render, only me for thee” is
the line which precedes this “Get thee behind me.” Fineman writes, “the subject of
Shakespeare’s sonnets experiences himself as his difference from himself. His
identity is an identity of ruptured identification, a broken identity that carves out in the
poet’s self a syncopated hollowness that accounts for the deep personal interiority of
the sonnets’ poetic persona” (25). It is this rupture that is revealed within this
outburst, for it reveals the complexity and psychic depth which constitute the poet-

\textsuperscript{29} It is clear that Shakespeare found this scene of Christ’s trial before the high priests dramatically
compelling, for he borrows from it later in his career to heighten dramatic and thematic tension. I am
thinking here of Cordelia’s “nothing,” uttered twice in the face of the unreasonable demand from her
father to express how much she loves him (Lear 1.1.87-89). Further, this moment is played out again
by Cordelia precisely when she is asked to define her love for her father, a love that is, as the play
demonstrates, self-sacrificial, transformative and redemptive, and ultimately unsustainable in this world
(yet whether or not this leads to transcendence or despair remains, I think, ambiguous at the end of the
play).

\textsuperscript{30} This counter-thematic temptation exists regardless of whether the “suborned informer” is, in fact, a
type of “devil’s advocate” that exists outside the framework of the poem or if he is, as I submit, a
component of the poet-lover’s own psychology. In either case, the vehemence with which this
command is uttered belies the insecurity that the poet feels with regard to his own inclination to be less
of a “true soul.”
speaker. It is no easy thing to surrender to perfect love. Nor is it necessarily a desirable thing. If “Desire is death” as Sonnet 147 (8) states, it is paradoxically a death that “preserves” life; it is Sonnet 126 that illustrates the quietus of the gaping nothing that is the end result of perfect love, of “me for thee.” Sonnet 126’s silence demonstrates the “quietus” that is ultimately rendered from the young man unto eternity, and thus by identification from the poet-lover too. The outburst of Sonnet 125, then, demonstrates that selfishness is a dynamic force – even an explosive – “reaching” that is itself what constitutes the subjective voice of the poet-lover. The brokenness is expressed in the conflict between “yes I will give my all, all of me, to you, my beloved,” and, “No! Wait! There is a part of me that does not want to be such a perfect and ‘true soul.’” For when the poet succumbs to the “quietus,” “the rest is silence.”

However, the Sonnets do not end with this silence at the conclusion of Sonnet 126, but continue, if the quarto sequence can be trusted, with the sonnets to the dark lady, a decidedly organic and animate character. In contrast to the evaporation into the young man that Sonnet 125 celebrates as “true” and transcendent love, the dark lady attracts the poet into herself without causing the loss of self that the poet’s love for the young man inspires. The repeated “Wills” of Sonnet 135 demonstrate this overabundance of self that the poet’s love/lust for the dark lady elicits:

Whoever hath her wish, though hast thy Will,
And Will to boot, and Will in overplus;
More than enough am I that vex thee still,
To thy sweet will making addition thus.
Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,
Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?
Shall will in others seem right gracious,
And in my will no fair acceptance shine?
The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,
And in abundance addeth to his store;
So thou, being rich in Will, add to thy Will
One will of mine to make thy large Will more.
Let “no” unkind no fair beseechers kill:

Think all but one, and me in that one Will. (135)

Like Sonnets 125 and 126, this poem too evokes eternity: the sea is proverbially without end, yet here it is not figured as a place of transcendence or zero-tension, but as active and dynamic. Above all, this poem is hilarious in its dizzying multiplications of “Will.” Clearly, in a relationship with the dark lady Will can be in her – as can every other man, evidently – and not at all lose his own identity. He is “Will in overplus.” It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in any great depth the layers of poetic subjectivity that are expressed in the dark lady sonnets, but I reference them here to show how the poet-lover steps away from the brink – or rather, if we take the silence of Sonnet 126 as perfect love’s resting place, as eternal quietus, he returns from beyond the brink – of sacred communion with his beloved young man. It is as though the unheard objections of the “suborned informer” are heeded because to give oneself over to another in love is a terrible prospect. In this way, the retreat into the dark lady is a return to himself, albeit in a resigned “might as well make the best of it” kind of way: “All this world well knows, yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell,” reads the couplet of Sonnet 129; and Sonnet 147, “For I have sworn thee fair, and thought thee bright, / Who art as black as hell, as dark as night” (13-14). “Giving way to one’s various passions,” writes Schoenfeldt, “is a loss of power over the self, a surrender of sovereignty to a vastly inferior jurisdiction. Torn apart by conflicting passion, the self loses any sense of its integrity and disintegrates into its various undifferentiated appetites” (315). Schoenfeldt has a keen argument here, for indeed my work has been to demonstrate how giving way wholly and completely to “passion,” or more precisely to perfect love, does cause the self to lose “any sense of its integrity and disintegrate,” but not, significantly, into “various

---

31 The proceeding Sonnet, 136, emphasizes the same overabundance of selfhood: “Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love, / Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one […] Make but my name thy love, and love that still, / And then thou lov’st me for my name is Will” (136.5-6,13-14). “So it was, of course,” writes Colin Burrow in the Oxford Edition of Shakespeare’s poems. Further, Burrow finds a link between this poem and a popular riddle: “the poem approaches a popular riddle cited by Kerrigan, and blurs into anonymous ribaldry: ‘My lover’s will / I am content to fulfill; / Within this rhyme his name is framed; / Tell me then how he is named?’ Will I am (William) is the answer” (652). Indeed, Will I am is a quintessential assertion of self-identity, something that is so clearly in opposition to the “me for thee” of Sonnet 125.
undifferentiated appetites,” but rather into the “radiant center” of the beloved (even if the beloved’s identity is itself a poetic construction of the poet-lover). In fact, I take exactly the opposite view to Schoenfeldt’s with regard to the poet-lover’s “undifferentiated appetites,” since it is the “appetites” that are the focus, though not the exclusive focus, of the dark lady subsequence, and it is within these sonnets that the poet’s subjectivity retreats from the edge of “not being” back into being “Will.”

Petrarchism functioned in the Renaissance, writes Marshall, “as at once fervently declaimed, exposed as transparent, and somehow most compelling in its moment of collapse” (63). Similarly, Fineman writes, “Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, because they incorporate loss into their person, because they enact in their actions their loss of self-presence, thereby acquire their remarkable subjective density” (303). Both critics with whom I have primarily been in conversation in this chapter agree on this final point: self-collapse, self-loss is beautiful. It is beautiful precisely, as Jean Laplanche would say, “precisely there where he suffers” (qtd. in Marshall 44, original italics), or as Cleopatra says, “The stroke of death is as a lover’s pinch, / Which hurts and is desired” (5.2.286-7). The final two sonnets to the young man express this loss overtly, though in many ways it is present throughout the entire young man subsequence since even from its beginning the subsequence looks forward to the final “render” of the young man, and thus of the poet-lover himself, which gives the sonnets to the young man what Fineman terms their “special melancholy” (140). Yet since the sequence as a whole does not end with a “the rest is silence” blank ellipsis but continues to address the dark lady, the young man subsequence does more than incorporate the “loss of self-presence” into its rhetoric; it incorporates the loss of the self-presence. The longing to find perfect communion is not fulfilled – or if it is at the end 126, it is only for a fleeting moment, for a brief pause before the poetic speaker immerses himself in his appetite for the dark lady, thereby holding on to his identity even when it is submerged in her.
3 “Love-devouring death”: Love and Spirituality in Romeo and Juliet

3.1 Eros and Agape

“These violent delights have violent ends, / And in their triumph die like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume” (R&J 2.5.9-11). So says Friar Laurence as he prepares to wed Romeo and Juliet. “So between love did shine / That the Turtle saw his right / Flaming in the Phoenix sight: / Either was the other’s mine” (33-36). Thus states Shakespeare’s enigmatic poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” which expresses “the truth of love” through the narrative of two birds who are self-immolated in the consummation of their love. Shakespeare’s metaphors of an explosive love that is self-destructive and self-devouring at the moment of its consummation express my entire project in a distilled form. The love that Romeo and Juliet and the Phoenix and Turtle experience is triumphant in its moment of union. Love is triumphant precisely because it results in the death of the self at the same moment it fulfills the purpose of loving another. Shakespeare expresses their loves as something eternal because love – mysteriously – lasts only a moment but changes their subjectivities forever. In this chapter, I shall demonstrate how Romeo and Juliet’s romantic love is self-constitutive because in it we see the lovers engage with what is ultimate: their identities are formed truly in the moment they “kiss” and “die”; their “violent delight” does indeed find its end in their consummation. This experience of love is represented again in the metaphysical poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” a poem in which two avian lovers are literally consumed in the Phoenix’s self-immolating flame at the moment of their triumphant expression of mutual love. The lovers’ movement into eternity does not happen as they turn away from things temporal to things divine; it rather occurs through their embodied love for their beloveds. In this way, Shakespeare’s texts present us with something original: a secular love which is itself a type of spiritual alterity that functions at once in opposition to the material world and as the fulfillment of it. The end result of both Juliet and Romeo’s love and the Phoenix and Turtle’s is a radical freedom from self for the other which opens the possibility of spirituality;
what Shakespeare shows us with these two couples is a love that amplifies the intersection of material with spiritual, and how this intersection is where the individual most truly is him and herself precisely because “either was the other’s mine.”

“The Phoenix and the Turtle” expresses in concentrated form what *Romeo and Juliet* unfolds in five acts, so although the poem was published in 1601, six years after *Romeo and Juliet* was written, I discuss it here first in order to frame my argument about the quality of love that Juliet and Romeo experience; and I discuss it first because the poetic language of “The Phoenix and the Turtle” distills the subjectivity of lovers who have sacrificed themselves for their love, just as Romeo and Juliet do for each other in the Capulet tomb. It is my contention that the mutual self-sacrifice and subjective dissolution that the Phoenix and Turtle experience in their “mutual flame” are akin to the self-sacrifice that Romeo and Juliet enact in the Capulet tomb, what Romeo describes as the “feasting presence full of light.” In these texts we see Shakespeare working through the same idea: specifically, that real love for another is a kind of radical “dissolution of difference” that requires a complete sacrifice of the self. Of course, this self-shattering leads to physical death for both Romeo and Juliet and the Phoenix and Turtle. Yet at the same time and in impossible conflict with this material reality, their intense and fleeting self-abandonments are instances of, in Zizek’s terms, “the true intervention of Eternity in Time,” the revolutionary core of Christianity which is functions as the founding of a “New Order”: “We are only one with God when God is no longer one with Himself, but abandons Himself” (*Puppet and the Dwarf* 91). Self-abandonment for the beloved is the radical act of love Shakespeare represents in these two works, and it, too, is modeled on the core of Christianity.

In addition to using Shakespeare’s poetry itself as part of my theoretical framework, I engage most closely with theorist Slavoj Zizek and contemporary critic Paul A. Kottman who analyses the creation of radical new subjectivities in *Romeo and Juliet*. Kottman’s research is important to my work because the nuance of my argument, that the lovers’ self-identities are fully constituted the moment they are sacrificed, builds
on his assertion that the lovers’ self-fashion against the ultimate experience of love. In an effort to define the large and unruly term “love,” I refer extensively to Anders Nygren’s seminal study Agape and Eros. Much of this chapter, however, is in response to criticism that either ignores the love that Romeo and Juliet experience in favour of an analysis of desire, or which treats love as an unsophisticated sentimental emotion. Shakespeare, however, does not hesitate to represent the fullness of love in poetic and dramatic works; indeed, the experience of love and its radical alterity to desire is at the heart of Shakespeare’s play, and as such it is the focus of my study.

Conventional wisdom sees eros and agape in a dialectical relationship with each other. “Eros is how the world loves,” writes David Clough in his analysis of Karl Barth’s theory of love; Eros “is creative”; it is “capable of superlative heights”; and can even inspire a “wondrous love of God.” But, continues Clough’s analysis, it “is always finally a melancholy love of self” (196). Agape, on the other hand, “is not merely the antithesis of this worldly love, but is a new thing, a joyful giving of ourselves, thereby a renouncing of the idea that we belong to ourselves, and an exaltation that we may love as God loves” (196). In the conventional view, shared by thinkers such as Barth and Nygren, the Christian “loves in both these ways,” but the tension is ultimately unsustainable, and is “resolved in the end of eros in the death of the sinner, and the exclusive existence of agape in the life of the saint” (Clough 196). Essentially, according to Nygren’s view, “eros is in all cases equal to self love; and agape is in all cases God’s love toward or by means of human beings” (Brümmer 137). The eros that Romeo and Juliet experience, like the eros that is expressed in the Phoenix and the Turtle’s love, is also, however, agape because it is at its core a giving love. Their love is desiring and is therefore a need-love, but it is also an overabundant love, and a love that seeks the other. Max Scheler writes that the meaning of love “lies in itself”: “the act of giving away, and the spiritual freedom and abundance of love which manifest themselves in this act” make one “even ‘richer’ than he is” (93, italics original). In the Phoenix and Turtle’s “mutual flame” and in Romeo and Juliet’s suicides, the lovers experience the “triumph of love” within their giving of self to the beloved. This movement erases the dichotomy between agape and eros, and opens up a space instead for holy romantic love. And the act of giving up the self is holy
because through self-sacrifice the subject is constituted fully. Lacan, explains Zizek, “changes the balance between Death and Resurrection in favour of Death.” This Death “between the two deaths” is the space of the subject, “the ‘night of the world.’” The self-withdrawal, the absolute contraction of subjectivity, the severing of its links with ‘reality’ – this is the ‘wiping the slate clean’” (Ticklish Subject 154). That is, for Zizek, it is the space before the resurrection where one finds a new relation to the law of reality, “the tension marks the subjectivity of those in Christ, a subjectivity that is a suspension between his death and his resurrection” (Holsclaw 172). Zizek’s reading of Pauline theology aligns forcefully with my project: in Romeo’s and Juliet’s deaths and in the self-sacrifice of the phoenix and the turtle, love is expressed in their dying. In the in-between moment, the space where the lovers perform their violent resistance to the world as it is, they claim their own subjectivity through the act of dying to the self for the other.

3.2 “Either was the other’s mine”: The Phoenix and Turtle

“The Phoenix and the Turtle” is a text that suspends the in-between moment of dying to the self for the other and expresses what that accomplishes for the lovers and for those who testify to this love. Shakespeare’s poem was written, it is generally agreed, in the second half of 1601; a short poem in the collection of “Diverse Poetical Essays,” appended to Robert Chester’s long poem, Love’s Martyr. Love’s Martyr and the “Poetical Essays” were written and dedicated to John Salusbury, who was knighted in June of 1601, and who was, at the time of publication, attempting to gain election to Parliament (Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen 109).

Early in its critical reception scholars argued that “Shakespeare’s poem on the Phoenix and the Turtle can scarcely be understood except in its context – if at all” (Rollins 559). And yet despite this injunction, critics have at times ignored the historical context altogether,

32 MacD. P. Jackson’s “stylometric analysis,” write Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen, places “The Phoenix and the Turtle” in the “very early 1600s when [Shakespeare] may also have been working on some Sonnets within the group numbered 104-26. This suggests that Shakespeare’s poems in Love’s Martyr were composed very close to the time of their publication” (114). This chronology is significant to my research project because it dates this poem of self-sacrificial love as a contemporary of Sonnet 125, which, I argue, is equally and preeminently concerned with the loss of self that occurs in love.

33 For information regarding John Salusbury and his relationship to Queen Elizabeth, see Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen; for a discussion of Queen Elizabeth and the Earl of Essex, see Bednarz.
choosing to read this poem as a religious, philosophical, or mystical work, free from its historic location; alternately, scholars have read this work too contextually, attaching historical personages to the procession of mourners and to the Phoenix and the Turtle themselves.

Both of these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, but neither has been able to apprehend comprehensively the “truth of love” expressed in this poem. Critics’ reactions to the work show as much diversity as do its interpretative and allegorical readings: some have dismissed Shakespeare’s short poem as “doggerel” (George Stronach, qtd. in Rollins 565) while others have declared it to be the most mysterious and beautiful poem in the English language. Poet-laureate John Masefield states, “‘It is too strange to be the fruit of a human sorrow. It is the work of a great mind trying to express in unusual symbols a thought too subtle and too intense to be expressed in any other way. Spiritual ecstasy is the only key to works of this kind’” (qtd. in Rollins 564).

My own reading treads somewhere in between these two approaches, yet instead of locating this poem’s historical context in some kind of allegorical detective work, in which I attempt to sleuth-out the real-life personages of the birds, my reading connects this poem to Shakespeare’s other works thematically, and particularly to Romeo and Juliet. I do not doubt that there is some allegorical overlap between this poem and John Salusbury’s quest for political advancement, but this type of exclusively historical reading reduces the thematic content of the poem to just another historical archive. Taken as a piece of Shakespeare’s ongoing wrestle with “the truth of love” instead, we can see the dramatic moment that is fulfilled in the Capulet tomb expressed esoterically in this short poem.

“The Phoenix and the Turtle” begins with the procession of mourners for the dead birds. Curiously, although the “bird of loudest lay” is tasked with calling this group of avian mourners together, the roll call consists more of interdictions than of invited guests: “From this session interdict / Every foul of tyrant wing, / Save the eagle, feathered king: / Keep the obsequy so strict” (9-12). From these opening stanzas of
the poem, then, Shakespeare creates a kind of inverted logic: the bird of loudest lay calls the procession together only to forbid most birds from participating. The eagle, the swan, and the crow are the only birds specifically named as mourners: the eagle for his kingly nature, the swan for his song, and the crow for its chastity. Of these, the descriptions of the swan and the crow are particularly interesting:

Let the priest in surplice white,
That defunctive music can,
Be the death-divining swan,
Lest the requiem lack his right.

And thou, treble-dated crow,
That thy sable gender mak’st
With the breath thou giv’st and tak’st,
’Mongst our mourners shalt thou go. (13-20)

The colour contrast between these two birds coupled with the contrast between what these two birds stand for – the white swan for his death-song and the black crow for its generative breath – hints at both the unlikely union of disparate characteristics and the life-and-death – or rather, death-and-life – nature of the Turtle and Phoenix’s union. That is, the swan’s song, his “defunctive music,” is a song not merely about death, but about something “defunct,” no longer in existence. The swan’s song itself is thus an impossible reach into oblivion, giving voice to the “forms of things unknown.” And, further, this is not merely the song the swan sings before his death, but it is “death-divining,” as though the swan can somehow see into death spiritually, not just react, or pre-act, to its onset with his music. The crow is no less spiritualized than the swan: Burrow’s note explains that “[c]rows were believed to generate their black offspring (sable gender) not by sexual reproduction, but by touching beaks and exchanging breath” (18n.). Yet while the swan and bird of loudest lay are gendered, the single crow, “thou”/“thy,” is left sexually ambiguous; this detail may seem unimportant, save for the fact that its breath “giv’st” life and “tak’st.” That is, if this crow were female, it would make sense for it to “take” the life-breath from the male in order to lay her eggs; if male, then “give” this breath. But to have the same crow give
and take this generative breath has implications for how we see the Phoenix and Turtle’s union: it is not simply a conflagration that engenders new life nor one that causes material death. It is something in between these two states, a fullness of being not in death, but in dying, of being in a defunctive state of being itself, that Shakespeare describes through the Phoenix and Turtle’s union. Put simply, this is a poem about spirituality. The complicated task is to unpack what spirituality is and how Shakespeare expresses it.

Ewan Fernie writes, “spirituality is (or purports to be) the experience or knowledge of what is other and what is ultimate” (8). Through the “defunctive music” of the “death-divining” swan and the life-breath that “giv’st and tak’st,” Shakespeare’s poem expresses this “other” and this “ultimate” that the Phoenix and Turtle experience through the consummation of their love. Although this language of spiritual transcendence – the experience of something “ultimate,” may sound inflated or impossible – it can equally be seen as quite ordinary, for what is more “ultimate” than the everyday experiences of birth and death to which the crow and swan allude? These are moments when the “there” and the “here” are one and the same, moments infused with the possibility of a spiritual experience while at the same time being moments of gross materiality. Consummated love, too, has the potential of being a moment of openness to the experience of something ultimate. This quality of love is expressed elsewhere by Shakespeare as he has, for instance, Bottom misquote Paul as he wakes from his encounter with Titania in the forest. Bottom names this encounter a dream – a supremely spiritual dream – when we know that it was in fact quite real, and that it was quite physical, grossly material in its own way. At the centre of the narrative of this poem is the material urn where the turtle’s and phoenix’s ashes are housed; the avian mourners access the mystery of the truth of love through the mediation of the material remains of the lovers.

“Here the anthem doth commence,” begins the sixth stanza as the poem transitions to the funeral service for the Phoenix and Turtle. “Anthem,” as Burrow tells us, is “a passage of scripture set to music” (21n.). The Book of Common Prayer’s “Order for the Burial of Dead” begins, again as Burrow notes, with the priests or clerks singing,
“I am the resurrection and the life (saith the Lord): he that believeth in me, yea, though he were dead, yet shall he live. And whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall not die forever. [John 11]” (BoC P 309). This passage from scripture shares the typical phoenix metaphor: new life, a resurrection, comes after death. Shakespeare’s anthem, however, deviates from this orthodoxy. “Love and Constancy is dead,” the next line states, “Phoenix and the Turtle fled, / In a mutual flame from hence” (21-24). There is no suggestion of a resurrection to new life here: “Love and Constancy is dead.” There is a finality to this statement that is lacking from “though he were dead,” the conditionality of the scriptural analogue. Further, the grammatical flexibility of “is dead” as opposed to “are dead” reveals, as I. A. Richards notes, that “the two are so much one that even from the first mention the verb is singular […]. This confounds grammar, as Reason, itself, is going to be confounded in what follows” (90).

Yet even though resurrection is not forthcoming in this poem, this absence does not negate the fact that the birds experience a real, if fleeting, moment of spiritual alterity in the mutual flame of their union. Moreover, the two birds “fled […] from hence” in the burning of their union. Although the Phoenix and her dove are not resurrected, their self-sacrifice opens a space – or opens the possibility for such a space – for a “truth not of this world.” In the act of fleeing from hence itself, the two birds experience a “mode of opposition to what is” (Fernie 9): by actually being the living sacrifice to each other, the two birds are able to confound grammar, reason, mathematics, property, and subjective identity. They live an instance of opposition to what is by fleeing from hence in their mutual flame. Through their immolation the Phoenix and the Turtle bring the world of spirituality into this one, what Zizek terms the “true intervention of Eternity in Time”: Love is a striking at oneself that is “an act proper […] the paradox of the timeless/‘eternal’ gesture of overcoming eternity, opening up the dimension of temporality/historicity” (Fragile Absolute 94). Zizek’s theory is glossed by Fernie as a spiritual moment in which the “beyond is here
already, spirituality an indwelling excess inalienable from being” (Fernie 23). The Book of Common Prayer terms this a “lively sacrifice,” a form of self-sacrifice and indwelling that is mutually accomplished: Christ made a “full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world,” the Priest says in the Holy Communion service. “And here we,” responds the congregation, “offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee” (263-64). The point I emphasize here is that Shakespeare is using the grace-infused culture of Reformed England to represent the experience of secular material love.

The heart of “The Phoenix and the Turtle” reads:

So they loved as love in twain,
Had the essence but in one,
Two distincts, division none:
Number there in love was slain.

Hearts remote yet not asunder;
Distance and no space was seen
’Twixt this Turtle and his queen;
But in them it were a wonder.

So between them love did shine
That the Turtle saw his right
Flaming in the Phoenix’ sight;
Either was the other’s mine.

Property was thus appalled
That the self was not the same:
Single natures, double name,

---

34 “‘Eternity,’” writes Zizek, “is not atemporal in the simple sense of persisting beyond time; it is, rather, the name for the Event or Cut that sustains, opens up, the dimension of temporality as the series/succession of failed attempts to grasp it” (Fragile Absolute 95).
Neither two nor one was called.

Reason in itself confounded
Saw division grow together;
To themselves yet either neither
Simple were so well compounded. (25-44)

These stanzas describe the lovers’ union of selves in the “mutual flame” itself, and they suspend in time the “kiss of fire and powder” which is the consummation of love. Within the love that the dove and the Phoenix share exists a reality that transcends the world of reason, logic and the possible. Shakespeare emphasizes numbers, “twain,” “one,” “two,” division,” immediately before stating that “Number there in love was slain.” In the following stanza Shakespeare moves through the same hyper-reasoning. The birds here are “remote,” they are far away from each other, at the same moment that they are unified together, “not asunder.” The laws that govern time and space are, again, not made irrelevant by the birds’ love – Shakespeare uses these laws to describe it – but rather the laws of physics are transcended through the flame: “Distance and no space was seen.” With any other individuals, the poem states, this mutuality would be a “wonder,” but inexplicably, for the Phoenix and the Turtle, it is their natural state.

In his recent book, *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: The Mystery of “The Phoenix and Turtle,”* James P. Bednarz convincingly outlines the “wonder” of the intersubjective union achieved in the Phoenix and Turtle’s perfect love. “Shakespeare discovered in one strange poetic compound,” Bednarz writes, not only the source of a new poetics but a vehicle for exploring a radical conception of human identity grounded in an ideal intersubjectivity. Shakespeare was fascinated by “incorporate” selves, but one of the most remarkable aspects of “The Phoenix and Turtle” is its radical formulation of ideal love as an experience in which the self and other merge while remaining distinct in a state that guarantees community and independence. (10)
This, as both Bednarz and J.V. Cunningham before him have noted, is based on the intersubjective union of the Trinity: “Shakespeare’s poem dwells on the Christian mystery of dialectical ‘persons’ of God that are and are not the same, that see themselves in and through each other while maintaining an individual integrity that sets them apart” (Bednarz 14). The word “essence” in particular has theological resonance. Richard Hooker’s *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* describes the Trinity as an indivisible essence: “And sith they are all but one God in number, one indivisible essence or substance, their distinction cannot possibly admit separation” (Burrow 26n.). Thus “number,” the logic of mathematics itself, is “slain” by the impossible yet actualized union of the distinctive identities of the two birds. Moreover, the geography of the lovers’ union – which is, again, impossible – brings the space of “the beyond” to the here and now: “Hearts remote, yet not asunder; / Distance and no space was seen / ’Twixt the Turtle and his queen; / But in them it were a wonder” (29-32). “‘[T]he impossible happens’: that is, it really is possible to bring the beyond absolutely into the world now” (Fernie 15).

Shakespeare’s formulation of incorporate selves figures the mystery of the Trinity as essentially relational; the birds see themselves truly in each other’s gaze: “the Turtle saw his right / Flaming in the Phoenix’ sight; / Either was the other’s mine.” This incorporation of selves is, in Bednarz’s words, “the Trinity’s egalitarian unity with difference, its radical epistemology of self-realization achieved in and through other selves” (105). More than this, the recognition of self through the gaze of the other is itself a radical turn to the other. This is the path of true spirituality according to Martin Luther’s understanding of “the flesh” and “the spirit.” “Luther asserted that flesh, according to St. Paul,” writes Richard Strier, “‘means everything that is born of the flesh, i.e. the entire self, body and soul, including our reason.’ Fleshliness or carnality from this point of view, is fundamentally the condition of egotism or of self-regard – the condition of being, as Luther wonderfully put it, *incurvatus is se* (curved, or turned, into oneself). Being ‘spiritual,’ from this point of view, would be a matter of being turned away from self-regard” (37). When Shakespeare writes that “the Turtle saw his right / Flaming in the Phoenix’ sight,” it makes sense even though – or perhaps because of the fact – that “Property was thus appalled.” That is, he sees “that
which he owned” (34 n.) precisely by being turned away from himself and towards the Phoenix; just as the Phoenix sees her “right” in the Turtle’s eyes: “either was the other’s mine.” What they see, then, is not themselves, but themselves belonging to the other. “The doctrine of grace flows from the reinterpretation of ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit’ because it seems truly impossible to imagine the self willing itself out of self-regard” (Strier 37). And this moment of grace is precisely what the Phoenix and Turtle achieve together; to be turned away from egotism towards the other is what enables this love to be spiritual. It is not their “wills” that make the birds turn to the other. It is the other itself that makes the “will” irrelevant. The “self was not the same” because it is in the other, which paradoxically enables each bird to see his or her “right.”

Nygren writes that Christ’s love is “not an acquisitive love, but a love that gives” (683). Elsewhere, he writes, “Self-love is not to be ennobled and refined, but totally annihilated” (709). God’s love, in contrast to egotistical love, “is a real love which does not seek its own, but gives and sacrifices. This is the criterion of Christian love” (726). Self-sacrifice is the defining characteristic of the Phoenix and Turtle’s love: their union is not fully realized until their identities are incorporated in the “mutual flame” that both consummates and annihilates their “Love and Constancy.” Or rather, through self-sacrificing, the birds are able to experience sacred love: a “love that gives” and which is realized in the moment of its self-annihilating consummation. “Grace in all simplicity,” as the Threnos describes it, occurs not in death, but in dying: “So between them love did shine / That the Turtle saw his right / Flaming in the Phoenix’ sight.” The dove sees himself belonging to another in the moment he is aflame and as the Phoenix is aflame: “flaming in the Phoenix’ sight.” The verb is the present participle; it is still happening. This idea of an ongoing dying resonates entirely with Zizek’s reading of the Pauline theology of the Cross. In Christ one is a new creation, reads Zizek: “it is not the symbolic subject who is reduced to the ‘real’ individual, it is the individual (in all the wealth of his ‘personality’) who is reduced to the singular point of subjectivity; as such, ‘uncoupling’ does actually involve a ‘symbolic death’ […] (‘everything old has passed away’)” and the subject begins “fresh from a zero-point: consequently, there is also a terrifying violence at work in
this ‘uncoupling,’ that of the death drive, of the radical ‘wiping the slate clean’ as the condition of the New Beginning” (Fragile Absolute 127). The strike at oneself that marks ‘uncoupling’ from the symbolic order is what the Phoenix and Turtle accomplish in the eternal space of their “mutual flame,” the space that exists “between the two deaths.”

Bednarz writes that “Love” was the cause of the Phoenix’ and Turtle’s deaths:

To choose love is to choose death, since the conditions of ordinary experience, ordered by Property and Reason, cannot withstand its realization. A strong undercurrent of Elizabethan romanticism carries what Hiram Haydn calls “the metaphysical ache,” a rooted yearning to escape the limitations of mundane life, based on a troubling sense of discrepancy between the real and the ideal. This escape might be equated with death. […] Their experience, however remote, is nevertheless always somehow human and comprised of reciprocally self-constituting states of mind. Because while outlining their autonomy, Shakespeare emphasizes the lovers’ intersubjectivity: […] the dove knows himself because the Phoenix knows him. He sees himself […] in and through her eyes. Self-recognition coincides with self-destruction. (132)

Here Bednarz writes that “[s]elf-recognition coincides with self-destruction.” That is, the moment of un-curving oneself towards the love of another, “real love which does not seek its own, but gives and sacrifices,” necessarily requires the annihilation of the self-fashioned identity. “Love to one’s neighbour,” writes Nygren about Luther’s conception of sacred love, “has the task of completely dispossessing and annihilating self-love” (713). The Phoenix and the Turtle are able to see themselves as fully themselves in the moment of their un-curved postures towards their neighbours.

Bednarz’s language here shares the same impossible logic that Shakespeare’s poem expresses: “This escape might be equated with death,” he writes. Bednarz is indeed correct to correlate this “ache” with death, but he is also correct to hesitate in forcefully aligning these ideas. For the love of the Phoenix and Turtle does end in
material death, but equally in something that is generative and life-giving precisely because one gives one’s life to the other.

For Reason, this consummation of selves is confounding: “‘How true a twain,’” Reason laments in this poem, “‘Seemeth this concordant one; / Love hath reason, Reason none, / If what parts can so remain’” (45-48). Reason cannot comprehend how the birds could be wholly separate and yet a “concordant one” at the same time: for Reason, this paradox is, to quote Theseus’s assertion, “more strange than true.” And yet true it is since this is Love’s logic, not Reason’s. Nor can Reason make sense of the birds’ final “view from nowhere.” The Threnos laments:

Beauty, Truth, and Rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed, in cinders lie.

Death is now the Phoenix’ nest,
And the Turtle’s loyal breast
To eternity doth rest. (53-58)

Reason, clearly, cannot see past the physical remains of the birds: they are enclosed, in cinders, in the urn, and death is now their nest. At the same time, however, the poem suggests another reading, not in opposition to Reason’s Threnos, but layered on top of it, more like a ghostly palimpsest of another text than a dialectal counterpoint to Reason’s assertions. With the change in stanza length in the Threnos, our attention is drawn to the rhyming words at the lines’ ends, especially to the hard consonant “t” ending the rhymes of “nest,” “breast,” and “rest.” What is interesting about this stanza is the possibility that the lovers have found a different location to make their home; that is, their home is not merely the cinders in the urn – although it is decidedly this – it has the potential also to be the “over there” of eternity. The Phoenix and the dove have found an eternal rest in death. That is, they are continuously resting in this other nest. Moreover, the immolated Turtle’s breast is at rest “To eternity,” as if he is still moving towards it. Reason, again, cannot make sense of the possibility of a kind of eternal existence apart from the material world: the birds are now ash enclosed in
an urn and can neither return here nor generate new life from the ash: “Leaving no posterity.” For Reason, this death is final. For the birds themselves, however, I am not so sure this logical distinction between life and death works, just as the distinction of separate identities no longer works in the total mind and body meld that the birds experience together in their mutual flame. This is an eternal moment of perpetual dying to the self and towards the other.

Bruce Young, in his generous and insightful response to a version of this paper for a Shakespeare Association of America’s conference (2012), wrote that “[i]f self-offering is required for eternal life, if eternal life involves somehow becoming members of Christ, is it possible that the Biblical afterlife is something other than a continuation of the masterful self that is identical with itself?” (2). To clarify his point, Young directed me to C.S. Lewis’s *The Problem of Pain*: the afterlife for the Christian, theorizes Lewis, is something like “a continual self-abandonment – an opening, an unveiling, a surrender, of itself.” That is, “eternal life” may “also be eternal dying” (139). The “self,” clarifies Young, “exists to be abdicated and, by that abdication, becomes the more truly self” (2). Nygren writes that “Human love is acquisitive love, and so is created by the desirable nature of its object. God’s love is itself creative – i.e., it makes something of that which is nothing. […] Human love is distinguished by the fact that in all things it seeks its own and prefers to receive rather than impart its good” (725). Could it be that the Phoenix’ and Turtle’s is a love that continuously exists in the creative space of imparting the self to the other, of eternally un-curving itself to the other? “Christian love,” states Nygren, “is by its very nature ‘eine verlorene Liebe,’ a lost love. It is the direct opposite of rational calculation” (732). The inclusion of confounded Reason in this poem especially underscores the alternate possibility of an unreasonable hyper-love – of a love that is all giving. The spirituality that is activated by the quality of this giving love is a possibility of being that Shakespeare takes seriously here, and of course also in *Romeo and Juliet*. 
3.3 “Star-crossed lovers take their life”: Romeo, Juliet, and Subjectivity

Romeo and Juliet are more accessible to audiences than the Phoenix and Turtle simply because the young lovers are fully fleshed-out characters whose narrative we can easily follow, yet their love is of the same kind that Shakespeare magnifies in his enigmatic poem about the two birds. Romeo and Juliet, too, experience a consummation of their relationship which allows for the possibility of a space where our categories of social distinctions and subjective identities are, if not annihilated, at least transcended. The poem and the play both demonstrate that self-giving is the sacred act that allows for an intersubjective union. That is, more specifically, in the final moments of the play in the Capulet tomb, the space of the tomb at once becomes a place of material density and open to the infinite space of the heavens, even as it maintains its demarcations of a concrete “stony limit.” The physical and spiritual qualities of the tomb that should be at odds but which exist without tension simultaneously mirror the secular and sacred qualities of Romeo and Juliet’s love itself. Further, the lovers find their lives at the very moment they render them up: the act of mutual render is the purest expression of the self.

“The Phoenix and the Turtle” and Romeo and Juliet follow my analysis of Sonnets 125 and 126, where the “mutual render” of the speaker for the beloved opens the space for him to “know no art” and become “a true soul,” which means, in the case of the Sonnet sequence, to give over the role of the first person poetic speaker, hence the distanced third person voice of Sonnet 126 and the gaping silence of its absent couplet. In Romeo and Juliet this subjective dissolution-constitution is represented much more completely, and the emotional force of the lovers’ self-sacrifice is accessed and experienced by the audience in a very real way that is not present in the Sonnets.\(^\text{35}\) The perplexing impossibility of the lovers’ intersubjective union at the

\(^{35}\) Paul Stevens argues that the theatre in Reformed England was not always experienced merely as a passing moment of wholly “secular” entertainment: “early modern English audiences, all of whose members were familiar to some degree or other with the divine service of the Church of England, might have felt that theatrical transcendence was not always as this-worldly, temporary, and provisional” as some scholars contend. Even the radically Protestant Milton, Stevens shows, believed that the theatre
moment of their deaths is what is expressed in the “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” in which “mutual render” is figured as a willing spontaneous combustion, the “mutual flame” of the birds’ passion and of their mutual consummation in that flame. There is a particular genus of subjectivity that Shakespeare constructs by representing the loss of oneself in love: it is the active motion of self towards the beloved where the individual is most fully him/herself. And it is this movement away from selfhood that opens up the possibility of transcendence and inward spirituality.

Recently, Paul A. Kottman offered a new reading of *Romeo and Juliet* that demonstrates the play is about the lovers’ quest for subjective freedom. “Shakespeare’s play shows how Romeo and Juliet are formed as subjects through acts of mutual self-recognition,” Kottman states.

The tragic core of our self-realization springs not from our personal struggles with external social or natural necessities but from the dawning realization that nothing, not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely. This awakening leads Romeo and Juliet to the realization that, if they are to claim their lives as their own, they must somehow actualize their separateness for themselves, through one another. Their love affair is not the story of the two individuals whose desire to be together is thwarted by “A greater power than we can contradict” (5.3.153). Rather, it is the story of two individuals who actively claim their separate individuality, their own freedom, in the only way that they can – through one another. Their love affair demonstrates that their separateness or individuation is not an imposed, external necessity, but the operation of their freedom and self-realization. (6, original italics)

In Kottman’s reading, it is the love relationship more than any other experience that extends the limits of our subjective experience and, as such, climaxes in an intersubjective fusion of selves: a recognition of the self in the other that causes the self to be fully experienced as a separate being.

had a potentially religious effect: Shakespeare in particular “had the power to astonish us” and could “produce a kind of religious ecstasy, to enable us to transcend the this-worldly” (7).
My work differs from Kottman’s, however, with regard to the nuances of our understandings of early modern subjectivity. Kottman sees the subject as constituted by its quest for freedom: freedom not only from the pre-determining social roles of family and state, but also from the ultimate horizon of death. In my readings of Shakespeare’s works, however, I see the subject claiming her or his individuality in the action of self-sacrifice itself; or rather, more to the point, there is no individualization worth striving for in a love relationship. The endgame is not to achieve “freedom” of self or any kind of self-realization, but to reorient the terms of the playing field altogether. The endgame is to experience love from the perspective of God (and from that perspective, there is no game); this creates the space for the self to expand limitlessly and become fully oneself. *Romeo and Juliet*, like *Henry VIII* almost two decades after, as Stevens argues, “encourages us to think about things other than individualism” (“Shakespeare and Fletcher’s” 5). We cannot transplant our own “grand narrative of individualism” into sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformed England, Stevens continues, for this “obscures the revolutionary alterity of historic Protestantism.” Doing so “does real violence to the reformers’ profoundly other-worldly emphasis on the freedom of God and to so many ordinary people’s renewed sense of his immediate presence in the world” (“Shakespeare and Fletcher’s” 6-7). Personal freedom becomes irrelevant – as does a cohesive sense of “the individual” – when one lets go of the self for another, and in this letting go is where subject becomes most completely and authentically her- or himself. This paradox is beautifully articulated in “Bottom’s Dream, because it hath no bottom,” a statement which at once affirms Bottom’s unique and transcendent experience and simultaneously erases Bottom from it. This self-abnegation is in itself a defining aspect of Renaissance England’s culture of grace. It is the idea of grace that Shakespeare engages with in Sonnet 125’s ethos of self-sacrifice, “take thou my oblation, poor but free,” which is in turn aligned with *The Book of Common Prayer’s* service for the Eucharist: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord,” says the congregation, “ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto thee, humbly beseeching thee, that all we which be partakers of this Holy Communion, may be fulfilled with thy grace, and heavenly benediction” (264).
The spirituality that Romeo and Juliet’s love and self-sacrifice achieve in the final scene of the play in the tomb is present already in the opening lines of the drama. Shakespeare sets the stage and tips his hand with the Prologue, a sonnet that summarizes the events and the themes of the play:

Two households both alike in dignity,
   In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
   Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
   A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
   Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love,
   And the continuance of their parents’ rage –
Which but their children’s end naught could remove –
   Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
   What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend. (1-14)

The tension between death and transcendence, between love as a self-sacrificial unbending of oneself from oneself and love as tragic material loss is expressed powerfully in the Prologue. M.M. Mahood outlines how in the line “‘The fearful passage of their death-marked love’” the phrase “death-marked” “can mean ‘marked out for (or by) death; foredoomed.’” Simultaneously, “death-marked […] suggests the meaning ‘With death as their objective.’” The two meanings of fearful increase the line’s oscillation; the meaning ‘frightened’ makes the lovers helpless, but they are not necessarily so if the word means ‘fearsome’ and so suggests that we, the audience, are awe-struck by their undertaking” (56). Additionally, Levenson’s note points out that the line “A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life” is “a double-edged phrase meaning either ‘derive their life’ or ‘deprive themselves of life’” (6n.). Indeed, especially with the phrase “take their life,” Shakespeare distils the heart of my
investigation: we see here the paradox that exists in finding one’s life at the moment one loses it for another.

Barbara Freedman explains the “paradigmatic conflict” of attempting to find oneself in an other in terms of want and desire: “The denial of self-presence doesn’t negate presence but redefines it as a distancing or spacing we always seek but fail to close,” she argues (110). Thus, explains Lloyd Davis, “[c]haracters cannot attain their goals, and the inability to claim satisfaction affects desire as much as selfhood. Proceeding from an uncertain source, desire remains ‘predicated on lack, and even its apparent fulfillment is also a moment of loss’” (Davis 30, citing Catherine Belsey). These critical readings clearly express the workings of desire – the inability to claim satisfaction – and how by placing the dynamics of desire alongside conceptions of selfhood, Shakespeare gives us representations of subjectivity constituted by an unattainable reaching towards the other. What emerges from out of the networks of desire is a self that is defined by what it seeks. Shakespeare, however, also gives us instances of selves that are created by what they find. *Romeo and Juliet*, like “The Phoenix and the Turtle” represents the fulfilment of desire in love, where to “take life” is actually and figuratively to derive life from the taking of it. For Romeo and Juliet and for the Phoenix and the Turtle the distance between the here and now and eternity is nil; in the “consuming kiss” itself the spiritual and material are folded together: “Distance and no space was seen.”

The Phoenix and Turtle’s and Romeo and Juliet’s acts of radical love are revolutionary in themselves; their love becomes more meaningful, however, when it is witnessed and lamented, hence the procession of avian mourners and the lamentation of Reason in the *Threnos* of “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” and hence the audience’s central importance to *Romeo and Juliet* – an importance highlighted in the Prologue. The “Prologue ends,” writes Davis, “by anchoring the staging of ‘death-marked love’ in the here and now of the audience. […] It anticipates a successful theatrical conclusion, with the play’s performance ‘striv[ing] to mend’ what the lovers ‘shall miss’” (31). In my Introduction I discussed at length how Shakespeare conceives of love, the sacred, and art as being “all compact.” In *Romeo and Juliet*, by implicating
the audience in the meaning of the lovers’ story, the play suggests that the truth of love is to be found not in Romeo’s and Juliet’s deaths themselves, but rather in the audience member’s response to their love. Shakespeare underscores this as he has the Prince direct Verona’s attention to the lovers’ bodies and how old Montague and Capulet both swear to memorialize their children’s love through the monument of art, in this case, a golden statue.

It seems impossible, though, to sustain the tension between witnessing something fearsome that misses its mark and stating that their love is in fact fearfully marked for death. That is to say, if Romeo and Juliet experience an awe-inspiring love, they do not “miss” their “mark.” Indeed, a fearsome love would have them hit the bull’s-eye of their “death-marked love.” This “mark” is an impossible target if we put an emphasis on “what here shall miss,” and yet because there is the open possibility that their love is fulfilled in their self-sacrifices, which open up a space for the over there of eternity to invade the space of the here and now, an over there that is, to use Juliet’s and Romeo’s words from their dying moments, “everlasting,” “dateless,” and “timeless,” Shakespeare suggests that the impossible can happen.

Still, why is this important? Why should hyper-reality, this “airy nothing” of spiritual possibility, be a concern of scholarship? Arthur Brooke’s narrative poem 

The narrative poem Romeo and Juliet, writes White, “sees the deaths as punishment for the ‘unfortunate lovers, thrilling themselves to unhonest desire,’ but Shakespeare has at least made this interpretation ambiguous if not irrelevant.” White goes on to write, though, that contemporary critics, “[a]fter exonerating the lovers of charges of transgressive love, [...] reprove the lovers for not being transgressive enough against the norms of their society, for allowing themselves to be deceived into believing their love is not a political construction inherited from their patriarchal society. It does seem somehow odd,” he concludes, “that like the psychoanalysts, materialists are capable of coming around to blaming Romeo and Juliet, or Shakespeare’s depiction of them, for something” (15). I write this chapter not to refute any of the political, materialist, feminist, or historicist approaches of recent critical trends, but not to blame Romeo and Juliet for their love and deaths, and to take seriously the agonistic qualities...
inherent in Shakespeare’s plays and poetry: the conflict of being both “food for worms” (*1 Henry IV* 5.4.86-87) and at the same time feeling that “there’s a divinity that shapes our ends” (*Hamlet* 5.2.10). Selfless love was a radical subjective posture in Protestant England, and part of *Romeo and Juliet*’s achievement is to get the “patient ears” of the audience to attend to the “piteous overthrows” of the star-crossed lovers.

The Prologue’s description of the “star-crossed lovers” who “take their life,” and of these lovers’ “fearful passage” of “death-marked love” is echoed in Romeo’s premonition of doom before he goes to the Capulet ball. Immediately following Mercutio’s “talk of dreams,” Romeo states,

> […] my mind misgives
> Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
> Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
> With this night’s revels, and expire the term
> Of a despisèd life closed in my breast
> By some vile forfeit of untimely death.
> But he that hath the steerage of my course
> Direct my suit. (1.4.104-11)

Levenson notes that this passage echoes the Prologue, “not only presaging the tragedy to come but repeating the key words *stars, fearful, life/death* and rephrasing in *course* the idea of ‘passage’” (105-10n.). Here, though, the effect is subjective: whereas in the Prologue we can see that for the lovers “take their life” means both deprive themselves of life and derive their life from their deaths, in this speech we are given an insight into how Romeo himself feels about his life. On the surface, it seems clear that Romeo is distressed by the thought of losing his life prematurely because of “some consequence” of “the stars.” In another register, however, the line “a despisèd life closed in my breast” may be understood literally: Romeo despises the enclosure of his life within himself. This reading resonates both with what Luther writes of holy love, it is curved away from oneself (Strier 37), and with the Phoenix and Turtle’s love, “Property was thus appalled” (l. 37). Property, here, is defined by Burrow as: “(a) the abstract principle of ownership; (b) the principle that particular qualities
inhere in one entity alone” (37 n.). In other words, since property is appalled, the birds’ love is horrified by and utterly incompatible with an enclosed form of selfhood. The interpretive possibilities of Romeo’s passage are opened up further when we consider the term “forfeit,” for, as Levenson’s note explains, “Forfeit may refer to a transgression (sb. 1), penalty, or loss, and its agent could be the consequence, death, or Romeo” (107-9 n.). It is possible, then, to read death as losing, or having to forfeit, Romeo’s “despisèd life.” This reading would seem to conflict with the conventional Liebestod reading of this play that figures the lovers as somehow in love with death and hatred as they hurtle into oblivion. “There would be no myth and no romance,” writes Denis De Rougemont in his study Love in the Western World, “if Tristan and Iseult were able to say what is the end they are making ready for in the depths – indeed, in the abyss – of their wills. Who would dare admit that he seeks Death and detests offensive Day, that what he longs for with all his being is the annihilation of his being?” (48).

While De Rougemont’s argument may hold true for the Tristan myth, this mythology is inadequate to explain a nuanced reading of Shakespeare’s play. Of course, the text is filled with moments that foreshadow the lovers’ tragic ending in death, and there are many lines that suggest that death personified is Juliet’s husband, or at least a rival suitor. Yet there is something distinct in their love itself that is in opposition to death, though not in opposition to subjective undoing. This may be splitting hairs, and the outcome, regardless, is the same: death is final. The lovers themselves, though, as I have already suggested, seem to be experiencing an open-ended “now” of self-sacrifice, which is not the same thing as a Leibestod narrative – or at least we can say that there is the possibility that they transcend death through dying. In “The

---

36 When Juliet hears the news of Romeo’s banishment, in her despondency she states, “I’ll to my wedding bed, / And death, not Romeo, take my maidenhead” (3.2.136-37). And then again when she is commanded to marry Paris she tells her mother to “make the bridal bed / In that monument where Tybalt lies” (3.5.200-1). Shakespeare is actually quite heavy-handed about Juliet’s potential nuptials with Death, so much so that it is reminiscent of Romeo’s love for Rosaline: Juliet’s real love for Romeo supplants her false love for Death.

37 John Lawlor describes it thus: “[t]he ‘ripeness’ or readiness, especially as it is manifest between fellow sufferers in the bond of love, is all. If that tie holds, Death is robbed of the greater glory, the ending is triumph, a transcending of the limits of mortality by holding fast, in a union of suffering, to what is best in the mortal condition” (qtd. in Marsh 83). To this, Derick R. C. Marsh states that the
Phoenix and the Turtle,” the “between the two deaths” might be the difference between the birds resting “to” eternity rather than “in” eternity: “And the Turtle’s loyal breast / To eternity doth rest” (57-8). With “to” there is the connotation of continual movement towards eternity; a paradox of “rest” that contains within it a dynamic trajectory. “The Phoenix and Turtle” suggests an illogical alternative to the “physical extinction of love” (Marsh 88): “Love hath reason,” cries Reason, “Reason none, / If what parts can so remain” (47-8). Burrow’s note on these lines speaks to the fusion of selves that occurs in the “mutual flame”: “that which is separate can none the less remain so together” (48 n.). It is possible to read in “remain,” however, the suggestion that something, some “parts,” of this union do remain. One can find, in other words, in both the poem and in the play Shakespeare working through the same paradox where material death, dying to the things of this world, and spiritual life equate to the same thing. In the case of Romeo and Juliet, this paradox is suggested by the idea that Death may be the loser in this bargain. In “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” the language is porous and can suggest that the avian lovers have “fled” but still “remain,” and in so doing, they transcend “the limits of mortality.”

In Romeo’s passage above, he describes his “despisèd life” as “closed within my breast.” The focus is on self-containment. After he meets Juliet, though, most of the images and metaphors he uses to describe himself and Juliet, and most of the images Juliet reciprocally uses to describe Romeo, are of being torn apart, dismembered, and generally speak to open bodies and open boundaries. The balcony scene begins with Romeo’s line, “Can I go forward when my heart is here? / Turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out” (2.1.1-2). Here Romeo is making the rather conventional claim that his heart lives with his beloved. However, what is striking about these lines is the idea that Romeo is turned inside out because of his new-found love. Levenson’s note on this phrase is particularly insightful: the centre of the self was thought to be, among other things,

The location of the soul (see Booth). At the same time it brings cosmic associations to earth, regarded as the centre of the Ptolemaic universe.

“play is the stronger because it does not flinch from showing the physical extinction of the love by the same act that supremely testifies to its unique value” (88).
Romeo’s metaphor becomes an emblem at once of strength and weakness, power and sluggishness; his body is both a microcosm and a handful of dust. Moreover, since the centre of earth was conceived as one site of hell, the centre which Romeo seeks can lead him potentially not only to self-definition but also to self-destruction. (2.1.2 n.)

Paradox clearly infuses Romeo’s phrase; his desire to “find thy centre out” is at once his quest both to discover his core self, his soul, and to have that core self turned out of itself. It is both cosmic and grossly material in a way that resonates with “Bottom’s Dream”: a dream that is eternal and unfathomable – bottomless – and equally material and carnal, and equally uniquely subjective – it is Bottom’s own dream – while it negates the sense of personal selfhood it should describe: “it hath no bottom” (*MSND* 4.1.212). Logic collapses upon itself in Romeo’s language, just as notions of selfhood, self-transcendence, and self-destruction are enfolded together. Davis writes of *Romeo and Juliet* that “[i]t could be said that the play’s symbolic bequest to these works [to Platonic, Ovidian, and Petrarchan tropes] is a notion of desire as lost presence,” or as “present-in-absence” (42). Romeo, however, is interested not in “losing himself,” but rather in finding out how to turn out of himself, which is achieved through finding Juliet. And then, dizzyingly, this love for her, which is itself a loss of self, will enable him to find his life. Davis’s reading of desire as a kind of “lost presence” is correct, for this is what we see in Romeo when he is “love-sick” with longing for the unattainable Rosaline: “Tut, I have lost myself, I am not here; / This is not Romeo, he’s some other where” (1.1.193–194). Romeo’s longing in the first few scenes is desire that is in “conflict with time, recounting moments of ideal presence whose future reveals they could never have been” (Davis 42). The distinction between my argument and Davis’s is our reading of the nature of Juliet and Romeo’s relationship. No doubt, a healthy dose of teenage hormones is present in the young couple’s relationship, but there is a quality in it that transcends desire and moves into love. In seeking out Juliet, the centre of his “dull earth,” Romeo moves into the territory of the Phoenix and Turtle’s transcendent love where “the self is not the same” because it is given wholly to the beloved, a transition which in turn allows the self to see its “right” clearly.
Roman’s suggestion that Juliet is the centre of his “dull earth” is reciprocated later with Juliet’s lament when she fears that he has killed himself: “O break, my heart, poor bankrupt, break at once! / To prison, eyes, ne’er look on liberty. / Vile earth, to earth resign, end motion here, / And thou and Romeo press one heavy bier” (3.2.57-60). Shaheen outlines a connection between Juliet’s “earth, to earth resign” and The Book of Common Prayer’s funeral service, “thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou return” (see 3.2.59 n.). Clearly Shaheen is correct here: since her heart lives in her beloved, Juliet figures herself as nothing more than “vile earth” while she believes him dead. What is most interesting about Juliet’s passage, though, is the language of enclosure that she employs to describe the horror of her beloved’s – and thus of her own – death. “To prison, eyes,” she commands. And since this passage follows Juliet’s dizzying use of homonyms and sound effects in the lines that immediately preface this “vile earth” passage – “Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but ‘Ay’, / And that bare vowel ‘I’ shall poison more / Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice. / I am not I if there be such an ‘I’, / Or those eyes shut that makes thee answer ‘Ay’” (45-9) – one can interpret “eyes” as “I.” If the logic of this first-person pronoun is followed, what Juliet is seeking by imprisoning her “I” because of her beloved’s death is the mirror opposite of what Romeo does when he first seeks out the living Juliet on her balcony. Through finding love, he will be turned out of himself: “turn back, dull earth, and find thy centre out”; through love’s loss, she will be imprisoned within herself.

Further, Juliet’s language in this passage expresses concretely what Romeo’s speech at the end of 1.4 suggests obliquely when his precognition warns him that the night’s revels will “expire the term / Of a despisèd life closed in my breast.” That is, in love the self exists apart from the self, and a stable, enclosed identity is despised. The cessation of “motion,” which signifies both “obsolete definitions referring to intense emotion” (59 n.) and also the motion of the earth – in this case the “vile earth” – in the Copernican universe, ends both Juliet’s love and the potential for a transcendent

---

38 This passage is additionally a powerful foreshadowing of the final scene in the tomb, of course, where Juliet’s body is figured as a mere “sheath,” and where she and Romeo do in actual fact “press one heavy bier.”
experience. Life without her beloved, in fact, is the very nature of death. Juliet’s claustrophobic image of herself and Romeo pressing “one heavy bier” emphasizes this fact: though their corpses might be commingled after their deaths, this material meld has nothing whatever in common with the commingling of selves that occurs in the “kiss” of “fire and powder” (2.5.10). Juliet’s lament is despairing here because she imagines her life without Romeo’s. Without his “I” there is no her “I.” Without his life in hers, she is a mere “sheath.” This acknowledgement of vile material death in Juliet’s Act 3 speech is not the same as suggesting that when they both “take their lives” they cannot transcend this heaviness of their corporeal bodies. After Juliet discovers the true cause of the Nurse’s lamentations – Romeo’s murder of Tybalt – Juliet reconfigures the architecture of her universe: “He was not born to shame. / Upon his brow shame is ashamed to sit; / For ’tis a throne where honour may be crowned / Sole monarch of the universal earth” (91-94). Romeo becomes, in a cosmic sense, the ruler of the “universe,” and simultaneously quintessentially himself: he is the ‘soul’ monarch of her earth. Juliet expresses the triumph of love by positioning Romeo in a celestial space, and also by positioning him humbly within his material particularity. He is just earth; he is her entire earth.

The beloved, then, in a fusion of selves, is figured as the core of the lover’s identity; transcendence from self is a type of trade in selves that occurs in the love relation. Yet Shakespeare pushes the notion of self-abnegation further. As Romeo steals upon the wistful Juliet on her balcony, he fantasizes, in essence, about removing her eyes:

She speaks, yet she says nothing. What of that?
Her eye discourses; I will answer it.
I am too bold; ’tis not to me she speaks.
Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
Having some business, do entreat her eyes
To twinkle in their spheres till they return.

39 The Friar’s words about Juliet’s deadened body just prior to Juliet’s suicide ring more true than he intends: “Thy husband in thy bosom there lies dead” (5.3.155), he tells the remarkably cool and collected Juliet when she first wakes in the tomb. This is, of course, in part a stage direction: Romeo is lying dead upon the chest of his beloved. But it also speaks to the incorporation of selves that occurs in love. There is a deadness within Juliet because Romeo is dead; she is a mere sheath without him.
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars
As daylight doth a lamp; her eye in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night. (2.1.55-65)

Romeo’s metaphoric interchange of eyes and stars has always struck me as potentially disturbing: there is something uncanny about this imaginative removal of Juliet’s eyes that speaks to a deeper sense of personal instability than a mere “you have stars in your eyes” clichéd image would suggest – or rather, this is an image that should strike me as disturbing. Here, though, the effect of this image is beautiful; it makes Juliet’s face a source of radiance. It is the glimpse of his universal.

Curiously, Juliet expresses this same type of wish for Romeo’s body: “Give me my Romeo,” she pleads before her wedding night,

and when I shall die,

Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine,
That all the world will be in love with night,
And pay no worship to the garish sun. (3.2.21-25)

Both these declarations engage with imagery that plays off the contrasts between day and night, light and dark. Thematically, though, these passages have more in common than just imagery. Shakespeare figures the “star-crossed” lovers’ relationship as celestial even from the start of their courtship – it is not just her “eye” in heaven, but also her “I” – and second, it is important to note that through the experience of love, each lover almost wishes for the other’s corporeal undoing. Juliet’s desire is more forceful in this regard: “Give me my Romeo,” she pleads, “and when I shall die, / Take him and cut him out in little stars.” Juliet’s fantasy about dismembering Romeo occurs after she dies, though many editors have favoured Q4’s “when he dies” (21 n.). I favour the Q2 reading, for if we take “I” as authorial, then the text suggests here a reality about Juliet’s indwelling in Romeo that it will emphasize more forcefully in the final scene when it focuses on Romeo’s indwelling in Juliet; specifically, that
when Romeo is dead, Juliet herself is a mere “sheath” (5.3.170), an empty physical casing without her core, her heart.40

The reverse, I think, holds true for Juliet’s speech in Act 3: the intersubjective indwelling of these lovers is figured so absolutely, that there is nothing macabre about Juliet’s dismemberment fantasy. Levenson explains that “this passage has inspired an array of readings, from Juliet’s fantasy of shared sexual climax to her premonition of shared death” (3.2.21 n.). There is also something immeasurably generous about Juliet’s celestial-body fantasy in Act 3, as there is with Romeo’s heavenly-eye fantasy in Act 2. By placing the body parts of the beloved in the heavens, they share each other and their love with “all the world.” In this light, Q4’s “when he dies” works equally well: Romeo would become “the sole monarch of this universal earth” through Juliet’s act of universal generosity; we would all share in Juliet’s love. Further, though in other contexts there would be, undoubtedly, something macabre and sadistic about cutting up a (still alive?) body, here it is unquestionably an act of devotion. That is, in Romeo and Juliet this talk of dismemberment and cosmic disbursement could strike us as deeply disturbing, but instead it is beautiful. Juliet’s and Romeo’s metaphors resonate with the depiction of the Phoenix and the Turtle after their deaths, who become “Co-supremes and stars of love”; the birds are established as a celestial model for the “truth of love” while at the same time, impossibly, are enclosed within their cinders.

What, then, do these images and metaphors in which love, identity, and death collide say about the spiritualized material love Shakespeare represents in these works? There is an instinct towards self-shattering – or equally, spontaneous combustion, as seen in “The Phoenix and the Turtle” – through the experience of love expressed in part through physical destruction in these texts and in part through the bliss that is achieved through being fully alive. Yet the additional integration of the lovers with “the heavens” suggests that they experience something which transcends even the

40 Further, a sheath requires a knife or a dagger; so if we keep the sexual overtones engaged as we consider this line, then Juliet is decidedly collapsing sexual consummation with that which makes her complete, but it is this very completeness of self that, in a concrete way, causes her death: she is a self that is fulfilled by the thing that destroys herself.
limits of human understanding, and that leaves us no other space to consider but the spiritual. “The touch of spirituality” in Shakespeare’s plays, writes Fernie, “threatens the cruelly provisional ‘realities’ of the plays” (6). In contrast to Fernie’s advocacy for a spiritual component to Shakespeare’s plays, De Rougemont writes:

> Selfishness, it is said, always ends in death. But that is as a final defeat. Theirs [that is, Tristan and Iseult], on the contrary, requires death for its perfect fulfillment and triumph. To the problem this raises there is only one answer worthy of the myth. Tristan and Iseult do not love one another. [...] What they love is love and being in love. [...] What they need is not one another’s presence, but one another’s absence. (41-42)

Juliet and Romeo, however, do not love being in love – Shakespeare addresses this attitude by showing how Romeo’s false love for Rosaline is supplanted by his real love for Juliet. They love each other. And what they need is not the other’s absence, but the other’s universal presence. What they desire is their own absence.

Yet, again, this explanation is not precisely right because defined in these terms we are seeing Romeo and Juliet’s love through the paradigm of desire, and thus selfishness, instead of the spiritual “un-curving” of oneself towards the beloved without the attempt to fulfill one’s own desire. What we glimpse through the Phoenix and Turtle and through Juliet and Romeo is selflessness. Nygren writes that for Luther, “[s]elf-love is not to be ennobled and refined, but totally annihilated” (709). Selfishness may end only in death; yet selflessness, a love whose gravitational pull is exerted from the beloved instead of the self – “find thy centre out” – will also end in annihilation. The possibility that Shakespeare explores in both “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and Romeo and Juliet is that self-annihilation and death may not be one and the same thing. Love may devour death, as of course, it may be devoured by it. This is the point at which my argument fundamentally diverges from Kottman’s central thesis; his assertion is that Romeo and Juliet “experience freedom and self-realization as lovers, not only by negating these powers [that is, “nature, mortality, family

---

41 Even the Augustinian and medieval “idea of Caritas,” writes Nygren, “contains in its way an attack on self-love. But the peculiar thing is that the self-love which is attacked is nevertheless retained as a basis for the doctrine of love as a whole. [...] Luther’s campaign against self-love is marked by a very different ruthlessness and intensity” (709).
enmity, or civic norms”] – to the point of taking their lives – but in the acts of mutual self-recognition that this negation makes possible. These acts,” Kottman asserts, “including their suicides, constitute their love affair, the dawning realization that nothing, not even mortality, separates or individuates us absolutely, and that we must actively claim our separateness if our life is to be our own” (37-38). Yet in love, Romeo’s and Juliet’s lives are no longer their own, and they do not desire them to be. The purpose of spiritual love is precisely to give one’s life away, not to claim separateness and ownership. Indeed, the concept of “Property” itself is appalled by the Phoenix’s and Turtle’s radical turns to their beloveds. This disregard for the entire system of Reason and economy is the idea Scheler emphasizes when he defines love as the “act of giving away”; the meaning of giving is not to make the beloved richer, but rather for the lover to experience the freedom in giving itself (Scheler 93). This free giving is what Juliet expresses when she says she would withdraw her love from Romeo only so that she could give it to him again. “And yet,” she continues, “I wish but for the thing I have: / My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite” (2.1.175-78). Prior to the wedding ceremony, she expresses the overabundance of her love again: “They are but beggars that can count their worth; / But my true love is grown to such excess, / I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth” (2.5.32-34).

The astonishing thing about Juliet’s and Romeo’s love is that it is both eros and agape simultaneously. Juliet’s posture towards Romeo expresses the abundance of agape. Inexhaustible, it demonstrates the nature of the Juliet’s character: endlessly generous with her love because of her own abundance of it, not because she expects to receive advantage from Romeo. Yet at the same time, she is endlessly yearning for him, too: “Give me my Romeo,” she pleads right before the consummation of her marriage vows. Juliet’s expression tells of a forceful desire. Her love is both “need-love” and agape.

As if in direct response to the type of self-actualizing, self-loving treatment Kottman gives to the tragic couple, Fernie writes that “[i]f the spirituality of the plays has scandalized the materialism of contemporary thought, it has also often been
depreciated or ignored because the truth-claims it involves are presumed to be at odds with Shakespeare’s theatrical polyphony. It is certainly the case that spiritual utterances or experiences are often ironised by the plays” (5). It is also certainly the case, however, that Shakespeare takes the idea of spiritual transcendence as a serious reality, one in which real stakes are involved. Juliet and Romeo do not merely stake their lives for their love, their investment of themselves is, in part, otherworldly. The “star-crossed lovers” – and the Phoenix and Turtle, who are “co-supremes and stars of love” (51) – are described more like a supernova than “dull” and “vile earth.”

3.4 “Love-devouring death” or Love Devours Death?

According to De Rougemont’s theory of love,

The outstanding find made by European poets, […] what most profoundly expresses the European obsession by suffering as a way to understanding, is the secret of the Tristan myth; passionate love at once shared and fought against, anxious for a happiness it rejects, and magnified in its own disaster – unhappy mutual love. […] But unhappiness comes in, because the love which “dominates” them is not a love of each for the other as that other really is. They love one another, but each loves the other from the standpoint of self and not from the other’s standpoint. Their unhappiness thus originates in a false reciprocity, which disguises a twin narcissism. So much is this so that at times there pierces through their excessive passion a kind of hatred of the beloved. (52, original italics)

R.S. White discusses De Rougemont’s conclusions about narcissism and the fusion of identities. “Romances and popular songs,” he writes, “attest to the simultaneous absorption in the other, and the self-sustaining fantasy that marks young love, a total investment in believing that one knows completely the other, because one is seeing only the self” (11). Again, the Tristan myth and popular romances may in fact be revealing this egotistic state to us. Shakespeare, however, is not. Not only do Romeo and Juliet literally love their enemies – “My only love sprung from my only hate,” exclaims Juliet (1.4.251); “My life is my foe’s debt,” says Romeo (1.4.231) – but
Juliet works at an understanding of her love that allows her to see the identity of her beloved clearly and not simply as a narcissistic reflection of herself.

Paradoxically, the identity she locates as Romeo’s is fractured, shattered, and self-cancelling. “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet” (2.1.86-87). Juliet’s assertion here has now become proverbial, and yet what she is speaking about is not at all a simple idea. “‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy,” the whole passage reads:

```
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What’s Montague? It is nor hand nor foot,
Nor arm nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O be some other name!
What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.                              (2.1.81-92)
```

Here again the idea of dismembering Romeo’s body is apparent, though only in verbal and discursive terms, for in her attempts to determine who Romeo is, Juliet divides his body into component parts; it is not in his “hand nor foot, / Nor arm nor face” where Romeo’s “self” can be found. Romeo’s name, she decides, is “no part of” him, but nevertheless for this “no part” she offers “all myself.” This is poor economy: Juliet is giving herself away for a name that is not part of her beloved to begin with. This is the precise opposite of narcissistic and selfish love, and the opposite of Kottman’s radical separateness. Zizek theorizes the quality of Juliet’s love as akin to Christianity’s “Breakout” via Love: “by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains the space of free action. Is not such a radical gesture of ‘striking at oneself’ constitutive of
subjectivity as such?” (Fragile 150). That is, as Geoffry Holsclaw glosses, “[r]ather than seeking ‘subjective affirmation’ from (indicating source/origin) the political order (even in the guise of transgression), […] one ought to enact a hysterical subjective destitution from (indicating separation/removal) the socio-economic order” (Holsclaw 163, italics original). By abdicating themselves from the symbolic order of words, patriarchy, and identity, Juliet and Romeo engage with the radical spiritual freedom of Love. “Only when one considers oneself dead to the existing order will one be able to actually act freely with regard to it,” writes Holsclaw. “Subjective destitution” creates “the possibility of another order altogether” (163-64).

More curious still is that though Juliet insists that Romeo is decidedly not defined by his name, she almost obsessively names him in these opening passages of the balcony scene: “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” she famously asks, and in the passage quoted above, she gives Romeo his proper name, first and last, five times. Further, after Romeo reveals himself to Juliet by stating, “My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself, / Because it is an enemy to thee. / Had I it written, I would tear the word” (98-100) – a statement that, with the word “tear,” echoes the type of disarticulation Juliet verbally describes in this scene and which she imaginatively enacts in Act 3 – Juliet proceeds to name him twice: “Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?” (103). And near the end of this scene, almost as if Juliet has picked up on Romeo’s image of violent name-tearing, she states, “Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud, / Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies / And make her airy tongue more hoarse than mine / With repetition of my ‘Romeo’” (206-9). There is a tension between calling Romeo “Romeo” and tearing that word apart; even the idea of

---

42 Zizek discusses Romeo and Juliet specifically in The Fragile Absolute: “When, in the balcony scene, Romeo and Juliet pathetically proclaim their renunciation and hatred of their own family names (Montague, Capulet), and thus ‘unplug’ themselves from their particular (family) social substance, do they not provide the supreme example of ‘hatred of one’s parents’ as the direct expression of love? […] Does not Christianity, however, go even a step further and enjoin us not only to hate parents on behalf of the beloved one, but, in a dialectical inversion of love for one’s enemy, ‘to hate the beloved out of love and in love?’ (125-26). My response to Zizek is, yes. And this is precisely what Juliet and Romeo express in the passages in which they imaginatively pull apart their beloveds.

43 In Act 4 as Juliet imbibes the Friar’s sleeping-death elixir, she echoes herself from Act 2 where she mused on Romeo’s “true” identity, only this time she is offering a toast to – potential and actual – self-destruction rather than self-annihilation by trading oneself for the other: “Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here’s drink – I drink to thee” (4.3.57).
“tear[ing] the cave” and thus “rend[ing] the air of Echo’s dwelling-place” (207-9 n.) has in it the suggestion of doing violence to the name of Romeo, or, alternately, doing violence to the air of the cave by constantly *repeating* this name. These ideas cancel each other out: either one tears the word Romeo or tears space by speaking it repeatedly. This collapse of meaning and subjective identity may be seen as speaking to the nature of desire and love. Desire gives one a subjective position, even though this position is defined by a longing that displaces the self. Love, on the other hand, displaces the material world by giving the beloved his or her self as well as one’s own self. The same tension is at play in the Phoenix and Turtle’s love, which sees the birds as at once being “enclosed, in cinders” and as being “co-supremes and stars of love” (55, 51).

Yet instead of describing a hollowed-out absence of meaning, Romeo and Juliet’s love expresses a superabundance of feeling and energy: “I wish but for the thing I have,” Juliet says to Romeo, after teasingly pointing out that she should withdraw her love for him, as it was revealed unintentionally to his eavesdropping ear. “My bounty is as boundless as the sea,” she continues, “My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite” (2.1.175-78). Juliet’s words here resonate with how Fernie, in his reading of Derrida, describes spirituality; it is a turning away from the “narrow investment in the self and what is, to an infinite openness” (13). The ideas Fernie examines in his analysis of spirituality in Shakespeare resonates with Strier’s theory of the “spiritual” as described by Luther: “being ‘spiritual’” is a “matter of being turned away from self-regard” (37). Agape is “unconditional since it is not motivated by the qualities of the other, but only by the abundance of the giver himself” (Brümmer 129). This is the duality of love Juliet is describing here: “infinite” and “boundless.” At the same time, no one can dismiss the passionate component of Juliet’s longing for her beloved. Shakespeare does not represent agape and eros in tension with each other, but as each overflowing and fulfilling the other.

---

44 With “tearing the cave” we may also be able to align this metaphor with the “stony limits” that “cannot hold love out.” It is as though Juliet’s mantra, “Romeo,” is more powerful than the stone of a cave, a limit – or a vault.
The interpretive errors involved in defining Romeo and Juliet’s love as either “twin narcissism” or as, in Julia Kristeva’s term, “love-hatred,” or as Kottman’s “individuation,” are somewhat excusable: Shakespeare presents us here with such a radical spiritual love that neither logic nor psychology has currency. This is a love “in opposition to what is” (Fernie 9). By looking at the young couple’s relationship, we can see that even their fantasies of the other’s undoing are not rooted in hatred nor in a liebstod fantasy; it is comprehensible only if we apprehend that these two lovers locate themselves in the infinite. Moreover, the subjective identities and naming of self and other in the balcony scene forcefully resonate with the Phoenix and Turtle’s mystery of compound identities: “Neither two nor one was called.” Juliet names Romeo truly as she trades herself for his name, just as the Turtle sees his “right,” that which is properly his, only as it belongs to the Phoenix. Property is appalled not because the Phoenix and Turtle cease to be themselves, but because they become radically themselves only when sacrificed freely to the other.

Sonnet 125, as I have shown in the previous chapter, culminates in this same self-sacrifice: “And take thou my oblation, poor but free, / Which is not mixed with seconds, knows no art, / But mutual render, only me for thee” (11-12). The expression of love culminates in this “oblation” – culminates, that is, right before the speaker hesitates from this total investment of self in other through the couplet: “Hence, thou suborned informer: a true soul / When most impeached, stands least in thy control” (12-14). What the speaker of Sonnet 125 achieves, or at least very nearly achieves before the couplet, at the end of what has been recognized as the young man sub-sequence, Romeo and Juliet achieve at the start of their romance. “Romeo, doff thy name,” states Juliet, “And for thy name, which is no part of thee, / Take all myself.” Romeo, suddenly revealing himself, replies, “I take thee at thy word” (2.1.90-92). The active verb here is “take”; both lovers describe this relationship as a loss of self, and the thing they “take” is the very giving up of the other’s self for the beloved. This is true of Juliet’s extravagant exchange of herself for Romeo’s name,

---

45 We can perceive here the same notion of “Simple were so well compounded,” which is the wonderful mixture of pure selves in “The Phoenix and Turtle.”
and equally the case for Romeo. Q2’s “I take thee at thy word” is often written as it is in Q1’s more commonplace reading: “I take thee at thy name,” that is, a “name, title, appellation” (92n.). This suggests that Romeo may now take Juliet’s name – her title – at the very moment she gives herself for Romeo’s name, which itself is nothing. Moreover, Romeo’s new identity is based on a negation: “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptized: / Henceforth I never will be Romeo” (93-94). Just as Juliet’s exchange of all herself for an empty signifier is an unthrifty trade, Romeo’s exchange too ends in a sum-zero gain. Although he promises to be “new baptized,” his newly christened identity is based on “never” being Romeo again; indeed, we cannot even say that his new self will be established on being Juliet’s love, for he asks to be called “but love,” which further diminishes the value of the return.

For the lovers, however, this exchange is one not of penury, but of inexpressible wealth, as Juliet says, “They are but beggars that can count their worth; / But my true love is grown to such excess, / I cannot sum up sum of half my wealth” (2.5.32-34). And they do – at least Shakespeare allows them this – get to spend one night together as husband and wife before Romeo flees to Mantua. While in exile there, Romeo has another premonition of the catastrophe and the consummation that defines his love for Juliet:

If I may trust the flattering truth of sleep,
My dreams presage some joyful news at hand.
My bosom’s lord sits lightly in his throne,
And all this day an unaccustomed spirit
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.
I dreamt my lady came and found me dead –
Strange dream that gives a dead man leave to think! –
And breathed such life with kisses in my lips
That I revived and was an emperor. (5.1.1-9)46

46 This passage expresses the most positive light in which to view the lovers’ deaths, for it is here in Romeo’s speech that Shakespeare gives us a suggestion of an actual afterlife for the young lovers and not just a disembodied – or dismembered-bodied – relocation in the heavens. At the same time, this speech makes their deaths all the more tragic, since when Juliet does find Romeo dead and kisses his still-warm lips, he does not revive.
Here the language Romeo uses to describe his “unaccustomed spirit” overlaps with previous references to an earth-self-celestial paradigm. In Act 3, Juliet describes her body pressing together with Romeo’s in death, and this solely material incorporation of selves is “vile.” This, in turn, has resonances with Romeo’s description of “a despisèd life closed in my breast.” Joy comes not from being embodied in a closed and defined geometry of self, but instead from being undone physically and from losing any rigid control over the self. Even in this speech itself, there is an ambiguity over what or who is making Romeo happy: is it his own heart that is his “bosom’s lord” or some external force of love (3 n.)? Is the “unaccustomed spirit” Romeo’s own lightheartedness or some nebulous creature of the spirit realm? The point is, I think, that this is the point; that is, the sense we get of Romeo’s “lightning before death” here is that he is somehow in this moment both entirely filled with himself just as he is also filled with something entirely other.

Romeo’s passage, his “I revived and was an emperor,” shares remarkable similarities with Juliet’s previous assertion that he is “sole monarch of the universal earth.” These metaphors, in both cases, dovetail with the Phoenix and the Turtle, who become “co-supremes and stars of love” after their deaths. All this language suggests that the lovers are fulfilled in their love for each other and simultaneously in their self-identities, in their subjective realizations, when they are most lifted out of themselves and, in a sense, amplified in their corporeal bodies. In other words, self-constitution is not merely achieved simply through self-destruction, but it is through self-destruction that one becomes most powerfully the self - and this is a self that is acknowledged as powerful not only by Romeo’s and Juliet’s own subjective positions, but because the lovers have surrendered themselves to each other, they now see one another from an eternal perspective, just as the speaker of Sonnet 126 sees his beloved from the same infinitude of time and space. The lovers become “stars of love” to each other in their supernova-like moment of self-extinction. And because this is theatre, Romeo and Juliet’s love becomes universal to the audience as well as to them through the poetry that expresses the cosmic quality of their love.
Romeo hears no joyful news from Verona, however. Instead, Balthazar tells him of Juliet’s death. With astonishing speed, Romeo buys the poison from the Apothecary, and then the next time we see him, he is at the doorway of the Capulet tomb, ready for his own suicide. The tomb, the receptacle of death and rot, is described by Romeo as “a triumphant grave”: “I’ll bury thee in a triumphant grave,” Romeo says to Paris’s corpse:

A grave – O no, a lantern, slaughtered youth;
For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
This vault a feasting presence full of light.
Death, lie thou there, by a dead man interred.
How oft, when men are at the point of death,
Have they been merry, which their keepers call
A light’ning before death. O, how may I
Call this a light’ning? (5.3.83-91)

In the final scene in the Capulet tomb, the image patterns and thematic concerns that have been invoked throughout the play coalesce in the tragic ending of the two lovers. The interplay of light and darkness, consumption and consummation, and the tension between transcendence and enclosure are opposites that are activated by Romeo’s passage; these ideas and images come to a crescendo in this speech. In Romeo’s imagination, the Capulet tomb is a “feasting presence full of light” because of Juliet’s radiant beauty. A well-known aspect of the play is throughout their exchanges, Juliet and Romeo have described each other in terms of contrast between light and dark, “O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!” declares Romeo when he first lays eyes on Juliet. Romeo’s passage here from Act 1 continues with, “It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop’s ear, / Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear. / So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows, / As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows” (1.4.158-62). This passage resonates wonderfully with Juliet’s “Come night, come Romeo, come thou day in night; / For thou wilt lie upon the wings of night / Whiter than new snow upon a raven’s back” (3.2.17-19). And, as I have discussed at length above, both lovers imagine and describe each other’s dead

---

47 Of course, there is a tragic irony to Romeo’s line “Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear.”
bodies, or rather parts of each other’s bodies, as light in the night sky. “The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,” muses Romeo, “As daylight doth a lamp” (2.1.63-64). This image “transforms Juliet’s face into an extraordinary play of light” (61-63 n.).

In the Capulet tomb at the climax of the play Juliet is not merely a “radiant source of light” (84 n.), but the vault itself becomes a “feasting presence” filled with her light. This imagery is crucially important because in the tomb Shakespeare represents the consummation of love through the consummation of the language with which he has described love. It is therefore necessary to trace back some of the other metaphors activated within Romeo’s passage. Immediately before the lovers’ wedding ceremony, Friar Laurence warns that “These violent delights have violent ends, / And in their triumph die like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume. The sweetest honey,” the Friar continues, “Is loathsome in his own deliciousness, / And in the taste confounds the appetite” (2.5.9-13). Just prior to the Friar’s metaphors, Romeo boasts:

[…] come what sorrow can,
It cannot countervail the exchange of joy
That one short minute gives me in her sight.
Do thou but close our hands with holy words,
Then love-devouring death do what he dare,
It is enough I may but call her mine. (2.5.3-8)

Both of these passages have consummation, eating and devouring, as a central conceit. The idea that death or a tomb swallows bodies is proverbial, as Romeo demonstrates when he first opens the Capulet tomb: “Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death, / Gorged with the dearest morsel of the earth, / Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open, / And in despite I’ll cram thee with more food” (5.3.45-48). Yet despite the commonplace image of the gaping death-mouth, in the phrase “love-devouring death” it is possible to hear the words without their hyphen, with love as the agent who is devouring death, the relationship in inverse. This reading of the “triumph” of the consummation suggests that the “detestable maw” of the tomb entrance is inverted into a space where love truly may devour death. Or more precisely, “love-devouring death” and “love devouring death” exist at the same time:
love devours death and is devoured by it. The space of the tomb opens up within itself as the enclosure becomes celestial – it is infinitely bigger on the inside – and as the “detestable maw” consumes that which transcends it, while it is itself feasted upon.

In addition to these image patterns of light and consumption, Romeo focuses on the concrete reality of the tomb with the words “vault” and “interred.” Earlier in the balcony scene, Romeo dismisses Juliet’s shock and apprehension about his presence in the garden: “With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these walls, / For stony limits cannot hold love out, / And what love can do, that dares love attempt” (2.1.109-11). If “stony limits cannot hold love out,” then Romeo’s entrance into the tomb, more so than into the Capulets’ garden, is a concrete instance of love breaking through a “stony limit.” And if “love-devouring death” will “do what he dare,” love will dare to devour death, for “what love can do, that dares love attempt.” Further, in Romeo’s description, it is the vault itself that is the “feasting presence.” What is being feasted on here? Who is doing the feasting? On the one hand, it may be Juliet’s light that is devoured by the tomb; this makes special sense if we connect the “feasting presence” to a presence chamber, the stately room in which a monarch receives his or her guests. If we follow the logic of this reading, a reading obviously suggested by the text, then the liebestod arc of this tragedy remains the only perspective of the text: Death is the monarch who receives the young lovers (and Paris) and subsequently feasts upon the beauty of Juliet. This reading underscores the materiality of death. In death, Juliet will be eaten by the “worms that are [her] chambermaids” (5.3.109). On the other hand, the vault itself is the feast, imaginatively consumed by Romeo. It is not, after all, Death who makes this a presence chamber, but Juliet’s beauty that makes it so. That is, Juliet’s light is what makes the vulgar tomb a royal space, not Death – and certainly not the worms of the chamber. In fact, Death is incidental here; Juliet’s beauty triumphs over Death. It is Romeo’s experience of Juliet’s beauty that transforms the dark vault into a presence chamber. If Romeo, then, comes before Juliet’s presence as he himself is consumed by the tomb, his entrance into the tomb suspends Death’s authority as Shakespeare places Romeo’s subjective experience of beauty above the tyranny of Death. In either case, the space of the tomb expands as
the enclosure becomes celestial, and as the “detestable maw” consumes that which transcends it.48

Davis argues that in Romeo and Juliet subjectivity collapses because of the characters’ unfulfilled desire: “The spirit of Petrarchism is revealed as tragically fatal and idealized romance collapses. […] Romeo and Juliet stages the outcome of unfulfillable desire” (29). Collapse defines the final moments in the Capulet tomb: language, metaphor, and logic all circle back upon themselves. And yet instead of seeing Romeo exhibit a kind of existential crisis, or the fury of passion he experienced in Act 3 after hearing the Prince’s order of banishment, what we see here is Romeo in his truest form: generous, honest, and selfless. Romeo’s desire for Juliet may very well be “predicated on lack,” as Davis says, but his love for her is overfilled at this moment, as is his sense of himself. “How oft,” he says, “when men are at the point of death, / Have they been merry, which their keepers call / A light’ning before death. O, how may I / Call this a light’ning?” (88-91). Levenson’s note states that “[t]he ambiguous may, probably signifying both ‘can’ and ‘ought’ (Abbot 307), allows Romeo to pose two questions in one. He asks rhetorically how he can conceive of this sensation as A light’ning, and also seems to consider how he should turn the experience into a metaphor” (90-91 n.). But Romeo cannot turn the experience into a metaphor because it is precisely not symbolic – or rather, more specifically, it is not symbolic to him. Here, in the moment of expiring the “life closed in my breast,” he is actualizing the images of feasting turned self-destruction: by imbibing the poison, Romeo takes in death, just as by entering the tomb, the death-maw takes him in. By consuming the poison, he will turn “his centre out.” At this moment, Romeo’s “bosom’s lord” does sit “lightly in his throne.” Further, in calling his emotions and his experience of being a “light’ning” before death, Romeo retroactively reinterprets Juliet’s previous assertion that their love is “Too like the lightning which doth cease to be / Ere one can say ‘It lightens’” (2.1.162-63). Romeo’s love here is the lightning of the self-destructive moment; it is a lightning before death, just as the Phoenix and

48 A third reading would suggest that Romeo sees Juliet’s light itself feasting on the tomb, which would indeed be an instance of love devouring death as it is devoured by it (taking into consideration, of course, the fact that Juliet is not dead yet). Even Romeo’s language here circles back on itself in this kind of impossible way: “Death, lie thou there, by a dead man interred” (87).
Turtle’s love defined as a perfect commingling of selves occurs in the mutual flame itself. The “triumph” and consummation of love, in the Friar’s terms, occur in the “kiss of fire and power.”

If desire is, as Davis writes, a distancing or spacing gap that we are unable to close, love is able to close this gap precisely through loss. That is, Romeo’s loss of life is not the result of his love for Juliet, it is his love for Juliet: it is the ultimate unbending of himself from himself and towards an other. Indeed, Romeo is not even moving towards an other since he believes Juliet to be dead already; his love here is truly what Nygren terms a “lost love” (732). The lovers’ selflessness makes their love radical. In the lovers’ final moments in the Capulet tomb, what Zizek terms a “true intervention of Eternity in Time” (The Puppet and the Dwarf 91) happens, a “real event” that does not take place “sometime in the future, but something that is already here – we merely have to shift our subjective position” (Puppet 86-87), just as Romeo shows he has done. In Romeo’s final speech within the tomb he states, “O, here / Will I set up my everlasting rest” as he seals “with a righteous kiss / A dateless bargain to engrossing death” (5.3.110, 114-5). The key words here are “everlasting” and “dateless,” both suggesting a moment of eternity which transcends a definitive end: this “rest” is ongoing. Moreover, the poison Romeo imbibes here is, unaccountably, a source of vitality: “O true Apothecary, / Thy drugs are quick” (119-20). M.M. Mahood states that the “drugs are not only speedy, but also quick in the sense of ‘life-giving’” (72). Juliet’s last words echo Romeo’s: “Poison, I see, hath been his timeless end” (5.3.162). Here “timeless” can connote “eternal” (Levenson 162 n.). Further, Juliet kisses her beloved’s lips in the hopes that “some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative”; that is, she wishes to die with something that restores her health. Of course, the lovers’ language has added pathos because it expresses the love each has for the other that will never come again. But it simultaneously expresses the possibility of a beyond in which love and life are eternally restored. The language collapses time: the here and now of the moment of

49 The idea of an eternal rest resonates with the intersubjective fusion of selves that occurs through the Phoenix and Turtle’s mutual combustion which I have discussed above. Like Romeo and Juliet, the poem describes a present and an ongoing eternal movement of self-sacrifice with the words “now” and “to”: “Death is now the Phoenix’ nest, / And the Turtle’s loyal breast / To eternity doeth rest” (56-58).
dying exists contemporarily with a moment of living to the fullness of life: Romeo’s “quick” poison and Juliet’s desired death by “restorative” fold the experience of dying and the experience of living into each other. And it is this tension of transcendence and materiality that permeates the play as a whole.

Romeo promises that if Juliet loves him, he will become “new baptized” (2.1.258). Of course, Romeo here means that he will be christened with a new name, since Montague is hateful to Juliet. However, since this love takes the couple past the law of the symbolic order – the ritual of baptism itself reenacts death to self and resurrection into new life with Christ – Shakespeare engages here with the Pauline “new creation,” a “new creation” that is “equal parts loving and monstrous, marked as much by dying to the symbolic order as it is by killing oneself in regard to the symbolic order” (Holsclaw 165). Zizek’s theory of the “‘perverse core of Christianity’” is that “God is dead and we with him” (Holsclaw 166). What Zizek describes here with regard to Pauline philosophy is precisely what Shakespeare expresses in Romeo and Juliet’s mutual love: “Christianity proper is precisely to break out of the vicious superego cycle of the law and its transgression via Love,” states Zizek (Fragile 145). “But this break out via love is characterized by the radical gesture of ‘striking at oneself,’” glosses Holsclaw, “which constitutes subjectivity as such. This striking at oneself is the means by which one becomes ‘uncoupled’ from the symbolic order, dying to one’s social substance” (Holsclaw 165). John Donne expresses much the same thing in his Christmas Day Sermon of 1626, “The whole life of Christ was a continual passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha […] even in Bethlehem […] His birth and his death were but one continual act” (279). Donne continues to explain that “every penitent, and devout, and reverend, and worthy receiver hath had in that holy action his Now, there are all things accomplished to him” (279). This, then, takes us again to the moment in the Capulet tomb where living and dying, temporality and eternity are folded in to each other: Romeo’s and Juliet’s self-sacrifices, like the “worthy receiver,” are “dateless,” “timeless,” quickening and “restorative.” Eternity is invoked repeatedly by both lovers in their final moments. Time, space, light and dark, language and the real, death and life, self and other all coalesce in this vault. And the result is
revolutionary: in the allegorical poem “The Phoenix and the Turtle” the avian mourners testify to the “Beauty, Truth, and Rarity” of the Phoenix and Turtle’s self-immolation. In Romeo and Juliet authority testifies to their self-sacrifice, and the result is, potentially, real social change. “The wall is down that parted their two fathers,” to quote Bottom’s line from Pyramus and Thisbe (5.1.351-52).

3.5 “As they kiss consume”: Love as the Authentic Act

“These violent delights have violent ends,” Friar Laurence warns Romeo, “And in their triumph die like fire and powder, / Which as they kiss consume” (2.5.9-11). The well-intentioned Friar sees the young lovers’ union as a violent, rash affair that may lack permanence, a relationship that may burn itself out as quickly as it ignited in the first place. Friar Laurence, however, does not apprehend love in the same way that Romeo and Juliet do – “Thou canst not speak of that thou dost not feel,” retorts Romeo to the Friar’s reasoning (3.3.64) – nor does he comprehend the truth of what he says here, though I think Shakespeare intends it to be understood in more than its manifest context. It is clear, to begin with, how this metaphor dovetails with “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” for the birds’ “mutual flame” is in actuality what the Friar’s “kiss” of fire and powder is metaphorically. Of course, the narrative of Romeo and Juliet’s relationship is decidedly different from the allegorical union of the two birds; the young adolescents’ love turns tragic because of a long-standing family feud and because of the patriarchal structure of Verona, while the Phoenix and Turtle die because their love is by its very essence anti-egotistical, so that it is expressed only in a mutual self-sacrifice and realized in the moment of combustion. Further, the young lovers die while trying to stay alive – or rather, while trying to stay alive together: theirs is not the classic liebestod, the love of death, that punctuates the expression of desire in the Western tradition, except that it is this, too.

With the play and the poem, we reach a point where reason is confounded not only because of the hyper-love that the two birds and the two young lovers experience, but additionally because the spiritual and eternal quality of the lovers exists simultaneously with their physical and temporal selves. The Friar’s metaphor expresses this richness of experience and possibility beautifully: the “violent delights”
itself a paradoxical phrase – “in their triumph die,” and one does not have to reach far in order to hear the sexual innuendo in the word “die” here. At the same time, with the word “consume” we have the paradoxical simultaneity of “consummate” – the orgasmic associations with “die” lead us there – and “to perish or burn away” (2.5.11n.) (and also, of course, to consume, to eat, hence the importance of the tomb’s mouth). Love’s goal is “the little death” and death. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that love’s goal is the moment of the explosion, the “flash of lightning” or “true intervention of Eternity in Time,” the “flaming” moment itself that both invades the time and space of this world while being an experience of a wholeness yet to come. “[A]n authentic act is in between Time and Eternity,” writes Zizek, “the point at which ‘eternity intervenes in time’ […] the act designates the direct intervention of the noumenal dimension into phenomenality.” Romeo and Juliet’s love moves past the “deadlock of pure simultaneity; it ‘breaks the deadlock’ by disturbing the balance, by ‘unilaterally’ privileging some aspect of the undifferentiated Whole over all other aspects” (Fragile 93-94).

This thing-in-itself now of Romeo’s and Juliet’s mutual self-sacrifice is important to work at understanding because it is an idea Shakespeare repeatedly works through in his poetry and drama, and also because, as the world of the play demonstrates more concretely than the allegorical avian world of the poem, the radical love of Verona’s young teenagers transfigures the real world of their patriarchal society – or at least it is possible that it does so. “Poetry and spirituality both promise no less than another world,” writes Fernie – and writes Shakespeare, too: “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet, / Are of imagination all compact” – “[b]ut this promise may be hollow, which only makes them the more sensationally interesting” (4). The promise, however, is not hollow if it is something the audience desires, for it is desire that leads to longing, that leads to the ache which forms the identity. Poetry and spirituality, that is, do not promise another world, they promise the hope of another one.

“Why is it we delight most of all in some tale of impossible love?” De Rougemont asks:
Because we long for the *branding*; because we long to grow aware of what is on fire inside us. Suffering and understanding are deeply connected; death and self-awareness are in league; and European romanticism may be compared to a man for whom sufferings, and especially the sufferings of love, are a privileged mode of understanding. […] Hence, whether our desire is for the most self-conscious or simply for the most intense love, secretly we desire obstruction. (51-52, italics original)

De Rougemont’s *liebestod* analysis concludes that lovers desire death: “[u]nawares and in spite of themselves,” he writes, “the lovers have never had but one desire – the desire for death!” (46). Julia Kristeva’s reading of the play mirrors De Rougemont’s in many ways: “[t]he fact remains,” she writes, “that Juliet’s jouissance is often stated through the anticipation – the desire? – of Romeo’s death” (221). More forcefully, Kristeva argues that “[m]ore deeply, more passionately, we are dealing with the intrinsic presence of hatred in amatory feeling itself. In the object relation, the relation with an other, hatred, as Freud said, is more ancient than love” (222). These particular readings of the play speak to the nature of desire, but not to the nature of love. Desire in its most distilled form, to reiterate White’s argument, “hovers between genuine need and superficial self-gratification” (5). In contrast, pure love of the kind we see in “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and in *Romeo and Juliet*, which is based on Reformation conceptions of divine love – not a self-gratifying love, “not an

---

50 Julia Kristeva’s influential psychoanalytic reading of *Romeo and Juliet* equates desire with love. “Romeo and Juliet: Love-Hatred in the Couple” begins with an analysis of the play’s opening scene. “Under the guise of sex,” Kristeva writes, “it is hatred that prevails. […] In the first scene, the two servants’ remarks, peppered with puns and obscenities, cause the darkness of sex and inversion of all sorts to hang over this presumably pure romance” (208). Is *Romeo and Juliet* only about “sex”? If it is, then Kristeva’s point is well taken; the servants’ vulgar and violent comments about sex – and in particular about dominating women via sex – do “cause the darkness of sex […] to hang over this presumably pure romance.” Moreover, the argument that *Romeo and Juliet* is “pure romance” is equally fraught. Is Kristeva suggesting that these are our two avenues for interpretation; that is, are we either to see *Romeo and Juliet* in terms of materialist/psychoanalytic theory, in which the serious critical discourses of desire, the body, and the political structure are set up in opposition to a “pure romance,” or are we to respond to this play in a romantic and emotional manner, viewing it as little more than a tale of young love taken too far – a sentimental reading of the play that is already discounted by Kristeva in her qualifier of “presumed” before “pure romance,” which hints at the idea that she does not share in this mass presumption? The object of this project is to propose that Shakespeare represents love a serious feeling in itself.
acquisitive love, but a love that gives” (Nygren 683) – is a subjective experience that is wholly turned to the other. “In its infinite capacity for constant renewal and absolute beginnings,” writes John J. Joughin, “Shakespeare’s drama (which itself could not openly speak of God) offers us an analogous taste of, and for, the invention of the wholly other” (155).

Davis brings the concepts of desire, love, death, and spirituality together. “The drama alternates,” he writes, “between instants of passion, when time seems to stand still, and inevitable returns to the ongoing rush of events. […] The play […] confirm[s] a conception of desire that speeds not to its goal but its end” (32). Here Davis’s argument expresses the sustained tension between the here-and-now and the potential of a world not yet here; his reasoning includes the allowance for an “‘intervention of Eternity in Time’” while not negating the social and material realities of everyday Verona. Moreover, Davis acknowledges head-on the consummation of the young couple’s relationship in their “death-marked love.” Elsewhere, he writes, “[i]n these instances, the lack of absence which motivates love is conceived positively, part of a spiritual response which lifts the lover beyond temporal identity. Through its philosophic or poetic utterance, the self is not destroyed but surpassed. However,” he continues, “the link between lack and love can also affect selfhood less positively, even fatally” (35). Davis’s line of thinking expresses my reading of Romeo and Juliet beautifully in their attempt to surpass themselves, the lovers move beyond the limits of life itself. The distinction is this: given the fullest expression of the Phoenix’s and Turtle’s love in their “mutual flame,” it seems that love affecting selfhood “even fatally” is actually a hyper-positive way of surpassing the self. Or rather, the “less positive” and “fatal” end and the transcendent “beyond” end are at the same time polar opposites and one and the same. “Opposing notions of genre, time and character underlie these figures of ecstasy and loss,” Davis writes. “Platonic and Neoplatonic transcendence is marked by timelessness and selflessness. It brings narration and character to an end, as the self enjoys eternal fusion with the other” (35). In “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” the avian community mourns the passing of the two dead birds; in Romeo and Juliet, Verona’s community mourns the deaths of the two lovers. Yet these pairs of lovers themselves do not mourn their mutual absence;
indeed, they embrace their short-lived moments of self-destruction for love with an openness that suggests these experiences are not short-lived at all but instead are eternal; or rather, the lovers show that these moments have the potential to be eternal.\(^{51}\)

I have spent a great deal of time working to show that Shakespeare takes the spiritual realm seriously in *Romeo and Juliet* and in “The Phoenix and the Turtle.” But I am not suggesting that this transcendent reading is the only correct way to read this play. *Romeo and Juliet* is just as much about adolescent desire, about the arbitrary and rigid social and political structure of the patriarchs, and about the real sense of loss we feel when the cold and unfeeling universe arbitrarily prevents the two lovers from being together (had Friar John *not* been quarantined in a house of plague, the play would have a very different ending). There is as much insistence on the material finality of death as there is on the hope of an eternal hereafter. Indeed, Juliet unflinchingly contemplates the nature of death, and more specifically, of the Capulet vault – that “feasting presence full of light” itself – before she drinks the Friar’s elixir:

```plaintext
How if, when I am laid into the tomb,  
I wake before the time that Romeo  
Come to redeem me? There’s a fearful point.
Shall I not then be stifled in the vault,  
To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in,  
And there die strangled ere my Romeo comes?
[.................................]
As in a vault, an ancient receptacle,
```

---

\(^{51}\) On mourning in *Romeo and Juliet*, Kottman writes, “To be mourned is perhaps the fullest, most abiding form of human recognition. An individual attains her full humanity, her full belonging to the ‘human’ community only by having her dead body mourned and cared for by the community” (34). Kottman goes on to argue why the young lovers do not mourn each other: “Because Romeo is banished and Juliet estranges herself from her family by means of the ruse, they could not act on behalf of any community. […] The lovers assert their freedom and ‘the movement of consciousness’ through deeds that can have no communal justification, no social explanation” (35-36). Here as elsewhere in his argument Kottman continues to view the young lovers as post-Freudian heroes who actualize their “movement of consciousness” through the ultimate act of individuation. “The Phoenix and the Turtle” and “the feasting presence full of light,” at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, however, demonstrate that the act of self-immolation for the other has nothing whatever to do with individuation but rather demonstrates the perfect incorporation of selves – which may still, paradoxically, result in self-actualization, but this is figured as a freedom *from* self, not a freedom to assert their selfhoods.
Where for this many hundred years the bones
Of all my buried ancestors are packed;
Where bloody Tybalt, yet but green in earth,
Lies fest’ring in his shroud; …
[.................................]
O if I wake, shall I not be distraught,
Environèd with all these hideous fears,
And madly play with my forefathers’ joints,
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud,
And in this rage with some great kinsman’s bone,
As with a club, dash out my desp’rate brains? (4.3.29-34, 38-42, 48-53)

Significantly, Shakespeare gives Juliet more lines to contemplate her fear of death and colourfully to depict its vulgar physicality than he gives her to imagine the joys of the wedding bed in Act 3 – this passage is the longest speech of the play. Indeed, there is a poetic intensity and an imaginative vigour to Juliet’s language that describes the grotesque horror of death. Moreover, Juliet’s description of the disarticulated body parts of her ancestors resonates uncomfortably with her earlier fantasy about cutting apart Romeo’s body and placing it among the stars. Here the “joints” will be used maniacally as a form of suicide, not as a transcendent symbol of love and generosity of spirit. Romeo, too, has a robust understanding of death: the focus of his Apothecary speech is on the dried-up animal corpses and bones that litter the Apothecary’s shop, and on putrefied and rotting seeds and, significantly, on roses, that symbol of love and of Romeo’s name.

Might not this gritty material view of death and self-destruction suggest that Shakespeare suspects that the lovers’ dream of transcendent love is just as tragically fated as Romeo’s dream of being revived and becoming an emperor? That is, might not all this just be wishful thinking? Perhaps. In the lovers’ final lines the material reality of death is emphasized at the same time as the spiritual. “Here, here will I remain,” states Romeo as he looks his last upon his beloved,

With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last.
Arms, take your last embrace. And lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death. (5.3.108-15)

I have discussed above the spiritual connotations of Romeo’s speech here: “everlasting” and “dateless” gesture towards the transcendent possibility of eternity. Simultaneously, however, Romeo’s passage focuses on the “[h]ere, here … here” of this world, on the “worms” that are Juliet’s chambermaids – indeed, it is maggots who are the real “feasting presence” in a tomb. And this bargain is sealed towards “engrossing death”: it is the “detestable maw” of death whose “rotten jaws” hold the monopoly on and get enlarged by the lovers’ deaths. Except that this equally may not be the case since the text allows us to consider that love may devour death and bring about, impossibly, a “feasting presence full of light.” Juliet’s final words express the same kind of tension between the material and the spiritual, and here we get the added textual ambivalence of Q1’s and Q2’s readings. In Q1, Juliet’s final line is: “O happy dagger, thou shalt end my fear; / Rest in my bosom. Thus I come to thee” (5.3.116-7). Q2 reads, “O happy dagger, / This is thy sheath. There rust, and let me die” (169-70).

Rest can suggest a repose, an escape and release from the struggles of this life. Rust, on the other hand, is solidly material, nothing more than the process of corrosion and oxidation. The quartos themselves, it seems, refuse to conclusively stake their claim for either transcendence or materiality.

White writes that “[w]e hear and use the word ‘love’ every day in many different contexts and we seem to understand it in so many ways that it is hard to think of another single word defined so diversely, unless it is ‘desire’” (4). White goes on to say that while passionate love does not accept “limitations, sacrifice, commitments and provisionality,” an exception I will return to later, all other kinds of love “can strike us as admirable, inspiring, touching, poignant or funny. […] So radically multiple are the associations of ‘love’ and ‘desire’ that we find ourselves circling
around an absent centre of meaning, an evacuation” (5).\textsuperscript{52} Tellingly, Callaghan – almost embarrassingly – acknowledges the same problem of the indescribable “absent centre,” which is nevertheless still the centre, of this text: “The passion of romantic love,” she writes, “requires an inexplicable and mutual abandonment of ‘mastery’” (101). Callaghan’s admission that there is something “inexplicable” in the “mutual abandonment of ‘mastery’” itself sits uncomfortably in the centre of her argument about \textit{Romeo and Juliet}, desire, and the patriarchy, so that while what she reveals about social restrictions and female oppression holds true for the world of Verona, it is “inexplicably” not true for the young lovers’ relationship.\textsuperscript{53}

White confronts the elusive core of \textit{Romeo and Juliet} head-on, though he still is unable to define it, except by stating what precisely this “absent centre” is not. Yet Fernie and other contributors to \textit{Spiritual Shakespeares} are able to come to terms more readily with this “evacuation” by being open to the spiritual aspects of

\textsuperscript{52} This is precisely what George T. Wright states about the Sonnets, which I cite in the preceding chapter: Shakespeare’s Sonnets are “more about absence than presence, more about the absence – experienced, feared, or forecast – of their radiant center than about the enjoyment of its presence, though there is enough testimony about its presence to make its absence seem all the more poignant” (Wright 136).

\textsuperscript{53} In her essay “The Ideology of Romantic Love: The Case of \textit{Romeo and Juliet},” Callaghan argues that Shakespeare’s play “was written at the historical moment when the ideologies and institutions of desire – romantic love and the family, which are now for us completely naturalized – were being negotiated” (85). It is her project to “examine the role of \textit{Romeo and Juliet} in the cultural construction of desire. Desire – variously generated, suppressed, unleashed, and constrained – is particularly significant for feminist studies because in its most common formation as transhistorical romantic love it is one of the most efficient and irresistible interpellations of the female subject, securing her complicity in apparently unchangeable structures of oppression, particularly compulsory heterosexuality and bourgeois marriage” (85-86). Callaghan’s opening sentences illustrate a large aspect of the critical framework I am responding to in this research project. While Callaghan’s perspective sheds light on the politics of desire, her thesis establishes a false equivalency between \textit{love} and desire. In her first paragraph, Callaghan substitutes the term “desire” for love – and then further obscures these terms by absorbing “transhistorical romantic love” into the broader category of “desire.” Once Callaghan has equated “love” and “desire,” her project of demonstrating how patriarchal power structures oppress female subjectivity becomes a relatively straightforward task, and Shakespeare’s play is flattened into a subversion and containment argument in which the authority of the patriarchy will always win. Indeed, according to Callaghan, the evolving view of companionate marriage was hardly subversive at all, since women’s roles were always already absorbed into the patriarchal structure. The problem with Callaghan’s thesis is not that she shows \textit{desire} to be a tool of patriarchal and capitalist oppression – it may very well be; it is that love and desire are not the same thing at all, and by eliding the distinction, Callaghan erases one of the real possibilities of Shakespeare’s play: the possibility that love is real, and that it is something beautiful and powerful – even something terrifying – that challenges the very foundation of our conceptions of reason, materiality, and the real.
Shakespeare’s works. “[T]o comprehend the visibility of the invisible is a life’s work,” writes Joughin, citing Theodor Adorno’s theory of art:

Art becomes an image not directly but by becoming an *apparition* but only through the counter-tendency to it. The preartistic level of art is at the same time the memento of its anticultural character, its suspicion of its antithesis to the empirical world that leaves this world untouched. Important artworks nevertheless seek to incorporate this art-alien layer. When, suspected of being infantile, it is absent from art, when the last trace of the vagrant fiddlers disappears from the spiritual chamber music and the illusionless drama has lost the magic of the stage, art has capitulated. (qtd. in Joughin 138, italics original)

This citation contains within it the type of critical leanings some new historicist, feminist historicist, and psychoanalytic critics have toward an insecurity about addressing something potentially “infantile” in works of art. There is additionally an awkwardness in much recent criticism around acknowledging the type of “evacuation” at the core of Shakespeare’s play that White recognizes. What Joughin boldly does in his essay is to claim that there is, in essence, a world that is in opposition to our empirical one – a world that is *possible*, and that it is the artist’s openness to this possibility that gives art its magic. Or, as Adorno states, “‘[i]n each genuine artwork something appears that does not exist’” (qtd. in Joughin 138).

The achievement of an exceptional production of *Romeo and Juliet* would be to have the audience feel not merely as though the young lovers aimed at something great but missed their mark because of the injustice of their patriarchal society and the irrational violence of the social order, nor would it be to create the consciousness of the uncomfortable fact that hatred is inherent in “amatory feeling itself” (Kristeva 222), although these are important components of what we as the audience should “strive to mend.” But rather the text can inspire performances that create the perception that, if only for a brief luminous moment, the lovers did experience something more than what is sustainable in the day-to-day world, and that, more importantly, this *something* is worth dying for. Through the young lovers’ willingness to sacrifice themselves for each other, we can glimpse their relationship’s alterity compared to the
workaday world of Verona, and we also see how, in their moment of letting go, they truly define the limits of self-constitution. In other words, one can account for this play’s timeless popularity because of the real stakes invested in “what does not exist.” If Shakespeare does write “holy theatre,” then it is hyper-transgressive: “Spirituality is a mode of opposition to what is,” writes Fernie. “Sometimes it is especially opposed to the body and the material world – and what could be more oppositional than that?” (10). Obviously, then, the lovers are not “transgressive enough” against the norms of their society because their radicalism is that they are socially transgressive writ large. The spirituality they embody and which we witness “does not stand just for a passing carnivalesque suspension of Order […] but starts to function as a founding figure of a New Order” (The Puppet 91).

Part of the artist’s imaginative genius is to see past the concrete world as it is to what it could be. “The poet’s eye,” says Theseus, “in a fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven” (5.1.12-13). Athens’ Duke, of course, means this in a derogatory way; poets have nothing like the “cool reason” of this world’s leaders. But Shakespeare celebrates the poetic imagination: artists do glance all the way to the heavens, and by “bodying forth” what they see there, “the forms of things unknown,” they can radically change the world here, and give to “airy nothing / A local habitation and a name” (5.1.16-17). “In spite of the long-standing critical prejudice against ‘essentialism,’” Fernie argues,

specific spiritual alterity is aesthetically and theoretically interesting because it is configured not just as totally different from ordinary life but also as ultimately significant and real. Spirituality affords a credible alternative, or rather a range of such alternatives. It has a special power to break the illusion of what all-too-often is taken to be “this world’s eternity” (2 Henry IV, 2.4.91). The conviction that an alternative world is more desirable as well as somehow more profoundly real than this one can motivate a hermit-like withdrawal from the world as it is, but it can also inspire positive revolutionary change. (3-4)
There is a spiritual component to Romeo and Juliet’s love, a spiritual palimpsest on their desiring bodies that is “more profoundly real” than the realities of Verona’s social order and more real than desire itself. By the end of the tragedy, the social reality of Verona experiences a revolution. The social fabric of Verona is concretely changed – or at least, it is potentially changed, since the text leaves open the possibility that the two feuding fathers are just going to continue the family war under different terms: they will outdo each other in forgiveness and generosity rather than bravado and machismo. All the same, this is no doubt an improvement over the civic violence we see in the opening scene. Alternatively, if, as Kottman has recently – and rightly – argued, that civic peace in Verona “is not worth the price” it is bought at (4), that does not diminish the potential for radical real world change, for Kottman does not consider the response of the viewing audience. True, the end to Verona’s civil unrest pales in comparison to Juliet’s and Romeo’s deaths, yet what kind of emotional, empathic transformation occurs in us as viewers after witnessing the tragedy which unfolds when authority and love collide? Surely we see the wrongness of the family feud; of Tybalt’s quest to repay “the injuries” Romeo has done to his sense of honour by attending the masked ball; of the Nurse’s joyful and robust but vulgar conception of love; and of Lord Capulet’s notion of parental love that is conditional on obedience. If art does not have the power to change the world, we are doomed.

Dympna C. Callaghan writes that “when we are in its throes, romantic love is a classic instance of false consciousness” (86). This, however, seems to be precisely the opposite of Romeo and Juliet’s experience in Verona: their relationship comes across to us as true, and it is the empirical world of their fathers and of the Prince’s authority that rings false and hollow. It is more in keeping with Shakespeare’s text to say that Romeo and Juliet give us not an instance of “false consciousness,” but rather one of

54 “[W]e recognize that the objective outcome – civic peace – stands removed from the heart of our real dramatic investment. We did not really care whether Capulet and Montague could be reconciled to one another; indeed, for Capulet and Montague the ‘glooming peace this morning with it brings’ (l. 304) is not worth the price. […] The connection between their woe and the social outcome (peace between the families) still appears to us strained, unsatisfying, unconvincing” (Kottman 4).

55 Indeed, Milton believed that the theatre had the potential to “come to a better knowledge of God” (Stevens “Shakespeare and Fletcher” 7).
hyper-consciousness. John D. Caputo writes of just this type of experience when he speaks of “hyper-reality”: post-structuralism’s “discontent with realism arises not from anti-realist motives but from hyper-realist ones, from a love and a desire for the real beyond what today passes for real” (Caputo xix). This impossibility is a possible reading of what occurs in the Capulet tomb at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*: the lovers attain a consummation of their love which transcends our ability to comprehend it, though I think that audiences for generations have been able to apprehend the force of this “inexplicable and mutual abandonment of ‘mastery.’” Zizek, writes Fernie, advocates “the spirituality of a real advent: a flash of lightning that may, at any point, strike and transfigure the world of history” (16). Fernie goes on to state that “[t]he impossible assumes specific form and invades the reality of the poems and plays time and again. […] Of all Shakespeare’s works, potentially most scandalous to Derrideans is ‘The Phoenix and Turtle’, which celebrates an actual (if admittedly short-lived) dissolution of difference in a flamingly intense spiritual union” (16). Fernie does not further discuss Shakespeare’s short and enigmatic contribution to Robert Chester’s miscellany *Love’s Martyr*, yet the fact that he singles out this poem as a “scandalous” specimen of spirituality reinforces my reading of the poem. Indeed, nothing so powerfully illustrates Zizek’s real advent of a “flash of lightning” as the Phoenix and Turtle’s “mutual flame” that destroys both birds but, paradoxically and inexplicably, is the fullest consummation of their love – a consummation that is expressed in a final and complete “abandonment of ‘mastery,’” the self-annihilation expressed in Sonnet 125: “mutual render, only me for thee.”

Shakespeare repeatedly shows that the “abandonment of mastery” over oneself is the way to fullness. Kottman argues that “only by staking one’s life can one come to know what is worth dying for: to know the measure of one’s own life, that which one loves absolutely, as the core of one’s very being” (8). Yet, as Kottman demonstrates, the aborted duel scene with which the play opens, and Tybalt’s and Mercutio’s fight to the death in Act 3 show us that, “while not inescapable, the life-and-death struggle is less elemental and less dramatically compelling than the love relation” (9). The “satisfaction” “must lie,” Kottman continues, “in the free and mutual self-recognition, whereby one claims one’s own freedom through another’s” (23). Elsewhere, Kottman
writes, “Self-realization requires staking one’s life through another” (26). Yet while this play is eminently concerned with self-identity – “What’s in a name?” – it is decidedly unconcerned with “self-realization”; instead, it underscores self-abnegation. Kottman’s new reading of the play is exciting, yet his argument strikes me as particularly modern: what he draws out of the play resonates with our culture of self-actualization, but not with Protestant England’s culture of grace that sees the way to holiness as self-sacrifice, as in John Donne’s well-known Holy Sonnet 14: “That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break blow, burn, and make me new” (3-4). One may still find one’s life by losing it, but the lovers’ movement is consistently toward being unmade rather than self-actualized: finding one’s life is incidental to the act of giving oneself up for another.56

Throughout his Songs and Sonnets, Donne, like Shakespeare, takes seriously the possibility of spiritual reality, and to my mind this is seen nowhere better than in “The Sun Rising.” The final stanza of this poem reads:

She’s all states, and all princes, I,
Nothing else is.

Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honour’s mimic; all wealth alchemy.

Thou sun art half as happy as we,
In that the world’s contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that’s done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere. (21-30)

In this stanza Donne pulls a characteristic sleight of hand: at the beginning of these ten lines, the speaker states that the whole world is contracted into the perfect union of the two lovers; even the meter of the first line, “She’s all states, and all princes, I,” is perfectly balanced and accented to form a circle of itself. The next declarative

56 This concept is ubiquitous in the Gospels: “He that wil save his life, shal lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake, shal save it” (Matt. 10:39); “For whosoever wil save his life, shal lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, shal finde it” (Matt. 16:25); “Whosoever wil seke to save his soule, shal lose it: and whosoever shal lose it, shal get it life” (Luke 17:33).
statement stands out from the entire poem: “Nothing else is.” And yet the poem ends with the perplexing statement, “Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.” A conventional reading would have Donne invoking the idea of the Ptolemaic universe, in which the sun revolves around the world – here the two lovers – and thus acknowledges them as “everywhere.” The lovers are the centre of the universe, their love so hyper-real that nothing else is real in comparison. Yet this could equally mean that the lovers are in the centre of the sun, “This bed thy centre is,” in which case the lovers would be absorbed into the very thing that the speaker derides. Further, if “Nothing else is,” then the lovers are themselves nothing, since if they are incorporate in the sun and the sun is everywhere, they are nothing, too. However, in Donne’s poem one cannot have it both ways: either love is taken seriously as spiritual reality, or it is made irrelevant by the very thing against which it defines itself. In Shakespeare’s work, on the other hand, we can have it both ways at the same time. The two realms of material reality and spiritual reality may be incompatible, but may exist simultaneously nonetheless. Reason is “in itself confounded” by witnessing the “wonder” – or rather, what would have been in any other creatures a “wonder,” since the line reads “Hearts remote, yet not asunder; / Distance and no space was seen / ’Twixt this Turtle and his queen; / But in them it were a wonder” (29-32) – of absolute intersubjective incorporation that occurs in the “mutual flame” of the Phoenix and the Turtle. But this impossible event has happened, all the same.
4 “Less Without and More Within”: Love, Death, and Redemption in *Cymbeline*

4.1 Romance and the Impossible

*Romeo and Juliet* and “The Phoenix and the Turtle” express the “truth of love”: the moment when one gives oneself for the other in a “lost love,” which paradoxically enables one to become most fully him or herself through the experience of turning away from the self. The Sonnets, especially Sonnets 125 and 126, show this to be a loss of self; that is, the subjective voice of the Sonnets occupies the space between one’s inward self and selflessness, the point at which the voice of the self disappears into an eternal and transcendent space where the self moves out of the self. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, we see Bottom experience the wonder, the strangeness, and the joy through his experience of love – irrational, spontaneous, and above all, embodied – with Titania in the woods. Bottom’s ability to give himself to this experience constitutes his identity at the moment he negates it: “It shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream,’ because it hath no bottom” (4.1.214). I have traced instances of love in Shakespeare’s works in order to show how it is the love relation that most powerfully forms the identity, and that this identity formation is linked with death: death to the self, which paradoxically allows one to become most fully oneself. Love in Shakespeare’s works is linked both explicitly and implicitly with the theological concept of giving oneself as a “reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice” to another (*Book of Common Prayer* 264). In *Cymbeline*, one of Shakespeare’s “late” plays, we witness something that surpasses a transcendent inexplicable moment and moves beyond self-sacrifice: *Cymbeline* presents us with the redemption of the self. In this play we move through the religious experience of love to self-sacrifice and death to arrive at a renewed – even a reborn – and redeemed experience of subjectivity.

The central character of this text is Posthumous – central, despite the fact that he is literally absent from the centre of the play\(^57\) – and he is the character who is most

---

\(^{57}\) We do not see him on stage at all in Acts 3 and 4, and as a result the structure of the play itself is metonymic for Posthumous’s absent identity, as I shall demonstrate below.
dramatically redeemed in the final act. But the cast of characters is broad, and save for Cloten and the wicked stepmother, all the characters are offered a second chance. Indeed, the final scene of this play strains belief; the happy reveals and miraculous reunions almost defy belief. Almost, I say, but not quite. This is a romance, the genre Shakespeare turned to in his final texts (the collaborative works *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Henry VIII* are the exceptions). The reality that governs Shakespeare’s great tragedies is absorbed into the structure of the romance narrative, and so we feel the end of this play as a self-conscious piece of art. This is not “real life,” nor is it meant to be, but it is, perhaps, something more real than the gritty reality of everyday life. “It is sometimes said, and often assumed, that the tragic view is truer to real life than the happy endings based on second chances,” writes Kenneth Muir of the Romances, “and that Shakespeare was escaping from reality in his last plays. […] But, as Calderòn puts it, the worst is not always certain” (42). By turning to romance in his last plays, Shakespeare restricts his narratives to this specific genre, but the genre of romance itself, in turn, is expansive. The plays open up their worlds to seeming impossibilities, which then transform the worlds of the play by changing the limits of what is possible. *Cymbeline* opens with a discussion of why the love relationship between Innogen and Posthumous is impossible. It closes with their relationship not only possible, but fully realized, and this impossible event changes all the characters and the world that they inhabit. The love relationship in *Cymbeline* enacts inwardly and in microcosm what the entire play’s resolution enacts globally and indeed throughout the entire cosmos.

“Romance,” writes Gillian Beer, “is always concerned with the fulfillment of desires” (12). Northrop Frye offers a more comprehensive explanation of the function of romance: in part, the fairytale element of romance is to “recreate the past and bring it into the present.” But this nostalgia, he says, is only part of the function of romance: “[t]he other half consists of bringing something into the present which is potential or possible, and in that sense belongs to the future. This recreation of the possible or future or ideal constitutes the wish-fulfillment element in romance.” Frye concludes by stating that “romance brings us into a present where past and future are gathered” (*Secular Scripture* 179). Kiernan Ryan, in his frustration that contemporary analyses
of the Romances miss what strikes him as “their most salient quality,” expresses the same idea as Frye: “To most critics it is inconceivable that these plays might be more intent on anticipation than recollection and replication; that they might be turned to the frequency of futurity rather than doomed to reiterate outdated wisdom” (13). These plays, he writes, have a “prophetic impulse,” they intimate “the future in the past” (13). Similarly, Russ McDonald emphasizes that the “loose syntax” of Shakespeare’s romances invite the audience to share in the unconcern for rigidity of form and realism: “Words, phrases, clauses and sentences are less significant than the meanings beyond them, and the playwright seems to be pointing us to that mysterious region beyond” (96).

Frye, McDonald, and Ryan are all speaking to what Fernie labels spirituality, “a mode of opposition to what is” (9), the impossibility of a “real advent” that happens in the world now (Fernie 17). In Cymbeline, the play that occurs during the nativity of Christ, this spirituality, this past and future that exist in the present moment, happens. The “futurity,” “wish-fulfillment,” “prophetic impulse,” and “mysterious region beyond” that these critics push up against is what Shakespeare shows to be pushing back down onto this world here below. There is no avoiding it: in this play I see Shakespeare taking seriously the great “what if” of Western culture: what if God descended into this world and got involved personally with the lives of the people within it? What if the ransom for sins is not death, but unmerited grace? What if Doomsday’s judgment brings new life and freedom, not bondage? I did not intend to seek out this message in Shakespeare, but I have found it here, in spite of my hypothesis that Shakespeare consistently secularizes sacred love as I began this project. In the words of Jupiter’s prophetic message to Posthumous, this conclusion I have, “without seeking” found. That is, in the previous works I have studied, the secular love relationship of people is able to become in itself transcendent; Shakespeare’s language and images show us that these characters touch something divine. In Cymbeline, the divinity reciprocates by bringing transcendence down to earth. Self-sacrifice is still the defining characteristic of love, but here it ends not in obliteration, but in universal and particular rebirth and redemption. There is, in other words, an after death — a Posthumous ethic of hope for second chances in this text that
I see Shakespeare only courting in his earlier works. Here, the play itself surrenders to the possibility of the impossible.

4.2 “Such stuff within”: Inwardness, Selflessness, and Love

The play begins with two gentlemen discussing state gossip, the marriage of princess Innogen to Posthumous. Immediately, two themes are engaged: the tension between one’s inward self versus one’s outer demeanor, and, more subtly, the influence of “the heavens” on people here below: “You do not meet a man but frowns. Our bloods / No more obey the heavens than our courtiers / Still seem as does the King” (1.1.1-3). The project of this play is to bring these spheres into harmony with each other through transformation and grace. In fact, I would argue that by the end of the play, the characters’ bloods still do not obey the heavens – this is not a play about obedience – rather the personal transformations occur because of the grace of the heavens: inner and outer selves are remade so that they have a natural concord with themselves and with “the heavens,” and this harmony is what brings about personal and national freedom. Derrick C. Marsh writes that Cymbeline’s “concerns are the nature of life and death, of piety, of fidelity, of fitness to rule, and of the virtue and life-giving power of disinterested goodness. Conversely,” he goes on to say, “it is a play about selfishness, and about the way in which freeing oneself from the bonds of self brings a regenerative acceptance of all the conditions of life” (24). Love, as I have been arguing, is perfect selflessness, which is then, paradoxically, constitutive of perfect selfhood.

The issue for Posthumous, of course, is that although he may be inwardly noble, he has no outward identity to merit his marriage to the princess: he has no family name nor any social rank. Because of this absence of outward social distinction the terms used to describe Posthumous are equally evasive and empty; they circle around something indefinable. Posthumous is described as

First Gentleman: […] a creature such

As to seek through the regions of the earth
For one his like, there would be something failing
In him that should compare. I do not think
So fair an outward and such stuff within
Endows a man but he.

Second Gentleman: You speak him far.

First Gentleman: I do extend him, sir, within himself,
Crush him together rather than unfold
His measure duly.

Second Gentleman: What’s his name and birth?

First Gentleman: I cannot delve him to the root. (1.1.19–28)

This type of language should sound familiar: in Romeo and Juliet and in “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” to be “crushed together” is the opposite of what the lovers seek in their union. Romeo and Juliet’s bliss comes from being undone, torn or cut apart, exploded into something vast and eternal, such as the stars. In this passage from Cymbeline there is a sense of expansiveness: even if one were to “seek through the regions of the earth” one would not find his equal, and he is spoken “far” by the first gentlemen. The problem is that because Posthumous has no “root,” he is extended “within himself,” crushed together rather than unfolded. The path to authenticity of self, I argue, comes from turning away from the self. Romeo and Juliet are compelled to do this naturally since their family roots keep them from loving fully; to give up their names – to “tear” them – enables them to take control of their self-identities through the act of sacrificing them. But since Posthumous has no root, he cannot unfold himself away from it, and to be “crushed” within himself is precisely the type of “incurvatus in se” that is anti-spiritual. “The self cannot be crushed and destroyed, for that is just as much a denial of life as the view that makes the self all-important,” writes Marsh (64). That is, what leads to transcendence in Shakespeare’s love relationships is a turning away from self towards the other; but since Posthumous has no definable self, this is going to be a difficult task indeed.

Circumstances for Posthumous only get worse. The identity that Posthumous does have, and that he will have to sacrifice in the course of his quest for love, selfhood,
and redemption, is constituted solely through Innogen. “To his mistress,” says the First Gentleman,

For whom he now is banished, her own price
Proclaims how she esteemed him; and his virtue
By her election may be truly read,
What kind of man he is. (1.1.50-54)

The syntax of these opening lines enacts in form what it speaks of in content: consistently the First Gentleman’s sentences spiral around his actual point, which is only arrived at after a series of subordinate clauses. This syntax achieves two effects: here specifically it demonstrates the absent centre of Posthumous’s own identity; more generally, it speaks to the historic event of the Nativity. Indeed, these first few lines are representative of the poetry and syntax that unify the play as a whole, and it is this elliptical language that suggests the numinous quality of the play: the fact that surrounding the events of this world is cosmic drama that circles around and puts pressure on the lives and the actions of the people here below. In the universe of the play, the action of the cosmos becomes concrete in Jupiter’s descent through the “marble vault,” and yet even the god’s speech patterns reflect this same evasive poetic syntax which characterizes the rest of the play. The real event of the play occurs offstage, in a stable in Bethlehem. But since what occurs there cannot be expressed straightforwardly – at least cannot be said well straightforwardly – the language has to get to its point circuitously.

The point at first, though, is Posthumous’s absent “root.” Later when we follow Posthumous to Italy he is again described as being valued only as Innogen is. To Giacomo’s snide remark that, “I could then have looked on him without the help of admiration, though the catalogue of his endowments had been tabled by his side and I to peruse him by items” (1.4.3-5) – a statement that itself conceives of identity as a ledger of characteristics that do not organically adhere to the person they are meant to describe – Philaro counters, “You speak of him when he was less furnished than now he is with that which makes him both without and within” (7-9). It is fair enough, then, to say that Innogen’s love for Posthumous makes him more admirable both outwardly – he has married the future queen, after all! – and inwardly, for I have
demonstrated in this project that love for another does indeed “furnish” one’s inward self. But since poor Posthumous has no gift of self to give to Innogen – or at least, because of his social position, he and others believe that his worth is wholly inadequate when compared to Innogen’s – this enlargement of Posthumous’s “without and within” is one-sided, a gift that he cannot hope to reciprocate. “As I my poor self did exchange for you,” Posthumous tells Innogen in the first scene, “To your so infinite loss, so in our trifles / I still win of you” (1.1.120-22). Indeed, although Posthumous is “spoken far” by the First Gentleman, this gentleman describes him as a type of cipher: “A sample to the youngest, to th’ more mature / A glass that feated them, and to the graver / A child that guided dotards” (1.1.48-50). These lines echo what Ophelia says of Hamlet: “The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword; / Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mould of form, / Th’observed of all observers – quite, quite down!” (3.1.152-55). Ophelia’s problem here, of course, is that she is defining Hamlet by what he does, how he is seen, and not who he is, and thus she misses the chance to empathize with Hamlet’s existential crises: Who am I? It is not precisely correct to say that the exchange of selves is the goal of love; what I have been arguing is that transcendent love occurs in the sacrifice of identity, and that self-sacrifice constitutes the self fully (“It shall be called Bottom’s Dream, because it hath no bottom”). How intolerable for Posthumous, who has no self-identity worthy to be sacrificed. Worse still, if love requires surrendering oneself to the beloved, and the person who makes Posthumous who he is is the beloved, then it follows that Posthumous has to sacrifice Innogen in order to gain his sense of self. This is clearly a problem.

By contrast, Innogen is able to love Posthumous with self-sacrificial, un-curved love, and this is because as the princess, she has a secure outward and inner identity that she can sacrifice as her act of love. “His value as a man,” writes Marsh of Posthumous, “he must establish for himself. By far the most telling thing said in his praise is that he has been chosen as a husband by Innogen, and so, almost casually, she is presented as the standard, her own value unquestioned, all other values judged from her. In this corrupted court, however, it appears that position is more important than worth” (26). While I question Marsh’s suggestion that position is only of value in “this corrupted
court” – this is symptomatic of all early modern texts, I think – his general assertion holds true. Indeed, even the terms of endearment Innogen and Posthumous use to describe each other in the opening scene reveal the disparity between their positions. Repeatedly, Posthumous refers to Innogen in terms of her social position; repeatedly, Innogen names Posthumous in terms of the heart. In their parting scene, Innogen says that she will abide in England, “not comforted to live / But that there is this jewel in the world / That I may see again” (1.1.91-93). To which Posthumous replies, “My queen, my mistress!” (93). A few lines later, Innogen gives Posthumous the gift of the jeweled ring: “Look here, love, / This diamond was my mother’s. Take it, heart, She gives him the ring / But keep it till you woo another wife, / When Innogen is dead” (1.1.112-15). Certainly, there is something uncomfortably melodramatic and self-pitying about Innogen’s statement “till you woo another wife, / When Innogen is dead.” And yet this mention of death here is apt. The gift of the diamond is quite literally immeasurable since this is the only time Innogen mentions her deceased mother in the play, and it is as though she gifts Posthumous with her mother’s worth as well her own. Thus at the moment Innogen gifts Posthumous with her mother’s diamond, with her “root,” she speaks of her own death, because to love fully is the act of offering the death of the self.

At Innogen’s mention of her death and of her husband’s remarriage, Posthumous responds by questioning, “How, how? Another? / You gentle gods, give me but this I have, / And cear up my embracements from a next / With bonds of death! Remain, remain thou here He puts on the ring / While sense can keep it on” (1.1.115-19). Again, these lines should sound familiar; in Romeo and Juliet’s final scene in the tomb, Romeo says, “Here, here will I remain / With worms that are thy chambermaids. O, here / Will I set up my everlasting rest” (5.3.108-10). In both plays, the experience of love pushes up against the experience of death. The meanings of these lines, however, could not be more different: when Romeo utters these final lines, he is living out the action of self-sacrifice; when Posthumous speaks, he is receiving the gift of Innogen’s symbolic sacrifice: “give me but this I have,” he says, which in essence states that though he has her already, he is asking to get her again: he is only taking. Of course, I do not mean to diminish the dramatic context of
this moment: Posthumous is asking the gods to give him Innogen again because although he has her – she is his wife – he is forced to be exiled from her. Obviously, he wants to get her back. All the same, instead of speaking about giving of himself for Innogen, he is asking for her to be given to him.

What he, in fact, gives to her in exchange is a bracelet that is “a manacle of love.” “I’ll place it / Upon this fairest prisoner,” he says, as he gifts her with it (1.1.123-24). In every way, Posthumous’s language here is contrary to the ethic of love: love is unconditional freedom for the other without the expectation of a return; it is “mutual render, only me for thee” (Sonnet 125.12). It is decidedly unethical for Posthumous to imprison his wife symbolically to his love. But since Posthumous’s self-identity is constituted through Innogen at this point in the text, his attempts to enclose her in “a manacle of love” are, in a strange sense, his only way of protecting her, for as I have already argued, if love requires self-sacrifice and if Innogen is the value of Posthumous’s self, to sacrifice himself is to sacrifice her.

In the wager scene, Posthumous again describes Innogen’s love as a gift: “The other [Innogen herself, not the “trifle” of her ring] is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods. […] Which by their graces I will keep” (1.4.80-81, 83). Giacomo continues to prod Posthumous, and before long the wager is set. In a strange way, Giacomo is right to challenge Posthumous’s faith in Innogen; he recognizes from the start that Posthumous is valued because of Innogen’s love for him, “You may wear her in title yours” (1.4.84), and it is for this reason that the chastity contest is set: “I make my wager rather against your confidence than her reputation” (1.4.106-07). Of course, Posthumous should not accept the terms of the wager, but, again, in a strange way, he is right to do so, for by giving Giacomo the ring, he is able to risk self-sacrifice: “My ring I hold dear as my finger, ’tis part of it” (1.4.127-28). The ring, the symbol of the gift of Innogen’s self, is indeed a part of Posthumous: it is his very body. I argue in this project that Shakespeare conceives of pure love as a sacred act. It is not surprising, then, that religious language colours this moment. “I see you have some religion in you, that you fear,” says Giacomo (1.4.131-32), by which he implies, writes Warren in his edition, “ironically that Posthumous’ religion is to show a wise
doubt about his goddess, Innogen” (n. 131-32, original italics). But this could additionally suggest that this is a *fearsome* wager, awe-inspiring, and also that this is a *fearful* moment for Posthumous: self-sacrifice is a frightening risk. Surrender itself is the most frightening action.

The next time we see Posthumous, Giacomo has returned to Italy and confirms that “the ring is won” (2.4.45). Posthumous is easily convinced of Innogen’s guilt, and his first instinct for retribution is “to tear her limb-meal!” (2.4.147). As Posthumous’s frustration and rage begin to consume him, his language and thought express almost indiscriminate violence and rage: “I will go there and do’t, i’th’ court, before / Her father. I’ll do something” (2.4.46-48). In response to this ambiguous “something,” Philario says, “Let’s follow him and pervert the present wrath / He hath against himself” (2.4.151-52). It is significant that Philario sees Posthumous’s rage as “against himself,” and also that this anger threatens to manifest itself in tearing Innogen “limb-meal.” In the first scene, we recall, the First Gentleman attempts to describe Posthumous’s character by crushing him together. In Act 2, Posthumous’s wish to tear Innogen limb-from-limb is somehow interpreted by Philario as a threat of self-violence. Innogen herself seems to intuit that their love is a form of self-suffering as she imagines watching Posthumous’s ship sail away:

I would have broke mine eye-strings, cracked them, but
To look upon him till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
Nay, followed him till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat to air, and then
Turned mine eye and wept. (1.3.17-22)

Innogen’s language here suggests the type of self-annihilation that Romeo and Juliet imply when they speak of each other in the balcony scene: the princess desires “cracked eye-strings” – can we push this further to “cracked *I*-strings”? – at the same time she imagines Posthumous’s evaporation into nothingness. And yet, as with the teenage lovers from Verona, this diminishment into nothingness is an expression of Innogen’s love for Posthumous, imagining this for him causes *her* eye to weep; there is the suggestion that *he* will not be saddened by this “melting” into nothing.
Posthumous’s outburst towards Innogen and his desire to see her “cracked,” on the other hand, expresses precisely what I have previously argued is the generous and transcendent fulfilment of love. So why, here, is it a fantasy of cruelty? It is sadistic because Posthumous has not been given the opportunity for self-sacrifice, though his entire identity has been destroyed none the less. Posthumous has had no opportunity to effect the “mutual flame” of love, there has been no moment of reciprocal giving of the self to the other; nor is this the “mutual render” of Sonnet 125, the one-sided “oblation” of the self for the beloved. Posthumous has had no self to offer. As soon as Innogen gifted him with her love, he has been constituted through her. He seems to feel this effect keenly: “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?” he asks (2.4.153-54); “Could I find out / The woman’s part in me – ” he half-threatens, before his disjointed mind breaks off into a rambling litany of women’s faults. For Posthumous, at this point, women are not “half-workers”; Innogen is fully the “part in” him that determines his being. This is why it is significant that Innogen echoes Posthumous’s language and desire for her to be torn apart when she discovers that he has commanded her death: “I must be ripped. To pieces with me!” (3.4.53).

Cloten feels much as Posthumous does in regard to Innogen: “I love and hate her,” he declares (3.5.70). And like Posthumous’ assertion, “O that I had her here to tear her limb-meal! / I will go there and do’t, i’ the court, before / Her father” (2.4.146-48), Cloten swears to rape Innogen – in Posthumous’s clothes, no less – and then present her to her father at court: “With that suit upon my back will I ravish her: first kill him, and in her eyes; […] He on the ground, my speech of insultment ended on his dead body, and when my lust hath dined – which, as I say, to vex her I will execute in the clothes that she so praised – to the court I’ll knock her back, foot her home again. She hath despised me rejoicingly, and I’ll be merry in my revenge” (3.5.136-44). This a tragicomedy: a play whose arc, by most accounts, curves towards a tragic ending with a high body count, but which in fact ends unexpectedly – inexplicably – in joy.58 It is a play of redemption, and redemption requires sacrifice. “Sir,” says the First Lord to

---

Cloten, “I would advise you to shift a shirt. The violence of action hath made you reek as a sacrifice” (1.2.1-2). Shakespeare is not being subtle here: Cloten is the sacrifice for Posthumous’s hatred and rage towards Innogen, his resentment that “she’s fair and royal” [my emphasis]. He is “appetite inchoate and undirected […] a chaos of contradictory, infantile impulses” (Adams 69). Cloten is the doppel-gänger for Posthumous, and thus atonement for Posthumous is only possible after Cloten is beheaded by Guiderius. To link them further, in Cloten’s penultimate scene, he states that, “Posthumous, thy head, which now is growing upon thy shoulders, shall within this hour be off, thy mistress enforced, thy garments cut to pieces before her face; and all this done, spurn her home to her father” (4.1.14-18). Cloten swears that Posthumous’s garments, the symbol for his identity, will be “cut to pieces.” The coalescence of theme and character come full circle here: clothes represent the outer identity of Posthumous, yet because he has no “root” – it is only Innogen who makes him “both without and within” – when his without is cut apart – through Cloten, by Guiderius – Posthumous’s rage is exorcised.

Further, because Cloten is sacrificed for Posthumous, the hero’s redemption is made possible. When Giacomo returns to Italy to confirm his success with the wager, his ace in hand is the birthmark he discovers on Innogen’s breast. “You do remember / This stain upon her?” he snidely asks Posthumous. “Ay,” he responds, “and it doth confirm / Another stain as big as hell can hold” (2.4.138-40). Innogen, of course, is innocent of this “stain”; it is Posthumous who needs to be cleansed. Innogen’s mole, “cinque-spotted, like the crimson drops / I’th’ bottom of a cowslip,” recalls the strawberry pattern on Desdemona’s handkerchief in Othello, another tale of a husband’s jealousy and retribution. I do not make this connection offhandedly, for it is reinforced by the presence of a handkerchief that appears throughout the text and also by the thematic similarities between these two devices, for in Othello, too, the red-stained handkerchief is false “ocular proof” of Desdemona’s guilt. As I said above, though, the “stain as big as hell can hold” is Posthumous’s mark of guilt to cleanse. By the end of this play, though, the “stain as big as hell can hold” is not washed away, nor is it shown to be insignificant; instead, the motif of the “birthmark” is redeemed.
When Posthumous leaves England, Pisanio tells of how he waved his handkerchief in farewell:

for so long
As he could make me with this eye or ear
Distinguish him from others he did keep
The deck, with glove or hat or handkerchief
Still waving, as the fits and stirs of’s mind
Could best express how slow his soul sail’d on. (1.3.8-13)

The pure white cloth here is metonymic for Posthumous’ soul. The next time we see “a cloth,” Posthumous is apostrophizing the bloodstained fabric that Pisanio sent as proof of Innogen’s death. “Yes, bloody cloth, I’ll keep thee,” Posthumous states, “for I once wished / Thou shouldst be coloured thus” (5.1.1-2). Of course, this cloth is stained not with Innogen’s blood, but rather with Posthumous’s own desire to wipe out her “stain.” In his letter to Pisanio, Posthumous writes that, “Thy mistress, Pisanio, hath played the strumpet in my bed, the testimonies whereof lies bleeding in me” (3.4.21-23). The blood of the cloth is, in a sense, the sign of Posthumous’s own guilt: the cloth has soaked up his blood from his inside. It is his stain that needs to be washed clean, and this cleansing is accomplished through the sacrifice of Cloten.

Thus when Posthumous takes off his clothes but keeps on only the “bloody cloth” he claims his own death, which is possible now that Cloten is in fact dead for Posthumous. In his edition Roger Warren expands on the action of this scene: “If, as Oxford’s stage direction at l. 24 suggests, he disrobes at this point (and not offstage), it would be a simple matter to remove those, revealing the Briton peasant clothes, or lack of them, underneath. In several modern productions,” Warren goes on to explain, the disrobing has been very thorough, taking naked breast (5.4.4) literally. In the 1988 National Theatre version, especially, he became a reduced figure: naked, bloodsoaked, with the bloody cloth wrapped round his head like a guerilla’s balaclava (see fg.4). This emphasized that Posthumous undergoes a physical and spiritual purgatory like his wife’s in 4.2. (5.1.23n.)
In other words, the stained bloody cloth here is, in no subtle way, a symbol of Posthumous’s own sin.

“I’ll disrobe me / Of these Italian weeds,” Posthumous says, as he disrobes during the final battle,

So I’ll fight
Against the part I come with; so I’ll die
For thee, O Innogen, even for whom my life
Is every breath a death; and thus unknown,
Pitied nor hated, to the face of peril
Myself I’ll dedicate. Let me make men know
More valour in me than my habits show.
Gods, put the strength o’th’ Leonati in me.
To shame the guise o’th’ world, I will begin
The fashion: less without and more within. (5.1.22-33)

The note on this final line states that this means, “less (i.e. the peasant’s garb) on the outside, more (i.e. his valour) inside” (33n.), which is no doubt correct. But this is by no means the only signification of this line, especially because the without-within paradigm is repeated throughout the play to describe Posthumous’s identity: “I do not think / So fair an outward and such stuff within / Endows a man but he” (1.1.22-24); “You speak of him when he was less furnished than now he is with that which makes him both without and within” (1.4.7-9). Prior to this scene, the without-within paradigm worked against Posthumous: his inwardness was her worth, and thus he had no self to sacrifice to Innogen. Yet now his inwardness is her death; his outwardness has been redeemed through Cloten’s death, who has unintentionally taken the First Gentleman’s advice and “shift[ed] a shirt” and become a “sacrifice” (1.2.1-2). In a strangely beautiful way, Shakespeare has made this death of Cloten redemptive for both Posthumous and Innogen; when Innogen wakes beside Cloten’s headless corpse and gets his blood on her, she states, “The dream’s here still. Even when I wake it is / Without me as within me” (4.2.307-8). This last instance is important, for in it we see Posthumous’s/Cloten’s death transform Innogen’s outward self – the blood she takes
on her face\textsuperscript{59} – and her inward self, just as Posthumous takes Innogen’s death inwardly as well as outwardly with the “bloody cloth.”

It is Innogen’s outward social position that causes her to be “hated” by Posthumous. Cloten’s death, then, is the necessary sacrifice for Posthumous’s stain: the insoluble problem of Innogen’s birthmark – that is, her birthright; her royal position – is the singular thing that makes Posthumous’s identity an absence, valued only because of Innogen’s love for him. Once Cloten has been exorcised from Posthumous, and once Innogen, who established the value of Posthumous’s own self is dead, \textit{then} Posthumous is able to sacrifice himself to Innogen. When Posthumous disrobes he becomes a peasant – less than a peasant: this moment, in fact, mirrors Innogen’s declaration to Lucius, “I am nothing; or if not, / Nothing to be were better” (4.2.368-69) – in order to regain his own sense of self, a sense of self he reclaims only in order to lose it for Innogen, “for whom my life / Is every breath a death.” It is no accident here that as Posthumous dedicates himself to death, he uses his personal pronouns, “I,” “me,” “myself,” twelve times in this passage; the constant reassertion of selfhood at the moment he dies to himself illustrates precisely the ethic of this play, and indeed of my project as a whole: one loses oneself to find oneself: “He that wil save his life, shal lose it, and he that loseth his life for my sake, shal save it” (Matt. 10:39).

After the battle is “strangely” (read: wondrously) won, Posthumous puts on his Italian clothes again in order to be captured and executed: “For me, my ransom’s death, / On either side I come to spend my breath, / Which neither here I’ll keep nor bear again, / But end it by some means for Innogen” (5.3.80-83). Ransom is a loaded word here; I began this chapter by stating that while elsewhere in Shakespeare’s works he invokes a Christian paradigm to frame secular love, which in turn makes secular love in itself

\textsuperscript{59} Roger Warren details some of the theatrical productions of this scene, highlighting particularly the \textit{bloodiness} of the moment: “The Oxford Shakespeare Complete Works inserts the stage direction ‘She smears her face with blood.’ When it is played that way, for example, by Helen Mirren in the BBC television version, it emerges as a powerful but grotesque moment […]. But most actresses have brought out what Richard David […] calls the ‘the reality of the basic human situations presented.’ That is certainly how Vanessa Redgrave and Geraldine James played it, cradling the body in their arms and burying their faces in the severed neck, bloodying themselves in the process” (48). I am compelled by this reading of the scene, for in this way Innogen’s devotion to Posthumous is the very thing that brings about her symbolic bloody stain.
a sacred act, in this text Shakespeare takes seriously Christianity itself. In this regard, Posthumous is right: his ransom is death. I have written at some length about Luther’s theology of the flesh, the incurvitus in se that imprisons us to our sinful nature. Tyndale’s “Prologue to the Epistle of Paul to the Romans,” which is for the most part a translation of Luther, states this necessity of knowing one’s own self, one’s own sinfulness, before mercy and redemption can occur: “No man therefore can prevent the spirit in doing good: but the spirit must first come and wake him out of his sleep and with the thunder of the law fear him, and show him his miserable estate and wretchedness, and make him abhor, and hate himself and to desire help, and then comfort him again with the pleasant rain of the gospel, that is to say, with the sweet promises of God in Christ, and stir up faith in him to believe the promises” (216). Since the god of this play intervenes in the lives of the “mortal flies” here below, Posthumous is offered redemption through his self-sacrifice. Everyone – save Cloten, whose name itself suggests blood sacrifice, and his fairy-tale-like wicked step-mother – in this play is given a miraculous second chance.

The “manacle of love” that Posthumous gives Innogen in the opening scene, which I have argued is antithetical to the ethic of love, is brought full circle in the final act when Posthumous is actually manacled in prison. “Most welcome bondage, for thou art a way, / I think, to liberty,” Posthumous begins,

Yet am I better
Than one that’s sick o’ th’ gout, since he had rather
Groan so in perpetuity than be cured
By th’ sure physician, death, who is the key
T’unbar these locks. My conscience, thou art fettered
More than my shanks and wrists. You good gods give me
The penitent instrument to pick the bolt,
Then free for ever. Is’t enough I am sorry?
So children temporal fathers do appease;
Gods are more full of mercy. Must I repent,

60 See also Martin Luther: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (71).
I cannot do it better than in gyves
Desired more than constrained. To satisfy,
If of my freedom ’tis the main part, take
No stricter render of me than my all.
I know you are more clement than vile men
Who of their broken debtors take a third,
A sixth, a tenth, letting them thrive again
On their abatement: that’s not my desire.
For Innogen’s dear life take mine, and though
’Tis not so dear, yet ’tis a life; you coined it.
’Tween man and man they weigh not every stamp;
Though light, take pieces for the figure’s sake;
You rather mine, being yours. And so, great powers,
If you will make this audit, take this life,
And cancel these cold bonds. O Innogen,
I’ll speak to thee in silence. (5.3.97-122)

Posthumous speaks about the freedom he will gain by giving his life for Innogen’s
even though she is already dead, and so the gift would be a giving up of self for
nothing.

More importantly, Posthumous speaks of this as a “render,” which recalls Sonnets 125
and 126, the “mutual render, me for thee” of 125 and, more forcefully, the final lines
of 126, “Her audit, though delayed, answered must be, / And her quietus is to render
thee,” which is followed by empty silence in place of a concluding couplet. Further, it
is not entirely correct to say that silence characterizes this passage, but rather that
Posthumous effaces himself through his own language. In Act 1, Posthumous asks
the gods to “give” him his beloved while Innogen asks him to “take” the giving up of
herself. Here, Posthumous asks the gods to take him, and crucially the language
reveals that he has already surrendered to self-evacuation: he is not the subject of his
own sentences, and when he does refer to himself in the first person, it is either at the
end of a sentence or buried within references to his surrender to the gods.
Posthumous asks for the gods to “take no stricter render of me than my all” and for
them to “make this audit, take this life,” before himself lapsing into silence. Posthumous’s language and actions here are both a turning away from the self, a giving up of self without the expectation of a return, and a movement into an ulterior space of eternity and spirituality.

“The bondage of sin,” writes Robin Moffet, “is a rather special case. It is good that Posthumous should accept this bond, even welcome it, but it is not the kind of bond that is in general acceptable and welcome. Freedom is, rightly, desired; but it seems possible only through death and is in fact effected through the gracious benevolence of Providence (Jupiter)” (214). Derrick R. C. Marsh also highlights Posthumous’ imprisonment as a crucial turning point in the text: the “cold bonds” that Posthumous here welcomes signify, on the one hand, “the steel fetters he bears,” and on the other, “the cold fetter that life itself has become to him, Innogen being dead.” Ultimately, writes Marsh, Posthumous’ bond becomes “an acceptance of the conditions of the agreement that life must always end in death” (103). For Marsh, who views the tension between bondage and freedom as the central ethic of this play, Posthumous’s acceptance of his living death for Innogen and “this acceptance of the conditions of life” are what “sets him free” (103).

4.3 “Beyond beyond”: Redemption, Grace, and the Christian Advent

Marsh is entirely correct to link Posthumous’s turning away from self as the only way to freedom; indeed, he continuously – even obsessively – reiterates this point in his analysis of the play: “the main part of freedom lies in service, in satisfying somebody else’s need. Complete dedication to love, for instance, is not bondage, but freedom” (102). Yet this play, I have been arguing, concerns itself with more than just freedom. This text goes beyond the freedom of selflessness that we see in Shakespeare’s other texts I have examined in this project to culminate in something “beyond beyond,” as Innogen says (3.2.56). One’s most fully realized subjective state is achieved through surrender of the self to another – “The Phoenix and the Turtle,” The Sonnets, and
*Romeo and Juliet* take us here. What *Cymbeline* shows is that this need not be the end of self. After judgment, after death, is grace.

In previous chapters when I have made the case for this type of spiritual experience, for instance, Romeo and Juliet’s entry into a celestial spiritual space, it has always necessarily had to be only a *possibility* of the text. Here it is literal. Posthumous does not have a dream-vision of his family’s spirits and of Jupiter: this really happens to him. The spirits of Posthumous’s dead family rally around him and cry out to the gods for mercy. Indeed, Posthumous himself invokes divine mercy in his soliloquy: “Gods are more full of mercy.” The remarkable thing about this play is that when god is called upon, he answers the call, descends to the realm of “petty spirits,” and sets in motion the redemption that will transform this play into a comedy. If it is true that self-knowledge is knowledge of one’s own sinfulness – a conclusion that Posthumous emphasizes at the start of Act 5: “Gods, if you / Should have ta’en vengence on my faults, I never / Had lived to put on this” (5.1.7-9) – one needs to be shown the way toward self-forgiveness through empathy. When his “mother calls him ‘a thing of pity!’” (5.4.47),” writes Marshall, “Posthumous discovers the grounds for becoming a charitable person – he first learns to pity and forgive himself” (25). Empathy for the basic human condition, for what Marsh terms “the conditions of life,” is what causes this awakening and movement towards self-forgiveness in Posthumous. Linking it to Posthumous’s newly discovered empathy for himself, he “came crying ’mongst his foes” (5.4.46) to Lear’s “we came crying hither” (4.6.178), Marshall argues that Posthumous’s “newly found understanding of the original frailty of the human condition, a frailty never completely outgrown,” is where Posthumous is able to move beyond his ethic of sin and judgment (25). Marshall not only underscores the importance of the Posthumous’s pitiful humanity, but because of her emphasis on the universality of Posthumous’s condition, shows how being human is both worthy of pity and, at the same time, expresses the fullness of humanity. Frye writes that the “principle of the aristocracies of the past was respect for birth; the principle of fraternity in the ideal world of romance is respect rather for those who have been born, and because they have been born” (*Secular Scripture* 173).
In the quarto Lear the true horror of the play resides in the possibility not that the gods are cruel, “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport,” (15.35-36) but that there are no gods. Though heaven should have pity on the “mortal flies” below, it remains deafeningly silent; “heaven’s vault should crack,” only, it does not do so (24.255, my emphasis). The apocalyptic silence of the final scene is “the promised end” that Kent intones (24.259). In Cymbeline, Lear’s moment of despair is transformed into a moment of hope: “No more, thou thunder-master, show / Thy spite on mortal flies” (5.3.124-25), Posthumous’s father pleads. And, astonishingly, Jupiter answers this request: he descends and gives to Posthumous a prophetic tablet, a tablet that gives Posthumous both his own personal identity, his family heritage as one of the Leonati, and a place of eminence socially: as go Posthumous’s fortunes, so go the nation’s. This tablet recalls the table of Posthumous’s character Giacomo derides in Act 1: “But I could then have looked on him without the help of admiration, though the catalogue of his endowments had been tabled by his side and I to peruse him by items” (1.4.3-6). I have already explained how Giacomo’s comment and Philario’s response speak to the gap between Posthumous’s inward identity and his outer self (“You speak of him when he was less furnished than now he is with that which makes him both without and within” (1.4.7-9)). Jupiter gives Posthumous this without and within. “Everything man has that seems most profoundly himself,” writes Frye, “is thought of as coming to him from outside, descending from the most ancient days in time, coming down from the remotest heights in space. We belong to something before we are anything, and, just as an infant’s world has an order of parents already in it, so man’s first impulse is to project figures of authority, or precedence in time and space, stretching in an iron chain of command back to God” (Secular Scripture 182). Through the Romance genre, Shakespeare is able to concretely show this universal order. In other words, in both comedies and tragedies, events happen because of chance, fate, or because of some silly fairies who cause mischief in the woods; even in Shakespeare’s more realistic comedies, the plot turns to goodness because the machinations and strategies of the protagonists go well. Hamlet might hope for a “divinity that shapes” his end, but the play itself does not conclusively reinforce Hamlet’s faith in providence.
Indeed it cannot: the essence of tragedy is to make the audience aware of a possibility of a better existence but then to show how far short reality comes from it. Comedy does the opposite by reminding us how often our lives could go horribly wrong and then astonishes us each time things do not end in disaster. Romance incorporates both of these genres into itself and then gives its proof that there is an order, that we do “belong to something before we are anything.” Romance gives us the long-view, the perspective of the gods.

“Sleep, thou hast been a grandsire, and begot / A father to me,” Posthumous says when he wakes from his dream vision:

and thou hast created
A mother and two brothers. But, O scorn,
Gone! They went hence so soon as they were born;
And so I am awake. Poor wretches that depend
On greatness’ favour dream as I have done,
Wake and find nothing. But, alas, I swerve.
Many dream not to find, neither deserve,
And yet are steeped in favours; so am I,
That have this golden chance and know not why.
What fairies haunt this ground? A book? O rare one,
Be not, as is our fangled world, a garment
Nobler than that it covers. Let thy effects
So follow to be most unlike our courtiers,
As good as promise.
[..........................]
’Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madman
Tongue, and brain not; either both, or nothing,
Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such
As sense cannot untie. Be what it is,
The action of my life is like it, which I’ll keep,
If not for sympathy. (5.3.217-30, 239-44)
Posthumous’s waking soliloquy here recalls Innogen’s waking moment in the open grave next to Cloten’s headless corpse:

O gods and goddesses!
These flowers are like the pleasures of the world,
This bloody man the care on’t. I hope I dream,
For so I thought I was a cavekeeper,
And cook to honest creatures. But ’tis not so.
’Twas but a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing,
Which the brain makes of fumes. Our very eyes
Are sometimes like our judgements, blind. Good faith,
I tremble still with fear; but if there be
Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity
As a wren’s eye, feared gods, a part of it!
The dream’s here still. Even when I wake it is
Without me as within me; not imagined, felt. (4.2.296-308)

I have placed these two passages beside each other in order to demonstrate their similarities, and to show how fully Posthumous is reborn into his outward and inward identity. Innogen’s speech represents the inverse of Posthumous’s. Her waking moment discovers a death, a reality more concrete than what had come before it. The “bolt of nothing” was in fact very real: she was a “cavekeeper,” though this fades into insignificance when she is confronted – shockingly – with Cloten’s headless corpse, whom she rightly assumes to be Posthumous. Innogen asks for heaven’s mercy to take the horror away, this new waking “dream” “which the brain makes of fumes,” but of course the gods cannot do this: “Even when I wake it is / Without me as within me.” What she takes within herself – and without herself, too, for she gores herself with Cloten’s blood – is Posthumous’s death, a death that makes her a “nothing,” just as Posthumous himself has been an absence “without and within” because of Innogen. Indeed, to be “nothing” would, for Innogen at this moment, be an improvement: “I am nothing; or if not, / Nothing to be were better” (4.2.368-69).

Posthumous, on the other hand, at this moment when he is most wretched, in prison and waiting for death, distinguishes himself from those wretches who dream of a
“golden chance” only to “wake and find nothing.” That is, he wakes to find something concrete, a book that itself is antithetical to Cloten clothed in Posthumous’s garments, for this book harmonizes that without and that stuff within – “Be not, as is our fangled world, a garment / Nobler than that it covers” – and thus speaks to the “action of his life” which is now also noble inwardly and outwardly. Both lovers, significantly, speak about the threshold of reality: Innogen describes her experience as though it were like a lived dream, “a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing, / Which the brain makes of fumes”; Posthumous, similarly, states, “Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen / Tongue, and brain not; either both, or nothing, / Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such / As sense cannot untie.” Both lovers are pushing at the limits of The Real in these experiences. Importantly, for Innogen this limit comes at the cost of self: “Nothing to be were better” than the living death she now experiences. For Posthumous, the living dream transcends existence: in a moment that is reminiscent of Bottom’s waking moment in the woods, Posthumous states that his “dream” is beyond reason, or it is nothing. Again, this experience exceeds the characters’ realities. The style and form of these passages, again, speak to their meanings: impressionistic, they move around the concrete events and focus instead on the halting, uncertain reactions of both protagonists. In other words, neither Innogen nor Posthumous comes to the point quickly, even though they use vivid, even startling, imagery. How can one assert the inexplicable, if not by hesitations, if not by speaking around what it is.

Both characters, then, have entered into an ulterior space because of their outward positions (Cloten’s bloody body, the tablet), but this experience transforms them inwardly. Both of these moments are reminiscent of Bottom’s “dream” in more ways than the hyper-reality overlaps they share – indeed, Posthumous even invokes the world of fairies in his waking speech: “What fairies haunt this ground?” – for in these passages we can see a self-negating moment dovetail with a self-constituting moment: “Bottom’s dream” that “hath no bottom,” a “dream” in which to be nothing is in fact to be fully human. The point is that both Innogen and Posthumous experience the same subjective transformations in this play, but they move through these states of being differently. Because Innogen has a firm identity at the start of the play, she
must herself experience Posthumous’s initial subjective state; that is, she moves through a death to enter into a type of subjective liminality: she is less than nothing. Similarly, Posthumous moves from subjective liminality to a rebirth: “Sleep, thou hast been a grandsire, and begot / A father to me; and thou hast created / A mother and two brothers.”

For Posthumous in particular, the divinity himself is responsible for this rebirth. This is the overarching structure of the play, the reason it is a tragicomedy, instead of the catastrophe toward which it seems to be moving. I have already stated that the astonishing event of this play is that when the god is called upon, he actually answers the call. Equally astonishing is that the world of history – of geopolitical statecraft – is tied to Posthumous and Innogen’s relationship and, in particular, to Posthumous’s inward transformation. This transformation is entirely the work of grace. “Be not with mortal accidents oppressed,” states Jupiter to the spirits of Posthumous’ family,

No care of yours it is, you know ’tis ours.
Whom best I love, I cross, to make my gift,
The more delayed, delighted. Be content.
Your low-laid son our godhead will uplift.
His comforts thrive, his trials well are spent.
Our Jovial star reigned at his birth, and in
Our temple was he married. (5.3.193-200)

Jupiter has been guiding Posthumous’s life from his birth, and now he gives Posthumous his future: the prophecy on the tablet, which reads in part, “then shall Posthumous end his miseries, Britain be fortunate and flourish in peace and plenty” (5.3.237-38). Though Posthumous is still ready for death – “over-roasted rather; ready long ago” (5.3.246) – we know that his life in particular and the nation in general will now all be turned to peace and redemption. “For a Christian audience,” writes Marshall, “Jupiter’s assertion of his own command, as a pagan god, over Posthumous’ life proleptically suggests the Christian idea of purposeful history; hence in a certain sense he predicts the coming of a new era” (25). It additionally suggests Posthumous’s predestination for grace, as Romans 9 reads:
I will have mercie on him, to whome I wil shewe mercie: and wil have compassion on him, on whome I wil have compassion. So then (it is) not in him that willeth, nor in him that runneth, but in God that sheweth mercie. […] But, o man, who art thou which pleadest against God? […] (What) and if GOD wolde, to shewe hys wrath, and to make his power knownen, suffre with long pacience the vessels of wrath, prepared to destruction? And that he might declare the riches of glory upon the vessels of mercie, whiche he hathe prepared unto glorie? (Romans 9:15-16, 20, 22-23)

The resonance between Jupiter’s “How dare you ghosts / Accuse the thunderer […] No care of yours it is, you know ’tis ours. […] Your low-laid son our godhead will uplift” and the scriptural passage is clear: in the text, this is a moment when the “marble pavement” opens, and the god declares his sovereignty and his divine plan to the “mortal flies.”

Adams, in an attempt to minimize the Christian framework of the play, writes that “[p]eople who are impressed by the fact that Christ was born during the reign of Augustus, which was also in part the reign of Cymbeline, ought to be impressed by the fact that Shakespeare neither mentions nor alludes to the fact, even though Hollinshed does. For the playwright, skilled in arts of substitution and implicit analogy, Jupiter and the Genius of the Ancestors came quite close enough to ultimate divinity” (78). Adams’s argument, though, collapses on itself: of course Jupiter is still Jupiter, and of course Posthumous still the husband who is overcome with grief because of his rashness in ordering Innogen’s death, not an allegorical figure of the converted Christian. Jupiter’s presence is as close to “ultimate divinity” as Shakespeare comes. He could come no nearer to representing God on the stage. Posthumous’s family gives to him his self-identity; Jupiter’s appearance and his prophecy prove the “dream” to be real and, additionally, speak to the always-already presence of the mercy of God.

The final scene sees resurrections, reconciliations, reunions, and redemptions. All of these are made possible because of the personal transformation of the characters’
hearts, the results of forgiveness: each reconciliation occurs because of personal surrender and the experience of humility. Giacomo confesses his crime of belying Innogen, and though he deserves death at the hands of Posthumous, he receives an outstretched hand in forgiveness and redemption instead. This exchange occurs only because Posthumous has died to himself, or at least he has died to the struggle for selfhood, which was a struggle against Innogen’s worth that had made him who he was. “Ay me, most credulous fool,” Posthumous states as he steps forward and identifies himself,

Egregious murderer, thief, anything
That’s due to all the villains past, in being,
To come! O give me cord, or knife, or poison,
Some upright justicer! Thou King, send out
For torturers ingenious. It is I
That all th’abhor’red things o’th’ earth amend
By being worse than they. I am Posthumous,
That killed thy daughter – villain-like, I lie,
That caused a lesser villain than myself,
A sacrilegious thief, to do’t. The temple
Of virtue was she; yea, and she herself.
Spit and throw stones, cast mire upon me, set
The dogs o’th’ street to bay me. Every villain
Be called Posthumous Leonatus, and
Be villainy less than ’twas! O Innogen!
My queen, my life, my wife, O Innogen,
Innogen, Innogen! (5.4.210-27)

There are a number of things that stand out about this passage. The most important is that here Posthumous names himself by negating himself. Posthumous hurries an almost thoughtless insult towards Giacomo – “Italian fiend” – and then launches into

---

61 This moment, in fact, is reminiscent of Hamlet’s declaration at Ophelia’s graveside, “It is I, Hamlet the Dane,” where he – after so much existential questioning – makes a bold claim for his own identity which is, significantly, based as much on his external social position as the heir, as rightful king, just as much as it is on his inward quality that “passes show.”
a diatribe against himself and, moreover, seeks for some way to end himself. He is, at this moment, less than nothing, and through this absolute debasement, he is able to qualify everything else in the world, just as Innogen’s value had previously qualified Posthumous’s identity. It is remarkable, really, that when Posthumous names himself and embraces his particularity, he becomes a universalizing force. Yet while Posthumous debases himself, he repeatedly names himself: “It is I”; “I am Posthumous”; “Posthumous Leonatus.” Posthumous’s simultaneous self-assertion and self-negation has the same effect as “Bottom’s Dream, because it hath no bottom” and as the speaker of the Sonnets, who moves from the disembodied third person voice of Sonnet 126 to the self-asserting/self-negating “Will” of the Dark Lady Sonnets. Further, the syntax and form here are decidedly assertive and direct. Gone is the circumnavigatory, hesitant style of the previous speeches; Posthumous says directly what he means. Posthumous is not shuffling here, not coming to his point obliquely: “It is I,” “I am Posthumous.”

Critics have noted the anti-heroic quality of the conclusion of this play. In his essay “Cymbeline and the Comedy of Anticlimax,” Leonard Powlick writes that “[i]n Cymbeline, each character has certain options open to him: he can perform the ‘great’ action and become a tragic hero; or else he can perform the insignificant, unheroic action, showing that he is an ordinary mortal. The great action is never performed. […] The insignificant action, on the other hand, shows the way to all sorts of possibilities, and the plot opens out to allow the characters to order their world” (14). “The power that I have on you is to spare you,” Posthumous says to the kneeling and prostrate Giacomo, as he raises him up to a place of dignity and equality (5.4.419). By laying claim to his own depravity, and by choosing the unheroic posture of humility, Posthumous is finally able to relate to Innogen in the intersubjective manner of the other love-relations in Shakespeare. Further, because he is an “ordinary mortal,” “a thing of pity,” he is able to pity others who share that same universal condition. By turning away from himself, he is able to express love to another: “O Innogen! / My queen, my life, my wife, O Innogen, / Innogen, Innogen” (225-27). In the first scene of the play, when Posthumous spoke to Innogen like this, his terms of endearment stayed at the level of outward social signification: “My queen, my
mistress!” (1.1.93); here, he moves deeper into the relationship by calling her “my life” – even though she is now dead, or at least so it seems to Posthumous.

Innogen, for her part, is the “same dead thing alive” (5.4.123). Because she lives still, redemption and new life are possible for all the characters – indeed, even before the reconciliations can begin, Cymbeline tells “Fidele” that there is something strange in “him” which inspires life and grace: “Thou hast looked thyself into my grace, / And art mine own. I know not why, wherefore, / To say ‘Live, boy’” (5.4.94-96).

Innogen’s abiding life is the event that makes possible the universal pardon in the final scene, and it is described, significantly, in religious terms. Pisanio, for instance, is called by Posthumous a “sacrilegious thief” for killing Innogen; she was “the temple of virtue”; and the tears Cymbeline sheds because of her return are “holy water” on her. Yet in the midst of these moments of humility and recognition of the other, we have the irrational and shocking act of violence of Posthumous towards Innogen. “Peace, my lord, hear, hear,” says Innogen as she runs to embrace her husband. But instead of embrace, he hits her, “strikes her down.” This is the most inexplicable action of the play. Why does this happen? It seems unnecessary: has not Posthumous already felt the depth of his depravity? Has he not already humbled himself? Is he not already experiencing a living death because he has killed Innogen? Why this excess? I hesitate to offer a definitive answer to this troubling event, but there seems to be something Lear-like about this moment: in Lear, Edgar states, “O gods! Who is’t can say ‘I am at the worst’? […] The worst is not / As long as we can say ‘This is the worst.’” (15.23, 25-26). Here, Posthumous has been claiming – repeatedly claiming – that he is at the worst. Yet the discovery that his moment of irrational violence was perpetrated against his own beloved, who is miraculously alive, definitively brings Posthumous to the worst, even to beyond the worst, for he hardly has the vocabulary or the physical strength to endure the revelation of Innogen’s identity, let alone the fact that he has just knocked her unconscious. “How comes these staggers on me?” he asks, barely able to stand himself, and then remains silent until Innogen embraces him (5.4.233).
This final embrace occurs when both characters are, to use Innogen’s earlier phrase, “beyond beyond” (3.2.56), and it is here, finally, where the lovers’ intersubjective love, the love that is entirely selfless, is fully realized. “Why did you throw your wedded lady from you?” Innogen asks, “Think that you are upon a rock, and now / Throw me again. She embraces him” (5.4.261-63). Posthumous replies, “Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die” (5.4.263-64). Here, it is difficult to tell who is who: when Innogen and Posthumous embrace, is Innogen conceiving of herself as the rock on which Posthumous stands, just as Posthumous is the tree upon which Innogen grows? The image of the lovers’ mutual-rootedness is reinforced by Cymbeline’s description of the scene a few lines later: “See, / Posthumous anchors upon Innogen, / And she, like harmless lightning, throws her eye / On him” (5.4.393-396). How can Posthumous throw Innogen from him while she is embracing him? When it comes to that, how can Innogen continue to hang off of Posthumous if he is dead? We should notice, too, that Innogen throws her “eye” – her “I” – on him “like lightning.” In other words, Innogen’s love is god-like, precisely conceived of in the terms I have been exploring in this project. That is, the sacred has been translated into the secular realm without losing any of its spiritual force. Innogen’s gift of self to Posthumous echoes the gift of Jupiter, who descends “in thunder and lightning” and who “throws a thunderbolt” (5.3.186 sd). Important here, too, is that each lover speaks of her/his own death: Innogen as rock that is cast into the sea, and Posthumous as tree that is anchored in the rock. The images here are of the beloved continuing to thrive even when the self is gone, which is an idea that takes us to the place of self-sacrifice that occurs when love is turned wholly towards the other. “This is sure Fidele,” states Guiderius before this embrace occurs. He does not seem to apprehend fully the truth he speaks. “Most important of all,” writes Marsh of the play’s conclusion, “the play shows that to care for someone or something beyond oneself is an act of faith” (121).

Although Innogen and Posthumous have mutually died to self in order to express perfect love, since this is not a tragedy, they are both reborn into redeemed selves. Rebirth, in fact, runs throughout the final scene: “O what am I, / A mother to the birth of three?” exclaims Cymbeline, “Ne’er mother / Rejoiced deliverance more” (5.4.369-71). Moffet writes that the Nativity is the defining event of the play. I agree with this
argument, though I do not think he pushes his reading of the text far enough. This is a tale of new birth, a play that enacts the miracle of a god coming down to earth from “the heavens,” who breaks through the “marble pavement” of this world in order to accomplish a transformation in Posthumous’s character, and also to usher in a new era of peace, reconciliation, and harmony. This is a play that occurs during the Nativity, but it is also a text that looks forward to death and resurrection, just as in the Anglican calendar, Advent was the time to consider the Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. “Cymbeline scarcely fits modern secular notions of the Nativity,” writes Marshall. “If we consider, however, the traditional tone of Advent, the way the liturgical season was regarded in the early seventeenth century, we see that Cymbeline anticipates the Nativity in a similar way – by brooding on death, judgment, and apocalypse” (13). In a similar vein, Stanley Wells writes that “the features of the play’s conclusion considered singly, are unremarkable in Renaissance drama. Occurring together, however, theophany, battle, reunion, collective judgment, and final peace become profoundly suggestive, for they follow the pattern of events expected to take place on Judgment Day. Recognizing the scene’s apocalyptic ramification,” he continues, “clarifies the relationship between Cymbeline and Christian history” (28).

When Arviragus, Guiderius, and Belarius see “Fidele” alive again, their exchange speaks to this prophetic way of seeing:

Arviragus: One sand another
Not more resembles: that sweet rosy lad
Who died, and was Fidele! What think you?

Guiderius: The same dead thing alive.

Belarius: Peace, peace, see further;
[...............................]

Guiderius: But we see him dead.

Belarius: Be silent; let’s see further. (5.4.120-27)

The play as whole does indeed see further into the wonder, not only of Posthumous and Innogen’s selfless love for each other, but also for the real world transformations that are possible when one does become uncurved from the self. Because Posthumous
understands what is meant to be lesser even than a “sacrilegious thief,” he is able to offer unmerited grace to Giacomo, who himself has turned away from self and now seeks death: “(kneeling) [Giacomo] Take that life, beseech you, / Which I so often owe” (5.4.415). Posthumous, “(raising him)” says, “Kneel not to me. / The power that I have on you is to spare you, / The malice towards you to forgive you. Live, / And deal with others better” (5.4.418-21). This moment is entirely without irony or subversion. Unlike the similar moment with Prospero and his brother at the conclusion of *The Tempest*, or even the Duke’s pardon of Angelo and Barnardine at the end of *Measure for Measure*, a play that deals explicitly with the disconnect between ideal divine justice and the paltry substitute we have here, Giacomo is truly penitent. Posthumous is truly merciful. This mercy offers a genuine second chance to Giacomo, just as, of course, Posthumous has been offered a second chance from Jupiter – and, of course, from Pisanio’s refusal to follow orders and go against the dictates of conscience. “Posthumous’ forgiveness,” writes Marshall, “violates the norms for Renaissance drama, where honor is typically the code which regulates sexual behaviour. His attitude here, as Joan Carr writes, ‘parallels the Christian doctrine of forgiveness: “Love your enemies; do good to them that hate you’” […] Importation of the religious ethic into the manifestly secular plot of Posthumous’ sexual jealousy is unexpected, but in keeping with the largest concerns of the play” (20).

This grace is catching: “Nobly doomed!” declares Cymbeline, “We’ll learn our freeness of a son-in-law. / Pardon’s the word to all” (5.4.421-23). Cymbeline himself “sees further” in the final moments of the play: not only does he pardon Lucius and the other Roman prisoners, Cymbeline agrees to pay the tribute to Rome, even though Briton won the battle fought over these taxes. The play begins with Innogen stating that if Posthumous should write to her, and she not receive the letter, “’twere a paper lost / As offered mercy is” (1.3.3-4). The play also begins with Innogen stating that she is past grace: “Cymbeline: Past grace, obedience? Innogen: Past hope and in despair: that way past grace” (1.1.137-138). Later, the play sees the king himself as “past the hope of comfort” (4.3.8-9). Because of Jupiter’s direct intervention, however, mercy is offered and accepted; despair is turned to joy; and the comfort of
redemption is made known. Indeed, in the service of the Holy Eucharist in *The Book of Common Prayer*, the priest reads out “the comfortable words” of God’s love after the congregation confesses their great need for redemption. Comfort is faith in unmerited redemption.

4.4 “The powers above”: Reality, Fantasy, and Theatre

In order to understand how Shakespeare conflates the play’s redemption and comfort with Christianity’s redemption and comfort, it is necessary to understand why the playwright turned to romance during the final stage of his career. To some, this has been seen as an imaginatively and poetic failure. “This play has many just sentiments, some natural dialogues, and some pleasing scenes, but they are obtained at the expense of much incongruity,” writes Samuel Johnson. “To remark the folly of the fiction, the absurdity of the conduct, the confusion of the names and manners of different times, and the impossibility of the events in any system of life were to waste criticism upon unresisting imbecility, upon faults too evident for detection, and too gross for aggravation” (108). Furness himself, though he seems loath to do so, comes to agree with Dr. Johnson and blames Shakespeare’s “deterioration” on “advancing years”: “it is not difficult to fancy that at this period there may have crept into Shakespeare’s study of imagination a certain weariness of soul in contemplating in review the vast throng of his dream-children” (v). Furness and Johnson object to the conventions of romance itself and to the types of unheroic characters we see in these final plays; the protagonists of the romances seem diminished when compared to the larger-than-life figures we see in the tragedies.

Other critics, however, have found in these two objections the reasons for the greatness of the final plays. “Some critics comment that Shakespeare had written himself out by the time he came to write *Cymbeline*,” writes Leonard Powlick, “[t]hey complain of the lack of any ‘great’ actions or heroic characters in the play; what they fail to see is that their absence is to a great extent what the play is all about. In a sense, *Cymbeline* illustrates the constricting nature of tragedy. Shakespeare had mellowed with age, and here was no longer showing men as gods. Now, in effect, he is saying that to be a man is enough” (140-41). McDonald, too, holds that
Shakespeare’s romances at the end of his career show us the value of art and the growth of Shakespeare as an artist. “By turning at the end of his career to stories of fantasy and magic, Shakespeare commits himself not only to the value of illusion but to the beneficent power of fiction in general,” McDonald writes, “The tragedies record a profound abhorrence of the perils and deceits of illusion, a fear that exposes the playwright’s serious doubt about his own profession. The turn to romance implies a reversal of this dubious view, an embrace of the illusory and the poetic” (108). And Frye finds that,

the turn to romance in Shakespeare’s last phase represents a genuine culmination. […] I mean that there is a logical evolution toward romance in Shakespeare’s work […] an interest in genre develops an interest in the technique of constructing stories. We may therefore see in the romances the end of the steady growth of Shakespeare’s technical interest in the structure of drama. The romances are to Shakespeare what The Art of Fugue and The Musical Offering are to Bach: not retreats into pedantry, but final articulations of craftsmanship. (Natural Perspective 7-8)

“Romance is a structural core of all fiction,” writes Frye, “being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as whole, as the epic of the creature, man’s vision of his own life as a quest” (15). I quote Frye at length to show that it is the qualities of romance as a fantastical genre that make Cymbeline so revolutionary: if romance is the structural core of narrative, if it represents a vision one has of life as quest, then it is arresting that this play occurs during the Nativity of Christ, and that at its conclusion, we witness both the inward knitting together of Innogen and Posthumous, and also a new era of global peace. That is, this play represents the world of ancient Briton as imagination and dream, but because it is set during the historic moment of the

---

62 Writers of the Romantic period itself, argues Gillian Beer, “recognized that the romance expressed a world permanently within all men: the world of imagination and dream” (7). In romance, “as in dreams,” she writes elsewhere, “queens and kings are our representatives. Their royalty universalizes them” (3). And Edward Dowdon focuses on “the knitting together of human bonds, the reunion of parted kindred” (qtd. in Fuchs 95) that occurs in these texts, while Frye, Beer, and Fuchs emphasize the expansive quality of the genre.
Nativity, Shakespeare integrates dream and reality together. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare himself at this point in his life was a devout Christian, but I am suggesting that in his final works, but most explicitly in _Cymbeline_, Shakespeare breaks the wall between fiction and reality, and that when he does this in _Cymbeline_ the effect is to equate romance’s “secular scripture” with Christian theology.

“Shakespeare shifts the whole text into the future perfect,” writes Ryan of _The Winter’s Tale_ – though the same can be said, I think, about _Cymbeline_’s messianic time: “What we witness on stage is neither what was nor what is, but rather what _will have been_ […] the play projects us beyond it, quickening our sense of the script’s obsolescence and alerting us to the transience of the world in which we watched it acted” (16-17). This is and is not what happens in _Cymbeline_, however, for because of the historic moment of the nativity, Shakespeare also alerts the audience to the eternal moment of the play. The event of the nativity that occurs offstage but still within the world of the play alerts us to the transient nature of our own existence. It is the world of the play that is cosmically and eternally real.

“There is a line of Pope’s which exists in two versions,” writes Frye, “‘A mighty maze of walks without a plan,’ and ‘A mighty maze, but not without a plan.’ The first version,” he explains,

recognizes the human situation; the second refers to the constructs of religion, art, and science that man throws up because he finds the recognition intolerable. Literature is an aspect of the human compulsion to create in the face of chaos. Romance, I think, is not only central to literature as a whole, but the area where we can see most clearly that the maze without a plan and the maze not without a plan are two aspects of the same thing. (_Secular Scripture_ 30-31)

In _A Natural Perspective_, Frye writes that _Cymbeline_ “is so close to folk tale that the manipulating of the action is at least not a breach of decorum: it does not violate its own dramatic assumptions” (17). He then goes on to compare the romances to twentieth-century paintings, arguing that in realistic art, the things represented have an “external reference to the outer world, a reference in which likeness or correspondence is one of the aims.” But in other art, art which expresses something
beyond the thing that is represented, “there has been a deliberate departure from the
conventions of realism, a distorting or stylizing of the subject, which indicates an
interest in more purely self-contained pictorial values” (18), and, I would add, in the
subjective experience of unrepresentable values, ideas, and emotions. Romance is an
experience of art, not of realism. Its main concern is to tell a really good story, so that
we do not see what the artist is attempting to represent, we see what is represented.
“The return to artifice and virtuosity heard in Shakespeare’s late verse is a token of
the playwright’s reconceived attitude towards his art,” writes McDonald, “the
exchange of mimesis for poesis. No longer content merely to represent the conflicts
of this world, he has instead imagined new ones” (107). In this way, romance gets
further away from realism, but closer to the real. We see, to take up Pope’s metaphor,
our own attempts to create a plan for the mighty maze of walks, and through that
attempt, we see both the maze and our path in it more clearly. Shakespeare’s
insistence that art is sacred takes us back to Theseus’s speech in A Midsummer
Night’s Dream: the “poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, / Doth glance from heaven to
earth, from earth to heaven” and “the poet’s pen […] gives to airy nothing / A local
habitation and a name” (5.1.12-13, 15-17). By becoming more artful in language and
in scope, Shakespeare tightens the connections between theatre, love, identity, and the
sacred. And remarkably in Cymbeline he does this all while pointing toward the
Christian narrative of grace and redemption.

“It is required you do awake your faith,” instructs Paulina in the fantastic final scene
of The Winter’s Tale (5.3.94-95). This is our “imaginative faith,” something more
“positive than any mere suspension of disbelief,” argues Frye (Natural, 19). In other
words, Shakespeare’s art makes no attempt to represent the possible in the sense of
realistic, but rather is able to show us what is possible when we enter into the play
imaginatively ourselves. He “reminds us that this is a play, and the effect of the
reminder is to shatter the framework of the play and lead us inside it” (Natural, 31).

63 We are to read and watch these plays instead as a child does, writes Frye: “[t]he child should not
believe’ the story he is told; he should not disbelieve it either, but send out imaginative roots into that
mysterious world between the ‘is’ and the ‘is not’ which is where his own ultimate freedom lies”
(Natural 166). Gillian Beer likewise states that:
The romances are supremely artistic in the sense that they make little attempt to reconcile events that can “really happen” with what in fact happens within the worlds of the plays, but what bearing does this artistry have on my argument that in *Cymbeline* the formation of Posthumous’s subjectivity is not only linked to his self-sacrificial love for Innogen, but also is caused by Jupiter’s direct intervention into the “real world” of the play – an intervention that itself reaches outside of the world of the play to the “Real Advent” of the Nativity? That is, how can a play that is contained within the frame of its own universe, which is then itself contained within the structure, conventions, and imaginative space of theatre, collapse both of these frames to connect with the transcendent, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of each? Stephen Orgel writes of *The Tempest* that “the absent, the unspoken” is “the most powerful and problematic presence” in the play (1). Similarly, Kiernan Ryan asserts that the “ulterior effect of the romances – the sense that more is at stake in them than meets the eye and ear – has often been registered but never, to my mind, convincingly explained.” Referint to R.A. Foakes, Ryan then writes that “[i]n each play the spectators behold ‘a ritual that is only partly comprehensible because its terms are not wholly dramatic; they suspect a philosophy of life, recognizing tolerance, benedictions, the joy of restitution, but are not given the key to it all’” (5-6).

Ryan goes on to argue that critics who miss this “ulterior effect of the romances” do so because they share previous critics’ assumptions about literature and the limits of the creative imagination. That is to say, they expect Shakespeare’s romances to represent a prior vision of reality: to be the subsequent expression of a conception or condition that precedes them […] To most

[i]t is our relationship to the narration which has an affinity with a child’s experience, not the world portrayed or the insights which compose it. And of course any adult participating in such a relationship is likely to do so with a sense of relief and sophistication. The romance rarely attempts to dislodge our hold on reality completely.

The comfort of being told a story mingles with aesthetic elation. (9)

Similarly, Stanely Wells writes that “[t]he full response to the works of the romancers comes only when we find ourselves reading for pleasure, caught up in the swirl of the story, rapt in wonder and anticipation – reading in fact as children read. Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare appeal primarily to our imaginations, not our brains” (*Later Shakespeare* 55-56). *Cymbeline*, romance, is a story, and should be read as such: we are to enter into the world of the play, and then in that world of imagination and wonder, we are invited to see the unrepresentable more clearly, if even still obliquely.
critics it is inconceivable that these plays might be more intent on anticipation than recollection and replication; that they might be turned to the frequency of futurity rather than doomed to reiterate outdated wisdom. The failure to countenance this possibility results in constant attempts to curb the romances by translating them back into the very terms they have striven to transcend. (13)

This work of art, in other words, is representing something “beyond beyond.”

Robin Moffet’s essay from 1962 identifies the esoteric quality in Cymbeline, as I do, with Christ’s nativity: “[t]he play makes sense as romance and history, but I think it makes better sense when its complications and resolution are viewed in the light of the greater denouement which is not mentioned but is known to be at hand. I am not concerned here,” he writes, “with the critical consequences of my argument, but the possibility that the play is, to some extent, directed towards something outside itself” (215). In order to support his assertions, however, Moffet works historically both by emphasizing the fact that Cymbeline’s “historic” reign occurred during the birth of Christ and by focusing on “the intensity of detail and the apparently casual artifice of the whole. […] What fragility there is is due to a consciousness of the inadequacy of art to express the whole of what must be implied” (213). However much I agree with Moffet’s central thesis, his argument here inverts the point of my analysis: that art – art that does not make an attempt toward gritty realism – is the only way one can express the whole of what is implied. “In poetry,” writes Frye’s paraphrase of Valéry, “anything that must be said is almost impossible to say well” (Natural 29). Cymbeline avoids poetic failure by not saying what “must be said.” This intentional ellipses accounts for its “partly comprehensible” ineffable quality. And it is this quality that is the play’s most masterful artistic achievement.

Cymbeline is prophetic at the same time that it is fantastic. This is what makes it revolutionary. “Everything that makes the romances nonsensical from the standpoint of realism makes perfect sense if the plays are perceived as a frontal assault on what counts as reality and the tyranny of realism itself” (Ryan 16). Frye’s analysis agrees with Ryan’s: “There is a strongly conservative element at the core of realism, an
acceptance of society in its present structure” (Secular 164). Romance, by contrast, that eschews reality by the rules of its own imaginative construction, has a “revolutionary quality”: this quality “appears in the polarizing between two worlds, one desirable and the other hateful” (Secular 163). Again, Ryan’s essay seems to respond directly to Frye’s: “If being realistic, in both art and life, is an attitude inclined to secure our accommodation to the status quo, to subdue our desire for difference to the sway of the way things are, then the ambition of Shakespeare’s romances is the precise reverse of this: to expand the scope of the possible and whet our appetite for change by forging from the theatrical dialect of his day a discourse of the future” (Ryan 16). More than this, time and space collapse in the romances and opens up reality to the transcendent impossible. “The symbolically condensed projections of Shakespearean romance allow us to grasp the potential as if it were already actual, to watch the improbable and the impossible become plausible and feasible before our very eyes. […] these plays seek to break the cynical grip of realism on our minds and sustain the insatiable hunger of hope, our yearning for the world to be otherwise” (Ryan 16). This is the precise definition Ewan Fernie gives us of spirituality, which I discussed at length in the previous chapter: spirituality is an “opposition to what is,” “[t]he conviction that an alternative world is more desirable as well as somehow more profoundly real than this one” (3-4). Yet in this play – Moffet is right – Shakespeare pushes past this yearning to the event of the Nativity that occurred in the “real world” outside the world of the text. Real and ideal overlap. What my reading of the play demonstrates is that Shakespeare forms the ideal of romance and of the ideal romantic relationship on the “Real” of God’s love for humanity, just as in the world of the play, the love relationship between Innogen and Posthumous is the catalyst for universal grace and peace.

The Tempest closes with Prospero’s petition for freedom from the world of fiction:

Now my charms are all o’erthrown,
And what strength I have’s mine own,
Which is most faint. Now ’tis true
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. (5.1.319-323)
“Prospero’s epilogue,” writes Stephen Orgel, “is unique in the Shakespeare canon in that its speaker declares himself not an actor in a play but a character in a fiction. The release he craves of the audience is the freedom to continue his history beyond the limits of the stage and the text” (319n). Prospero may be the only character who has the magic, potentially, to be set free into the real world, but this rupture between fiction and reality, between ideal and real – or rather, the coalescence of real and ideal, of this world and the heavens – occurs at the end of Cymbeline, too. “The fingers of the powers above do tune / The harmony of this peace,” says Philharmonus. Nowhere else in Shakespeare is this more evidently the case. “Laud we the gods,” responds Cymbeline, “And let our crooked smokes climb to their nostrils” (5.4.477-478). This is a play in which the seemingly impossible hope of the characters becomes actual, and though Shakespeare did not have to show Jupiter descending and asserting his providence over the affairs of the “mortal flies” here below, the fact that he does so gestures towards another “real” fantasy of wish fulfillment: that of purposeful Christian history and for, to use Ryan’s phrase, “our yearning for the world to be otherwise” (16). This spiritual hope is recognized by McDonald as the most salient quality of language in Shakespeare’s romances, language that orbits around the thing that needs to be said, but is impossible to say. “Some magical agency, some providential force seems to stand beyond the characters and their actions,” MacDonald writes, “there is something numinous about the world of Shakespearean romance. The style points us towards it” (109).

Cymbeline concludes with the assertion that the gods tuned “the harmony of this peace”; since we saw Jupiter descend and intervene in Posthumus’s life, we know that Philharmonious’s sentiment is not just wishful thinking. Something happens at the end of this play that reaches outside itself to the Christian Advent and to death, resurrection, and redemption. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare near the end of his career was himself reborn into a new Christian life, but I am claiming that this play loses the agonistic quality evident in his earlier work. If Romeo and Juliet takes seriously the possibilities of a spiritual love without losing the limitations of concrete materiality, Cymbeline goes a step further to take seriously the possibilities of redemption: by setting the play during the historic time when “the powers above” did
come down to earth to offer hope and grace, this play enacts *Romeo and Juliet*'s movement in reverse. That is, this play “sees further” than itself into the Christian Real. *Cymbeline* collapses the space of the theater with what John D. Caputo terms “hyper-reality,” “from a love and a desire for the real beyond what today passes for real” (xix). Indeed, the cascade of grace and forgiveness in the final scene redeems even the birthmark that is “as big as hell can hold”: Guiderius’s “natural stamp” is now the “mark” of his salvation. Because he is recognized by this “mark of wonder,” his killing of Cloten is just. “This is he,” says Belarius, “Who hath upon him still that natural stamp. / It was wise nature’s end in the donation / To be his evidence now” (5.4.366-69). The stain as big as hell is now a wonderful mark of nature’s own redemption. The “birthmark” is turned to a “sanguine star”; the stain of hell to the redemption of nature.

“The reign of Cymbeline,” writes Moffet, “is of unique importance because it is to see the birth of the saviour of mankind, thus the central idea will be the need of mankind for a saviour; the content of the play […] will show the straights into which men have fallen as a result of sin, error, and misfortune, followed by a supernaturally effected restoration to come and a fitting preparation and greeting for the divine child soon to be born” (208). Whether or not we believe in the Christian narrative, this play does. And it does so most powerfully through the love relationship, a relationship of absolute selflessness, of Innogen and Posthumous. “Life is established as the greatest gift of all; imprisonment in the self prohibits the enjoyment of it,” writes Marsh. “More particularly still, since this is the story of Imogen and Posthumus and their love, love is seen as one of the great forces which liberate the individual from the bonds of self. To care more about someone or something than one does about oneself is a way to freedom, perhaps the great way” (120-21).
Conclusion
Towards *King Lear* and Seeing Feelingly

*King Lear* predates *Cymbeline* by six years, yet I am choosing to discuss it in my conclusion because its themes look retrospectively on the qualities of love and subjectivity that Shakespeare represents in the plays and poems I have discussed above. *Lear* explores the intersections between love and identity, between the economy of merit that the structures of authority demand and the anti-economy of freedom that love offers, between the effort of self-fashioning and the joy of self-sacrifice, and between the world as it is and the world for which we long. *Lear*, though it is a tragedy of epic proportions – the scope of the play rivals *Cymbeline* with the fate of the nation at stake, the protagonists traversing the country, and entire armies mobilized in battle – is at its core a play about love and humility. Moreover, since *Lear* is a tragedy in spite of its source material that ends in triumph and concord for Cordelia and Lear, Shakespeare draws attention to the power of theatre itself; the play asks us to become aware of our own humanity and it asks us to take stock of our own limitations and freedoms in the face of things ultimate: love and death.

*Lear* opens with two patriarchs, two old fathers, Gloucester and Lear, conflating love and property. Seemingly within earshot of Edmund the bastard, Gloucester and Kent discuss his identity and value: “I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account” (1.18-19). Though Gloucester is here acknowledging his responsibility and affection for both of his sons, he expresses his relationship to his children with the language of property, “no dearer in my account” means that Edgar is as loved as Edmund *and* that both sons have cost him the same amount of money to raise. It may be that Edmund’s villainy is rooted in his disenfranchised economic position as a younger bastard son, yet the end reveals that his spitefulness is caused in large part by believing that he is not loved – how could he believe otherwise when his own father conflates love and financial expense?

Immediately after the exchange between Gloucester, Kent, and Edmund, Lear comes onto the stage with his three daughters, and administers the “love test”: “Tell me, my
daughters, / Which of you shall we say doth love us most, / That we our largest
bounty may extend / Where merit doth most challenge it” (1.44-47). Gonorill and
Regan disingenuously play along with Lear’s game; by contrast, Cordelia’s response
comes across as harsh and uncaring. Yet her response answers her father’s question
in kind, since his equation of love and property is wrong-headed to begin with.

“Nothing” means everything, of course, and from this moment the play moves
forward to an examination of what “nothingness” signifies in relation to love, to self-
identity, and to the cosmos. Cordelia’s “nothing” starts the process of evacuating
Lear’s conception of himself as the king and begins the process of making Lear aware
of himself as human, which the play shows to be infinitely, infinitly, more important
than a king. In Cymbeline, both Innogen and Posthumous discard their own identities
before they are able to love freely and become who they truly are. “It was a bolt of
nothing, shot at nothing” (4.2.301), says Innogen of her life before discovering
“Posthumous’s” (though actually Cloten’s) headless corpse. “I am nothing,” she
continues, “or if not, / Nothing to be were better” (4.2.368-69). Posthumous, too,
disrobes to become an “unknown” (5.1.27) before he is able to claim who he truly is.

Romeo and Juliet similarly doff their family names in order to be freed to love: “I’ll
no longer be a Capulet”; “I’ll be new baptized; / Henceforth I never will be Romeo”
(2.1.79, 93-94). In Sonnets 125 and 126, after the speaker offers his “oblation […]
only me for thee,” he, too, becomes subjectively “nothing” as his voice is merged with
the eternal perspective of Time. And, of course, Bottom unwittingly establishes this
pattern as he negates his own identity after his “dream” with Titania: “‘Bottom’s
dream,’ because it hath no bottom” (4.1.212). “Nothing can come from nothing,”
says Lear throughout the play (1.81, and later, “Nothing can be made out of nothing”
4.125), but Shakespeare shows that in fact everything that defines who one truly is can
occur only after one’s self is cast off and exchanged for nothing. This is freedom:
self-sacrifice without the expectation of a return. It is only as one lets go of selfhood
that he or she is able to experience the fullness of being; and letting go occurs when
one turns toward another in love.

The nothingness that Shakespeare has his characters walk through, nothingness which
paradoxically leads to everything, is an experience beyond reason and logic.
Shakespeare explores a different register of experience in these works, one that operates not necessarily in opposition to the world as it is, but one that is beyond it. In part, this is the way of feeling, and of insisting that feeling itself is the way to understanding oneself and the world in which we live. “No eyes in your head, nor no money is your purse? [...] yet you see how this world goes,” says Lear to the eyeless Gloucester. “I see it feelingly,” he replies, which signifies that he must find his way by his sense of feel, but also that he has true insight now into himself, others, and the world around him because he perceives through feeling, not through reason, power, and the network of worldly authority (20.140-41, 143-44). Innogen, similarly, describes her “dream” of waking to find her decapitated husband beside her, a “dream” whose reality surpasses her abilities of comprehension: “’Twas but a bolt of nothing, shot at nothing [...] not imagined, felt” (4.2.301-2). “You cannot speak of that you do not feel,” says Romeo to the Friar. Even the “suborned informer” of Sonnet 125 who objects to the self-sacrifice of the speaker is silenced by the “true soul” of the speaker’s which surpasses the claims and suggested logic of the informer. Love is the letting go self in a way that is in opposition to the logic of this world; yet it is the way of freedom and thus of a higher truth.

“Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (4.222) asks Lear as his older daughters systematically strip him of title, of authority, and of status. The question Lear asks without intending to is the one that he must ask if he is to embrace his full humanity. The epic scope of King Lear is not measured by the journey through the British countryside, nor either by the concerns of nation and statecraft, but by Lear’s journey inward into his own mind, into his own self. Unlike the other texts I have analysed in this project, Lear’s journey begins not because he is in love with another, but because he rejects the pure love of another. Like Posthumous who needs to feel the horror of self-abasement before being born anew into his literally god-given identity as one of the Leonti and as the rightful husband of Innogen, Lear’s journey goes through a dark period (and that is putting it gently) before he emerges as a redeemed character on the other side of his suffering. “Now thou art an O without a figure,” says the Fool to Lear, “thou art nothing” (4.184-85). The Fool’s declaration is true from the world’s
perspective, and what it means to be nothing is what Lear discovers as he is cast out of court life and family life.

Prior to the night of the storm, Lear is entrenched in his belief that he deserves merit as a human because of his status and social position: “Thou shalt find,” he insists to Gonorill, “That I’ll resume the shape which thou dost think / I have cast off for ever; thou shalt, I warrant thee” (4.299-301). In this exchange with his daughter, however, Lear is entirely wrong-headed about who he is and about who he will become. He believes here that he will reassume his position of authority; but the shape he does resume is both infinitely truer and more dignified than “the king” precisely because it is entirely human. “Is man no more but this?” he asks Kent and the Fool of “Poor Tom,” the naked and abject Edgar: “Here’s three on ’s are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come on, be true” (11.92-93, 95-98). The shape the king assumes is that of being no more than a “poor, bare, forked animal,” and it turns out that to be only this is enough. “They told me I was everything,” says Lear about Gonorill and Regan’s false protestations of love, “’tis a lie, I am not ague-proof” (20.102-3). What Lear learns is that to be not ague-proof is to be frail and thus human: “We came crying hither. / Thou know’st the first time that we smell the air / We wail and cry” (20.167-69). The shape Lear resumes is like the one of a new-born babe, who is entirely human because of his frailty and vulnerability. Lear sees in Edgar, and in turn all people and in himself a “thing of pity,” which is Posthumous’s state on the day he came “crying hither” and on also the day he is given his identity back by Jupiter.

Although the texts included in this project all explore un-becoming as the way to self-fulfillment, none do so as emphatically as Lear. After the storm and nearing the end of the play, Gloucester asks to kiss Lear’s hand, since Lear is, after all, the king (as Lear himself says sardonically, “No, they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself” (20.83-84)); Lear’s response to Gloucester is, “Here, wipe it first; it smells of mortality” (20.128). A large part of the power of Lear is the revelation that to be the lowest of humans is the path to understanding the sacred nature of humanity, which
transcends hierarchy. When Lear is reunited with Cordelia, he confusedly calls her a spirit, “You’re a spirit, I know. Where did you die?” (21.47). Of course, Cordelia is very much alive in this scene, yet what his confusion connotes is the spiritual overtones to his daughter’s love for him, Cordelia’s love that was “nothing” yet which opened up the space for Lear to become everything he truly is. Significantly, Cordelia’s words to her father here are, “Sir, know me” (21.46), which speaks to the dovetailing of love, identity, and one’s spirit that I have been discussing throughout this entire project.

Lear does know his daughter at this moment; he certainly knows her here more truly than he did in the first scene when he rejected and disowned her. Cordelia, in love and service to her father, kneels before him and asks for his “benediction” over her, a sacred blessing. Yet in an act of astonishing humility it is Lear who attempts to kneel before his daughter, “No, sir, you must not kneel,” insists Cordelia. This scene of mutual humility and self-other recognition is the heart of love in Shakespeare’s works. “I fear I am not in my perfect mind,” Lear says to his child, “Methinks I should know you […] For as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child, Cordelia,” to which Cordelia responds, “And so I am” (21.60-61, 66-67). In this moment as both father and daughter are kneeling to each other in benediction, they see each other “feelingly” and claim for themselves their own identities: “as I am a man,” and here he is fully a man; “I am,” replies his daughter, which denotes that she is in fact Lear’s daughter, and connotes Cordelia’s Christ-figure role in this play. Indeed, during the love test, when Cordelia is expected to give a full account of her love but instead responds with “nothing,” she is for the first time Christ-like: in the test the stakes of the response are high, but she refuses to participate in the terms of the discourse itself. Cordelia’s silence in the face of Lear’s questioning is reminiscent of Christ before the Sanhedrin prior to his crucifixion. Shakespeare takes a biblical scene that is filled with dramatic tension and translates it into the love test, which serves the double

---

64 The mutual kneeling from daughter to father, father to daughter in the scene has all the more pathos because of Lear’s mock-kneeling towards Regan in scene 7: “On my knees I beg / That you’ll vouchsafe me raiment, bed, and food. Regan: Good sir, no more. These are unsightly tricks” (7.312-314). When Lear assumes the same posture in front of Cordelia and asks not for food and bed but for forgiveness and blessing – two things that require humility and honesty – the contrast is striking, and deepens our understanding of Lear’s transformation.
purpose of both adding dramatic tension to the love test and of signaling that Cordelia is a Christ-figure in the play. The point is that Shakespeare represents love as mutual humility; as the moment when one sees the other clearly; the moment when one becomes most fully her or himself; and this experience, Shakespeare suggests, is itself sacred.

The movement of Lear is away from the structures of authority and towards interiority that is achieved through love. Even Edmund, whose personal narrative is defined by power and self-fashioning, comes to a place of humility and self-acceptance: “The wheel is come full circled,” he says after he is defeated by his brother, “I am here” (24.170). Edmund’s “here” is both the place of reassuming his humbled position in relation to Edgar and of accepting, after all his daring bravado, his frail humanity. In the end Edmund finds what he has in fact been seeking all along: love. His journey begins with his father wrong-headedly conflating love and value; it ends with Edmund feeling the effects of love – even the loves of Regan and Gonorill – which opens a space for him to be his most generous self precisely because, for this moment at least, he is no longer thinking about himself: “Yet Edmund was beloved […] Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my own nature” (24.236, 239-40), he says as he orders a soldier to stop the execution of Lear and Cordelia.

Edgar, it seems, is the only character for whom things end in a way that is not entirely tragic, if we can consider the blinding and then the death of his father as not catastrophic, and the fratricide of Edmund as not completely horrific. Nonetheless, in the end Edgar has regained the love of his father, and is reinstated as the rightful inheritor of his father’s title. Yet even he needs to move through utter abjectness in order to be able to remain who he truly is: he becomes “‘Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom!’ / that’s something yet. Edgar I nothing am” (7.185-86). When Edgar resumes his proper shape, he states, “In nothing am I changed / But in my garments” (20.9-10). The use of the word “nothing” here of course means that Edgar is not changed inwardly but only in his outward clothes, but it additionally suggests that because he went through the process of becoming nothing, of living “in nothing,” he is now able reassert his true identity. The same evacuation of self occurs with Posthumous and
with Innogen, with Juliet and Romeo as they abandon their family ties, with the speaker of the Sonnets as he moves away from desire and into selfless love, and it occurs with the Phoenix and the Turtle for whom “property is appalled.”

The significance of becoming “nothing” in order to move into the fullness of being is a crucial feature of Lear. Yet Lear’s most salient feature is its epic scope. Much of the play focuses on Lear’s insistence that the entire cosmos is engaged in his suffering, and on the characters’ repeated invocations of the “heavenly justicers” who are participating in the affairs of the nation and in the personal torments of the protagonists. In this way Lear and Cymbeline are mirror images of each other, for both complain of the injustice of the gods as the protagonists suffer. In Cymbeline Posthumous’s pitiful state inspires Jupiter to intervene in his life; in Lear, however, the king’s realization that he is under the heavens inspires him to pity both himself and others. “Why then, let fall / Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave, / A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man,” he says to the tempest (9.18-20). Later in the same scene, Lear overlaps the tempest with the gods in a more explicitly Christian manner (even though the play is set in pagan Briton):

Let the great gods,
That keep this dreadful pother o’er our heads,
Find out their enemies.

[…………………………………………………]
Close pent-up guilt, rive your concealèd centres
And cry these dreadful summoners grace.
I am a man more sinned against than sinning. (9.49-51, 58-60)

Here Lear expects that “the great gods” will punish the wicked, just as elsewhere Gloucester and Albany expect the gods to deliver justice: “This shows you are above, / You justicers,” says Albany after hearing about Cornwall’s death, “that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge” (16.77-79). Indeed, even in the final moments of the play, when the news of Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths is delivered, Albany still holds on to the conventional notion that evil deeds are punished by the justice of the gods: he sees the women’s deaths as the “justice of the heavens, that makes us
tremble” (24.226). Gloucester, too, believes that what happens here on earth is part of the “opposeless” wills of the gods: “O you mighty gods,” he says before his failed suicide,

This world I do renounce, and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off!
If I could bear it longer, and not fall
To quarrel with your great opposeless wills,
My snuff and loathèd part of nature should
Burn itself out. (20.34-40)

Shakespeare deliberately builds the audience’s expectation that providence is at work within Lear’s narrative; this would have been especially the case for Shakespeare’s own audience who would have likely been familiar with King Leir, a Job-like play which reinforces a narrative of perseverance and faith.

Yet as I stated in the previous chapter, the horror of Lear is not that the gods do not intervene in the lives of “mortal flies” here below, it is that there are no gods. Thirty short lines after Albany’s assertion, Lear enters the stage carrying Cordelia’s lifeless body in his arms. “Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones. / Had I your tongues and eyes, I would use them so / That heaven’s vault should crack” (24.253-55). Heaven’s vault does not crack, however. It remains entirely unconcerned with the people and affairs of “this tough world” (24.309). “Is this the promised end?” asks Kent of the cosmos as he watches Lear desperately trying to cling to the lost hope that Cordelia might still live (24.259). Yet she is dead, and there is no suggestion of a resurrection. This is not the world of Cymbeline. Nor is there in Lear any paradox of living eternally through dying itself that exists in Romeo and Juliet and in “The Phoenix and the Turtle.” “She’s gone forever. / I know when one is dead and when one lives. / She’s dead as earth” (24.255-57). There is no justice in Lear, nor no setting at peace the souls of the protagonists. Lear stares directly at materiality, at the tyranny of cause and effect and the arbitrariness that governs life and death: “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And thou no breath at all? O, thou wilt come no more. / Never, never, never” (24.301-3).
Shakespeare ends the play with the certainty that there is nothing to look forward to for the remaining survivors of this horror. Nevertheless, Lear is such a strangely beautiful and spiritual play. How can Shakespeare turn “the image of that horror” to goodness? He achieves this in two ways, and both reflect upon what I have demonstrated in this project, specifically, that Shakespeare makes the secular itself sacred and that the work of a play is accomplished by the audience members, in the universe that is imagined by them. Shakespeare gives the audience an opportunity to “seek to mend” the nihilism of Lear. At the beginning of scene 24 when Lear and Cordelia are defeated and captured by “these daughters and these sisters” (24.7), Lear expresses his love to Cordelia:

No, no. Come, let’s away to prison.
We two alone will sing like birds i’th’cage.
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news, and we’ll talk with them too –
Who loses and who wins, who’s in, who’s out,
And take upon ’s the mystery of things
As if we were God’s spies; and we’ll wear out
In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th’ moon.

[……………………………………………….]

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,

The gods themselves throw incense. (24. 8-19, 20-21)

This passage begins with Lear describing the mutual humility he and Cordelia enacted in scene 21 and then moves on to describe the quality of this love: it is both sacred and eternal. “We’ll take upon ’s the mystery of things / As if we were God’s spies,” he tells Cordelia as they are being escorted to prison. On one level Lear is speaking of how he and his daughter will treat the affairs of court with bemusement, but on
another level, Lear speaks directly of how their love is God’s mystery.65

“Theologically,” mystery is “religious truth known only through divine revelation; also used for ‘a matter unexplained or inexplicable; something beyond human knowledge or comprehension’ (OED sb.¹ 5a)” (16n). Shakespeare repeatedly represents love as a divine mystery, a truth that is beyond human understanding, but one that is not beyond human feeling and experience. Further, Lear imagines that he and Cordelia will experience timelessness together: “we’ll wear out / In a walled prison packs and sects of great ones / That ebb and flow by th’ moon” (17-19). What Shakespeare suggests here overlaps with Romeo’s “everlasting rest” and with Juliet’s “timeless end” in the Capulet tomb: although physical space and self-determining freedoms are entirely limited, love inverts the authority of the material and temporal world. The empathy that is inspired by Lear’s recognition of his own humanity is now transferred even to the “gilded butterflies” of the court; the tone suggests that Lear now pities them because of their delicate transience: they do not have love. Lear and Cordelia, he imagines, will outlive them all because they have touched the eternal mystery of selfless love.

When Lear asserts, though, that the “gods themselves” will throw incense on their sacrifices, Shakespeare’s language distills in two lines the core idea of my research project: love is self-sacrificial and sacred; it allows humanity to experience the transcendence of “the mystery of things,” while at the same time revealing that “the mystery” itself is profound humility and selflessness. In Lear’s lines it is not clear what these sacrifices are: “sacrifices may allude to the sacrifices Cordelia has made for Lear, or to their joint loss of freedom” (20n). The word additionally “draws on the biblical tradition of sacrifice as a tribute to the gods” (20n). Both of the note’s readings are at play in Lear’s lines, yet Shakespeare, characteristically, leaves his meaning intentionally open-ended so that it can mean more than is suggested. Here “sacrifices” may also mean Lear’s imprisonment to which he goes willingly precisely because he is experiencing a greater freedom in his love for his daughter. If this

65 “God’s” is “[p]rinted without an apostrophe in early editions” so that it could mean “gods” and thus align with Lear’s pagan setting. Printed as “God’s,” it is “the play’s only direct reference to a Christian God” (17n) – a reference suggested by the words “pray,” “blessing,” and of course “mystery.”
reading is engaged then the fact that the gods themselves should sanctify this self-sacrifice underscores both the divine and the humble nature of love as it is characterized so often in Shakespeare’s works. Lear and Cordelia both sacrifice who they are according to the economy of this world in order to live out the truth of love which operates through the grace of another one. What is lost is power, position, and wealth, what is gained is a full understanding of the human condition.

The gods, however, do not throw incense upon the sacrifices of Cordelia and Lear, nor of anybody else in the play. There are no gods in Lear. Audiences feel this. The horror at the end of Lear draws attention to the gap between life as it is and as it should be. What is represented in Lear is the absence of the “powers above” (Cym 5.4.467). Yet, if what Adorno says is true, that there is “in each genuine artwork something [that] appears that does not exist,” what appears in the play is the longing for things to be otherwise; what appears in the play is spirituality.

“The weight of this sad time we must obey,” says Albany at the play’s curtain, “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.4.318-319). Albany’s injunction to “speak what we feel” underscores the ethic of Lear and of the inquiry of my research as a whole. Feeling is the way to a fullness of understanding the self and the other. Theseus is wrong to deride the “strange” experiences of the lovers in the woods, and Bottom is correct to describe his encounter in terms of the Christian mystery. The sonnets to the young man rightfully build towards self-abnegation even as they rightfully employ the experience of loving as the path to subjectivity. Romeo and Juliet are right to die for each other because it is only then that they are able to both testify to the value of each other, and to transform the structures of authority and oppression of Verona. The Phoenix and Turtle confound Reason, even as Reason herself sings the praises of the two birds’ Truth that Reason cannot comprehend. Lear embodies the magnitude and the dignity of selfless love when he is broken in heart and frail in body because of the death of his beloved Cordelia.

---

66 In the Folio Lear these final lines are given to Edgar, not to Albany. “These powerful lines,” writes Greenblatt, “suggest that their speaker will inherit political leadership, and conflating editors face the challenge of selecting which character should stand as the moral and political spokesperson at the end of the play” (footnote 2, 2570). Regardless of who says the lines, their sentiment remains stable.
It is inadequate to simply say that Shakespeare engages with paradox to describe the experience of love, nor is it satisfactory to argue that in Shakespeare’s works the experience of love simply provides an emotional bliss unachievable by other means. Love is radical in Shakespeare because it moves beyond the inversion of logic to logic’s fulfillment in mystery; it is radical because emotional bliss is able to transform the material world; it is radical because sacrificing one’s life through love opposes and transforms the structures of authority that cannot comprehend selflessness precisely because this is something power cannot comprehend. Shakespeare’s texts look unflinchingly at the world as it is, and then propose an alternative world. The mystery of theatre is that the proposal itself can change the world as it is.

In the works I have examined in this dissertation, Shakespeare enfolds love and faith and theatre together: in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Bottom’s waking moment begins the process of conflating love with a sacred mystery and with the formation of subjectivity, a process that Theseus’s speech continues when he dismisses love and poetry as folly — in powerfully written poetry: Shakespeare is having some fun with Theseus, his embodiment of logic, here. Similarly, in *The Winter’s Tale*, written near the end of Shakespeare’s career, Shakespeare continues to emphasize this idea as Paulina conflates faith, art, and mystery as Hermione returns to life and is reunited with the humble and redeemed Leontes. In *Romeo and Juliet* and in “The Phoenix and the Turtle” Shakespeare represents self-sacrificial love as a sacred experience that paradoxically amplifies the self. In both works, this selfless love is expressed as the moment — potentially — when one encounters eternity. Self-sacrifice through love enables an intersubjectivity and mutual indwelling for the Phoenix and Turtle and for Juliet and Romeo that gives each character freedom from self and thus the fullness of being. For the Sonnet speaker self-sacrifice without the expectation of a return allows him to dwell within the beloved’s heart and then to move past the boundaries of self and Nature, the material world, to the perspective of Time itself. The speaker of the Sonnets may reject the perfection of love and transcendent subjectivity for the grounded materiality that results from the desiring self, yet the desire that gives one a sense of selfhood, the speaker acknowledges, is anti-transcendent in every way, even if it may be preferable to love because of this. *Cymbeline* knits love and Christianity,
theatre and reality together: Posthumous and Innogen experience the freedom of sacrificing themselves for their beloveds, and the grace that results from their freedom begins the series of pardons that heal family bonds and then extend to international peace. The world of the play sees the “marble vault” of heaven crack and the god descend in order to realize his providential will, just as the world of the audience saw its God intervene and descend in Bethlehem to begin the work of salvation through self-sacrifice and love. In all the works I have examined in this project, Shakespeare stakes a claim for the very real power of art; in Cymbeline, he erases the boundary between art and reality, theatre and real life, by suggesting that the real has a more radical alterity than even theatre can comprehend.

Love is a slippery term to define. Yet this slipperiness does not prevent Shakespeare from taking this emotion seriously – indeed, it is because of love’s slippery incomprehensible and intangible qualities that it so profoundly shatters his characters, unmakes them, and then realizes their full humanity in the unmaking itself.

Shakespeare treats love as perhaps the most permanent substance in the universe, and he represents love as perhaps the most serious of human experiences. Shakespeare’s definition of love is a giving of oneself to another freely. Freedom from self is freedom of self. Shakespeare contrasts love against desire, love against authority, love against the world as it is. He demonstrates that when love wins, revolutionary social change is possible. And that when love loses, it wins still by transcending the laws that govern the ethic of loss and gain. Love is “beyond beyond” at the same time that it is grounded in the humble materiality of Bottom – indeed, love is transcendent precisely because it is the fulfillment of humble materiality and of human frailty.
Works Consulted


Certain Sermons or Homilies. [reprinted from MDCXXIII]. Oxford, 1844.


Davis, Lloyd. “‘Death-marked love’: Desire and Presence in Romeo and Juliet.” White. 28-46.


---. “Introduction.” In Fernie. 1-27.


Harris, Bernard. “‘What’s past is prologue’: ‘Cymbeline’ and ‘Henry VIII.’” In Brown and Harris. 203-234.


Johnson, David. “Cymbeline.” Brown and Johnson. 3-42.


Joughin, John J. “Bottom’s Secret.” *Fernie.* 129-156


McDonald, Russ. “‘You speak a language that I understand not’: Listening to the Last Plays.” Alexander. 91-111.


Perkins, William. “A Survey or table declaring the order of the causes of salvation and damnation according to God’s word.” *The Works of that famovs and vvorthy minister Christ, in the Vniversitie of Cambridge, Mr. W. Perkins... Newly corrected according to his owne copies... [Works 1608].* Yale, Beineke Library Zd 0037.


---. “Let the bird of loudest lay.” [“The Phoenix and the Turtle.”] Burrow. 373-77.


Steel, Karl. “The Phoenix and the Turtle: Number There in Love Was Slain”
Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare.


---. “Introduction: What is this thing called love?” White. 1-27.


Young, Bruce. “Comments on Marilyn Simon’s paper.” For the Shakespeare Association of America’s annual conference: Boston, 5-7 April 2011.


