

COMMENTARIES ON SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS 88-93**DR. CATHERINE BROWN**

Close readings, of around 1300 words each, of this series of sonnets in which the speaker professes to be concerned with the possibility or likelihood of losing the addressee's love.

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SONNET 88

Many of the earlier sonnets fear either the friend's death or the poet's own. Sonnet 88 opens a sequence of six sonnets which fear instead the withdrawal of the friend's love. Sonnets 88 and 89 state that the poet's love for the friend is such that, if ever the friend found fault with him, he would take the friend's side against himself. Sonnet 88 makes this promise in its first quatrain; the second quatrain states that the poet will do this with the help of his superior knowledge of his own faults; the third claims that this process will benefit the poet himself. His "double vantage" (12) may consist, firstly, in thinking lovingly of the friend (10), and secondly in sharing the advantage which the friend gains by losing him. This shared gain is possible because he considers himself and his friend to be one (13) -- a point underlined by the rhyme of "thee" with "me" in lines 10 and 12. The poet's identification of himself with his friend is found in several of the other sonnets, including 22, 24, 36, 37, 62, and 66. In Sonnet 37 the good that occurs to the friend is multiplied by as much as tenfold in the poet's enjoyment of it (37.14). In Sonnet 88, however, the friend's benefit is attained at the poet's apparent expense, in what is presented as a zero-sum game. There is therefore also a self-sacrificial aspect to the poet's position: "for thy right myself will bear all wrong" (14).

Yet the sonnet also suggests that there is something "wrong" with the friend's hypothetical accusations, and the poet's hypothetical support of them. The end of the first quatrain casually undermines the sonnet's apparent argument with the quiet accusation "though thou art forsworn" (Vendler 385; this article is written with

reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler's critical work). Admittedly, the verb allows of some ambiguity; the phrase could mean *even though you are*, or *even if you were to be* (Burrow 556). There is a similar ambiguity in the sonnet's opening words: "When thou shalt" could mean *if you do* or *when you do* (like the modern German *wenn*, the Elizabethan *when* meant both *if* and *when*). "Forsworn" could mean generally *untrue*, or forsworn specifically in making accusations against the poet. Possible readings therefore range from: *even though you are forsworn, and will falsely accuse me* to *even if you were ever to accuse me, and be forsworn in doing so*; from this point onwards the tenses of the sonnet assume that the accusation has been made. Either reading is enough to retrospectively suggest ambiguity in the phrase "set me light" (1), which could mean not only *consider me to be of low value, promiscuous, immoral* (in which *light* is an adjective), but *consider me in a thoughtless, immoral manner* (in which *light* is an adverb) (Crystal 262). Similarly, "merit" (2) can simply mean *just deserving* (positive or negative), but if the friend is "forsworn", then it carries the positive sense of *virtue*.

The second quatrain also functions ambiguously. "Upon thy part I can set down a story" (6) contains an echo of the "set" of line 1, suggesting that his own "story" against himself may be no more true than the friend's. In the 1590s *story* could mean a history or true events, but could also mean a fabrication or fiction (Shakespeare uses the term in all of these ways in his plays). If the story is fiction, then so too is the claim of line 8. Or the story might be true, but describe the friend's "faults concealed", including his slander of the poet; the adjective *attainted* can mean slandered (Burrow 556; Crystal 25). In this case, "Upon thy part", which most obviously means *on your side*, could also carry the sense *regarding, or condemning, your negative characteristics*. *Upon* means *against* when Malcolm tells Macduff: "My first false speaking/ Was this upon myself" (*Macbeth* 4.3.131); *part* means a negative quality when Henry IV says of his son: "This part of his conjoins with my disease" (*Henry IV Part II* 4.5.65). The verb *losing* in line 8 functions more ambiguously with the spelling of the 1609 Quarto "loosing"; the claim would then be that *you would do well to set me free from you*, and "I by this will be a gainer too" (9; Burrow 556). Since -- as Shakespeare knew -- English spelling is more a matter of sense than sound, and since in his own time it was flexible, "loosing" (if accurately typeset from a manuscript) was chosen by Shakespeare deliberately. The "bending" of line 10 suggests twisting or perversity, as though the poet's "loving thoughts" do not

naturally or healthily tend towards his friend (Booth 292). Since the noun *love* can refer to both an emotion and its object, the closing couplet could mean *you are such that to make you seem in the right I must bear the injustice you do me*, in which case the poet sounds like a querulous Christ. Even more subversively, “bear” (14) can mean *reveal*, as in *laying bare*, in which case the sonnet ends with a threat to reveal all the wrongs which have been done to the poet or which the friend has committed (Booth 292). The sonnet itself does not quite bare them, but it does suggest them in its ambiguities.

These ambiguities constitute double-speech -- far from the “true, plain words” which the poet claims to apply to the friend six sonnets earlier (82.12). It is therefore appropriate that, for one of only three times in Shakespeare’s sonnets, the word *double* itself appears (12). Here it alliterates and visually rhymes with the doubled *do* and *doing* of the same and the preceding line. The adjective is sometimes used by Shakespeare to mean *twice the strength*, as in “good double beer” (*Henry VI Part II*, 2.3.64). Elsewhere, however, it means *ambiguous*, as when Queen Katherine claims that Wolsey “would...be ever double/ Both in his words and meaning” (*Henry VIII*, 4.2.38). It means *self-contradictory* when Coriolanus tells Brutus “This double worship,/ Where one part does disdain with cause, the other/ Insult without all reason” (*Coriolanus* 3.1.142). In *Venus and Adonis* a *double* is a *doubling-back* (“Venus and Adonis” 682; Crystal 138). The “double vantage” which the poet claims he will do himself is therefore of questionable value.

Nearly all of the sonnets contain double (or triple, or quadruple) speech. Sonnet 88, however, is particularly divided. Its vaunted masochism carefully fails to conceal sly attacks on the friend. The sonnet therefore appears in the light of a threat: “*When* thou shalt be disposed to set me light”, this is the wit with which I am capable of responding.

SONNET 89

This and the preceding sonnet have similar arguments and share certain words: *fault*, *love*, *acquaint*, *wrong* (Vendler 388; this article is written with reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler’s critical work). The poet again claims that if ever the friend accused him, he would justify the friend’s accusations of him. As in Sonnet 88, the degree of realization of the opening

statement is unclear. The first line could mean *if you left me because of my fault*, or *if you claimed that you were leaving me because of my fault*, or else: *having left me, you should tell me that you did it because of my fault*. In the rest of the sonnet the verb forms assume that the friend will indeed accuse him. Whereas in Sonnet 88 the poet claims he will provide verbal support to the friend's accusations, in Sonnet 89 he claims that he will act up to them. If the friend accuses him of limping, then he will limp (3).

As in Sonnet 88, ambiguities undermine the apparent argument. The "some fault" of the first line could be the friend's fault, which has led him to forsake the poet. In line 2 "comment" could mean *substantiate*, but it could also neutrally mean *to give an opinion on*. The line could even mean *I will criticize the offence that you have done to me*, if *upon* works negatively, as it may have done in 88.3. The sonnet itself can be seen as performing any of these functions. The poet's claim that he "straight will halt" (3) implicitly asserts that he was not limping when the friend accused him of lameness, and undermines itself with the contradiction that when one limps one does not walk straight. It is precisely with the words "and I straight will halt" that line 3 stops halting and starts walking with iambic regularity. Since *halt* rhymes with *fault* (Shakespeare frequently performed the feat of rhyming Germanic with French words) it is possible that the poet's alleged fault also has no reality. "To set a form upon desired change" (6) could mean *in order to provide a reason for you separating from me, which is what you want to do* (Burrow 558). The verb *to set* is reused from the previous sonnet, where it also implied falsity. The real reason for the desired separation may be a new object of lust, in which case "knowing thy will" not only puns on the poet's name, but uses the word *will* as *lust* (7). Since *will* can also mean the genitals (as in Sonnets 135 and 136), there is a submerged sense that the poet may disgrace himself by having sexual relations with him (the modal *will* is hidden at the beginning of the same line but repeated in full at the beginning of the next). When the poet then claims that "in my tongue/Thy sweet beloved name no more shall dwell" (9-10), there is a possibility that this is because the friend's name is no more sweet and beloved. The verb *to dwell* is used only eight times in the sonnets, and with one exception (55.14) describes a deceptive or unpleasant condition. There is a rebellious undertone in his promise to disown his friend, since this may be in revenge for, not in conformity to, the friend's own disowning of him. The poet says that he will not speak the friend's name, lest "I [...] should do it wrong" (11); *it* could be the friend's

name, but it could also be his tongue that would be wronged by mentioning “our old acquaintance” (10). Since *haply* also means *happily*, the tone of line 12 can be read as arch: let me not speak about our relationship, lest I do it happily, which would be inappropriate.

In sonnet sequences similar sonnets often appear as neighbors (see for example Sonnets 153 and 154). These similarities may function as the backdrop for significant differences, allowing each sonnet to animate the other. Since there is considerable evidence that Shakespeare ordered the sonnets in the 1609 Quarto himself (Burrow 107-11), much is gained from reading them in that order, bearing in mind that it is possible for sonnets to anticipate those which follow as well as echoing those which precede. Although Sonnet 89 does use strategies similar to Sonnet 88 in undermining its own argument, it is overall less double-edged, and contains a greater note of desperation, than the earlier sonnet. It is less verbal; whereas Sonnet 88 promises (or threatens) to use words in support of the friend, Sonnet 89 promises to use action, and silence: “Against thy reasons making no defence” (4; Vendler 388). In the 1609 Quarto there is no comma in the middle of line 9, but there is one at the end of it, so that the second half of the line suggests that he may be generally *absent in tongue* -- absent from his own tongue. In the claim “I’ll myself disgrace” (7) the verb carries not just its modern meaning, but the contemporary meaning *to put out of favor* (Ingram 204). The poet is promising to discountenance himself both with his friend and with his self; the 1609 Quarto gives *my self* always as two words, emphasizing the self as an entity (as in modern English), rather than as part of a reflexive pronoun. In the final couplet he vows to pursue “debate” against himself; this could mean *quarrel* or *strife* as well as *discussion*.

“Thee” and “I” are associated by each following “For” at the beginning of lines 13 and 14, but *for* is employed with different syntactical functions; the sonnets as a whole could be thought to explore the limits of correspondence of *I* and *thee*. At the end of the sonnet the poet faces the possibility that what the friend feels for him is *hate* – the last, harsh, word of the sonnet, which contrasts with the semi-accusatory and self-justificatory *wrong* which ends the preceding sonnet. This ushers in Sonnet 90, which begins with *hate* in its first line. In the light of Sonnet 89, the bravura of Sonnet 88 is emphasized; in the light of Sonnet 88, that of Sonnet 89 seems to falter.

Sonnet 89 contrasts even more sharply with Sonnet 49, in which the poet anticipates a time when the friend will justly “frown on my defects” (49.2). “Against”

that time (49.1; *in anticipation of*, but deliberately an ambiguous term) he writes against himself, in cool, slippery, legal language. Sonnet 49 finishes: “To leave poor me thou hast the strength of laws,/ Since why to love I can allege no cause”; the poet can adduce no legal reason why the friend should love him. Sonnet 89 is closer to the desperate tones of Sonnet 149, in which the poet remonstrates with his lady for doubting that he loves her, “When I against my self with thee partake” (149.2). The second quatrain opens with an echo of the final couplet of Sonnet 89: “Who hateth thee that I do call my friend?/ On whom frown’st thou that I do fawn upon?” (149.5-6). Sonnet 89 lacks the robust self-defence of Sonnet 149, however. The final couplet of Sonnet 149 suggests that the lady only loves those who can see her faults. Sonnet 89 is less concerned with fault, and is a sadder sonnet.

SONNET 90

Here the poet drops the argument of the previous two sonnets, the promise to side with his friend against himself if ever the friend should accuse and reject him. This is partly because the poet no longer has (or claims to have) that degree of identification with his friend which would allow him to share in what the friend gains by losing him. Rather, rejection by his friend is presented as an unmitigated loss. The sonnet’s plea is that this rejection, if it come at all, come sooner rather than later. It is made for two reasons: the poet is currently undergoing other difficulties and does not want rejection to come as a fresh trouble after he has recovered from these (4-8; the poet is too impatient to wait for the second quatrain to begin to make this point). In addition, he wants to experience the worst trouble early, so that he will then perceive the other troubles as insignificant by comparison: this argument is summed up in the rhyme of “first” with “worst” (12). In the phrase “do not drop in for an after-loss” (4), “for” means *in the form of* or *in order to achieve*, and the *after-loss* (not hyphenated in the 1609 Quarto) is a defeat experienced after other defeats -- in this case, the loss of the friend (Burrow 560; this article is written with reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler’s criticism).

This sonnet, which pleads for an immediate event, is more urgent than either of the preceding. It enjoins the same thing seven times; thrice positively (1,3,11) and four times negatively (4,5,7,9). The poem’s most important word is *now*. This word can never have the same denotation more than once, yet is repeated between the first

and second lines, exaggerating the pause that one expects to find at the end of every line of a sonnet, and emphasizing each instance. *Now* in Elizabethan English not only rhymed with *bow*, but may also have rhymed with the end of every line of the second quatrain and of final couplet. If so, the *now* reverberates through the whole sonnet; it is repeated in line 13; and yet, by the poem's end, has apparently elicited no response.

The poet holds "fortune" responsible for his present troubles; in the 1609 Quarto it is not capitalized, but is certainly personified; far from being blind (as she is proverbially held to be), she is actively malevolent. The poet's injunction to the friend to "Join with the spite of fortune" (3) blurs the distinction between Fortune and the friend. This blurring is apparent in the "purposed overthrow" of line 8, which could be an overthrow intended by the friend, or by Fortune, or both (Ingram and Redpath 206). This ambiguity increases the friend's supposed power. The presence of Fortuna gives to the sonnet a Roman aspect which accords well with the military imagery of "rearward" (6, meaning both a *rear guard* and a *rear position*, as in *Westward*), "purposed overthrow" (8), and "in the onset" (11).

The last couplet's conceit is reflected in its repetition of "woe" in line 13; in the light of line 14, the two seem to cancel each other out. The idea that greater woes obscure lesser is explored also in *King Lear* (written about a decade later), in which the King refuses to take shelter in a storm, explaining to his servant Kent: "where the greater malady is fixed,/ The lesser is scarce felt" (*King Lear* 3.4.8-9). Neither the King nor the poet are pleading for death -- merely for a minimization of pain, by making one pain work as a narcotic for others. The poet's position is therefore distinct to that in both Sonnet 92, in which he says that he will not outlive the withdrawal of the friend's love, and in Sonnet 139, in which he pleads that his lover (this time a woman) will kill him outright by her hard looks, "and rid my pain" (139.14). Whereas in Sonnet 139 the poet is already "near slain" by his lover's hostility (139.13), in Sonnet 90 the friend's rejection is merely potential. The poem implies less certainty about an eventual rejection than the two preceding sonnets, since the hypothesizing *if* of line 1 is repeated in line 9. Indeed, part of the poet's current pain is not knowing whether the friend *will* reject him; this pain, too, would be ended by rejection, and although it is not mentioned in this sonnet, it is explored in the three following. This sonnet is in part a thought experiment through which the poet tries to make his current problems *seem* as nothing in relation to the potential trouble of rejection in love. In other sonnets the poet wishes for the opposite. Sonnet 140, also to a woman, pleads

that she will *not* tell him the worst: “Bear thine eyes straight, though thy proud heart go wide” (140.14). Two sonnets before appears the sonnet which starts: “When my love swears that she is made of truth/ I do believe her though I know she lies” (138.13-14).

Hate appears just once in this sonnet, and is used only seventeen times in Shakespeare’s sonnets (plus one use each of *hated* and *hateth*). Even amongst these, the way in which it features here is unusual, for two reasons. First, because most of the sonnets in which it appears concern a female lover (from 127 onwards). Secondly, because when *hate* is used in a sonnet it nearly always appears along with *love*. This is in part a matter of statistical probability; *love* is used a hundred and ninety-six times in the sonnets, and is their last word. But *hate* nearly always appears in close proximity to *love*; often in the same line, and sometimes immediately adjacent. The proximity can be antagonistic, as in Sonnet 35 where “civil war is in my love and hate” (35.12), or rhetorical, as in 149, which instructs “But, love, hate on” (149.13), or paradoxical, as in 150, in which the poet declares that he loves his lover the more, the more reason he has to hate her. In Sonnet 40 the poet claims that “it is a greater grief/ To bear love’s wrong than hate’s known injury” (40.11-12). By contrast, Sonnet 90 conflates “love’s wrong” with “hate’s known injury”; *this* is the greatest grief, and rather than accepting it out of love, as in Sonnet 40, he begs for it for his own sake. The only other sonnet which contains hate but not love is 129, which concerns lust. That sonnet’s view of lust is remorselessly negative; Sonnet 90 makes such a negative presentation of love that it cannot even be named.

SONNET 91

In Sonnet 90 the poet had urged his friend to reject him now if ever he was going to; it would seem that the friend has not done so, and the poet is now less certain than in Sonnets 88-90 that he will ever do so. Indeed, the sonnet gives the mirror argument of the previous one. Whereas in Sonnet 90 the friend’s rejection of the poet would make all of the poet’s other troubles seem like nothing (90.14), in Sonnet 91 the poet considers that all of the other possible joys in life are bettered (trumped, not improved) by the “one general best” of the friend’s love (8). But the sting in the tail of this love, as of the sonnet, is that the love is nonetheless insecure; since the friend

might at any time turn against him, he is “wretched” in that he may be left “most wretched” (13, 14).

In other sonnets the poet claims to be sure of his friend’s love. In Sonnet 25 he contrasts himself with those whose public honour depends upon Fortune, since he himself is “beloved/ Where I may not remove, nor be removed” (25.13-14). In Sonnet 53 he argues that the friend possesses all the virtues that other people possess, but differs from them by possessing a “constant heart” (53.14). In Sonnet 105 he declares that the friend is “Fair, kind, and true” (105.9) as repetitiously as he considers the friend to be constant. These sonnets are decisively outnumbered, however, by those in which the friend is unsure of the friend’s love: 48, 61, 64, 75, 90, 91, 93 and 139. In 48, 61, and 75 the poet describes his friend’s love as a treasure which may be stolen from him, by Time or otherwise. In Sonnet 75 the poet describes himself as a miser whose pleasure in his treasure alternates with his fear of losing it, and in 64 he weeps for possessing something that he fears to lose (64.14). Two centuries after Shakespeare wrote these sonnets the English Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham tried to calculate quantity of pleasure using what he called a *felicific calculus*. This took account of seven dimensions of pleasure: intensity, purity, duration, extent, propinquity, fecundity, and certainty or uncertainty. The last of these is the concern of Sonnets 64, 75, and 91; if a pleasure is uncertain in its continuation, then, according to Sonnet 91, it is reduced.

Yet the pleasure which is described in Sonnet 91 has a second order dimension which cannot be impaired by uncertainty; his pride in himself at being capable of it. The poet implicitly argues that this makes him superior to those who “glory” in the various goods listed in the first quatrain. Such people are classifiable by their “humor” (5). Before the mid-nineteenth century in Europe it was widely believed that each person was dominated by one of four humors: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. The dominating humor determined their character, and to which pleasures and pains they were most susceptible. The poet argues that whereas most people “glory” in whatever their humor predisposes them to, he himself is outside of all categories of “some” (the anaphoric word of the first quatrain’s clauses), and, by extension, above the humors themselves. This makes his pleasure particular to himself, and he argues that the friend’s love is a good felt “to me” (9). On the other hand, he boasts that his pleasure is “one general best” whereas everyone else’s are “particulars” (7-8), with this word’s connotations of the private, personal, peculiar,

and pettiness (Booth 298; this article is written with reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler's critical work). He does not explain how this glory can encompass the others as he claims in line 12. More controversially for his own time than now, he holds high birth at low worth. Not all of the pleasures of the first quatrain are repeated in the third, but one of them which is, is "birth", expanded into "high birth" (9). In arguing that his friend's love is a greater benefit than all of those valued by other people, he inadvertently measures himself against the majority of people and appears as an obsessive. The impropriety of valuing one love above all else is explored, in a still more exaggerated form, in the scene in *King Lear* in which the King divides his realm between his three daughters according to how much they claim to love him. The eldest daughter claims:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
 As much as child e'er lov'd, or father found;
 A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.

Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (*King Lear* Folio 1.1.55-61)

Her sister Cordelia points out that this speech indicates excessive love, since Gonoril is married and makes no mention of loving her husband. Unlike this speech, Sonnet 91 gives us no reason to doubt its sincerity. Nonetheless, it hints, as many of the sonnets do, at the unhealthiness of obsession. Unlike in such sonnets as 114, the poet himself is not conscious of it. But in the couplet all of his pride in the love he possesses, and in his own capacity for valuing it, are undermined by the thought that he may lose it. This consideration impels him to the strategy of Sonnet 92.

SONNET 92

The transition from Sonnet 91 to 92 constitutes one of the starkest about-turns in Shakespeare's sonnets. These poems read severally and together not only describe but enact the uncertainty and mutability of the poet's feelings about his friend, and of the feelings which the poet attributes to the friend. In Sonnet 91, the poet's sole source of wretchedness was uncertainty about the continuation of the friend's love for him. In Sonnet 92, the poet asserts that he would not outlive the friend's love for him, and

therefore need not fear unhappiness: he is “Happy to have thy love, happy to die!” (12). The *worst* of Sonnet 90 (90.10) is echoed in lines 1 and 5 of Sonnet 92 -- and is escaped. As in Sonnet 90, he is telling the friend to “do thy worst” (1), but here he is boasting that he won’t suffer from even the least withdrawal of the friend’s affection, since he would immediately die (6). He twists his claim that he wouldn’t outlive the friend’s love into an implicit claim that he and the friend are married: in “For term of life thou art assured mine” (2), *assured* is a legal term, and the whole therefore means “you are contracted to me for life” (Burrow 564; this article is written with reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler’s critical work).

This is a version of the argument that is sometimes used of death: we need not fear it, since whilst we are dead (whether awaiting the final judgment, or completely annihilated), we are not aware of it. This sentiment is several times expressed in Shakespeare’s plays, as for example by the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, who tries to prepare a condemned man to die by pointing out that:

Thy best of rest is sleep,

And that thou oft provok’st; yet grossly fear’st

Thy death, which is no more. (*Measure for Measure* 3.1.17-19)

In Sonnet 92, then, the poet is claiming a philosophical acceptance not only of the loss of his friend’s love, but of life itself: the former is not to be feared because he will be dead; the latter is not to be feared because when dead he will not be able to feel the loss of his friend’s love. The “Then” at the beginning of the second quatrain could mean *therefore* in relation to the first quatrain, but it could also indicate *when my life ends, on a slight withdrawal of your favor, then I will not need to fear anything worse* (5-6). The “state” which is “better” than relying on the friend’s changeable humor (7) primarily means the fact that he will die rather than suffer, but could also refer to death itself, particularly if the “When” of line 6 governs not only the preceding but the following line, as suggested by the punctuation of the 1609 Quarto:

When in the least of them my life hath end,

I see, a better state to me belongs (6,7)

Yet how is this death to be achieved in physical rather than merely rhetorical terms? The sonnet might be an emotional blackmail note threatening death by suicide at the least withdrawal of the friend’s love -- but its rhetorical strategies more suggest *self-persuasion* (Vendler 397). Over the course of it the poet claims to make two discoveries: at line 7 he “see[s]” and at line 11 he “find[s]”. The legal language of

lines 2 and 11 may be employed to assure himself that it is a *law* that *if* my friend no longer loves me, *then* I will be dead. How the death would be effected is not discussed and cannot be faced; what is important is that the poet, at the present, *believe* it to be true, in order to escape the wretchedness described in line 13 of the previous sonnet. Since in the 1609 Quarto lines 10 and 11 are separated by only a comma, the “since” of line 10 can govern line 11, in a willed continuation from the willed premise to a thrice-happy conclusion (11-12).

Yet the sonnet does not “die” at line 12. Whereas in the preceding sonnet the turn to the couplet was one from boastful happiness to wretched uncertainty, here it is from assured dealing with the loss of the friend’s love to a suspicion that the friend may be “false” (14) without the poet knowing it -- a suspicion which is manifested in the uncertainty of tenses in Sonnets 88 and 89, and which is the explicit subject of Sonnet 93. The blot on the poet’s state is itself ambiguous in its temporal aspect: it is current in that the very possibility of the friend’s concealed “revolt” (10; unfaithfulness in love) mars the argument and happiness of the three quatrains; in this case the “blot” (13) applies to the poet’s happy state. On the other hand, the “blot” could be the friend’s, in which case it remains to be feared (Burrow 564). The “mayst” could mean *may in the future*, or else *may at the moment*; in the latter case, one should hear a stress on “be” (14). “Yet I know it not” could mean *though it’s going on now, I still don’t know about it*, or *if you were to do it in the future I nonetheless might not know about it* (14). These ambiguities are precisely the point, and either way the argument of the rest of the sonnet fails, since the poet cannot die if he is not aware of lacking the friend’s love, and we are not led to believe that the uncertainty itself counts as one of the “least of” wrongs (6) which would suffice to kill him; at the beginning of the following sonnet, he resolves to “live” (1). The fact that the possibility of the friend’s unfaithfulness is not enough to kill the poet also undermines the sonnet’s argument.

If the “blot” applies to the “blessed fair” friend, however, then why should the friend himself “fear” the blot which would take the form of unfaithfulness to the poet? And why should the poet use a rhetorical question at line 13 (albeit without a question mark in the 1609 Quarto), making the likelihood of the fair turning false seem proverbial? Perhaps, if the friend were secretly false, the poet would carry on living not only because he didn’t know about the unfaithfulness but because he didn’t *want* to die because of such unfaithfulness. Such a blot might be an alternative path to

happiness to that articulated in the rest of the poem. Indeed, the very security engendered by the argument established by line 12 may liberate the poet to think and feel beyond it. In this case the “wrongs” of line 5 are retrospectively pointed, the “vex” of line 9 acquires its legal sense of *to accuse unjustly* (as in today’s *vexatious litigation*), and “I see a better state to me belongs/ Than that which on thy humor doth depend” (7-8) can be retrospectively read as presaging the poet’s own “revolt”; *to depend on* could mean to be a dependent of, and therefore to serve (Pandarus says to servant of Paris “You depend upon him”); the poet claims to transcend such a state (*Troilus and Cressida* 3.1.4; Crystal 120). But this sense of rebellion is under the surface, and does not survive into the following sonnet. Sonnet 92 ends on a note of troubling epistemological uncertainty: he probably won’t die whatever happens, but will probably have to live on in a state of miserable uncertainty which, after all, is preferable both to miserable certainty and to death.

SONNET 93

The final couplet of the preceding sonnet provides the starting point for this one: the poet's speculation that the friend might be unfaithful without him knowing about it. Sonnet 93 explains that the reason why it is difficult to estimate his friend's inner worth is that his face, in contrast to others' (7), is so beautiful that it cannot reveal inner corruption (5, 10-12). However, the couplet states that if the friend is unfaithful to him then this beauty will become ("grow", 13: usually a negative verb in Shakespeare's sonnets) like Eve's apple, which was beautiful on the outside and corrupt on the inside; apples' external appearances were proverbially deceptive (Burrow 566; this article is written with reference to the editions of Booth, Burrow, Ingram and Redpath, and Vendler's critical work).

The correlation between inner and outer beauty is a long-standing literary subject, perhaps reflecting the belief that physical beauty was a gift from God (just as deformity was a punishment), and sometimes used as a literary device to make characters easier to read. Sonnets 46 and 54 assert the correlation; in Sonnet 46 the poet's heart and eye are at war as to which should possess the friend, until they divide his beautiful heart and "outward part" (13-14) respectively between them. In Sonnet 54 the poet describes the friend's physical beauty as like a rose, and his "truth" as like that rose's odour, which the poet's verse distils and preserves. However, that sonnet also mentions "canker-blooms", which look as fair as "sweet roses" (5, 11) but possess no scent. There is an equally long literary tradition of beauty masking evil, particularly in the case of women, who are then called *fatale* (in Milton's *Paradise Lost* the allegorical Sin is beautiful above the waist but composed of scaly folds below). However, such men have also been known: *King Lear*'s Edmund, and *Pride and Prejudice*'s Colonel Wickham, are as sexually attractive as they are dangerous; Milton's Lucifer was the most handsome of the angels before he fell. An increasing distance between inner and outer beauty is described in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the hero Dorian degenerates into vice which is registered physically only on his portrait, not on his body. Amongst other sonnets in which Shakespeare's persona accuses his friend of stain (41, 67, 69), Sonnet 69 complains that the friend is growing common, and is therefore thought not as beautiful inside as out by people who see "farther than the eye hath shown" (69.8). Sonnet 70 denies that his friend is false, but does say that others slander him precisely

because he is fair: “slander’s mark was ever yet the fair” (70.2). Here the poet claims that this is because of envy, but, within the terms of Sonnet 93, it might be out of suspicion, since the friend is considered incapable of appearing false. The poet considers it a God-given gift that he cannot produce “wrinkles strange” (8-9); since a *wrinkle* could also be a moral blot, the term itself confuses internal and external worth (Booth 304). However, the implication is that the friend could not express himself even if he wanted to, as though he had been treated by Botox. “In thy face sweet loves should ever dwell” (10), but, as in 89.10, *dwelling* has a connotation of falsity. Whereas “change” is rhymed with “strange” in the second quatrain of Sonnet 89 to indicate that the poet will feign lack of love for the friend who turned from him, in Sonnet 93 this rhyme appears in the same position to indicate that the friend feigns love that he does not feel. The latter fact makes the promises of Sonnet 89 and 88, as well as of 92, impossible to fulfill.

However, the poet is *willing* to be misled about his friend. In contrast to Sonnet 90, in which he begs to know the worst immediately, or Sonnet 91, in which the poet’s wretchedness consists precisely in his uncertainty about the friend, here he is willing to live on “Like a deceived husband” (2). In this the sonnet relates to 138, in which “When my love swears that she is made of truth,/ I do believe her though I know she lies” (138.1-2). The “altered new” (which rhymes with *true* and makes the latter suspect) of line 3 is a very delicate euphemism for the friend’s unfaithfulness, and the “should” in line 12 can be read as a directive to the friend, telling him to deceive him (Burrow 566). In Sonnets 57 and 58 too, the poet refuses to see the friend’s faults, describing love as “so true a fool” that “Though you do anything, he thinks no ill” (57.13-14). But whereas these sonnets strongly imply that the friend does wrong, in Sonnet 93 it is uncertain; even by the standards of the other sonnets addressed to the friend, here the friend’s nature and feelings are opaque. As in all of the sonnets, although they reach out to exterior circumstance, there is no reality to which the reader can appeal to decide between the possibilities which they present -- and here, none to which the poet can appeal either (Burrow “Introduction” 119-120). The tenses, as in the previous poems, are ambiguous. The first line contains a pun, with reference to the previous sonnet. It could mean, *on the assumption that you are true, I will live (as opposed to dying because of the withdrawal of your favor)*, or *given that I can’t know for certain when you are being unfaithful to me, I will live on “like a deceived husband”, making the supposition that you are true*. The making of

the supposition could be involuntary or voluntary, but there is a strong suggestion that it is voluntary. After all, the previous sonnet argues that the slightest diminution in the friend's apparent love for the poet would kill him; but such a diminution might be concealed and allow the poet to live on. The question suggests itself: in what does the friend's love for the poet consist, if not in that which manifests itself to the poet? Just as a kiss cannot be faked -- it is still always a kiss -- so the apparent giving of love by a lover is still, at some level, the giving of love.

However, the couplet is darker. In linking the friend's beauty to Eve's apple the poet not only connects the friend with the origin of all human evil, pain, and death, but implies that he himself should not "eat" the friend's love, if disaster is not to result. Yet the friend's love is what he feeds on all the time. Without it, as the previous sonnet argues, he would die. The poet is therefore in a weak and conflicted position, despite the implied threat of the "If" of line 14. After all, God made quite clear to Adam and Eve of which fruits they were not to partake (their doing of precisely the thing forbidden to them has a vaudeville aspect), whereas the poet does not know whether or not the friend is such a tree. Even the tasting of the fruit -- his friend's beauty -- will not give him knowledge of good and evil. And so the poet is impelled to the tortuous positions of the following sonnet.

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