EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: TRUTH AND DECEPTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S *SONNETS*

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

May 2022

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Frida Laurel Graumann for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of English to be taken June 2022

Title: Eye of the Beholder: Truth and Deception in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*

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My thesis, *Eye of the Beholder: Truth and Deception in Shakespeare's Sonnets,* considers the use and abuse of deception in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence. The sequence is through the eyes of the sonnet speaker, who expresses his complicated experiences of truth and lies in his relationships with his beloveds. The speaker's relationships with the youth and the mistress embody emotions of love, hate, trust, and betrayal. These conflicting and confusing experiences in love expose the speaker of his relationship with and understanding of deception. The speaker is a particular character who appears capable of believing lies. He experiences self-deception throughout the sequence. Despite his seemingly constant association to lies, the speaker seems to strive for a sense of truth, or more specifically, his sense of truth. Overall, this thesis seeks to unravel the complicated nature of truth and deception between the speaker and his beloveds and the effects of such in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

Acknowledgements

It is a strange feeling to think back to the start of this incredibly intimidating process of writing an Honors College thesis. I was full of doubts and questions, but I learned to take the process truly one step at a time. That strategy and my manta, too blessed to be stressed, buoyed me along the way. Writing a thesis is difficult, to say the least, and it makes me feel very happy for and proud of myself. However, I would not have been able to achieve this accomplishment without all the support and guidance I received throughout the entirety of this writing process. First, I have to thank my Primary Thesis Advisor, Associate Professor Lara Bovilsky. Professor Bovilsky truly carried me through this experience. I am so grateful for her constant wisdom, advice, and words of encouragement. I also want to thank the other members on my Thesis Committee: Professor Michael Moffitt and Assistant Professor Brent Dawson. Although we only spoke briefly throughout this process, I thank you both for your support and kindness. I was lucky to have taken classes with both of you and I am genuinely grateful to have each of you on my committee. I also want to thank the Clark Honors College for the opportunity to write a thesis. I am grateful for all the wonderful professors who challenged me academically, but always with genuine support and care.

I have to thank my family for their constant support and unconditional belief in my success at the Honors College and during this process. I'm thankful for my grandmother, Marilyn Briggs, who dragged me to countless Shakespeare plays growing up. I understand the appeal now! I'm grateful for my late grandfather, Arlen John Briggs, who patiently taught me how to preform Shakespeare's *All the Worlds a Stage*. I

will always remember giggling when we acted out the “shrunk shank.” I am grateful for my friends who supported me in their own ways throughout. I have to thank my dad, Ted Graumann, and my younger sister, Anais Graumann, who supported me with encouraging text messages that made me laugh. Lastly, I am beyond grateful for my mom, Miranda Graumann, who always listened to my stressed-out phone calls with pure love and understanding. Thank you so much for your encouragement and genuine interest in my project. Reflecting on this process, I find myself feeling immensely grateful for the supportive people in my life, the opportunity to write a thesis, and for my time in the Honors College. Thank you.

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Introduction

Shakespeare's *Sonnets* expose the speaker for his use of deception to encourage virtue and his experience of love as a source of self-deception. The speaker in the sonnet sequence has two beloveds: the youth and the mistress. Lies, deceit, and falsity are present in both his relationships, for better and for worse. This thesis seeks to better understand the form and function of deception in the sonnets, and its effect on the speaker. This thesis considers four youth sonnets (14, 35, 88, 93) and three mistress sonnets (137, 152, 138). In this analysis, many occurrences are uncovered. The speaker experiences his beloveds' concealment of their wrongdoings and infidelities. He considers his collaboration in his own mistreatment. In this way, the sonnets consider the complex ways in which the lover accommodates or even pursues his own abuse when he is further drawn to a beloved despite or because of their deceptions. The sequence considers love as a driving force toward the speaker's self-deception. He also exposes him capability of believing lies. The speaker struggles to navigate the deceptive qualities of his beloved's appearance and dismantling his believed connection of beauty and virtue. The sonnets also consider the effect of reciprocal and mutual deceit in the speaker's relationship. Lastly, I will consider how the speaker and his beloveds may not be the only ones affected by falsities, as the reader too can fall victim to deception while reading the sequence. There are countless examples of untruths in the sequence. Hence, my thesis, *Eye of the Beholder: Truth and Deception in Shakespeare's Sonnets,* considers the use and abuse of deception in the sonnet sequence and the speaker's relationship to truth and lies throughout. Conclusively, truth, however it may be defined by the lover, might merely be in the eye of the beholder.

Youth Sonnets

A False Belief (Sonnet 14)

With the first appearance of the word 'truth' in the sequence, we see the speaker's understanding of truth in relation to the youth. The speaker seems to hold a deep belief that beautiful beings resemble truthfulness. The youth is often referred to as Shakespeare's Fair Youth by many critics because of the frequency that the youth is referenced as "fair" in the sequence. The word "fair" holds several meanings. First, it is used to describe someone who is beautiful (OED 'fair' 1). It also represents purity or light (OED 'fair' 3). "Fair" describes acting with fairness, honesty, or virtue. Hence, the speaker appears understands his beloved as such. The youth is fair and meant to embody all its meanings. The youth is a beloved and the speaker's love for him consequently provides additional context to his understanding. The context of love heightens the youth's "fairness" to the speaker. However, this understanding of the youth will prove to be a false belief.

Sonnet 14 reveals the speaker's understanding that he can see the future in the youth's eyes. In the first lines of the sonnet, the speaker explains that he is unable to predict the future using astronomy or the weather, like most who can see into the future. He says he cannot tell of "good or evil luck / Of plagues, of deaths, or seasons' quality" (ll. 3-4). The speaker cannot predict events that those interested in the future tend to be concerned about, such as certain practical contents. However, at line nine the speaker's explanation of his future-telling skills changes. He says that, although he cannot foretell the future using the stars in the sky, he can see the future when he looks into the "stars" in his beloved's eyes.

But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
And, constant stars, in them I read such art
As truth and beauty shall together thrive,
If from thyself to store thou wouldst convert:
(Sonnet 14, ll. 9-12).

The youth's eyes serve as a lens of knowledge to the speaker and like the stars, the speaker views this as an art or ability of interpreting data. "Constant stars" also represents a dependable guide to the speaker which he will use to discern meanings and guidance. The speaker explains that he sees truth and beauty coexisting in a future state, but only if the youth's beauty is protected, as he says, "Or else of thee this I prognosticate, / Thy end is truth's and beauty's doom and date" (ll. 13-14). The speaker predicts (OED 'prognosticate' 1) that unless the youth's beauty is "stor[ed]," it will cease to exist. The word "store" represents a provision for future use (Booth) or a reserved abundance, like a storeroom. Thus, the speaker suggests that he ought to preserve the Youth's beauty through the sonnet sequence. To "store" the youth's truth and beauty would be in the form of abundant tributes and texts. "Store" might hold another implication. The word "store" also means to increase or multiply. Hence, the youth's ability "to store" would "ensure the flourishing continuance of truth and beauty" (Duncan-Jones, 14). The sonnet sequence strives to capture the essence of the Youth to ensure that his "truth and beauty" will "thrive." Hence, the youth must fulfill his fairness by being truthful or by the speaker expressing him as such in the sequence.

Sonnet 14 sets up the reader's understanding of how the speaker understands the youth: an embodiment of truth and beauty. He expresses an almost non-negotiable confidence in his skills. From the youth's eyes, which he reads as "constant stars," he derives a "knowledge," not merely prediction. To the speaker, what he sees in the

youth's eyes is fact, truth. His assertions about his predictions reveal that, regarding the youth, "truth and beauty shall together thrive." He believes that he can trust the youth's eyes to tell him the truth. This understanding might suggest that because of the youth's beauty, the youth will, or should, be truthful. This belief will provide an explanation for the speaker's understanding of his other beloved, the mistress character. She is not initially characterized as "fair" like the Youth. This distinction plays into the speaker's understanding of the truthfulness of each beloved. But fairness, or beauty, does not always go with truth. Thus, Sonnet 14, which presents the first mentioning of the word "truth" in the sequence, immediately expresses the speaker's faith in a false belief. Instead, the speaker's trust in his understanding of the connection between truth and beauty will prove to act as a means of deception throughout the sequence. The speaker will use deceiving strategies to see the youth as virtuous or even promote a lie for the sake of the youth's truth. As the beholder, he sees and deceives himself about the youth.

Roses have Thorns… (Sonnet 35)

While Sonnet 14 expresses how the speaker is deceived by his understanding of the youth's beauty equating to truth as well as his love for his beloved, it does not yet consider the speaker's response to the youth being untruthful. Sonnet 35 verifies one or more occurrences where the youth has been untruthful and provides an example that outlines the speaker's thinking about such. An analysis of Sonnet 35 allows the reader to see even more deeply into the deceptive means of the speaker's love for the youth.

The poem begins with an assurance to the youth explaining that he should stop feeling bad about something he has done to the speaker: "No more be grieved at that which thou hast done" (l. 1). The speaker acknowledges that the youth has done

something bad that he might "grieve," but he tells him to no longer feel bad about it. Also, what the youth has done is not specified, perhaps to further conceal the truth from himself. He continues to describe a rationalization for his approach to the situation and adjusts his perspective to continue to see the youth as fair or truthful. The speaker says, "Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud; / Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun, / And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud" (ll. 2-4). The speaker describes beautiful natural objects being stained, polluted, and harmed to express what the youth did to him. His analogy describes normal occurrences in nature. All roses have thorns, and bugs live in buds. The speaker is comparing the youth's unfaithfulness to all these natural occurrences. It is extremely unlikely that anyone would blame a rose for its thorns or condemn clouds for blocking out the sun. Hence, this metaphor would imply that the youth's betrayal is not worthy of blame because being unfaithful to the speaker was merely as natural for him as a "fountain" (i.e. stream) to contain mud. The speaker does not recognize the youth's unfaithfulness as a flaw or wrongdoing, but instead as something that simply occurs. Roses have thorns, clouds cover the sky, and flowers contain bugs, but that doesn't make any of them less beautiful. If anything, it makes them more real. The youth retains the speaker's image of him as beautiful and even more human. The speaker has a skewed idea of the severity of the youth's actions, does not accurately see his betrayal, or chooses not to. By comparing the youth's sins to such beautiful images in nature, he is excusing or validates the youth's sins.

In a seeming additional effort to ease the blame of the youth's actions, the speaker provides the justification that "all men make faults" (l. 5). Again, he excuses the youth's behavior by bringing himself into the situation. The speaker equates himself

with the youth's sins, when he says, "and even I in this." He too, is like a rose with thorns. However, the speaker switches from his comparison of the youth in nature to that in law and court concepts about truth and antagonism. He compares this situation with the youth to the experience of being in a courtroom. He says he is "authorizing thy trespass with compare, / Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss, / Excusing these sins more than these sins are: / For to thy sensual fault I bring in sense;" (ll. 6-9). The speaker is "authorizing" or justifying, in a legal means, the youth's actions. Corrupting himself, the speaker intends to heal (OED 'salving' 4) the youth's faults wrongfully (OED 'amiss' 3). He is either offering more excuse for the youth's sins than they deserve or offering more than they require (Duncan-Jones, 180). The speaker will defend the youth's "fault" with "sense." He says, "Thy adverse party is thy advocate" (l. 10). The speaker explains that he should be the "adverse party," or plaintiff, speaking against the youth and his actions, but instead he plays his "advocate," or the youth's defense lawyer. He is both the plaintiff and the defense lawyer. When the speaker should be, and rightfully so, angry at the youth, he defends his actions. Much like a defense lawyer, who does not have to support or accept the defendants' actions, the speaker merely defends him. He goes so far as to say that he would volunteer a legal justification or excuse (OED 'plea' 3a) against himself: "And 'gainst myself a lawful plea commence" (l. 11). As his love for the youth in Sonnet 14 understands his beloved as truth and beauty, the speaker is still driven by his love, even when the youth is not truthful. The deceptive means of the speaker's love motivates him to defend the youth and even blame himself instead. The speaker has flipped the narrative to put him in a position of blame while the youth is blameless and his actions are justified, or that their

blame is connected. The speaker blames himself more than the youth for the youth's betrayal. Perhaps, the speaker would rather experience this sort of self-blame than see the youth, his beloved, as untruthful.

The speaker concludes by expressing his "civil war … in my love and hate" of the youth (l. 12). He is battling within himself about his feelings for the youth. He is aware of the harm the youth has done to him, making the speaker want to hate his beloved. Yet simultaneously, he continues to ignore or even uphold the youth's wrongdoings because of the intensity of his love. In the last line of the sonnet, he describes the youth as the "sweet thief which sourly robs from me" (l. 14). This line clearly describes the speaker's understanding of the youth. He explains how the youth "robs" him or takes advantage of his love. Like a crime of theft, the youth is stealing forgiveness or understanding from the speaker. The beloved likely knows the power of the speaker's love for him and like a thief, he can take it for his advantage. The speaker describes this occurrence as "sour" to mean hurtful or unkind. Yet he refers to the youth as a "sweet thief." Despite, the youth hurtfully taking advantage of the speaker, he continues to see him partly in a positive light.

In Sonnet 35, the speaker seems to be deceiving, or even manipulating, himself, so he can forgive the youth. As Heather Dubrow explains, the beloveds in the sonnets do not function as active participants. She says that "the problems engendered by their behavior are frighteningly immediate, but the characters themselves are not" (Dubrow, 179). Thus, as the reader we only have access to the speaker's word and how he expresses his understanding of situations with the youth. As Sonnet 35 makes clear, the speaker tends to support the youth regardless of his wrongdoings and despite their

negative impact his own well-being. It appears, the speaker would rather experience his own self-blame than blame the youth. Sonnet 35 exposes the corruption the speaker produces in himself in his excuses for the youth's actions. Hence, it is made clear the veil of deception that the speaker exists beneath. The speaker arguably manipulates his understanding or implication of the youth's betrayal to make the youth remain free of blame. This deceptive means of using his own word to manipulate himself is a common occurrence throughout the sequence, especially with the youth. The speaker's love for the youth and his use of deceiving strategies works to skew his understanding of a situation and inhibit the youth from receiving blame and instead, blame himself.

Promotion of the Lies (Sonnet 88)

Deepening the understandings expressed in Sonnet 35 that the speaker will use deception to see the youth's virtue, Sonnet 88 conveys the extent that the speaker will go to facilitate the youth's cruelties to him. The speaker will sacrifice his own truths for the youth's will and go so far as to even promote the youth's lies. Whether it is the catalyst of the speaker's self-deception or the intensity of his love for the youth, he expresses many modes of self-sacrifice to ensure that the youth remains as an embodiment of truth, even when he is not.

Sonnet 88 begins with a statement of assurance.

> When thou shalt be disposed to set me light
> And place my merit in the eye of scorn,
> Upon thy side, against myself, I'll fight,
> And prove thee virtuous, though thou art forsworn:
> (Sonnet 88, ll. 1-4)

The speaker admits that when the youth "scorns" his "merit," he will avidly promote the youth's lies and "fight" on the beloved's side to "prove" him to be truthful, even though he is lying, as the speaker says he is "forsworn". This statement of defense for the youth's wrongdoings echoes the message of Sonnet 35, where the speaker will act as a defense lawyer for the youth. However, Sonnet 88 takes the dynamic of Sonnet 35 to a greater intensity as the speaker mentions that he will fight for the youth's virtue when the youth thinks little of him or looks upon the speaker's merits with a scornful eye (Duncan-Jones, 286). Even when the youth insults the speaker or treats him disrespectfully, the speaker will still fight to find him virtuous.

The speaker's decision to promote the youth's lies rather than fight against them and defend himself is a disrespectful thing to do to oneself, but the speaker provides his reasons. He says that in promoting these lies, he is getting something out of the situation as well. The speaker says, "Upon thy part I can set down a story / Of faults concealed, wherein I am attainted, / That thou, in losing me, shall win much glory; / And I by this will be a gainer too" (ll. 6-9). The speaker can create a narrative where the flaws or wrongdoings are concealed and that he, the speaker, is rightfully accused, as if in a court of law (Duncan-Jones, 286). In turn the youth, "losing" the speaker by destroying his reputation, will "win much [the youth] glory," but so will the speaker. He explains how assisting the youth will "double-vantage" him: "For bending all my loving thoughts on thee, / The injuries that to myself I do, / Doing thee vantage, double vantage me" (ll. 10-12). This statement means several things. First and most simply put, the speaker assumes that doing something good for the youth makes the speaker good. As if the speaker is flaunting all the things he will do for the sake of the youth, which

makes him appear as a desirable lover. Secondly, the speaker can tell himself, know, or document the circumstance as he "can set down a story" that his beloved knows he is taking all the bad reputation and blame on himself because of his love for the youth. Thus, the speaker is an even more honorable lover. In turn, the speaker is slightly contradicting himself as he is making clear that the youth has wronged him, but he is doing things to make the youth gain respect from the public or those other than the speaker himself. Thus, the speaker is simultaneously exposing himself of his self-deception. Again, like in Sonnet 35 where the speaker obtains a sense of self-blame rather than blaming the youth, here he is permitting himself to be deceived. Thus, this "double-vantage" also falsely affirms the youth's integrity (Duncan-Jones, 286), which makes him a more desirable beloved.

Sonnet 88 concludes with a final statement of the speaker's unwavering loyalty to the youth's virtue. He states, "Such is my love, to thee I so belong, / That for thy right myself will bear all wrong" (ll. 13-14). Helen Vendler describes the last line of 88 as a recognition of the speaker's loss of self to uphold the beloved: "the depersonalization of the speaker, his thoughts on the young man's *right*, his self bearing all *wrong*, is, as the last line shows, now complete" (Vendler, 386). The speaker makes decisions demonstrating that his view of the youth is far more important than his view of himself. Like Vendler says, the speaker will bear all wrong for the youth to be right. It appears his relationship to the youth exists merely to ensure the youth's virtue and the speaker will use deceptive means to make the youth appear as such. Sonnet 88 begins to reveal the layers of deception with the youth. The speaker will promote lies to make the youth virtuous or truthful with further deception, yet he recognizes the youth's lies as

lies. It is not as simple as the speaker being ignorant of the youth's lies, but rather that he recognizes them and decides to not only accept them, but to fight for and promote them. Thus, the speaker is relentlessly fighting for the youth to be virtuous because he is not truthful, or the speaker is deeply deceived by himself and his beloved.

Equating Beauty and Truth (Sonnet 93)

In the youth sonnets discussed, the speaker finds that many of the deceptive aspects of his relationship are consequence of his understanding that beauty is directly connected to virtue and truth. However, Sonnet 93 presents a different understanding of this concept. The speaker expresses that he cannot trust the youth because of his appearance, and arguably, to some extent, that lack of trust and truth is out of the speaker's control. He begins the sonnet by stating: "So shall I live, supposing thou art true, / Like a deceived husband" (ll. 1-2). The speaker will assume that the youth is truthful or faithful. However, to implement this decision he compares himself to a "deceived husband." These conflicting notions of the youth being "suppose[ed]…true" and the speaker consequently assuming the role of a "deceived husband" create a logical tension. As the reader, we might find it strange or not possible for the speaker to simultaneously believe in the youth's truths and be deceived, unless however the speaker is aware of his own self-deception or capable of believing something that he knows is false. Then he can understand the youth is lying, but nonetheless accept him as truthful and thus, deceive himself. We have seen aspects of this notion in previous sonnets. In Sonnet 88, as we saw, the speaker says he will promote the youth's lies, even if he sacrifices his own truths and public integrity. The speaker desires for the youth to be true, hence, reflecting his beauty, even at the expense of the speaker's truths

himself. The speaker is choosing or wanting to do what he does, as mentioned. It appears he is misleading himself. However, the speaker knows that he is being deceived because he thinks of himself like a "deceived husband."

Sonnet 93 reads as a continuation of the last line of 92, where the speaker experiences the "notion of being happily deceived" according to Duncan-Jones (296). Lines 11 and 12 of Sonnet 92 state, "O what a happy title do I find, / Happy to have thy love, happy to die!" (ll. 11-12). Here the speaker sounds satisfied with his relationship with the youth. Sonnet 92 concludes with the line "Thou mayst be false, and yet I know it not" (l. 14). This means that the youth might be false to the speaker in the future or perhaps, might already be false to him now, but nevertheless, the speaker is unsure of the falsity and content in that understanding. The speaker expresses contentment with the situation, nonetheless. Thus, the speaker will, as Sonnet 93 begins, "live, supposing thou art true" (l. 1). He continues to describe the deceptive qualities of his beloved's appearance, and says, "…so love's face / May still seem love to me" (ll. 2-3). "Love's face" means the "appearance of affection" or the youth's "loving façade" (Booth, pp. 303). In this context, "love's face" does not necessarily imply true or genuine love but might rather refer to an illusion of love. The use of the word "may" similarly suggest possibility, not certainty. When the speaker says that the Youth may still "seem love to me," he implies that the beloved appears to still have affection for him. However, "seem" is not as definite as "is" or "does." It is not certain that the youth still loves the speaker because the youth's face, the speaker claims, always looks loving even if the youth's feelings don't correspond to his appearance as the sonnet will reveal. Additionally, "may" can also mean "can," in the definite sense. Thus, there is also the

understanding that the youth does "still seem love to [the speaker]" and the speaker is decided to see it as such.

The speaker continues to address his beloved's looks as a means to understand his love when he says, "Thy looks with me, thy heart in other place" (l. 4). The phrase "looks with me" refers to the Youth's loving glances or outward appearance, while "thy heart" relates to his emotions. This means that although the Youth "may" still look loving, his true desires or feelings might be elsewhere and not with the speaker. He continues to explain the deceptive aspects of the youth's appearance: "For there can live no hatred in thine eye, / Therefore in that I cannot know thy change" (ll. 5-6). These two lines implies that any emotions other than love cannot appear in the beloved's eyes. Thus, the speaker cannot know if the Youth no longer loves him as he cannot see any hatred and is instead potentially deceived by his beloved's looks. Additionally, this notion that the speaker cannot trust the Youth's eyes is a direct contradiction of the speaker's beliefs in earlier sonnets. In Sonnet 14, the speaker sees the truth through the "stars" in the beloveds' eyes, yet in Sonnet 93 he cannot trust the Youth's eyes to express his true emotions. The speaker's understanding of truth in relation to the youth have changed as the speaker's belief about his beloved is proven false: the youth is not truthful because of his fairness. Thus, the speaker cannot trust the youth and he becomes aware of how his love for and assumptions about the youth have deceived him.

Sonnet 93 continues to describe how the youth's appearance is not to be trusted, further opposing claims in Sonnet 14. The speaker then explains how untruthfulness is usually shown on people's faces with wrinkles or frowns: "In many's looks, the false heart's history / Is writ in moods and frowns and wrinkles strange" (ll. 7-8). The "false

heart" implies a deception or untruthfulness of one's most inner thoughts and feelings or with things having to do with love. The speaker says that these inner falsities are "writ" or metaphorically written (OED 'writ' 1) in "moods," which relates to one's facial expressions or visible signs of someone's state of mind. This means that people (or at least romantic cheaters) tend to show their states of mind as though they were written on their face. Although "wrinkles" might usually connote age, Booth mentions, "wrinkles also meant 'trick' or 'cunning device,' a sense obviously pertinent to the hiding of the false heart's history" (Booth, 304). The word "frown" also expresses feelings of anger, dislike, distress, or plotting. The speaker then explains that the youth does not show such physical signs of falsity as he does not show his "false heart's history" in his moods. The speaker offers a suggestion to explain why the youth does not show falsity on his face.

> But heaven in thy creation did decree
> That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
> Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be,
> Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell"
> (Sonnet 93, ll. 9-12).

When the youth was born, heaven set forth an ordinance (OED 'decree' 1) that his face will always show loving features and appearances. The speaker continues to explain that whatever the youth's thoughts or innermost emotions might be, his looks will not reveal anything but "sweetness". If the youth's true self is not in love or truthful with the speaker, the speaker will never know because the youth's appearance conceals his truest self.

The speaker concludes this sonnet by comparing his beloved to "Eve's apple." The final lines state, "How like Eve's apple doth thy beauty grow, / If thy sweet virtue answer not thy show" (ll. 13-14). Eve's apple is a very specific example of deception. As Duncan-Jones describes, it is a fruit that "looks attractive but has evil effects when consumed" (Duncan-Jones, 296). The apple provides a metaphor for how the speaker experiences the youth. The beloved's attractiveness is supposed to represent his virtue. But, when the speaker gains a greater understanding of the youth, he begins to realize his deceptive or evil qualities. Like the youth through the speaker's eyes, Eve's apple was sweet in looks (and likely taste), but not in repercussions, just as the youth is untruthful. As in Sonnet 35 where the youth was compared to natural or plant-like things that don't control their own actions, the comparison to Eve's apple might imply that the youth's actions are inevitable. Hence, the inevitability of the youth's lack of truth would provide an argument as to why the youth is not blameworthy and the speaker struggles to blame him for his wrongdoings. "Virtue" relates to the youth's inherent quality or essence and "show" relates to appearance (Booth, 305). When the speaker says that the youth's virtue might not "answer" his "show," he means that the youth's essence does not match or correspond to his appearance. His inner truths are not reflected outwardly, consequently and contrarily to prior beliefs, the speaker cannot trust the youth. The speaker then becomes aware of how his love for and assumptions about his beloved have deceived him.

Conclusion of the Youth Sonnets

Sonnets 14, 35, 88, and 93 give insight into how the speaker understands his beloved, the youth, in relation to truth and deception, thus far. In Sonnet 14, the speaker

trusts that he can see a foretelling of truth in the youth's eyes and that the youth embodies truth and beauty. This sonnet sets up the understanding that the youth's beauty ought to be "an index of sincere goodness" (Duncan-Jones, 298). Because the youth is beautiful to the speaker, he must be truthful to the speaker. However, the speaker's understanding about the supposed connectedness of truth and beauty proves to be a means of deception for him. In Sonnet 35, the youth has wronged the speaker, quickly disproving the speaker's belief in the youth's truth catalyst of his beauty. However, the speaker remains within a mode of deception because he never blames the youth, but rather blames himself. The speaker uses his word to manipulate himself. Hence, in Sonnet 35, the reader begins to feel the pull of deception with the speaker. As the reader we only have access to the speaker's word and understanding. Thus, we can no longer trust the speaker to adequately assess or understand the reality of his beloved because the force of his love causes him to be deceived about the youth. The speaker is too susceptible to deception and influenced by his love that the reader cannot fully believe everything he says about the youth. He is an unreliable narrator. Sonnet 88 further reveals the depth of the speaker's self-deception because of the extent that he will go for the sake of upholding the youth's virtue. The speaker will sacrifice his own truths to promote the youth's lies. He even believes that by doing so, he is gaining something in return. The speaker's belief in the youth's embodiment of truth and beauty is becoming something that the speaker must prove and uphold. He needs to lie to keep the youth truthful and in correspondence to how the speaker understands him in the beginning of the sequence. Finally, Sonnet 93 reveals that the speaker is aware of his self-deception, to some extent. He describes how the youth's appearance is a source of

deception because although his face shows love or truthfulness, his actions do not. In this sonnet, the speaker finally sees a mismatch between the youth's virtue and appearance. The speaker's assumed connectedness of truth and beauty will play out differently in the sonnets addressed to the mistress, as she, unlike the youth, is not initially perceived as fair.

These sonnets addressed to the youth expose the speaker's belief in conflicting notions. He connects beauty to truthfulness, despite evidence of falseness. Hence, the speaker's love for the youth must be another force driving his decisions and understandings. His love for the youth enables him to continue to see his beloved as truthful, even though the youth exposes himself as not virtuous. The sonnets are poems addressed to beloveds and love is an important aspect of the reader's understanding of the speaker. He is the lover, and his love arguably encourages greater susceptibility to self-deception. He loves the youth and deeply desires for the youth to love him in return. Hence, resorting to modes of deception and lies might provide greater comfort to the speaker than seeing the actual truth about the youth. The speaker's personal narratives and emotions deceive the reality of his beloved, the youth, thus inhibiting him from seeing the truth.

Mistress Sonnets

Distorted Vision (Sonnet 137)

As with his relationship with the youth, the speaker struggles with conflicting understandings of truth, beauty, and what he believes to see in the mistress. The speaker begins describing his relationship with his second beloved in Sonnet 127. The ten subsequent sonnets focus on the erotic power of the mistress. He describes how he had deemed her fair despite her unconventional appearance. While the Youth is inherently attractive, beautiful, or fair, the mistress is not: she is described as "dark," "black," and "foul" throughout the sequence. As an antonym to the word "fair," those words used to describe the mistress reflect the opposite meaning of truthful, virtuous, or beautiful. The speaker explains how the mistress has black eyes or darker hair, which directly opposing the light haired and fair skinned youth. She is not initially perceived as beautiful. However, the speaker repeatedly mentions how her unconventional beauty does not inhibit him from seeing her as fair. Because he has established the mistress is fair throughout those first ten sonnets of the mistress sequence, it has led him to believe, like with the Youth, that the mistress is also virtuous, good, and truthful. However, the speaker begins to understand that he might have judged the mistress wrongly. She is not fair, but rather foul or untruthful, yet he continues to be governed by "blind love" (l. 1) as he might be infected by blindness. The speaker is deceived by his love for the mistress to see her as something she is not.

Sonnet 137 begins by addressing "Love" rather than the beloved herself. The speaker asks a question: "Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes, / That they behold, and see not what they see?" (ll. 1-2). The speaker is pondering how "Love"

deceives his eyes to make them incorrectly interpret what they see. He saw the mistress as beautiful and fair, but now understands and questions why his eyes mislead him. The speaker calls "Love" a "blind fool," which might hint at his frustration or confusion with the circumstance. It also describes how he understands or lacks understanding of love. Cupid, the ancient Roman god of love, is traditionally represented as being blind, hence, the "blind fool love" might be in reference to Cupid. Like the speaker, blind Cupid does not see, or clearly see, the beloved. So, like Cupid, the speaker understood his female beloved blindly. Blindness, like love, is a powerful force for the speaker.

The speaker, himself, does not truly know or understand what is happening to him or what is the truth. He continues to describe the faults of his eyes: "They know what beauty is, see where it lies, / Yet what the best is take the worst to be" (ll. 3-4). The speaker trusts that his eyes know where beauty resides and what it is, but still, the "best" might appear as the "worst" and vice versa as he might take the worst to be the best. The mistress now understood as a non-beautiful character is the "worst" appearing as the "best."

> Or mine eyes, seeing this, say this is not,
> To put fair truth upon so foul a face?
> In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,
> And to this false plague are they now transferred.
>
> (Sonnet 137, ll. 10-14).

The speaker has put "truth" upon the mistress' "foul" face because of blinding love. He understands, perhaps, that he cannot trust his eyes as he did with the youth. Love makes the speaker see things or beauty differently and arguably, incorrectly. The speaker has the understanding that love makes him see untruths and questions what his

eyes may not see. He mentions his "corrupt" eyes, to further represent these deceiving notions of "Love." The final line mentions a "false plague." He expresses the blinding nature of love as a "plague" or sickness. It is something that takes over him. The speaker feels as though he has been consumed by a sickness of distorted perceptions. Perhaps he is alluding to how his love for the mistress is a falsity that plagues him. He thought she was fair because of the "blind fool love" but he now understands how his love deceives him. As if he were blind, the speaker's love for the mistress does not allow him to see truths.

Choice of Blindness (Sonnet 152)

Sonnet 137 considers how the speaker's blindness, whether self-inflicted or not, affects his conception of truth. He is aware of the mistress' untruthfulness, yet he continues to be governed by a blind love, as if it is out of his control. Or, as if love itself is deceiving. In Sonnet 152, however, the speaker describes a similar understanding of using blindness to enable him to see the virtues of his mistress, but it is a blindness he imposes upon himself. The speaker chooses to use blindness or self-deception to see his female beloved as fair, despite her foulness.

Sonnet 152 describes the speaker and mistress' betrayal of one another, sexual or otherwise. The speaker explains that by loving the lady, he knows that he is willfully told untruths or broken an oath (OED 'forsworn' 1). "In loving thee thou know'st I am forsworn" (l. 1). The word, "forsworn," represents perjury, and also "break[ing] faith with another lover" (Booth, 531). The speaker knows that he has broken an oath to the youth as he swore to always love the youth. However, the acknowledgment of a wrongdoing is shared with the mistress: "But thou art twice forsworn, to me love

swearing, / In act thy bed-vow broke and new faith torn, / In vowing new hate after new love bearing" (ll. 2-4). The mistress has also told an untruth. There is mutual lying and forswearing in this sonnet with the speaker and the mistress. By swearing her love to the speaker, she has broken two oaths and thus, he implies, acted twice as badly as the speaker. It is unclear, however, because of the tense, whether the lady swears her love to the speaker now or previously. He continues to say that "in act," meaning a sexual action with someone else, her "bed-vow" or their promise of faithfulness, was "broke[n]" and consequently, any "new faith" was "torn." The mistress vows a "new hate" after "new love bearing." She breaks their "bed-vow" and faith with the speaker. The speaker continues the complication in the next lines. "But why of two oaths' breach do I accuse thee, / When I break twenty? I am perjured most; / For all my vows are oaths but to misuse thee / And all my honest faith in thee is lost" (ll. 5-8). The speaker expresses that his vows are oaths to "treat the mistress badly, by deception or otherwise" (Duncan-Jones, 420). And now, all his honest faith in the mistress is gone. These first few lines of Sonnet 152 express the complicated, and somewhat vengeful relationship between the speaker and his female beloved.

He explains how he continued to see the mistress in a positive way, despite their complicated, forswearing relationship.

> For I have sworn deep oaths of thy deep kindness,
> Oaths of thy love, thy truth, thy constancy,
> And to enlighten thee gave eyes to blindness,
> Or made them swear against the thing they see.
>
> (Sonnet 152, ll. 9-12)

The speaker swore “deep oaths” of the mistress’s “kindness,” “love,” and “truth.” The speaker then mentions how he achieved this way of thinking with the mistress. He explains how he had to “enlighten [the mistress]” to see her love and truth. The speaker often characterizes the mistress as “dark” or “black,” which is used to describe the mistress’ physical appearance. The word “black” does not have the same meaning now as when Shakespeare wrote this sonnet sequence. In the late 1500s and into the late 1800s, “black” referred to anyone who did not appear light haired and fair skinned. An individual with light skin and dark hair would be called “black.” Hence, the mistress in the sequence is often called “dark” or “black” by the speaker to describe her lack of a fair appearance. The inclusion of her “dark” appearance, however, provides a contrast to the speaker’s other beloved, the fair youth. As with the fair youth, the mistress’s appearance is also meant to reflect her actions. As the youth is fair and meant to act virtuously, the mistress is dark, and her actions are assumed to be untruthful or unfair. Hence, when the speaker describes how he had to “enlighten” the mistress, it means that he had to make his beloved appear lighter: physically and morally. Or, in other words, he wanted to make her seem morally fair.

To see the mistress as fair or virtuous, the speaker “gave [his] eyes to blindness” or “made them swear against the thing they see.” It appears that for the speaker to see the mistress as truthful, he has two options. He can decide to not see the mistress’s wrongdoings or betrayals with a sort of self-inflicted blindness. This blindness, although similar to that in Sonnet 137, is one cast upon himself. In Sonnet 137, the speaker describes “love” as a “blind fool” who inhibits him from seeing the truth about his female beloved. He thought the mistress was fair, realizes that she is not, yet he

continues, as if it is out of his control, to be governed by a blind love. In Sonnet 152, however, he describes "[giving] his eyes to blindness," as if it is a choice. Perhaps he is in greater control of perceptions or maybe he prefers to exist in a false understanding. Regardless, there is a shift in how the speaker orients himself in relation to seeing his beloved's truth and virtue. The second option to see the mistress as truthful, however, includes his involvement in a lie to himself. This second possibility involves him initially seeing the truth, but them lying to himself, "swearing against," the seen truth. This option exposes his ability to believe untruths and accept lies as fact. The finals lines state, "For I have sworn thee fair; more perjured I, / To swear against a truth so foul a lie!" (ll. 13-14). He willingly told an untruth about the mistress' foulness to make her fair to him. In Sonnet 152, the speaker expresses his ability to deceive himself about his beloved for the sake of her virtue. By swearing falsities about his female beloved, the speaker too, might be considered foul alongside his mistress. Regardless, the speaker exposes his ability to believe the lies he tells himself as he purposely deceives himself to understand the mistress as fair.

Good Deceit (Sonnet 138)

Sonnet 152 describes the speaker and mistress' mutual lying, and that the speaker cannot trust his beloved; thus, he chooses to use blindness or self-deception to make his beloved true. However, the sonnet does not consider how his and the mistress' mutual deceit might affect their love or their relationship. There is a reciprocal nature to the relationship's deception with the mistress. Hence, in Sonnet 138, the speaker addresses his and his beloved's inclination towards deception in his relationship with the mistress. However, even more than this tendency or preference for lies, Sonnet 138

resembles a more productive and perhaps, beneficial use of deception in their relationship. There is a unique connection between the speaker and mistress in 138 that is sustained by their lies.

The first two lines of the sonnet immediately demonstrate the speaker's lack of trust for the mistress. The poem begins: "When my loves swears that she is made of truth / I do believe her, though I know she lies" (ll. 1-2). The speaker contradicts himself. He is stating that he "believes her" in being truthful or "made of truth" even though "she lies." This contradiction is also seen in Sonnet 93 when he compares himself to a "deceived husband." Perhaps in 138, the speaker is choosing to believe the mistress, despite his knowledge of knowing better. Or he might decide to trust her regardless of her past lies. Either way, the speaker is making a conscious decision to believe and trust a lie, just like in Sonnet 93, thus reflecting his tendencies toward deceit or his capability of believing a lie.

There is a doubleness in the use of the word "lies." The speaker knows that his mistress lies, but it is uncertain whether he means that she tells lies or that she lies with other men. Or the mistress might be acting upon both meanings of lies, telling untruths and having sexual relationships with people other than the speaker. Regardless, she is being untruthful in either use of the word. Edward Snow argues that the word "lies" in line 2 becomes the "grounding consoling truth of the relationship" (Snow, 469) by the end of the sonnet. Additionally, the mistress "swears" that she is truthful, implying that there is a reason to think otherwise. When someone ought to "swear" something, it stems from an occurrence where their truthfulness was put into question. The mistress saying that she "swears" to be "made of truth" means that her truthfulness was

questioned, for good reason or otherwise. She intentionally "swears," rather than states or says, as if she is guilty of something. Lastly, there is another distinction between the words "made of truth" and simply "truth" or "truthful." Being "made of truth" is not the same as being truthful. It appears being "made of truth" is an amplification or overcompensation, perhaps because she is trying to cover her untruthfulness.

In line 3, the speaker provides a proposition as to why he might choose to believe his mistress's lies: "That she might think me some untutor'd youth, / Unlearned in the world's false subtleties" (ll. 3-4). He thinks that it would be childish or naïve to believe the lies his beloved tells him. Thus, to make himself appear younger or like "some untutor'd youth," he will accept her lies as truths because he is wants to appear "unlearned in the world's false subtleties." He, too, is deceiving his beloved, just as she intends to deceive him. Already, there are multiple layers of deception in this sonnet: of the speaker by the mistress, of the mistress by the speaker, and of the speaker by himself. The speaker is arguably deceiving himself because he chooses to believe the mistress' untruthfulness. So, whether it is a conscious or unconscious self-deception, the speaker is still lying to himself, in a sense.

The mistress, too, knows that the speaker is lying to her: "Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young / Although she knows my days are past the best" (ll. 5-6). The speaker says that his mistress "knows my days are past the best," implying that she knows that his claim to be a "youth" is a lie. Both the mistress and the speaker are playing the same game. The lover and beloved lie to each other, knowing that they are likewise being told a lie, but accepting it as truth, and reciprocating back with yet another lie. They are equal in their deception. David K. Weiser gets at the double

consciousness of their lies when he describes how "[the speaker and mistress] retain an awareness of what truth is even as they consciously collude to ignore it" (Weiser, 149). The lover and beloved know about each other truths, but as though it is more beneficial to their relationship, they remain in their falsities instead. The next lines continue to describe the functionality of their mutual deceit. "Simply I credit her false speaking tongue: / On both sides thus is a simple truth suppress'd" (ll. 7-8). The speaker says that he "simply," or naively or foolishly, "credits" her "false speaking tongue." He admits that accepting her lies is foolish. However, he also accepts that the lying is mutual. He says, "on both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd." The speaker understands that "simple truth" or pure and non-complex honestly is not encouraged in their relationship. Whether intentional or not, this relationship prefers complexity to simplicity and both lovers cooperate in sustaining these deceiving complexities.

The speaker asks and then answers two questions about her being "unjust" and him being "old." Unlike in sonnet 137, he answers them.

> But wherefore says she not she is unjust?
> And wherefore say not I that I am old?
> O, love's best habit is in seeming trust,
> And age in love loves not to have years told"
>
> (Sonnet 138, ll. 9-12)

The speaker asks about his beloved not being "unjust" and him not being "old." He says that "love's best habit is in seeming trust." However, "seeming trust" does not imply trust, but to the appearance of trust. He argues that this appearance or façade of trust is "love's best habit." Apparently, he believes that a façade of trust is beneficial. He answers the second question with a similar appreciation for deception. The speaker

says that “age in love loves not to have years told,” implying that “love” does not “love” one’s beloved to know of one’s “age,” but rather be deceived. Thus, deceptive ways are “love’s best habit,” which might imply that the speaker understands deception as a favorable function of love or his love, specifically.

The speaker concludes this sonnet with an overarching understanding of the mechanics of his relationship with the mistress: “Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, / And in our faults by lies we flattered be” (ll. 13-14). The lover knows that they “lie” together, which offers the same double meaning as in line 2: the lovers both lie to and with each other. The use of the word “therefore” represents a conclusive understanding of the complexity between the lover and beloved. “Therefore” might also be used to acknowledge the reality of their relationship. They lie to and with each other and that is simply how it is. The speaker even notes their tendency to lie as a “fault.” He recognizes that it might be a flaw in their relationship, but nonetheless, they are content or “flattered” in their deceptive ways. Edward Snow remarks on the uniqueness of their relationship, that it “leaves us with the impression of the two lovers no longer laboring under but resting upon, even buoyed up by the deceptions they practice on each other” (Snow, 479). It is as if the lies sustain their relationship, and perhaps without the presence and practice of deception, their relationship would be less flattering, or even loving, to them. Hence, Sonnet 138 reveals the lovers’ contentment and awareness in their relationship or the depth of the speaker’s self-deception. As mentioned, he is an unreliable narrator, so the reader cannot be sure whether the speaker is truly “flattered” lying with the mistress or not.

Conclusion of Mistress

Sonnets 137, 152, and 138 expose the complicated nature of the relationship between the speaker and his female beloved, the mistress. It appears their relationship experiences many transformations regarding control. Sonnet 137 describes the speaker's transformative understanding of how he initially thought the mistress to be fair, despite her non-fair appearance, to realizing she is not. However, despite his realization, he continues to be guided by a blind love. As with the youth, love is a driving force that is catalyst for the speaker's untruthful understandings of his beloveds. He cannot control his love for the mistress, and thus he cannot control him seeing her through a deceiving lens. Yet the lack of control does switch in Sonnet 152. The sonnet begins by acknowledging how the speaker and mistress are both "forsworn." They act untruthfully to one another and lie about it. He describes how, amongst all the foul play, he decided to continue to see her as fair. Similar to the youth sonnets, the speaker chooses to not see her untruthfulness and instead impose a "blindness" upon himself or to self-deceive himself about his female beloved's falsities. The blindness is not inflicted upon him from elsewhere, but he decides to control his perception with a blindness. Although there is a similar instance in Sonnet 137, the difference involves the speaker's sense of control. Additionally, however, he also describes how he could choose to lie to himself about the mistress. As with the youth, the speaker will deceive himself for the sake of his beloved's virtues. Lastly, in Sonnet 138 the speaker further describes the reciprocal and mutual use of deception in his relationship with the mistress. They both lie to and with each other and by doing so, they are seemingly content. This sonnet reveals perhaps an even greater sense of the speaker's control. Or it exposes the depth of his

self-deception. As the reader, who only has access to the speaker's word and has already determined him to be an unreliable narrator, we might question his contentment with the beloved. Perhaps he has merely chosen to be content with the lies just as he chose to see the mistress as fair. These mistress sonnets expose the speaker's persistent use of deception in his relationship, his comfort in using self-deceptive strategies, and his tendency to use deception to see virtue.

Conclusions

Shakespeare's speaker in the sonnets experiences his own self-deception repeatedly throughout the sequence. It appears self-deceit is a part of his love. Dubrow seems to agree: "Shakespeare forces us to recognize behind literary conventions one of the most fundamental facts about human emotion: lovers are notoriously prone to be deceived in and by their own "thoughts and… discourse"" (Dubrow, 201). As this thesis has uncovered, the speaker is certainly capable of believing lies. The speaker deceives himself about the connectedness of truth and beauty in Sonnet 14. In Sonnet 35, he reassures himself that the youth's wrongdoings are acceptable because he has deceived himself about his understanding of the youth. Sonnet 93 addresses the awareness of his self-deception, yet he chooses to remain in that space and understanding. Sonnet 152 considers how the speaker chooses to give his eyes of blindness as not to see the truths about the mistress. The speaker's constant return to self-deceiving understandings suggests that his love for his beloveds is the driving force behind his deception. Martha Nussbuam also explores how we deceive ourselves about love. She considers how, when in love, we are unable to trust ourselves. She explains how the forces of deception are powerful as they can provide protection and self-sufficiency, but also joy and connection. The line between truth and falsity can easily become blurred. Nussbuam asks questions about the self-deceiving qualities of love: "The difficulty then becomes: how in the midst of this confusion (and delight and pain) do we know what view of ourselves, what parts of ourselves, to trust? Which stories about the conditions of the heart are reliable ones and which the self-deceiving fictions. We find ourselves asking where, in this plurality of discordant voices with which we address ourselves on this

topic of perennial self-interest, is the criterion of truth?" (Nussbuam, 261). In the sonnet sequence, the speaker comes to a place where he is unattached to reality and unbale to discern what is truth, what is falsity, and what is self-deception. The speaker, along with the reader, is unable to have confidence in anything as truth, except the truths, or lies, he decides to believe. Because he is so detached from a constant truth, he cannot be trusted or even trust himself. Hence, love is the driving force behind many of his self-deceptions, making him unable to be trusted and detached from any sense of truth.

In addition to the speaker's self-deception as a part of love, another notable characteristic shared in both of the speaker's relationships is how he uses deception for the sake of virtue or truth. In Sonnet 88, the speaker expresses how he will fight, against his own truths, for the youth's untruthful agenda. He demonstrates a greater loyalty to preserving the youth's virtue than that of himself. Sonnet 137 explains how the force of blind love allows him to see the mistress as virtuous, even though she is not. The speaker prefers to exist under a veil of deception to see virtue than to see the reality of his beloveds. In Sonnet 138, the speaker's relationship is upheld by deception, yet it keeps him, and the mistress "flattered" and thus achieving their own mutual understanding of virtue. The speaker's desire for truth is so compelling that he will deceive himself. This strive for truth is interconnected to the presence of the speaker's self-deception in love, but also to his inclination to or comfort in lies. Despite the speaker's constant interactions with deception, he continues to strive for a sense of truth and virtue. However, it is also plausible that the speaker uses deception and lies with his beloveds to prove himself as a worthy lover. By upholding the youth's lies in Sonnet 88 or choosing to continue to see the mistress as fair in Sonnet 152, he is demonstrating

how great of a lover he is to them. He will do anything for them or the sake of their truths, even if that means lying to or about himself. The speaker might understand his decisions as a method certifying his worthiness. Hence, he uses deceptive strategies to reach his own sense of truth and to also uplift his own image of himself.

The sonnet sequence raises issues and questions about lying in love and whether the speaker's experience of deception with his beloveds is universal or specific to his character. The answer might include each understanding. As revealed through this thesis, the speaker is a particular character who embodies distinctive aspects. He demonstrates a very specific capability of believing lies even while he knows that they are lies, whether they are lies that his beloveds have told him or lies that he tells himself. The speaker also exhibits an inclination or comfort in deception, especially when the truth is unfavorable to him. Thus, these relationships in the sequence certainty align with the representation of his particular character. The speaker is a deceiving man, and his relationships are as such. However, the speaker's experience in the sequence might also make a relatable statement about the power of love and how it has the potential to cause deception in relationships. As mentioned, not all the deception that the speaker experiences are within his control and typically, the uncontrollable deceit is consequence of the powerful force of his love. Thus, the sonnet sequence, although it follows the eyes of an unreliable and deceptive character, does enable a potentially truthful statement about how people often deceive themselves in love.

This thesis has yet to define truth. However, the speaker has shown through his prose, that truth is far from something that can be objectively defined. In fact, it is uncertain whether the speaker is at all concerned with discerning the truth. Instead, the

speaker seeks to create his own truth, often through lies. Arguably, the speaker understands truth as what he decides to believe or to be true. To him, truth is willful, and truth is a choice. Friedrich Nietzche makes a claim about truth being an untruth: "truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions" (Nietzsche, 84). Perhaps, in the sonnets, the speaker utilizes this perception of truth as merely an illusion. When truth is understood or accepted as an illusion, it is arguably less threating when truths are falsified or to determine one's own truths. The speaker's relationship to truth being entirely subjective might provide an explanation to how he can believe lies as though they are truths.

Ultimately, the speaker decides what is truth or what to see as truth. He is the lover, the perceiver, the beholder, and the storyteller in the sonnet sequence. Truth is then determined by him and his perceptions. Although the sonnets communicate the complexities of lying and deception, more than anything the sonnets are love poems. As mentioned, love is the driving force behind the speaker's self-deception, but also his understanding of his beloveds. Perhaps to the speaker, truth is consequence of love. As the lover, his truth is thus determined by his beloveds, even if it includes the presence of lies. The speaker reveals his understanding that deception is in the eye of the beholder and as the lover, the speaker understands that "love's best habit is in seeming trust" (138, l. 11). Thus truth, revealed through the speaker's understanding and experience, must be in the eye of the lover.

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