Shakespeare's Preservation Fantasy

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A good book is the precious lifeblood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.

—Milton, *Areopagitica*

Preserving the old ways from being abused
Protecting the new ways for me and for you
What more can we do?

—Ray Davies, "The Village Green Preservation Society"

THIS ESSAY IS CONCERNED WITH THE HUMANIST IMPERATIVE TO preserve cultural artifacts. Preservation is a value shared by Renaissance humanism and by the humanities and sciences in modern academic culture. In these contexts, preservation for the purpose of historical representation is considered an absolute good. If something exists, it must be preserved in its original form: every Deanna Durbin movie, every "Prince Valiant" comic strip, every strain of the smallpox virus. As this short list suggests, I am interested in examples of things that resist either the technology or the value of preservation, or both. Most of my examples in the following pages will be taken from Shakespeare's *Sonnets*.

For Ray Davies and the Kinks, preservation is an "act"; their song lists things deemed worthy of preservation, such as Donald Duck and billiards tables, and notes available institutions and media for preserving them, such as museums and strawberry jam. The song presents itself as engaged in a secondary form of culture-making—not making in the sense of creation (adding to the world something that was not previously there) or transformation (giving new qualities to things) but rather identifying and maintaining what is valuable in the

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.92 Published online by Cambridge University Press

given world. What else is there? "What more can we do?" In this essay, I am concerned with this "more," not with acts but with preservation fantasies, poetic experiments that have not been enacted in history. What do poems say they can do? Here is the foundational proposition of Allen Grossman's *Summa Lyrica*: "The kind of success which poetry facilitates is called 'immortality'" (210).[1] This is hardly a conservationist agenda. If Grossman is right, poetry proposes a violent intervention in the given world that would suspend two of the limiting conditions on human life, mortality and temporality. What if poems could do what they say they can do? Then poetry would become a different kind of experiment—not a fantasy but a research project that would take historical figures as test subjects—and the success or failure of the experiment would become a problem for justice as well as poetics.

The fantasy of surviving through culture—in particular, the fantasy that poems, although not living things, preserve human life—derives significantly from Shakespeare and receives its definitive statement in his 1609 sequence of sonnets. For Shakespeare, there are two significant prior statements of the value of preservation. The first occurs in Horace's third book of odes (Leishman 28, 40; Booth 227–28):

> I have finished a monument more lasting than bronze and loftier than the Pyramid's royal pile, one that no wasting rain, no furious north wind can destroy, or the countless chain of years and the ages' flight. I shall not altogether die, but a mighty part of me shall escape the death-goddess. On and on shall I grow ever fresh with the glory of aftertime.
>
> (ode 30 [1–8])

The first thing the speaker says about the poem is that it is "finished." This assertion occurs not in the last line but in the first, implying that the poem is a total enclosure in which there is no outside and no forward or backward movement in time.[2] The speaker is not engaged in the act of composition, because the poem is fully composed long before the last line has been pronounced. The poem's undifferentiated surface is contrasted with the hard but nonetheless breakable surfaces of other artifacts, monuments made of bronze and stone, which are subject to time in the full variety of its manifestations: weather (rain and wind), which changes daily; the calendar ("countless chain of years" ["innumerabilis / annorum series"]), which measures a human lifetime; and historical epochs ("the ages' flight" ["fuga temporum"]), which measure civilizations. The poem is completely written so that it can be removed from time and so that it can shelter other objects, such as the speaker, from the effects of time.

The poem is already "finished" before the speaker arrives at its end point, but the speaker is incomplete—already incomplete—before crossing the threshold between life and death. The boast "I shall not die" ("non moriar") is qualified by "altogether" ("omnis")," which means that the speaker still has to die, just not completely; "a mighty part" ("multaque pars") will continue to live, and even "grow" ("crescam"), past the threshold of death. In this line, Horace creates a space between life and death, which ordinarily have no middle term. I interpret this space as quasi-human, because death is an absolute limit on the human condition; a human being is either living or dead and once dead no longer enjoys the rights and privileges of personhood.[3] In addition, I interpret this space as quasi-human because its inhabitant is not complete, not a person, only a part person. The mortal part of the speaker, the part capable of dying, is personal; the other part is extrapersonal. Nevertheless, the other part is the more valuable one because of its "might," which designates its creative power (a power not simply to make something but to make it without spatial or temporal seams) as well as its powerlessness in the face of what it has created, its capitulation to the total enclosure of the poem.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.92 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In Horace, the fantasy of surviving through poetic representation is synecdoche: the person will survive as a fragment. Death is a point of aperture, not closure; not a guarantee of wholeness, defining the person as a complete unit, but a mark of division within the person. The poem is complete; the person it preserves is a "mighty part," but a part nonetheless. The question is, what part?

One traditional answer is the proper name. This is the answer Horace gives in his fourth book of odes, where he remarks that there were heroes in history before Agamemnon, but they are not accessible to memory because there were no poets before Homer to preserve their names in the form of a poem (Grossman 6). Ariosto gives the same answer in canto 35 of *Orlando Furioso*, where Astolfo, transported to the moon, sees two swans dragging metal nameplates out of a river and is taught by Saint John to interpret this scene as an allegory of the cultural work of poetry: poets rescue heroes from oblivion by collecting their names. These examples are merely theoretical. Horace and Ariosto implicate classical epic, but not their own poems, in the fantasy of survival. The second, more immediate model of preservation for Shakespeare, one that has both theoretical and practical implications, is sonnet 75 in Spenser's *Amoretti*:

> One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
> But came the waves and washed it away:
> Agayne I wrote it with a second hand,
> But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray.
> Vayne man, sayd she, that doest in vaine assay,
> A mortall thing so to immortalize.
> For I my selve shall lyke to this decay,
> And eek my name bee wiped out lykewize.
> Not so, (quod I) let baser things devize,
> To dy in dust, but you shall live by fame:
> My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
> And in the hevens wryte your glorious name:
> Where whenas death shall all the world subdew,
> Our love shall live, and later life renew.

Like the poets imagined by Horace and Ariosto, this poet claims to give "later life" (life past the limit imposed by mortality) to a person by recording her "glorious name." I say that this poem has practical implications because of the way that it repeats Horace's boast, not as a statement about what poems do but as a statement about what this poem is doing. If this statement were true, the fantasy of preservation would become a research project using readers as test subjects. However, this statement is obviously false. Spenser does not transcribe the woman's proper name in any of the lines where, in the diegesis of the sonnet, the speaker writes it. Instead, he substitutes the indirect representational formula "her name," "my name," "your name," finally inserting the vague adjective "glorious," as though that might identify it more precisely.

The proper name is never given. This is the most important fact about the poem. This fact can be explained away easily enough: for one thing, we know that the woman in the poem has a historical referent and that her name is Elizabeth Boyle. She conveniently shares her first name with the state, with a historical period, and with the poet's mother. Modern critical editions of the *Amoretti* suggest that the poem may have succeeded, in a trivial sense, in the project of immortalizing this name, making it last beyond Edmund Spenser's and Elizabeth Boyle's lifetimes. But it is hardly an accident that this specialized knowledge is nowhere available in the sonnet or in the other poems in the *Amoretti*. (The others—particularly the "three Elizabeths" poem, which immediately precedes sonnet 75—refer to the "happy name" in various coded forms and also make interesting quibbles on the protocols governing the historical manifestation of Elizabeth Boyle as opposed to the sovereign Elizabeth, but they always withhold a full or direct articulation of the name [Martz 166–67].) It may also be said that Spenser deliberately avoids saying the name in sonnet 75 to make a sophisticated point about

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textuality: that a poem, once it has been written down, can be quoted, cited, adapted; it becomes material for the production of other texts. The woman's "renewed life" or "life by fame" after dying is thus not limited to a particular material instance, which can easily be erased. Once the name is inscribed anywhere, it has entered a textual condition and can be written elsewhere ("in the hevens"). The serial inscription and erasure of the woman's name in the opening lines may be intended to represent the multiple copies in a printed edition of the *Amoretti*, or it may represent the sequentiality of the sonnets, or the intertextuality of all sonnet sequences, or the larger serial phenomenon of the European Renaissance.

The fact remains, however, that some force in this sonnet resists the representation of the woman's name in a form that will outlast her ordinary human existence. This force is the woman herself, who does not want to be preserved in textual form; as Christopher Warley puts it, she speaks for "the very processes of 'decay' which her name (in his hands) is meant to overcome" (108). When she calls the speaker and his actions "vayne," the primary meaning is that immortality is an impossible project. Any name given objective form will eventually be erased. This is the lesson of bibliography and textual studies—vanity: all earthly things are subject to decay. "Vayne" also implies a value judgment: the speaker should not attempt to immortalize a mortal thing. The fantasy of a quasi-human space between life and death may enlarge the conditions of possibility for being human, but its historical realization may have unforeseen consequences for those who share in these conditions. What are the implications of the immortality project? Who are its test subjects—the speaker, the addressee, the rest of the world? Who are its victims?

Shakespeare's sonnets ask and answer these questions repeatedly and almost obsessively, but without the moral emphasis that I have given them. The poems simply restate explicitly what Grossman calls the "commonplace" that success in poetry results in immortality. For my purposes, Shakespeare's restatement of this commonplace is important because of its influence and especially its explicitness. For critics, the problem of Shakespeare's sonnets has always been to find a critical vocabulary that is as complicated and precise as that of the poems. As Joel Fineman argues in *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, critics who use a metalanguage such as Platonism to explain the language of the poems do not solve this problem and at best do no more than redirect the flow of explanation, so that the sonnets become merely intermediary, and therefore less interesting, and Platonism becomes that which needs to be explained (324–25).[4] Fineman's solution is to assume that the poems provide the most accurate description of their own operations. Before a question is asked in criticism, it "is a question *in* the sonnets themselves. This is a question for criticism to hear and register *as* a question" (325). Contrary to its reputation in some circles as overtheorized, his account is above all an internal reading. The absence of a metalanguage can sometimes make these habits of reading seem primitive. For example, when Fineman asks, "[I]f the poet of the young man sonnets is thus given the assumptions of the poetry of praise . . . why does the poet of the dark lady sonnets proceed to give them up?" (54–55), he does not assume a theoretical or historical explanation and is not immediately able to give the obvious answer: misogyny. Instead, he looks to the poems for answers, privileging the "metaleptic" tendency in Shakespeare's language (51), its reflections on its own process, to generate a critical vocabulary. Critics who describe *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye* as a "formidable" book mean that it is as formidable as Shakespeare, because its language is really Shakespeare's.

Like Fineman, I take the language of the poems seriously.[5] My primary but not exclusive focus, unlike Fineman's, is on the first group, which are sometimes called

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"procreation sonnets." The earlier poems in the collection may not invent a new kind of poetic subjectivity, as Fineman argues for the "dark lady sonnets"—in fact, the earlier poems have no original ideas at all—but they do something interesting and influential that comes into view when you replace "procreation" with "preservation." I take this group to be a relatively coherent hermeneutic unit, with a consistent speaker, addressee, and argument.[6] Because of this coherence and because the development of the argument is recursive rather than progressive, I will allow myself to move freely between sonnets, starting with a question (which the speaker calls a question, although there is no question mark and it is expressed in the mode of necessity rather than interrogation or doubt) from sonnet 12:

> Then of thy beauty do I question make
> That thou among the wastes of time must go,
> Since sweets and beauties do themselves
> forsake,
> And die as fast as they see others grow. (9–12)

Note that when answering the question of what part of the person the poem preserves, Shakespeare provides an answer different from the traditional one, which is the proper name. The young man addressed in this sonnet is given no name more precise than "thou." His name is not mystified or codified, as the woman's name is in the *Amoretti*; the speaker does not seem to care about it and may not be sufficiently curious to ask what it is.[7] The most valuable part of the young man, the part that should be saved—in this poem, the speaker does not consider whether poetry may be capable of saving it—is his beauty. The speaker is asking whether the young man's beauty is subject to time. One possible answer—which "beauty" does not give, since neither the young man nor any part of him can be shown speaking—is no. That answer would be frightening; such a forsaking of self would mean that the young man was no longer identifiable as a "sweet" or a "beauty," no longer attachable to any collective of things (instantiated here by days, flowers, hairs, trees, herds, and harvests) regulated by time. The speaker will ultimately endorse this horrifying, negative answer as the correct one in sonnets 15, 18, 19, 54, and 55. In sonnet 12, the speaker assumes a positive answer to the question: the young man's beauty is subject to time, and therefore it will die. The speaker immediately starts working to produce the negative one: therefore we should preserve it, make more of it, extend it into the future. The final move is to argue that the young man should entrust his beauty to some technology of preservation, such as sexual reproduction. (I use the word *technology* to indicate the speaker's naive attitude—the poems sometimes appear to be written by someone who has never heard of sex or figurative language.) In the couplet, breeding is the only adequate preservative: "And nothing 'gainst time's scythe can make defence / Save breed to brave him when he takes thee hence" (13–14).

To put this theory of sexual reproduction into practice looks impossible from any human perspective. According to Hannah Arendt, plants and animals are able to experience immortality through breeding because they are not limited by the human condition and are endlessly replaceable across generations (17–22). In the sonnets, this condition has been relaxed through the establishment of a new middle space between life and death. What does sex look like in a quasi-human community? Consider sonnet 3:

> Look in thy glass and tell the face thou
> viewest,
> Now is the time that face should form another,
> Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
> Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some
> mother.
> For where is she so fair whose uneared womb
> Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
> Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
> Of his self-love to stop posterity?
> Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.92 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Calls back the lovely April of her prime:
So thou through windows of thine age shalt
see,
Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.
But if thou live rememb'red not to be,
Die single and thine image dies with thee.

This quasi-human sex education is naive from the points of view of Arendt's humanism and modern biology but is consistent with Renaissance accounts of reproduction insofar as it emphasizes only one side of genealogy, the father's side; the mother, who can be any woman ("some mother"), contributes no genetic information (Lacqueur 25–62).[8] The implied theory of sexual preference is not very different in personal ads, where the author of an ad may declare an interest in *any* person in a certain category, such as "SWM, 20–30, nonsmoker, sense of humor, into punk rock." Attraction to the young man, on the other hand, is a universal principle: he is everybody's type. Through collaboration with any fertile woman, the face of the young man will be transferred intact to the face of his child. The emphasis on the paternal line is extreme even in the context of Renaissance medicine, which at least allows the mother to contribute some shape to the infant's body through psychic impressions—for example, in the subsection "Of the Force of Imagination" in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, the infant looks like whatever the mother happens to be thinking about during her pregnancy (Burton, 254–55, pt. 1, sec. 2, member 3, subsec. 2). The late introduction of the young man's mother makes this account of reproduction additionally incoherent even on its own terms: the young man's image is supposed to be exactly reproduced in the face of his child, but he has received that image from his mother ("Thou art thy mother's glass") rather than from his father, which implies that "some" mothers are more important progenitors than others (Kalas 188–89).

The speaker makes an even more extreme, unmodern, non-Galenic, antiempirical suggestion at the start of the poem, where the young man's sex organs appear to be located not in the genitals but in the face: "Now is the time that face should form another," as though faces might propagate themselves by kissing or rubbing noses, or as though a single face could reproduce by parthenogenesis, like an amoeba dividing into two copies of itself. This line is an unusually full manifestation of the young man and of his most valuable part, a beauty whose primary residence turns out to be the face. (Other sonnets focus attention even further to a small area on the face: in sonnet 1, for example, the young man's beauty is "contracted to thine own bright eyes" [5].) The young man's voice is also represented in this line—not actually but potentially speaking. If the young man were to speak at this point, the sanest thing he could say would be that his face already had "formed another" just like it in its mirror reflection. If the speaker were to object that the mirror does not solve the problem of preservation because it does not retain an image, the young man could reply that, in the speaker's own analysis, people and mirrors are commensurable ("Thou art thy mother's glass"). This little dialogue is an extradiegetic invention, but it follows the internal logic of the poem in that the young man's voice can be represented only as an echo of or projection from the words of the speaker, and it serves to articulate the disadvantage of the naive theory of sexual reproduction: if mirrors are not successful preservation technologies, then people cannot be, because neither a mirror nor a human body presents the same image at all times.

A variation on the naive theory of sexual reproduction occurs in sonnet 15, where people and plants are assumed to be interchangeable in the community of "things that grow" (1). The young man's most valuable part can therefore be isolated, separated from the rest of him, and removed elsewhere to continue living and growing, just as one might graft a clipping from one plant onto another. Technically, grafting is a kind of asexual reproduction, but

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"engraft" is used in an apparently transitive sense that sounds vaguely sexy: "And all in war with time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new" (13–14). This variation introduces a new technology of preservation, writing, through a pun on *engraft* and *graph* (Booth 158). The speaker—part of an erotic triangle whose third point is not "some mother" or a particular woman such as the dark lady but time itself—preserves the young man's beautiful face by writing about it.[9] This solution to the problem is initially presented as an expedient that could only work in conjunction with or as a supplement to the young man's biological progeny, as in the couplet in sonnet 17: "But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice in it and in my rhyme" (13–14). A poem could serve as independent confirmation of the young man's beauty after his death, but, like the human body, the poem's material embodiment is subject to time ("my papers, yellowed with their age" [9]) and requires an additional preservative to be fail-safe.

Finally, the speaker endorses the poetic solution. In sonnet 18, poetry makes the image of the young man available to anyone who sees, hears, or recites the poems: "As long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee" (13–14).[10] The antecedent of "this" could be this poem or this book of poems; or, literally, the pronunciation of "this," a magic word, creates the middle space between life and death in which the young man will enjoy another life. The statement that "this gives life to thee" is not supposed to be merely theoretical. Nor is the performative "I engraft you new." As in *Amoretti* 75, the speaker presents the fantasy that poetry preserves human life as a project for this poem that will be initiated by the act of writing and fulfilled by the act of reading. The speaker declares the ultimate success of the project in sonnet 55, in lines that echo the Horatian boast of immortality: "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this pow'rful rhyme" (1–2). Unlike other monumental forms, instantiated here by marble and gold, which are "besmeared with sluttish time" (4), the young man's beauty preserved in poetic form is unbreakable, unmarkable, and not even touchable.

In these examples, the fantasy is preservationist without being conservationist. Unlike the mission statement for an institution such as a museum or library that would maintain artifacts in their present condition, these poems propose an intervention more radical than creation or transformation, one that would protect the young man from time and death. As we have seen, when these conditions become questions, ordinary activities such as writing and sex start to look very different. If the poems were able to realize the fantasy as a project and actually suspend these conditions, what would happen? One result might be "the creation of a world that will never know sleep," as Anne-Lise François writes in an essay that tries to imagine genetically engineered organisms and genetically modified foods as possible objects for the pastoral tropes of "Wordsworthian natural piety": "In its natural state, Bt lives and dies, only periodically releasing into the soil the toxins that effectively kill corn-eating caterpillars and other pests. Genetically engineered corn, on the other hand, produces only the active part of Bt's insecticide, and produces it all the time" (56–57). The problem in the sonnets, however, is not exactly "a desperate denial of the fact of time itself" (56), because, as we will see, poetry's capacity to defeat or unfold in time is disputed in the poems. I will argue in the conclusion that the problem with Shakespeare's preservation fantasy is that its realization would be unjust to the young man and to anyone else who participated in the experiment. Or, to use Shakespeare's pun, which collapses problems of aesthetics and justice, this kind of preservation is "unfair" (sonnet 5 [4]).

As in *Amoretti* 75, the speaker's confident projections of success may be premature. The

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phrase "this gives life to thee" cannot pretend to offer absolute eternity, because as a technology of preservation it operates in time—the brief moment of enunciating the poem, or the even briefer moment of saying "this"—and depends on the continued existence of people and eyes to perform the life-giving work of breathing and seeing. As Daniel Juan Gil remarks, "The reference to actual biological readers (equipped with lungs and eyes) introduces a certain vulnerability that is echoed in the tentativeness and even finally the emptiness of a poem that is all about Shakespeare's declining to compare the Young Man to a summer's day" (132). The couplet of sonnet 55 reiterates the dependence of this technology on the continued existence of the English word *this*, of love, and of sight recognition: "You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes" (14). The quasi-human status of the young man depends on the future continuity of the human as we currently understand it (the implied conceptual limit is holocaust) and thus shares the disadvantages of sexual reproduction as a medium for preserving a person.

The advantage of poetry as preservation is not its presumed escape from temporality, which is controversial, but rather its independence of the activity or even the consent of the young man. That's why the odd phrase "I engraft you new" sounds sexual: the speaker's arousal is no longer mediated by the prospect of what the young man might do with "some mother." If poetry adequately preserves the young man's beauty, then the speaker does not need to convince the young man to do anything with anyone else; he can act directly on the young man just by addressing him. The fact that the young man is finally preserved as a keepsake without his consent indicates a moral problem. As in the *Amoretti*, the love object does not share the fantasy of preservation. The young man in Shakespeare, however, is less available as manifestation than the woman in Spenser. There is no universally recognized extratextual, specialized information that would provide a name for the young man and, later, for the dark lady. We do not even know if these poetic figures have historical referents.[11] In addition to a name known to anyone who can read the footnotes, the woman in *Amoretti* 75 has a voice, which she uses to speak back to the poet, whom she calls "vayne man," in direct discourse. By contrast, Shakespeare's young man never speaks. The strict limits on the representation of the young man in the space of the poems may suggest that the project of immortalizing him has failed and that he is a particularly strong site of resistance to the preservation fantasy. By the same token, his resistance is only implicit.

For the speaker, the preservation of the most beautiful object in the culture, the young man's face, is a universal moral imperative: "From fairest creatures we desire increase" (sonnet 1 [1]). As Richard Halpern puts it, paraphrasing this line: "Reproduction is, in the first instance, an *aesthetic* duty; its purpose and aim is the perpetuation of the beautiful" (19). However, there is disagreement in the poems about the meaning and value of the aesthetic. For example, in sonnet 4 beauty is a kind of money, part of the young man, identifiable with him, but alienable from him: "Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend / Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?" (1–2). According to the speaker, beauty is not disinterested, purposeless, frivolous; on the contrary, it is the most rare and valuable kind of personal property, and it implies a responsibility to a society here called "nature" (3), herself a quasi-person, who wants to see some return on her investment. Not just nature but everyone who sees the young man's face wants to see more of it and is angered because the young man does not work harder to bequeath his beauty to the culture in a material but unbreakable form that can be enjoyed forever as a keepsake. Insofar as the young man can be said to have any position on this issue, he implicitly supports the formalist sense of the

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aesthetic assumed by Halpern. According to this interpretation, beauty has no political consequences and would be compromised, made no longer beautiful, by a duty to society. In this unspoken debate, the first person plural ("we desire increase") emphatically does not include the second person singular ("thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes"). In fact, the young man appears to be the only exception to this otherwise universal principle.

One explanation for the young man's resistance to preservation is the selfish aestheticism that Halpern describes. The arguments fail, the young man apparently is not convinced, because the speaker offers him a bad deal. He might prefer a different preservation fantasy—for example, Woody Allen's wish "to achieve immortality . . . through not dying" (Lax 183). Instead, the young man will survive in synecdoche, which means that part of him will be preserved for a later time, but he will not be removed from time altogether. If preservation isolates and preserves his beauty (sonnet 12), then he still has to die, but his beauty lives on. Similarly if the procedure separates the young man from his image (sonnet 3), or beauty from the effect of beauty (sonnet 5), or "thou" from "thine" (sonnet 11)—in every scenario, a part of the young man is preserved in a form that will not allow him to enjoy it.[12] Even in Shakespeare's sonnets, the most familiar and influential statement of the value of preservation in English literature, preservation turns out to be a rather unattractive plan against the fact of mortality and the possibility of holocaust. Either you do not preserve the object of value, or you preserve it in a form that will not allow you to experience it fully, or you preserve it in a form that is toxic to whatever quality you value and that originally made you want to preserve it. The latter is the case for the "flow'rs distilled" in sonnet 5, which not only do not enjoy the separation of their "substance" from their living bodies, they are in fact injured by it, as the violent imagery makes clear: "A liquid pris'ner pent in walls of glass" (10). "Pent" could mean simply that the liquid is contained in the glass bottle, but "pris'ner," if it is not redundant, registers a powerless desire in the liquid contrary to the process of distillation and imprisonment. The flowers, like the young man, resist preservation in that the procedure is difficult and painful and in that they do not want its result.[13] There is nothing attractive about "living twice" if it means sacrificing the first life, if you do not get to experience the second life, or if the experience is known to be unpleasant.

Another explanation for the resistance to preservation is that the technology is not only antiaesthetic but unjust. The materials for this second objection to preservation are apparent in sonnet 11:

> As fast as thou shalt wane so fast thou grow'st—
> In one of thine, from that which thou departest,
> And that fresh blood, which youngly thou bestow'st
> Thou mayst call thine, when thou from youth convertest.
> Herein lives wisdom, beauty, and increase;
> Without this, folly, age, and cold decay.
> If all were minded so, the times should cease,
> And threescore year would make the world away.
> Let those whom nature hath not made for store,
> Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish.
> Look whom she best endowed, she gave the more;
> Which bounteous gift thou shouldst in bounty cherish.
> She carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby
> Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.

Note that the couplet, in identifying the young man with print, provides a glimpse, for the first time in the entire sequence (not sonnet 15, as Booth would have it), of poetry as an alternative technology of preservation: "print more" sonnets as a way of adding more of the young man's face to reality. However,

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the preservationist impulse is dwarfed by a violent impulse that it does not appear to oppose. This sonnet, which tacitly introduces the possibility of living on through culture, is primarily an exercise in imagining the destruction of all culture and all life. Apocalypse is initially posited as the dreaded result of the failure of technologies of preservation: "threescore year would make the world away." The speaker is quick to jump to that conclusion, and his quickness, his willingness to imagine the end of the world, may suggest hope rather than fear. That hope is confirmed by the next sentence, which describes successful preservation as a holocaust: "Let those whom nature hath not made for store, / Harsh, featureless, and rude, barrenly perish." Everyone else has to die to prove that the young man is indestructible. The "harshness" is attributed to the victims of the holocaust but is really a quality of the speaker, who wishes for the deaths of everyone in the world who isn't as beautiful as the addressee; the "featurelessness," which seemingly contradicts the harshness but actually confirms it, anticipates a future in which it will be possible to describe the world completely without mentioning any object except for the young man's beautiful face.

The young man is identical to the figure that Elias Canetti calls "the survivor . . . mankind's worst evil." According to Canetti, the survivor is no longer a fantasy in modernity; it is instantiated in the technology of nuclear warfare: "All the terror of a supernatural power which comes to punish and destroy mankind has now attached itself to the idea of the 'bomb'; and this is something an individual can manipulate" (468). In the arms race, the modality of survival shifts from the possible to the probable, or, to put it generically, from poetry into history. Surprisingly, Canetti exempts the image of literary immortality from the deplorable fantasy of being the last survivor. Thus, when Stendhal dedicates the novel *Le rouge et le noir* to "the happy few," he gives life to others rather than wishes himself alive when others are dead: "But whoever opens Stendhal will find him and also everything which surrounded him; and he finds it *here*, in this life" (278). I am arguing, on the contrary, that the fantasy of culture as preservation of human values is not only compatible with but can also encourage a holocaust fantasy and, in the examples adduced in this essay, would require holocaust as proof of success.

In sonnet 11, the specific content of the fantasy of living on through culture is to be the unique survivor in an otherwise dead world.[14] It would be a mistake to attribute this discovery to Shakespeare. It is already implicit in Horace, whose ode 30 in book 3 imagines a time when everything human will have died and every product of civilization will have been destroyed except for a "mighty part" of the poet; in this "aftertime," history will be reduced to tracking the growths and changes in a still-living piece of himself. The fantasized end point in *Amoretti* 75 is another dead world ("whenas death shall all the world subdew"), in which a woman identified as "she" lives on because her "glorious name" appears in a poem (but not this one). Shakespeare's sonnets are distinguished by the explicitness with which they mobilize apocalyptic tropes. His poems repeatedly ask us to imagine the end of the world, not because we are supposed to be anxious about it, and not because we are supposed to resist it, but because it will serve as the most reliable confirmation of the young man's increased life.

The young man could object that he does not want his increased life to be the pretext for the end of civilization. However, he never does—or, more precisely, we do not know whether he resists preserving himself because he understands that it is a violent impulse, or, in fact, whether he resists at all. For a serious, articulate resistance, we need to look at one of Milton's readings of Shakespeare. Milton's first response to these proposals is also his first published poem, "On Shakespeare,"

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which appeared, anonymously, as part of the front matter in the 1632 second edition of the Shakespeare folio:

> What needs my *Shakespeare* for his honor'd Bones
> The labor of an age in piled Stones,
> Or that his hallow'd relics should be hid
> Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?
> Dear son of memory, great heir of Fame,
> What need'st thou such weak witness of thy name?
> Thou in our wonder and astonishment
> Hast built thyself a livelong Monument.
> For whilst to th'shame of slow-endeavoring art,
> Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
> Hath from the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book,
> Those Delphic lines with deep impression took,
> Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving
> Dost make us Marble with too much conceiving;
> And so Sepulchr'd in such pomp dost lie,
> That Kings for such a Tomb would wish to die.

This poem is sort of a sonnet. It looks like a sonnet at first glance, but it has sixteen lines and is written in couplets, as though Milton were trying both to enter into conversation with Shakespeare's sonnets and also to exceed their limits. The speaker of "On Shakespeare" unquestioningly assumes that Shakespeare's preservation fantasy has been successfully realized but implies that there is a cost.

The first cost is the beautiful young man. Milton, following Horace, displaces successful preservation onto the poet; the sonnets are devices for preserving Shakespeare rather than Mr. W. H.

The second cost is Shakespeare's capacity to experience immortality either in bodily human form or in conventional symbolic forms. Milton's poem begins by evoking Shakespeare's body and its resting place in terms derived from Horace: "What needs my *Shakespeare* for his honor'd Bones, / The labor of an age in piled Stones, / Or that his hallow'd relics should be hid / Under a Star-ypointing *Pyramid*?" The answer to this question is that Shakespeare does not need any of these things, does not need a body, does not need a tomb, does not need anything that can be experienced on a human scale, because human experience is irrelevant to the realization of this project.[15] When texts such as sonnets (here text is represented by "the leaves of thy unvalu'd Book") become repositories of life energy—in fact, of the most valuable part of a person—then more conventional carriers of value, such as human bodies and graves, become insignificant and equivalent ("Bones" and "Stones").[16]

The third cost is everyone else. Successful preservation entails the deaths not only of Shakespeare and his addressee but also of Shakespeare's readers. Why do we have to die when we read? Because Milton understands reading as a form of service, the transformation of persons into what Hobbes calls "artificial persons" or "actors."[17] When we read Shakespeare's poems, we become possessed by him, we follow a script written by him, we think and act at his command. Thus, the site for Shakespeare's life beyond life is "our wonder and astonishment," faculties that, once they have been transformed into "a livelong Monument" for Shakespeare, are no longer our own. The etymological significance of "astonishment" is literalized in the final lines: "Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving / Dost make us Marble with too much conceiving."[18] The fancy, an image-producing faculty, is "bereaved" of itself because it is overwhelmed by someone else's fancy and therefore "astonished," turned to stone (in this case, marble). The world has become a monoculture in which no one can say or do anything that has not been written in "the leaves of [Shakespeare's] unvalu'd Book." Shakespeare does not need a tomb for his bones because he has turned the entire human population into tombs. He is, as Elizabeth Pittenger puts it, "the brain that wouldn't die" (205), the only

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survivor in a dead world, like Vincent Price in *Planet of the Vampires*. "On Shakespeare" is spoken by an inhabitant of that world.

What if these poems could do what they say they can do? Then poetry would be a form of research on human subjects, and poets and critics would need to start asking the questions that scientists ask about their research. Professional medical researchers, anthropologists, sociologists—all scientists who use people as test subjects—are expected to conform to three ethical principles established in the Belmont report for the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. These principles are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. This is true even for scientists whose research consists merely in interviewing people. Scientists take the rhetorical power of the interrogative mood seriously—more so than poets and critics.

There is an important sense in which poems, insofar as they describe people and insofar as people are expected to read them, *are* a form of research on human subjects. This is the sense in which poetry can be experimental: we do not know what the effects of our poems will be, how readers might be changed by them, whether that change will be desirable. To put it another way, poetry is experimental because it risks failure.

Notes

I wish to thank Lara Bovilsky, Michael Clune, Jonathan Goldberg, Andrew Griffin, Margaret Owens, Joel Slotkin, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins.

1. The name for this kind of success in Shakespeare's sonnets (e.g., sonnets 2 and 127) is "succession," as Joel Fineman notes (66–67). Susan Stewart significantly revises Grossman's commonplace in *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, where she argues that the "eidetic" function of poetry is not to extend life but rather to extend recognition, "to make visible, tangible, and audible the figures of persons" (2). Even Stewart's retelling of the Orpheus story reframes the commonplace that the story usually illustrates: in the figure of Orpheus, poetry succeeds against death but fails to recover sight recognition, or, to use the term Stewart borrows from sociology, "face-to-face interaction" (256).

2. On closure as an aspect of all poems, even those that appear to reject it, see Smith (234–60). For the implications of "radical" as opposed to "partial" closure, see Toufic (175–250). Jalal Toufic argues that the postmodern rejection of closure is merely the rejection of partial closure and does nothing more than add openness to a situation that is already partly open; a radical closure, on the other hand, is impermeable because it has no outside. In film, which is Toufic's focus, radical closure means that there is nothing outside the frame—e.g., in Jacques Rivette's *Haut bas fragile* (1995), the performer Laurence Côte, in a medium shot from the waist up, announces that she has no legs. Toufic's account also includes paintings (Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows*), novels (Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*), and cities (Beirut), in addition to films.

3. In Hannah Arendt's interpretation of ancient Greek cosmology, which Arendt implicitly offers as an accurate description of her own universe, human beings are the only mortal things: gods are immortal, individual plants and animals die and are replaced without difficulty by new generations of plants and animals, and other things were never alive and therefore are incapable of dying. Only a living person cannot be replaced by anything else, including another person (17–22). Although terms such as *posthuman* and *transhuman* are in wide circulation and are distinguished by their use in the work of critics and theorists like Lee Edelman and Anne-Lise François and conceptual artists like Madeline Gins and Arakawa, I use *quasi-human* to describe the middle space between life and death because this term enlarges the human community. (E.g., pieces of furniture, such as chairs and clocks, are quasi-human in that they share characteristics with the human body, including legs, arms, and hands.) I follow Arendt in assuming that being human entails being limited by conditions that can be relaxed or restricted.

4. This is just to reiterate a point made in William Empson's 1949 review of Rosemond Tuve's book *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*. To illustrate habits of reading that would be assumed by "any educated reader" in the Renaissance, Tuve quotes Donne's defense of the "Anniversaries" against the charge of blasphemy: "he described the Idea of a Woman and not as she was." She concludes, "Jonson [who called the "Anniversaries" blasphemous] mistook [Donne's] amplification of a universal for a description of an exception" (Tuve 149). Empson responds that this Platonist explanation does not in any way normalize the extravagant images of Elizabeth Drury in the "Anniversaries." The possibility of Jonson's mistake should also be "embarrassing" for Tuve, because "it doesn't seem likely that Jonson wouldn't know what every educated reader knew" ("Donne" 579). To put it another way, educated readers know different things. Education

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.92 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in any system of knowledge, including Platonism, has different effects on and uses for different people.

5. To describe this practice as literalizing the metaphors of the sonnets is not quite right, because, for one thing, to read metaphors literally is simply to read them. The philosopher Donald Davidson explains that "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean" (209). (Davidson is arguing against the view popularized by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* that a metaphor is embedded in a "conceptual scheme"—in other words, a metalanguage—that makes it communicable and from which it derives its true significance.)

6. I am defaulting on the challenge of the most advanced historicist scholarship on the sonnets, which is to treat the book as an object with movable parts that can be regrouped, reordered, and attached to other sonnets and other authors. For a historical account of the problem of ordering the sonnets, see de Grazia (152–63); for a useful summary of problems involved in assuming consistency across the sequence, see Dubrow. It should be obvious by now that I am not interested in creating a historical context or explanation for these poems. The best excuse for dehistoricizing them and reading them as a Victorian novel with "the smallest number of characters" is Eve Sedgwick's: "*The* tradition of the Sonnets is the tradition of reading them plucked from history and, indeed, from factual grounding" (29). Helen Vendler makes a different argument against the practice of assuming a consistent speaker when she insists that poetry is a virtual discourse that can potentially be enacted, spoken, by any reader of a given poem (17–21, 97–100). She bluntly states, "The words of a poem are not 'overheard'; this would make the reader the eavesdropping voyeur of the writer's sensations" (18). In other words, the reader becomes the first person in the poems. For Grossman, on the other hand, the commonplace that poetry is virtual discourse is easily compatible with the commonplace that poetry is overheard speech: "In what sense of the word 'overheard' is the voice of the speaker in lyric (not heard but) overheard? The answer must be either as the devil (and all social beings) knows the self, by outward indications, *or* as God knows the self, through participation of personal being" (248). Because I do not have recourse to Grossman's spiritual machinery, I am troubled by Vendler's objection. The term *speaker* is a real problem. I use it because it allows me to make intelligible statements about the poems and because I do not know of an acceptable alternative.

7. With some overstatement, David Schalkwyk writes, "The collection of poems originally entitled 'SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS' contains no proper names." Actually, there are numerous proper names in the poems; even Schalkwyk admits that "one might quibble about 'Will'" (24). And what about Adonis, Helen, Saturn, Philomel, Cupid, Dian? In addition to the menagerie of classical gods and heroes, what about the months (April, December) and the numerous personified abstractions (needy Nothing, maiden Virtue, Truth miscalled Simplicity, etc.)? In ancient poetry, these figures of absolute reality are subject to a rigid set of name protocols, which, according to the poet and classicist Anne Carson, bind the modifier to the substantive in an atomic fact that can be split only at the poet's peril. Thus, when the poet Stesichoros invents a new epithet for Helen, he "unlatches" the adjective, splitting the atom and thereby releasing a destructive energy that blinds him; he recovers his sight only when he writes a retraction addressing Helen correctly—that is to say, with the Homeric epithet (Carson 4–5). Shakespeare bypasses this problem by making names "pragmatically redundant" (Schalkwyk 156), not giving their utterance the power—which they retain in Ariosto and Spenser—to preserve the life energy of exceptional persons.

8. See especially Lacqueur's consideration of three apparently contradictory accounts of "seed" in the work of Isidore of Seville: "For a child to have a father *means* that it is 'from one blood, that is, from the same semen as the father'; to be a father is to produce the substance, semen, through which blood is passed on to one's successors" (56). Halpern describes this process as "sublimation," relating it to alchemy and to the aesthetic category of the sublime (14–16).

9. Time's love for the young man implies that love is a kind of wear and tear. Contrary to every humanist impulse, love may not be an effective medium of preservation.

10. Smith uses this sonnet as an example of particularly "strong closure" (159–60).

11. This metacritical problem has been a productive site, in terms of sheer page numbers, in Shakespeare studies for many years; the most satisfying solution to the problem is still Wilde's: "Willie Hughes" (19). On the surprising antiaestheticism and fatalism of this theory, see Halpern (33–58).

12. An anonymous reader points out that this formulation depends on a limited sense of enjoyment. Could the young man not enjoy something without experiencing it directly? The possibility of vicarious enjoyment is oddly not offered as an inducement; instead, the poems promise that the young man will be "new made," will "live twice." This is odd because vicarious enjoyment is, for the speaker, the declared personal motive for wanting the young man to generate offspring.

13. The sacrifice of the young man's biological life for an afterlife that he will not be able to experience is conventional. Grossman describes this exchange as "the bitter logic of the poetic principle": to be represented in a poem, you have to die (240–44). However, an alternative trope emerges in some of the later poems in the sequence. Praise occurs independently of preservation in, for example, sonnet 94: "The summer's flow'r is to the summer sweet, / Though to itself it only live and die" (9–10). Empson usefully paraphrases: "Either 'though it lives only for itself' or 'though, in its own opinion, so far as it can see,

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it does no more than live and die'" (*Some Versions* 96). In either case, this flower, which exists in time and gives its most valuable quality, its sweetness, to summer, instead of extracting the sweetness and withholding it from participation in time, is the opposite of the preserved essence of flowers in sonnet 5, "A liquid pris'ner pent in walls of glass." What is expressed as a threat in sonnet 5 ("Nor it nor no remembrance that it was" [12]) becomes a promise in sonnet 94. On the implications of the alternative trope—a power that does not resist time and is not traumatized by it—see François: "The challenge for the critique of biotechnology is . . . to find ways of presenting incompletion as a mode of satisfied knowledge, and indeterminateness as consummate temporal experience, not simply deficient and unachieved cognition" (68).

14. Gil describes this world populated only by versions of the young man as an "alluring" alternative to the social, a place that is not interrelation. The community that I have called the "Shakespeare preservation society" is, in Gil's reading, asocial. "The young man's family becomes a sort of premodern tribe that can secede from the shared social world projected by civility—and then displace that world altogether" (118). The allure of this alternative is qualified by the young man's failure to participate in the world empirically, as perceiving subject or as possessor of perceptible qualities.

15. Goldberg emphasizes the anonymity of this perverse epitaph: "For the refusal to erect the tomb is also the refusal to write, a denial of the poem" (127).

16. Shakespeare's sonnets are not collected in the folio, which is the obvious referent for "thy unvalu'd Book," but Milton is demonstrably thinking about the sonnets in that the phrase "livelong Monument" reworks the first lines of sonnet 55, bringing it closer to its source in Horace's ode 30 in book 3.

17. See ch. 16 in Hobbes's *Leviathan*, "Of Persons, Authors, and Things Personated." In *Areopagitica*, Milton inveighs against a model of reading in which the book acts as a conduit for replacing the reader's imagination with that of the author. If reading is ideally a temptation scene, the result of which cannot be determined in advance, then state licensing makes the reader into a puppet, "such an Adam as he is in the Motions" (731).

18. Paul Stevens is at pains to find positive examples of this trope in Milton's other poems (e.g., the speaker in "Il Penseroso" wants to "forget" himself "to marble" [42]), in Spenser's "Hymne of Heavenly Beautie" (where beautiful forms "bereave / [The] soule of sense" [257–58]), and in Shakespeare's romances. Although the phrase "too much conceiving" implies that readers of Shakespeare are victimized by his excessive image making, Stevens has a point. The speaker of the elegy presents the transformation to marble as a majestic conclusion, fit for "Kings" who "would wish to die." The question for criticism is whether "wishing to die" is a desirable response to a collection of poems.

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