Shakespeare's Perfume

Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan

RICHARD HALPERN

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Introduction

Sodomy and the sublime: once the pleasures of alliteration have faded, it is not at all clear what might connect the two. Sodomy is primarily a legal and theological category whose heyday was the medieval and early modern periods. The sublime is an aesthetic category that originated with Longinus but flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. So the two terms inhabit not only different and apparently unrelated discourses but also distant historical and cultural moments. The temporal problem is perhaps the less serious of the two, since the category of the sublime often seems to be applied after the fact. Longinus detects it in Homer, who surely lacked any inkling of the concept; Edmund Burke finds it in Milton, who at least had read Longinus, as well as in Shakespeare and Spenser, who had not. So if the conjoining of sodomy and sublimity seems anachronistic, at least anachronism is built into one of the two terms. Still, other problems remain. Sodomy has generally denoted a class of nonprocreative sexual activities (usually but not always same-sex activities) for which one might be denounced, prosecuted, or executed. Sublimity is a class of aesthetic phenomena associated variously with grandeur, exaltation, the experience of fear or pain, and the limits of representation. Both categories have been so diversely construed that they are fuzzy around the edges, but it isn't intuitively obvious how they might overlap, either logically or culturally. Sodomy doesn't engross much space in treatises on aesthetics, and aesthetic issues, conversely, don't much preoccupy the jurists and theologians who define sodomitical acts.

Things seem less dire if we shift categories a bit and speak of sexuality and aesthetics, for here we find a rich tradition, from Plato to Freud, connecting erotic (often homoerotic) desire and artistic creation or transcendent experience. Freud's concept of sublimation, in which sexual

drives are diverted to nonsexual (often artistic) aims, will provide a kind of guiding thread for much of this study, although I take it as a culminating point of the tradition I wish to explore rather than a theoretical postulate, and I will also examine certain themes that run distinctly against the Freudian grain. The very word sublimation suggests a connection with the sublime which I will develop in every chapter of this book, not only those on Freud and Lacan. Sublimation as a psychoanalytic concept draws on older alchemical traditions of purification, separation, and (surprisingly) defeminization, which will also come into play.

I turn to Oscar Wilde, however, to provide a first set of connections as well as tensions between the sexual and aesthetic spheres. Wilde's novella The Portrait of Mr. W.H. depicts the catastrophic results of a theory about Shakespeare's sonnets that circulates in hothouse fashion among a coterie of young men. There is much swooning over the beauty of the sonnets and of the young man they depict, all of which serves to displace the desire that Wilde's characters feel for one another. Lawrence Danson wryly notes that "for many of Wilde's readers, both before and after the trials, this 'rationalization of homosexual desire as aesthetic experience' (in Elaine Showalter's phrase) was a verbal fig-leaf bulging with phallic reality." Such a response was not wrongheaded; indeed, it was probably just what Wilde demanded of his readers. One might even argue that part of Wilde's project in the Portrait is to push the "fig-leaf" model to the point of breakdown. At the same time, however, this strategy reveals certain difficulties with the model itself insofar as it reduces the aesthetic to a mere surface phenomenon covering the truth of forbidden sexual desire. For one thing, aesthetic experience could not substitute for sexuality at all if it did not already offer a sensual intensity that rivals (or at least evokes) that of its counterpart. Second, it is not at allclear that (homo)sexuality is the hidden "truth" of aesthetic experience for Wilde; it seems more accurate to say that for him aesthetic experience is both the "truth" and the origin of sexual desire. This, I will argue, is an idea that Wilde borrows from Shakespeare, and it turns Freudian sublimation on its head. It is to be found as well in a passage from St. Paul to which I shall soon turn. The aesthetic origins of sexuality is a recurrent motif in the tradition I trace in this book.

But even if we accept the idea that aesthetic experience provided Wilde with a kind of fig-leaf for the love that dare not speak its name, his discursive situation has now been precisely reversed. On the one hand,

openly addressing homoerotic themes when discussing Shakespeare's Sonnets is now perfectly acceptable, indeed unavoidable—unless, that is, one happens to be Helen Vendler. I myself frequently enjoy the pleasurable frisson of springing sonnet 20 and its "master mistress" on unsuspecting groups of undergraduates. On the other hand, I would be rendered squirmingly uncomfortable were I told to teach a class on the beauty of Shakespeare's sonnets. And I believe that I'm not alone in this. Thus if what was unspeakable for Wilde (let's call it sodomy) is now perfectly speakable for us, yet what was once speakable for Wilde (let's call it beauty) has now become somehow unspeakable—or at least less speakable—for us. This reversal of positions is the product of a complex history, but its possibility depends, I believe, partly on the fact that sodomy, from the very inception of the concept, is implicated in certain aesthetic categories, in particular that category known as the sublime.

The chronological starting point for this connection is a passage in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. I address this passage in my first chapter and don't want to anticipate too much of that argument here. Briefly, however: the passage claims that the Greeks were afflicted with homosexuality as divine punishment for worshiping statues. This is an odd moment in an odd but brilliant writer. Paul's particular way of articulating same-sex acts and idolatry posits the former not only as the enemy of the unrepresentable God but also, more strangely, as his counterpart, a situation that continues in later descriptions of sodomy as the unspeakable vice. Sodomy is thus placed in that "beyond" of representation known as the sublime. More specifically, it is brought into proximity with a Hebraic sublime, associated with the Mosaic ban on images. Hebrew scripture has been associated with the sublime ever since Longinus and is cited in the writings of eighteenth-century writers on the sublime such as Burke and Kant. But it was Hegel who, in his Aesthetics, ties the concept of the sublime most intimately and powerfully to Hebrew scripture. I shall discuss Hegelian sublimity in my chapter on Freud, but I should also say that it influences this entire book, though sometimes only implicitly.

My thesis is that Paul's equation of sodomy and sublimity in Romans is elaborated by medieval theologians and given aesthetic form by Shakespeare's Sonnets. The Sonnets, in turn, powerfully influence Oscar Wilde's later "invention" of homosexuality as both an identity and an aesthetic. The emergence of modern homosexuality does not cancel

the older ties between sodomy and sublimity, however, but simply reworks them in new guises. Freud's little book on Leonardo da Vinci and Jacques Lacan's writings on sublimation in his Seventh Seminar exemplify this. I would claim, then, that the four works examined in this book are not randomly chosen but form part of a coherent tradition, a tradition I could easily have extended both laterally and forward to such contemporary writers as William Burroughs. I have limited myself to a few outstanding instances, however, on the theory that less is more.

Earlier I made the somewhat tongue in cheek remark that writers of treatises on aesthetics do not spend much time discussing sodomy. This is not to say that the issue of homoeroticism does not ever put in an appearance. Here I shall note two moments in which homosexual desire inflects the concept of beauty in philosophical aesthetics, as a kind of general prologue to my more specific investigation of sodomy and the sublime. The first example comes from Edmund Burke's A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757). At the beginning of the Third Part of the Enquiry, Burke first turns to the concept of beauty, which he defines as "that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (83).2 He adds that he "confine[s] this definition to the merely sensible qualities of things" (83), meaning that he speaks of a love that attaches not to the personalities or the spiritual qualities of loved persons but only to their visible attributes as bodies. It might seem, then, that when Burke speaks of "love" he means "desire," but he insists that this is not so:

I likewise distinguish love, by which I mean that satisfaction which arises to the mind upon contemplating anything beautiful, of whatsoever nature it may be, from desire or lust; which is an energy of the mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects, that do not affect us as they are beautiful, but by means altogether different. We shall have a strong desire for a woman of no remarkable beauty; whilst the greatest beauty in men, or in other animals, though it causes love, yet excites nothing at all of desire. (83)

Having first defined the beautiful as that which causes love, Burke then defines love, tautologically, as the mind's reaction to beauty. The two examples by which he proceeds to distinguish love from desire are parallel but asymmetrical to the logic of his argument. The "woman of no remarkable beauty" arouses desire but not love. She therefore falls outside the sphere of Burke's investigation entirely. Although she plays the functional role of distinguishing an aesthetic passion or sensation from a non-aesthetic one, she is not herself a proper object for aesthetic contemplation. By contrast, the man (or animal) who causes love but not desire does constitute a legitimate object for aesthetic reflection—doubly legitimate, in that he provokes the proper impulse and does not arouse the improper one. The very possibility of the beautiful as something that excites a passion distinct from desire therefore depends on the non-existence of male homoerotic desire. This is not just a case of any absence, but of a determinate absence that nevertheless provides a structural support. Burke could easily have found exemplary objects—a vase, a flower—in which the question of sexual desire would not have arisen at all. But he seems compelled to bring the question of beauty into dangerous propinquity with lust so as then to purge it as best he can.

Purgation, as we shall see in my chapter on Shakespeare's Sonnets, plays an important role in the aesthetic tradition that this book explores. Burke's contrast between the beautiful man and the "woman of no remarkable beauty" recalls, in fact, the Sonnets' pairing of the beautiful young man and the so-called Dark Lady, whose "face hath not the pow'r to make love groan" (131: 6) but who nevertheless exerts an inexplicable sexual attraction on Shakespeare and, moreover, draws to herself all the sodomitical attributes that are carefully expunged from the young man. Burke does not mention sodomy directly in the opening passages on beauty, but by linking (non-)desire for men with that for animals, he obliquely evokes the fact that English law had for centuries united homosexuality and bestiality under the category of "buggery." (A statute passed in 1533, for instance, outlawed "the detestable and abhomynable vice of buggery committed with mankynde or beaste.")3 Burke therefore knew, and indirectly tells us he knew, that same-sex desire was possible, since the very existence of buggery laws attests to it. But such desire will be definitionally excluded from the field of the aesthetic.

Having made, as best he can, the requisite distinctions to define beauty, Burke sums up:

Which shews that beauty, and the passion caused by beauty, which I call love, is different from desire, though desire may sometimes operate along with it; but it is to this latter that we must attribute those violent and

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tempestuous passions, and the consequent emotions of the body which attend what is called love in some of its ordinary acceptations, and not to the effects of beauty merely as such. (83)

In provoking "violent and tempestuous passions," desire spawns a turbulence more akin to the sublime than to the beautiful. Male homoerotic desire simply does not exist for Burke, but if it did, its passions would seem to be allied with sublimity. For what it is worth, a few pages before the beginning of Part Three, Burke notes that bitter tastes and stenches, including "the bitter apples of Sodom," induce "ideas suitable to a sublime description" (78).

My second example comes from Hegel's discussion of Greek statuary art in his Aesthetics. For Hegel, Greek art supremely embodies the ideal of the beautiful in which visible form and a richly determined and individualized consciousness harmoniously combine. In a section entitled "Particular Aspects of the Ideal From in Sculpture," he undertakes to itemize those formal qualities of face and body that elevate Greek art to its ideal status. Before beginning, however, he discharges an intellectual debt:

If we turn now to consider in more detail the chief features of importance in connection with ideal sculptural form, we will follow Winkelmann in the main; with the greatest insight and felicity he has described the particular forms and the way they were treated and developed by Greek artists until they count as the sculptural ideal. Their liveliness, this deliquescence, eludes the categories of the Understanding which cannot grasp the particular here or get to the root of it as it can in architecture [mathematically]. (727)⁴

Hegel borrows liberally from the catalogue of statuary facial features and body parts in Winkelmann's History of Ancient Art (1765), though his analysis rarely follows his predecessor's. The distinctive qualities of Greek art that Hegel claims to learn through Winkelmann is "their liveliness, this deliquescence" (Die Lebendigheit, dies Zerfliessende). Both Hegel and Winkelmann distinguish Greek statues from their Egyptian forerunners on these grounds. But "deliquescence" also glances at the homoerotic element in Winkelmann's work. The History of Ancient Art elevates the figure of the eighteenth-century castrato to a classical ideal, reflecting Winkelmann's sexual interest in the castrati he consorted with in Rome.⁵ What Winkelmann valued aesthetically in the bodies of castrati and of youths was an indeterminacy of line (and of gender) that distinguished

them from the hard outlines of adult male figures. "Here however in the great unity of youthful forms, the outlines themselves imperceptibly flow one into the other" (unmerklich eine in die andere fliessen). The "deliquescence" (Zerfliessen) of which Hegel takes note is therefore for Winkelmann the flowing (fliessen) of lines in the androgynous and attractive figure of the male youth.

I do not wish to claim, however, that in praising Winkelmann Hegel either assumes or endorses the homoerotic strains in the latter's work. On the contrary, Hegel's analysis systematically dampens the sensuous elements in Winkelmann's descriptions. Moreover, this neutralization is, I would argue, elevated to a kind of thematic status when Hegel discusses the eyes of Greek statues. Hegel begins this discussion by insisting that Greeks painted in the eyes of statues only as an exception, and that the blankness of the eye is therefore a deliberate norm. He gives several reasons, of which two are pertinent here. First, a man's

glance is what is most full of his soul, the concentration of his inmost personality and being.... But in sculpture [as opposed to painting] the sphere of the artist is neither the inner feeling of the soul, the concentration of the whole man into the one simple self which appears in the glance as this ultimate point of illumination, nor with the personality diffused in the complications of the external world. Sculpture has as its aim the entirety of the external form over which it must disperse the soul, and it must present it in this variety, and therefore it is not allowed to bring back this variety to one simple soulful point and the momentary glance of the eye. (73)

In other words, Greek statues must lack a seeing eye because the expression of soul must be distributed over the entirety of their form. Second, "the eye looks out into the external world; ... But the genuine sculptural figure is precisely withdrawn from this link with external things and is immersed in the substantial nature of its spiritual content, independent in itself, not dispersed in or complicated by anything else" (732–33). The statue is therefore blind because it looks inward rather than outward; it "sees" only its withdrawn spiritual content and not the external world.

This theme of blindness recurs indirectly when Hegel turns to the question of nude and draped forms in Greek sculpture. The Greeks, claims Hegel, valued personal individuality and therefore respected the bare human figure because it is "the freest and most beautiful one. In this

sense of course they discarded that shame or modesty which forbids the purely human body to be seen, and they did this, not from indifference to the spiritual, but from indifference to purely sensual desire, for the sake of beauty alone" (744). Of course, as Hegel notes, the Greeks sculpted primarily male figures nude. The "indifference to purely sensual desire" (Gleichgültigheit gegen das nur Sinnliche der Begierde)7 that allows aesthetic appreciation of the male body thus recalls Burke's negation of homoerotic desire in his definition of beauty. But while Burke denies the very existence of such desire, Hegel insists rather that the Greeks do not care for it—they abstain from desiring this desire. To put it differently, the desire is there, but Greek eyes do not see it, and this not-seeing defines the aesthetic quality of their vision. Moreover, while describing the Greeks themselves as spectators, Hegel's remarks clarify in retrospect the blindness of Greek statues. For what these statues (like the Greeks who sculpted them) do not see is sensual desire, specifically male homoerotic desire. Following a classically Freudian formula, then, we may say that blindness takes the place in Hegel that castration occupied in Winkelmann. The not-seeing of Greek statues is their way of incorporating the neutralization of desire that characterizes not only the Greeks but the subject of aesthetic contemplation more generally. The blind eyes of Greek statues teach the spectator in turn a blindness with respect to merely sensual content. But this (partial) negation of the visual in Greek art also recalls the more thoroughgoing annihilation of images that characterized the Hebraic sublime in Hegel. Greek beauty ascends to the spiritual, and it does so by blotting out the merely sensual, thus retaining a faint echo of its sublime precursor even as it celebrates the image. Where St. Paul saw Greek statues as fomenting homosexuality by turning the Greeks away from the sublime God, then, Hegel wields the sublime as a way of cordoning Greek beauty off from Greek homosexuality.

These examples provide nothing more than an initial matrix for this study. Aesthetic theory will play no great role in the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan share both an awareness of, and a subversive intent toward, the tradition of philosophical aesthetics. And Shakespeare constructs in his Sonnets an art that formulates—and then shifts—its own aesthetic principles as it proceeds. All four writers reflect in original ways upon the role of sexual desire in art (and art in sexual desire), and all four do so by conjoining the unlikely categories of sodomy and the sublime.

Before proceeding, however, I want to make clear what I do and do not hope to accomplish. Despite my book's subtitle, I have relatively little to say directly on the topic of sodomy, and not a great deal more to say on the topic of the sublime. Much of the interesting recent work on sodomy in the early modern period has involved opening the concept up to include its associations with nonsexual phenomena such as witchcraft, treason, heresy, and so on. But this larger penumbra of cultural meanings simply doesn't come into play in the specific tradition I address here. This is a book not about sodomy as such but about the way it is constructed by a specific, post-Pauline tradition. My treatment of sodomy is determined in large part by the fact that I focus on literary and theoretical texts, not on the legal arguments and the medical and theological treatises on which historians of sexuality have tended to base their work. In all the writings I address, sodomy is invoked either fleetingly or implicitly. Indeed, it constitutes a kind of empty hole in discourse, about which nothing directly can be said. This is one of its points of contact with the sublime. In any case, both sodomy and the sublime, taken separately, are topics that have generated abundant commentary and scholarship in recent years. My contribution, as I see it, is to draw previously unnoticed connections between the two. It is only natural, then, that I should focus on mediating terms, of which sublimation is the most important for my purposes.

Perhaps it is only a restatement of the previous paragraph to say that, while I hope this work will be of interest to queer theorists and historians of sexuality, I consider it to be primarily concerned with literary criticism and aesthetics. It would be an exaggeration to say that this is a book about art, not life. But it is more about literary constructions of the sexual than it is about the history of sexuality. Moreover, the specific lineage of writers I construct will be a puzzling and even troubling one, since it conjoins a foundational homophobe (St. Paul), a foundational homosexual (Oscar Wilde), the writer of the world's most renowned same-sex love sonnets, and two of the most influential figures in psychoanalysis, a discourse and practice that have had a history of enforcing heteronormativity. This strange constellation of writers argues for the continuing and even generative presence of phobic strains in the construction of a "canonical" homosexuality—that is, same-sex desire as represented by some central texts and writers of the literary canon. I think it is fair to say that Shakespeare, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan all struggle with St. Paul, or with the tradition to which he gives rise, and that they manage to wrest something unexpected and even delightfully perverse from his dour moralizing. But it is true at the same time that Paul exerts an irresistible pressure despite the twistings and turnings to which he is subjected. And he does so not merely through the dead weight of cultural tradition but because his disagreeable fulminations also display a brilliance that almost invites revision. As a result of the fascination he exerts, later writers end up saying things that they might not be expected (or even wanted) to say.

Although the four figures on whom I focus have been arranged in chronological order, and some later writers even refer to earlier ones, nothing so coherent as a history emerges from the series I present. If anything, what I uncover is a compulsion to repeat a culturally primal scene. This is not a book about the emergence of modern homosexual identity, in part because the instances of sodomy I examine are, almost as often as not, heterosexual. But also in part because this a book about the ways in which an older, sodomitical thematic persists even into the modern regime of sexual identities, when its cultural supports might seem to have fallen away.

CHAPTER ONE

Shakespeare's Perfume

Given his many forays into the realms of art and literature, Freud shows a surprising lack of interest in the love lyric. Surprising, because such poetry would seem to offer an obvious point of connection between eros and art. Perhaps too obvious. Not only is the Freudian hermeneutic drawn more to covert or occulted expressions of sexuality, but Freud's theory of art as *sublimated* desire ascribes a certain "coolness" or desexualized quality to the artwork. The love poem, a literary form which not only takes sexual desire as its explicit content but also frequently adopts a rhetoric of seduction, lacks both the representational and the libidinal distance that a Freudian theory of art seems, if not exactly to require, then at least to prefer. The love lyric conjoins sex and art in so blatant a way as to be, for Freud at least, apparently devoid of interest.

Yet in the Petrarchan tradition, which includes Shakespeare's sonnets, love poetry often represents a form of sexual desire which is both idealized and sublimated.¹ Likewise the courtly love lyric, in which the beloved is elevated to an object of almost religious veneration, offers Jacques Lacan a privileged point of entry for his own distinctive theory of sublimation. (Both Freud's and Lacan's theories of sublimation will be addressed in later chapters of this book.)

In the case of Shakespeare's sonnets, a sublimating interpretation has been both encouraged and complicated by the fact that most of the sequence's poems are addressed to a young man. The most famous—and, I will argue—the most profound instance of such an interpretation occurs in Oscar Wilde's novella *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* Wilde's fictional critic Cyril Graham depicts Shakespeare as the victim of a largely desexualized but still somewhat intoxicating fascination with the beauty and personality of the man whom Graham "identifies" as a young actor named Willie Hughes.² Graham goes on to argue that not only Shakespeare's sonnets but "the essentially male culture of the English Renaissance"

(194)3 derives much of its inspiration from Ficino's translation of Plato's Symposium, which extols a decorporealized love between men. "There was a kind of mystic transference of the expressions of the physical sphere to a sphere that was spiritual, that was removed from gross bodily appetite, and in which the soul was Lord" (185).

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Wilde's sublimating interpretation of the sonnets has found answering echoes among critics from G. Wilson Knight to W. H. Auden to Joel Fineman. More recently, however, and particularly at the hands of gay criticism and queer theory, sublimating interpretations of the Sonnets have come under severe critical scrutiny. The Freudian associations of the term "sublimation" have rendered it doubly suspect, as being both ahistorical and tainted by its association with a discourse that has sometimes classed homosexuality as pathological. Moreover, the postulate of a sublimated homosexuality in the Sonnets has (with some reason) been seen as a strategy for installing an aestheticized, desexualized, and therefore relatively sanitized and "acceptable" version of same-sex passion that would allow homophobic readers of the Sonnets to acknowledge the unavoidable fact of homosexual desire while ignoring its more earthy and direct expressions.5

This last objection strikes me as the most significant of the three. English Petrarchanism, starting with Thomas Wyatt, has always accommodated a strongly anti-idealizing strain. Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man combine a rhetoric of sublimation with an exuberantly bawdy taste for sexual wordplay.6 Any theory of sublimation that either ignores or is embarrassed by the poems' repeated references to same-sex practices as well as desires will thus be guilty of both homophobia and simple inaccuracy. Wilde, it should be said, balanced his sublimating interpretation of the Sonnets with intimations of things forbidden. Cyril Graham is careful to mention "critics, like Hallam, who had regretted that the Sonnets had even been written, who had seen in them something dangerous, something unlawful even" (186-87). And he admits to being "almost afraid to turn the key that unlocks the mystery of the poet's heart" (160). Wilde will not and cannot name this secret, of course, but he takes pains to communicate its presence to the reader, as both the antithesis of and the counterpart to sublimated desire. Wilde's invocation of sodomy only as the unnameable secret is, as we shall see in a later chapter, dictated by motives other than simple prudence. The rhetoric of the unspeakable is not merely a means of avoidance or self-protection

but a positive strategy with both political and aesthetic dimensions. In any case, Wilde's ability to find in the Sonnets both a legitimate, because sublimated, form of same-sex desire and the unspeakable crime of sodomy is not a simple contradiction. It results, rather, from careful reading of the Sonnets' own rhetoric of sublimation.

In this chapter I shall argue that Shakespeare's Sonnets contain not only a rhetoric but what one might go so far as to call a "theory" of sublimation, and that such a theory will enable us to pass from a merely thematic handling of male same-sex desire to the aesthetic principles that govern the form of the Sonnets. It will also, I believe, answer the charges of ahistoricism by positing sublimation not as a way of processing a nonhistorical essence called "homosexual desire" but as a discourse that helps to produce such desire in a culturally and historically specific way.

My initial focus will be that subsequence of poems, beginning with the first sonnet and usually but not always taken as ending with the seventeenth, known as the "procreation sonnets." These poems might seem to offer a counterintuitive starting point. For one thing, in counseling the young man to reproduce, they promote a distinctly nonsublimated form of sexual activity. For another, in counseling him to take a wife, or at least a mistress, they offer a curiously mediated and indirect form of same-sex desire. It is nevertheless these sonnets that formulate, in an especially striking and visible way, a poetics of sublimation. And they do so in a manner that defines the nature of same-sex desire for the entire sequence of poems to the young man.

Typical of the procreation sonnets in many respects is number 5:

Those hours that with gentle work did frame The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell Will play the tyrants to the very same And that unfair which fairly doth excel: For never-resting time leads summer on To hideous winter and confounds him there, Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone, Beauty o'ersnowed and bareness everywhere. Then were not summer's distillation left A liquid pris'ner pent in walls of glass, Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft, Nor it nor no remembrance what it was. But flow'rs distilled, though they with winter meet, Leese but their show, their substance still lives sweet. Like many of the procreation sonnets, this one employs a turn on the familiar carpe diem argument: since time will soon ruin your beauty, it cautions, best to have sex now. Only in this case, have sex with someone other than me—with a woman who will bear your child. Somehow the sonneteer's rhetoric of seduction has gotten twisted in the direction of family values. Indeed, the sense of imminent demise that pervades the poem works less to whip up a desperate sexual longing than to mortify desire into something merely prudent. It makes sex seem as exciting as putting up preserves.

The poem's most interesting and (not incidentally) most elegiacally beautiful lines introduce the image of the perfume bottle. But while this metaphor bolsters the poem's longing for a beauty that transcends death, it fits somewhat awkwardly with its supposed tenor. In the translation from a child, to semen in a womb, to perfume in a bottle, something has been lost, and that something is life. The glass bottle is, to begin with, a conspicuously sterile and inorganic image for the womb. It contains the vital fluid, but does not nourish or quicken it. Its beauty is therefore static—not so much the transcendence as the incorporation of death. It turns birth into stillbirth.

But if the image of perfume and glass is vastly ill-suited to its stated purpose of figuring sexual procreation, it is, as more than one critic has noticed, perfectly suited to another, implied purpose: that of figuring poetic procreation. The diminutive, unchanging perfection of the perfume bottle thus represents not a baby but a sonnet. The glass womb is the male womb of Shakespearean verse, in which the young man's essence will be perpetuated, not as another living and therefore perishable blossom but rather as eternal though static lines of poetry.

This particular substitution is in itself neither novel nor surprising. Its interest, from my perspective, is that it makes Sonnet 5 into a tiny treatise on poetic sublimation. What I mean by this is that Shakespeare's image of the perfume bottle takes the commonplace but mysterious process whereby the father's sexual substance produces a baby, and puts in its place the even more mysterious process whereby the young man's sexual substance—his semen—is distilled into poetry. Sonnet 5 seems to offer a curiously material demonstration, even before the fact, of the Freudian thesis that sexual desire can be sublimated into art.

Both Shakespearean and Freudian sublimation find their origin in older traditions of medical and alchemical literature, especially the latter.

Two of alchemy's principal refining processes were distillation, or the evaporation and recondensation of liquids, and sublimation, or the evaporation and recondensation of solids. Both aimed at separating and elevating a purer and more spiritualized substance from a grosser and more corporeal one. Nicolas Flamel, a medieval French alchemist whose works were translated into English in 1624, writes:

Note therefore, that this separation, division, and sublimation, is without doubt the key of the whole worke. After the putrefaction, then, and dissolution of these Bodies, our Bodies doe lift themselves up to the surface of the dissolving water, in the colour of whitenesse, and this whitenesse is life; ... which separateth the subtile from the thicke, and the pure from the impure, lifting up by little and little the subtile part of the Body, from the dregs, untill all the pure be separated and lifted up: And in this is our Philosophicall and natural sublimation fulfilled: And in this whitenesse is the soule infused into the Body, that is, the mineral vertue, which is more subtile than fire, being indeed the true quintessence and life, which desireth to bee borne, and to put off the grosse earthly faeces, which it hath taken from the Menstruous and corrupt place of his origin.⁹

Alchemical sublimation thus produces two substances: a purified and spiritualized essence and, separated from this, a fecal discharge or remainder. In turning solid to gas, and gas back to solid, sublimation was seen as transforming body to spirit and spirit to body. The goal was not a separation of spirit from matter but a reconciliation of spirit with a purified matter:10 hence the sublimate was often compared to an infant emerging from the womb or to Christ's resurrected body.11 The fecal remainder, by contrast, was associated variously with earth, with menses, with putrefaction, and with death. Flamel writes of this discharge or remainder that "it stincks, and gives a smell like the odour of graves filled with rottennesse, and with bodies as yet charged with their naturall moysture."12 It is also, not incidentally, associated with the female body. Flamel elsewhere describes sublimation as the process of eliminating "the dark moiste dominion of the woman."13 Sublimation is thus not only a purifying but a defeminizing process, qualities that will persist when the concept is adopted by Freud.

Returning to Sonnet 5, we can see how the tropes of alchemical sublimation serve to imagine a masculinized, poetic birth. The metaphor of glass bottle as womb was already widespread in alchemical literature before Shakespeare borrows it here. Moreover, male semen resembles the

alchemical quintessence not only in its masculinity and its white color, but because Renaissance medicine already conceived of semen as a distillation and purification of the blood. I am not arguing that the images of Sonnet 5 are specifically alchemical in origin, although Shakespeare's sonnets make occasional explicit reference to alchemy. Obviously, the direct subject matter here is perfume-making. Rather I am arguing that discourses such as alchemy, medicine, and even perfume-making shared a common figural vocabulary of sublimation.

Our brief survey of alchemy immediately reveals something crucial about Sonnet 5: the poem depicts only the perfume as distillate, while the waste matter or remainder of distillation has disappeared. Shakespeare's imagery of distillation is thus, itself, distilled or purified. The effects of this may become clearer when set against another image of distilled perfume, this one occurring in John Donne's eighth elegy, "The Comparison." Donne's poem consists of a series of contrasting descriptions pitting the speaker's own, beautiful mistress against the putatively repulsive mistress of a male friend. It begins thus:

As the sweet sweat of roses in a still,
As that which from chafed musk cat's pores doth trill,
As th'almighty balm of th'early east,
Such are the sweat drops of my mistress' breast.
And on her neck her skin such lustre sets,
They are no sweat drops but pearl carcanets.
Rank sweaty froth thy mistress' brow defiles,
Like spermatic issue of ripe menstruous boils,
Or like that scum, which by need's lawless law
Enforced, Sanserra's starved men did draw
From parboiled shoes, and boots, and all the rest
Which were with any sovereign fatness blessed,
And like vile lying stones in saffroned tin,
Or warts, or weals, they hang upon her skin. (1–14)14

It is no coincidence that the first set of comparisons takes up fourteen lines, for despite the rhyming couplets this is clearly an anti-sonnet. Inversion of structure (an opening sestet followed by an octave) announces a thematic inversion of Petrarchanism, the latter's presence signaled once again by imagery of distillation. But if Donne grotesquely parodies a sublimating rhetoric, he does so (paradoxically) not by negating it but by completing it—that is to say, by portraying not only the

distillate but the remainder as well. For Donne, something like alchemical separation produces two contrasting women: one the traditionally idealized Petrarchan mistress, the other a repulsive mass of scum and sores. These are, of course, simply the two halves of the fantasized diptych known as Woman, seen here simultaneously and anamorphically rather than (as in Spenser's Duessa, for example) sequentially.

Things aren't so simple, however, for the strain of sublimation imprints itself even on the first, "pure" mistress. The opening comparison, "As the sweet sweat of roses," exhibits a slightly oxymoronic stress that bursts forth in the grotesque second line. The very fact of choosing sweat for his first point of comparison—a kind of bodily distillate, to be sure, but one of necessarily compromised purity—indicates the limits of sublimation when the poetic subject is woman.

Yet the threat of contamination runs not only between the two women, but between woman and man. The grotesque qualities of the "other" mistress, after all, derive both here and elsewhere in the poem from a disturbing admixture of masculinity, visible in the "spermatic issue" and in the image of Sanserra's men boiling their shoes. What the sublimating movement of "The Comparison" actually hopes to separate—and in the end, does separate—is not one woman from another, but woman from man. The poem ends by exhorting the friend to abandon his mistress and (in a slightly more covert vein) to take Donne himself as an erotic substitute. The grotesque hermaphroditism of the "other" mistress is finally resolved, then, not by purging her of the offending masculinity, but by purging the masculinity of her. In the final irony of the poem, the masculine "remainder" is transubstantiated and saved as sublimate while even the idealized, Petrarchan woman is abjected as waste matter.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, the young man is sometimes depicted as sublimate, sometimes as sublimating agent—both product and radiant source of alchemical refinement.¹⁶ The waste remainder is associated primarily (though not exclusively) with woman, as in Donne. In fact, Shakespeare's Dark Lady embodies every aspect of what Nicholas Flamel calls the "dark moist dominion of woman." ¹⁷ But if the young man serves as the sublimated opposite of the Dark Lady, this is not to say that he is free of feminine attributes. Indeed, Sonnet 20 dwells at length on the young man's androgyny, though this "master mistress" is depicted as an even purer version of the idealized Petrarchan mistress. In Sonnet 5,

intimations of femininity surround the perfume bottle. Donne, for instance, writes of perfume: "By thee, the greatest stain to man's estate/ Falls on us, to be called effeminate" (Elegy 4, 61–62). Moreover, the distilling of perfume from flowers is used elsewhere in Shakespeare as a metaphor for *female* sexual pleasure. Of course, perfume would seem to evoke the sweet Petrarchan mistress (as in Sonnet 20) and not her abjected "other." Yet in the early modern period perfume was frequently used to cover the smells of unwashed or diseased bodies. Donne, typically, expresses what Shakespeare represses. His fourth elegy apostrophizes perfume in the following terms:

Base excrement of earth, which dost confound Sense, from distinguishing the sick from sound; By thee the silly amorous sucks his death By drawing in a leprous harlot's breath. (57–60)

It is not my intention to claim that the perfume bottle of Sonnet 5 evokes all these things; the miracle is rather that it doesn't. Shakespeare's crystal flask does not harbor a Baudelairean "parfum corrumpu." Perhaps this is because it exists primarily as a visual rather than an olfactory object, and so suspends or cancels the connections on which Donne dwells. Trapped within its bottle, the perfume is prevented from releasing its associative as well as its floral bouquet. Instead, the image achieves a kind of untroubled luminescence in which the crystalline enclosure of the bottle signifies, among other things, its isolation from all that was abjected to produce its contents. A manifestation of pure *claritas*, Shakespeare's perfume bottle is a distant ancestor of the snowy, aseptic bowl in Wallace Stevens's "The Poems of Our Climate." The bottle's walls of glass are visually transparent but semiotically opaque; they reduce the image to mere seeming or appearance rather than meaning.

But while the sublimating rhetoric of Sonnet 5 leaves no residue, it does offer a faint commemoration of the labor needed to expel it. The image of the perfume as a "prisoner pent" suggests a latent dynamism that threatens the visual repose of the image—indeed, threatens it from within. This one detail causes the image to vibrate with the energy of everything it tries to exclude. By "everything," as we have seen, I mean in part "woman." But as we shall see next, I also mean in part "sodomy."

"Procreation sonnet" has become such a convenient term for the opening seventeen poems of the Quarto sequence, it trips so easily from the tongue, that one is prone to overlook how very odd a thing a sonnet on procreation is. In every respect it seems to violate the sexual canons of a form traditionally devoted to idealized worship on the one hand and libertine seduction on the other. The procreation sonnet at once charts a third option and splits the difference between the first two, since it counsels sex in the name of reproductive duty—that is to say, for a purpose other than that of sexual pleasure itself.

But while they enjoin childbearing, the procreation sonnets strangely evacuate the content of this duty. First, as Joseph Pequigney notes, they deprive themselves of possible arguments by inexplicably failing to allude to the young man's noble birth: "They might easily have done so; they might have urged his responsibility to his family, to hand on a great name, to enable the passage of a title or property along bloodlines, to provide for the maintenance of an ancestral house." Second, they refrain from mentioning any divine injunctions to be fruitful and multiply. So the "duty" of procreation, whatever it may be, stems neither from God nor from the social order. Then why reproduce? The very first lines of sonnet 1 say why:

From fairest creatures we desire increase, That thereby beauty's rose might never die, But as the riper should by time decease, His tender heir might bear his memory. (1-4)

Reproduction is, in the first instance, an *aesthetic* duty; its purpose and aim is the perpetuation of the beautiful. Moreover, as we learn in Sonnet 11, Nature has granted beautiful creatures a reproductive advantage with just this aim in mind:

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. (9-14)

In reproducing, the young man will obey natural law; to this point, Shakespeare's argument appears quite orthodox. But by redefining the

aim of that law so radically, the procreation sonnets engage, as we shall see, in a theologically subversive form of aestheticism.

This redefinition will, moreover, engage the problem of sodomy. For in the very process of endorsing a licit, reproductive sexuality, the procreation sonnets employ a range of figures that mimic, and in some cases may derive from, theological condemnations of sodomy. If at times these sonnets covertly endorse or propose sodomitical practices, they also constitute a distinctive sexual aesthetic precisely by negating, expelling, or purging sodomy.

One way in which they do so is by repeatedly advising the young man on the proper "use" of his semen. In Sonnet 4, which tries to dissuade the young man from masturbation, variations on the word "use" ("abuse," "usurer," "use," "unused," "used") occur five times. Sonnet 6 repeats Sonnet 4's contrast between the procreative "use" of semen and "forbidden usury" (5). As Mark Jordan shows in his book The Invention of Sodomy in Christian Theology, medieval theologians often defined sodomy not as a forbidden form of sexual desire or as an excessive form of pleasure or even as a specifically same-sex practice but simply as a misuse of semen for anything—including male masturbation—that does not serve to fulfil its reproductive potential. Albertus Magnus even goes so far as to state that female masturbation is not necessarily sinful since it does not entail a waste of male seed.21 In Thomas Aquinas, distinctions between legitimate and sodomitical sex turn entirely on the proper or improper "use" (usus) of the seed, a vocabulary that informs Shakespeare's procreation sonnets as well.²² Likewise, the conception of sodomy as usury derives from medieval sources. Dante puts sodomites and usurers in the same circle of hell. In urging the proper "use" of the young man's semen, the procreation sonnets thus engage a theological discourse that opposes such use to sodomitical "abuse" or "usury." Yet even as they employ a theologically derived vocabulary, and do so precisely to invoke the specter of sodomy, the sonnets never adopt a tone of theological condemnation. Indeed, the sonnets undermine the theological concept of "use" by twisting that term, as we have seen, in a purely aesthetic direction. For Shakespeare, as opposed to Aquinas or Albertus Magnus, the proper "use" of semen involves not the creation of life as such but the creation of beauty.

Theological distinctions between the use and sodomitical abuse of semen frequently invoked a supplementary distinction between the female womb as semen's "proper vessel" and the anus (male or female) as an "improper vessel." The proper vessel fulfils the semen's procreative potential while the improper vessel wastes it. To borrow Shakespeare's vocabulary in Sonnet 3, the latter is semen's "tomb" rather than its "womb." I believe that by depicting the womb as a "vial" Sonnets 5 and 6 invoke something very like this medieval figure and its context. Yet in doing so the sonnets transform it just as they did the term "use"—by aestheticizing it. For, as we have seen, the perfume bottle fails as metaphor precisely by evacuating *life* in favor of art. Shakespeare thus summons up the image of the proper vessel in order to pervert it. Instead of abandoning the proper for an officially improper vessel, he makes the proper vessel itself improper by substituting an aesthetic function for a reproductive one. In effect, he refashions the theologians' vessel of birth into something like an ornate vase or a crystal vial, beautiful but barren objects that contain only poetic *claritas*.

From this moment of conversion or transformation, something one might call Shakespearean homosexuality emerges. It is not identical with sodomy but results, rather, from aestheticizing the theological categories that construct sodomy. Here I will venture a preliminary formula: Shakespearean homosexuality is the aesthetic sublimate of sodomy. This way of putting it reverses the terms of Freudian sublimation, since, instead of regarding art as the displacement of sexual aims, it posits Shakespearean homosexuality as itself a product or effect of the aesthetic. In this sense, the thesis championed by readers from Wilde to Auden to Fineman that Shakespearean homosexuality is idealized or sublimated—seems exactly right. The sublimating rhetoric of the sonnets separates out an impeccably refined and aestheticized form of desire from a sodomitical discourse that is then abjected as fecal remainder. This remainder is not, however, expelled to a space outside the poems, but is rather relegated to a nonspace within the poems. That is to say, it abides in the half-light of wordplay, implication, and insinuation. Sodomy subsists as the speaking of the unspeakable, as the topos of the inexpressible or unnameable. Perhaps it is more correct, then, to identify Shakespearean homosexuality with both sublimate and remainder, or indeed with the very separation that produces this double product. The Shakespearean sonnet gives off a perfume that contains just the slightest hint of feces.

But while Shakespeare's sublimating rhetoric produces a significant poetic achievement, it does so at some cost. For what the division into

Shakespeare's Perfume

spiritualized friendship and obscene wordplay evacuates is precisely the middle space of eros. Shakespeare's sacrifice may become clearer when the Sonnets are contrasted with another piece of homoerotic verse from roughly the same period: Richard Barnfield's *The Affectionate Shepherd*:

O would to God (so might I have my fee) My lips were honey, and thy mouth a Bee.

Then shouldst thou sucke my sweet and my faire flower That now is ripe, and full of honey-berries:
Then would I leade thee to my pleasant Bower Fild full of Grapes, of Mulberries and Cherries;
Then shouldst thou be my Waspe or else my Bee,
I would thy hive, and thou my honey bee.²³

Shakespeare's sonnets (and, for the most part, the plays) produce nothing like the erotic concreteness of such verse. Indeed, the first 126 sonnets evacuate fleshly desire to the point that they do not even allow the reader to visualize the young man. Shakespeare never shares even those qualities such as hair and eye color that typify the poetic blazon, although we learn in Sonnet 20 that the young man's appearance is androgynous. One of the fundamental ironies of Wilde's *Portrait of Mr. W.H.*, then, is that Shakespeare provides no directions for such a portrait. The sublimating logic of the first 126 sonnets drains their poetic subject of all corporeal specificity, leaving only a glassy, transparent vehicle of poetic comparison: the young man as perfume bottle.

We now arrive at a question that we will pose and repose throughout this book: what is the link between sublimation, a psychoanalytic (and alchemical) concept, and the sublime, a theological and aesthetic one? The way to negotiate this crossing in Sonnet 5 is far from obvious. Certainly, the poem does not ascend to anything recognizable as an aesthetics of the sublime; the image of the perfume bottle is, rather, beautiful, and may even emblematize the sonnets' fidelity to an aesthetics of the beautiful. In this section, then, I want to address the problem of the sublime directly, in the hope of reconciling it with Shakespeare's poetics of sublimation.

My starting point here will be chapter one of Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Having divided the world into Jews and gentiles, Paul then identifies idolatry as the defining sin of the gentiles, and especially of the Greeks:

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;

19 Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them.

20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.

21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

22 Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

23 And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things.
24 Wherefore God gave them up to uncleanness, through the lusts of their

own hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves:

25 Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

26 For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature:

27 And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. (KJV)

This passage is interesting to me on several counts. First, Paul defines Greek culture by homosexuality on the one hand and an unhealthy addiction to statues on the other. But as in Shakespeare, it is an excess of the aesthetic, one might say, that gives rise to homosexuality, rather than homosexuality that finds its sexual desire sublimed into art. Second, by specifying homosexuality as the punishment for idolatry, Paul situates it in relation to the unrepresentability of God, and hence in relation to what would later be called the sublime.

The logic by which Paul connects homosexuality and idolatry is not immediately apparent, but we can elaborate it by noticing that this passage is constructed around three occurrences of the Greek verb (met)ellaxan or "exchange." Because the Greeks have exchanged the unrepresentable God for visible, created things (representations of nature),

they are forced to exchange the "natural" objects of desire for unnatural ones. But this means that homosexuality, as a failure of natural vision, mimics that transcendence of nature which the Greeks otherwise fail to achieve. In other words, homosexuality is the equivalent, as well as the opposite, of sublime transcendence.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19 exhibits similar traits. When the inhabitants of Sodom attempt to break down Lot's door and ravish the angels within, they are blinded by a bright light, and this failure of vision mockingly repeats their refusal to recognize the invisible God and his messengers. The blinding light in the doorway, moreover, presages the consuming fires that will destroy Sodom in a sublime act of divine de-creation. These flames, as a direct manifestation of godhead, are also under a visual prohibition, as Lot's wife learns the hard way.²⁴ Thus the Sodom story likewise connects homosexuality, loss or cancellation of vision, and the sublime transcendence of God. (Chapter 5 of Peter Martyr's Book of Gomorrah articulates Romans 1 and Genesis 19 on all three of these counts.)25

What that same Peter Martyr will be the first to call "sodomy" 26 thus occupies an ambiguous relation to the sublime God, at once his demonic opposite and his troubling equivalent. Nowhere is this clearer than in sodomy's status as the unnameable or unspeakable vice, from whose utterance even God's angels will flee. For this prohibition on speech makes sodomy the obscene counterpart to the Tetragrammaton, or the unspeakable name of God.27 John Bale's Protestant morality play, The Three Laws of Nature, Moses, and Christ (1538), pairs the allegorical characters Sodomy and Idolatry, thus betraying the influence of Romans 1 and its elaboration by Thomas Aquinas. When the character Infidelity conjures up this devilish pair, he does so as follows: "By Tetragrammaton, / I charge ye, apere anon, / And come out of the darke."28 Not only are Sodomy and Idolatry invoked by the divine Tetragrammaton, but in being ordered to "come out of the dark," they are depicted as inhabitants of a hidden space that resists representation. Sodomy is, here as elsewhere, a devilish subspecies of the sublime.

This connection between sodomy and sublimity is crucial, I believe, to Shakespeare's Sonnets-not because the Sonnets (at least those to the young man) embrace either term but because they avoid both, and in so doing define their own aesthetic.29 Nowhere does this appear more clearly than in the much-discussed Sonnet 20:

A woman's face, with Nature's own hand painted, Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion— A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted With shifting change, as is false women's fashion: An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling, Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth; A man in hue, all hues in his controlling, Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth. And for a woman wert thou first created. Till nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting. And by addition me of thee defeated, By adding one thing to my purpose nothing. But since she pricked thee out for women's pleasure, Mine be thy love, and thy love's use their treasure.

Most recent commentary on this sonnet has worked ingeniously to undercut the apparent gesture of sexual renunciation in the poem's final lines. I would like to focus rather on the figure of Nature, who occupies almost as much of the poem as the young man. The image of Nature fashioning human beings draws on long-standing medieval traditions of the goddess Natura's double role as procreatrix and vicaria dei or vicar of God.³⁰ Nature's apparent inattentiveness at this job is also not new, harking back to Prudentius³¹ and Alan of Lille, although the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea may also hover in the background. As the procreative deputy of God, Nature engages in an activity that at once recalls and differs from divine creation. As Alan of Lille puts it in his Anticlaudianus, "divinum creat ex nihilo, Natura caduca / procreat ex aliquo" II, 72-73)-"the divine one creates from nothing, Nature breeds perishable things from something."32 Alan's phrasing is, I think, suggestive for Sonnet 20, both in its play on "nothing" and "something," which presages line 12 of Shakespeare's poem, and in contrasting Nature's procreation with the sublime scene of God's creatio ex nihilo.

The odd thing about all scenes in which a mythological Nature fashions human beings is that real nature doesn't work that way. People originate as tiny embryos and grow into adulthood; they aren't sculpted as fully grown creatures. Thus Shakespeare's scene of creation, in which Nature molds adult forms, inevitably invokes God's fashioning of Adam and Eve in the first chapter of Genesis.33 I would even argue that the play on "something" and "nothing" in line 12 is meant in part to recall God's original creation of something (indeed, everything) out of nothing.

But, typically, the goddess Natura both invokes and negates this scene of divine creation. A nurturing mother steps in for the sublime father Jehovah, natural birth for the original scene of creation. The feminizing logic of this substitution goes so far as to hint at a rewriting of Genesis in which Adam is a kind of supplementary afterthought to Eve. Or perhaps Shakespeare even understands the biblical line "male and female created he them" in a manner similar to that of the rabbinical commentators (and Renaissance Platonists) who argued that God created a single androgyne, which he subsequently split in two.³⁴

In any case, the strategy of this sonnet is to summon up a sublime scene of creation in order then to veil it, by which I mean to naturalize, feminize, and aestheticize it. Divine narrative gets reworked here in the same way that theological categories did in the procreation sonnets. And to similar ends, since sodomitical undertones clearly disturb Sonnet 20. By adding a penis to the half-finished woman, Nature simultaneously invokes the specter of sodomy and fends it off, at least if we accept the poem's surface argument that this penis stands definitively in the way of sexual contact.35 But what the poem has thereby and perhaps even more importantly avoided is a divine injunction against sodomy. To put this in Lacanian terms, Sonnet 20 substitutes a real impediment for a symbolic prohibition. That is, instead of the sublime "Thou shalt not" of an angry God, what bars access to the young man is just a harmless if frustrating bit of flesh. A piece of nature fends off the daunting theological apparatus of anti-sodomy discourse, thus defining a safe space in which homoerotic desire may be harmlessly indulged. The psychoanalytic significance of the poem may be brought out by quoting the Lacanian theorist Slavoj Žižek as he comments not on Shakespeare's Sonnet 20 but on the infamous scene of discovery in Neil Jordan's film The Crying Game: "This scene of failed sexual encounter is structured as the exact inversion of the scene referred to by Freud as the primordial trauma of fetishism: the child's gaze, sliding down the female body towards the sexual organs, is shocked to find nothing where one expects to find something (a penis)—in the case of The Crying Game, the shock is caused when the eye finds something where it expected to find nothing."36 Or, to put this in more Shakespearean terms, when it finds something to its purpose nothing. The effect, however, is the same as in the classical Freudian scene. For just as the threat of castration leads, in Freud's narrative of the Oedipus complex, to a suspension of sexual desire and paralysis of the phallus known as the latency period, so in Sonnet 20 the superfluous presence of the young man's penis renders the speaker's penis likewise superfluous, at least in regard to the young man. The speaker finds his sexual impulses blocked, and this pacifying of desire helps to constitute the young man as something more like an art object than a sexual object. Indeed, it turns him into something like the perfume bottle of Sonnet five, which is to say, the object of a sonnet.

In attempting to move from sublimation to the sublime, my argument may seem to have landed in a contradiction. For my analysis of Sonnet 5 emphasized the defeminizing aspects of Shakespearean sublimation, but my reading of Sonnet 20 insists on its feminizing of a masculine sublime. Even if there is a contradiction here, it is Shakespeare's rather than my own. But, I would claim, it is less a contradiction than a multiplication of strategies to effect the same end. For the two poems share this double aim: to invoke the threat of sodomy so as to expel or foreclose it, and to invoke a poetics of the sublime so as to reject it in favor of a poetics of the beautiful. Sodomy and sublimity are engaged and neutralized as a linked pair. While somewhat idealized, then, the young man does not attain the inhuman and terrifying loftiness of the Petrarchan mistress. This sublime height, and depth, are avoided because they are also the realm where sodomy and its divine punishment dwell.

My argument thus far has focused on Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man—admittedly, the bulk of the sequence. But what of the equally famous sonnets to the so-called Dark Lady? At first glance, they would seem to conform roughly to the aesthetic principles I have already described. Sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," systematically negates the idealizing tropes of Petrarchan poetry, thus producing a desublimated and presumably more "human" mistress—a slightly earthier counterpart to the young man.

Things are not so simple, however. As Jonathan Goldberg has pointed out, "the threatening sexuality that the dark lady represents—outside marriage and promiscuous and dangerous to the homosocial order—is closer to sodomy than almost anything suggested in the sonnets to the young man." To Goldberg's list of sodomitical attributes