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Sonnet XXIII

As an <u>unperfect actor</u> on the <u>stage</u>,
Who with his <u>fear</u> is put beside his <u>part</u>,
Or some <u>fierce thing</u> replete with too much <u>rage</u>,
Whose strength's abundance weakens his own <u>heart</u>;
So I, for <u>fear of trust</u>, forget to say   5
The <u>perfect</u> ceremony of love's rite,
And in mine own love's strength seem to decay,
O'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might.
O! let my books be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,   10
Who plead for love, and look for recompense,
More than that tongue that more hath more express'd.
  O! learn to read what silent love hath writ:
  To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit.

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Annotating with a Purpose: Theatrical Self-Reflexivity in Sonnet 23

or

How to Stage Silent Love, with Language, in a Sonnet

I: Introduction: *Sonnet 23* and its theatrically self-reflexive language

Sonnet 23 is compelling because it merges the actor's and playwright's world of the theatre with the world of the poet's language in a way that is alchemical in its outcome. Without the images of the tongue-tied actor on the stage, there would be no "hear[ing] with eyes" the intense written or gestured "silent love" the speaker wants to express to the addressee through "books" or "looks." No three words refer to the world of the theatre more directly and unequivocally than "actor," "stage," and "part." More so than any other sonnet in the sequence, *Sonnet 23* evokes images from the stage that carry with them an almost signature-like stamp from the world of a performer. In a review on Shakespearean metadrama, Harold Fisch states that much literary criticism "sees Shakespeare as occupied (even when he seems to be talking of other things) with the problem of art itself" (Fisch 279). Shakespeare's art is, of course, expressed through his language. In Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, the speaker is mostly 'talking of other things' than the theatre, and yet theatrical references weave themselves through many sonnets and reveal a dramatic approach to poetry. As Patrick Cheney points out, "Shakespeare's insertion of this theatrical discourse into his sonnet sequence [is] unusual enough during the period to warrant attention" (Cheney 333). Most sonnets up until Shakespeare's time built on the Petrarchan form and revolved around praising idealized high-status females. Shakespeare's sonnet sequence, being addressed in part to a young man, "[m]ust have struck the 1609 reader as a radical disruption of the conventional narrative of erotic courtship" (Schoenfeldt 240).

To blend written poetry with the "newer, more socially compromising medium of staged theatre [was something] [n]o other English Renaissance sonnet sequence does"[1] in such explicit fashion (Cheney 334). The fact that Shakespeare wrote from the position of a man of the theatre and professional actor whose sonnet sequence addresses a young man and a dark lady offers an

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[1] Other sonnet sequences such as Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* or John Donne's *Holy Sonnets* have dramatic elements, but neither employs the language of the stage as explicitly as Shakespeare does, and with such technical terms.

"extra dimension" to the many theatrical references and allusions sprinkled throughout the sonnets (cf. Cheney 333). Meredith Anne Skura points out that "the sonnets contain a provocative number of references to the stage [even though] the stage is not what the poet is writing about" (Skura 219). Skura adds that the stage metaphor appears peripheral at first, "merely a figure for the sonnet's ultimate concern with something else," but it "turns out to be more important than it seems" (cf. Skura 219) because *Sonnet 23* is the sonnet with the most explicit and theatrically most self-referential terms and similes that enable the speaker to express what he initially describes as impossible ("forget to say"), namely the extent of his love. If the speaker had begun with "O! let my books be then the eloquence," and if he had asked the addressee directly to read his "silent love" in his writing ("books") or in his gestures and actions ("looks"), the sonnet would not be successful. The theatrical similes and the images they evoke are necessary to successfully express the love the speaker feels for the addressee. In that sense, *Sonnet 23* is "a thrilling, deeply convincing staging of the [speaker's] inner life," and it is, with its theatrical images, "an intimate performance" in that it stages "silent love" with language (cf. Greenblatt 249).

While interpretational essays and commentaries by literary scholars such as Margaret Anne Skura, Stephen Greenblatt, Patrick Cheney, Stephen Booth, William B. Worthen, David Schalwyk, Helen Vendler, Neil L. Rudenstine, Michael C. Schoenfeldt, Paul Edmondson and Stanley Wells have explored the performative and theatrical self-reflexive aspect of Shakespeare's sonnets and works, the standard annotated editions[2] of *Sonnet 23* neglect to convey the depth in meaning of the speaker's theatrical references and the additional self-reflexive dramatic and philosophical dimension these references incur. Frequently, the editors of existing standard sonnet annotations leave out relevant information altogether as is the case with theatrical self-reflexivity and its purpose in *Sonnet 23*.

II: The problem with current standard annotations of *Sonnet 23*

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[2] The standard annotated editions used in this essay are the Arden edition, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones, the Cambridge edition, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, the Oxford edition, edited by Colin Burrow, and the Yale edition, edited by Stephen Booth

By close-reading some of the existing annotations (Arden, Cambridge, Oxford, Yale) given for theatrical words, terms or metaphors in *Sonnet 23*, and by exploring the arbitrary categories and levels of comprehension these existing annotations fall into, this essay will compare them with annotation-examples according to the digital *Tuebingen Explanatory Annotation System (TEASys)* with its eight categories (1-8) and three ascending levels (I-III). Furthermore, this essay will attempt to show that, through the more methodized approach of *TEASys*, annotations gain in depth, and an important Shakespearean concept such as theatrically self-reflexive language and its purpose is more readily understood by the reader.

"Unperfect actor," *Sonnet 23*, line 1, as annotated by the standard editions:

As an instance of a problematic annotation, *The Arden Shakespeare*'s editor, Katherine Duncan-Jones, gives a one-dimensional annotation for "unperfect actor." She explains an "unperfect actor" to be "an actor who is *not* 'word-perfect', [who] does *not* know his lines correctly" (Duncan-Jones 156, *emphases mine*). In an equally one-dimensional language annotation, the editor of *The New Cambridge's Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans, explains an "unperfect actor" to be "an actor who is not word-perfect" or even "unskilled" (Blakemore Evans 128). Similarly, the editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare*, Colin Burrow, defines an "unperfect actor" as one "who does not properly know his lines" (Burrow 426). The "unperfect actor" Duncan-Jones, Blakemore Evans and Burrow describe lacks in memory, lines and talent ("not word-perfect", "not know his lines," "unskilled"). The editor of the Yale edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Stephen Booth, attempts to make the connection between "unperfect" and "perfect" in line 6 in respect to performance by giving an example from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in which "perfect" is used to describe an actor who seeks to be word-perfect (cf. Booth 171). However, Booth does not explain what it means for "perfect/unperfect" to be used as theatrically self-referential language.

Duncan-Jones, Blakemore Evans, Burrow and Booth neglect to point out the unique usage of the word "unperfect," which was used by Shakespeare only once in all of his works, whereas "imperfect" was used by him many times. The choice to use the word "unperfect" instead of "imperfect" by a writer proven to be deeply aware of how a minute linguistic nuance can change or enrich a word's and text's meaning ought to be addressed in an annotation. If what Duncan-Jones, Blakemore Evans, Burrow and Booth state, namely that "unperfect" is "not word-

perfect" because Shakespeare uses "perfect" in other works to mean a character who performs his part 'perfectly', then the unique use of "unperfect" instead of "imperfect" might be caused by "unperfect" relating to performance quality alone. However, neither do the annotators explain their reasoning behind linking two antonyms via a theatrically linguistic background, nor do they offer any evidence for such a conclusion, which is really only an assumption at this point.

Blakemore Evans and Burr cite intertextual sources (*Coriolanus* and *Love's Labour's Lost* respectively) and explain "unperfect" to mean an actor who is "not word-perfect," but they do not follow through on their argumentation which begs the question of the uniqueness of "unperfect" in relation to performance. The explanation of the performance-related use of the word "unperfect" is missing, and with it the relation and echo of "unperfect" to "perfect" in line 6. If "unperfect" refers to an actor's script issue, the implication that "the perfect ceremony of love's rite" in line 6 refers to the speaker's social script issue is missing as well. With such 'unperfect' levels of explanation and premises, a whole dimension of meaning is lost. Some of the editors state the "unperfect/perfect" echo of lines 1 and 6, but none of them explains to the reader the underlying reminder of language being used to draw a comparison between an actor on a stage, and a person within society's stage. Moreover, the *OED* defines "unperfect" first and foremost as "not fully developed" and "incomplete," which brings a notion of maturity to the meaning of "unperfect" where Duncan-Jones solely sees an actor who "does not know his lines correctly" and is arguably a bad actor versus an unready one (Duncan-Jones 156).

Booth attempts to illustrate the sonnet speaker's theatrical self-reflexivity when he reminds the reader that Shakespeare was an actor and that "there is a suggestion of a positive fault inherent in being an actor" (Booth 171). However, Booth does not explain to the reader how he arrived at this conclusion other than through biographical speculation. Consequently, the reader has the choice of understanding an "unperfect actor" to mean a bad actor (Duncan-Jones; Blakemore Evans; Burrow), an embarrassed actor (Booth) or an actor, as Paul Edmondson suggests, who is either "dull" or someone who "overacts" (Edmondson 84). None of these interpretations take into consideration the *OED*'s definition of "unperfect" as "not fully developed" and, again, none point out the uniqueness of the word (*OED*). After all, if "unperfect" describes performance quality alone, then the actor might not be "unskilled," but, as the comparison with the speaker in love suggests, the actor might be as overwhelmed by his 'unreadiness' to express himself as is the speaker (cf. Blakemore Evans; cf. *OED*). The latter

would imply that the actor is not a bad actor, but an artist who cares as much about his art as does the speaker for his beloved. Nowhere in the existing annotations of "unperfect" is this interpretation - that builds on the *OED*'s first meaning of the word - touched upon or developed.

III: Application of TEASys: Examples of how TEASys annotations achieve greater meaning in comparison to standard annotations

Theatrical self-reflexivity in William Shakespeare's *Sonnet 23* reveals itself in six of the eight categories laid out by the digital *Tuebingen Explanatory Annotation System (TEASys).* The latter's model presents a set of instructions on how to annotate specific words or passages, how to build on already-existing annotations with the help of eight categories, and how to enrich a learning reader's understanding of texts with an accessible, interactive annotation system within the digital medium (cf. Bauer & Zirker). By applying *TEASys*' first six categories of linguistic, formal, intratextual, intertextual, contextual and interpretational annotation guidelines to *Sonnet 23*, theatrical self-reflexivity can be elucidated by certain theatrical words and expressions the sonnet employs, by the form it takes, by recurring motifs and words throughout Shakespeare's entire sonnet sequence, by other related texts written during the English Renaissance, by the historical and cultural context the poems are situated in, and by interpreting all of the above with the help of current and past literary criticism. *TEASys* annotations are presented on three levels of complexity ranging from a brief explanation to a more detailed one, to a third, in-depth interpretation. With *TEASys* being digital, it is at the reader's discretion how much additional knowledge is needed for their better understanding of the text. The advantage of an electronic platform of learning is, first and foremost, that it offers more explanation space than do physical text annotations. A virtual platform such as *TEASys* also evolves more quickly than book annotations due to user interactions and feedback. These advantages ought to be taken into consideration when comparing a virtual annotation system with the limited space editors of physical annotations face.

Latter editors, in an attempt to enrich their annotations' dimensions, often drop clues in regards to important concepts and authorial conceits that are difficult to decipher for a learning reader. Too often these clues are cryptic and ask more questions than they answer. The *TEASys'*

aim is to create more purposeful annotations that walk the reader through the annotators' reasoning without overwhelming her or him with too much obligatory information.

As example: *TEASys*-annotation for "unperfect actor" in *Sonnet 23*, line 1:

L1: Language:

"Unperfect." Something that is either "not fully developed" or "flawed" (*OED*).

L1: Intratext:

"[T]hy fair imperfect shade" (*Sonnet 43*, line 11).

L2: Intertext:

"Unperfect" is used only once in all of Shakespeare's works, whereas "imperfect" is used frequently. Examples include the following:

"Stay, you imperfect speakers" (*Macbeth*, Act I.iii.69).
"Why then your other senses grow imperfect" (*King Lear* IV.iv.5).
 "It is a judgement maimed and most imperfect" (*Othello* I.iii.99).

"Unperfect" is used in the 1611 *King James Bible* as originally translated from Hebrew as "the still unformed embryonic substance:"
"Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect" (*Psalms 139:16 KJV*).

L2: Context:

Shakespeare was an actor before he became a playwright. Renaissance "players [were] classed with common vagrants" according to the "Act for the punishment of Vagabonds" of 1572 (Worthen 214). A player/actor could be arrested unless he had a royal patron. An actor without a patron was viewed as nothing more than a common vagrant, and patrons could neither be relied nor counted on. Economically speaking, an actor's life was exceedingly unstable. Furthermore, actors had no social standing without patronage. An actor's life was a balance act between social

ostracism and poverty or, if successful with a patron, a celebrated life that could, at any moment, slide back into poverty and oblivion. Shakespeare's lasting career, therefore, was exceptional.

L3: Context:

Much of Renaissance thinking was shaped by the idea of the 'theatrum mundi," which related and compared the theatre-stage to the world-stage, the theatre-actor to the person as actor in the world. As an example, "Holinshed[3] reports that, "in her response to a parliamentary petition for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, Queen Elizabeth told the joint delegation of lords and commons, 'we princes…are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world'" (Montrose 76). The ruler of England publicly compared her existence as queen on the real-world-stage to the theatrical stage, thereby giving a glimpse of Renaissance thinking and philosophy.

L3: Interpretation:

"Unperfect" in line 1 of *Sonnet 23* refers to an actual actor who is either "not word-perfect" (Duncan-Jones, Blakemore Evans), or "not fully developed" (*OED, KJV*). There is a vast difference between the two in plausible meaning: the former suggests a negation, the latter suggests potential. The former suggests a bad actor, the latter an actor who is not ready, but might become ready at a later date. The fact that Shakespeare only used the word "unperfect" once in all of his works, namely here, in *Sonnet 23*, cannot be ignored. The difference between "unperfect" and "imperfect," which he used frequently, might be that it is used in the sense of the *OED*'s "not fully developed" (*OED*). Perhaps "unperfect" was used only once because it was meant to be purely performance-related and to serve as the contrast to a "word-perfect" actor. Since line 6 uses the antonym to "unperfect," "perfect," a correlation can be drawn between the actor on stage not being "word-perfect," and the poet on the real-world-stage forgetting to "say/The perfect ceremony of love's rite." Shakespeare, as an actor/poet might choose "unperfect" over "imperfect:" He might prefer to describe his actor as "unperfect" in his 'unreadiness' that leaves hope for improvement rather than being called hopelessly 'unskilled'.

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[3] Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* of 1587 were some of Shakespeare's most poignant historical sources. The *Chronicles* also shed great insight into Renaissance thinking and philosophy, such as the concept of the 'theatrum mundi'.

Interestingly, it is the poet who, by describing the actor's failure of spoken language with his own written language, turns such failure into a successful sonnet. Therefore, what is impossible for the actor on the stage or the playwright who wrote the actor's lines to express, namely the silence caused by an overabundance of emotion or fear, is possible to express by the poet. Contrastingly, without the theatrical reference to the "unperfect actor"['s] silence, the poet might not be able to find the "right" language to express such silence in writing. Such at-home-ness with metatheatrical paradox, as Helen Vendler calls it, is important whenever Shakespeare uses theatrically self-referential language (cf. Vendler 138).

<u>"As […]/So," "fear," "put beside his part," as annotated by the standard editions, lines 1-6</u>
Similarly, the next words or phrases the existing annotations refer to with respect to theatrically self-reflexive language are neither anchored in the same locations, nor do they help the reader grasp the purpose behind such metatheatrical allusions. Duncan-Jones gives a definition of the phrase "is put beside his part," thereby leaving out a definition of "fear" that drives the phrase's context. She explains the phrase to mean someone, presumably the 'unperfect actor' who "forgets his lines, loses his mastery of his role: 'part' was the technical term for the lines and cues to be learned by an actor" (Duncan-Jones 22). Duncan-Jones, then, appears to anchor her annotation on "put beside" and "part" without explaining why she does so in an interpretive note. Neither does Duncan-Jones explain to the reader that her definition of "forgets his lines" is based on the word "beside." She does not address the reason behind the actor's forgetting his part ("fear"). Duncan-Jones' annotation of the entire line is successful at demonstrating a strong theatrically self-referential simile and its likely meaning, but she fails to extrapolate just why such a simile is important in relation to a world-as-stage/theatrum mundi trope. She also fails at walking readers through her annotation's reasoning so they can trace and parse her definitions in a systematic manner. Duncan-Jones never addresses the initial "As" that introduces the theatrical simile, therefore the reader is not guided by her through said simile and what its eventual purpose is, namely the comparison of the failing actor on the stage to the poet within the world-stage ("so I"). Both 'actors' have a script ("part") to adhere to, and both fail at it (initially). The fact that the failure is expressed with a theatrical simile makes all the difference because it draws attention to how deeply scripted and dramatic life is. Duncan-Jones, as do the other annotators,

does not explain the 'what', the 'how', and the 'why' behind her annotations, which does little to engage the reader's own thinking.

Burrow's annotation is closest to Duncan-Jones' in this instance. He anchors his annotation on the whole line of "with his fear is put beside his part." As does Duncan-Jones, he explains it to mean an actor or person who "is made to forget his part by stage fright" (Burrow 426). Unlike Duncan-Jones, Booth, or Blakemore Evans, Burrow defines "fear" as the theatrically self-referential term "stage fright" [4](Burrow 426). Booth implies that "fear" causes the "lapse in memory," but he does not explain it further (Booth 171). Burrow asserts that it is due to stage fright that the actor/speaker is so "put besides" himself. However, Burrow does not take this bit of knowledge any further to explain to the reader the theatrically-loaded comparison of 'stage fright' to real life: "*As* an unperfect actor on the stage" is afflicted by stage fright that he goes off script, "*so* I," the sonnet speaker, is transported out of his social and professional script. Booth and Blakemore Evans both home in on "put besides" as "put out of, made to forget" (cf. Booth 171; cf. Blakemore Evans). They do not explain the background of the theatrical simile, however. Without defining the echoing comparisons between the stage and the world-stage ("As/So I," "unperfect/perfect," "with his fear/for fear," "put beside/forget," "part/perfect ceremony of love's rite," "replete/o'ercharged"), the background behind the theatrical simile's purpose remains arcane. Once more, the annotators anchor their definitions on certain arbitrary words and phrases that they deem important, but they do not allow the reader to follow their argumentation and deduction. Their random choices of annotations also do not help to grasp the sonnet as a whole.

Booth is the only annotator who gives a solid explanation of the construct of the simile. He clarifies, in detail, how the "As…Or" structure "introduces a parallel construction that presents an alternative for the whole of lines 1 and 2" (Booth 171). After all, both the "actor" and the "fierce thing" can serve as point of comparison to the speaker's "so I." None of the annotators mention that the second simile is not, strictly speaking, a simile or a direct comparison: the "or *as* some fierce thing" is implied in the initial sentence construct, but, nonetheless, the "as[5]" is not there.

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[4] The term "stage fright" was not used until 1876 (*OED; Merriam-Webster*).
[5] Another reason for leaving out the "as" in line 3 might have been that it sounds better in respect to rhyme, rhythm, and melodiousness. However, neither said reason for leaving out the "as," nor the lack of a true comparison or simile the missing "as" represents are mentioned by the annotators.

As example: TEASys-annotation for "As/ […] So I, […] love's rite" - *Sonnet 23*, lines 1-6

L1: Language:

"Fear." "The emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger" (*OED*).

"Fierce." "Of formidable wild and intractable temper, like a wild beast" (*OED*).

"Perfect." "Of a lesson, part, etc.: accurately or thoroughly learned, esp. by heart or by rote" (*OED*).

"Thing." Amongst other meanings, it euphemistically refers to "[t]he genitals" (*OED*).

"Unperfect." Something that is either "not fully developed" or "flawed" (*OED*). (Link to "unperfect actor" annotation.)

L1: Form:

"As…So I" is a simile. The speaker of the poem compares his inability to speak about his love to the actor's inability to speak his lines. The simile's construct compares the speaker's situation with that of the actor, and then compares his situation with a "fierce thing," if the second "as" is assumed: "As an unperfect actor on the stage […]

> Or [as] some fierce thing […]
>
> So I […].

Since the second "as" does not exist in the sonnet, it is assumed, but it is not perfectly clear if the simile is meant to include lines 3 and 4. Booth states that the "As…Or" structure "introduces a parallel construction that presents an alternative for the whole of lines 1 and 2" (Booth 171), namely lines 3 and 4.

L2: Intertext for "thing"

"By adding one *thing* to my purpose nothing" (*Sonnet 20*, line 12).

"She that's a maid now […] shall not be a maid long unless *things* be cut shorter" (*King Lear, I.v.46*).

L2: Intertext for "As […] part"

Lines 1-2 of *Sonnet 23* are very similar to Coriolanus's:

"Like a dull actor now,

I have forgot my part, and I am out,

Even to a full disgrace" (*Coriolanus*, Act 5, iii, 46-48).

L2: Context:

- Renaissance sonnets were originally written as a kind of courtier's game for a small circle of readers with the challenge of "sounding as intimate, revealing, and emotionally vulnerable as possible, without actually disclosing anything compromising to anyone outside the innermost circle" (Greenblatt 234). It was key to convey as much personal information as possible while remaining undetected. The only person that would have been able to identify the sonnet's author was the addressee. For the rest of the readers, the sonnet had to remain coded (cf. Greenblatt 249) because nothing "compromising [could be circulated] to anyone outside the innermost circle" (Greenblatt 234). "Sonnets always carried an air of risk" (Greenblatt 234). For a sonnet to be "too cautious [was] insipid and would only show the poet to be a bore; sonnets that were transparent could give mortal offense" (Greenblatt 234).
- Another important contextual matter was that *Sonnet 23* is introduced by a simile of an actor on a stage, which had been Shakespeare's profession. Stephen Booth points out in his note on *Sonnet 111* that "William Shakespeare, actor, provided for himself by public means" (Booth 359).
- Yet another important contextual fact is that Renaissance theaters often stood next to bear-baiting and cock-fighting pits. All three were considered entertaining (see L3 / Interpretation).

L3: Interpretation:

Since writing sonnets was a balance act of being intimate and yet discreet, the fact that the image of the actor is not given directly, but as a simile, makes sense. The theatrical image is there, but the fact of it is not. *Sonnet 23* is seductive because it reveals so much while having a "built-in principle of deniability" (Greenblatt 230). The first image may be of an actor on a stage, but it is created by a simile that solely compares the speaker to an actor ("As"). The simile allows *Sonnet 23*'s speaker to escape the degrading label of the Renaissance actor while still evoking the image of him. *Sonnet 23*'s self-referential theatricality, as the first line shows, hides in plain sight, which was viewed as the ultimate achievement amongst Renaissance sonneteers:

to bare one's soul and be personal while eluding public identification and rigid interpretation. However, the one uncompromising fact of *Sonnet 23* remains, namely that it introduces itself with an image from the theatre, despite the simile and despite the other images and comparisons that follow. Such an introduction demonstrates a dramatic approach to poetry and evokes the world of the stage. Neil L. Rudenstine sums up the theatrically self-reflexive aspect of *Sonnet 23* by indicating that the drama of the speaker's helplessness ("fear," "put beside," "fear of," "forget," "decay," "O'ercharged with burthen," "plead") in the face of the beloved's power to give or withhold "is a metaphor for the very idea of performance, for the theatre, and for art—as well as for the ultimate dependence of actors (or poets) and their 'productions' on the response of their audiences" (cf. Rudenstine 37).

Sonnet 23 stands out in its success of capturing intensely felt love with theatrical images that enable the speaker to, paradoxically, demonstrate his eloquence by evoking a tongue-tied actor. Shakespeare's poem moreover demonstrates the speaker's skill at revealing the truth behind a linguistic paradox (a tongue-tied actor becomes written "eloquence," silent "books" or "looks" as "eloquence," and "to hear with eyes") in a poetic and cunning manner. *Sonnet 23* flaunts "a witty conceit by showing [the speaker's] lack of wit" (Skura 216) in that it evokes the theatrical image of a tongue-tied actor to express the speaker's eloquent "silent love." The speaker demonstrates a "paradoxically selfless self-assertion in love […that] always resembles the actor's achievement of subjectivity" (Skura 216). The speaker evokes the actor's humility in front of an audience, while also evoking his authority ("O! Learn"). Both the actor and the fierce thing have lost control over their mind and body. They cannot do the things they are called upon to do (speak/fight) and are portrayed as helpless ("put beside," "weakens"). However, the images of the actor's tongue-tiedness and the animal's excessive rage allow the speaker to overcome *his* stifled expression within the sonnet. There is too much love in the speaker's heart to vocally express it, he claims with humility ("o'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might"), just as he is expressing his love verbally by evoking theatrical images of self-defeating excess ("unperfect actor-fear-beside his part/ fierce thing-too much rage- weakens his own heart"). *Sonnet 23* shows that language can express love ("mine own love's might," "silent love") while initially claiming, in a *praeteritio*, that it is impossible to do so ("fear," "I forget to say,"

"decay")[6]. *Sonnet 23* is both humble ("As an unperfect actor," "weakens his own he/art") and didactic (to possess "love's fine wit" means to be able to "hear with eyes"). *Sonnet 23* is both full of love, but at the same time, full of "rage:" The speaker's love is "tinged with hostility" (Skura 219) and evokes images of "fierce thing[s]" imploding with "rage," likely because falling in love and confessing one's love exposes one's soul against one's will. Such intense love can be beautiful (the love depicted in the "books" or "looks"), humiliating (the "unperfect actor on the stage" fully exposed to the audience's judgement), or even self-destructive (the "fierce thing" that is so full of fury that it has been rendered weak ("weakens his own heart")).

Theaters during the Renaissance were situated right next to cock-fighting pits and bear-baiting arenas. The seemingly abrupt 'cut' from the speaker's image of the actor on stage to a fierce animal does not sound so implausible when one keeps in mind the violent games happening right next door to the Elizabethan theaters. Neither is it improbable that the sonnet speaker would think of his own frustrated love when watching the common sight of a chained bear's exasperated rage ("replete with too much rage") as he is being attacked by wild dogs. The more the bear rages, the quicker his energy drains, and the quicker he will self-destruct. The more impassioned the actor, the more tongue-tied he becomes; the more impassioned the speaker/poet, the more self-defeating he becomes in his attempt to express love. Both the actor and the animals, after all, performed for the audience's amusement. The fact that the animals' performance was deadly and the audience's taste cruel might not have escaped the sonnet speaker when he describes a failing actor shortly followed by an animal consumed by its own desperate attempt at survival. Love and violence, during the Renaissance, were paradoxically close. The intensity of love was equally understood as being violent and self-destructive.[7] The actor's performance is intimated to be as violent as the blood sport next door.

As Booth points out, it is difficult in this instance to shy away from biographical information: "Shakespeare's profession is - and presumably always was - known to his readers

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[6] It is much like the paradoxical colloquial expression: "I can't tell you how much I love you." - But you just did. By stating the inexpressible love as inexpressible, the speaker has rendered it expressible.

[7] This goes back to the theory of the *Four Humours* of ancient Greece and Rome as put forward by Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen. Throughout the Renaissance, it was commonly understood that, when the humors were in balance, a person was healthy. When the humors were out of balance by something such as intense love and passion, a person was unhealthy. An early example of the humors is given in Bartholomaeus Anglicus' *De Propriatibus Rerum* of 1240, translated into English in the late 15th Century.

and this line is colored by […] the pertinence to the particular circumstances of its author's life."
(Booth 354).[8] This background information gives a "witty, pun-like extra-dimension to
statements complete and meaningful in themselves" (Booth 354). *Sonnet 23* aligns the images of
an actor, a fierce animal or someone's excessive lust or rage to "explore the relationship between
life and stage, between the world and the word" (McDonald 55).

Booth mentions that "thing" can also mean "generative organ" as its use in *Sonnet 20*[9] makes
rather obvious (Booth 164). Such a meaning adds a layer of lust, if not obsession, to the sonnet.
Shakespeare shared "the Renaissance's delight in language […] and its pleasure in verbal
games," which would allow "fierce thing" to mean either passionate human, beast or lust, or all
three (McDonald 44). If "thing" is understood in a sexual way, the speaker is bemoaning that he
suffers from too much lust for the addressee. The sexual subtext is important because some-
"thing" out of control creates more drama than elaborate flattery. The speaker's love is neither

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[8] Booth mentions Shakespeare's background as an actor in his notes on *Sonnet 110*, and he explains it in
his notes on *Sonnet 111*:

> Alas, 'tis true, I have gone here and there
> And made myself a motley to the view
>
> Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear (*Sonnet 110*, 1-3).

There is a similarity in sentiment of the speaker's self-denigration and repugnance over his shortcomings
in *Sonnet 23* and *Sonnet 110*. *Sonnet 23* evokes the image of a failing actor in front of an audience
followed by the failure (at survival?) of a "fierce thing," arguably an animal. *Sonnet 110* suggests that the
speaker bemoans his having played the fool ("motley") for an ungrateful audience by selling himself and
his "most dear" thoughts and feelings cheaply (cf. Booth 354). The fact that the speaker uses the word
"gored," which is usually used in a violent hunting or fighting scenario, also speaks volumes about the
relation between both actor and animal playing the fool for an audience's pleasure. The word "gored" in
relation to bear-baiting and animal fights is clear enough. However, "gored" in relation to an actor on the
stage who plays the fool for others takes on an extra-dimension that reveals the power of language to
make or break a person: "Ambiguity can be deadly" and wordplay, here, is "a tool for seriously exploring
the discrepancy between surface and substance" (McDonald 46, 47).

[9] "By adding one thing to my purpose nothing" of *Sonnet 20*, line 12, is described in great detail by Booth
to mean "penis" (cf. Booth 164-165; 171). He goes into detail about the bawdy undertone of "thing,"
whereas Duncan-Jones skirts the indecorous description and points to its counterpart instead: "equivalent
to a woman's sexual parts" (Duncan-Jones 151).

innocent nor pretty, but light and dark, passionate and violent, and the language used to describe it is often paradoxical and ambiguous. "[S]ome fierce thing" can mean both "some savage beast or some fiercely passionate human being," and "generative organ/penis" (Duncan-Jones 23; cf. Booth 164; cf. *OED*). The "fierce thing" is so enraged that its impulses turn on itself. In comparison, the speaker's excessive lust and passion "weaken[] his own heart." Since "heart" rhymes with "art," the excessive lust might not only affect the speaker's "heart," but also his "art," namely his writing. By painting a picture - with language - of deeply disturbing failures such as public humiliation (the actor) and self-destructive rage, lust, or obsession (the "fierce thing"), the speaker is able to convey to the reader the feeling of a love so overwhelming that it makes one speechless. By using words and images of helplessness ("beside his part"-"weakens his own heart"-"mine own love's strength seem to decay"/"O'ercharged with burthen") and humility ("for fear of trust"- "plead for love"), the speaker is not just using language to express his love, but he is also begging to be loved in return ("look for recompense").

These reflections lead to an interpretive annotation of the sonnet as a whole:

Sonnet 23 is both humble and brazen at the same time. The speaker "plead[s] for love, and look[s] for recompense," to be loved back, but the speaker also instructs the addressee how to do that ("O! learn to read […]"/"To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit")[10]. The language of humility and the images of failure appear to make the speaker look helpless and hopeless in love, but he is also cleverly and presumptuously implying that, to have "love's fine wit," means to love intelligently ("wit") by reading the speaker's silence (the "dumb presagers [reveal] his speaking breast"). As Greenblatt points out: "Even while slyly criticizing his beloved — or perhaps because he is slyly criticizing him — [the speaker] plays at utter subservience" (Greenblatt 249).

Shakespeare, in all of his works, is ever alert to the power of ambiguous language. It can enchant just as well as it can deceive. In many of his plays, Shakespeare explores both the power and danger of language by drawing attention to the theatricality of the play itself. Such exploration is an important dimension of Shakespeare's work because it questions, as Paul

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[10] *Sonnet 23* has to be taken in its entirety for this point. To compare one's situation to an actor failing and to a self-destructive animal stands in stark contrast with the last two lines. The last line drops all subservience. It is audacious, presumptuous even. But this is well hidden amongst humility.

Edmondson puts it, "the limits of theatre and the limits of language" (Edmondson 84). In *Sonnet 23*, the "unperfect actor" cannot say what he needs to say on stage. The actor cannot do the very thing that is needed from him in the theatre, namely to interpret and express words and emotions for the audience. The speaker is equally afraid ("fear of trust") that he may not be able to express the full extent of his love with language ("decay" in "mine own love's strength"/ "o'ercharged […] mine own love's might").The poet is afraid of failing at the very thing he is called upon to do: to express emotions with language. *Sonnet 23*, therefore, brings up both the limit of theatre and the limit of language. Just because the addressee can see and read the written "books" full of the speaker's "silent love," doesn't mean that he can feel it. To be able to feel it, the addressee might need an actor to interpret the "books." Therefore, both the limits of language and the limits of theatre are tested. The poet blends both spheres in the end by letting a theatrical simile express the "silent love" the speaker feels.

   Sonnet 23, as do many of Shakespeare's plays[11], asks if "words [can] create situations [or if] situations overwhelm words" [12] (Barton 26). Is it possible to "read what silent love hath writ" and to "hear with eyes" what the speaker's written poems ("books") or silent actions ("looks") attempt to express? Can love be heard, or be seen, or can it only be felt in an inexplicable manner that goes beyond oral and written language? When the sonnet's speaker invokes theatrically self-reflexive language, *Sonnet 23* takes on philosophical meaning: it seeks the line between language being either the gap or the bridge between human beings, between words as "servants of reality," or "reality's masters" (cf. Barton 19; 21). Theatrical terms and metaphors are an ever-present reminder of the fact that language is both 'the power of language' and 'the language of power': the subservient language of the speaker also undermines the addressee's authority when it

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[11] Hamlet adds his own targeted and artificial language to the play-within-the-play to tease a kind of cathartic admission of guilt out of his uncle Claudio. Claudio contaminates people's ears with both linguistic and actual poison. Prospero's words alone carry enough magic to transform the world around him. Cordelia lacks the "right" words to express "the perfect ceremony of love's rite" to her father, King Lear, who stands on such linguistic ceremony. Consequentially, Cordelia is punished with banishment and death. Iago "pours […] pestilence into [Othello's] ear" (*Othello, II, iii, 265*) and proves that language can be more powerful than "ocular proof" (*Othello, III, iii, 370*). Macbeth is undone by a linguistic equivocation. Language, therefore, has the power to create, persuade or destroy.

[12] The implication of this statement is founded upon famous linguistic examples of language doing something instead of solely representing something. A prime example of such a performative utterance is J.L. Austin's mention of the sentence "I pronounce you husband and wife," which enacts the legal (and arguably sacred) act of marriage instead of just describing it.

stealthily instructs him in matters of intelligent love ("To hear with eyes belongs to love's fine wit"). Theatrically self-reflexive language in *Sonnet 23* also alerts the reader to the fact that, at times, the most powerful language is silence. For an actor, playwright and poet to, paradoxically, use theatrical language to remind the reader that sometimes spoken words cannot express inexpressible concepts such as true love, only silence can ("books"/"looks"[13]) is powerful indeed." *Sonnet 23* demonstrates the truth of the seeming paradox of silence speaking louder than spoken words through a theatrical simile and the images it elicits.

<u>"Heart," as annotated by the standard editions, *Sonnet 23*, line 4:</u>

The only annotator who points out the likely wordplay of "heart" and "art" is Booth. Blakemore-Evans defines the fierce thing's "heart" as the creature's purpose, but neither he nor Duncan-Jones nor Burrow emphasize what Booth suggests, namely that Shakespeare might have "picked the word because its pronunciation invited confusion with 'art'" (cf. Blakemore Evans; Booth 171). Booth even declares that, in both *Sonnet 23* and *24*, these two words [heart/art] capsule the wit of the poem" (Booth 174). Since the speaker's heart's purpose *is* his art, namely his eloquence that allows him to express his love, the mentioning of the paronomasia is important. Once more, Booth is the only annotator who alludes to this extra-dimension of the "power of what words can do" (McDonald 55). It is as though "the dramatist begins playfully to examine the implications of his play, and [...] the poet asks the same questions of language" (McDonald 55).

<u>As example: TEASys-annotation for "heart" in *Sonnet 23*, line 4:</u>

<u>L1: Language:</u>

"Heart." "The vital, essential, significant, or operative part; the essence or core of something" (*OED*).

"Art." "The expression or application of creative skill and imagination" (*OED*).

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[13] This essay will not address the ongoing debate over "books" and the emended "looks." It will, however, treat both "books" and "looks" as something that can be read and understood by a reader and an audience through silent gestures. After all, "books" can describe gestures and therefore evoke "looks." Both can be read. Both ask the reader and audience to "hear with eyes" and to see with the heart.

L2: Form:

The use of "heart" in *Sonnet 23* is, in all likelihood, a paronomasia. It is suggestive of two meanings. "Heart" and "art" are also similar in sound, and they rhyme.

L2: Intertext:

Sonnet 24 , as does *Sonnet 23*, mentions "heart" in relation to "art."

"Mine eye hath played the painter and hath steeled

Thy beauty's form in table of my heart

[…]

Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art;

They draw but what they see, know not the heart" (*Sonnet 24*, lines 1-2, 13-14).

L3: Interpretation:

      To weaken the poet's "heart" also means to weaken his "art," his way of expressing his heart. The latter reveals, once more, the dynamic relationship between life and drama as expressed through language. To the speaker "art" and "heart" appear to merge into one entity. Equally important is the rhyme of "part" and "heart" as another example of the relationship and comparison between the stage and the world-stage. The actor's "part," poetically and melodiously speaking, has a direct impact on the speaker's "heart." The 'verse' of the actor (his part/art) rhymes with the "he/art" of the speaker's 'uni-verse' and purpose.

Similarly, in *Sonnet 24*, it is the poet's eye that has acted the part ("played") of the painter so to inscribe the addressee's beauty onto the canvas of the speaker's "heart." "Art" and "heart" form the rhyme in the final couplet of *Sonnet 24*. The poet's "art" is directly compared with the addressee's "heart." The speaker questions if his "art" can truly express the addressee's "heart." *Sonnet 23* pleads with the addressee to read the speaker's art in his "books," to let the speaker show him his love/"heart" instead of talking about it. Both *Sonnet 23* and *Sonnet 24* demonstrate a link between "art" and "heart," and they reveal an anxiety over the ability of art to capture what is in one's heart. In *Sonnet 23*, the speaker pleads with the addressee to "read" his art, his writings or poems ("books"), to grasp the full extent of what is in the speaker's "heart."

"For fear of trust," *Sonnet 23*, line 5, as annotated by the standard editions:

To give a final, powerful example of an existing annotation that does not equal *Sonnet 23*'s magnitude in meaning, one has to look no further than line 5. Duncan-Jones, Blakemore Evans, Burrow and Booth all chose to define "for fear of trust." They all define the phrase in a very similar manner. All existing annotations agree on two meanings: 1: "afraid to trust myself;" and 2: afraid of the responsibility (cf. Duncan-Jones, cf. Blakemore Evans, cf. Burrow, cf. Booth). The problem with these existing annotations is that, while they all seem to agree on the importance of this phrase, they do not offer full explanations of *why* the speaker is afraid to trust himself, or *what* the responsibility is that puts the speaker in a state of fear. Once more, the annotations ask more questions than they answer: is it the "unperfect actor," as Blakemore Evans hints in parentheses, who cannot trust his own skill? If so, how does this relate to the speaker? After all, "for fear of trust" is used after "so I," which refers first and foremost to the speaker, not the actor from line 1. The annotators' suggestion, it appears, is that just like the actor cannot trust his own ability of expressing himself, so does the speaker. However, none of the annotators explain this seemingly automatic linkage, which leaves the interpretation of the phrase to the conjecture of the reader. Blakemore Evans makes a half-hearted attempt to account for the relation between the actor and the speaker by pointing out the link between lines 5-6 with lines 1-2, but he does not support this link with an explanation.

At times as these, such short and unrefined existing annotations can seem just as frustrating to the learning reader as the sonnet speaker finds his line of expression. Underdeveloped and cryptic annotations might even cause more frustration in the reader than parsing the sonnet itself. Having to parse the annotator's thought process *and* the sonnet defies the purpose of annotations. Instead, it would be beneficial if the annotators explained their reasoning to the reader. That way, the reader can decide if she or he agrees or disagrees with an interpretation. Otherwise, reading annotations can seem a bit like watching an exclusive battle of wits fought by erudite literary critics in their own cryptic language, amongst themselves, which is anathema to the purpose of instructing a learning reader. In this regard, Booth is often the only annotator who makes a genuine effort to guide the reader through his thought processes.[14]

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[14] This essay lists Booth's edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets* as annotations because he chooses certain words or phrases, anchors them clearly, and then defines or explains them. However, his annotations are considered "analytic commentary" by Yale Nota Bene as the subtitle suggests.

As example: TEASys-annotation of "for fear of trust," *Sonnet 23*, line 5

L1: Language

"Fear." "The emotion of pain or uneasiness caused by the sense of impending danger" (*OED*).
"For fear of trust." An idiom that means "in order to avoid or prevent" (*OED*).

L1: Interpretation:

Burrow states that the "fear" of line 1 is stage fright. Since the term "stage fright" was not used until 1876, this is a possibility (*OED*).

L2: Intratext

"Fear" is used twice in *Sonnet 23*: in line 2 ("Who with his *fear* is put beside his part"), and in line 5 ("So I, for *fear* of trust, forget to say").

L2: Intertext

"It shall not fear where it should most mistrust" (*V&A, 1154*)

L3: Interpretation:

"[F]or fear of trust" could mean the following: 1: "afraid to trust myself;" and 2: afraid of the responsibility (cf. Duncan-Jones, cf. Blakemore Evans, cf. Burrow, cf. Booth). Booth offers a third possible meaning for "for fear of trust," namely "afraid that I will not be trusted," which suggests that the speaker is afraid of his audience not believing him (Booth 171). It also suggests that the speaker fears that his "books" are not persuasive enough. Booth also points out the "paradoxical conjunction of fear and trust" (Booth 171), which is important because it is the speaker's "fear of trust" that leads to the paradoxical "double stranglehold [of] not enough and too much at once" to say or feel that weaves itself through the entire sonnet (Vendler 138). Vendler's commentary builds on Booth's point by emphasizing the importance of *Sonnet 23*'s dramatic vacillation: "only a mentality at home with paradox could recognize and articulate this simultaneity of apparently opposite states" (Vendler 138). Vendler's point on *Sonnet 23*'s paradox is what makes the sonnet so unique: the speaker bemoans his lack of eloquence in love, but by evoking the theatrical images of a tongue-tied actor and a self-consuming animal, he

expresses his love after all by *showing* the addressee the "double stranglehold [of] not enough and too much at once" (Vendler 138). As Hamlet puts it: "this was sometime a paradox, but now the time gives it proof" (*Hamlet, III, i, 116-117*). *Sonnet 23* gives proof to a sometime paradox, and it does so with theatrical self-reflexivity. It also is paradoxically didactic in telling the addressee to learn to pay more attention to what is shown than to what is heard ("O! learn to read […] wit"), while "play[ing] at utter subservience" (Greenblatt 249) and humility ("unperfect," "fear," "weakens," "fear of trust," "decay," "O'ercharged").

Vendler adds to the theatrical point about "fear of trust" her reasoning that the speaker might liken himself to the actor on the stage "who in fear forgets his part because the presence of the audience provokes stage fright" (Vendler 137). Vendler also sees the "unnamed rival with the ready tongue" as causing the "tongue-tiedness rather as a fear of trusting the audience" (Vendler 138). Vendler's commentary on *Sonnet 23* adds two important points, namely the fear of the audience (she links "fear" of line 1 with "for fear of trust" of line 5), and the fear of the rival-poet who might be better with language than the speaker is at the moment (line 12). Skura observes that the "poet's paradoxically selfless self-assertion in love, or his achievement of subjectivity through serving the other, always resembles the actor's achievement onstage" (Skura 216). The fear of the audience is the link between the actor of line 1 and the speaker in line 5. The fear of the audience is heightened when taking into consideration that another writer is more eloquent than the speaker whose strong feelings have left him tongue-tied. Certainly, there is the suggestion of the rival poet using language frivolously. The rival poet's chattering flattery, the speaker seems to imply, does not express true love. Line 12's "*More* than that tongue that *more* hath *more* expressed" certainly uses "*more*" tautologically, and the bitterness in the speaker's voice over his rival's empty but copious language cannot be overlooked *(emphases mine)*. Therefore, the speaker's "fear of trust" might also be the fear of language and the ever-awareness that language, as love, can go both ways,[15] light and dark. As Russ McDonald points out as well: "much of the time [Shakespeare] is talking about language itself, and we are never allowed to forget it" (McDonald 55).

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[15] "Fear of trust," it has to be pointed out, rhymes with "fear of lust." Considering Shakespeare's love of wordplay and the fear of language's duality as mentioned above, this underlying rhyme of trust/lust is also worth mentioning in a TEASys interpretation despite its speculative nature. Several of the sonnets reveal an anxiety over desire and lust that make such a speculative interpretation plausible, if not necessary.

Love is conventionally assumed to presuppose "trust," and "trust" is conventionally assumed to be in opposition to "fear." However, the speaker uses linguistic opposites to reveal the distance between an apparent meaning (love does not suffer from "fear of trust"), to what meaning exists underneath the substance (love can, indeed, encompass "fear" and "trust" simultaneously). Language can "assault the purity of action," blur the line between "sincerity and pretense," and, as throughout all of his works "the word in Shakespeare is not allowed an unexamined triumph" (Barton 28, 25, 20). The speaker may have found a way to convey his love by telling the addressee to "hear with eyes," but it is not clear if the addressee can (or will) do that and love him back ("recompense").[16]

IV: Conclusion & Purpose: *Sonnet 23*'s linguistic triumph: Staging a sonnet

Sonnet 23 constructs a brilliant linguistic paradox and demonstrates its truth: it expresses silent love (the actor) with language (the poet/speaker), it is authoritative ("O!learn") while being subservient ("plead"), it shows how too much love ("mine own love's strength") can be too little ("weakens his own heart," "O'ercharged with burthen of mine own love's might"), and it shows that those who feel the most ("strength's abundance," "love's strength") are not always the ones who talk about it the most ("that tongue […]"). The speaker finds a way of acknowledging the limit of words ("in mine own love's strength seem to decay," "for fear of trust, forget to say") and the empty flattery they can represent ("more than that tongue that more hath more express'd"), but then he skirts those linguistic traps and finds a way of expressing love with theatrical images that describe silent love with words of failure and humility ("unperfect actor," "beside his part," "fierce thing replete with too much rage," "strength's abundance weakens his own heart"). Failure and humility, therefore, successfully allow the speaker to express his "silent love" for the addressee. They do not, however, guarantee that the addressee will "hear with eyes" and love the speaker back (give "recompense"). "[F]ear" is used twice within *Sonnet 23*. Both times "fear" carries with it a meaning of unease, distress and even foreboding (cf. *OED*). The first "fear" of line 2, to emphasize its theatrical aspect, has been

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[16] To "learn to read what silent love hath writ" is a plea and an instruction. "To hear with eyes […]" is, albeit beautiful, a contentious proclamation. Neither is a performative in the sense of J.L. Austen that automatically performs an action when the words are spoken.

defined as "stage fright" by Burrow[17]. *Venus and Adonis* is similar to *Sonnet 23*'s "fear of trust" of line 5: "It shall not fear where it should most mistrust" (*V&A, 1154*). In both *Sonnet 23* and *Venus and Adonis*, "fear" is linked to "trust," or the lack of it. Skura's poignant thoughts on the matter offer an explanation of the conjunction of the polar opposites of "fear" and "love:" *Sonnet 23* shows:

> the overt paradox of a love so excessive it undoes itself; but it also elaborates on the covert paradox of a devotion inseparable from its opposite, rage and mistrust. Here the 'fear', likened to the actor's fear, is "fear of trust." But it is not clear who fears what: the poet may not trust himself to perform the ceremony correctly; or he may also mistrust his "love's strength"—his own "rage" which could lead him to love not wisely but too well (Skura 218-219).

The speaker, in *Sonnet 23*, uses theatrical language to express his paradoxical "fear" in love in the same way Venus in *Venus and Adonis* uses language to first receive and then curse love. Venus' cursing of all love on earth occurs because she loved "not wisely but too well" (Skura 219). Venus, overwrought with grief, rage and bitterness over the death of Adonis, turns love into a dramatic paradox: "it shall not fear where it should most mistrust" (*V&A, 1154*). Venus' language *is* her curse, and her curse turns pure love into complex, dark-in-light, light-in-dark love. It is through language that Venus turns love into a world of light and shadow. Romeo, similarly, expresses such a paradoxical love as "more light and light, more dark and dark our woes" (*R&J, III, v, 36*). Likewise, Juliet is "o'ercharged with burthen of [her] own love's might," while also being "replete with too much rage" at the news of Romeo having murdered her cousin Tybalt:

> O serpent heart hid with a flowering face!
> Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?

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[17] The source of Burrow's definition of "fear" as "stage fright" is uncertain. It is not the *OED*. Therefore it is likely a Renaissance-specific source or an interpretation of his. "Stage fright" was not used until 1876 (*OED, Merriam-Webster*). While all stage fright is a kind of fear, not all fear is stage fright. Therefore Burrow's annotation is most likely an interpretation, not a definition. The reader of Burrow's annotation can only venture a conjecture.

> Beautiful tyrant! Fiend angelical!
>
> Dove-feathered raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!
>
> Despisèd substance of divinest show,
>
> Just opposite to what thou justly seams't (*R&J, III, ii, 74-79*).

Juliet's soliloquy best demonstrates the kind of 'messy' and paradoxical emotions true love brings with it. Love, as is the art that expresses it, language, can always be two things: beautiful and ugly, pure and violent, good and bad.

Skura recognizes the theatrically self-reflexive link between the word and the world in *Sonnet 23*. She also recognizes the sonnet speaker's ever-awareness of the ambivalence of love and the art that expresses it, language:

> This is precisely the kind of ambivalent relation to audiences which lies behind an actor's experience and generates stage fright in the first place. The poet's predicament may seem entirely removed from any but superficial connections with the unperfect actor's fear in the opening line, but it nonetheless takes us back to the dynamics in which the actor's fear is generated and which it recalls (Skura 219).

Such a fear is the fear of love being both beautiful and violent, and the fear that the language that expresses such love is so excessive that it chokes. Rudenstine, similarly, recognizes the speaker's uneasiness ("fear") of "[t]he possibility and danger of flattery; the presence of other poets willing to sell their wares; and the declared intention to be accurate and plain-speaking in one's praise all converge in this slight poem" (Rudenstine 37). *Sonnet 23* combines the power of the theatre (the spoken word) with the power of the poem (the written word), and the power of language with the power of silence[18].

Sonnet 23 shows how, through theatrically self-reflexive images, silent love can be expressed without flattering eloquence such as a prattling "tongue that more hath more

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[18] Even though the speaker pleads to show his love for the addressee with his "books" does not mean that the speaker did not *initially* suffer from love-imposed writer's block. He says that he "forget[s] to say/ The perfect ceremony of love's rite," but "say " is used both for writings and for actual spoken words. If it is "looks" the speaker wishes to show to the addressee, this argument becomes even stronger. It says that nothing can show and express the speaker's love but his actions and gestures toward the addressee.

express'd." *Sonnet 23* is an instance of what Cheney calls the speaker's ability to self-deprecatingly draw attention to all his shortcomings and failures, but then turning them into a winning argument for his own linguistic mastery (cf. Cheney 336). No one, *Sonnet 23* articulates, with its "simultaneity of apparently opposite states" (Vendler 138), does silence better with language than Shakespeare. By staging a sonnet with a simile from the theatre, the speaker maintains the dignified art of silent, printed poetry, but keeps the poem vivid with its 'loud', dramatic images. It is as though the speaker is working through his own dialectics on love and language. In *Sonnet 23* the speaker shows his 'at-home-ness' with paradox (Vendler 138) by letting language[19] express silence, and by letting drama express poetry. It is as if he is saying to the reader: "I am going to explain to you in a sonnet how hard it is to express true love with language. To do so, I will give you a familiar example of the number one discipline of eloquentia, namely the theatre. When an actor is overwhelmed and fails to speak his lines, he is just as inefficient as a poet trying to express his love in a poem without words. But by putting these images of the tongue-tied "unperfect actor on the stage" in your mind, reader, I just *showed* you the power of *silence* in the face of true love, and through *language!"* [20] In this instance, the word triumphs, but not without examination (cf. Barton 20). It can be argued that such a linguistic 'showstopper' that accomplishes the fusion of apparent opposites transcends the limits of language[21]. Shakespeare stages silent love, with theatrically self-reflexive language, in *Sonnet 23.* The exceptional magnitude of this accomplishment, of this silent/loud, humble/brazen, violent/tender, linguistic 'performance', is not articulated in the standard annotations.

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[19] It must be said that there are instances in which Shakespeare concedes that silence is more adequate than language. In *Sonnet 126*, the empty parentheses and lack of lines 13 and 14 speak louder than words. Hamlet's dying words "The rest is silence. O O O O" also express that there are moments that render language inadequate (*Hamlet, V, ii, 356-357*). King Lear's initial love of ceremonious court language is turned into an incoherent "Howl, howl, howl, howl" animal sound when he enters with the dead Cordelia in his arms. (*King Lear, V, iii, 270*). Similarly, in his dying speech, Lear's former ceremonious iambic pentameter is turned into a disturbing trochaic "Never, never, never, never, never," and he dies on a primal "O O O O" (*King Lear, V, iii, 324; 326*).

[20] P.G. Wodehouse, unquestionably, would have added a "Hah!" here.

[21] When read in combination with the rest of the sonnet sequence, there also is a suggestion of a humble-brag: "I'm desperate. I'm only an actor/writer, and I can't tell you how much I love you, and how impossible it is to count the ways. BUT, oh, look. I think I just did it. Look, look! Who knew? And that! Is how you do it. Bazinga! …..PS: Please love me back."

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