The Anatomy of Sight: Poetic Eyedentity in Shakespeare’s Sonnets to the Fair Youth


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THE ANATOMY OF SIGHT: POETIC EYEDENTITY IN
SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS TO THE FAIR YOUTH
(THE EYE AND VISION IN SHAKESPEARE AND ELIZABETHAN SONNET
SEQUENCES – A COMPARATIVE STUDY)

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And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow.

*As You Like It*, 2.7.147-9
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INTRODUCTION
Often considered as one of the best examples of lyrical expression ever achieved in the English language, Shakespeare’s Sonnets have constantly aroused admiration, excitement or identification, although tainted with an unexpected aura of malaise, alienation, disapproval, or indecision. At once the most intensely personal and genuinely universal of all Shakespeare’s productions, the Sonnets have called forth an incredible amount of commentary and emendation and raised more controversy amongst critics than any other work by its author with the possible exception of Hamlet. If the cycle is read in parallel with other sequences of the time, such as Sir Philip Sidney’s Astrophel and Stella, Edmund Spenser’s Amoretti, or Samuel Daniel’s Delia, the subverted and parodistic petrarchism the Sonnets disclose soon becomes a cause of major disturbance for attentive readers. As Northrop Frye reminds us in one of his numerous essays on Shakespeare¹, what we must keep in mind when starting a consideration of the Sonnets is that they were written within a precise literary tradition and a specific cultural context, and let us confess that we completely adhere to this train of thought. First of all, the sonnet is a fixed and codified form of poetic expression originally used by Petrarch or Dante as a means of crystallising the uncompromising experience of love. Second, even if Shakespeare stands as the world’s best known author and every age seems eager to consider his works through the lens of its own particular ethos, he nonetheless remains a man of his time and writes according to a specific cultural background.

The major difficulty one may encounter with regard to the Sonnets paradoxically springs from their greatest force: their universal appeal. The sequence, exploring as it does, the complex and meandering paths of emotion, at once probes the ever-changing depths of our human condition and brings to the surface the idea that the essence of our human identity is not static and flat, but rather vivid, fluid, and dynamic. Its vital concern

with the frail beauty of life, the deep, tender and ineffable feeling of love, the measured
strictures of the clock and the inescapability of death, has indeed produced an incredible
appeal on generations of readers. The overwhelming impact the sequence had on literary
minds is obvious in the pages of William Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard
Shaw, or Anthony Burgess. More recently, Shakespeare’s text has even been remediated
and set to music by some of the most famous artists of the twentieth century, such as, for
instance, Pink Floyd’s leader – David Gilmour – who recorded his own version of
Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18. As for criticism, it can be said that there are as many possible
interpretations of Shakespeare’s sequence as there are critics to analyse it. The works
range from the serious undertakings of Knight, Vendler, Booth and others, to several
ambiguous and puzzling critical attempts. Amongst them some intend to reorganise the
complete text of the sequence in order to form a coherent narrative, while others, such as
Rollett, even try to demonstrate that Shakespeare may not have written the Sonnets at all.
Over the last decades, several scholarly works have even been dedicated to mapping out a
history of the Sonnets’ criticism, which shows well enough the extent of the critical
disarray surrounding this work. As such, before undertaking an investigation of the
Sonnets, we should be clear as to the nature of our approach. We will attempt to be as
close to the text as possible and as such, to derive and define the issue at stake in this
Master’s dissertation from observable and quantifiable facts.

On the occasion of the Tenth International Conference of the European Society for the
Study of English – held from 24th to 28th August 2010 in Turin, Italy – Mireille Ravassat
(University of Valenciennes) and Simon Palfrey (Brasenose College, Oxford University)
convened a seminar entitled « New Approaches to Shakespeare’s Language and Style ».
The contributions of Jacqueline Mullender (University of Birmingham) and Laura
Tommaso (University of Molise), in the field of computational corpus studies particularly
caught our attention. The advent of computational tools for textual analysis has allowed new possibilities for a fact-based logic of literary interpretation exclusively relying on observable and quantifiable linguistic events. Moreover, the launching of two lexical analysis software programs by Oxford and Northwestern universities and the recent publication in *Shakespeare Quarterly* of a survey dedicated to digital editions have made us aware that, indeed, computer sciences did open the way for new perspectives in Shakespearean criticism.

Several software programs are now available. For instance, Wordsmith Tools 5.0, published by Lexical Analysis Software Ltd and distributed by Oxford University Press, or the WordHoard Shakespeare, a joint project of the Perseus Project at Tufts University, The Northwestern University Library, and Northwestern University Academic Technologies. The latter is derived from *The Globe Shakespeare*, the one-volume version of the *Cambridge Shakespeare*, edited by W. G. Clark, J. Glover, and W. A. Wright (1891-3). Whereas Wordsmith Tools 5.0 remains unaffordable for a Master’s student, Wordhoard is available as a freeware. Yet, in both cases a problem arises. The online presentation of Wordsmith describes the different functions the program offers without any information as to the way the program really works. We do not know how the data is created nor do we know how the statistics are established. Conversely, Wordhoard’s developers clearly explain their methodology. Yet, the way the software program establishes its statistics remains obscure, cryptic and even controversial. The whole process relies on the very assumption that a computational study necessarily has to

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3 In his feedback to the present introduction, Professor Jonathan Culpeper (Lancaster University) remarks: « Mike Scott, the creator of Wordsmith, has written a huge and easy-to-read “help menu”, which is available as a pdf download from his website. (Mike is also a linguist; he understands the things linguists are trying to do). So, it is not really true that the way the program works is obscure. » The website Prof. Culpeper refers to is: [http://www.lexically.net](http://www.lexically.net). Unfortunately, we did not know about it when we created this software program. The website of Oxford University Press which commercialises Wordsmith Tools 5.0 offers very limited information about it, hence our criticism. (Cf. [http://elt.oup.com/catalogue/](http://elt.oup.com/catalogue/)).
oppose and contrast two or more different fragments on a source / target comparative basis. As such, Wordhoard makes computational exploration within the limits of a single work impossible, or at least, inaccurate.

Since the available tools opened the way for a dizzying array of questions as to the methodological basis of the exploration to come, and none of them provided any satisfying answer, we decided to develop our own lexical analysis software program. Developing the application program by ourselves made it possible for us to be sure that it would work precisely as we meant it to. The subsequent results are therefore retrievable and ensured by the rigour of our methodological approach. Starting with the very assumption that, in every literary work, ideas and emotions are communicated through words, we decided to count the words in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and to classify them by order of occurrence. With the exception of grammatical words, connectors, deictics, pronouns etc., it seems a very logical assumption to start with that the more a word is used in a specific work, the greater its importance in this work. As such, this process may help isolate the most salient aspects of Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence.

Our application program was developed with Microsoft Visual Basic 6.0. It is related – through Windows ODBC (Open Database Connectivity, a Windows standard software interface for accessing database management systems) – to a Microsoft Office Access Database. We privileged the 1997 professional version of Microsoft Office for its greater compatibility with Microsoft Visual Basic 6.0. We disregarded the possibility of a SQL Oracle database because the application program we intended to develop was relatively small. In such cases, Microsoft Access provides a quicker treatment of the data than SQL. The database includes two tables. Each table is designed to contain a set of data elements (or values) organised following a model of vertical columns and horizontal rows. The columns are identified by their names. The first table includes three columns and an
unlimited number of rows. Its columns are entitled « work », « word » and « occurrence ». The second table has two columns and an unlimited number of rows. Its columns are named « work » and « total ». The aim of our application program is to fill in these two tables in order to provide ourselves with the text of the Sonnets presented in exploitable form for a statistical analysis. Our study is based on the digital Moby Shakespeare™ edition, itself derived from The Globe Shakespeare, the one-volume version of the Cambridge Shakespeare, edited by W. G. Clark, J. Glover, and W. A. Wright (1891-3).

The first problem arises when one considers that a computer cannot possibly « read » a text as we do. In order to have the software counting words, it first needs to recognise them. As such, the application program opens a [.txt] file containing Shakespeare’s text. Then, it explores the document from the beginning to the end, line after line. It first isolates a line and then explores it character by character. Each and every time the software encounters one of the characters we predefined as word-boundaries (colon, full stop, semi-colon, dash, bracket, blank, question mark, etc.) it memorises it. For the program, a word is the entity defined as a succession of characters between two word-boundaries. When the program identifies a word, it suppresses the word-boundaries, records the word in a variable, and then, questions the database through ODBC. If the word does not exist, it creates the data in the first table. For instance, for the first word of Sonnet 1, verse 1, « From fairest creatures we desire increase », the data would be recorded as follows : work = sonnets, word = from, occurrence = 1. Then, the program goes on until the end of line, and then, line by line until the end of the file. Each time it isolates a new word, a new entry is created in Table 1. Conversely, if the word already exists in the database, the program only changes the value in the « occurrence » column and records « occurrence » = « occurrence+1 ». Every time the program isolates a word,
it changes the counter’s value similarly. When the work is over, the value of the counter is registered in Table 2. It represents the total number of words treated, that is, the total number of words in a specific work.

Table 1 provides us with the complete list of all the words used by Shakespeare in the Sonnets and the frequency of their use. The listing is reproduced in Appendix 1 for the words appearing at least ten times in the sequence. Anyone may very well have expected that the word Shakespeare uses most in his Sonnets was «love» (187 times). Yet, surprisingly, the word «eye» – with its 88 occurrences – appears more often than «time» (68), «beauty» (70) or «art» (51), the three major themes of the sequence. It seems that the eye, and perhaps, more generally, visual perception, is endowed with a particular importance in the Sonnets. The «eye» is not a theme in the Sonnets and, as the chart reproduced in Appendix 1 demonstrates, this very word appears regularly throughout the sequence. It might very well turn out to be one of the sequence’s leading motifs or crucial images.

However, these results raise a new question. We cannot possibly pretend we are rigorous if we consider any abnormal word use as the signal for a new leading motif. Is the «eye» a typical motif in Shakespeare’s production? Could it be that the high level of appearance of this word in the Sonnets remains statistically normal for Shakespeare? Is it really one of the Sonnets’ specificity, or merely one of Shakespeare’s writing idiosyncrasies? The easiest way to answer these questions is to compare Shakespeare’s use of this particular word in the Sonnets with its use in the rest of his production. Therefore we need to know how many times the word «eye» appears in his plays and poetic works. On that point our methodology remains the same. Each individual work has been analysed with our software program and the results recorded in the database. Yet, a problem arises as to the comparison of the data. A mere glance at Table 2 shows that the
length of Shakespeare’s works varies greatly, ranging from 343 words in *Phœnix and Turtle* to more than 30,000 in *Hamlet*. A mere comparison of the number of occurrences between one work and the others – as Wordhoard enables it – appears inadequate, not to say, useless. We have to compare strictly comparable values, not mere occurrences. Therefore, we added a new function to the original software in order to make the most of the collected data. This function enables us to compare Shakespeare’s use of a specific word in different works. It does not rely on a mere word count, but rather on statistics of representation. It simply calculates the degree of representation of a given word with regard to the total number of words in the work studied:

\[
\text{Representation of Word (x) in Work (y)} = \frac{\text{Occurrence Word (x) in Work (y)}}{\text{Total number of Words in Work (y)}} \times 1000
\]

This has to be explained by an example. For instance, the word « eye » appears 58 times in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and 64 in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. A mere comparison of occurrences would tell that the « eye » is more present in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* than in *Midsummer*. This is wrong. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a much shorter play. It reckons only 16,624 words whereas *Love’s Labour’s Lost* reckons 22,368. When the number of occurrences is reported to the total number of words in the play, it appears that the degree of saturation of the play with the word « eye » is higher in *Midsummer* (3.48‰) than in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2.86‰). Therefore, this new function enables us to draw our statistics on the same comparative basis.

The results of this comparison are reproduced in Appendix 2. They show that the word « eye » appears more often in the *Sonnets* than in any other work by Shakespeare. The word is used in every work except *Phœnix and Turtle*. Yet, its degree of representation in the *Sonnets* is much higher than that in any other work, even when compared to the other
poetic works where it appears more often than in the plays. A mere writing idiosyncrasy could not account for such a discrepancy from one work to the other. We can therefore truly consider the « eye » as a leading motif in the *Sonnets*, and probably, argue that it is the dominant one. This is interesting because, with the possible exception of Fineman’s study which undertakes a Lacanian / Foucauldian reading of the *Sonnets*, it seems that the extraordinary importance of this motif in Shakespeare’s sequence, both within it and with regard to his complete production, has passed quite unnoticed amongst critics. The most prominent commentators sporadically refer to the eye in their analysis of certain sonnets, yet no study of this leading motif, considered as such, has yet been undertaken.

However, a statistical comparison with four other Elizabethan sequences (Samuel Daniel’s *Delia*, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti* and Michael Drayton’s *Idea*) has revealed similarities between Shakespeare and his contemporaries. We analysed these four sequences with our software program. Since the available digital editions for these sequences were numerous and their sources could not be identified for sure, we typed the text reproduced in Maurice Evans’s anthology for the four of them. The results are reproduced in Appendix 3. It clearly appears that, even if Shakespeare’s use of the word « eye » in his *Sonnets* stands out with regard to his complete production, the works of his contemporaries are also replete with this word, showing as they do very similar degrees of representation.

That Shakespeare so extensively used what appears as a conventional motif throughout his quite unconventional sequence is indeed surprising and raises a certain number of issues as to the significance of this motif in his work. Therefore, with these results in mind, we undertook a synoptic reading of several Elizabethan sequences and we discovered that all of them showed a great interest in the eye, and more generally, visual perception. It seems that, for the Elizabethans, a complex symbolism surrounded
the notion of sight which was by the time considered as a matter of great importance in love.

As such, this study will aim at analysing Shakespeare’s use of this motif with regard to the long-established norms of the traditional Elizabethan love discourse. Given the complexity of the sequence and the limits imposed by this scholarly work, we will exclusively concentrate here on the Fair Youth series. The first part of this dissertation will be dedicated to the beloved’s eye. We will attempt to identify the symbolism it was traditionally endowed with in Elizabethan sonnet sequences and in Shakespeare’s own dramatic and poetic production. We will see how Shakespeare reverses this traditional motif of the Elizabethan love discourse throughout his Sonnets to the Fair Youth. Starting from these assessments, our second part will focus on the eye of the lover. We will study the symbolism attached to it in Elizabethan sequences and in Shakespeare and question the connection between sight and love melancholy in these works. Finally, the third part of this Master’s dissertation will focus on the possible cures for this melancholy suffering, as they are presented either in traditional Elizabethan love sonnets or in Shakespeare’s.
PART 1

Elizabethan eyes:
motives of woe, motives of wooing
1.1. « Ye sleen me with youre eyne, Emelye ! » : tracing the history of a poetic image

1.1.1. The Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity : a specific cultural context

In many respects, the Renaissance marks a turning point in the history of ideas. Never before had an era existed in which everything was so vividly questioned, challenged, or compromised; nor did ever man witness such an overwhelming change in his fundamental beliefs and creeds. It was indeed a period of great discovery and rediscovery, one intensely focused on man – on his values and concerns. From 1453 onwards, as Christianity mourned the fall of the Roman Empire in the East, the fleeing and scattering Greek scholars disseminated the original texts of the classics as well as much of the ancient culture throughout the Western world. The dissemination of that culture and those texts was the cultural factor which served as an impetus for the Renaissance. The era’s passion for the classics had rich results in every domain and, as the humanists developed a consistent exegesis of classical texts, they managed an incredible improvement in their understanding of man.

Renaissance artists shared this growing interest in man and the works of the classics. Painters, poets and dramatists intensely focused on the individual, his instincts and passions, his questions and fears, his relations to his fellow men and to the world he lives in. Their enhanced appreciation of the classics is everywhere perceptible. They relentlessly represent the whole of our human condition and experience through a dizzying array of allegories they derived from Ovid and others⁴. As far as love is concerned, for instance, one cannot possibly call to mind its Renaissance representations in the visual arts without mentioning Caravaggio’s painting of a Narcissus contemplating

his own reflection in still waters, or his most famous Amor Vincit Omnia where Cupid is depicted – with his traditional arrows in his hand – assuming the characteristics of a young, winged, and naked boy. Such representations were typical allegories in the Renaissance, respectively standing for self-love and love. The myths of Ganymede, Galatea, Venus, Echo, Pygmalion, Diana, and others were also, at the time, a matter of great artistic interest.

Cultivated Elizabethans were perfectly aware of the myths to which these representations referred and such allegories literally permeate early modern literature; many of them are richly illustrated in the pages of the Elizabethan sonneteers. Now, although much has been said, already, about the common use of classical myths in Elizabethan sonnet sequences, the research we undertook in order to write this Master’s dissertation has enabled us to realise that Elizabethan sonneteers did not only draw from these myths – viz. from the stories and fables they feature – but also, from their common literary expression in the works of the classics. As far as ocular images are concerned, their literary history and arrival in England can easily be traced.

1.1.2. The Italian influence: a bridge between classical and Renaissance writers

In Achille Tatius’s Leucippe and Clitophon, for instance, the lover describes the experience of falling in love in these terms:

As soon as I had seen her, I was lost. For Beauty’s wound is sharper than any weapon’s, and it runs through the eyes down to the soul. It is through the eye that love’s wound passes, and I now became a prey to a host of emotions. (Achile Tatius: 179)

Writers of the Italian Trecento, such as Dante or Boccaccio, were the first to reintroduce this image in their poetic works. For instance, in Il Filostrato – the Italian poem having

5 My own emphasis here and throughout.
inspired Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and, through Chaucer, Shakespeare’s play *Troilus and Cressida* – Boccaccio depicts the experience of falling in love in a very similar way:

> Nor did he [Troilus] who was so wise shortly before [...] perceive that **Love with his darts dwelt within the rays of those lovely eyes** [...] nor notice the arrow that sped to his heart.

*(Boccaccio: 29)*

As he introduces Boccaccio’s text, Nathaniel Edward Griffin argues that:

> According to this description, love originates upon the eyes of the lady when encountered by those of her future lover. The love thus generated is conveyed on bright beams of light from her eyes to his, through which it passes to take up its abode in his heart.

Interestingly enough, both writers associate the painful birth of passionate love with visual contact. Whereas Boccaccio focuses on the impressive effect of Criseida’s eyes, Tatius concentrates on Clitophon’s response to Leucippe’s gaze. In both cases, however, visual encounter is held responsible for the young man’s falling in love. Cupid fires his arrows through the eyes of the beloved, they penetrate through the eyes of the beholder and inflict love’s wound upon the lover’s heart. This image could now be considered as a pure poetic cliché. Yet, as far as the classic or Renaissance writers were concerned, this was not the case.

As Marguerite Tassi puts it:

> Underlying theatrical performance and early modern discourses on visual phenomena were assumptions writers derived from ancient and medieval optical theories that emphasized the direct contact between the eye and objects of sight. The theory of extramission, espoused by Plato and Euclid, assumed that the gaze (rays of light emanating from the eye) acted upon the world, affecting

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its object. Intromission [...] assumed that objects struck a mostly passive eye. A connective function was attributed to sight in both theories.

Later on she adds:

In moral terms [...] sight was potentially dangerous, erotic, and spiritually deviant, as the medieval phrase *libido videndi* (lust of the eye) and the Protestant emphasis on the « idolatrous eye » emphasize. [sic] The courtly love tradition, as well, supported the notion that a beautiful woman’s eyes could bind the soul of a man; by extramission, her visual rays wounded her victim through his eyes. This implied that the male gazer’s eyes were passive, as in the intromission theory, and were penetrated, and sometimes blinded, by the intensely beautiful image of the beloved.  

As such, until the beginning of the seventeenth century and the publication of Kepler’s *Astronomia pars Optica* in 1604 and Descartes’s *Dioptrics* in 1637, this poetic image was backed up with much Platonician doctrine. Indeed, Shakespeare’s close contemporaries used to consider that light emanated from the eye and seized objects with its rays. Robert Burton’s *Anatomy* informs us well enough about the era’s literal beliefs. With regard to the previous quotations, his own description of the process of falling in love sounds quite familiar:

But the most familiar and usual cause of love is that which comes by sight, which conveys those admirable rays of beauty and pleasing graces to the heart. Plotinus derives love from sight, ἔρως quasi ὅρασις. —— Si nescis, oculi sunt in amore duces, « the eyes are the harbingers of love », and the first step of love is sight, as Lilius Giraldus proves at large, HIST. DEOR. SYNTAG. 13. they as two sluices let in the influences of that divine, powerful, soul-ravishing, and captivating beauty, which, as one saith, is sharper than any dart or needle, wounds deeper into the heart; and opens a gap through our eyes to that lovely wound, which pierceth the soul itself. (Burton : 507)

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9 This statement would be the ideal starting point for any psychoanalytical investigation of the Elizabethan sonnet sequences. The concomitance of intromission and extramission, as defined by Tassi, can be construed as a metaphorical expression featuring sexual intercourse. The subversion and unexpectedness of this image most certainly raise a good number of issues.  
As the writer dedicates himself to the study of melancholy « by being busy to avoid melancholy » (Burton : 4), he combines the traditional metaphor of the theatrum mundi\(^{11}\) with the long-established tradition of anatomy\(^{12}\). Observing the world as a spectator – that is, from a distance – the Oxford scholar builds up an impressive study. The book is a dissection of the Elizabethan world picture and is backed up with an impressive number of quotations – or rather, authoritative cues – « seen apart » and « joined in one by Cutter’s art » (Burton : xix). In this, Burton’s Anatomy is a library in itself, one which enables us to realise what knowledge was available in Elizabethan England, which authors were read and, perhaps even more important, what was the era’s very understanding of these books and these authors.

1.1.3. Adapting an Italian image to the British context

Obviously, before appearing in Burton’s treatise, this dart image had to become part and parcel of English poetic discourse. Its arrival in England can be traced back to the first adaptations of several texts written during the Italian Trecento. Amongst them, the works of Chaucer – in which the first references to Petrarch or Boccaccio in the English language can be identified – teem with examples. One of them, for instance, springs in the first narrative of The Canterbury Tales as the lover exclaims, « Ye sleen me with youre eyne, Emelye ! » (Chaucer, The Knight’s Tale, 1568/1914: 34). This image echoes the earlier « This prison caused not my clamour but I was hurt right now though mine eyne into my herte ». (Chaucer 1914 : 25)

\(^{11}\) Cf. « I presume thou wilt be very inquisitive to know what antique or personate actor this is, that so insolently intrudes upon this common theatre » (Burton : 1). Later on he defines his auctorial position as that of « A mere spectator of other men’s fortunes and adventures, and how they act their parts, which methinks are diversely presented unto me as from a common theatre or scene. […] I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plague, fires, inundations, theft, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrum, prodigies, apparitions […] then again in a new shifted scene, […] now comical, then tragic matters » (Burton : 3). Cf. also « But it therefore as it is, well or ill, I have essayed, put myself upon the stage; I must abide the censure, I may not escape it » (Burton : 8).

\(^{12}\) Burton provides numerous examples of dissection (cf. Democritus sitting by « carcasses of many several beasts, newly by him cut up and anatomised » (Burton : 4). Then, he provides several examples of anatomy as a literary genre (Burton : 12).
Furthermore, as early as 1621, Burton establishes the parallel between the works of the classics (such as Achille Tatius’s) and those of Chaucer:

*The same proceeding is elegantly described by* Apollonius in his Argonautica, between Jason and Medea, by Eustathiu in the ten books of the loves of Ismenius and Ismene, *Achilles Tatius* between his Clitophon and Leucippe, Chaucer’s neat poem of *Troilus and Cresseid.*

(By Burton : 537)

As Daniel E. Owen demonstrates, other early works written in Middle English contain the same image. It also appears, for instance, in Richard Ros’s translation of *La Belle Dame Sanz Mercy*:

*Your eyen sette the print which that I feele

withynne myne herte.* (Chaucer, 1899 : 477)

And finally, it is also to be found in John Lydgate’s *Temple of Glass,* as the lover exclaims:

*For with the stremes of her eyen clere

I am wounded even to the hert* (Lydgate, 1477 [unpaginated])

As such, it clearly appears that ocular images were already widespread in earlier English verse and its attendant love discourse. Our study of these images in Elizabethan sonnet sequences – whether in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* or in the works of his contemporaries – has therefore to be understood as a general interrogation on these writers’ use of intertextuality. All of them draw on a traditional poetic convention and an existing form of verse. Nevertheless, as they use the words of others, Elizabethan sonneteers manage to make them theirs, to endow them with their own story, their own symbolic vein, in other words, their own meaning.

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Fig 1. Infatuation springs from visual contact and Cupid’s darts

Arcanum VI, Amanti
Visconti-Sforza Tarot deck Cary-Yale collection
1.2. « The death-darting eye of cockatrice » : ocular images and the Elizabethan love discourse

1.2.1. Love at first sight and the Elizabethan poetics of love

This image goes a long way informing many aspects of the Renaissance literary production\textsuperscript{14}. It can be easily identified in most Elizabethan sonnet sequences. For instance, in his Amoretti, Spenser provides us with this example as he exclaims :

\begin{quote}
But when I feel the bitter balefull smart  
Which \textit{her fayre eyes} unwares \textit{doe worke in mee},  
That death out of \textit{theyr shiny beames} \textit{doe dart},  
I think that I a new \textit{Pandora} see ; \textit{(Amoretti} : 24.5-8)\end{quote}

Likewise, in his Parthenophil and Parthenophe, Barnabe Barnes asserts :

\begin{quote}
But \textit{from a cleare bright eye}, \textit{one captaine blinde}  
(Whose puisance to resist did nothing boote)  
\textit{With} men in golden armes, \textit{and dartes of golde},  
\textit{Wounded my hart}, and all which did behold. \textit{(Parthenophil and Parthenophe} : 60.11-4)\end{quote}

Barnes’s « \textit{captaine blinde}\textsuperscript{15} » obviously refers to Cupid who wounds the lover’s heart with the beams emanating from Parthenophe’s eyes. The beams are introduced in this poem through the metaphor of the « \textit{dartes of golde} » which – as was done by Boccacio, Chaucer, Lydgate, Ros or Tatius – associates Plato’s theory of extramission with the

\textsuperscript{14} Our development of a keyword searchable computational concordance to the Elizabethan sonnet sequences and Burton’s \textit{Anatomy} has enabled us to find out all these interesting parallels. The digital editions of the texts we utilised are identified in our bibliography. Our concordance does not include Shakespeare’s complete works because such concordances to Shakespeare’s production were already available on the internet. As far as Shakespeare is concerned, we exclusively relied on \textit{The Open Source Shakespeare}, (www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance) as it has recently been considered a valuable and rigorous digital tool by the editors of \textit{Shakespeare Quarterly} (cf. supra : 12, note 3). A similar tool has been used to analyse the works of Chaucer and Ros in order to broaden the references identified by Owen. As far as Lydgate is concerned, this was impossible as the only digital edition we found was a facsimile of the original text. It was therefore impossible to convert this document from PDF to a plain text format.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Fig 2 (infra : 35).
myth of Cupid. A similar image crops up in Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* as the poet, in a most uncompromising prosopopeia, invokes Stella’s eyes upon wounding him to death:

O eyes, where humble lookes most glorious prove,

Only lov’d Tyrants just in cruelty.

Do not, O do not from poore me remove;

Keepe still my Zenith, ever shine on me.

For thought I never see them, but straight wayes

My life forgets to nourish languisht sprites,

Yet still on me, O eyes, dart downe your rayes;

And if from Majestie of sacred lights,

**Opressing mortall sense, my death proceed, (Astrophel and Stella : 42.5-13)**

All these images are very close to those featured in the earlier works from which these writers draw. Nevertheless, Sidney’s prosopopeia marks a turning point in the use of this image. Before him, the beloved’s eye was regarded as the originator of a passion, of an open wound (exceptionally with Chaucer as lethal but this was not the norm). With Sidney this image is endowed with a new dimension: throughout his sequence the gaze of the beloved is said to « oppre[ss] mortall sense » and therefore, possess this lethal quality. It is well known that Newman’s pirated publication of Sidney’s sequence in 1591 elicited the incredible craze for the sonnet form in Elizabethan England\(^{16}\). In this context, Sidney’s subversion of the traditional image soon became an essential part of the poetic norm. From here derives the image of the beloved’s lethal gaze which springs everywhere throughout the works of his followers. After him, the mistress’s eyes were indeed depicted as having « the powre to kill » (*Amoretti* : 49.2). In many Elizabethan sequences, this idea is most richly expressed when associated with other classical myths, such as, for instance, that of the Gorgon (referred to by Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) or that of the Basilisk (referred to by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*).

\(^{16}\) Peter Reinman, *Samuel Daniel’s Delia*, Master’s dissertation, Montreal, McGill University, 1974, p. 2.
The eye of the mistress is also often related to that of the Cockatrice: a traditional figure of the late-medieval bestiaries. Such images were never related to love in earlier English works\textsuperscript{17} and therefore, the inclusion of such images within the Elizabethan love discourse can be considered as a particularity of the era’s sonnet craze.

In his \textit{Sonnets to the Fairest Coelia}, published in 1594, William Percy provides this example:

\begin{quote}
With cheerefull lookes I towards bent my pace,
Soone when I came, I found unto my bane,
\textbf{A Gorgon shadow’d under Venus face},
Whereat afright, when backe I would be gone,
I stood transformed to a speechlesse stone. (Coelia : 13.10-4)
\end{quote}

In his Sonnet 49, Spenser introduces a kindred image through the cockatrice simile:

\begin{quote}
Let them feele th’utmost of your crueltyes,
And \textit{kill with looks, as Cockatrices doo}:
But him that at your footstoole humbled lies,
With mercifull regard, give mercy too. (Amoretti : 49.9-12)
\end{quote}

Finally, this very same simile crops up in \textit{The Fairie Queene} as the speaker asserts:

\begin{quote}
Like as the \textbf{Basiliske} of serpents seede,
From powrefull \textit{eyes close venim doth conuay}
\textbf{Into the lookers hart, and killeth farre away}. (The Fairie Queene : 4.8.39)
\end{quote}

As such, this first survey has enabled us to realise that ocular images were part and parcel of the allegorical symbolism which accompanied love discourse in Elizabethan sonnet sequences. We learn that this motif used to designate both the birth of love and the pain inflicted by passion. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated so far that these images

\textsuperscript{17} Our computational concordance has identified references to the basilisk in Chaucer’s \textit{Canterbury Tales}, but these are never connected to such notions as love or infatuation.

[29]
were also common in earlier English verse. Nevertheless, we discovered that this particular body of love images encountered several changes over time, with for instance the introduction of the lethal quality of the mistress’s gaze, and that of the basilisk/cockatrice images.

1.2.2. Traditional Elizabethan ocular images in Shakespeare

Such Renaissance poetic topoi literally permeate Shakespeare’s production. In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for instance, Hermia – as she attempts to obtain her father’s agreement to marry Lysander instead of Demetrius – exclaims: « Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind » (I.i.234). Yet, her statement is soon to be refuted. In a dark and mysterious forest near Athens, Hermia, Demetrius, Lysander and Helena soon become mere puppets in the hands of the mischievous Puck. Under the light of the moon, in the realm of Fairy Land, the facetious Puck – ironically known as Robin Goodfellow – ensnares them in a series of comical incidents by rubbing on their eyelids a « little western flower » (II.i.167) once shot by Cupid’s lost arrow. As a result, the four of them inevitably fall in love with the first living thing seen upon awaking. This work is particularly interesting because Shakespeare dissociated here the tenor and vehicle of the traditional dart metaphor and made two different symbols of them. First, Cupid shoots an arrow at the flower and then, the flower is rubbed on the eyes. This is particularly interesting because the invisible damages due to Cupid’s darting beams in the lovers’ hearts now become clearly visible on the frail pansy. Its very pigmentation is altered under the arrow’s influence:

Flying between the cold moon and the earth,

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18 As far as the traditional darting-eye metaphor is concerned, the vehicle, « darts », stands for the rays emanating from the beloved’s eye and their wounding quality on the eyes and heart of the lover. The latter are therefore depicted as the passive recipients of the wound (cf. supra: 22-3). Here the traditional vehicle, « darts » is dissociated from its attendant tenor, that is, the rays, and more generally, the specular impact of beauty. As such, Shakespeare’s use of the image of the pansy emerges as a point of inflection and diffraction with regard to this traditional metaphor.
Cupid all arm’d: a certain aim he took
At a fair vestal throned by the west,
And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
As it should pierce a hundred-thousand hearts:
But I might see young Cupid’s fiery shaft
Quencht in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
And the imperial vot’ress passed on,
In maiden meditation, fancy-free,
Yet mark’d I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
It fell upon a little western flower,—
Before milk-white, now purple with love’s wound,—
And maidens call it love-in-idleness. (ii.i.156-68)

Shifting from « milk-white », the symbol of purity and innocence, to « purple », the colour most commonly associated with death in Shakespeare’s production, the « little western flower » highlights the destructive and painful quality of love. Now, let it be reminded that, once dead, Adonis is metamorphosed into a « purple flower [... ] chequer’d with white » (Venus and Adonis, 1168) and that, during Ophelia’s funeral in Hamlet, Laertes exclaims:

Lay her i’t’earth:—
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring! (v.i.246-8)19

As compared to the two others, this excerpt from A Midsummer Night’s Dream shows well enough how Cupid’s arrow, although it gives birth to the overwhelming feeling of love, at the same time, imprints a vague copy of death within the lover’s heart.

19 All these images feature a kind of intermediary stage in experience, one between life and death which is to be related to 1/ the traditional expression of love as voluptas dolendi (cf. infra : 44) but also, 2/ the « violet » in Sonnet 12 (cf. infra : 62-3).
This dart image also occurs several times in *Romeo and Juliet*. In Act 1, for instance, as a betrothall with Paris is envisaged, the young lady exclaims:

I’ll look to like, if looking liking move:

But no more deep will I endart mine eye

Than your consent gives strength to make it fly (I.iii.99-101)

Similarly, in Shakespeare’s earliest narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess compares the beams emanating from the young man’s eyes to the light of the sun. Through this promethean metaphor she associates Cupid’s arrows and Love’s burning fire:

The sun that shines from heaven shines but warm,

And, lo, I lie between that sun and thee:

The heat I have from thence doth little harm,

**Thine eye darts forth the fire that burneth me.** (193-96)

Such an image appears from time to time in Shakespeare’s production, from *Venus and Adonis* to *Cymbeline*, via *As You Like It*, *Troilus and Cressida* or *The Taming of the Shrew*.

As for the lethal gaze metaphor, it crops up ten times in Shakespeare’s complete works. It is always associated with the basilisk / cockatrice imagery, for instance in this excerpt from *Henry VI Part II*:

Look not upon me, **for thine eyes are wounding**:

Yet do not go away: come, basilisk,

And kill the innocent gazer with thy sight:

For in the shade of death I shall find joy; (III.ii.47-50)

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20 Cf. *As You Like It*, III.v.8-25; *Cymbeline*, II.ii.291-332; *King Lear*, II.iv.65-8; *Richard II*, V.ii.7-21; *The Taming of the Shrew*, V.ii.137-80; *Venus and Adonis*, 959-64.

Juliet’s meditation on Romeo’s possible death provides a similar example in which both the dart and cockatrice images are intertwined:

What devil art thou, that dost torment me thus?
This torture should be roar’d in dismal hell.
Hath Romeo slain himself? say thou but « I, »
And that bare vowel « I » shall poison more

**Than the death-darting eye of cockatrice:**

I am not I, if there be such an I;
Or those eyes shut, that make thee answer « I. »
If he be slain, say « I »; or if not, no:

Brief sounds determine of my weal or woe. *(Romeo and Juliet III.ii.43-51)*

This excerpt is particularly interesting. The whole play extensively relies on Petrarchan motives, from Romeo’s initial hopeless one-way love for Rosaline up to the description of his initial encounter with Juliet. His very famous oxymoronic evocation of love as *voluptas dolendi* certainly provides the most blatant piece of evidence for this.

In the passage above, through the paronymy on « I », « aye » and « eye », Juliet re-envisages her self-definition as a Petrarchan lady, one who is conscious of the lethal quality of her gaze and of her responsibility in her lover’s trespass, be it literal or metaphorical. Indeed, for her, saying Romeo is dead (aye) would involve her own guilt (« I »).

We learn from the previous examples that, for Renaissance writers – whether Shakespeare’s predecessors, contemporaries or Shakespeare himself – the process of infatuation always springs from visual encounter. As Berowne has it in *Love’s Labour’s*

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22 Cf. Romeo’s most famous string of oxymora in the play’s opening scene: « Alas, that love, whose view is muffled still, / Should, without eyes, see pathways to his will! / Where shall we dine? O me! What fray was here? / Yet tell me not, for I have heard it all. / Here’s much to do with hate, but more with love. / Why, then, O brawling love! O loving hate! / O any thing, of nothing first create! / O heavy lightness! serious vanity! / Mis-shapen chaos of well-seeming forms! / Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, / Sick health! / Still-waking sleep, that is not what it is! / This love feel I, that feel no love in this. / Dost thou not laugh? » *(1.1.69-81).*
Lost, « love » is « form’d by the eye » (V.ii.755). Rosalind’s discourse on love’s degrees in As You Like it is also most explicit:

For your brother and my sister no sooner met but they look’d; no sooner look’d but they lov’d; no sooner lov’d but they sigh’d; no sooner sigh’d but they ask’d one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy— and in these degrees have they made pair of stairs to marriage, which they will climb incontinent, or else be incontinent before marriage. (V.ii.33-41)

Here also, visual encounter is held responsible for love’s birth; it is the second degree in love which immediately follows the meeting. Let it be added, moreover, that the importance of this idea finds itself reinforced by Orlando’s remark which comes just before: « Wounded it [his heart] is, but with the eyes of a lady » (As You Like It, V.ii.26). Anyway, love is everywhere envisaged in its passionate mode and provokes a real suffering on the lover’s part. Renaissance poets depict love as a bitter-sweet experience, it is a pleasing wound, a « lyke-dying lyfe » (Amoretti: 25.1), a passion inflicted upon the lover’s heart by his mistress’s gaze. Shakespeare knew of this literary tradition and, as the previous examples show well enough, extensively used this imagery in his works.
Fig 2. Blind Cupid

Botticelli Sandro, *Primavera* (detail)
Galleria degli Uffizi, Firenze, Italy
1.3. The Youth’s « medicinable eye »: Shakespeare and the uses of convention

1.3.1. Visual alchemy in the Sonnets

As far as the Sonnets to the Fair Youth are concerned, however, Shakespeare’s use of ocular images appears even more interesting. Contrary to other Elizabethan sequences and to the imagery to be found in his plays, he makes no reference to either Cupid’s arrows, the Gorgon or the Basilisk’s eyes, his poetry nonetheless testifies to the prime importance of the eye in love’s matters. In Sonnet 104 the poet recalls his first meeting with the young man in these terms: « when first your eye I eyed » (104.2). Here the combined use of polyptoton and paronomasia emphasises the importance of the visual aspect of this first encounter.

In addition, the influence of Plato’s theory of extramission is perfectly perceptible in the Sonnets. For instance, in Sonnet 20, a particular emphasis is put on the gaze of the Fair Youth:

> An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,

> Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth ; (5-6)

This depiction of the youth’s eye anticipates the poet’s description of the sun in Sonnet 33:

> Full many a glorious morning have I seen

> Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,

> Kissing with golden face the meadows green,

> Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy ; (1-4)
This association is twice reinforced throughout the sequence, first in Sonnet 18 as the poet terms the sun « the eye of heaven » (18.5), and then, in Sonnet 49, as he pictures to himself the painful days of fading love :

Against that time when thou shalt strangely pass,
And scarcely greet me with that sun, thine eye ; (5-6)

Obviously enough, such lines spring from the same cultural and literary background than those of Spenser, Sidney or Shakespeare himself, quoted earlier. Yet, the poetic treatment at work in the Sonnets could not possibly be more different. In his sequence, Shakespeare uses the same traditional motif as his contemporaries. Yet, with him, the beams emanating from the youth’s eyes are neither lethal nor darting. They do not have the power to hurt the poet and, as such, the visual metaphors he uses are always deprived of any negative connotation. Quite on the contrary, the eye of the young man is depicted as a magical or alchemical tool : it positively beautifies everything it kisses with its rays. Just as the shining sun sets glittering hints of gold on the meadow’s grass, the eye of the young man adorns everything within range. We are very far, indeed, from Stella’s « beamy eyes, like morning sun on snow » (Astrophel and Stella : 8.9) which transfix and dissolve the pure, frail and perfect whiteness of the freshly fallen shroud of snow with their corrosive rays.

1.3.2. Astrological representations : two stars leading a poet’s destiny

Shakespeare goes on with this stellar comparison in Sonnet 14 as the speaker asserts :

Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck ;

[...]

But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,
And, constant stars, in them I read such art
As truth and beauty shall together thrive (1, 9-11)
In this sonnet, the poet is presented as an astrologer who considers the eyes of the beloved as the only stars in his sky. This image is not specifically Shakespearean and this conceit – although far less obtrusive than the dart or the basilisk images – can be identified in several Elizabethan sequences. For instance, in his *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney writes:

Though dustie wits dare scorne Astrologie,

[...]  

For me, I do Nature unidle know,  
And know great causes great effects procure:  

**And know those Bodies high raigne on the low.**  

And if these rules did faile, proove makes me sure,  

Who oft fore-judge my after-following race  

By only those **two stars in Stella’s face.** (*Astrophel and Stella* : 26.1, 9-14)

Sidney’s lyrical self, Astrophel, is likewise presented as an astrologer. In this sonnet, Sidney’s conceit is rooted in the era’s literal belief in the macrocosm/microcosm analogy and in the great chain of being pattern: the poet « knows[s] those Bodies high raigne on the low ». Exactly as everything in the world is said to be under the influence of stars, he claims that he is under the ascendency of Stella’s eyes, those « two stars » in her « face ». Furthermore, a very similar illustration is to be found in Daniel’s sequence:

Oft do I mervaile, whether **Delia’s eyes**  

Are eyes, or else **two radiant starres that shine** :  

[...]  

Starrs sure they are, **whose motion rule desires.**

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23 Let us remark that Astrophel derives from the Greek compound « Astro-phil »: he who loves stars, and Stella from : stella, ae, fem : the Latin word for star.

And calme and tempest follow their aspects :

Their sweet appearing still such power inspires,

That makes the world admire so strange effects.

Yet whether fixt or wandring starrs are they,

**Whose influence rule the Orbe of my poore hart,**

Fixt sure they are, but wandring **make me stray,**

*In endles errors whence I cannot part.* (*Delia*: 28.1-2; 5-12)

Daniel also focuses on his mistress’s powerful star-likes eyes and their behaviour-modifying influence. Their « motion » rules both his « desires » and « the Orbe of [his] poore hart ». These two excerpts can be said to exemplify the traditional use of the conceit Shakespeare develops in Sonnet 14, quoted earlier. Yet, whereas other sonneteers utilise it as yet another symbol of the lover’s loss of free will and liberty, Shakespeare endows it with a sense of absolute freedom and personal certitude. In this sonnet, the beloved’s eyes – those « constant stars » referred to by the poet – are an instrument of « knowledge », a vehicle of « art », a tool to enhance the poet’s « judgement » on « beauty » and « truth ». They are not, in any way, a means to imprison him, and we are very far from Daniel’s complaints about his « freedome past » (*Delia*: 25.9).

Shakespeare’s use of ocular images in the *Sonnets* – when considered in parallel with what can be envisaged as the era’s normative use of such a device – informs us widely as to the *Sonnets*’ specificity. The beloved’s eyes are nothing like the hurting, burning, destructive, enslaving and alienating visual murderers of Stella, Diana, Cynthia, Delia, Phillis, Chloris and others. They rather adorn the real with their creative alchemy and feature in the sequence as the very revealers of beauty and truth. The eye of the young man can indeed be considered as the earthly counterpart of

*the glorious planet Sol*

*In noble eminence enthroned and sphered*
Amidst the other; whose medicinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil. (Troilus and Cressida : v.iii.542-5)

Like the sun, the youth’s gaze actually corrects everything and its divine alchemy is even depicted as contagious in Sonnet 114:

Or whether shall I say mine eye saith true,
And that your love taught it this alchemy,
To make of monsters and things indigest
Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble,
Creating every bad a perfect best,
As fast as objects to his beams assemble? (3-8)

Now, let it be added that, surprisingly, the word « alchemy » appears only three times in Shakespeare’s complete works, namely twice in the Sonnets. The third occurrence appears in Julius Caesar (1.iii.137-40) in a very positive description of Brutus. Yet, the eye is absent from this panegyric. Shakespeare’s association of the eye with alchemy has therefore to be considered as a specificity of the Sonnets.

1.3.3. Ocular images and gender reversal

Nevertheless, it could be argued that this basic reversal of imagery exclusively depends on another major reversal in the sequence. Here, the addressee is a man, and not a woman. One could therefore consider that this major reversal justifies minor subversions in Shakespeare’s use of imagery. However, when the Sonnets are read in parallel with the one other Elizabethan sequence dedicated to a male addressee, this justification, though plausible, appears no more than an empty assertion. This sequence entitled Certaine Sonnets from Cynthia With Certaine Sonnets was published by Richard Barnfield in 1595 and clearly praises the beauty of a young man. Except for the ambiguous feminine title of
his sequence, Barnfield – who is now better known for the « Marlovian enticements » of his *Affectionate Shepheard* – does never hide the homoeroticism which permeates his sonnets. References to Ganymede are numerous and his use of masculine pronouns, unambiguous. For instance, in Sonnet 11, the poet exclaims, « He straight perceav’d himselfe to be my Lover. » (*Cynthia*: 11.14). Furthermore, this excerpt from Sonnet 8 is explicit when it comes to the masculine sexual fantasy at work throughout his sequence :

> Sometimes *I wish that I his pillow were,*  
> *So might I steale a kisse,* and yet not seene,  
> *So might I gaze upon his sleeping eine,*  
> Although I did it with a panting feare :  
> But when I consider how vaine my wish is,  
> *Ah foolish Bees (think I) that doe not sucke*  
> *His lips for honye* ; but poor flowers doe plucke  
> Which have no sweet in them ; *when his sole kisses,*  
> *Are able to revive a dying soule.* (*Cynthia*: 8.1-9)

However, in this quite unconventional sequence with regard to the choice of its addressee, ocular images faithfully follow the Elizabethan tradition presented earlier. Let us consider, for instance, this passage from Barnfield’s Sonnet 4 :

> *Two stars there are in* one faire firmament,  
> (Of some intitled *Ganymedes sweet face*),  
> *Which other stars in brightness doe disgrace,*  
> [...]  
> *By these two stars my life is onely led,*  
> In them I place my ioy, in them my pleasure,  
> *Love’s piercing Darts,* and Natures precious treasure. (*Cynthia*: 4.1-3; 9-11)

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Cupid’s arrows, the stars leading the lover’s destiny and the beams emanating from the beloved’s eyes all feature in this poem and, each and every time, these images serve the poet’s description of his attraction for another man. With regard to this example, it seems evident that Shakespeare’s gender reversal in his Sonnets does not justify his particular use of this motif in his sequence. Therefore any attempt to explain Shakespeare’s use of this specific type of imagery in his Sonnets to the Fair Youth by relying on the sole argument that his sequence has a male addressee instead of a female one, appears quite impossible.

Our comparison of these basic ocular images displayed in Shakespeare’s Sonnets with regard to the poet’s contemporaries is most interesting. First, the implicit reference to Plato’s theory of extramission has enabled us to understand why the Fair Youth’s gaze is depicted in alchemical terms. But even more important, this comparison has enabled us to realise that the poet writes both within, and against, his literary background. Whereas other Elizabethan sonneteers merely amplify the meaning of the classical image they use, Shakespeare endows it with a meaning that is totally different from the original. As such, his use of intertextuality appears most specific. Furthermore, his sequence is particular because his reversal of traditional images implies that no wound is inflicted upon the lover’s heart. Shakespeare therefore presents a new and different conception of love, one that appears as eminently positive and that is not to be found in other Elizabethan sequences.
PART 2

Love and sight, lovers’ sighs:
vision and the English malady
2.1. « And then the lover, sighing like a furnace » – Elizabethan sonneteers: arrows, tears and love-sickness

2.1.1. The birth of love melancholy

The first part of this Master’s dissertation mostly focused on the kind of imagery associated with the beloved’s gaze in Shakespeare’s Sonnets to the Fair Youth and in other Elizabethan sequences. Starting from the previous assessments, this second part will therefore concentrate more precisely on the lover’s eyes. It has been demonstrated earlier that the Elizabethans considered love as a suffering, a wound, or as Robert Burton has it in his Anatomy of Melancholy, « a plague, a torture, an hell, a bitter-sweet passion at last » (Burton : 535), one inflicted upon the lover’s heart through visual contact. Nevertheless, the precise nature of the lover’s suffering comes into question. The excerpt from As You Like It, quoted earlier, is very interesting. The fourth degree in love, according to Rosalind, is that of sighs and suffering: « no sooner met but they look’d; no sooner look’d but they lov’d; no sooner lov’d but they sigh’d. » (V.ii.34-6).

Gisèle Venet asserts that the common body of ocular images to which we referred earlier serves the expression of the Petrarchan voluptas dolendi. As she puts it:

[L.]a flèche d’un premier regard entraîne une blessure physique et mystique qui ne pourrait guérir que par l’impensable fusion des corps et ne sera donc suivie que de la langueur d’une attente jamais récompensée. Elle induit en l’amant qui souffre de la passion amoureuse une humeur mélancolique, la subtile « voluptas dolendi » de Pétrarque26.

Her argument is relevant to Rosalind’s speech. Lovers’ sighs – the symptom of their melancholy suffering – have two remedies: an « incontinent » race to « marriage », which leads to the idealised Christian kind of « fusion » contemplated in Phoenix and Turtle, or mere « incontinence », that is carnal knowledge before or out of marriage. Yet,

in most Renaissance poetic works, this fusion remains elusive and the lover turns melancholy. In extreme examples, unrequited love may even lead to madness.

As far as Shakespeare’s dramatic production is concerned, the case of Hamlet, the melancholy prince, is perhaps the most revealing with regard to this belief although this assertion has to be qualified straight away\textsuperscript{27}. Throughout this play, Polonius is probably the chief advocate of the forlorn lover theory in order to account for Hamlet’s madness. In Act 2, as Ophelia explains to her father that the young man entered her room « with a look so piteous » on his face (\textit{Hamlet}, II.i.82) and then tormented her, the councillor of State immediately envisions that the young man may very well be prey to a lover’s melancholy humour: « Mad for thy love? » (\textit{Hamlet}, II.i.85) he asks her. Then Ophelia goes on with her recollection of the events and asserts:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{He raised a sigh so piteous and profound}

As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being: That done, he lets me go:
And, with his head over his shoulder turn’d,

\textbf{He seem’d to find his way without his eyes,}

For out o’ doors he went without their helps,

\textbf{And, to the last, bended their light on me.} (II.i.95-101)
\end{quote}

Here Hamlet sighs and suffers. He remains unable to break eye contact with Ophelia and even prefers walking blindly through the doors than losing it. As carnal fusion has been strictly limited to « nothing », ocular contact remains the only loose form of fusion he can possibly hope for with the object of his love. Polonius analyses the Prince’s behaviour in the following terms:

\textsuperscript{27} But, in fact, through a process of dramatic irony, the spectators of the play are well aware that Hamlet’s emotional turmoil here is more probably caused by the sight of his father’s ghost in the previous scene than by a form of love-madness or by melancholy, hence the reference to the ‘horrors’ (line 84) he has been a witness of.
This is the very ecstasy of love,
Whose violent property fordoes itself
And leads the will to desperate undertakings
As oft as any passion under heaven
That does afflict our natures.

[…]
That hath made him made. (V.ii.103-12)

Even after Ophelia’s death and burial, her father goes on with this theory and asserts:

But yet do I believe
The origin and commencement of his grief
Spring from neglected love. (III.i.179-81)

We learn from the previous examples that the wound inflicted by the eye can be healed. Carnal fusion makes it possible; otherwise the wound will putrefy into a melancholy humour, which may even lead to madness. The humoral origin of melancholy is constantly reaffirmed in Shakespeare’s plays. For instance, in As You Like It, Jacques describes his own melancholy as the results of a «sundry contemplation», of a «rumination» which «wrap[s]» him «in a most humorous sadness» (As You Like It, IV.i.19-20). «Humorous» has to be understood here as a reference to the origins of Jacques’s sadness, viz. an imbalance of humours. Moreover, Jacques’s «sundry contemplation» also provides an interesting echo to Berowne’s «leaden contemplation» in Love’s Labour’s Lost (IV.iii.328). Both characters emphasise the specular origin of the melancholy man’s humoral imbalance, if the term contemplation is taken in its literal initial meaning, not in its derived sense of meditation.

28 Let us remark that Burton wrote: «Folly, melancholy, madness, are but one disease, Delirium is a common name to all» (Burton : 16). In Hamlet, the contagion of melancholy is worked out in terms of a multi-layered objective correlative (this terminology derives from T.S. Eliot’s new criticism). Indeed, symptoms of melancholy literally infuse the play. The contagion unfolds in ever-expanding ripples, from the realm of the psyche to that of the body – in other words, from the prince’s «antique disposition» to Ophelia’s madness.
This belief was extensively developed by Burton and its literary expression was deeply rooted in Elizabethan culture. In the 1621 edition of the *Anatomy*, Burton writes on the correlation between vision and love melancholy and recommends to any convalescent melancholy reader to avoid eye contact with the object of his love:

> Nothing sooner revives, or « waxeth sore again », as Petrarch holds, than « love doth by sight ». As pomp renews ambition ; the sight of gold, covetousness ; a beauteous object sets on fire this burning lust. Et multum saliens incitat unda sitim. The sight of drink makes one dry, and the sight of meat increaseth appetite. 'Tis dangerous therefore to see. (Burton : 589)

Melancholy was an essential feature of the Elizabethan episteme. The association of ocular images with it can perhaps be considered as another new meaning the sonneteers added to the original dart metaphor.

### 2.1.2. Elizabethan tears : an ocular distillation of sorrow

Such a connection can be identified in most Elizabethan sonnet sequences. In all of them, the lover is lachrymose and melancholy. This is, for instance, the case in this quatrain by Sidney:

> The curious wits, seing *dull pensivenesse*
> Bewray it selfe in my long settled eyes,
> Whence those same fumes of melancholy rise
> With *idle paines*, and *missing ayme*, do guesse. (*Astrophel and Stella* : 23.1-4)

The eye motif is here endowed with another meaning. It serves the diagnosis of the poet’s melancholy suffering. Quite often, indeed, the lover’s eye, in an idea derived from alchemy, distils his own sorrow. Lodge probably advances the most elaborate turn of this image:

> My love doth serve for fire, my heart the furnace is,
> The aperries of my sighs augment the burning flame,
> The limbec is mine eye that doth distil the same:
And by how much my fire is violent and sly,
By so much doth it cause the waters mount on high,
That shower from mine eyes, for to assuage my miss. (Phillis: 37.9-14)

In this sonnet, the poet compares his body to the traditional tools of the alchemist and
depicts it as a combination of ambix, curcubit and retort. His heart is the « furnace »,
containing love’s wound. It is heated by love’s burning fire and therefore, his melancholy
humour becomes volatile and « mount[s] on high » within his body as if in a retort. His
eye is the « limbec » which carries out the distillation and metamorphoses his melancholy
humour into the tears of the pure, crystallised, essence of sorrow.

Similarly, Daniel introduces this image in his sequence :

These sorrowing sighes, the smoakes of mine annoy,
These teares, which heate of sacred flame distils,
Are those due tributes that my faith doth pay
Unto the Tyrant whose unkindnes kills. (Delia: 22.1-4)

Finally, it can also be identified in Michael Drayton’s Idea :

But precious Teares distilling from mine Eyne,
Which with my Sighes this Epicure doth burn. (Ide: 7.6-7)

In the previous examples, Sidney, Lodge, Daniel and Drayton extensively rely on the
tenets of Galenic medical theory. The process they present has to be interpreted as the
mutation of putrefied humours into vital spirits and then, into animal spirits. They

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29 Debus published his first article (Cf. Allen G. Debus, « The Paracelsian Compromise in Elizabethan
England », Ambix 8, juin 1960, p. 71-97.) in a journal called Ambix. As we were looking for the meaning of
this word, we found this article in the Chambers Encyclopaedia, vol 1 : Al bix (formed by the Alarbs
from their article al and Gr. antibix, a goblet) is a form of still introduced into chemistry by the alchemists,
and used by the more ancient experimenters in manipulative chemistry for the distillation and sublimation
of substances. [...] The vessel consisted of a body, cucurbit or matrass, in which the material to be
volatilised was placed ; a head, retort, or capital into which the vapors rose, were cooled and then trickled
down to the lower part, from whence by a pipe the distilled product passed into the receiver. » (Cf.
Chambers Encyclopaedia (vol. 1), Londres, W & R Chambers, 1868).
30 This very process is most clearly explained by Tillyard (Cf. Op.Cit., p. 76-8) and Debus (Cf. Op.Cit., p. 54-
9).
poetically show the basic imbalance of humours – and the consequent disease – that love has provoked in them.

This symptom of melancholy is made explicit in Burton’s *Anatomy* in very similar terms. As he refers to the lover’s « ordinary sighs, complaints and lamentation », the scholar asserts:

As drops from a still, – *ut occluso stillat ab igne liquor*, doth Cupid’s fire provoke tears from a true lover’s eyes: « The mighty Mars did oft for Venus shriek, / Privily moistening his horrid cheek / With womanish tears, » ; « Ignis distillat in undas, / Testis erit largus qui rigat ora liquor » with many such like passions. (Burton : 551)

The image of distillation reappears in the second Latin quotation Burton weaves through his argumentation. Furthermore, this passage immediately follows, in his book, a tentative medical explanation for the lover’s imbalance of humours.

In the previous examples, Elizabethan sonneteers associate the medical beliefs of their day and age with the heritage of Hermetic philosophy³¹ and its attendant science of alchemy. As such, the lover’s eye becomes a « limbec » distilling melancholy and sorrow. In other words, the eye becomes the outward interpreter of the poet’s inward world.

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³¹ Hermeticism was an essential constituent of the Elizabethan train of thought. The Renaissance rediscovery of the texts of Hermes Trismegistus (*The Emerald Table*, for instance) served as an impetus for the renewal of natural magic, alchemy and astrology (Cf. Debus, *Op.Cit.*, p. 54-911-4; 78-9; 123-4).
Fig 3. A lover’s suffering: the melancholy « inamorato »

Title page from the 1628 edition of Robert Burton’s *The Anatomy of Melancholy*
2.2. « And perspective it is best painter’s art » : Shakespeare and artistic vision

2.2.1. The aesthetic birth of love

With Shakespeare, however, the poet’s eye is endowed with another meaning. Sonnet 30 teaches us that the speaker’s eye is « unused to flow » (30.5). This is not surprising. Indeed, it has been said earlier that the most immediate consequence of Shakespeare’s reversal of this traditional motif of the Elizabethan love discourse was that no wound was inflicted upon the lover’s heart. Therefore, the reasons for his falling in love and the rationale of his melancholy suffering spring from a different context. Sonnet 24 informs us well enough about this:

Mine eye hath played the painter, and hath steeled
Thy beauty’s form in table of my heart;
My body is the frame wherein ’tis held,
And perspective it is best painter’s art;
For through the painter must you see his skill,
To find where your true image pictured lies,
Which in my bosom’s shop is hanging still,
That hath his windows glazed with thine eyes:
Now see what good turns eyes for eyes have done:
Mine eyes have drawn thy shape, and thine for me
Are windows to my breast, wherethrough the sun
Delights to peep, to gaze therein on thee;
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art:
They draw but what they see, know not the heart.

The poet clearly describes the way he fell in love with the young man as an aesthetic, or rather, an artistic process. His « eye hath played the painter » and imprinted the image
of the young man in the « table » of his « heart ». It is, explicitly, the poet’s aesthetic emotion before the beauty of the young man which initiated this artistic process. This sonnet is particularly interesting as it is the key to understanding many aspects of Shakespeare’s love discourse throughout the sequence. Contrary to what happens in the works of other Elizabethan sonneteers, the poet is not the passive victim of external stimuli; he is at once the dagger and the victim, the « painter » and the « table » and as such, the causes of his love are internal. In other words, even though the Fair Youth is the originator of beauty, the poet remains the only originator of love.

As Vendler puts it in illuminating terms:

This sonnet turns on the etymological pun perspective = see through [<per-spicio]. As the painter-lover must employ perspective (his best art), to represent the beloved, so the beloved must employ pers-pective to see into the painter to find his own image engraved on the painter’s heart.

This etymological pun is central. The youth, in order to contemplate the poet’s artwork, has indeed to look through the poet. His eyes are the « windows » to his « breast ». In other words, the young man directs the beams of his eyes into the poet’s eyes, and through them, into his heart. The image of the sun serves the metaphorical expression of this process.

As far as this image is concerned, both Vendler and Knight consider the sun as an allegory, i.e. another character that is foreign to the youth/poet relationship:

The Sun itself delights to look, not simply, as Tucker takes it, « into my breast », but rather « through these windows, your eyes, into my breast, where it sees you ». The Sun we may, I think, equate with the mind of God, some greater consciousness enjoying and using human experience; or

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perhaps the mysterious « love » to which we refer when we say that two people are « in love with » each other.

Nevertheless, with regard to the earlier development, it appears that Knight’s analysis may tell a bit more than what is actually to be found in this sonnet. The Christian background he introduces in his analysis as he « equates » the image of the sun with « the mind of God » is absent from the sonnet proper. Moreover, it has been demonstrated so far that the sun is a common metaphor in the Sonnets standing for the eye of the young man. One may perhaps, more simply, consider the sun as such, and not as yet another allegorical character in the sequence or as the symbol of « some greater consciousness ».

Understanding this image in this way leads us forward in our analysis. The eye of the youth « delights to peep, to gaze therein », that is, to see through the poet in order to observe his own picture hanging in the lover’s workshop. This creates an imbalance in love, one which permeates the sequence as a whole. The lover looks at the beloved, but the beloved, as he looks through the poet, only looks at himself. The very nature of their love, so depicted, is therefore a one-way relationship ; it has two subjects but only one object : the Fair Youth.

This kind of consideration is common in Elizabethan sequences. The mistress is always considered as a stony heart, incapable of loving anyone but herself. She is a chaste Diana (Cynthia : 9.1), a « cruell Fayre » (Delia : 10.2) who scorns the poet’s love. Let us remember, for instance, that Griffin’s sequence is entitled Fidessa, more chaste then kinde.

Now, Sonnet 24 also features another pun on « perspective ». As Booth claims – although he does not analyse the consequences of his statement with regard to the sequence as a whole – the word has to be understood in the sense it was traditionally
endowed with in Shakespeare’s day and age, that is, as an anamorphosis. Indeed, as Booth reminds us, the word « perspective » used to designate a « kind of picture that was particularly popular with the Elizabethans; a perspective is a picture drawn so as to appear distorted except from one particular point of view. Shakespeare himself used the word « perspective » three other times in his complete production and each time with this meaning, for instance in this excerpt from Richard II:

Like perspectives which, rightly gaz’d upon,
Show nothing but confusion, – ey’d awry
Distinguish form. (Richard II, II.ii.18-20)

Sonnet 24 is written from the painter-lover’s standpoint. In other words, it informs us concerning the « one particular point of view » from which this perspective has to be looked at. The state of emotional fulfilment felt by the poet is only made possible when visual contact is achieved: « All days are nights to see till I see thee » (43.13). The poet’s own individual experience of love is indeed depicted as an anamorphic representation, a « perspective » with one correct point of view, that of presentia. When unable to have this « one particular point of view », that is when the youth or the poet is absent and visual contact therefore made impossible, the poet « sinks down to death, oppressed with melancholy » (45.8). As such, contrary to other Elizabethan sonneteers, it is not the wound inflicted by the beloved’s eye which provokes a melancholy humour, but rather the fact that the poet’s eyes are deprived of the occasion of gazing at him.

34 Cf. Fig 4 & 5 (infra: 59).
36 Perspective is also used with this meaning by Orsino in Twelfth Night (V.i.213-14) and Bertram in All’s Well That Ends Well (V.iii.48).
38 We use the words presentia and absentia to designate the psychological point of view which corresponds, for the poet, to the youth’s physical presence or absence. We think this difference is too often neglected by critics. For most of them, terms like « absence » or « presence » are too general concepts to be defined. This, unfortunately, makes some argumentations unclear. When one speaks of the sonnets of absence, for instance, we do not know if the term “absence” refers to the youth’s absence or to the poet’s emotional reaction when confronted to separation.
2.2.2. The matter of appearances and the poet’s partial sight

It has been argued that the poet considers love as a case of artistic representation. Yet, in the couplet of 24, he raises a problem with regard to the representation of love. He asserts that his eyes only « draw what they see » and therefore, « know not the heart » of the young man. In other words, the poet has to derive a deeper knowledge of the youth’s inward nature from a visual experience. Exactly as Shakespeare puts it through the use of synesthesia in 23, « To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fines wit » (line 14). The problem arising in this couplet turns into a full-blown conflict and an eye/heart conceit in Sonnet 46:

```
Mine eye and heart are at a mortal war
How to divide the conquest of thy sight:
Mine eye, my heart thy picture’s sight would bar;
My heart, mine eye the freedom of that right;
My heart doth plead that thou in him dost lie,
A closet never pierced with crystal eyes;
But the defendant doth that plea deny,
And says in him thy fair appearance lies.
To cide this title is empanelled
A quest of thoughts, all tenants to the heart,
And by their verdict is determined
The clear eyes' moiety, and the dear heart's part:
As thus, mine eyes' due is thy outward part,
And my heart's right, thy inward love of heart.
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Here the poet’s heart and eye are « at a mortal war ». The whole sonnet presents a kind of trial with a defendant (the « eye »), an accuser (the « heart ») and a jury (« a quest of thoughts »). Both claim their monopoly in love’s matters. Yet, the jury gives its verdict and distributes different roles or « parts » to the accuser and defendant. Whereas the first
will be dedicated to the youth’s « inward love of heart », the latter will exclusively
contemplate its « outward part ». This sonnet reaffirms the basic dichotomy between
essence and appearance, one that is constantly worked out in the sequence and
everywhere else in Shakespeare by the way. In spite of the verdict, which appears as a
resolution of the conflict, the original division (« mortal war ») leads to another, broader
one. Both eye and heart are condemned to see the Fair Friend only in part, they no longer
benefit from a complete vision of him.

2.2.3. Partition and substitution

Nevertheless this conflict is only momentary, and in 47 an amiable truce is finally
managed. The division is abolished :

    Betwixt mine eye and heart a league is took,
    And each doth good turns now unto the other ;
    When that mine eye is famish’d for a look.
    Or heart in love with sighs himself doth smother.
    With my love’s picture then my eye doth feast,
    And to the painted banquet bids my heart ;
    Another time mine eye is my heart’s guest,
    And in his thoughts of love doth share a part.
    So, either by thy picture or my love,
    Thyself away art present still with me :
    For thou not farther than my thoughts canst move,
    And I am still with them and they with thee ;
    Or, if they sleep, thy picture in my sight
    Awakes my heart to heart’s and eye’s delight.

    Between the « eye and heart a league is took » (47.1) in order to make up for absence.
The eye is « famished for a look » (47.3), the heart « doth smother » itself « with sighs ».

[56]
In other words, the poet turns melancholy on account of the beloved’s absence. Eye and heart give a « painted banquet » (47.6) where each of them is each other’s « guest » (47.7). They « share » their « part » (47.8) in order to keep the « picture » of « love » (47.9) always « present » (47.9) with the poet when the youth is « away » (47.9).

Here also the language is intensely visual and artistic. The point of view is no longer that of presentia depicted in 24, but that of absentia. The psychological perspective of love’s representation cannot be looked at correctly and therefore, the poet turns melancholy. His body serves the artifice so as to counteract this melancholy. This, indeed, is essential. As Vendler puts it, « The air of triumphant success in maintaining possession of the beloved, directly attributable to the minuet of courtesy between eye and heart, is a mask for the desolation of absence39. » In other words, the poet discovers that he can resort to an artifice in order to maintain the perfect perspective contemplated in 24.

Sonnet 113 deals with physical eyesight and the mind’s eye :

Since I left you, mine eye is in my mind,
And that which governs me to go about
Doth part his function and is partly blind:
Seems seeing, but effectually is out:
For it no form delivers to the heart
Of bird, of flower, or shape which it doth latch;
Of his quick objects hath the mind no part,
Nor his own vision holds what it doth catch:
For if it see the rud’st or gentlest sight,
The most sweet-favoured or deformed’st creature,
The mountain or the sea, the day, or night,
The crow, or dove, it shapes them to your feature.

Incapable of more, replete with you,

My most true mind thus maketh mine eye untrue.

In this sonnet, the poet perceives all the aspects of the outside world through the privileged prism of his friend. The point of view is that of absentia, « Since I left you » (113.1). Here, the poet’s physical eye « doth part his function » (113.3), that is partly completes its task, and is therefore « partly blind » (113.3). The mind’s eye – « mine eye is in my mind » (113.1) – replaces physical eyesight and, as such, every natural phenomenon or creature the eye sees is metamorphosed by the power of imagination, which « shapes » them according to the « feature » of the young man (113.12). His love turns to obsession, but at least, he remains safe and succeeds in enduring melancholy.

It has already been demonstrated that Shakespeare’s treatment of ocular images is very different from that of his contemporaries as far as the beloved’s eyes are concerned. But now, the consequences of this simple reversal turn into a full-blown idiosyncratic treatment with regard to the poet’s eye – one that is eminently different from that of his contemporaries.
Fig 4. Perspective painting

Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*
National Gallery, London

Fig 5. The one correct point of view

Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (detail)
National Gallery, London
2.3. « These, present absent, with swift motion slide »: Time, death, absence – the melancholy of the invisible

2.3.1. « For through the painter must you see his skill »: Nature’s rich pageant

It has been argued earlier that the conception of love expressed in the Sonnets is eminently artistic and that the poet’s relationship with the young man has to be construed in terms of a visual/psychological perspective with one correct point of view, that of presentia, vs an incorrect one, that of absentia. This consideration becomes increasingly important as the sequence unfolds. The very aesthetic experience of love springs from the poet’s acknowledgement of the young man as a work of art. His love is, in some ways, a mirror image, hence the notion of perspective, which is itself an artistic representation of another work of art.

In Sonnet 20, the creator of the work of art is clearly identified as the poet exclaims, « A woman’s face, with Nature’s own hand painted, / Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion » (20.1-2). The young man is clearly defined as Nature’s artefact, one so perfectly produced that Nature herself, Pygmalion-like, fell in love with her creation: « And for a woman wert thou first created, / Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting » (20.9-10). The sense of « doting » is unequivocal; it recalls the « little western flower » which makes everyone « madly dote » upon any creature seen upon awaking in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, (II.i.169-72) or « [t]his dotage of our general’s » (I.i.1) which designates Antony’s « overflow[ing] » love for the queen of Egypt in the opening line of Antony and Cleopatra.

Nevertheless, if the poet’s love is nothing but an artistic meta-representation – i.e. the mirror image of an existing artistic representation – the words of Sonnet 24 are endowed
with a crucial importance: « For through the painter must you see his skill » (24.5). That’s precisely what the poet is aiming at throughout the sequence.

Nature’s responsibility in the creation of the work of art the youth represents is constantly reaffirmed. For instance, it is impossible to call to mind the image of the Fair Youth without recalling at once the rose in full bloom (1), the peace of a sunny springtime morning (33), a summer’s day (18) or the rising sun (7); nor is it possible to think of Shakespeare’s lyrical self without mentioning the frail frozen boughs shaking against the wind (73). Throughout the sequence, the poet constantly intends to look « through the painter » so as to « see his skill » (24.5). Yet, even though it is Nature which created the artwork, her creation is « framed » by « Time » (5.1-2). As such, however transcendent the aesthetic experience of love expressed in the Sonnets, it remains nonetheless locked within the world of Nature and Time. The poet gradually discovers the truth in Hotspur’s words « Life’s Time’s fool » (Henry IV Part I, 5.4.81) and through this, that in Ulysses’s words:

Beauty, wit,
High birth, vigour of bone, desert in service,
Love, friendship, charity, are subjects all
To envious and calumniating time (Troilus and Cressida, III.iii.171-4)

The acknowledgement of the artist’s skill is visual and it is particularly exemplified in Sonnet 12 as the poet observes the rich pageant of Nature. The idea expressed here is one of inevitability, as though fate had decided that everything in the world was condemned to inescapable decay and extinction. Everything in nature unremittingly forecasts the dissolution to come and therefore, it is in a most paradoxical, and thereby typically Shakespearean way, that life itself becomes a veritable memento mori:
When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silvered o’er with white:
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer’s green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard:
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake,
And die as fast as they see others grow. (1-12)

For the first time in the sequence, the first-person singular pronoun « I » dominates the sonnet and puts the emphasis on the inwardness of the temporal exploration induced by the initial adverb « [w]hen ». As the poet « count[s] the clock that tells the time » (12.1) – where in the alliteration of the plosives /t/ and /k/ phonemically imitates the oppressive ticking of the pendulum – he is called upon to consider evidence of the passage of time in the natural world. He provides us with seven different avatars of time in the next seven lines: the « brave day » overcome by « hideous night » (12.2), the fading « violet » (12.3), the « sable curls » « silvered » with « white » (12.4), the « lofty trees » losing their « leaves » (12.5), the ensuing loss of protection for the « herd » (12.6), the harvest of the wheat (12.7) and finally, the image of the harvest as a funeral procession (12.8). All these images follow one another with unrelenting rapidity, which creates a growing tension in the sonnet. All of these depict the coming of death, yet they are all desperately vibrant with an ultimate breath of life as if the world intended to struggle against its own fate or destiny. What is very interesting here is that the poet extensively relies on verbs of visual perception: he « count[s] » the « clock », « see[s] » the « day », « behold[s] » the
« violet » etc. Yet all he sees in the world leads him to an overwhelming question which pops up in verse 9 and unfolds until verse 12. The poet has observed the « painter » of the young man, viz. nature, so as to « see his skill ». He has discovered that everything it created was condemned to decay. This assessment leads him to the question of verse 9 where he asks himself to what the young man’s beauty will amount amongst the « wastes of time ».

2.3.2. From observation to integration

This visual exploration of the artist’s skill continues in Sonnet 64 :

> When I have seen by time’s fell hand defaced
> The rich proud cost of outworn buried age ;
> When sometime lofty towers I see down razed,
> And brass eternal slave to mortal rage ;
> When I have seen the hungry ocean gain
> Advantage on the kingdom of the shore,
> And the firm soil win of the wat’ry main,
> Increasing store with loss and loss with store ;
> When I have seen such interchange of state,
> Or state itself confounded, to decay,
> Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate :
> That time will come and take my love away.
> This thought is as a death, which cannot choose
> But weep to have that which it fears to lose.

Here also the poet emphasises his own individual perception. Yet, even though the poem is in many ways similar to that presented earlier, Shakespeare nonetheless introduces here a major reversal in the tone he uses. Indeed, the poet introduces a past tense : have-en, and therefore, inscribes the process of visual recognition in the past just
as he puts in the foreground the present consequences of this very recognition. Whereas Sonnet 12 only presented the speaker’s growing awareness of the common fate of all Nature’s creations, he has now integrated destruction as a norm. In other words, his visual perception of natural processes has begun to influence his very understanding of life itself, and most poignantly, his very understanding of love. The poet no longer perceives the world through his ocular organs only, he has « seen » (64.1, 5, 9) in the past, but now he « ruminate[s] ». In other words, his « mind and sight » are now « distractedly commix’d » (A Lover’s Complaint, 28). He is at once committed to both a visual and a psychological kind of sensory perception. The speaker no longer analyses the world with crude objectivity and detachment, he is now involved in an intensely subjective internalisation of the natural processes he observes. The consequences of this internalisation are clearly rendered visible throughout the poem as the personal pronoun « I » (64. 1, 3, 5, 9) is finally replaced by the possessive one, « my » (64.12). In line 12, « my love » (64.12) takes on a twofold semanticism as it first designates an object in the world, the Fair Youth, and then refers to an internal emotion: the poet’s intensely personal feeling of love.

From his visual perception of the world of Nature – the creator of the young man – the poet has drawn a conclusion: « Time will come and take my love away » (64.12). This is perhaps the most essential verse in the whole sequence. In itself it symbolises the connection between love and time. It has been said earlier that, for the poet, love is an artistic emotion, a perspective the correct point of view of which is that of presentia, and the incorrect one, that of absentia. Because he has observed the youth’s creator, the poet has realised that, his love (whether the object or the feeling), is « [s]upposed as forfeit to a confined doom » (107.4), that imposed by « Time’s thievish progress to eternity » (77.8). Time will therefore « take » the poet’s « love away » (64.12). In other words,
Time will lead to death, and death will be a substitute for absentia. It clearly appears that Love’s Nemesis in the Sonnets is not Death, nor Time, but absence. This very thought leads the poet to melancholy suffering, to a near-death: « This thought is as a death » (64.13), one that cannot be cured by the simple trick of substitution contemplated in 47 because death is unavoidable. As such, Time becomes a threat for love as it shifts the perspective’s point of view from presentia to absentia.

Burton powerfully makes this point in his treatise as he asserts:

If parting of friends, absence alone can work such violent effects, what shall death do, when they must eternally be separated, never in this world to meet again? This is so grievous a torment for the time, that it takes away their appetite, desire of life, extinguisheth all delights, it causeth deep sighs and groans, tears, exclamations. (Burton: 234)

Later on he adds:

A true saying, Timor mortis, morte pejor, the fear of death is worse than death itself, and the memory of that sad hour, to some fortunate and rich men, « is as bitter as gall, » Ecclus. xli. 1. Inquietam nobis vitani facit mortis metus, a worse plague cannot happen to a man, than to be so troubled in his mind; ’tis triste divortiuma, heavy separation. (Burton: 238)

This thought obsesses the poet and he can only live a life of melancholy. This is particularly rendered explicit through the sequence’s twofold treatment of time which gives birth to each and every thing in the world, and then destroys them, « For never-resting time leads summer on / To hideous winter and confounds him there » (5.5-6). Indeed, as the poet observes Nature he becomes aware of the transient quality of all its creations. The bitter-sweet concomitance of love and threat, intensity and vulnerability is

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40 This is the main argument of Henderson’s M.A. dissertation (Cf. Liza Marguerite Bell Henderson, The Still Moment: A Study of the Relationship Between Time and Love in Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Montréal, McGill University, 1985). Nevertheless, as she opposes the transcendent quality of love to the immanent quality of a temporal experience, she fails to make her point clear. Indeed, even though her study is in many ways admirable, she does not define her meaning of transcendence (is it Husserlian? Kantian?). As such, her personal analysis differs widely from our personal understanding of this concept.
always exploited with an incredible pathos. All things are seen in their relation to time and the burden of extinction and absence is constantly perceived in what is present, new and alive.

Fig 6. Nothing lasts

Philippe de Champaigne, Vanité
Musée de Tessé, Le Mans
PART 3
Awe, woe and wooing:
sight and thought
3.1. « Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show » : showing the pangs of a melancholy muse

3.1.1. Possible cures for love melancholy

As far as Elizabethan sonnet sequences are concerned, it was stated earlier that the eyes of the mistress wound the lover’s heart and that, as this wound festers, the poet turns melancholy. Yet, surprisingly, each and every time, it is precisely the mistress who is presented as the only possible cure for the lover’s melancholia. Most often, the cure springs from the intervention of her eye which is expected to show pity. This is explicit in Spenser’s *Amoretti*:

> And *kill* with looks, as Cockatrices *doo*:
> But him that at your footstool humbled lies,
> **With mercifull regard, give mercy too.** (*Amoretti* : 49.9-12)

Here it is the mistress who may heal the poet’s wound. Smith also shows it well enough in his *Chloris* as he exclaims:

> But winged *Love’s impartial cruel wound,*
> Which **in my hart is ever permanent,**
> **Until my Chloris maketh me whole and sound** (*Chloris* : 11.5-8)

As Gisèle Venet puts it in the quotation above\(^{41}\), love’s wound can only be healed by the mistress. As Fletcher writes, « You gave me the wound and can the hurt remove » (*Licia* : 39.4). This may, however, sound quite surprising. Even though, as has been demonstrated before, melancholia is defined through the consistent medical framework promoted by the Galenists, its cure definitely partakes of Paracelsianism\(^{42}\) since it clearly

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\(^{41}\) Cf. supra : 44.

uses the motto « like cures like » as an axiom. This is perfectly perceptible, for instance, in Barnes’s *Parthenophil and Parthenope*, as the speaker exclaims:

Then (from her Venus, and bright Mercury,  
My heaven’s clear planets), did She shoot such blazes  
As did infuse, with heat’s extremity,  
Mine heart, which on despair’s bare pasture grazes.  
Then like the Scorpion, did She deadly sting me;  
And with a pleasing poison pierced me!  
Which, to these utmost sobs of death, did bring me,  
And, through my soul’s faint sinews, searched me.  
Yet might She cure me with the Scorpion’s Oil. (*Parthenophil and Parthenope*: 39.1-8)

Here Barnes introduces the eye motif through his reference to the planets Venus and Mercury. Elizabethan writers used to refer to the eyes of their beloved through this metaphor. For them, the light emanating from their mistress’s eyes was comparable with the dark light of stars and planets, « Those two starres in Stella’s face », Sidney writes (*Astrophel and Stella*: 26.14). The wound is here inflicted by Parthenope’s eyes upon Parthenophil’s heart. He compares love’s wound to that of a scorpion, which « pierced » him with its « pleasing poison ». Melancholia is again contemplated here in terms of *voluptas dolendi*. Yet, once more, the poet’s only possible cure is the very cause of his disease: the mistress herself. She may cure the « scorpion » wound she inflicted upon Parthenophil’s heart « with the Scorpion’s Oil ». Here again, like cures like.

Burton himself introduces the same image in the opening pages of his treatise. As he explains the reasons and rationale of his writing in his notice to the reader, he asserts:

[A]s he that is stung with a scorpion, I would expel clavum clavo, comfort one sorrow with another, idleness with idleness, *ut ex vepriā Theriacum*, make an antidote out of that which was the prime cause of my disease. (Burton: 5)
A similar treatment is also presented in Smith’s *Chloris* as the poet asserts, « She like the scorpion gave me a wound ; / And like the scorpion she must make me sound » (*Chloris* : 19.13-4). Furthermore, Shakespeare also knew of this tradition as he introduces the same simile in *Cymbeline*. In Act 5, Cornelius asserts:

Your daughter, whom she bore in hand to love

With such integrity, she did confess

Was as a scorpion to her sight ; whose life,
But that her flight prevented it, she had

Ta’en off by poison. (*Cymbeline* v.v.43-47)

Here again, sight is important. The scorpion metaphorically features both the cause of trouble, « a scorpion to her sight », and the active principle of the remedy which « take[s] off » the pain. The young lady has indeed annihilated the effects of the metaphorical scorpion’s venom « by poison ».

In Lodge’s *Phillis*, this Paracelsian theory is even more explicit:

As when two raging venoms are united,

Which of themselves dissevered life would sever,

The sickly wretch of sickness is acquitted

Which else should die, or pine in torments ever. (*Phillis* : 18.1-4)

Daniel’s *Delia* hinges on a similar image. Furthermore, the relation between the lover’s melancholia and the eye is still emphasised here:

Love was the flame that fired me so neere ;

The Dart transpearsing were those Christall eyes.

Strong is the net and fervent is the flame ;

Deepe is the wounde, my sighes doe well report :

Yet doe I love, adore and praise the same

That holds, that burns, that wounds me in this sort.

[...]

[70]
Yet least long travailes be above my strength,

**Good Delia**, lose, quench, **heale me now at length**. *(Delia : 14.3-8, 13-4)*

Daniel reintroduces the dart/eye metaphor and asserts that only « Good Delia » is able to heal the wound. The intertwining in these sequences of two traditionally opposed medical theories in relation with the notion of sight and love-sickness is surprising; it is yet another Elizabethan specificity which does not appear in earlier English verse. This poetic treatment springs from the very particular cultural context of Elizabethan England which, as Debus demonstrates, was the only country in Europe where such a compromise between Paracelsianism and Galenism was ever achieved43.

### 3.1.2. The causes and motives of sonnet writing

In many Elizabethan sequences, sonnet writing appears as a means to convince the lady of administering the cure. For instance, in the first sonnet of his *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney asserts that he « sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe » (1.5). The public expression of the lover’s pain and melancholia seems to be a way to seduce the woman he loves:

> Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,  
> That she (dear she) might take some pleasure of my paine:  
> Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,  
> Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine. *(Astrophel and Stella : 1.1-4)*

This informs us well enough as to the motivations of sonnet writing. Indeed, as Berowne has it in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, « [f]iery numbers » are the outcome of the poet’s « sundry contemplation » of the ineffable quality of feminine beauty *(iv.iii.327-29)*. This

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43 Debus writes : « While on the continent a physician often was in a position where he could only choose between an almost complete overthrow, or an equally complete dominance of the Galenic medicine, in England, the physician had not only these choices, but also a third, the acceptance of the Galenic system with the addition of whatever was found valuable in chemical therapy. Logically enough it was this third solution which found almost immediate acceptance, even in the supposedly conservative Royal College of Physicians. » *(Cf. Op.Cit., p.97).*
idea is later synthesised as he exclaims, « Never durst a poet touch a pen to write / until his ink were tempered with love’s sighs » (iv.iii.343). In the Elizabethan era, the sonnet form is always envisaged as that kind of poetic expression ceaselessly exploring « the moods and pangs of lovers », as Puttenham has it in his *Arte of English Poesie*\(^{44}\). Even if the genre can be understood as amounting to nothing but fiction, sometimes even to a « mere literary exercise », as Frye puts it\(^ {45}\), it is nevertheless constantly presented as a serious attempt to seduce or to obtain pity from the lady in order to heal the damaging wound her eyes created in the lover’s heart. This is perfectly perceptible in most Elizabethan sonnet sequences. For instance, in *Delia*, Daniel exclaims:

> **These plaintive verse**, the Posts of my desire,  
> Which haste for succour to her slowe regard,  
> Beare not report of any slender fire,  
> Forging a griefe to winn a fame’s reward.  
> [...]  
> My humble accents beare the Olive bough  
> **Of intercession to a tyrant’s will.** (*Delia*: 4.1-4, 11-2)

Whereas Spenser – as the epithalamium proves – succeeds in obtaining his mistress’s favours, Daniel fails. He thus concludes his sequence with the following words:

> These tributarie plaints fraught with desire  
> **I send those eyes, the cabinets of love**  
> The Paradice whereto my hopes aspire,  
> From **out this hell, which mine afflictions prove** :  
> Wherein I thus do live cast downe from myrth,  
> **Pensive alone, none but dispaire about mee** ;  
> **My joyes abortive, perrisht at their birth.**

My cares long liv'd, and will not die without mee.

This is my state, and Delia’s hart is such;

I say no more, I feare I said too much. (Delia : 55.5-14)

Here his sonnets fail to conquer Delia’s stony heart, and therefore the cathartic value of the whole poetic process is negated. The lover remains melancholy, and the description he offers of his « state », which is highly reminiscent of Nicholas Breton’s account of his own experience in Melancholike Humours, proves it well enough:

Muse of sadness, neere deaths fashion,
Too neere madnesse, write my passion.
Paines possesse mee, sorrows spill mee,
Cares distress mee, all would kill mee.
Hopes have faild mee, Fortune foild mee.
Feares have quaild me, all have spoild mee.
Woes have worn mee, sighes have soakt mee,
Thoughts have torne mee, all have broke mee.
Beauty strooke mee, love hath catcht mee,
Death hath tooke mee, all dispatcht mee. (Breton : 14)

Daniel terms his sonnets « those eyes », he sends Delia so as to make her perceive in his verse the pain and melancholia he is afflicted with. The same motive of writing can be found in Sidney, Spenser, and in most contemporaries. Therefore, the Elizabethan sonnet does not merely partake of the lyric or epideictic, it is rather presented by the poets as a motivated form of verse, a pragmatic means to obtain the mistress’s favours. The lady wounds the lover with her eyes, and, in order to seduce her and consequently heal the wound, the lover sends her his sonnets, his « fiery numbers » (Love’s Labour’s Lost, iv.iii.329), his poetic « eyes » (Delia : 55.6).
3.2. « Make you live yourself in eyes of men »: Shakespeare’s prompting quill

3.2.1. Frost in the mirror

It has just been demonstrated that Elizabethan sonneteers present their « fiery numbers » (*Love’s Labour’s Lost* IV.iii.329) in an attempt to cure their melancholia. The lyrical selves of Sidney, Drayton, Griffin, Daniel or Spenser present their sonnets as a means to show their mistress the extent of their grief in order to have her see the richness of their love and the impact of the wound she inflicted upon them. Nevertheless, it has been argued so far that the principal source of the poet’s melancholia in the *Sonnets* is *absentia*, and the anticipation of it. It has also been argued that Time and Death are epitomes of *absentia*, which is Love’s nemesis.

Like other Elizabethan sonneteers, Shakespeare writes in order to find a remedy for melancholia, but, because his melancholia springs from a different context, the rationale of his sonnet writing is different. This section will be dedicated to the procreation sonnets in which the poet tirelessly attempts to urge the Fair Youth to procreate, i.e. to provide the world with a living copy of him. This process may very well be interpreted as a way to overcome the *absentia* imposed by Time. This argument is still made stronger when one considers the way the speaker addresses his motivations. He refuses the idea of seeing the youth’s « image d[ie] with [him] ». In other words, he wants to perpetuate the aesthetic emotion of love and to enable forthcoming generations to contemplate the artwork the youth represents. As such, he urges him to « [s]hift [his] place, for still the world enjoys it » (9.10) « to print more » and « not let that copy die » (11.14). The poet wants this beauty to continue to « live [...] in eyes of men » (16.12). In these sonnets (1 to 17), ocular images take on a new meaning. As he intends to urge the youth to transmit his
beauty to his offspring, the poet resorts to a treasure trove of rhetorical devices in order to drive his point home.

Throughout these sonnets, the youth’s sense of sight is constantly put to the test. The poet unremittingly calls him to look upon himself objectively: «Lo, in the Orient, [...] So thou, thyself» (7.1, 13), «Mark how one string, sweet husband to another [...] Sings this to thee» (8.9, 14), «Look whom she best endowed [...] and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.» (11.11, 13-14). Indeed, most of these sonnets follow a similar pattern: the poet draws on numerous examples in the objective world and calls upon the young man to consider the similarities between these objects and himself. In other words, by means of this analogical patterning, he tries hard to persuade the youth to look at himself indirectly, through the mirror of the world, as if from a distance. This idea is typical of Sonnet 3 wherein the mirroring process is explicitly referred to:

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another,
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest
Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.
For where is she so fair whose unear’d womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
Of his self-love, to stop posterity?
Thou art thy mother’s glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime:
So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time.
But if thou live, remembered not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee.
Here, the poet tries to convince the young man to look at himself in the glass. He expects that this will lead to his acknowledging the necessity for him to father children so that his beauty may be renewed in his offspring. He vindicates his point by referring to the youth’s mother whose beauty has been renewed in him. This kind of incentive is not typically Shakespearean. Other Elizabethan sonneteers used to introduce « mirror » sonnets in their sequences. For instance, in Daniel’s Delia, the poet asserts:

I once may see when yeres shall wreck my wrong.
When golden hayres shall change to silver wier :
And those bright rays that kindle all this fire
Shall faile in force their working not so stronge
[...]

When if she grieve to gaze her in the glasse,
Which then presents her winter-withered hew,
Goe you, my verse, goe tell her what she was,
For what shee was shee best shall finde in you. (Delia : 33.1-4, 9-12)

Here Daniel envisages the days when Delia « grieve[s] to gaze her in the glasse » because « Time’s desire » would have « fade[d] those flowers that deckt her pride so long » (Delia : 33.7-8). Against that time he opposes his verse which will serve as a mirror to her and show her « what she was ». Time is here described as that force which will make Delia’s eye-beams « faile in force ».

Similarly, in Cynthia, Barnfield’s male addressee is asked to look at himself in a mirror:

Sighing and sadly sitting by my Love,
He ask’d the cause of my hearts sorrowing.
Conjuring me by heavens eternall King
To tell the cause which me so much did move.
Compell’d : (quoth I) to thee I will confesse,

Love is the cause ; and only love it is

[76]
That doth deprive me of my heavenly blisse.

**Love is the paine that doth my heart opresse.**

And what is she (quoth he) whom thou so’st love ?

**Looke in this glasse (quoth I) and there shalt thou see**

The perfect form of my faelicitie.

When, **thinking it would strange Magique prove,**

He open’d it : and taking off the cover,

He straight perceived himself to be my Lover. (Cynthia : 11)

In both sonnets, the glass turns out to be the touchstone for the beloved. With Daniel, his very verse – his poetic « eyes » as was said earlier – becomes a mirror in which Delia will, in the future, be able to look back on her « flower, [her] glory passe » (35.14). In other words, she will recognise her past beauty in this mirror when this beauty fades. This is a means for Daniel to have her recognise the value of his « not all unworthy » verse and his love, so that, when she receives the scary « message from [her] glasse, / that teils the truth and saies that all is gone » (Delia : 36.3-4), she will « repent that [she] [has] scorn’d [his] teares » (Delia : 36.12, 13). With Barnfield, the mirror – which is definitely not a magic one – enables the young man to recognise himself as the poet’s lover. Whereas Daniel inscribes the process of recognition in the future, Barnfield inscribes it in the present. In Sonnet 3, Shakespeare’s treatment of the mirror image is very different. It both partakes of present and future and indeed, the youth’s mirror must be considered as that « glass that shows what future evils » (Measure for Measure II.i.96) are about to afflict him if he does not reproduce his own image. Present and Future are strongly linked here and the dissolution to come is already perceptible in the poem’s now moment.

### 3.2.2. The life and death of Narcissus

Furthermore, Sonnet 3, with its reference to the youth’s « self-love » that will « stop posterity » (3.8) has to be analysed as a sequel to Sonnet 1 which reads :
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel. (5-8)

The echo to Venus and Adonis – Shakespeare’s intensely personal rewriting of Ovid’s narrative in the tenth book of the Metamorphoses – is striking. Here, as the bawdy, sexually-soliciting and over-sweating goddess attempts to compromise the unresponsive adolescent into a passive rape, she exclaims:

Is thine own heart to thine own face affected?
Can thy right hand seize love upon thy left?
Then woo thyself, be of thyself rejected,
Steal thine own freedom and complain on theft.

Narcissus so himself himself forsook,
And died to kiss his shadow in the brook. (157-62)

In both cases the young addressee is called upon to realise that his own preoccupation with his beauty, or rather, his visual recognition of it and the subsequent self-love it generates, is going against nature’s law. But even more important, perhaps, are the implications of this reference to Narcissus. The Epistle Arthur Golding adds to his 1567 translation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses informs us well enough as to how the Elizabethans understood this myth. He writes:

Narcissus is of scornfulnesse and pryde a myrror cleere,
Where beawties fading vanitie most playnly may appeere. (Golding : 3)

Ovid’s Narcissus – who, as the Fair Youth, was « contracted to [his] own bright eyes » (1.4) and « died to kiss his shadow in the brook » (Venus and Adonis, 162) – is himself, in Golding’s own words, considered as « a mirror cleere », one inevitably recalling the
« vanitie » of « beawtie ». The contagion of this mirror image is most interesting as it also occurs with the same meaning in the Sonnets.

Furthermore, in her Paradoxia Epidemica, Rosalie Colie puts forward an illuminating statement about mirrors:

The psychological effect of mirrors is that they both confirm and question individual identity – confirm by splitting the mirrored viewer into observer and observed, giving him the opportunity to view himself objectively, as other people do; question, by repeating him as if he were simply an object, not “himself”, as he surely “knows” himself to be, by repeating himself as if he were not (as his inmost self insists he is) unique.

Colie’s remark is essential for our understanding of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 3 and perhaps for our understanding of all the procreation sonnets. Indeed, as the mirror operates a « splitting » of « the mirrored viewer into observer and observed » it redoubles the very act of seeing. As the youth « look[s] in [his] glass » (3.1) he is confronted to his own reflection watching him. This reflection is but the incarnation of a paradoxical non-being, a mere copy of the youth’s appearance, his « face », but not of his essence. This clearly enhances the dialectic of the palpable and the non-existent being, and that of essence and appearance which literally infuses the sequence. The young man looks in the glass at his own reflection and, this very reflection – which is not alive – looks back at him as through the very eyes of death. His epiphany before his own beauty, his own appearance, is therefore considered as a « tomb » (3.7).

The glass reminds us of our mere quality of walking corpse, one depicted by Bolingbroke in Richard II as « this frail sepulchre of our flesh » (I.iii.196). This belief was made clearly explicit by countless artists in the Renaissance visual arts. A good example is Furtenagel’s painting of the Burgkmairs reproduced at this end of this section.

Therefore, in Sonnet 3, the looking glass becomes a powerful metonymy for the hourglass: one glass synthesises and visually represents the effects of the other. This thought quietly navigates throughout the sequence until its final blossoming in 126 and the poet’s reference to « Time’s fickle glass » (126.2). Furthermore, a similar treatment appears in *Pericles* as the eponymous hero exclaims « For death remember’d should be like a mirror, / Who tells us life’s but a breath, to trust it error » (*Pericles*, 1.i.45-6).

Nevertheless, this « splitting » referred to by Colie appears as even more complex in Sonnet 3. The youth is not merely split between observer and observed, he is also a mirror himself: « thou art thy mother’s glass » (3.9) as the poet claims. As such, this sonnet has to be construed as a series of recognitions. First, the young man is called upon to observe his reflection in the glass and to recognise his beauty. Second, he is expected to realise that he is both essence and appearance, not merely appearance unlike his reflection, his « image » (3.14). Finally, the poet argues that the youth projects the reflection of his mother and that he is therefore a mirror himself. In other words, this confrontation is expected to convince the Fair Youth « to form another » (3.2) face – i.e. a reflection of himself in a living, three-dimensional mirror, one of flesh and bones, just like him, conveying essence as much as appearance – a child.

This is central to the understanding of this sonnet and to the understanding of the motives of writing expressed in the procreation sonnets as a whole. Each of them serves as a mirror. By their witty plays on analogy, all the procreation sonnets intend to have the youth look at himself from a distance, to get him look at death in the face and realise that he, also, like all those objects, will die. As such, all these poems serve as a mirror for the vanity of beauty and indeed, the poet, who is perfectly aware of the youth’s narcissism,

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47 Cf. Fig 7, 8 & 9 (infra : 82-4).
expects he will attempt to look at himself in another kind of mirror, the living, three-dimensional mirror a child incarnates.

Whereas other Elizabethan sonneteers present their poems as so many poetic « eyes » and expect them to show their grief and the extent of their love in order to seduce their mistress and to convince her into administering the cure for melancholia, the poet of the Sonnets has different motivations. His first sonnets are an exhortation to the youth to procreate, to eternise his beauty, that is the aesthetic experience which gave birth to the poet’s love in the first place. They are mirrors held up to the youth, intended to show him the reasons why he should preserve this beauty by transferring it from himself to another. We know that the poet’s initial melancholia derives from absentia, but we also know that he is able to make up for it through the trick envisaged in 47. Nevertheless, it has been argued earlier that Time and Death can be considered as epitomes of absentia, as a threat to Love which cannot simply be healed with so simple a trick. If the wishful thinking of the procreation sonnets came true, that is if the youth transferred his beauty from himself to another, the aesthetic experience would be preserved, the poet’s melancholy suffering would be annihilated and the threat would disappear. However, things do not work out this way.
Fig 7. Death in the mirror

Lukas Furtenagel, *The painter Hans Burgkmair and his wife Anna* (1529)
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
Fig 8. Looking glass, hourglass

Jan Mandyn, *The Temptation of St Anthony* (detail)

Private collection
Fig 9. Looking glass, hourglass (2)

Hans Baldung Grien, *The three ages of woman and death*

Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
3.3. « My gentle verse, which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read » : eternising the aesthetic experience – a poetic manifesto

3.3.1. The consequences of a failure

The poet fails to convince the youth to procreate, and accordingly, the rationale of his writing changes. In that, Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence greatly differs from his contemporaries’. From Sonnet 15 on, he envisages writing as a means to counteract Time’s destructive power, and therefore, to annihilate the threat of absentia. He exclaims, « And all in war with time for love of you, / As he takes from you, I engraft you new. » (15.13-14). The same idea crops up in Sonnet 100:

Rise, resty Muse : my love’s sweet face survey,
If time have any wrinkle graven there ;
If any, be a satire to decay,
And make time’s spoils despised everywhere :
Give my love fame faster than time wastes life,
So thou prevent’st his scythe and crooked knife. (9-14)

It is argued above that the poetic process underlying the poet’s creation in his procreation sonnets is depicted in highly visual terms. The poet holds a mirror up to the Young man – he gives him reasons to procreate – in order to have him show his beauty to others through his son. These sonnets are therefore designed to show the youth something. To some extent, this is also true for the immortalisation sonnets, for instance, in Sonnet 77, the poet exclaims:

Thy glass will show thee how thy beauties wear,
Thy dial how thy precious minutes waste,
The vacant leaves thy mind’s imprint will bear,
And of this book, this learning mayst thou taste :

[...]
Look what thy memory cannot contain,
Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain,
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.

These offices, so oft as thou wilt look,
Shall profit thee, and much enrich thy book. (1-4, 9-14)

In this poem the speaker envisages the youth’s future: “thy glass will show”, “thy mind’s imprint will bear”, “will truly show”, “will give thee memory”, “thou shalt find”, “thou wilt look”, “shall profit thee”. As he forecasts the future, the poet gives a great importance to the notion of memory. Nevertheless, two different kinds of memories are envisaged in this poem. On the one hand, the *memento mori* (the glass, the dial) which—as reminders of the future—look forward to death and time’s effects; on the other hand, the book (the sonnets), which will act as a reminder of the past and enable the youth to look backward. The speaker asserts that, as the youth’s beauty will disappear, the memories of his early days will wane: “Look what thy memory cannot contain”. He envisages his sonnets as a future reminder of the youth’s beauty. When the days of beauty are gone, the book will act as a reminder for the friend: “Those children nursed” (the sonnets) will “deliver” memories to his “brain” and enable him to “take a new acquaintance” of his past beauty. In the couplet, the echo of the youth’s “mind’s imprint” is explicit as to the meaning of “book”. In other words, “so oft as” the dedicatee “will look” at the material book the sonnets represent, he will enrich the “book” of his memory.

In many ways, this sonnet is highly reminiscent of the process at work in Daniel’s *Delia*. His Sonnet 33 provides a similar treatment. As the poet envisages the days when Delia’s “beautie / [...] must yield up all to tyrant Time’s desire” (*Delia*: 33.5, 7), he presents his sonnets as a future reminder of that beauty:
Goe you, my verse, goe tell her what she was,
For what shee was shee best shall finde in you.
Your fierie heate lets not her glorie passe,
But (Phenix-like) shall make her live anew. (Delia : 33.11-4)

Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s aim in the metastylistic immortalisation sonnets is not only to show something to the youth, but also to show his beauty to forthcoming generations. This is made particularly explicit in 81 as the speaker exclaims:

Or I shall live, your epitaph to make;
Or you survive, when I in earth am rotten;
[…]

Your name from hence immortal life shall have,
[…]

When you entomb’d in men’s eyes shall lie.
Your monument shall be my gentle verse.
Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read,
[…]

You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen,

Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men. (1-2, 5, 8-10, 13-14)

This sonnet is particularly interesting as it synthesises the aim of the poet. As he envisages the day when one of them dies, he defines and construes his verse as an epitaph. Even though the poet will soon be forgotten after his death, the name of the youth will become immortal thanks to his poetry, « such virtue hath [his] pen ». His work will be a monument and survive the youth. In other words, poetry will celebrate the memory of the friend in the eyes of forthcoming generations. Here the reader is definitely reminded of Sonnet 18:
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. (12-4)

As such, Shakespeare’s Sonnets should be understood as a means to eternise the aesthetic experience of love, to turn it into a testimony for others and not only for the youth. They are poetic « eyes » like those of Daniel. Nevertheless, contrary to other Elizabethan sonneteers who intend to show the extent of their grief to their mistress in order to seduce her and obtain the cure for their melancholy suffering, Shakespeare, whose melancholy springs from his fear of absentia, transforms the original aim of his Sonnets. They become a monument. In other words, he makes up for his fear of absentia by transposing his aesthetic vision onto the suspended, ever-present moment of a poetic emotion.

3.3.2. Poetry in question : the artistic process

Nevertheless, in 17 he questions the ability of his verse to do so:

Who will believe my verse in time to come,

If it were filled with your most high deserts?

Though yet, heaven knows, it is but as a tomb,

Which hides your life, and shows not half your parts:

If I could write the beauty of your eyes,

And in fresh numbers number all your graces,

The age to come would say « This poet lies; 

Such heavenly touches ne’er touched earthly faces. »

So should my papers (yellowed with their age)

Be scorned, like old men of less truth than tongue,

And your true rights be termed a poet’s rage,

And stretched metre of an antique song; (1-12)
Sonnet 54 informs us well enough as to the way the poet intends to overcome these
difficulties:

O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem
By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!
The rose looks fair, but fairer we it deem
For that sweet odour which doth in it live;
The canker blooms have full as deep a dye
As the perfumed tincture of the roses,
Hang on such thorns, and play as wantonly,
When summer’s breath their masked buds discloses;
But for their virtue only is their show
They live unwooed, and unrespected fade,
Die to themselves. Sweet roses do not so;
Of their sweet deaths are sweetest odours made;
And so of you, beauteous and lovely youth;
When that shall vade, by verse distils your truth.

The aim of this sonnet is clear enough: like in 21, the poet at once asserts the fairness
of his argument, « O let me true in love but truly write » (21.9) and features his attempts
at preserving the beauty of the Fair Youth. He expresses such notions in the same
imagery he already used earlier in 5 and 6, that of the distillation of flowers. The idea is
that his verse distils the quintessence of the young man exactly as distillation extracts the
quintessence of « sweet roses » in order to make the « sweetest » perfumes (54.12). The
poet’s linguistic choices are revealing here. He first presents the original principle,
« roses », associated with an adjective, « sweet ». But when it comes to presenting the
results of the distillation process, the substantive « odours » is this time associated with a
superlative, « sweetest ». Distillation is therefore instituted as a process enabling already
« sweet » things to become « sweetest ». The essence of the original principle is kept, but
it is unpolluted, concentrated and enhanced by poetry. What was already « better » is « still made better » (119.10). The sonnet itself therefore takes on a performative value as it literally distils and extracts the quintessence of the words used : « beauty » becomes « beauteous » (54.1), « fair » (54.3) becomes « fairer » (54.3) and, through the simple trick of an extended polyptoton 48, « sweet » redoubles (54.11-12) and becomes « sweetest ». In other words, poetry is presented as a means to extract the quintessence of the young man : « by verse distils your truth » (54.14) and to immortalise it in the poetic substratum. It thereby becomes the « living record » of the youth’s « memory » (55.8).

The arrival of the Rival Poet in the sequence informs us as to the way this poetic distillation is performed. The poet unremittingly condemns the Rival’s use of imitation. For him, his poetry is unfaithful to his subject. This excerpt from Sonnet 82 is a good example of this :

And do so my love ; yet when they have devised

   What stained touches rhetoric can lend,

Thou, truly fair, wert truly sympathized

   In true plain words, by thy true-telling friend ;

      And their gross painting might better be used

   Where cheeks need blood ; in thee it is abused. (9-14)

This sonnet opposes Shakespeare’s art and that of the rival. It is very interesting as it opposes true art and artifice. The rival’s is a poetics of praise, and he is thereby unfaithful to his subject. He rather masks the young man in the « gross painting » (82.13) of a panegyric of his physical features, one that has no connection with the real. Shakespeare goes on with this painting metaphor and definitely establishes the climactic condemnation of these uses in Sonnet 83 :

48 The repetition of words derived from the same root.
I never saw that you did painting need,
And therefore to your fair no painting set;
I found (or thought I found) you did exceed
The barren tender of a poet’s debt;
And therefore have I slept in your report,
That you yourself, being extant, well might show
How far a modern quill doth come too short,
Speaking of worth, what worth in you doth grow.
This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory, being dumb;
For I impair not beauty, being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb.
There lives more life in one of your fair eyes
Than both your poets can in praise devise.

Here Shakespeare asserts the simple truth of his verse. Whereas the Rival intends to « devise » (83.14) the living imitation of the youth’s « fair eyes » and fails, our poet remains silent about it. He « impairs not beauty being mute » and as such, his text, clad up as it is with the constant halo of vagueness and smoke of mystery he creates around his characters, involves the reader’s imagination. His Sonnets grant the young man an eternal life within our eye, both our physical eye through the materiality of the text, but – and this is perhaps even more important – within our « mind’s eye », as Hamlet calls it, that is our imagination49. Conversely, the Rival presents everything, claims everything real and as such, does not appeal to our imagination. His poetry is therefore a « record » (55.8), a « monument » (81.9), but definitely not a « living » one (55.8) unlike that of Shakespeare. The Rival creates nothing new, nothing individual, nothing universal, but rather copies what already is. His verse « brings a tomb » (83.12) in which the Fair Youth

49 Cf. Fig 10 (infra : 94).
is forever buried. This criticism is highly reminiscent of Montaigne’s own words in his essay, *Sur des vers de Virgile*:

Celui qui dit tout, il nous saoule et nous dégoûte. Celui qui craint à s’exprimer, nous achemine à en penser plus qu’il n’en y a. Il y a de la trahison dans cette sorte de modestie : Et notamment nous entrouvrant, comme font ceux-ci, une si belle route à l’imagination […]  

Even if the context is different, that is precisely what Shakespeare does for us in his *Sonnets*, and the impact they had on generations of readers shows it well enough. He opens up our imagination. He isolates a moment of pure emotion, and turns it into shape on the physical texture of a piece of paper. His poems definitely arouse our imagination; they engrave the image of the youth in our mind’s eye and therefore, as they present crystallised moments of poetic experience, they quicken into being a new, imaginative universe.

We can now better understand Theseus’s words in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

The poet’s eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven ;

And, as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen

Turns them to shape, and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name. (V.i.12-7)

Shakespeare’s stance as a poet in his *Sonnets* is very close to Theseus’s theoretical words. Poetry is envisaged as an incarnation, an embodiment of emotion, the turning into shape of an « airy »—that is an unsubstantial—shadow.  

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51 Cf. Fig 11. (infra : 95). Fludd’s theory of cognition depicts the imaginative universe as a shadow replica of the sensible one. As such, in the aforementioned engraving, the elemental constituents of the sensible universe (terra, aqua, etc.) become shadows of these very elements though the imagination (umbra terrae, umbra aquae etc.)
« the real world the unsubstantial image his soul so constantly beholds » as Joyce poetically has it in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The poet derives feelings and sensations from his visual, aesthetic observations. He then projects this emotion, this state of psychological activity that is yet a « no-thing » into an actual wording, a « name » bearing the implied cognitive, visual, oral and aural dimensions of the Saussurian sign. With Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, the aesthetic experience born of the visual recognition of beauty becomes essential. It is remediated through the eye of the poet who literally puts it before our own eyes via the materiality of the text, and metaphorically instils it into our mind’s eye through his creative alchemy.
Fig 10. The mind’s eye

First page of Robert Fludd’s
*Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris historia, II* (1619)
Fig 11. A new imaginative universe

_Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris historia, II (1619)_
tractatus I, sectio I, liber X, De triplici animae in corpore visione
CONCLUSION
Contrary to Sir Philip Sidney and his *Apologie for Poetrie*, Samuel Daniel and his *Defence of Ryme*, Thomas Watson and his *Passionate Centurie of Love* or George Puttenham and his *Arte of English Poesie*, Shakespeare leaves us with no personal work of literary criticism at all. However, there is enough explicit metastylistic material in his plays and poems so as to provide us with a clear view of his own conception of art, of how he followed the artistic philosophy of his day and age, and to what extent he distinguished himself within and from it. The *Sonnets* are, together with *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, certainly the most explicit in this particular vein. As such, when confronted to the *Sonnets*, one is obviously called upon to consider the metastylistic explorations of Sonnet 76. Here answering the laments of the fashionable Fair Youth, Shakespeare launches into an apologia of his own. The sonnet form clearly deprives his « verse » of « new pride », « variation » or « quick change » (76.1-2), but the nobility of his subject vindicates the conspicuous thematic monomaniac at work throughout the sequence. His love for the young man is his only « argument » (76.10), one nevertheless prone to a constant stylistic readjustment referred to in the poem by the clothing metaphor of « dressing old words new » (76.11). The oxymoronic co-ordination of « new and old » in verse 13 – encapsulated as it is by the two echoing polyptota of lines 12 and 14 « Spending again what is already spent : »(76.12) and « So is my love still telling what is told » (76.14) – at once associates the present and the past, the ancient and the modern and informs us well enough that Shakespeare’s poetic work in the *Sonnets* has to be construed as a palimpsest, a piece of literary creation disclosing old poetic features clad in the new robes of inventive novelty.

Giving new strength to old words is actually the core of Shakespeare’s art, and indeed, ample evidence has been provided so far by the critics regarding the sources of his dramatic production. Nevertheless, as has been demonstrated throughout this Master’s
dissertation, the same can also be said of his contemporary sonneteers. As far as the eye is concerned, all of them extensively draw on older sources. Their works feature images which were already present with the classics, yet, these are newly adjusted to the Elizabethan culture. From the basic dart/eye metaphor emerges a complex symbolism, associating at once the heritage of late-medieval bestiaries, the medical theories of their day and age and even, the current interest in melancholy.

This comparative reading has nonetheless revealed that Shakespeare reverses this renewed convention. Like others he clads old words in the new robes of inventive novelty, yet, he does it in a very different way. He does not merely update old poetic topoi, he rather readjusts them it in his own idiosyncratic way. In his *Arte of English Poesie*, Puttenham wrote:

> The very Poet makes and contriues out of his owne braine both the verse and the matter of his poeme, and not by any foreine copie or example, as doth the translator, who therefore may well be sayd a versifier but not a Poet.\(^{52}\)

All the sequences we studied so far only partially fulfil this definition. Obviously, these writers « make and contriue of [their] owne braine both the verse and the matter of [their] poeme[s] ». Yet, this creation is only achieved through their personal positioning with regard to others’ « foreine copie[s] or example[s] ».

As far as the *Sonnets* are concerned, they are constantly informed by the Elizabethan literary tradition. Shakespeare uses an « old » form of poetic expression, « old themes », « old » rhetorical devices, « old » motives, and rejuvenates them with a « new », intensely personal body of emotions. (73.13). It clearly appears that Shakespeare is well aware of the literary tradition he uses, and that he uses it as a limit imposed only to be

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transgressed. The basic essence of his creation springs from his intensely personal use of a negative heuristic\textsuperscript{53} with regard to the works of his predecessors and contemporaries.

So doing, Shakespeare succeeds into injecting new blood into an already moribund, though popular, form of poetic expression. These Elizabethan sonnets, with their desperate lovers crying floods of tears, entangled in a bad romance with their feminine monsters of frigidity, or being targeted by the arrows of their mistresses’ eyes, may appear extensively remote from any accurate description of actual human love. The traditional Petrarchan conceits ceaselessly explored in Elizabethan sonnet sequences can be analysed as a veritable code of emotion, a grammar of love, a syntax of feeling, that is, a codified way to express a poet’s « want of inward tuch »\textsuperscript{54} (Astrophel and Stella : 15.10). Shakespeare breaks with this grammar of emotion: he uses the same words, images, and themes as his contemporary writers, yet he nonetheless rearranges them in his own idiosyncratic way. As such, in his sequence, Shakespeare succeeds in restoring love to love poetry, thus conflating at once Aristotle’s views on mimesis and Horace’s conception of *imitatio*. He utilises the best available literary models for the expression of love and makes them the appropriate vehicle for the entire scope of our human condition and experience, from the most basic behaviours to the subtlest states of emotion. His art becomes a veritable mirror held up to the true, essential, nature of love, one nevertheless framed in the oxidised copper squares of a poetic convention.


\textsuperscript{54} Remark here the double entendre on « inward tuch » which refers to both the spiritual and physical realms of experience.
Appendix 1

1. Software presentation

Here is a screenshot of our application program while analysing *The Merchant of Venice*:

![Screenshot of application program]

2. Computational exploration of the Sonnets

For all the substantives in the list below, singular and plural occurrences were put together and as such appear here as undifferentiated. Self-enclosed semantic units were considered as the minimal relevant units for the sake of this study, disregarding number.

Results for « word » when « occurrence » > 10

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3. Chart

![Chart showing the occurrence of 'SONNETS' when 'WORD' = EYE and 'WORK' = SONNETS]
Appendix 2

Incidence of the word « eye » in Shakespeare’s complete works with degrees of representation:

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<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Saturation</th>
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Appendix 3

Incidence of the word « eye » in Samuel Daniel’s *Delia*, Edmund Spenser’s *Amoretti*, Michael Drayton’s *Idea in Sixty Three Sonnets* and Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* with degrees of representation. The text is derived from Maurice Evans’s anthology.

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<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Saturation</th>
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<td>4.894353 ‰</td>
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Works Consulted

1. Primary Sources

_Shakespeare and Elizabethan sonnet sequences_


All references to the _Sonnets_ come from The Arden Shakespeare Third Series edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones, 1997.


References to Percy’s _Coelia_, Spenser’s _Fairie Queene_, and Smith’s _Chloris_ come from the online digital Renaescence edition, The University of Oregon (éd.) [http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/resoures/mirrors/rbear/ren.htm](http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/iemls/resoures/mirrors/rbear/ren.htm)

References to Lodge’s _Phillis_ and Fletcher’s _Licia_ are derived from The Project Gutenberg EBook of _Elizabethan Sonnet Cycles_, by Thomas Lodge and Giles Fletcher (Martha Foote Crow, éd.) [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18841/18841-h/18841-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18841/18841-h/18841-h.htm)

References to Smith’s Chloris come from The Project Gutenberg EBook of _Elizabethan Sonnet Cycles, Idea_, by Michael Drayton ; _Fidessa_, by Bartholomew Griffin ; _Chloris_, by William Smith (Martha Foote Crow, éd.) [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15448/15448-h/15448-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15448/15448-h/15448-h.htm)
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