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## The Insistence of Art

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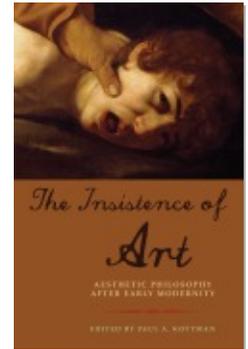
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# Object Lessons: Reification and Renaissance Epitaphic Poetry

*Rachel Eisendrath*

In this essay I explore how early modern artworks, both visual and verbal, anticipate Theodor W. Adorno's concerns with reification in aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Focusing in particular on epitaphic poetry, I argue that early modern art provides a kind of "unconscious" history of reification during a period in Europe that was, in Adorno's view, pivotal in the development of reification.

Adorno's well-known claim that "all reification is forgetting"<sup>2</sup> can be understood in at least two overlapping senses: one, that reification forgets whatever does not fit into the conceptual categories of instrumental reason and in so doing disregards the irreducible alterity of the things of the world,<sup>3</sup> and two, that reification forgets history, failing to acknowledge the historical processes that produced it. "Ever since men began to seek the foundation of all knowledge in the supposed immediacy of subjectivity, they have endeavored to expel the historical dimension of thought," Adorno writes.<sup>4</sup> Scientific methodology, for example, which emerges in the early modern period, presents itself as timeless.

Given Adorno's interest in this problem of effaced history, especially in regard to the rise of scientific objectivity, it is surprising that critics

rarely trace his thinking further back than the eighteenth century. Adorno himself repeatedly refers to Francis Bacon in the Renaissance: On the first page of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, he and Max Horkheimer quote a passage of Bacon's circa 1592 essay "In Praise of Knowledge" to show how "the father of experimental philosophy" wanted to "establish man as the master of nature"; in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, similarly, Adorno refers to Bacon as "the founding father of empiricism" and suggests that the "exuberant" phase of empiricism may have begun with this thinker;<sup>5</sup> and in the introductory text for these lectures, Adorno discusses Bacon's justifiable antagonism to tradition but faults him (and René Descartes), "the two progenitors of modernity," for disregarding the role of tradition in knowledge, given that tradition mediates among its objects.<sup>6</sup> It is hard to overestimate the importance of this kind of thinking for Adorno. "Since my earliest youth," he writes in a note of May 1960, "I knew that everything that I stood for found itself in a hopeless struggle with what I perceived as the anti-spirit incarnate—the spirit of Anglo-Saxon natural-scientific positivism."<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I explore the role of early modernity in Adorno's ideas by looking closely at the inner formal dynamics of various early modern artworks. I understand my approach as one way of attempting to take up Adorno's own challenge: Drawing on G. W. F. Hegel, Adorno raises the question of whether a critique really places us above an issue—or, instead, merely "not in it."<sup>8</sup> At the same time as Adorno considers the social factors that shape art, he directs us to look *inside* artworks at what he calls their "immanent problems of form."<sup>9</sup> Art, because it is sedimented with the conflicts that society repressed, is "the unconscious writing of history."<sup>10</sup> My task is to show how some early modern artworks attempted to defy emergent forms of reification by pushing outward from within their own locked-in state—perhaps not unlike some of Adorno's own sentences, which have the insistent charge of final utterances at the same time as they strive to express from within, as he says elsewhere, "an element of the tentative, experimental and inconclusive."<sup>11</sup>

In exploring the issue of early modern art's struggle with reification, I build on Hugh Grady's claim that Shakespeare "registered, reflected on, and . . . passionately denounced the historically new forms of reification erupting into a social world in the earliest stages of the permanent cultural revolution we blandly call modernity."<sup>12</sup> My core examples concern epitaphic poetry, which, in mimicking reified objects, presumes to speak from the perspective of a dead corpse or tomb. This poetry exemplifies how, as Adorno says, an artwork both evokes and resists its own objectness: "If it

is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art.”<sup>13</sup>

### *Art as the Unconscious Writing of History*

Let's begin with this image of Lucretia, the Roman matron who kills herself after being raped by the king's son, Tarquin. In a detail of a 1530–32 painting, Lorenzo Lotto represents her at the iconographic moment when she is about to plunge a knife into her chest (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> The artist has emphasized her extreme lack of self-possession: her mouth gapes open; her eyes roll upward; she is naked. This nakedness is traditional at the same time that it makes no sense (her suicide occurs the morning after her rape, in the presence of her father and others whom she has summoned from the war camp). Painfully off-balance, clutching a crumpled sheet to her loins, her wild hair whipping around her body, she stands as though exposed to the elements, almost bestial in her despair. To whom is she calling? What does she see with her upward-turned eyes? Blurring the moment of her rape into that of her suicide,<sup>15</sup> an artistic tradition situates her at the outer edge of the social or the civilized; she becomes in this moment almost an image of the savage. Does she even have language? Note her mouth, which opens but seems to form no words; it makes a mute dark space. If she is screaming, her screaming resembles silence. This is the tragic in the full primitive power that Franz Rosenzweig describes—the subject folding



Figure 1. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia*. Detail. 1530–32. 96.5 × 110.6 cm. The National Gallery, London. Permission granted.

in on herself, disappearing into the absolute loneliness of her “dumb anguish.”<sup>16</sup> Trapped within herself, the victim finds that her experience of brutality defies communication: “The worst is not/So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’” (*King Lear*, 4.1.29–30). Even screaming suggests the amelioration of pain.<sup>17</sup> At the extreme of suffering, the oppressed subject is transformed into a kind of object; a person is rendered thing.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written during World War II, Adorno draws our attention to the moment near the end of the *Odyssey* when Telemachus punishes the maidservants for sleeping with the suitors. Homer compares them to birds caught in a trap. After being forced to carry away the murdered bodies of their former lovers, and then to clean the hall of gore, the maids are penned within a courtyard where, all in a line and with a single cord, they are hanged. Homer writes:

They struggled with their feet for a short time, not for very long.

ἦσπαρον δὲ πόδεσσι μίνυθά περ οὐ τι μάλα δῆν. (22.473)<sup>19</sup>

As in Lotto’s depiction of Lucrece’s moment of suicide, what the narrative registers in this verse is suffering at the “unspeakable” instant just before it disappears into oblivion,<sup>20</sup> at the exact moment—what Adorno calls the “numb pause”<sup>21</sup>—where the subjects lose consciousness of themselves as subjects and become mere things. These are not just the detached factual records of suffering, which after all the Nazis themselves kept, and which break faith with suffering by treating the victims objectively already as things, but the registering of suffering as experience on the very edge of the communicable. Even if the *Odyssey* ultimately softens the edges of this scene of horror by transmuting it into the “once upon a time” of a fairy tale’s yesteryear, the poem also creates a significant pause at this instant. “In being brought to a standstill, the report is prevented from forgetting the victims of the execution and lays bare the unspeakably endless torment of the single instant in which the maids fought against death,” Adorno writes.<sup>22</sup>

These examples illustrate, in a possibly overdetermined way, how reified forms of brutality can imprint themselves in art. The things of culture are, Adorno says, saturated with unspoken horrors: “The historical trace on things, words, colors and sounds is always of past suffering.”<sup>23</sup> This is a variation of Walter Benjamin’s well-known thesis that “there is no document of civilization that is not also a document of barbarism.”<sup>24</sup> And yet Adorno also holds onto the possibility that art might make possible a critique of this history—through, as I explore in the following sections, the inner dynamics of its form.

Adorno articulates the following contradiction: Tradition is permeated with brutality, but to forget this tradition is to give in to brutality.<sup>25</sup> Veneration of tradition, no less than indifference to tradition, can blind us to the violent realities of the past. To understand this history demands a kind of immersion that is acutely critical, which “raises tradition to consciousness without succumbing to it.”<sup>26</sup> In his 1951 *Minima Moralia*, Adorno provocatively presents the problem of this relationship to the history of art and literature as how *to hate* tradition “properly.”<sup>27</sup> But it is also, no less important, how to keep faith with tradition or with the possibility of finally being able to lament suffering, rather than just to perpetuate it. The question is how to become conscious of this ingrained history of barbarism, without merely repeating its mentality.

The artwork is sedimented with historical experience, as are all material things. As such, the art object can be a luxury good that has a place in the market. Further, as a historical *artifact*, the art object is never entirely distinct from scientific objects or objects of evidence. However, as much as the art object may resemble these reified objects, it may also help negate their untruth. “Thoughts and other dead things might be taken to be object lessons for life,” explains Tom Huhn, “because they exhibit the stasis wherein life, for whatever reason, neglected to continue, except in a damaged and damaging fashion.”<sup>28</sup> The artwork does not promise any reassuring mollification of this accumulated memory of suffering; rather the artwork holds open the possibility of a nondominating relation to it. In preserving what would otherwise disappear into oblivion, the artwork creates a pause that makes possible a kind of lament, and thereby suggests a different way that the world could be.

### *Epitaphic Poetry*

Starting in the sixteenth century, antiquarians began to collect epitaphs as objects of historical evidence. In one sense, epitaphs are the kind of empiricist object that Adorno associates with reification. A previously living individual is collapsed into a sentence engraved in stone. What once existed in time becomes a static thing. Even when these epitaphs are fictionalized, they convey, in the words of one critic, “a *sheen of facticity*.”<sup>29</sup> Renaissance poets not uncommonly wrote epitaphs about real people, but they also played with this form through *epitaphic poetry*, by which I mean literary experiments that test and stretch epitaphic forms. One reason that epitaphs are disquieting is precisely because they play with their own ambiguous objectness—testing the tension between aesthetics and materiality, or

between art objects and any other kind of object.<sup>30</sup> In this essay, I develop these observations by focusing on Renaissance poetry in which suffering seems to collapse into the deathly silence of material things, especially into epitaphs. But first let's return to the Lotto painting.

Let's step back now from the detail of the anguished Lucretia that we examined earlier. It is part of a larger painting, in which, astonishingly, an early modern Lucretia holds this drawing of the ancient Lucretia (Figure 2). The composition offers a study of contrasts: Against this ancient exemplar, the model asserts herself, seeming to declare her own existence in the present in tension with this figure from the past—whether because, as some scholars currently believe, the model's name was Lucretia (the bride-to-be Lucrezia Valier), or because, as other scholars used to believe, she was a courtesan whose very livelihood contradicts Lucretia's ideal of chastity (the portrait used to be called *The Courtesan*).<sup>31</sup> Against the flat, gray, naked, torqued figure in the drawing, the living woman claims her



Figure 2. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia*. 1530–32. 96.5 × 110.6 cm. The National Gallery, London. Permission granted.

existence in the color, volume, and clothing of life. In contrast to the Lucretia in the drawing who appears lost to herself, beckoning off the frame to absent gods, the modern Lucretia confronts the viewer with a steadfast and emphatically self-possessed gaze, which draws us viewers into the set of relationships under consideration. We know that both the ancient and the modern Lucretia are representations, but it is as if the modern figure were more “real” than the woman in the drawing and mediates our relationship with this ancient exemplar. Note that the drawing is placed oddly in space: The model’s arm holds it back behind her, but the drawing also pops forward in relation to the table, as though the drawing were both receding backward as an object of history and also coming forward as an object for identification. Whatever the particularities of the modern model’s situation, she presents the possibility to the viewer of a kind of identification that is also an anti-identification.

Of special interest to me is the small piece of paper on the table (Figure 3). The note reads: “NEC VLLA IMPVDICA LV/CRETIAE EXEMPLO VIVET.”<sup>32</sup> It is a slightly modified quotation from the ancient historian Livy of the famous words that Lucretia says just before killing herself: “Let no unchaste woman live by the example of Lucretia” (1.58.10).<sup>33</sup> In Livy’s account, Lucretia has shifted in referring to herself from the embodied first person to a disembodied third person, almost as though she were already dead. Indeed, in Lotto’s painting, the quotation has been made to seem a rubbing from an ancient tomb inscription. The letters are all capital, Roman, and shadowed as though carved into stone. Also, the paper has been folded, as if transported from somewhere, possibly tucked in a pocket or in the bosom of the model’s gown. Why are there two separate sheets of paper at all? Instead of the statement being rendered as, say, an emblematic inscription on the drawing, the artist has emphasized a gap: above, the image of Lucretia in the drawing—the very image of subjectivity entering into the silent void of total suffering; below, the record of the inscription carved



Figure 3. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Woman Inspired by Lucretia*. Detail. 1530–32. 96.5 × 110.6 cm. The National Gallery, London. Permission granted.

into stone—the “timeless” object lesson that her image has been made to represent. By offering these two distinct versions of the event, Lotto has created a distinction between the image of the suffering individual who lacks speech and the record of the aphoristic object-saying. Lotto’s painting has in this way opened a space that allows the viewer to become critically aware of this collapse of experience into objects.

Epitaphs are unique for the way that they claim to speak from the position of an object (the tomb) and from the interred dead subject’s position of nonbeing. In a scene in John Webster’s 1613–14 *Duchess of Malfi*, the widowed Duchess professes her love to her steward Antonio and urges him to defy convention by loving her in return. She does so by contrasting herself with a statuary monument:

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh  
 To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident—  
 What is’t distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir:  
 ’Tis not the figure cut in alabaster  
 Kneels at my husband’s tomb. Awake, awake, man! (1.2.359–65)<sup>34</sup>

Against the image of the stony object kneeling at her dead husband’s grave, the Duchess attempts to initiate a shared coming-to-life by asserting the force and reality of their mutually embodied existences in the present. In a sense, the tragedy of the Duchess is the story of the failure of this attempt—and her disappearance back into the same tomblike figure of rigidified virtue that she initially resisted. As she is tortured and finally killed by her brother, she becomes the static type of virtue, as opposed to the life-desiring being who earlier put off “all vain ceremony” (1.2.366) for the sake of love, erotic joy, and playfulness in the present. Instead, what she becomes for history is a rigidified object lesson. As her death approaches, her lady-in-waiting tells her that, indeed, she looks “like some reverend monument/Whose ruins are even pitied” (4.2.32–33). The Duchess thus becomes the very thing that she initially asserted herself against—a silent thing, specifically, a statuary monument. The comment closely resembles that of the Steward in William Shakespeare’s and Thomas Middleton’s *Timon of Athens*, who, accurately or inaccurately, understands Timon’s fall as similarly illustrating a known object lesson: “O monument/And wonder of good deeds evilly bestowed!” (14.460–61).<sup>35</sup> In both cases, the main character’s capacity for life collapses into a static tomblike thing, in the one case by the main character’s choice (Timon) and in the other against her choice (the Duchess).

If the imagery in the *Duchess of Malfi* is tombl-like, so is the heroine's famous saying: "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.137). If Timon writes his own epitaphs (14.720, 17.71-74),<sup>36</sup> so, too, it seems, does the Duchess. Her words of Stoical resistance are epitaphic in expressing the collapse of the living self into a third-person construction. The Duchess transforms herself from an "I" who is a center of consciousness and desire into the Duchess of Malfi, her title and, significantly, the title of the play. It is as though the playwright could actually predict the play's own reception, for in fact this line has remained the most-often quoted line—and, in that sense, has become who the Duchess is "still." Like Lucretia's inscription on the unfolded piece of paper, the Duchess of Malfi's line is an epitaphic declaration that anticipates the stillness of death.

Many epitaphs are built on demonstratives like *here* or *this*.<sup>37</sup> The most common form of an epitaph is, of course, "here lies . . .," but we also often find other uses of the deictic: "In *this* tomb lies . . ." or "Beneath *this* stone behold . . ." In his 1605 *Remains concerning Britain*, William Camden quotes dozens of examples of epitaphs that use the word "this" to refer to the tomb on which the words are found: "*This* little stone a great King's heart doth hold"; "Under *this* stone/Lyes John Knapton . . ."; and "*These* lines with golden letters I have fill'd . . .," and so on.<sup>38</sup> As with the words of Eucharistic benediction, "This is my body" (*Hoc est corpus meum*), Matthew 26:26, an epitaph claims to overcome the space of referentiality by collapsing the distinction between word and thing. "How numerous and how important is the doubt produced in the world by the meaning of this syllable, *boc* [this]," Michel de Montaigne remarked in regard to the Eucharistic debates.<sup>39</sup>

More so than any other poet of the Renaissance, Shakespeare uses such highly condensed epitaphic forms to test the problematic reification of living subjectivity. Not only are his plays scattered with overt references to epitaphs,<sup>40</sup> but, on the level of form, he also explores what I have been calling an epitaphic poetics through his use of deictics like *here* or *this*. In his 1594 *Titus Andronicus*, for example, Shakespeare evokes the image of extreme suffering through the figure of Lavinia and identifies her, as Lotto did his Lucretia, with the materiality of the historical record. After she is raped and violently disfigured, she stands mutely on stage without hands or tongue, appearing not unlike a ruined statue from the ancient world. Her uncle Marcus oddly compares her lips bubbling with blood to a fountain. Indeed, the imagery of ruins and monuments recurs throughout the play: from the first act (where Titus buries his sons in the family sepulcher) to

the last act (with its oddly anachronistic reference to a “ruinous monastery” [5.1.21]).<sup>41</sup>

Here and elsewhere Shakespeare links living suffering with objects, emphasizing especially their silence. In the scene where Lavinia is presented as an object of suffering, Marcus emphasizes her inability to communicate as her worst suffering: “Sorrow concealed, like an oven stopped, / Doth burn the heart to cinders where it is” (2.3.36–37). Her reification, which may also represent the silent sufferings of the common people,<sup>42</sup> is best expressed when he presents her to her father in the language of an epitaph:

This was thy daughter. (3.1.63)

This epitaphic line, which describes Lavinia as though she were already dead, employs the deictic *this* to emphasize her status as an object—specifically, an object of her father’s, that is, within a patriarchal set of relations. Indeed, her brother Lucius responds: “Ay me, *this object* kills me” (3.1.65). Through this complex of associations, Shakespeare links Lavinia’s inexpressible suffering with the silent ruins and epitaphs that history preserves. When Lavinia finally does manage to communicate the crimes she has endured, by writing the names of her torturers in the dust, Titus says that he will write these names in brass—a kind of permanent epitaph (Shakespeare writes of “tombs of brass” in sonnet 107), expressing her death before it actually occurs.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia is rendered an object by others. But sometimes, Shakespeare uses an epitaphic form to explore the ways that characters render, or anticipate, their own objectification. For example, in his 1602 *Twelfth Night*, Olivia says when unveiling her face for the first time:

Look you, sir, such a one I was this present. (1.5.227)<sup>43</sup>

It is certainly true that Olivia is referring to the disclosure of a painting, as the Arden editions note (she explicitly says that “we will draw the curtain and show you the picture”). But so far as I know, scholars have not remarked that the line’s strongly melancholic undertone and effect of eerie self-detachment also derive from Shakespeare’s use of the *memento mori* epitaphic trope, the basic form of which is expressed in the beginning of a 1593 epitaph:

Come nere my friends, behold and see  
Suche as I am, suche shall you bee.<sup>44</sup>

Whereas the standard epitaph links the condition of a living stranger with the remains of a dead person (you will be like me, i.e., dead), Olivia uses

the epitaphic form to link her living consciousness with her object-like, externalized physical being. This association reflects her understanding of herself as an object of exchange. Olivia also plays on the first-person epitaph's impossible juxtaposition of past ("was") and present ("this present"). As though portraying in miniature the disappearance of her subjectivity, the line begins with an emphatic series of references to the singular being, Olivia, present in the iterative moment—*such, a, one, I*. But by the end of the line, this embodied person has faded into an abstract realm of externalized generalities and categories. She has become an example of the singular person that once was. As a category without content, "this present," fluctuates disturbingly between different presents (the iterative present versus the present of reflection). The *memento mori* trope derives from classical examples, first developing in a situation where people were buried along the roadside;<sup>45</sup> Olivia's line follows the epitaphic form so precisely as to mimic this traditional address of the anonymous stranger: "Look you, sir . . ." In adopting the epitaphic form, Shakespeare develops the problematic relation of a living person with her own reification in a system of commodified property relations. Shakespeare creates a space for critique by showing how these object lessons are too rigid to be modulated by what actually occurs, that is, by the unfolding realities of the world in its potential interrelations.

Many of my examples have so far involved the female body—and this is surely no accident. In literary history, women have a strange way of representing the body that absorbs suffering. The silence of this body is key: Silence, since the ancient Greeks, is "the adornment of women."<sup>46</sup> When Shakespeare takes up the Lucretia story in his 1594 *The Rape of Lucrece*, he foregrounds the problem of her silence. Although Shakespeare's Lucrece talks more than previous versions, what she articulates is the pain of her silence: "For more it is than I can well express, / And that deep torture may be called a hell / When more is felt than one hath power to tell" (1286–88).<sup>47</sup> Lynn Enterline explores how Shakespeare conflates the crime of raping her body with the act of silencing her person.<sup>48</sup>

Shakespeare probes Lucrece's consequent reification on two grounds, both relevant to my analysis. First, she represents, in the words of Oliver Arnold, a commodity in that her husband and father see her rape and death as "crimes against their property."<sup>49</sup> After her suicide, they argue over who has suffered the greater damage to this property: "'Woe, woe,' quoth Collatine, 'she was my wife; / I owed [owned] her, and 'tis mine that she hath killed'" (1801–3). Shakespeare makes this form of commodification crystallize as objects for our analysis.

Second, Lucrece becomes reified as an object of history, as the artificial object that for Adorno represents another form of reification. I discuss elsewhere the importance of historical material artifacts in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*,<sup>50</sup> which, like *Titus Andronicus* (published the same year), is filled with the language of ruins: For example, Shakespeare compares Lucrece to a "virtuous monument" (391), which, as Colin Burrow notes, may evoke the medieval and Renaissance tomb statues of women sleeping beside their husbands.<sup>51</sup> It is as though the poem itself becomes a kind of tomb in which once-living people have been interred. The word *here* (as in the epitaphic *here lies*) begins about ten stanzas scattered throughout the larger poem.<sup>52</sup> After delivering her famous pronouncement for posterity ("No dame hereafter living/By my excuse shall claim excuse's giving" [1714–15]), Shakespeare writes, "*Here*, with a sigh as if her heart would break,/She throws forth Tarquin's name . . ." [1716–17]). In this instant, Lucrece becomes reified as a picture for posterity. Most interestingly, this epitaphic form is echoed in the following stanza—with the addition for the first and only time of the emphatic "even"—to depict the moment when Lucrece stabs herself:

*Even here* she sheathed in her harmless breast  
A harmful knife. (1723–24)

To register this line as epitaphic is to encounter the exact moment when Lucrece becomes a thing, a moment that will be represented over and over again in the cultural tradition. This reification happens, precisely, "*here*." It is the instant that might remind us of the kicking feet of Homer's maid-servants, who "struggled with their feet for a short time, *not for very long*." Shakespeare marks the extreme edge of Lucrece's existence as an articulating subject at the exact instant where she becomes an object. It is like an Ovidian metamorphosis at the unbearable moment of transformation. If Apollo could still feel Daphne's heart "fluttering beneath the bark,"<sup>53</sup> we now witness that terrible moment from Daphne's perspective in the seconds when, ceasing to have any perspective, she is rendered *thing*.

### *Playing with This*

Shakespeare's experiments with aesthetic form may reach their greatest density in his *Sonnets* of 1609, which manage to draw from highly reified and collapsed forms a kind of dynamic inner life. For Shakespeare, literature is not what converts people into things, but what loosens up reified forms of thought and returns them to living experience that constantly

demands interpretive involvement. Reification itself “become[s] eloquent,” to use Adorno’s phrase.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the sequence of sonnets addressed to the young man, the speaker struggles with preserving the memory of his beloved. Famously, the speaker eventually asserts the idea that the poems themselves will serve as his beloved’s memorial:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments  
 Of princes shall outlive this pow’rful rhyme,  
 But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
 Than unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.  
 When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
 And broils work out the root of masonry,  
 Nor Mars his sword, nor war’s quick fire shall burn  
 The living record of your memory.  
 ’Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity  
 Shall you pace forth, your praise shall still find room,  
 Even in the eyes of all posterity  
 That wear the world out to the ending doom.  
       So, till the judgment that yourself arise,  
       You live in *this*, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.<sup>55</sup>

This sonnet (55) makes the claim that whereas physical things like walls and statues and tombs cannot endure, words will last. This notion of poetic immortality is a trope that has a long history. It goes back to the ancient Roman poets Horace (*Odes* 3.30) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 15.871–79). The very layout of Shakespeare’s poems seems to support this inherited assertion: As Burrow points out, the printer’s opening inscription employs, as did Lucrece’s inscription on the slip of paper in Lotto’s painting, all capital letters with periods between the individual words, in the style of a Roman tomb inscription—as though this book of poems were replacing a physical tomb with a verbal, poetic one.

But Shakespeare’s sonnets also work against this reified idea of memory, which preserves the beloved as though in a grand stony tomb. And the sonnets do so on the level of language, on the level of poetic play. If Shakespeare borrowed his themes and tropes from older poets such as Horace and Ovid, the language is his own—and it is here beneath the surface that he uses language to loosen up what’s been compacted and rigidified, what’s become stony and dead, and release this material back into more supple forms of interrelation and subjectivity. Shakespeare probes historically reified forms in a different way than did Lotto: Whereas Lotto opened up a

new space, triangulating the modern Lucrece, the papers and the viewer, Shakespeare focuses in on old collapsed linguistic forms, activating the verbal life trapped inside.

Shakespeare occasionally makes direct references to epitaphs in his sonnets. In sonnet 81, for example, he considers whether he will outlive his beloved, his “epitaph to make.” But through the heavy use of demonstratives Shakespeare also makes key parts of some poems *sound* like epitaphs. Returning to sonnet 55, note the last line: “You live in *this*, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.”<sup>56</sup> Or take the concluding couplet of sonnet 18: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives *this*, and *this* gives life to thee.” Or sonnet 107: “And thou in *this* shalt find thy monument / When tyrants’ crests and tombs of brass are spent.” Or sonnet 74: “The worth of *that*, is *that* which it contains, / And *that* is *this*, and *this* with thee remains.” Most epitaphic lines are in the couplets, but not all. In sonnet 32, it is the fourth line—“*These* poor, rude lines of thy deceased lover”—that is pretending to be, as William Empson long ago noted, “a quotation from a tombstone.”<sup>57</sup>

So, on one level, Shakespeare uses such epitaphic lines to further the claim that the poems can serve as equivalents of the beloved. But on another level, that of linguistic play, the poems also work against this reifying tendency, this kind of memory that might be a kind of forgetting, this kind of speaking that might be a kind of silencing—through a much more subtle play of poetic language.

The smallness of the sonnet form may be part of the point in that this smallness already suggests how Shakespeare extracts motion from verbal forms that seem, at least in contrast to the dramas, to have collapsed in on themselves.<sup>58</sup> The sonnet sequence begins with an expression of collapse into the self: “But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes, / Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel” (sonnet 1, lines 5–6). Refusing relationship with the world, the beloved has narrowed in on himself through a Narcissus-like contraction into the self, or even into the reflection of his eye’s own pupil. Bradin Cormack points out in his discussion of Latin roots that, in line 11 (“Within thine own bud buriest thy content”), the beginning and ending of the line are almost synonymous. The Latinate *con-tent* means *bold with*. In this way, “‘content’ holds a ‘with’ in it.”<sup>59</sup> Both ends of the line express the idea of containment, thus enfolding or—to use Shakespeare’s own language—*burying* the image of the bud at the center. The idea of collapse into the self as a kind of burial recurs in the last line of this first sonnet, which refers to the beloved’s grave. The energy of the poems derives in part from the minuteness of Shakespeare’s linguistic

analysis, which draws motion from almost tautologically collapsed verbal structures. Not unlike Adorno, Shakespeare attempts to break through reified forms of thought by close attention to the “micrological.” Through this method, the particular is “volatized,” and “its concretion vanishes.”<sup>60</sup> It may be through their meticulous linguistic form that Shakespeare’s poems best reveal their humane content.

For the remainder of this essay, I focus on one small example of how Shakespeare uses poetic language to turn the reader away from what is reified, monumentalized, universalized, stony, deadened, always-and-ever-the-same, and to open thought toward what is much harder to pin down, what is ephemeral and interrelational and experiential. In sonnet 98, the epitaphic *this* or *these* or *those* appears twice at the end, in lines 12 and 14:

From you have I been absent in the spring,  
 When proud-pied April (dressed in all his trim)  
 Hath put a spirit of youth in every thing,  
 That heavy Saturn laughed and leapt with him.  
 Yet nor the lays of birds, nor the sweet smell  
 Of different flowers in odour and in hue,  
 Could make me any summer’s story tell,  
 Or from their proud lap pluck them where they grew.  
 Nor did I wonder at the lily’s white,  
 Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;  
 They were but sweet, but figures of delight  
 Drawn after you, you pattern of all *those*.  
     Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away,  
     As with your shadow I with *these* did play.

Thematically, the poem concretizes absence by attempting to convert the surrounding physical world, the flowers, into “figures,” or images of the beloved. But these figures, or signs of the beloved’s absence, are also what allow him, the beloved, to appear in lively flickering motion, albeit only within the confines of poetic language.

If we look closely at the “those” in the last line before the final couplet and the “these” in the last line of the couplet—we might notice that they both refer to the same thing—the flowers. And yet, apparently, there has been a shift from “those” of line 12 to “these” of line 14, a shift in the nearness of the flowers, which have come closer by the end of the poem. In the first case, the last line before the couplet, the flowers are but figures: “Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.” The “after” conveys the sense of the flowers’ inferior status as a copy of the beloved: The flowers are

drawn after you. They may also be “after” in the sense of sequence: You were here first, but now you’re gone, and the flowers are drawn *after* you, that is, in a temporal sense. The flowers are also “drawn after you” in the sense of being pulled from stasis into motion.

The speaker names the beloved twice: “Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.” In the second half of the line, it could be that the beloved is simply being named again in order to give more information about him, but the line also suggests that perhaps the beloved has appeared in fantasy. It is as if the speaker were addressing him directly, in the vocative, as though the beloved had been conjured in imagination: “Drawn after you, *you pattern of all those*.” The beloved is nearer than the flowers, “*those*” flowers.

But notice that the final couplet reverses this relation: the flowers are now nearer than the beloved. “Yet seemed it winter still, and, you away, / As with your shadow I with *these* did play.” The first word underscores this shift: The initial “yet” suggests a wistful change, which is affirmed when the beloved (the “you”) is shown to be at a distance. If the beloved seemed for a moment to have appeared at the end of the last line before the couplet, it was only in the most fragile, tenuous fashion. As soon as he appears, he’s gone again. The beloved appeared only in the realm of fantasy and figurative language.

The last line of the poem brings to fruition the subtleties of this shifting. The speaker says, “As with your shadow I with *these* did play.” The flowers have again come closer, shifting from *those* to *these*. By becoming the shadow of what’s absent (they have become a shadow of *you*, the beloved), they have come nearer. If, by the end of the poem, the flowers have achieved presence, it is as a sign of what’s absent, the beloved. Shakespeare achieves in this way a flickering quality between the beloved’s substance and image.

An especially delicate trick of this poem’s last line is that what the speaker is shown doing—playing—is what the object of his play (a shadow) does. “As with your shadow I with *these* did play.” The *OED* offers as one definition of “play” (7b): “Of a thing: to move briskly or lightly, especially with alternating or irregular motion; to change or alternate rapidly, to flicker; to strike lightly on a surface, dance, flutter.” Instances cited are Edmund Spenser’s 1590 *The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.34, “Thereby a christall streame did gently play . . .,” and Shakespeare’s own circa 1591 *Henry VI*, Part I, 5.5.18, “As plays the Sunne vpon the glassie streames, / Twinkling another counterfetted beame.” The speaker’s mode of engaging with the flickering shadow of “you” (the *those-these* flowers) is, then, itself flickering. In other

words, the way I play with your shadow is itself in the manner of a shadow. The speaker and his beloved become intertwined in this imagery.

If the beloved can never be fully possessed or held in one place or monumentalized for all eternity, if he is essentially ephemeral (being known, as we know each other, only in time), he can nonetheless be experienced through this mimetic playfulness. This realm of poetry is an interpretive territory—maybe necessarily so. A space for contemplation and interrelation opens from within a highly reified epitaphic form. It is as though Shakespeare's poetry were trying to find within the silence of the material object its own form of expression—as though art could do justice to silence by finding in materiality what materiality has suppressed.

To look at the ways that Renaissance poetry lays the groundwork for Frankfurt School aesthetics is, of course, to read history backward, since one period can only “anticipate” another in retrospect. Yet doesn't a strictly empiricist approach do the same—that is, look at the past through its own anachronistic lens? Our increasingly undialectical attention to materiality may have made us less and less able to perceive the play of form, or to see the ways that Renaissance art objects resist the collapse into their own mere thingliness.<sup>61</sup> Contemplating in 1859 the rise of photography, Charles Baudelaire poses the question: “Is it permitted to suppose that a people whose eyes are accustomed to consider the results of a material science as the products of the beautiful won't, at the end of a certain time, have singularly diminished its faculty of judging and feeling what is the most ethereal and most immaterial?”<sup>62</sup>

Adorno raises the question of whether aesthetic experience—or even experience in its fullest sense—is still possible. But to immerse oneself within the history of Renaissance art, when empiricism was first emerging, and to ask of it our own questions, is perhaps to begin to hear a lost set of possibilities rustling beneath the surface: a new future of the past. That's not as paradoxical as it seems because the past only exists for us when (and to the extent that) we discern it. In the Renaissance epitaphic poetry that I've been analyzing, words collapse living people into deathly objects. By re-creating in miniature problems of reification, this poetry helps pry open these problems from within. At these highly charged junctures a new motion can be felt emerging from within the otherwise-dead thingliness of tradition. As Enterline says of Shakespeare's treatment of Lucrece: The narrator desires “to animate Lucrece—not from death, but from the reifying conceits of received poetic convention.”<sup>63</sup> Shakespeare's reification un-reifies reification.

I want to retain the difference between aesthetic objects and material objects, even in acknowledging their interrelation—by seeking in epitaphs a place where they *almost*, but not quite, intersect. “Poetry redeems its truth content only when it repels tradition at its closest point of contact,” Adorno writes.<sup>64</sup> From the site of greatest similarity leaps forth the difference.<sup>65</sup>

## NOTES

1. For my purposes, reification (*Verdinglichung*) entails turning living processes or interrelations into things. It is almost a truism that attempts to define this term run the risk of slipping into the very kind of thinking that the term is meant to criticize. As though a mini-lesson in negative dialectics, this problem of defining the term shows how the term only works when used critically, as a means of negation. For the intellectual history of the term, with its origins in Hegel (although he does not use the word), Marx, Lukács, and others, see Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), as well as Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Verso, 1978). For an account of the term in early modern literary studies specifically, see Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 191.

3. “Anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2006), 47.

4. Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 207.

5. *Ibid.*, 83.

6. *Ibid.*, 207. Adorno writes, “Knowledge deforms its objects as soon as it creates a tabula rasa by objectifying them in a single moment of time.”

7. In *Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VIII*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 2003), 14. Quoted in Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 89.

8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 1. See the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in which Hegel criticizes thinking that refuses to get “involved in the real issue” and that “is always away beyond it . . . instead of tarrying with it, and losing itself in it.” I am quoting A. V. Miller’s translation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3.

9. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 192, 259.
11. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 5. See also “The Essay as Form,” trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, no. 32 (Spring–Summer 1984): 151–71.
12. Grady, *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf*, 56.
13. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 175.
14. Lorenzo Lotto, *Portrait of a Lady Inspired by Lucretia* (1530–32), © The National Gallery, London.
15. Ian Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).
16. This phrase is from Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 107. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).
17. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 117.
18. See Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); “Object into Object?: Some Thoughts on the Presence of Black Women in Early Modern Culture,” in *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, and Empire in Renaissance England*, ed. Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Also Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), and Simone Weil, “The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force,” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 184.
19. Homer, *Odyssey*, Perseus Digital Library, ed. Gregory R. Crane. Tufts University. www.perseus.tufts.edu (accessed March 2014).
20. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 62.
21. *Ibid.*, 61.
22. *Ibid.*, 62. See Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 43–44.
23. Theodor W. Adorno, “On Tradition,” *Telos*, no. 94 (1992): 78.
24. Walter Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–38*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 267. See also “On the Concept of History,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938–40*, 392.
25. Adorno, “On Tradition,” 78.
26. *Ibid.*, 80.

27. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 52.
28. Tom Huhn, "Introduction: Thoughts beside Themselves," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5.
29. Scott L. Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England: The Poetics of Epitaphs beyond the Tomb* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 93. See also Joshua Scodel, *The English Poetic Epitaph: Commemoration and Conflict from Jonson to Wordsworth* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).
30. William N. West, "Less Well-Wrought Urns: Henry Vaughan and the Decay of the Poetic Monument," *ELH* 75, no. 1 (2008): 197–217.
31. Jacques Bonnet, *Lorenzo Lotto*, trans. Michael Taylor (Paris: A. Biro, 1996), 136. Cited in Rona Goffen, "Lotto's Lucretia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 3 (1999): 746. The flower on the table is a wallflower, which could mean both earthly and sacred love, as Goffen explains. See also Peter Humfrey, *Lorenzo Lotto* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), 110.
32. The "A" and "E" are fused together at the end of "LUCRETIAE," as was standard in epigraphs. Thanks to Christopher Baswell for this point.
33. "nec ulla deinde inpudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet." Livy, *History of Rome*, books 1–2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1919).
34. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2009).
35. William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton, *Timon of Athens*, ed. John Jowett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
36. See Robert Darcy, "Shakespeare's Empty Plot: The Epicenotaph in 'Timon of Athens,'" *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., 33 (2004): 159–79.
37. Newstok, *Quoting Death in Early Modern England*, 1. Also, Laura Kolb, "Writing Epitaphs for Death: The Work of Herbert's 'Church-monuments' and Donne's 'A Nocturnal,'" *St. John's University Humanities Review* 8, no. 2 (2010): 31–49. For a recent discussion of early modern deictics, see Heather Dubrow, *Deixis in the Early Modern English Lyric: Unsettling Spatial Anchors Like "Here," "This," "Come"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
38. William Camden, *Remains concerning Britain* (London: John Russell Smith, 1870), 386–440.
39. "Combien de querelles et combien importantes a produit au monde le doute du sens de cette syllable: *boc!*" Michel de Montaigne, "Apologie de Raymond Sebond," 2.12 in *Essais*, Livre 2 (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979), 192.
40. See *All's Well That Ends Well*, 1.2.50; *Cymbeline*, 3.3.52; *Hamlet*, 2.2.550; *1 Henry IV*, 5.4.101; *Henry V*, 1.2.233; *Love's Labor's Lost*, 4.2.51; *Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.118; *Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1.209 and 5.1.293;

*Pericles*, 4.3.43 and 4.4.32; *Richard II*, 3.2.145; *Timon of Athens*, 4.3.380 and 5.1.188.

41. William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995).

42. Oliver Arnold, *The Third Citizen: Shakespeare's Theater and the Early Modern House of Commons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

43. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Keir Elam (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2008).

44. The epitaph is John Trustlowe's in Ravenshaw, quoted in Scodel, *English Poetic Epitaph*, 30. Scodel explains that although the *memento mori* trope declined in England with the rise of Protestantism, it was still used in the sixteenth century. Scodel also cites E.K.'s gloss of Spenser's "Maye" in *The Shepheardes Calender*: "Ho, Ho, who lies here? / I the good Erle of Devonshire." *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 101.

45. Scodel, *English Poetic Epitaph*, 33.

46. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.13.1260a30; Sophocles, *Ajax* 293. Nicole Loraux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 21.

47. All citations of Shakespeare's poems from *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

48. Lynn Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 152–97. See also Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997), 27–45; and Jane O. Newman, "'And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness': Philomela, Female Violence, and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (1994): 304–26.

49. Arnold, *Third Citizen*, 103.

50. Rachel Eisendrath, "'Lamentable Objects': Ekphrasis and the Encounter with Historical Materiality in Shakespeare's 1594 *The Rape of Lucrece*," in *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. David Kennedy and Richard Meek (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

51. Burrow, *Complete Sonnets and Poems*, 265. For an image of one such monument, an effigy of Eleanor of Lancaster (d. 1372) in the Chichester Cathedral, Sussex, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ArundelTomb2.JPG>. This particular effigy was made famous by Philip Larkin's poem "An Arundel Tomb."

52. In *Remains concerning Britain*, 390, Camden quotes approximately three dozen examples that employ some variation of this form in English,

Latin, or French. “*Hic situs est, Hospes* [“Here lies, stranger”], as speaking to the reader,” is the ancient Latin scaffolding, he explains, and later epitaphs were built on this basic form: “So we & other Christians began them [epitaphs] with *Hic deponitur* [“Here is put”], *Hic jacet* [“Here lies”], *Hic requiescat* [“Here rests”], in French *Icy gist* [“Here is entombed”].”

53. “trepidare . . . sub cortice” (1.554). Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, books 1–8, trans. Frank Justus Miller, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1977).

54. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 85.

55. Italics mine in all quotations of sonnets.

56. Tom Muir writes about the emptiness of “this” in the couplet of sonnet 55. Muir’s probing of ruins, memory, and forgetting in the sonnets informs mine, although I do not see the sonnets as apocalyptically self-obliterating, as he does. See Muir, “Without remainder: ruins and tombs in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*,” *Textual Practice* 24, no. 1 (2010): 21–49.

57. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 51.

58. I am grateful to Russ McDonald for a version of this point.

59. Bradin Cormack, “Tender Distance: Latinity and Desire in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007), 242–60.

60. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 101. See also Adorno’s analysis of Proust’s technique, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 33, 96.

61. See David Hawkes, “Materialism and Reification in Renaissance Studies,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2004): 114–29, and Simon Jarvis, “Adorno, Marx, Materialism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 79–100.

62. Baudelaire, *Curiosité esthétiques, Salon de 1859*. Quoted in Marc Fumaroli, *Paris-New York et retour: Voyage dans les arts et les images* (Paris: Fayard, 2009), 12.

63. Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*, 190.

64. Adorno, “On Tradition,” 82.

65. I am grateful for the help of Christopher Baswell, Bradin Cormack, Allyson C. González, Teresa Jesionowski, Betsy Kalish, Paul Kottman, Scott Newstok, Timea Széll, the anonymous reader of this volume, and the participants of the seminar “Shakespearean Exceptionalism: The Case of the *Sonnets*,” at the Shakespeare Association of America, held in Toronto on March 29, 2013.