Shakespeare’s Spam Poetics

Christine Hoffmann

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Christine Hoffmann

Abstract
This essay argues that amidst the superfluous clutter of spam is a credible ethos combining the poetic consolation of the early modern sonneteer with the indulgent excesses of a capitalist precariat. William Shakespeare’s \textit{Will} sonnets (135 and 136) are explored as early instances of spam in that they illustrate spam’s peculiar objective to deploy itself into fields of lively but redundant engagement. While experimenting with the conventions of the sonnet, an outmoded genre devoted to the particular disillusionment of precarious romance, Shakespeare recomposes willfulness as a critical ethos designed to function as a form of life in both emotional and material environments that prove hazardous to conventional forms of intimacy and survival.

By modern definition, spam is indiscriminate message-sending; it shows up in superfluous bulk, cluttering our inboxes, disrupting our settings and scripts. Scholar and artist Hito Steyerl has described spam as “a substantial expression of a period [ours] that has elevated superfluity into one of its guiding principles” (72), but it was five hundred years earlier that Desiderius Erasmus began guiding his students of \textit{copia} toward rhetorical superfluity in the hopes of elevating their speech and social status: “constant reading of authors of every kind will permit you to store up as many words as possible,” he writes in \textit{On Copia of Words and Ideas}, “and no word is to be rejected” (I.XI), especially during one’s early education “where, as everyone knows, all things ought to be exaggerated,” all “extravagance[s] of speech” temporarily condoned (I.IV). “Fill it full with wills” is William Shakespeare’s subsequent, salacious suggestion for the mistress of Sonnet 136. Beyond its clever but routine suggestiveness, does such a line argue for a psychophysiological equivalence to the experience of superfluity on the page? In Shakespeare’s spammiest sonnets, the speaker’s assertion of his will—by turns desiring and indifferent; authoritative and acquiescent; ambient and egoistic—appears as a diffusion of the word \textit{will}, most notably in Sonnet 135, in which \textit{will} appears 13 times, and its companion 136. Willfulness, wordiness, fullness—they correlate in these poems to such an extent that, mid-plead for sexual favor from his mistress, \textit{Will} can argue against the need for favorable response, or indeed any response; taking
up the space that a reply would have filled is the word will, contented and consoled as a result of attending to its own banal conspicuousness. As Catherine Nicholson notes, Shakespeare has “self-conscious fun” (193) committing to an “Erasmian poetics of increase” (199), but there are moments when a poem’s particular embrace of the abundant style seems as much a confession of impoverishment as a celebration of versatility, and Shakespeare risks turning from a suitor to a spammer.

That there is profit in this transition is what I wish to explore. Moreover, the risk of finding oneself not (only) a victim of spam but a producer of it is one that we ought to find familiar and take seriously in the twenty-first century. Curator and media scholar Kristopher Gansing, for example, wasn’t wrong to suggest in 2013 that “[s]pam has become the essence of human communication as we live more and more of our social life in a spam-like way” (qtd. in Piesing). For evidence, Gansing looked to the posts of inconsequence that continue to dominate social media: anyone who has publicly posted a picture of the cat they’re about to pet or the meal they’re about to eat is a producer of spam, and one needn’t show up on the Register of Known Spam Operations (ROKSO) database to qualify as a sender of indiscriminate messages. ¹ Though they share some characteristics, spamming is an activity distinct from phishing, website spoofing, sextortion and various other cybercriminal activities whose communications are not only unsolicited but malicious, aiming to steal identities, ruin reputations or otherwise disrupt the operations of companies and individuals. ² Spam’s comparatively non-nefarious message-sending is an unexceptional example of the inconsequential sharing that has become an expected and broadly accepted part of mediatization. Indeed, our rather resigned encouragement of inconsequence may explain why the public perception of spam, particularly email spam after the millennium, is that it is more irritant than threat, and even then not terribly irritating, having perfected the technique of what Finn Brunton calls “disappearing into ubiquity” (188).³ But this supposedly emergent, new-media-driven sociability has a longer history that a closer look at Shakespeare’s sonnets can uncover.

Long before email, Shakespeare spammed readers with 154 sonnets, many of which express the same requests, dwell on the same anxieties, cover the same ground. How could they not, when “the inexhaustible nature of the object of praise, which in the case of the Sonnets is both the loved person and love itself, makes possible and in fact demands a poetry which repeats itself with a corresponding copiousness”? (Edwards 37). “[S]onnet sequences were always hazy in both their form and their social implications,” Christopher Warley observes, “[u]nlike epic and romance, which were well-defined forms with distinct classical precedents
that maintained definite social positions in the Renaissance” (2). Warley highlights 1560-1619 as the brief era for the sonnet’s cultural importance (3); they fell out of fashion by the early seventeenth century, and Shakespeare’s 1609 collection “has had more scorn poured on it than any other work … with the possible exception of Titus Andronicus” (Burrow 138). Lukas Erne and Tamsin Badcoe note that Shakespeare’s Sonnets “received not a single reprint in the 30 years following their original publication in 1609” (33). If Warley is correct that before their slide into irrelevance sonnet sequences “provided writers with a unique form to describe, and to invent, new social positions before there existed an explicit vocabulary to define them” (3), then perhaps no subgenre can better document how the procedures we follow to develop and differentiate ourselves on and off the page can become indistinguishable from procedures marching us towards indistinction. This essay is my attempt not to position Shakespeare as poster-poet of a prematurely abandoned genre, but to outline the procedures his will sonnets follow to embrace the spammy (in)exhaustibility of the sonnet form and to promote substantive abnegation as an available and desirable ethos. Concurrently, I hope to unfold the ways in which Shakespeare anticipates a poethical response to the condition of precarity. “A poetics thickened by an h,” as Joan Retallack explains, “launches an exploration of art’s significance as, not just about, a form of living in the real world” (26), so “[t]o place ethos in the foreground of the discussion of aesthetic process is to think about consequential ‘forms of life’” (12). I’ll demonstrate how such forms take shape in Shakespeare’s will sonnets—how, while experimenting with the conventions of a genre devoted to the particular disillusionment of precarious romance, Shakespeare recomposes willfulness as a critical ethos equipped to function as a “form of life” in both emotional and material environments that prove hazardous to conventional forms of intimacy and survival. Spam, meanwhile, is served up in a rhetorical analysis that follows spam’s logic on both page and screen until it arrives at what spam promises: enhancement by means of redundant or inconsequential action. I concede that I ask readers to downplay spam’s commercial motivations in order to credit what I see as an equally significant driving factor behind its production: a poethical intentionality that understands formal experimentation as a practice of self-composure, even when what the self/subject behind the intention substantiates is its own discardability.

1. SPAM POET(H)ICS

In an essay that wrestles with the concept of spam as digital debris, Steyerl recalls Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, caught in a storm that “irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while
the pile of debris before him [i.e., the past] grows skyward” (Benjamin 258). Steyerl reasons, “Since the angel faces us as spectators, and—according to Benjamin—also faces the rubble, the wreckage ... is in our place.... [W]e, the spectators, might actually be the rubble” (71). She then asks if rubble and debris are not “outdated notions for an age in which information can be copied supposedly without loss and is infinitely retrievable and restorable?” (71). Perhaps, but they were outdated notions for Benjamin as well: the past “threatens to disappear irretrievably,” but it can always flash up “at a moment of danger,” for “‘[t]he truth will not run away from us’” (255). What we try to throw away, for good, remains caught in history’s stare. It’s a historical materialist reminder similar to, if not as memorably indecorous as, ecocritic Timothy Morton’s reminder that we live in a world without any “ontological U-bends” in which we can flush our waste away; “there is no ‘away,’” “‘[o]ut of sight, out of mind’ is strictly untenable,” what is alien is also intimate, and what we need is an ethics that can address the “uncanny familiarity” of the strange intimacies “now thrust on us whether we like it or not” (115, 124). For Retallack, what we need is “a poethics of the contemporary, that is, the ethos of making something of one’s moment in the historical-contemporary,” a moment always complicated and never unaccompanied by “[a]n irremediable past” (11). The current mood regarding spam, the readiness with which we expect and accept intimacy with it while continuing to side-eye its incivility, suggests that the time for articulating the poethics Retallack and others have in mind is here.

Turned to Shakespeare’s historical-contemporary first, we find Sonnet 135’s speaker addressing the beloved from the rubble-heap:

> Whoever hath her wish, thou hast thy Will,  
> And Will to boot, and Will in overplus;  
> More than enough am I that vex thee still,  
> To thy sweet will making addition thus.  
> Wilt thou, whose will is large and spacious,  
> Not once vouchsafe to hide my will in thine?  
> Shall will in others seem right gracious,  
> And in my will no fair acceptance shine?  
> The sea, all water, yet receives rain still,  
> And in abundance addeth to his store;  
> So thou being rich in Will add to thy Will  
> One will of mine, to make thy large Will more.  
> Let no unkind, no fair beseechers kill;  
> Think all but one, and me in that one Will.

The spam poethics on display in Sonnet 135 illustrate how illusory is the border between the discardable and the residual. Will makes his situation “in medias mess” (Retallack 28) into a site of composure; he writes from a position of being discarded even while insisting that he has not
and cannot go away. There is no “away” in Sonnet 135; Shakespeare can literally will himself (back) into the mistress’s consideration without ever denying, indeed while insisting on, his inconsequence. “Will to boot … Will in overplus” (2); Will is aggressively, excessively, over-abundantly present in a poem that purports to be about the worthless, annoying and inconsequential status of that same Will. Shakespeare is both spam and spammer in this scenario, not only writing from the rubble, but writing as rubble. He asks to be noticed for his un-noteworthiness; he promises enhancement through companionship so superfluous it might as well be absence. His wooing is the equivalent of a one-weird-trick ad promising gain through the ungainly mix of oddity and ease. Twenty-first-century readers are all too familiar with such insistent ad campaigns within digital media, pop-ups declaring we can trim our bellies with the cinnamon in our spice racks, or make money from home by visiting the websites we already visit. Spam is true to form when it informs us that the regular habits of our lives are also life hacks. Shakespeare, meanwhile, tells his mistress she can make her rich will richer with just one will more. (Spam) translate Sonnet 135 and uncover a clickbait headline: The one weird thing about loving this lover is how not weird it’s going to feel!

Of course, such a headline neglects to feature Sonnet 135’s most distinctive element: its generation of multiple definitions for the word will. In Shakespeare’s energetic punning is a spam-like enthusiasm for production, remarkable much less for its persuasiveness than for its profligacy. As Brunton explains, the peculiar economics of spam

reward sheer volume rather than message quality, and the great technical innovations lie on the production side, building systems that act with the profligacy of a redwood, which may produce a billion seeds over the course of its lifetime, of which one may grow into a mature tree. The messages don’t improve from their lower bound unless they have to, so the result doesn’t get “better” from a human perspective—that is, more convincing or plausibly human—just stranger. (150)

Spam survives not despite but because it forges stranger connections than humans typically credit, compose or find profitable—outside of, say, poetry, for which we have long accepted that movement “toward the unintelligibilities of the developing contemporary” is integral to the craft (Retallack 39). Spammers fooled early search engines by stuffing webpages with “hidden word sets” that would blend into the color schemes of the pages’ backgrounds, “a magma flow” of terms “selected because they happened to get good returns at the time” (Brunton 118). Next came link farms, “pages of nothing but links between spam sites,” pages designed to juke the stats of other pages, to exploit the assumption that links “carry an implicit endorsement—a vote of relevance made by a person, like a recommendation made in a community” (Brunton
122). Litspam, a more recent development, uses fragments from public domain literature to construct textual bulwarks around spammy URLs. In short, as filters get more sophisticated, spammers get more creative: experimenting with genre combinations; sponsoring human-machine collaborations; developing euphemisms for genitalia that “approach poetic allusion: ‘your engine in pants’ / ... ‘Meatstick-champion!’ / ... ‘Make your volcano erupt over lion’ ...” (Brunton 152). Spam responds to being shut out of respectable discourse communities not by transforming itself into something completely unrecognizable, but by asserting its abiding compatibility with what it intrudes. Content farms solicit articles from human writers after determining subject matter through “algorithmic quantification” (Brunton 162); questions such as what are today’s most popular search terms? And which product ads are attracting the most clicks? lead to ehow.com DIY articles on Game of Thrones office chairs (May 2019) and washable grocery-cart handle covers (May 2020). Even if we accept that much of the newest bot-generated, filter-busting spam is not created for humans to read but for web-crawlers to be fooled by (Brunton 118), we can still pick out the rhetorical parts of the spam-machine, its art-official intelligence. We can marvel that “there are over a million possible permutations of ‘Viagra’ that could conceivably evade a filter and trick a target” (Rosen). To spam is to formally experiment; all that indiscriminate message-sending requires some industrious crafting at the front end; and in the uncanny manner that language and literature often both arrests and estranges our attention, spam can seem at once to demand engagement and deflect it. Those spammy one-weird-trick ads are good examples; of their curious “foot-in-the-door” rhetorical strategy, Oleg Urminsky explains: “If you lead with a strong, unbelievable claim it may turn people off. But if you start with ‘isn’t this kind of weird?’ it lowers the stakes” (qtd. in Kaufman). Indeed, in an article on spam written for Slate, Alex Kaufman reports the surprising difficulty he had giving his money to the companies behind the clickbait. What they seemed to want more than his credit card information was his time, more data for “the science of grabbing and directing ... attention” online. Our clicks are already currency, and what spammers want from us as much as anything is to do what we’re already doing.

While I don’t wish to suggest that a Shakespearean sonnet is equivalent in content or craft to the crudeness of an email spam subject line, the phoniness of a 419 scam, or the willy-nilly promiscuity of the litspam that combines fragments of novels with porn URLs or shady product testimonials, I do wish to explore the similarities between what Brunton calls “the entirely different intentionality” (150) of spam and the peculiar intentionality expressed in Shakespeare’s most aggressively punny son-
nests. As Julian Lamb suggests in his reading of the *will* sonnets, “we ought … to be aware of a different sort of analysis that … locates the power of this punning language not in any ambiguous meanings it produces but in the powerful, even gratuitous, manipulation of ‘will’ to accommodate a variety of meanings. We would thus resist understanding the word as something that means this or that and instead observe its potential to mean almost anything” (159). Lisa Freinkel, for example, reads Shakespeare’s manipulation of *will* as a defiance of the “sheerly enumerative linearity” that leads an audience to hear a pun “one meaning at a time;” the *will* sonnets defy this grammar, making it impossible to “assign priority or propriety to one meaning over another” (229). The poems do not, that is, tell a sequence of events, construct a straight course, initiate a progressive condensation from one kind of *will* to another. No recognizably anthropocentric advancement or emancipatory narrative appears to dominate. As Vendler reminds, “The ‘normal’ requests arising” from Sonnet 135’s spurned lover “would be either that [the mistress] should dismiss the other lover or that she should at least afford her previous lover a turn at her ‘rich will.’ However, the speaker’s request is neither of these: it is that she can cram him in as well …” (135). Vendler’s explanation for the strangeness suggests the speaker “is aroused by participating vicariously in the promiscuity of the mistress” (135). But the poem is stranger than this, and it is queerer than the queer interpretations that, for example, read the third quatrain of Sonnet 135 as a “homoerotic fantasy of multiple male bodies … commingling in a common erotic experience;” Valerie Traub, admitting the appeal of such readings, ultimately argues that as much as this poem models “specificity’s dispersion” and the “dissolution of boundaries,” the final “‘union’ or ‘oneness’ is literalized and condensed in the form of the speaker himself: ‘that one *Will*’” (Traub 252-53). I think this reading undersells the sonnet’s poethical swerve toward “linguistic forms of life” (Retallack 38); as Stephen Booth notes, “All the noun senses of will … are operative” throughout the poem (*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* 469): *will* as what one wants (or in this case what every *will* wants as a conglomerate), *will* as lust, *will* as the male sex organ, *will* as the female sex organ, *Will* as the poet’s name and possibly the name of the fair young man. The poet’s *will* read as a distinct ego wishing for advancement in his mistress’s estimation is ultimately no more salient than the “one *Will*” un-one’d by the poem’s conclusion—made indistinct, in other words, from poethical over-extension. And that *will* no more salient than the mistress’s *will*, said to be “large and spacious” (5) and “rich” (11), its constitution compared to the constitution of the sea: “The sea, all water, yet receives rain still, / And in abundance addeth to his store; / So thou being rich in *Will* add to thy *Will* / One will of mine, to make thy large *Will* more” (9-12).
“It seems impossible to confine this sonnet’s will to a single purpose or sense,” Kathryn Schwarz observes (738); moreover, these purposes and senses are contradictory. Never is what we might fairly describe as the speaker’s rejection-driven egomania not entangled with what we can just as confidently describe as his self-effacing acceptance of indistinction and redundancy.

Beyond its ambiguous meanings in Shakespeare’s sonnets, the word **will** is etymologically resistant to “this or that” meaning. All of the following are possible definitions:

- Carnal desire or appetite...
- Bewilderment, distraction...
- Going astray in thought, belief, or conduct; going wrong, erring...
- Expressing natural disposition to do something, and hence habitual action...
- To control (another person), or induce (another) to do something, by the mere exercise of one’s will, as in hypnotism...
- To pray, request, entreat...

Sara Ahmed describes the **will** as “one of philosophy’s most promiscuous terms” (5), citing Descartes’s 1644 remark that “The will ... can in a certain sense be called infinite ...” (qtd. in Ahmed 8), used to denote both the general—a common **will**, a social body—and the particular—both the **willing** individuals acting to reproduce an existing order and the **willful** deviants who obstruct or disrupt its flow (Ahmed 99). **Willfulness** can be what “compromises the capacity of a subject to survive, let alone flourish,” and at the same time can be “what prevents a fatality,” since “[w]illfulness involves persistence in the face of having been brought down” (Ahmed 1, 10). Thus **will** veers from legibility; never reducible to collective intention or autonomous desire, **willfulness** “might be thought of as becoming crafty,” says Ahmed, though I prefer **becoming spammy**—adopting, that is, spam’s profusive poetics of superfluity as “a mode or manner of expression” (Ahmed 133). To put it another way, when we hear in the **will** sonnets what Joel Fineman calls “the languageness of language,” we confirm “the way poetic language ... is essentially discrepant to idealizing, unitary, visionary speech” (“Shakespeare’s Will” 28). I believe the same can be said of spam as a language, and that Shakespeare is as much spammer as punster in the **will** sonnets. I say this because he speaks for the peculiar profit that emerges when a predictable, true-to-form devotion is offered, at the same time, as one weird trick. This is poethical work because, more than stylistic execution—more than poetics without an *h*—this shaping of language changes the poet’s “sense of the relation of [their] language to ‘the mess’—the world beyond the page, everyday life and death. And this ... in turn affect[s] the world of the page ...” (38). And so on. To accept
the un-resolvability of the will sonnets’ polysemy is to risk “the collapse of a narrative of fulfillment,” but in “the linguistic void left by the loss” of ideality, superfluity appears as an available ethos (Freinkel 232). The strange vision of return on investment on offer in this will-full poem is comparable to the returns observed in the industry of spam: Sonnet 135’s Will models advancement as the multiplication of inconsequential gestures, a quantity-over-quality strategy that displays will as prominent and at the same time pointless, deviant and at the same time unctuous, overabundant and at the same time of no special significance, a nothing to see and see and see.

2. SHAKESPEARE’S FULL MONTY

To understand better this ethos of willful superfluity, we can examine its emergence in a genre very different from the sonnet; in the Monty Python’s Flying Circus sketch that serves as one origin story for spam as a verb, characters in a Viking diner consider a menu that consists almost entirely of spam. Unsolicited (“but I don’t like Spam,” one diner protests), spam overtakes the sketch, which ends with all the characters literally singing its praises— “Lovely spam! Lovely spam! ... Spam spam spam spam!” That includes a historian who shows up to comment on the conquest but finds himself pulled into the event he meant to observe from a distance. Steyerl examines this skit at length; it sets up her general, not-limited-to-digital-realms definition of spamming as “the pointless repetition of something worthless and annoying, over and over again, to extract a tiny spark of value lying dormant within audiences” (74), which in the sketch turns out to be a spark of self-recognition that immediately resolves into camaraderie “as cheerful as it is overwhelming” (Steyerl 73). While the sketch suggests that spam elicits nothing but more of itself, that what it extracts is recognition of its own value over and above everything, the “triumph by repetition” that occurs by the end of the scene is arguably a triumph of a “new” form of life shared by all (Steyerl 73). In other words, if on the one hand the sketch tells a story about the domineering imposition of unfamiliar company, on/with the other hand it lifts a curtain to reveal (and revel in) superfluous intimacy as the natural state of things. Indeed, the actors stage a return to this natural state, where we can think all but spam, where overabundance of appetite prevails, even for those who don’t happen to be hungry, even for those who aren’t in the diner at all. The Vikings sketch runs for about four minutes, but “Spam” is the title listed for the entire 31-minute episode, suggesting that, though Spam conquers to be sure, it redefines conquering in the process, in the sense that spam’s version of conquering means revealing the space that encloses conquered and conquerors to be so simultaneously cramped and
expansive that the distinctions between one group’s rise and the other’s fall fail to register as at all conspicuous, much less finalizable. That’s spam’s one weird trick: to craft superfluity as constitutive of being, and of having been so all along.

According to this originary sketch, verbing may weird language, but spamming weirds that plus much more—intention, intimacy, boundary, appetite, knowledge of history, including personal history. Sonnet 135’s Will demonstrates a Vikingsque intention to conquer every boundary the mistress has, but since Will is a spammer, not a fighter, the outcome “he” has in mind looks as much like conquest as Vikings taking over a diner to sing about canned meat looks like conquest. His will-fullness is undisguised as incursion but framed as inconsequence, at once excessive and natural. His request for attention is disruptive of the poem’s aurality and of the mistress’s equilibrium: “make thy large Will more.” But the sea metaphor encourages us to think of “more” from a spammy perspective, at once enrichening and inconsequential given the moreness that already constitutes living, just as “the sea, all water, yet receives rain still.” Modern readers might think of the mistress’s will as a kind of doomed-to-fail Bayesian filter—in computing terms, an early example of anti-spammer programming designed to “learn” the language of spam through the messages readers flagged as junk. Just as Sonnet 135’s speaker tests the boundaries and the capacities of the mistress’s “large and spacious” will, spammers immediately set out to test the Bayesian filter’s questionable integrity, stuffing messages with more and more “innocent words … cumulatively increasing the likelihood of false positives” and, in a way, “taking words hostage. Either the spam continues to move, or say goodbye to ‘laughed’” (Brunton 146). Spam thus exposes the ambient environment of networked communication, pulling the curtain on a space where “invention itself cannot be exterior to inventional methods,” where both spammers and those who protest—but I don’t like spam!—live inside the intelligent infrastructures supposedly built to separate them (Rickert 70). So Shakespeare spams his mistress with his over-extension of will, revealing the overlap and ultimately the indistinction between “his” (will) and “hers,” between “more” and “too much,” between “here” and “there.” It’s an early-modern love-poet’s take on the Denial-of-Service attack—that twenty-first-century operation favored by hacker activists in which servers are “attacked” by being asked to “do what they’re built for, to the maximum of their capacity: they serve web pages so rapidly and in such quantity that they can no longer provide them to anyone else” (Brunton 200). The speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnets would recognize the intention behind this modern human-machine interaction if not the post-industrial particularities; and Shakespeare has been credited with
breaking the genre of Petrarchan praise by adhering to its conventions to the maximum of their capacity. Shakespeare’s accomplishment here, especially evident in the will sonnets, follows a spammy logic. To borrow again from Ahmed, “[i]t is not simply a subject who is becoming accomplished in an accomplishment. What is ‘here’ is also accomplished. The risk of assuming ‘here’ as accomplished is the risk of assuming a will behind that accomplishment” (40). Spam is here to remind us of the extension and indistinction of the will—that curious form of life—behind an accomplishment, a will which cannot be reduced to “that one,” any more than laughed could be reduced to “that obvious junk mail word” once it started showing up in spam messages. The will sonnets gesture toward the speaker as a subject who is becoming accomplished, and just as significantly they will into existence a “here” in which the speaker’s subjectivity extends (to) and overlaps with the mistress’s. It is through this act of willful poesis that Shakespeare anticipates the consolation of a spamlike sociability and models a strategy for thriving within the precarity that threatens his intimate relationships, a strategy I believe may be adapted for the stranger intimacies of the twenty-first century.

3. RUBBLE ROUSING

If thy soul check thee that I come so near,
Swear to thy blind soul that I was thy Will,
And will, thy soul knows, is admitted there;
Thus far for love my love-suit sweet fulfill.
Will will fulfill the treasure of thy love,
Ay, fill it full with wills, and my will one.
In things of great receipt with ease we prove
Among a number one is reckoned none:
Then in the number let me pass untold,
Though in thy store’s account I one must be;
For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
That nothing me, a something sweet to thee.
Make but my name thy love, and love that still,
And then thou lovest me, for my name is Will.

“All sonnets say the same thing of no importance,” William Carlos Williams once quipped, reminding poets and lovers of what they already know—that significance is precarious. In Sonnets 135 and 136 (above), Shakespeare accepts precarity as a way of love and life, incarnating will as a thing of no importance but many parts, a nothing and a something, unaccountable and yet “in thy store’s account” (136:10). To conclude this essay, I want to consider what it would mean to take seriously the speaker’s idea that he can 1) be granted entry into a full-to-capacity environment, and 2) find consolation there, in a space whose parameters exceed his capacity to achieve significance within them.
First, it means acknowledging the lingering crassness and creepiness of this imagery, given the never absent sexual connotations of the environment the speaker is requesting to enter. The image of a rejected lover refusing to go away, demanding entrance and intimacy, is a deeply uncomfortable one even when it only exists on the page. An inescapable theme of the *will* sonnets is that intimacy persists after rejection, that a No is a thinly disguised Yes; when this conclusion is framed as the result of the male poet’s strength of will combined with his fluency in revising—via the dominance of his person and his personality—a narrative of rejection into a triumphant revelation of abiding compatibility, it is frankly gross. And our revulsion may be only slightly tempered if we read these sonnets as two in a narrative series about a specific and notably toxic relationship. Read in this context, *Will*’s vision of mutual fulfillment in the *will* sonnets does not flush away his flaws, and nor can it flush away the mistress’s; all their bad behavior—memorably summarized or alluded to in the poems that surround Sonnets 135 and 136—remains present, despite the speaker’s last attempts here to idealize and/or eroticize a relationship he will ultimately concede is ruinous. I am not satisfied by this reading and believe there is a (perhaps differently sinister) context in which to read the *will* sonnets, one that understands the male poet’s nostalgia for past sexual favor as the exercise of an ethos of superfluity equipped to notice, finally, how expansive yet intimate the space of rejection is, and to explore different ways of thriving in that space. Through the superfluous presence of the word *will*, these poems challenge readers to imagine that “the will does not belong to the subject” and that willfulness “might not reside within a subject” (Ahmed 12). I believe what Douglas Trevor says of Sonnet 116 is also true of these later poems: they reveal “a poet interested less in creating a persona”—a distinct ego for readers to follow towards triumph or defeat—“than in fashioning an immutable, poetic [consolation] in the face of rejection and scorn” (239). It is the willfulness of these poems that is consoling, and not because they finally reduce willfulness to “one *Will,*” one subject position: the distinguished poet putting himself back together after a calamitous break-up; or the toxic ex- using the media to get revenge; or the loyal romantic desperate to stay near the love he’s lost. Instead, consolation arrives after first recognizing willfulness as “the word used to describe the perverse potential of will and to contain that perversity in a figure,” then endeavoring to “spill this container” (Ahmed 12). In Sonnets 135 and 136, *Will* writes/is written so that will spills over whatever we assumed might contain it. *Will* is wayward and wandering, so persistent about its inconsequence that intimate contact with it seems as incidental as it is inevitable. It is for these reasons that the willfulness of these poems is consoling; to borrow and (over)extend another of Trevor’s
assertions, “[w]riting is, it turns out, the best thing the speaker has, even if it is not perhaps the best thing he might imagine having” (239). And spamming, as a most willful kind of writing, filtered but yet in constant contact even as it is deemed of no account, is the Will’s way of writing itself out of favor and into ubiquity. Some scholars have found in the “logic of remainderless destruction” (30-31) demonstrated in several of Shakespeare’s sonnets a consuming “desire to annihilate everything” (Muir 30-31), but I hope it’s clear I see an offer to remain, and even substantively flourish, within a lush, expansive and ever-expandable zone of discardability. One more type of spam may clarify the peculiar opportunities available in such a space: the 419 scam, also known as the Nigerian email or letter fraud. Unlike most junk mail, such mailers are malicious, memorably so because they are characterized by their personal pleas; they offer recipients “the ‘opportunity’ to share in a percentage of millions of dollars” that oppressed letter-writers claim must be secretly transferred outside of their repressive country; “[p]ayment of taxes, bribes to government officials, and legal fees are often described in great detail with the promise that all expenses will be reimbursed as soon as the funds are spirited out of Nigeria. In actuality, the millions of dollars do not exist, and the victim eventually ends up with nothing but loss” (“Nigerian Letter”). FBI.gov notes the Nigerian government’s policy of non-sympathy towards the 419-scam victim, “since the victim actually conspires to remove funds from Nigeria in a manner that is contrary to Nigerian law,” but has little to say about the letter-writers themselves, those individuals working for pennies to produce the fraudulent mailers. Considering their perspective as well as the economic and social logic of the developing nations out of which 419 spam travels, Brunton reasons that

the messages are a natural enough business decision in a society that is, in fact, profoundly corrupt. It is common knowledge that the country’s political and business elite actually do move millions and even billions of dollars out of the country covertly ... [and] the countries these elites run are so thoroughly corrupt that any significant advancement ... involves some palm-greasing and “additional costs.” If that’s the case, how do you expect to make any real money without following their lead? (105)

“In the number let me pass untold,” as Shakespeare might rationalize such a strategy for advancement. 419 scams suggest that the profit proceeding from participation in a corrupt system is thoroughly tainted by that corruption.

It is certainly possible to read a similar morality tale into Sonnets 135 and 136. Nicholson discusses these sonnets as harbingers of the poet’s collapse into misogynist cynicism; they are marked as two of a number of poems that illustrate the doomed attempt “to make a virtue
of ... abundance” (199). Like the 419 spammers “obliged to create stories that model the stereotypes of their region that they think their audience already believe, to confirm what they expect to find, and to trap them” (Brunton 107), the speaker of the will sonnets traps the promiscuous mistress in her own low expectations of his and love’s worth. Tainted love is the only love there is, the sonnets assert, making its willful embrace a natural enough decision. According to this interpretation, the reader can only mark as pitiful the speaker’s attempt to disguise his polluted love-suit as “something sweet” (12). Indeed, it is hard to see the triumph in the possibility of the mistress granting the speaker affectionate acquaintance when doing so means accepting redundancy as comprehensive, indistinction as inevitable, and corruption as total. And it is true that if we persist in containing the willfulness of the will sonnets in the subject-centered figures of two tainted lovers, we will find ourselves less than sympathetic to either. Spill these containers, though, and we might gain back a sense of sympathy that can coexist with our contempt. As Brunton says of the willing and willful victims of 419s, “it takes a deeply cynical ... understanding of politics ... that views the world as including these covert, corrupt machinations from which you are finally in a position to profit. This cynicism is combined with an almost touching naïveté on the part of the Westerners” in thrall to the “fantasy that they would simply then have the money, without attracting the attention” of various law enforcement agencies (Brunton 105). Is not the cynicism in the will sonnets combined with a similarly touching naïveté? Will imagines gaining full access to an account described as both overflowing with assets and of zero credit. How naïve for speaker or mistress to will such a state into accomplishment? What but a precipitous status could be had in an environment that promises inevitable corruption, indeed whose entry fee is contamination? Yet the poem wills us to see that sweetness is possible in such an environment, wills us to share in its naïve triumph over its own bad faith. “Make but my name thy love” is the speaker’s final direction in line 13 of Sonnet 136. Make Will love—and why not, when it’s been everything else?! Schwarz notes of this line that “[t]he process of subjective constitution ... locates the agency of self-making outside the self, its perverse imperative mystifying the questions of whose volition is at stake and of what a claim to possession might mean” (738). I think the transaction Will models in its announcement of its own spilling over is a formulation for closeness without dominance; it is a performance of too much that requests mutual consent in the going too far; it is an offer, one weird trick to becoming willful, which is to say, to doing what we’ve all been doing all along, only this time recognizing the spammy superfluity of our everyday acts of composition.
What do we gain from such recognition? Spam, I’ve argued, is a poethical wager that bets on “a productive sense of contingency” (16) and the relinquishment of the “illusion of predictable trajectories” as necessary steps in the art of “composing one’s contemporariness” (Retallack 17-18). Such compositions may not prove profitable according to idealist or capitalist criteria, yet they are instructive reminders of the close and mutually redefining relationship between textual and extratextual realities. In bringing up the 419 scam, I want to stress again that I am not suggesting we condone the fraudulence of malicious spam; nor do I see evidence that 419s have inspired anything like the sweetness Will gestures toward in Sonnet 136. Still I think a rhetorical analysis of this scam reveals more of spam’s poethical potential, reveals how we can and why we need to perform analyses of language that link “aesthetic questions with an ethos of a historical need for experiment” (Retallack 34). Such a need is driven by our contemporary-historical moment, marked as it is by political, economic and ecological precarity, where more and more public services function as denials of service, where more and more elected government representatives advocate for shrinking government programs, and where the willful rich continue to pursue the kind of profit that can only accelerate the environmental collapse scientific consensus warns us is on the horizon, apparently believing the same fantasy of the 419 participant—that they will simply “have the money,” that the losses can always be forwarded to someone else, in some more precarious situation. By bringing to light the universality of precarity, spam—even malicious spam—might make legible, as the final lines of Sonnet 136 do, the compatibility that mystifyingly persists through relationships scarred by even the worst humiliation and ruin.

As a writer who certainly understood strange attractions, “who shows even his dying heroes repeatedly succumbing to the lure of word-play” (Ferguson 94), Shakespeare is the composer I look to for a model ethos of willful consolation in the face of life-altering, life-threatening precarity. As the discardable lover of the will sonnets confronts a mistress who will not accommodate his continued advances, human beings face a future that cannot accommodate ours. From an ecological perspective, that is, humans have already been rejected from occupying positions of favor or support in the future of the planet. I don’t want to project climate change concerns directly onto Shakespeare’s sonnets, but my own contemporary-historical moment makes me hear in lines such as these, from Sonnet 64—“Ruin hath taught me thus to ruminate / That time will come and take my love away” (11-12)—a voice I recognize as conditioned by precarity. Dwelling in the Anthropocene, recognizing the “self-precarization” that “has become a normal way of living and working
in neoliberal societies” (Lorey, qtd. in Puar 164), I find, like the speaker of this sonnet confronted with “state itself confounded to decay” (10), that I “cannot choose / But weep…” (13-14).

Other options, however, are available, opportunities to “create a horizon” for a future and reoriented understanding of human accomplishment (Ahmed 40). Of the capitalist conditions that inaugurated the Anthropocene, of the “techniques of alienation” that deny shared precarity and that “obscur[e] collaborative survival,” anthropologist Anna Tsing asks, “Can we live inside this regime of the human and still exceed it?” (19). (How) Can superfluity and precarity coexist? This is a question of form, of poethics. Conditions of precarity—when options are limited, expectations for elevation diminished, progress stalled or exhausted—demand “new tools for noticing” (Tsing 25), ways of expanding form beyond its perceived limits. Tsing says what she looks for are “disturbance-based ecologies in which many species sometimes live together without either harmony or conquest” (5)—hence her work on Matsutake mushrooms and the irregular commerce that springs up amidst their wild growth. But some very minor tweaks could make her sentence a perfectly apt description for Shakespeare’s sonnets: they are disturbance-based verses in which many species of metaphor live together, quatrain by quatrain, without either harmony or conquest.23 Booth remarks of the sonnet that it “does what all verse does; it just does more of it,” that its patterns “pull together and pull apart just as the different patterns do in verse forms less crowded with coherences,” and that “Shakespeare’s surprises … come from going farther in the direction natural to the convention” (“The Value” 18, 22). I am struck by how similar Booth’s recognition of Shakespeare’s generous movements “back and forth among metaphoric frames of reference” (“The Value” 22), all within the regime of a regimented form—the sonnet—are to Tsing’s recognition of the pre- and non-industrial livelihoods she features in The Mushroom at the End of the World: precarious livelihoods that are not about progress, that “show us how to look around rather than ahead” (22), that reveal the “patterns of unintentional coordination [that] develop in assemblages” (23), that uncover the earth as a home for superfluous exchange. On screen, meanwhile, spam delivers a similar revelation about the inconsequential sharing ubiquitous within the precarious Net: it is a lively inconsequence, energetic and indulgent and profitable in ways that do not always compute. Insofar as spammers seek creative ways to get noticed but/and remain inconspicuous, they make visible the panoramic scope of human attention, and they remind us how valuable that attentiveness is in a timeline that cannot promise more advancement even as it offers opportunities for more and more frequent exchange. What Emily Vasiliauskas says of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 107 might be extended

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not only to the whole sequence but to the whole digital age: “There is no promise of eternity here, just the simple reality of more life” (770). In the will sonnets and those that follow, there is no resolution for lovers hoping to rise above their bad angels and make their fertile way forward with satisfaction, and without an STD; but there is consolation in the poet’s pitch for abiding compatibility, for collaborative survival, for contact “without either harmony or conquest” (Tsing 19, 5), where “living on takes the form of an outmoded”—but social and dynamic—“existence” (Vasiliauskas 770). “Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency” (Butler qtd. in Puar 170); what if we will ourselves to recognize the reality of this interdependency, the superfluous intimacy that persists as consolation (to) prize through loss, ruin, abandonment—through the storm some of us still call progress—and in doing so begin to develop the “new forms of attention and community experience,” the new “acts of self-definition” and intentionality that spam poethics provokes and demands (Brunton 198, 203)? Tsing writes toward the end of The Mushroom at the End of the World that “[w]ithout stories of progress, the world has become a terrifying place. The ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment. It’s not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction. Luckily there is still company, human and not human. We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes…” (282). I would willfully add, we can explore the overgrown verses, too.

West Virginia University

Notes
1. See www.spamhaus.org/rokso/. The database tracks and names “spam senders and spam services that have been thrown off Internet Service Providers 3 times or more in connection with spamming or providing spam services, and are therefore repeat offenders” (Spamhaus).
3. Brunton refers to survey data from the US and UK collected shortly after the millennium, “even as spam was beginning one in a series of massive growth spurts” (190). Indeed, in 2008 spam accounted for 92.6% of global email traffic; numbers have fallen since then, to a record low of 28.5% in 2019 (Trustwave). (A separate study conducted by Symantec recorded a spam rate of 55% for 2018.) It is worth noting that the United States is second on the list of leading countries of origin for unsolicited spam email (after China), according to a study published in November 2019 (Kaspersky Lab).
4. Unless our seemingly endless criticism of the subgenre—including this essay—provides better documentation?
6. All sonnet quotations taken from Helen Vendler’s *The Art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (Harvard, 1997). For Sonnets 135 (above) and 136 (below), I have followed Vendler in using modernized spelling but retained the 1609 Quarto’s use of italics for the capitalized *Will*.


13. See the episode’s IMDB page, where, for example, Terry Gilliam is credited as “Terry Spam Sausage Spam Egg Gilliam:” https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0650991/.

14. Fineman asserts that the Shakespearean legacy is “a poetry of para-Petrarchanism not Petrarchanism, a poetry of the serious, not comic, paradox of praise, a poetry of representation not presentation…” (*Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye* 296). A poetry of Service, I would add, that is also a Denial of Service.

15. The kind of subject I am describing is not identical to the “third person” that Fineman argues the poet creates in the dark lady sonnets (*Perjured Eye* 291), but what he says about the language that speaks in these poems is extremely useful for understanding the contours of a spam poethics. According to Fineman, the languageness of language displayed in the sonnets “defines a fate that is imposed on any poetic persona who … realizes and renders real the fact that what he speaks is speech” (*Perjured Eye* 288). As to the fate imposed on those of us who live and write in the age of spam, call it the realization of the fact that what we flag and filter is speech, and doesn’t stop being speech after we discard it. Call it the recognition that any account we make of ourselves mustn’t ignore “that others and events not ‘willed’ by us constantly shape and become part of us,” that we are “also shaped by what we [do] not choose … [t]he messages and commercial slogans we are bombarded with, our culture and language…” (Razinsky 165).

16. See the particularly degrading language in Sonnets 129, 137, 141, 147, 152.

17. As Richard Chamberlain explains, though “there is [a] sense in which Shakespeare’s sonnets, and sonnets in general, invest in the idea of singularity or oneness,” as texts that “seem to question naive or identitarian notions of the subject and its economy of reproduction,” sonnets can also “imply a model of literary studies which refuses violent appropriation of the work’s alterity. Singularity, Derrida says, ‘loses itself to offer itself,’ and this is also true of the subject, the literary work, and the critic in the literary reading of literature” (123). More specifically, Colin Burrow observes of the mistress that “[h]er role is slightly different in each poem, and there is no particular reason to think of her as one person” (131). Brian Boyd agrees that “despite creating, in general, an intense emotional engagement with a Mistress (and later with a Youth), Shakespeare does not tell a story. He maximizes the openness of lyric, its freedom from the linearity of story. He offers each new poem as an unpredictable challenge, not least in the unpredictability of its relation to the poems before and after” (73-74).

18. Compare Aaron Kunin’s assertion that the sonnets “encourage a holocaust fantasy” and “repeatedly ask us to imagine the end of the world, not because we are supposed to be anxious about it, and not because we are supposed to resist it, but because it will serve as the most reliable confirmation of the young man’s increased life” (101).
19. Ahmed asks her own readers to remember the countless situations “when you ‘will something on’ knowing that your willing is not a switch that turns something on,” and knowing too that “the feeling of getting behind something is a bodily feeling that is not necessarily always intended to influence an outcome” but might be satisfying anyway, “even when it is separated, or perhaps because it can be separated, from being influential” (Ahmed 35).

20. To make a poethical wager, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett explains, is to accept the indeterminate affects of one’s condition “in the intertwining trajectories of pattern and chance” (24); furthermore, the poethical stance argues that while it may not be possible to prove that poetry makes any positive contribution to the world’s ills, for the poet there can be a probabilistic argument for persisting with it. Faith in God is replaced by faith in the value of poetry. It is such a wager that poetic communities take when they measure the success of poetic work on aesthetic rather than capital value, supporting and validating writers and readers who pursue such work. (24)

21. While concerns about scarcity of resources occupy central places in debates about climate change, also of concern are the lasting impressions the human species has and will make on the planet, the way our overconsumption and overproduction translates into material that will outlast us by comprehension-defying timescales: the half-life of plutonium is 24,100 years, for example; there are 8.3 billion tons of plastic waste on the Earth (Amos), for another, some of which will take 600 years to degrade (Cho). If our waste products (radioactive dust, engine emissions, oil slicks, coffee straws) outlast us, are we really discarding them, or just drawing more and more attention to the vulnerability of not only our selves but our wills to survive with the kind of distinction, the kind of intentionality, that we recognize? In the numbers cited above humans may certainly pass untold, but we’ll just as certainly remain part of the account, responsible as we are for what we have tried and failed to discard.

22. Scientific studies suggest the earth is in the midst of a Sixth Great Extinction, “characterized by the loss of between 17,000 and 100,000 species each year;” human activity greatly increases the risk for extinction of many animal and plant species and their habitats, but scientists and conservationists warn that “our [human] survival as a species ultimately rests on biodiversity” (Sadler). The recent UN report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change summarizes the range of impacts and risks associated with global warming; among other effects, it is “expected to drive the loss of coastal resources, and reduce the productivity of fisheries and aquaculture …. The risk of irreversible loss of many marine and coastal ecosystems increases with global warming…” (IPCC, Summary for Policymakers).

23. Though it should be noted that some scholars emphasize the instances of harmony and cooperation within Shakespeare’s sonnets more than the differences and discords. See especially the close readings of Vendler (1997) and Fineman (1986).

24. D.A. Harper points out that the uncomfortable takeaway of the sonnet sequence—“that this relationship, with its cycle of lust, shame, recrimination, and renewed lust will continue past the end of the sequence” (131)—is tempered by some critics’ tendency essentially to mark the final two sonnets, the nearly identical 153 and 154, as spam, filtering them out of the meaning of the sequence in its entirety and marking Sonnet 152’s strong “statement of revulsion” (131) as the sequence’s “proper ending” (138). Harper argues that the “inherent psychological reflex to see near-duplicate passages as inadequate or incomplete and the resulting tendency to dissociate the final poems from the rest of the sequence have obscured the proper conclusion of the Sonnets” (138). But I think this is part of the work Shakespeare’s Sonnets and sonnets as a form provoke, in modern readers especially. Perhaps the proper ending of a spammy form is one that points readers back to the form itself, to its crafty redundancy.
25. Ann Blair sounds a similar note in the epilogue of *Too Much to Know*, her researched account of historical methods of information management: “judgment is as central as ever in selecting, assessing, and synthesizing information to create knowledge responsibly…. Those skills themselves will require constant honing, in response to changes in the search engines and in the material available for searching” (267).

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