

Consider the link [Sonnet 129: Shakespeare's Lust in Action](#)

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"Sonnet 129"

by William Shakespeare

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjur'd, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner, but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof,—and prov'd, a very woe;
Before, a joy propos'd; behind, a dream:
 All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
 To shun the heaven that leads men to hell.

Scholars agree that Shakespeare's sonnets numbered 127–152 are addressed to a mysterious dark lady. However, anything known about this mistress is only speculation derived from the sonnets themselves. As enraptured as Shakespeare seems to have been by her, his deep regret of succumbing to the forces of lust, in what may have been an adulterous relationship, is bluntly and powerfully expressed in "Sonnet 129." This sonnet is written in the language of nervous desperation. Shakespeare reaches that state of desperation when lust's force inside of him is determined to move on, unrelenting in its pursuit for its goal. All the while, reason, which reminds of the consequences and rebels against lust's disorder, is put aside and his advice denied.

Shakespeare begins "Sonnet 129" declaring that the action of lust causes a person's spirit to waste away in shame. In the third line of the first quatrain, lust gets an immediate description of his unruly characteristics: he is extreme, savage, murderous, rude, cruel, full of blame, and not to be trusted. With this introduction, lust takes over and consumes not only the subject but the very pattern of rhythm and language in the sonnet as well.

As soon as the second quatrain begins the language becomes more desperate and sexual. Shakespeare announces that as soon as you enjoy the pleasure of lust, the "straight" way is despised. The straight way is always right, it is pure and virtuous. "Straight" represents the man's conscience while his reason is being despised. Yet "straight" also immediately suggests erect, and the repetition in the next two lines: "Past reason hunted...Past reason hated..." declares that reason has lost the battle. This same repetition also quickens the flow of the rhythm as a man quickens during the intensity of his "lust in action."

The words "no sooner *had*, *swallowed* bait, on purpose *laid*" are all quite clear with their sexual connotations, but just like a nagging thought of guilt in the back of the mind of a man whose lust is in action, reason makes his point in this quatrain. Once reason (or conscience) is sought after and had (understood), it is just as soon hated, and you are swallowed bait, you are caught in lust's trap. This quatrain ends with the proclamation that the purpose of lust is "to make the taker mad."

The last quatrain picks up right where the second ends as lust has taken over the mind of "the taker" and caused him to become "mad in pursuit" of it. Lust is in "possession" of the man just as the man is in "possession" of his desired object. In the next line, "Had, having, and in quest to have," the words are short and quick with the stressed syllables more pronounced, and now

the repetition is much closer together. This gives this line the sense of the intensity of a man's final thrusts in his "lust in action," and this sonnet climaxes with the word, "extreme."

When "murderous" lust has made its kill and the action is finished, reason comes flooding back in. The phrase, "a bliss in proof," states that lust is certainly pleasurable; it feels great! But in the end it is proved to be "a very woe." In the last line of this quatrain it is stated that before acting upon it, lust is a proposed joy, a simple desire that seems like a good idea at the time, but after lust reaches its goal, the act is simply a memory. No pleasure that lust produces can be held onto and taken with you. Lust is a momentary joy that causes "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Exactly two lines down from the sonnet's climax, "extreme," lust's action is already only "a dream."

The sonnet concludes with a well remembered couplet. Shakespeare almost exclaims in disbelief: the whole world knows of lust's powers over reason, yet no one is smart enough to avert himself from the pleasures that grow and consume and possess and lead you to lust's dark consequences. As mentioned before, most scholars agree that Shakespeare's Sonnets 127—152 are about his entangled relationship with a mistress. This implies that some of his poetry is autobiographical. Whether or not this relationship was adulterous, a man generally writes from the outflow of his heart. Shakespeare had to have experienced being consumed by lust and the regret it causes to have portrayed it so passionately, and at least Sonnet 147 deals with this same subject. Of course, what man hasn't felt the draw of lust in his heart? I imagine Shakespeare sitting up in his mistress's bed and loosely composing this sonnet immediately after his own lust was in action as his reason began to regain control. He may have actually signed Sonnet 129 as his own personal struggle. Shakespeare makes a pun on his name in Sonnet 135, as well as more subtly in others. It is possible that he makes a pun on Will with "well" in his ending couplet: "All the this the world *well* knows; yet none knows *well*," The whole world knows Will, yet no one knows of Will being able "To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell."