Sonnet 121 resembles 129 in several ways: in its concern with lust; in its discrimination between the individual and the world; and in the rhetorical obtrusiveness of its opening:

’Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed
When not to be receives reproach of being,
And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed
Not by our feeling but by others’ seeing.
For why should others’ false adulterate eyes
Give salutation to my sportive blood?
Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
No, I am that I am; and they that level
At my abuses reckon up their own,
I may be straight though they themselves be bevel;
By their rank thoughts my deeds must not be shown,
Unless this general evil they maintain —
All men are bad and in their badness reign.

Obviously enough, however, this poem presents lust, not as “a waste of shame” nor as an “expense of spirit,” but as an expression of natural vigor and a “just pleasure.” From this difference in basic opinion arises a still more interesting difference. Whereas in 129 the poet discriminates between conventional wisdom and personal experience, inhabiting that poem chiefly as an intelligence, in 121 he steps forward in the flesh to participate in a conflict between personal conduct and public censure.

The poet does not assert his independence from social pressure in 121 until the third quatrains, but his sense of conflict is evident from the beginning. Line 1 opposes a certain form of personal behavior, “to be vile,” against the general condemnation of vileness: the passive voice in the second half of the line implies the wide and uniform judgment of society. The impression of conflict is heightened by a couple of local tensions in the line. In its first half, the reader encounters the anomaly of describing “vile” behavior as “better”; and in its second half, he faces the conjunction of “vile”—and, as it seems for a second, of “vilest”—with a term,
“esteemed,” that normally signalizes a positive judgment, that is, a judgment that some person or action is estimable. The major opposition defined in line 1 is dynamic in itself since the linking term, “than,” spelled “then” in the 1609 edition, presents a serious equivocation: Shakespeare has played upon this orthographic identity in the second line of Sonnet 40, “What hast thou then more then thou hadst before”; and also, perhaps, in the second line of 71. In 121 the ambivalence of “then” allows the secondary meaning: it is better to be vile in fact and then judged vile. This option, which suggests the desirability of just and equitable public judgments, illuminates the poet’s cynical response to society’s actual injustice. Since this meaning of the first line precisely balances the primary meaning of the second line, it also allows a narrow focus for the whole line-pair: it is better to be vile and then to be judged vile when not being vile is judged vile anyway. This manageable cynicism, we may notice, fits nicely with the condition that is supposed and deplored in the couplet.

Because of the “better . . . than” pattern of the first line and because of its metrical definition, a definition enforced by the inversion of “esteemed . . . vile,” its more complex meaning predominates—even if not, as modern editors would have it, to the exclusion of the other. And this meaning, which stands in an oblique relationship with that of line 2, suggests a tangle of ethical questions: does the unjust judgment of virtue necessarily imply an escape by (or approval for) the vile? should it matter to the virtuous—or to the vile—how the other is judged? would it be best to be virtuous and to be esteemed so or to be vile and get away with it? is what the world calls “vileness” really a “just pleasure,” and, if so, what is the real nature of what the world calls “virtue”? This tissue of questions and implications, which is required to fill the discursive gap between the primary meanings of lines 1 and 2, radiates indignation; and, taken with the subordinate meaning of the line-pair, which cynically approves of vileness in a world that condemns both the vile and virtuous alike, it gives a powerful focus to the conflict between personal integrity and social encroachment.

The impression given by these lines of a determined personal resistance to public opinion is clarified and augmented in the rest of the poem. Sonnet 129 opens as a public declamation of essentially dogmatic wisdom and then advances, by means of refinements and expansions, to more inward and more comprehensive statements; 121, however, although public in its opening, becomes more so in course and reaches, at the beginning of the third quatrain, the resounding proclamation, “I am that I am.” Sonnet 129 draws its reader continually deeper into its workings, ending at last with a judgment on the quality and value of his knowledge. But in 121, although the poet confronts the reader at first with a tissue of complexities, his communication is otherwise direct. The antithetical figures after line 1,
most of which are syntactically progressive, are essentially straightforward. In lines 5 and 6, for instance, Shakespeare has opposed the subject of his sentence, “eyes,” to the object of a preposition, “blood”; and in lines 9-10 he has balanced the verb of a subordinate clause against the verb of the main clause. By using such practices, the poet shares his thoughts with his reader exactly as they occur to him, as it were; and, as a consequence, he appears to be a tremendously candid person. The reader may thus sympathize with the poet and approve, especially, of his honesty. But the poet’s claim of virtually divine singularity, however the reader may judge this, disallows any identification with him. The reader is hardly prompted, on the other hand, to line himself up with society, to which, however, because of the generality of the poet’s social recognition, he must in some sense belong. In 121, then, the poet has isolated himself from all public censure and all personal sympathy. He has, at the same time, isolated the separate members of his readership and forced each of them to observe and judge his moral stance with a deep but ambivalent sense of personal implication.

The poet’s singularity, which is evident in the bitter tone of the first quatrain, gradually develops toward comedy. The whole second quatrain, which expands on the impropriety of “others’ seeing,” invests the lewd prying of “false adulterate eyes” and the scandalized surveillance of “frailer spies” with satiric annoyance; and in the third quatrain these spies are turned out of doors, transformed into clownish archers who “level” at one target and “reckon up” the score on another. The poet also includes himself in these comic developments. His defiance modulates from the romantic “our” to the grandiose “I am that I am,” an echo of the divine self-assertion in Exodus, that must focus laughter on the all-too-human poet, and thus allows the reader to remain detached from both parties. At the same time, of course, this echo underscores a profound ethical dilemma: one who honors public opinion, as it is here represented, must be an absurd, a transparent hypocrite; but one who ignores it must puff himself up into a god.

The intensities of 121 are, in accordance with its diffused focus and its comic design, not cumulative, as in 129, but local. Shakespeare reaches points of resolution in this poem, not only at the end of the separate quatrains, every one of which is syntactically isolated, but even within separate line-pairs and, to some extent, separate lines. The opening chiasmus, unlike that which commences 129, is sharply defined by the first line; and the last line of each quatrain enforces an antithesis that ties it off from what follows. Each quatrain has its own special tone and quality: the first enunciates a serious ethical preference; the second develops a pair of debaters’ questions; and the third asserts and rationalizes a personal determination. The expressive result of such a segmentation is not fragmentariness, however, but stability. The encapsulated exposition retards the
flow of the poem and strongly modifies the kinds of shift and spread by which the poet elsewhere, especially in 129, has entangled his reader. Each segment of 121 illuminates some aspect of the poet’s persistently held independence, enforcing the firmness and the consistency of his position. These segments vary in quality, tending to be livelier in the first line-pair of each quatrain and more stable in the second. The couplet is cast in a minor key, punctuating a subordinate “unless” clause that refines the argument by entertaining alternatives to it. This rhythmical system and especially the diminished couplet, which acts somewhat like a musical coda, underscore the steadiness of the poet’s attitude and the completeness of his communication.

Certain of the local effects repay scrutiny. We have acknowledged the impression of conflict and the complex of suggestions embedded in the first line-pair. The first syllable of “esteemed,” we may notice further, raises “vile” to the highest degree and helps justify the first half of the first line: it would obviously be better to be “vile” than to be “vilest.” Shakespeare explicitly made a vile-vilest distinction, by the way, in Sonnet 71. The expression “of being,” again, although its primary force is determined by its relationship with “not to be,” suggests the poet’s awareness of social hypocrisy, which he will deplore in the second quatrain and analyze in the third. Other relevant meanings and relationships—the possible reference of “so” to “pleasure” and the possible contradiction of “so” by “not”—are similarly suppressed by the poet’s metrical and rhetorical emphases. Although these practices tuck away some meanings at the edge of the utterance, however, they strengthen and underscore others. Shakespeare has infused the term “feeling” in line 4, for instance, with intensely tactile indications: being opposed to the sense of sight, a sense the poet acknowledges here with contempt, it indicates the physical touches, the fleshly interpenetrations, shared by lovers—hence “our feeling”—that the alien world has agreed, on the basis of a distant and flickering apprehension, to call “vile.”

The intensities of the secondquatrain derive less from meter and rhetoric than from diction and figure. The relatively abstract “feeling” of the firstquatrain, for instance, is represented here as “sportive blood”; and “others’ seeing” is correspondingly intensified. By using the loaded term, “salutation,” moreover, Shakespeare has personified the opposing substantives and presented the figure of hypocritical courtiers (“eyes”)—paired like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—greeting with self-conscious formality their lord or king (“blood”). “Salutation” is itself richly suggestive. Since this term often represents an early-morning greeting, it recalls the conventional interruption of lovers by the awakening world; its suggestions of courtesy, however, are comically at odds with the aggressive voyeurism that it must here indicate. And if we trace the term back to its
root meaning, a formal wish of continued health and strength, the comic anomaly is heightened still further. The substitution of "frailties" for "sportive blood," an effect enforced by the proximity of these expressions, may not be comical, but it is surely satiric. The poet has obviously replaced, with an appropriate shift in tone, his own description of his activities with the cant of public morality. And the opposition embedded in these synonyms presents another anomaly: the more often and the more vigorously the poet's "sportive blood" manifests itself, the greater will be his imputed "frailties." "Frailties" also enriches "frailer," with which it is rhetorically balanced: the spies may be truly frailer than the poet and thus reproachful out of envious impotence; or "frailer" in the same sense in which the poet is frail and thus hypocritical in their censure of him: more than their "eyes" may be "adulterate"; or, rather, their eyes may have become infected by their lives. The equivocal term "wills," in the last line of this quatrain, carries on these satiric suggestions: the social judges may willfully condemn the poet's lecheries, that is, they may speak from a position of dogmatic self-righteousness; or they may be inadvertently acknowledging something in themselves, that is, their own secret appetite, which they profess to abhor in him.

Quatrain 3, which opens with the resounding proclamation of personal independence, also introduces a couple of new figures: first, that of the archery match. When people publicly take aim at the sins of another, as the development of this figure indicates, they actually reckon up their own sins; and they do so, moreover, without realizing it. Still another new figure, introduced in line 11, strengthens and extends this point. The poet's distinction between "straight" and "bevel," since it refers to our relationship with the earth's surface and our gravitational dependency, has an inescapably universal relevance: it implies the egoism of every human judge and the relativity of every human judgment: "All things to the vile seem vile," we recollect from the plays; and, on the other hand, "All's not offense that indiscretion finds." This gravitational figure draws strength from "level" in the lines just above, recalling the earth's pull on an arrow and the necessity for a compensatory aim. This whole quatrain is thus focused on the point that a perfectly, a surely, straight or level judgment is simply not available to humankind. We should notice the poet's tactful use of the subjunctive here: he "may be straight." Thus the poet relocates his argument in quatrain 3, basing it not on a divine fury and intransigence, but on the narrowness of human powers and the relativity of human positions.

The maintenance of a universal evil by human society, which is acknowledged in the couplet—acknowledged in the category "unless"—is, thus, or ought to be impossible. This is not to deny that society or its spokesmen have argued that badness reigns in this world nor that they have attempted, further, to impose their own hypocrisies upon it—the term
“maintain” activates these two prongs of the supposition. However, the poet’s determination to resist social pressure and abide by his own feeling and his own judgment, although this may require an emotional fury, a willingness to be the god of his own affairs, rests finally and firmly on a rational consideration of living experience. And although his individual readers may not, by the very nature of the case, sympathize with the poet, they should follow his lead. Their doing so will cancel the bad opinion and redeem the evil world, the possibility of which the couplet represents.

In each of the sonnets just analyzed, 104, 121, and 129—as well as in 116 and 124—Shakespeare has placed some narrowly personal interest or experience into a dynamic relationship with some broadly human or natural concern. In examining the apparent exemption from temporal process of a young friend, in asserting the social independence of his own sportive blood, and in discriminating between general and particular understandings of lust, the poet has produced within the narrow confines of single sonnets discourses of intense personal involvement and impressive general significance, his ambitious polarity of attention forcing him in each of these cases to articulate a literary tissue of remarkable poetic scope.

Shakespeare’s determination to accomplish such a poetic tissue within his individual sonnets, a determination that set him apart from his fellow sonneteers, is evident again and again in the collection. In Sonnets 30 and 66, for instance, the poet draws his intimate affections into poems of otherwise general interest, poems, that is, in which such feelings seem to have no real business. In the couplet of each one—if not until the couplet—he opposes an exposition of his general dissatisfaction with his life (30) and his world (66) with sudden references to his “friend” and his “love.” This shift of attention is dramatized in 30 by the couplet’s being actually addressed to the friend. In line 12 of Sonnet 64, again, Shakespeare narrows a general rumination, focusing his attention finally on the realization “That Time will come and take my love away”; and in the couplet of Sonnet 54, he addresses a particular consolation, which he has derived from the general discourse above, to a youth of his close acquaintance. Shakespeare often interposes general concerns, likewise, into poems of originally particular content. In the couplet of Sonnet 73, for instance, and in lines 11-12 of Sonnet 119, he derives some general wisdom from explicitly personal addresses; and in the last line of 105, he introduces an opinion on the general prevalence of fairness, kindness, and truth into a discussion of the meeting of these qualities in his own beloved.

To insist on the exceptional nature of a particular case, as Shakespeare does in 105, is common enough in the exaltations of such figures as Idea,
Delia, and Stella throughout the sonnet tradition. But even when Shakespeare deals with an exception, as he does in Sonnet 130, he characteristically integrates his own feelings and his own affairs with natural and normal human life.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white;  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak; yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.  
I grant I never saw a goddess go:  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

The ambivalence of “she” in the last line, that is, its susceptibility to being interpreted either as the poet’s mistress or as “any she,” may suggest the scope Shakespeare seems almost instinctively to have striven for. Throughout this famous poem, he describes his mistress as an exception, not to nature, but to the conventionally applied Petrarchan exaltations: her “eyes,” being nothing like the sun, her “breath,” which does not compare with perfume, and her “breasts,” which are not as white as snow, are, as the words themselves indicate, natural human eyes and breath and breasts. Her tread, likewise, although the poet’s limited experience disallows any kind of comparison with the gait of a goddess, declares her sisterhood with all the other women in the world. The exceptionality of this mistress, then, which is an exceptionality to the Petrarchan convention, amounts to a richly apprehended conformity to nature. Shakespeare’s colleagues, if they acknowledged any concern beyond their love or their beloved, did so commonly to deny any connection, any bond of relevance, between their unique situation and the mundane universe. But Shakespeare, by asserting the differences between his beloved and such perfectly remote beings, reveals once again his ambition to relate every most particular concern he has with the realms of nature and life that all people inhabit. His mistress is judged, finally, with oxymoronic wit, to be “as rare / As any,” and thus to be a woman of woman born.

The humbler lover is, of course, the more ambitious poet. And for us to recognize this persistent poetic ambition of Shakespeare’s is to grasp another important evaluative principle, the principle of scope. Some of his pointedly personal sonnets, truly, such as that addressed to his mistress while she is playing music (128) and those that focus on his own first name
(135, 136), make no universal claims; others, as we have already
acknowledged, make belated, incidental, or excessive claims. A few such
poems, however, establish wider frames of reference that rival in substance
and significance the signs of temporal process represented in 104, the
hypocritical society confronted in 121, and the knowing world indicated in
129. It is to such poems that the next chapter is devoted.

NOTES

1. “Then” and “Than” are spelled “then” throughout the 1609 edition of Sonnets; and
“than” is often, although not always, spelled “then” in the first folio of the plays. This
orthographic conflation, according to O.E.D., IX (1919), p. 244, almost became established in
our language during the sixteenth century.

describes 121 very differently from me; its couplet, which seems to me to radiate personal firm-
ness and confidence, she describes as “a confession of desperation and perplexity.”

3. In the 1609 printing of 71, the superlative degree is spelled “vildest”; but “vilest” is
also Shakespearean, as in 1 Henry IV, V, iv, 91, in which Hal represents Hotspur’s grave as
“two paces of the vilest Earth”—or, at all events, thus reads the first folio.

4. Shakespeare, who often distinguished between the different senses, has done so at
length in Sonnet 141, in which he describes “tender feeling to base touches prone.”

5. In Shakespeare, as in general usage, the socially or politically inferior person usually
“salutes” his superior: see, for instance, Richard III, III, vii, 239; Venus and Adonis, 859;
King John, II, i, 30; and Antony and Cleopatra, III, xii, 11—in all of which the impression of
obeisance in a “salutation” is manifest.

6. The O.E.D., VIII, ii (1914), p. 67, has described this employment of “salutation” as a
“nonce” usage.

7. See especially Sonnet 136 for an extended use of “will” to indicate sexual appetite and,
indeed, sexual performance.

8. Distance shooting (on which, see 2 Henry IV, III, ii, 41-49) naturally required the
archer to “level” his aim well above the level of the ground. One shoots on a dead level only at
extremely close range. Thus “level” itself acknowledges the necessity of one’s arching his
arrows in order to achieve a straight shot. See H. Walrond, “Archery” in Shakespeare’s En-
knowledge of archery: Love’s Labor’s Lost, IV, i, 106-139; King Lear, IV, vi, 85-95; Pericles,
I, i, 160-164; and Sonnet 117, 11-12.

Survey 15 (1962): 41-49, for example, notes that other sonneteers acknowledged the world
merely as a “spectator” of the beloved’s unparalleled beauty and their own unparalleled love;
and argues that Shakespeare both transformed the world into a “participator” and gave his
sonnets, generally, a new philosophical and critical depth.