

**SHAKESPEARE'S SWEET AND NOT-SO-SWEET NOTHINGS:  
HENOSES AND/OR KENOSES?****Danica IGRUTINOVIĆ<sup>1</sup>**

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***Abstract***

*This paper will attempt to show how, through an ambiguity of the association of Eros and Thanatos, as either the negative terrible fatality of sex or the positive orgasmic eroticism of death, Shakespeare seems to be deconstructing the usual Neoplatonic dichotomy of pure spirit and prime matter. Both the erotic ascent to henosis and the carnal descent to prime matter lead, ultimately, to nothingness and death. Death is inescapably the end of all desire in both meanings of the phrase: either as the inevitable end of all carnal desire or the desired end itself.*

***Keywords:*** Shakespeare, sexuality/gender, Renaissance Neoplatonism, spirit/matter dualism, henosis, kenosis

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***1. Introduction: drowning in spirit and/or matter in Renaissance  
Neoplatonism***

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We have in the past two decades, owing to the recently appearing translations of Ficino's works into English, witnessed a revival of interest in the phenomenon known as Renaissance Neoplatonism. Studying its inherently poetic and frequently paradoxical metaphysics arguably helps put into relief some of the more haunting figures in Shakespeare's work. A consistently gendered and hierarchized spirit/matter dichotomy is firmly at the basis of this metaphysics: spirit is forming, rational, light, and constructed as masculine, whereas matter is chaotic, irrational, dark, and constructed as feminine. The cosmos is a hierarchical combination of the two: at its top is the pure spirit of God, followed by a series of lower spheres, each reflecting, albeit imperfectly, the harmony of the one immediately above it, and each increasingly material. (Allen, 2002: 48) The bottommost rung on this ladder is the hell of primordial matter.

One illustration frequently used to explain both the structure of the Neoplatonic Cosmos and each spiritual being's role in it was taken from a dualistic reinterpretation of the myth of Narcissus. According to Ovid, Narcissus, a beautiful

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Greek youth, incurs the wrath of Eros by spurning the advances of the nymph Echo. His fundamental sin lies in his refusal to share his love – and his body – with the men and women who desire him. His punishment is symbolically appropriate: he is doomed to fall desperately in love with his own image reflected in water and drown attempting to become united with it, obliviously continuing to worship his reflection even in Hades. The moral of the story is clear: avoid solipsistic self-obsession and lovingly notice other human beings around you. In other words, don't be narcissistic.

Interestingly enough, Neoplatonists manage to interpret the myth in exactly the opposite way. Only three centuries after Ovid, Plotinus takes this story to refer allegorically to the soul's fall into the illusory but alluring world of lower matter. In Plotinus' interpretation, Narcissus represents the soul of the Neoplatonic Everyman, who is called upon to contemplate the beautiful forms imprinted upon the matter of this world only to be inspired by them to ascend into the purely spiritual realms of Ideas:

*When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality (like a beautiful reflection playing on the water, which some story somewhere, I think, said riddingly a man wanted to catch and sank down into the stream and disappeared) then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will, like the man in the story, but in soul, not in body, sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. (Allen, 2002: 289-290)*

This interpretation remained highly popular throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages and made its way into Renaissance Neoplatonism unscathed. Ficino interprets the myth of Narcissus in his *De amore* in terms very reminiscent of those used by Plotinus:

*Narcissus, who is obviously young, that is, the soul of rash and inexperienced man. Does not look at his own face, that is, does not notice its own substance and character at all. But admires the reflection of it in the water and tries to embrace that, that is, the soul admires in the body, which is unstable and in flux, like water, a beauty which is the shadow of the soul itself. He abandons his own beauty, but he never reaches the reflection. That is, the soul, in pursuing the body, neglects itself but finds no gratification in its use of the body. For it does not really desire the body itself; rather, seduced, like Narcissus, by corporeal beauty, which is an image of its own beauty, it desires its own beauty. And since it never notices the fact that, while it is desiring one thing, it is pursuing another, it never satisfies its desire. For this reason, melted into tears, he is destroyed; that is, when soul is located outside itself, in this way, and has sunken into the body, it is racked by terrible passions*

and, stained by the filths of the body, it dies, as it were, since it now seems to be a body rather than a soul. (Allen, 2002: 289)

This interpretation is one of those Neoplatonic concepts that have demonstrably reached England, as a version of the Narcissus story from Ovid appeared in English in 1560. Its anonymous author cites Plato and Ficino as authorities for part of his work and proceeds to moralize about the treachery of watery matter in a similarly dualistic fashion. (Jayne, 1952: 219)

The first option available to Narcissus, standing on the brink of the waters and admiring his reflection, is the one advocated by Plotinus and Ficino in their moralizing accounts of the myth: Narcissus should realize that what he is looking at is the mere shadow of a spiritual reality – his soul, identical to that of the One – reflected onto the dark formless nothingness of matter. This beauty he has fallen in love with should inspire him to ascend far away from the shadowy illusions that this world offers and, rising far above matter, finally become one with the real deity, essentially identical to his own spirit. This orgasmic plunge into the ineffable One has in the history of religious studies most often been referred to as *henosis*, the ultimate end of dualistic erotic desire, and an annihilation of all identity.

The second option is what, tragically, happens to Narcissus in the myth, as he does not seem to heed Plotinus' and Ficino's advice: Narcissus descends deep into the dark waters of matter and drowns in them as he pursues his erotic desires in a carnal fashion. I will refer to this movement as *kenosis* – the emptying or descent of the spirit into nothingness. In most Neoplatonic thought, prime matter is viewed as privation – and thus literally *nothing*. (Allen, 2002: 75-76)

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## ***2. A consummation devoutly to be wish'd: Eros as Thanatos***

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Ficino adopts from Plato and his successors a very clearly and explicitly dualistic version of the ultimate point of erotic ascent: according to his theory of erotic love, we are currently imprisoned in our bodies and can only catch a glimpse of “the one truth, which is the single ray of the one God,” but we can return to the source of our being and become fully unified with God, called by that ray of love. The return journey is also through love, being the act of creation in reverse. The lover is first attracted by the outward beauty of the physical world, then that of virtue, soul and mind. Finally, the soul is seized by the brilliance of divine beauty itself and, “drawn upwards, itself becomes God”. (Line, 2004: 5)

The beloved represents the divine and leads towards annihilation in it. The Eros of dualism demands that one become one with the beloved, a process which Ficino famously illustrated with his simile of the separate but amorous drops of water, yearning for each other, flowing towards each other, and finally completely

dissolving into one. This merging into one with the One is what is finally accomplished in the soul via the ray of divine love operating in it. Divine love first incites erotic love in the soul and purges it through suffering, and then, by a gradual movement towards purity from matter, finally assimilates it to its divine goal, itself. (Allen, 2002: 62)

It is indeed possible for erotic desire to attain its final goal, but only at the very limits of this world and beyond this earthly life. Love can never be consummated within the material world and in the material body. Only after he has first passed through suffering and death and completely transcended matter, “at the end of desire” – and certainly not before the end of life – is the lover finally united with divine beauty itself. (Hanegraaff and Kripal, 2008: 204)

Ficino explicitly – very daringly for a Catholic priest – defines erotic henosis:

*Finally, when the soul has become one, I mean the one which is inherent in the very essence of the soul, it remains for it to be changed thereby into the One which is above essence. This is what heavenly Venus herself accomplishes through love, that is, through the desire for divine beauty and the yearning for the good.* (Ficino, 2006: 54)

Heavenly Venus draws the lover upwards, not only to the divine realm of spirit, but to being finally “changed” into “the One which is above essence”. Henosis is here shown as the logical end of the narcissistic Eros of the Neoplatonic dualistic tradition. However, Ficino’s dreaded vulgar Venus will surely drag that same lover downwards into the nothingness of prime matter if he pursues desire in a carnal way. How can Shakespeare’s lovers know towards which end their erotic desires pull them – and does it matter if death is firmly at the end of both these ends?

Antony envisions being dissolved into a shapeless nothingness and speaks about it to his beloved servant, perhaps overdeterminedly named Eros. The differently shaped clouds, as Antony notes, are mere temporary illusions that will be dissolved eventually “As water is in water”. Antony declares, with what seems to be a mixture of anxiety and desire invoking the specter of death:

*My good knave Eros, now thy captain is  
Even such a body. Here I am Antony,  
Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave.  
(Antony and Cleopatra, IV. xiv. 13-15)*

The matter of each individual body will dissolve in surrounding matter, but also, in Renaissance Neoplatonism, the spirit of each human being striving towards the divine will dissolve in the oceanic One, as, in Ficino’s simile, water merges with water. Margaret W. Ferguson observes in her “*Hamlet: letters and spirits*” that

“Antony’s marvelous dialogue with Eros envisions death as a dissolving of boundaries that is more erotic than terrible”. (Parker and Hartman, 2005: 303)

Antony’s dialog with Eros illustrates several aspects of the tradition of dualistic erotic henosis: the erotic dissolving of boundaries between the lover and the beloved, the otherworldly nature of true love, the strong and persistent association of sex and death, the ultimate non-existence of identity, and the nothingness of death as the end of all desire – whatever and whomever human beings might (think they) desire.

A central theme of Giordano Bruno’s *De gli eroici furori*, a pivotal text of the Renaissance love theory, is his interpretation of the myth of Actaeon, the hunter who stumbles upon the naked goddess Diana while she is bathing. Mesmerized by her beauty, he does not even notice when his own dogs turn against him and devour him. As Bruno interprets it, the myth is an allegory for the “love-death” of the heroic lover: the passionate frenzies he suffers kill him, but this erotic death transforms him into the ideal object of his desire. Diana is for Bruno a figure of the purely spiritual One: she is “the world, the universe, the nature which is in things, the light shining through the obscurity of matter”. Thus Actaeon, the prototype of the heroic lover, is through his erotic death transformed into the inscrutable yet mysteriously immanent One:

*From the vulgar, ordinary, civil, and common man he was, he becomes as free as a deer, and an inhabitant of the wilderness; he lives like a god beneath the towering forest, in the natural rooms of the cavernous mountains, where he contemplates the sources of the great rivers, vigorous as a plant, intact and pure, free of ordinary lusts, and converses most freely with the divinity, to which so many men have aspired, who in their desire to taste the celestial life on earth have cried with one voice: “Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I remained in the wilderness”.* (Hanegraaff and Kripal 201-203)

Actaeon, significantly, never gets to carnally know the beautiful female he sees. He achieves far more than that. What seemingly starts as physical desire for a female shape is through Bruno’s dualistic conjunction of Eros and Thanatos transformed into a successfully completed erotic henosis. This conjunction of Eros and Thanatos is a commonplace in dualistically informed theories of erotic love and makes a regular appearance in Shakespeare’s work – especially the tragedies.

Hugh Grady perceives a complex synergy of Eros and Thanatos at work in the final scene of *Hamlet*. As he reads it, “the anointing with poison of Laertes’ sword – the emblem of his masculine honor – and then an envenoming of a chalice of wine – an emblem of pleasure, reward, and female sexuality now made a vehicle of death” strongly hints at the fatality of sex *or* the eroticism of death, but this is not the first hint that is offered in the play. The very pretext for the fencing match is provided

by Claudius' mention of the praise of Laertes' swordsmanship by Lamord, the apparently gratuitously mentioned gentleman from Normandy, whose name, significantly, "simultaneously evokes the French *la mort* (death) and the Latin *amor* (love)". (Grady, 2009: 176) Death and love will have become indistinguishable by the end of the tragedy. The next emblem of love-death appears after Gertrude has mistakenly drunk from the poisoned cup containing a precious pearl, otherwise named a "union", and Hamlet, having learned of this, shoves it down Claudius' throat, yelling "Is thy union here? / Follow my mother". (*Hamlet*, V. ii. 331-332) For Hamlet, as Margaret W. Ferguson notes in her "*Hamlet: letters and spirits*", "all unions are tainted with poison", like the literal "union" in the cup that Claudius has prepared for Hamlet. (Parker and Hartman, 2005: 302-303) Unions with the female Other certainly are tainted for Hamlet, and he has at that point already ascetically pronounced "we will have no moe marriage". (*Hamlet*, III. i. 147) However, death in erotic union can also be seen in positive terms, as both Claudius and Gertrude die by this union almost simultaneously, which seems more orgasmic than terrible. Grady explains that this death by "union" is an illustration of

*the concept of Liebestod (love-death), the ancient idea that death is in fact the true object of erotic desire – a theme hauntingly evoked in Wagner's Tristan und Isolde and in the medieval romances behind it – and one that has been connected to Romeo and Juliet several times.* (Grady, 2009: 202)

Hamlet and Ophelia's own frustrated erotic union can also be seen as ultimately realized in death. As Jardine establishes, ritual "sexual banter, including lewd mocking rhymes and fairly explicit romping at weddings, was an acceptable part of social practice". (Jardine, 2005: 25) Mad Ophelia's incoherent rhymes sound, more than anything, like sexually explicit wedding songs – those she would have heard at her own fervently desired wedding with Hamlet. It is during this "wedding" that she performs, as Showalter notes, that Ophelia first metaphorically "deflowers" herself – by divesting herself of all the flowers she has. (Parker and Hartman, 2005: 80)

Berry notices another metaphorical defloration of Ophelia. She means to hang her garland of weeds on the willow tree, a symbol both of sexuality and disappointment in love, which, according to Berry, here also assumes the symbolic role of male genitals. However, Ophelia loses this circular wreath of flowers:

*In slipping into the river, Ophelia's loss of her "crownet" of flowers functions as a metaphorical defloration; indeed, she appears to fall into the brook backwards, as the Nurse's husband told the infant Juliet that she would do, when "thou comest to age".* (Berry, 2002: 27)

She falls into the water much like a Neoplatonic Narcissus, but in a strange conjunction of Eros and Thanatos she goes to her death still happily singing her wedding songs, ultimately ecstatically becoming one with the fluid element. Her drowning can be seen as both a sexual and a mystical experience. Hamlet seems to seek his own erotic annihilation when he leaps into her grave, insinuating their impending union in death. As he has already said of death, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished – and this is how his and Ophelia's union is really to be consummated. His dive into Ophelia's open grave can be seen as courting death in the best courtly fashion, much like Romeo does before Juliet's tomb.

Both Hamlet and Romeo, but other fatally frustrated lovers in Shakespeare's tragedies as well, court death in this way, realizing that love cannot be realized in this world. This is no accident. Apparently, when her beloved Adonis died, Venus cursed – or blessed – those that “love best” with inevitable death: “Sith in his prime, Death doth my love destroy, / They that love best, their love shall not enjoy”. (*Venus and Adonis*, 1163-1164) Apart from reading it as a kenotic fall into carnal versions of the erotic, another possible dimension of interpretation of the consistent association of love and death in Shakespeare's tragedies is that pure lovers, those that “love best”, must ascend away from this cruel world in which true love is incompatible with life, so they can finally become one in death. De Rougemont has identified this as a central notion stemming from the consistent dualistic current at the core of the Western tradition of romantic love. (De Rougemont, 1983) These unifying and liberating deaths are in Shakespeare usually erotically charged nearly simultaneous suicides – as is the case with Romeo and Juliet – or murder-suicides – as is the case with Othello and Desdemona. This tradition of fatal love is to blame for the fact that, even today, the media at times cover murder-suicides perpetrated by the male as “tragic” but “romantic”, investing them with an intriguing aura of almost otherworldly grandeur and mystique.

Knowles has observed in his interesting treatment of *Romeo and Juliet* from a carnivalesque perspective that, inconsistently with the conventions of carnival, “only death came from their love, not the renewal and thus reaffirmation of life”. (Knowles, 1998: 58) *Romeo and Juliet* does not seem to fully belong to the medieval carnivalesque tradition with its medley of macabre and bawdy imagery which is ultimately monistic and life-affirming. It belongs, instead, to the dualistic tradition of erotic love which can only lead away from this dull and cruel world and straight into death. Quite possibly, it was the Neoplatonic view of love as Eros leading away from earthly life that made possible this novelty of treating love as fit subject matter for tragedy in the Renaissance.

De Rougemont has even flatly called *Romeo and Juliet* a “courtly tragedy”, and observed that, significantly, Verona was a major center of Catharism in Italy, and the scene of violent struggles between Patarenes and the orthodox, which likely became the stuff of legends that spread throughout Europe. (De Rougemont, 1983:

190) Accordingly, with a touch of pathos and in consciously Cathar terms, De Rougemont explains that, as Romeo and Juliet die together in the graveyard, “Death’s *consolamentum* has sealed the one kind of marriage that Eros was ever able to wish for”. (De Rougement, 1983: 91) Juliet anticipates the love-death resolution of her ultimately dualistic erotic infatuation for Romeo: “If he be married, / My grave is like to be my wedding-bed”. (*Romeo and Juliet*, I. v. 134-135) He becomes married to her, and still her grave has served as a wedding-bed to her, with Death referred to, in erotically charged terms, as her lover. In a very similar combination of imagery, Desdemona asks for her wedding sheets to be placed upon the bed when she appears to anticipate her death, which will only precede Othello’s by a short while: “If I do die before [thee], prithee shroud me / In one of those same sheets”. (*Othello*, IV. iii. 24-25)

Troilus is the only lover to die in the comedies – as he explicitly desired to. In his description of his exalted erotic state, he is a lost soul on the banks of the River Styx that leads into the underworld of Hades, and appeals to Pandarus to ferry him across:

*O, be thou my Charon,  
And give me swift transportance to those fields  
Where I may wallow in the lily beds  
Proposed for the deserver.  
(Troilus and Cressida, III. ii. 9-12)*

Charney sees the erotic imagery used here as odd and disturbing. (Charney, 2000: 70-71) Death, however, is the normal consummation of the kind of Eros that informs Troilus’ reverie. The lily beds of Elysium, of course, denote flowerbeds, but using the word “bed” here automatically conjures the image of a bed – along with the carnal consummation of love that is usually associated with it. Eros and Thanatos are once more firmly linked.

Even though lovers in the comedies do not necessarily actually die, sex and death are consistently linked in imagery. Isabella’s imagined martyrdom is, as has often been noticed, described in erotically charged images:

*Th’ impression of keen whips I’ld wear as rubies,  
And strip myself to death, as to a bed  
That longing have been sick for, ere I’ld yield  
My body up to shame.  
(Measure for Measure, II. iv. 101-104)*

Stripping herself to death as to a bed is an interesting image: it reflects the idea that the body will be stripped off her spirit before she becomes one with the One in erotic henosis. This is reminiscent of Ambrose’s notion that the body is but a filthy



robe to be discarded upon death – a strange notion indeed for a person that was to become a Catholic saint, but somewhat understandable given his Platonic philosophical education. Isabella's keenness for martyrdom is also comparable to the dualistic heresiarch Origen's effusion from his *Dialogue*:

*Bring wild beasts, bring crosses, bring fire, bring tortures. I know that as soon as I die, I come forth from the body. I rest in Christ. Therefore let us struggle, let us wrestle, let us groan, being in the body, not as if we shall again be in the tomb in the body because we shall be free from it.* (Armstrong, 1996: 181)

Armstrong offers a fascinating history of female martyrdom in her *Gospel According to Woman*. Martyrdom was first associated with sexual asceticism and hatred of the body when dualistic metaphysics began to seep into Christianity. In the Middle Ages, the martyr was already nearly always also a virgin, which signified a renunciation of the bodily. (Armstrong, 1996: 182) An interesting addition to the tradition appeared at some point before the 13<sup>th</sup> century: the virgin's martyrdom commenced to be depicted almost invariably in terms suggesting a sexual assault. (Armstrong, 1996: 183) That Isabella's guarded virginity and distaste for all things fleshly should appear to be inseparable from her morbid sexual fascination with martyrdom seems a little less strange in light of this.

Claudio echoes his sister's sexually charged imagery of death:

*If I must die,  
I will encounter darkness as a bride,  
And hug it in mine arms.  
(Measure for Measure, III. i. 82-84)*

After Claudio's promise to "encounter darkness as a bride", Isabel admiringly declares: "There spake my brother; there my father's grave / Did utter forth a voice". (*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 85-86)

The image is a strange one indeed. The hollow darkness of a masculine ("father's") grave is imagined to speak in erotic terms about the feminine ("bride") darkness of death: a deathly darkness is ultimately erotically desiring a deathly darkness. The same will be dissolved in the same, which is ultimately the erotically desired nothingness of death.

The image of an erotic encounter with death is a common one in Shakespeare, frequently inspired by the early modern usage of the verb "to die" to refer to a sexual orgasm, which was itself perceived as a kind of death. (Deats, 2005: 245) Lear declares "I will die bravely, like a smug bridegroom", (*King Lear*, IV. vi. 198) and Antony sees himself as "A bridegroom in [...] death", who will "run into" Eros' sword "As to a lover's bed". (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV. xv. 100-101)

Miodrag Pavlović has noted in his “Antonije i Kleopatra” (Antony and Cleopatra) that Antony’s suicide is placed in a consciously symbolic framework, as the servant Antony desires should kill him is named Eros; when he refuses and commits suicide himself, Eros, in Pavlović’s phrase, transforms into Thanatos. (Pavlović, 1990: 50-51) Antony’s desired erotic henosis is, interestingly, both homoerotic and heteroerotic, rendering Antony somehow androgynous, and both the penetrator (of Cleopatra) and the penetrated (by Eros’ sword).

Shakespeare offers in *Antony and Cleopatra* a more clearly and consciously ambiguous approach to love-death than in any other tragedy of his in which his lovers die. Antony and Cleopatra both seem to ascend to lofty dimensions in the imagery surrounding their demise and death, and yet are throughout openly and luxuriously carnal, in contrast with other lovers in Shakespeare’s world, who are almost ethereal by comparison. Unlike Antony and Cleopatra, Zamir notices, for instance, Romeo and Juliet never eat, which is consistent with “the noncorporeal passion that possesses them”. (Zamir, 2007: 131) Lisa Starks notes in her ““Immortal Longings”: The Erotics of Death in *Antony and Cleopatra*” that Shakespeare, who frequently explores the theme of love and death, takes the exploration further in this late tragedy, allowing the theme to become more potentially disruptive of cultural norms. Shakespeare’s equation of desire and death usually serves, in her words,

*not to valorize the fusion of death and sexuality but, rather, to reveal the abject loathing of the flesh and disgust of human mortality that ultimately results in the death of desire. In Antony and Cleopatra, however, Shakespeare transforms the death of desire into the ecstatic desire of death, a longing beyond the pleasure principle, a fusion of the destructive and the regenerative forces of Thanatos and Eros.* (Deats, 2005: 245)

The entire tragedy sometimes reads as an extensive treatment on the fusion of Eros and Thanatos, viewed from all sides. Enobarbus humorously puns on the double meaning of “to die” extensively:

*Under a compelling occasion, let women die. It were pity to cast them away for nothing, though between them and a great cause, they should be esteem’d nothing. Cleopatra, catching but the least noise of this, dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment. I do think there is mettle in death, which commits some loving act upon her, she hath such a celerity in dying.* (*Antony and Cleopatra*, I. ii. 136-143)

The clown also persistently quibbles on both “to die” and the phallic “worm”, allowing sex and death to be even comically intertwined in this tragedy. Cleopatra approaches her own death with a bit more gravity, but still persistently linking sex and death: “The stroke of death is like a lover’s pinch, / Which hurts, and is

desir'd". (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 295-296) As she dies, she declares with pathos: "I am again for Cydnus / To meet Mark Antony". (*Antony and Cleopatra*, V. ii. 228-229) She is referring here to their first encounter on the river Cydnus. Their deaths are thus depicted as a mystical union entailing the dissolution of both into the watery element, much like Ophelia was dissolved in her erotic drowning.

Through this ambiguity of the association of Eros and Thanatos, as either the negative terrible fatality of sex or the positive orgasmic eroticism of death, most accentuated in his *Antony and Cleopatra*, but present throughout his opus, Shakespeare seems to be deconstructing the usual Neoplatonic dichotomy of pure spirit and prime matter. Both the erotic ascent to henosis and the carnal descent to prime matter lead, ultimately, to nothingness and death. Death is inescapably the end of all desire in both meanings of the word: either as the inevitable end of all carnal desire or the desired end itself.

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### ***3. Nothing brings me all things: death as the end of desire***

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Erotic death can, as has been seen, often be interpreted as a representation of a mystical union and the ideal consummation of heroic love – a consummation devoutly to be wish'd – at times explicitly expressed as a lover's death wish, as is the case with Othello:

*If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate.  
(Othello, II. i. 189-193)*

Othello eerily (fore) sees in death the perfect consummation of his union with Desdemona – and devoutly wishes for it. His wish is fulfilled in their explicitly eroticized nearly simultaneous and uniting deaths. As he poetizes, "I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this, / Killing myself, to die upon a kiss". (*Othello*, V. ii. 358-359)

Whether pure and contemplative, as is the case with Prospero's proper theurgical ascent, or impassioned and destructive, as is the case with Othello's fiery frenzy, the annihilation of personhood into eventual nothingness is the ultimate goal of all dualistic desire.

As Clifford Leech has discovered in "The "Meaning" of *Measure for Measure*," the "meaning" of the play is what can rightly only be termed henosis. As Leech perplexedly observes, "the Duke offers no hint of Christian consolation: Claudio

must welcome death because there is no real joy to be found in life: he denies even personality itself". (Stead, 1971: 157) For this he cites the Duke's words

*Thou art not thyself  
For thou exists on many a thousand grains  
That issue out of dust.  
(Measure for Measure, III. i. 5-43)*

The trapped divine sparks are in dualistic systems ideally to be reunited with their source and thus annihilated in henosis with the originating One. (Igrutinović, 2009) Personality and identity are mere illusions that should – like Prospero's "rough magic" – finally be discarded like outgrown snake skins.

Juliet also proves that identity is ultimately an illusion:

*Hath Romeo slain himself? Say thou but ay,  
And that bare vowel I shall poison more  
Than the death-[darting] eye of cockatrice.  
I am not I, if there be such an ay.  
(Romeo and Juliet, III. ii. 45-48)*

I am not I, as there is no "I": "I" is fundamentally merely "a bare vowel" that poisons. She is not she, as finally, in their erotic annihilating union of death, she is him, as he is her. They have become one and their identities have evaporated as the mere illusions that they have always truly been. Something similar happens in imagery when, in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus runs on his sword, much like Antony does, and his servant answers Messala's question of where he is with

*Free from the bondage you are in, Messala;  
The conquerors can but make a fire of him;  
For Brutus only overcame himself,  
And no man else hath honor by his death.  
(Julius Caesar, V. v. 54-57)*

That the only thing the conquerors can do is give him a ritually proper funeral – "make a fire of him" – creates an interesting image wherein Brutus, because he "overcame himself" and, in one possible reading of these words, thus annihilated his identity, can now become the pure fire of spirit.

Richard II stumbles upon a significant philosophical discovery in the course of his vaguely suicidal musings:

*Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd*

*With being nothing.*  
(*Richard II*, V. v. 1-66)

Timon similarly notices, while merrily writing his epitaph:

*My long sickness*  
*Of health and living now begins to mend,*  
*And nothing brings me all things.*  
(*Timon of Athens*, V. i. 186-188)

After the Duke's speech, even Claudio's thoughts temporarily take a philosophical turn, and he muses: "To sue to live, I find I seek to die, / And seeking death, find life". (*Measure for Measure*, III. i. 42-43) Hamlet has to beg Horatio to absent himself from "felicity", (*Hamlet*, V. ii. 347) at least for a while, when he intends to commit suicide, and Constance amorously exclaims, as if to a lover: "Death, death. O amiable lovely death". (*King John*, III. iv. 25) The object of erotic desire – and the true object of any strong desire – is in Shakespeare often explicitly shown to be death itself.

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#### ***4. Conclusion: being nothing – the paradox of dualistic desire***

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Whether this end of desire equating Eros with Thanatos is, according to the Neoplatonic ideal, an orgasmic leap into henosis with the One, or a kenotic fatal plunge into the nothingness of prime matter caused by carnal passion, is something Shakespeare does not allow us to know – and for good reason, it would seem. (Igrutinović, 2014b)

Both prime matter and pure spirit can be seen as nothingnesses in the paradoxical and self-deconstructing binary opposition of spirit and matter at the basis of Neoplatonic metaphysics. For, if prime matter is in Neoplatonism an amorphous nothingness because it is as yet unformed and below form, then the One towards which all spirit strives is also a limitless nothingness because it is the origin of all forms and above any particular form. These twin nothingnesses both claim the split human being, the one threateningly, the other alluringly.

Annihilation in the nothingness of the One is the ultimate goal of the erotic ascent of dualistic Renaissance Neoplatonism – the final rung of the Platonic ladder of perfection, the last step on an arduous journey of suffering, purification, and, finally, death. It is achieved if the lover has avoided the lures of the shadowy and illusory world of matter and ascended upwards towards the pristine light of the spirit. If the lover, however, mistakes this erotic call of divine beauty for carnal stirrings, he will instead be drawn downwards and ultimately annihilated in the

nothingness of prime matter. How can a lover or any seeker drawn by strong passions know in which direction he is headed?

Shakespeare's answer is – he cannot; and we, in turn, cannot either. Does Romeo and Juliet's passion surpass life – or does it merely bring death? Is Gertrude and Claudius' "union" in death mystical and transcendent – or poisoned by carnality? Do Antony and Cleopatra ascend to lofty heights above mere mortals – or do they sink into the nothingness of base matter? Annihilating erotic deaths in Shakespeare, at least as often as not, appear to be impenetrably ambiguous on this very point, and this could well be a tongue-in-cheek response to Neoplatonism itself and its inherently paradoxical theory of love and life. (Igrutinović, 2014a)

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