***A Waste of Shame*** is a 90-minute television drama on the circumstances surrounding [William Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare" \o "William Shakespeare)'s composition of his [sonnets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare%27s_sonnets" \o "Shakespeare's sonnets). It takes its title from the first line of [Sonnet 129](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonnet_129).

**Plot**

1609: Shakespeare is struggling to complete his sonnets while plague rages. He sees the body of a young child and remembers the moment in 1596 when he learned of the illness of his son [Hamnet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamnet_Shakespeare) while rehearsing a play in London. Returning to [Stratford-upon-Avon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stratford-upon-Avon) he was subjected to abuse from his shrewish[[1]](#footnote-1) wife [Anne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Hathaway_%28Shakespeare%29) for neglecting them by living in the capital. His son died, and an embarrassing argument between his father [John](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Shakespeare) and Anne disrupted the funeral. John later told him that the family was in financial difficulties. William agreed to pay off the debt, but to do so he had to return to London.

1597: Shakespeare receives a bag of money from [Mary Sidney](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Sidney), Countess of Pembroke, for writing the [procreation sonnets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procreation_sonnets), to encourage her son, the young [William Herbert](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Herbert,_3rd_Earl_of_Pembroke) to marry. He meets the young aristocrat and becomes strangely attracted to him. Herbert says that he will meet Shakespeare again when he comes to London.

Disturbed by his attraction to the youth, Shakespeare gets drunk in a brothel run by his friend [George Wilkins](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Wilkins). Wilkins tempts him with a new dusky-skinned[[2]](#footnote-2) "half caste" called Lucie, just come from France. Shakespeare has sex with her.

At a performance of *Hamlet*, Herbert and his young friends meet up with Shakespeare. They are keen to experience the seedy[[3]](#footnote-3) side of London life, so Shakespeare takes them to Wilkins' brothel. There they enjoy the pleasures on offer but Herbert is shocked to see Wilkins help some men to beat up one of the girls. Shakespeare tells him to ignore it and that the girl is being punished for giving a client [syphilis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syphilis).

Shakespeare becomes increasingly close to Herbert and entranced by him, but discovers that his rival [Ben Jonson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ben_Jonson) is now one of Herbert's cronies[[4]](#footnote-4). He also becomes more deeply involved with Lucie. Lucie tells him that she is leaving Wilkins. She now has her own place paid for by another client. She tells him that she likes him best. Later, he visits Herbert's house, but is brushed off[[5]](#footnote-5) by a servant. He realises that Herbert is avoiding him. He follows him and discovers that Lucie has become Herbert's mistress, and that he pays for her lodging. Embittered, he writes [*Measure for Measure*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Measure_for_Measure).[[6]](#footnote-6)

He meets Herbert again at a performance of the play. He learns that Lucie has gone back to France. The two part awkwardly.

A new outbreak of plague leads to the closure of the theatres. Shakespeare, [Richard Burbage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Burbage)[[7]](#footnote-7) and [William Kempe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Kempe)[[8]](#footnote-8) discuss the options for their acting troupe. However, Shakespeare starts to notice worrying signs of illness on his body. He returns to Stratford to get a diagnosis from [John Hall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Hall_%28physician%29) and is told that he does not have the plague, but he does have syphilis. He writes up his sonnets for publication.

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| **Sonnet 129** | **Paraphrase** |
| 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 this hell. | *The wasteful, shameful expenditure of energy - that is what lust in action is. And until the real action, lust* *is dishonest, murderous, bloody, full of blame, savage, extreme, crude, cruel, and not to be trusted;*  *Lust is hated as soon as (or sooner than) it has been enjoyed, and pursued beyond reason; and as soon as it is had,* *It is hated beyond reason, like the bait swallowed by a fish, offered with the intent of making him who takes it insane;*  *The taker is insane in pursuing one's lust and mad in possessing the object of lust: going to extremes in having had it, in the having of it, and in seeking to have it;*  *A heavenly sensation when being had, yet a total woe after all; before having it, an expected joy; after having it, it seems like a dream, a lost ideal.*  *Everyone certainly knows all this about lust, but still no one quite knows how to shun the hope of satisfaction that leads men to this hellish madness.* |

**Analysis**

This Sonnet provides a warning against lust and lists the consequences of giving in to lustfulness. The first twelve lines of the poem all add to the first: “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame”. The second verse places a frame around the first “Is lust in action; and till action, lust”. The first packet of information within this verse shows that the “expense of spirit” referred to is the pursuit of love—one expends their spirit lusting. It is, however, the second packet of information within the second verse, “and till action, lust”, that the remaining six lines of the first octet inveigh against, that is to say, unconsummated lust. These lines explain Shakespeare’s opinion of lust—the following two lines list how a man acts, that is: “Perjured, murderous, savage, etc...”. The third quatrain is filled with statements denouncing even the ultimate goal of the lust, the action, such as: “Mad in pursuit and in possession so”. Here, Shakespeare points out that not only is one mad lusting till action, but mad too at the consummation of the action. This is further corroborated by verse 11, “A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe.” The sonnet is capped by a pause and a deliberation of thought, delivered in a rhymed couplet, as the reader reflects that each man knows the folly of this lustful pursuit.

This is another of the most famous sonnets, for in it the poet seems to engage the topic of sex explicitly and without reservation in a way that was not at all typical for Shakespeare's time. (Lust, however, could be applied to other objects of deep desire, such as money.) The overarching theme of the sonnet is the poet's contention that sexual fulfillment, or at least fulfillment out of lust, is something that is longed for desperately and ravenously right up until that blissful moment of climax - orgasm - after which it is immediately regretted. Yet despite the fact that "the world well knows" its consequences, the poet claims, no one is quite able to avoid the sinful temptations of lustful desire.

The poet wastes no time in getting this point across. He abandons his characteristic use of ambiguity in favor of unequivocal words of condemnation, as we see in his description of lust before action in lines 2-4. His frankness continues throughout the sonnet as he repeatedly bemoans the regret one experiences after succumbing to lustful temptation.

It is unclear from the sonnet whether the poet is describing sexual intercourse in general or only that which occurs out of lust but not love. But due to the sonnet's place within the dark lady sequence and the assumption that the narrator's regret comes from his inability to control his lustful urges, we are led to presume that it is the latter. The focus here is on the contrast between lust before action and regret after action, with action being the act of sex, the consummation of desire. Lustful sex is thus described, "A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe" (here "to prove" means "to try" or "to accomplish"), and he who succumbs to lust is thus likened to the fish that has swallowed bait: "Mad in pursuit and in possession so."

Note that sonnet 129 is full of contrasts: "before" vs. "behind" (after), "heaven" vs. "hell," and so on. The "heaven" of line 14 is the "bliss in proof" of line 11, while "hell" is the "very woe." Also note the possible pun in line 1: "waste of shame" sounds like "waist of shame," which some critics have interpreted as the waist of a prostitute. The impersonal perspective found here, otherwise rare in the sonnets, is perhaps a sign of the poet's malaise with regard to his own role in the situation. He has engaged in lustful sex and regrets it, and now wishes to condemn the act without explicitly admitting his own experience.

The fact that sonnet 129 is so full of contrasts is a good segue into a brief discussion of platonic love versus carnal lust as explored in Shakespeare's sonnets. Sonnet 129 contrasts heavily with, for example, sonnet 20 in that the present sonnet deals with lust while sonnet 20 deals with love. The contrast becomes obvious when we compare the "savage, extreme, rude" of sonnet 129 with sonnet 20's "master-mistress of my passion." While the narrator here regrets his lustful urges immediately after he has acted upon them, there is no such regret to be had in the case of his love for the fair lord; for even if the narrator may have longed for the fair lord sexually, the act of consummation never took place, nor would it ever, as many scholars agree. The contrast thus created diametrically opposes the fair lord and the dark lady, with the narrator betwixt them and torn from both sides in different ways.

1. Nagging, unpleasant and always arguing. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dark in colour [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [connected](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=connected) [with](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=with) [activities](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=activities) [that](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=that) [are](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=are) [illegal](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=illegal) [or](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=or) [morally](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=morally) [wrong](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=wrong), [and](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=and) [often](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=often) [looking](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=looking) [dirty](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=dirty) [or](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=or) [unpleasant](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=unpleasant) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Crony: [a](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=a) [friend](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=friend) [or](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=or) [supporter](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=supporter), [especially](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=especially) [of](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=of) [someone](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=someone) [powerful](http://www.macmillandictionary.com/search/british/direct/?q=powerful) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dismissed (liquidato) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ***Measure for Measure*** is a play by [William Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare), believed to have been written in 1603 or 1604. The play deals with the issues of mercy, justice, and truth and their relationship to pride and humility: "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall". [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. **Richard Burbage** (6 January 1568 – 13 March 1619) was an [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) [actor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor) and theatre owner. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. **William Kempe** (died 1603), also spelled **Kemp**, was an [English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/England) [actor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Actor) and [dancer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dancer) specializing in comic roles and best known for having been one of the original players in early dramas by [William Shakespeare](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Shakespeare). Kempe's success and influence was such that in December 1598 he was one of a core of five actor-shareholders in the [Lord Chamberlain's Men](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Chamberlain%27s_Men) alongside Shakespeare and [Richard Burbage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Burbage). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)