



## 'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed

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'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?

["Sonnet 121." 1-6](#)

This is, frankly, one of my favorite passages in Shakespeare. The poet, in a complex sonnet full of ironies and paradoxes, challenges common notions of what is and is not "vile," and somewhat diabolically embraces as his good what the world thinks bad. "'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed" means "it's better to actually *be* 'bad' than to be *thought* bad." If what we do is judged "vile" not "by our feeling" but by the way others see things, then we may as well at least enjoy our pleasures, so long as not being vile invites the accusation anyway, without any of the attending pleasure. In other words, though the poet cares what other people think—he wouldn't complain if he didn't—he objects to their self-righteous condemnation of pleasures which seem "just" (innocent or proper) to him. These pleasures, clearly erotic, are part of what makes us human: they are a gift of nature, not a vile indulgence. The speaker concludes that if others think his lifestyle is vile, that says more about their imagination than his deeds.

"Sportive blood" is another phrase coined in this sonnet, and its sexual connotations should be apparent. Shakespeare often uses "blood" as a metaphor for passion, and "sportive" derives from a bawdy sense of "sport." "He had some feeling for the sport," Lucio confides in *Measure for Measure* (Act 3, scene 2), insinuating that the Duke was a womanizer. The speaker in this sonnet bristles at others' estimations of his own "sport"; "give salutation to" is a difficult phrase, perhaps meaning "judgmentally address themselves to."

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