The Poem of Joan of Arc: Simon XXII

But as for us, we have never heard
A queen armed with such great

For all the heroes who have died
In a fight, we can't compare us
In war, against the Mard,

Who strikes, and out our enemies
As God does that, who's guiding her
Whose courage passes that of man

Chapman de Pyam
Poet & Author

Dr. commenent Cent Salades. &
Cover Illustration by
Javier P. Beltrán

“Woman, Renaissance, Enlightenment,” 2007
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Introduction

In keeping with a long-standing tradition that has its origin in the late sixties, namely, to publish yearly collections of essays pertaining to the theme of the departmental conference, the present issue of genre owes its thematic inspiration to the 42nd Annual Comparative Literature Conference hosted by the Department of Comparative World Literature and Classics at California State University, Long Beach, on 15-16 March 2007. The event featured twenty-three talks over two days, providing an enriching forum where ideas, perspectives, and viewpoints were presented, discussed, and exchanged on Women, Sexuality, and Early Modern Studies, the title of the present volume.

Four of the articles in this issue (by Pietras, Price, Langis, and Garwood) are the outcome of talks delivered at the 2007 conference while the balance was obtained from a wider call for submissions. The final outcome, a total of fourteen studies, is the work of contributors residing, working, and studying in England, Scotland, Germany, Egypt, the United States, and Canada, an impressive international array for a volume this size.

Equally impressive is the range of subject matters related to medieval and early modern authors and figures, including depictions, portrayals and invocations of the feminine by male and female figures alike: from the usage made of metaphors and proverbs in Ancrene Wisse (Katharine Wrobel) and Roman de Silence (Lynne Dahmen) respectively, to “Shakespeare’s Cleopatra as Virtuous Virago” (Unhae Langis), to “the ‘Crime’ of Self-Creation” in the anonymous prefaces to the autobiography of Mrs Mary Frith known as Moll Cutpurse (Geraldine Wagner), to contemporary Arabic women writers’ responses to the Shahrazad of The 1001 Nights (Faten Morsy).

In her study subtitled “Early Modern Women’s Testimonies of Death and Self,” Ulrike Tancke investigates the extent to which women such as Mary Stuart in her poetry and Elizabeth Joscelin in
her mother manual, create assertive self-images to be projected in the future while at once being threatened by the dominant patriarchal culture. Furthermore, through the analysis of a Spanish play and an English autobiography, *Life is a Dream* (1636) and *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith* (1662) respectively, Brian Pietras studies how gender hybridity or “hermaphroditism,” whether real or rhetorical, becomes a major “identity-crafting tool” for female cross-dressers in Early Modern Europe, while in “A Man is for a Woman […]” Jolie Braun seeks to demonstrate, through a Butlerian reading of the text, that gender performance in Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668) is at once “a source of agency and oppression.” In her paper related to “the Newfangelnesse of female autonomy,” Kristen Lillvis analyzes how the Squire, the only poet-pilgrim in *The Canterbury Tales*, “seeks to preserve masculine power” by describing the negative results females face when yielding to the temptation of “a life outside of the cage.” In “‘made to write ‘whore’ Upon’: *Othello* and the Cultural Projection of Whoredom,” Victoria Price, focusing on Desdemona, explores “the unstable boundaries between ‘wife’ and ‘whore’, chastity and whoredom” in Early Modern England. “Women’s Political will” is dealt with by William Ferleman who studies how Fletcher and Shakespeare in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613) “compellingly” dramatize women’s capacity to assert and impose their own viewpoints. Moreover, in a similar vein, in “Daughters, Defiance, and Death: Jane Lumley and Euripides’ *Iphiginea*,” Sasha Garwood demonstrates how Lumley freely adapts and reconstructs Euripides’ *Iphiginea* in order to portray a Christ-like figure significantly stronger than the play’s traditional male heroes. In “[…] Unnatural Female Sexuality in the Revenge Tragedy,” Liberty Stanavage explores women in *Hamlet* (1602) and *The Broken Heart* (1633), advancing that female avengers in the course of Renaissance drama come to “lack the sexual agency” and the power exhibited by their earlier counterparts in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1585) and *Titus Andronicus* (1594). Last but not least, Christophe Casamassima offers an incisive analysis of the rhetoric of Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz and Christine de Pizan in their respective effort to establish credibility and authority vis-à-vis their audience; he also expatiates on how Mary Stewart’s critique of slavery in nineteenth-century
America is informed by the emancipation of those early figures.

The editorial staff wishes to thank all the contributors to *genre 28* and those who support the journal: students, professors, and staff members in the Department of Comparative World Literature and Classics, the College of Liberal Arts, as well as the Instructional Related Activities (IRA) Board of CSULB that grants support and financial assistance for the continued production of the journal.

*genre* Editorial Staff
“Death hath this also, that it openeth the gate to good fame.” Thus remarks Francis Bacon in the closing paragraph of his essay “Of Death” (1612). His observation points to the proverbial paradigm shifts that occurred in the transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, which fundamentally changed the ways in which the future was conceptualised. As man came to gradually perceive himself as the arbiter of his own fate, fashioning and reshaping his identity to match his idea of himself, the future—the time that succeeds the individual’s lifetime—ceased to be the reserve of divine will beyond human control and became a central space onto which idea(l)s of the self could be projected and conserved for posterity. At least (as my use of the male pronoun indicates) this is the conventional, male-centred account, popularised by Renaissance scholars since Jacob Burckhardt.

Ever since, in the 1970s, Joan Kelly-Gadol asked her oft-quoted question, “Did women have a Renaissance?” feminist critics
Tancke

have sought to analyse whether early modern women experienced the period’s alleged paradigm shifts in the same ways as their male contemporaries, to what extent they contributed to, or else undermined them (and, as a consequence, whether we can legitimately speak of paradigm shifts at all). Looking at a variety of early modern women’s writings—poetry, conduct literature, and mothers’ advice books—this essay investigates women’s ideas and expectations of the future, as they are played out in their written representations of self. As my choice of genres suggests, the texts negotiate individual futures, rather than large-scale, socio-political perceptions. As such, the women’s notions of their futures are inextricably bound up with death, the most immediate and only certain future event, and the concomitant fear of all-out disappearance.

In order to position the women’s senses of self in relation to the dominant discourses of the time, I pursue the question of whether we can discern similar traces of confidence and optimism, as Bacon expresses, in the way that women faced the future, and to what degree they, too, used the idea of futurity to consciously create an image of themselves to be preserved for time to come, thus undermining the patriarchal imperative to feminine silence.

In 1587, awaiting her execution at the hands of her cousin Elizabeth I at Fotheringay Castle, the imprisoned Scottish Queen Mary Stuart reflects on her future:

Alas what am I? What use has my life?  
I am but a body whose heart’s torn away,  
A vain shadow, an object of misery  
Who has nothing left but death-in-life.  
O my enemies, set your envy all aside;

I’ve borne too long the burden of my pain  
To see your anger swiftly satisfied.  
And you, my friends who have loved me so true,  
Remember, lacking health and heart and peace,  
There is nothing worthwhile I can do;  
Ask only that my misery should cease  
And that, being punished in a world like this,
Death and Self

I have my portion in eternal bliss. (109)

For her immediate future, Mary Stuart foresees nothing but “death-in-life;” in a tone of self-abjection, she presents herself as already dead. Yet, crucially, in an exceedingly bold move that goes almost unnoticed, she reclaims for herself an enduring power and importance, simultaneously displacing it onto the hereafter (“I have my portion in eternal bliss”). Drawing on the rhetoric of martyrdom, she presents herself as abject (“a body whose heart’s torn away”) and ridden with pain. She appears to be well aware of the mechanism by which martyrdom creates a posthumous significance that far exceeds her influence during her lifetime. Staging herself as a martyr for her Catholic faith, Mary Stuart recognises that her loss of worldly power as Scottish Queen marks the beginning of her symbolic power as the quasi-metaphysical opponent of Elizabeth I:

I guide the hours and guide the day
Because my course is true and right
And thus I quit my own sad stay
That here I may increase my light. (89)

Mary Stuart seems to have a clear sense of the power that accrues to suffering and symbol: the pressurised and persecuted Queen styles herself as a figure that is able to command a mixture of identification and awe. Her personal motto—“En ma fin est mon commencement” [In my end is my beginning] (84)—expresses this awareness. Hers is a power that transcends the merely material and inscribes itself in the transcendental yet enduring sphere of “eternal bliss.” Thus her statements have obvious political implications. They express the conviction that her reduced worldly power will ultimately translate into a far more decisive form of transcendent power. At first glance, this suggests that the Scottish Queen was able to lay claim to a pronounced sense of personal identity in the present and, failing in this, to project her strong sense of self onto the future.

At the same time, however, hers is a fundamentally ambivalent stance. After all, it is her very self-projection onto the future that undercuts Mary Stuart’s bold assertion of self. On the immediate
level, her personal fate—her eventual execution after years of banishment and imprisonment—forbids us to see her self-stylisation as an act of empowerment; it should caution us against the danger of severing the link between textual representation and material experience. Whilst I do acknowledge that it might be possible for a woman like Mary Stuart to derive an alternative identity from staged self-annihilation, a reading of such feminine strategies as “a way of turning subordination into affirmation, by theatricalizing [women’s] subjection instead of internalizing it” (Findlay 193) misses the point, or at least neglects its less convincing downside. Certainly, it is fair to say that in Mary Stuart’s case, “enforced passivity leads to an alternative form of selfhood” (Findlay 195), but it is a selfhood that is unsettlingly insubstantial and elusive. Her example suggests the dialectic of self-assertion and self-erasure that is characteristic of early modern women’s ways of engaging with the future.

Mary Stuart’s stance is paralleled by a number of writings by lesser-known female authors of the period. It is especially the genre of the will or legacy that provides a format in which women could legitimately give themselves a voice and purposefully reach out to the future. The socio-economic basis for the proliferation of the genre is the early modern development towards a proto-capitalist market economy. This turned the will into a market-oriented genre that could be used to regulate commerce, banking, and trade, and to transmit business capital with a view beyond the person’s own lifetime (cf. Jordan 16). Significantly, women did not fully buy into this exclusively economic conceptualisation, as they often modified their wills by adding a symbolic dimension:

Rather than providing for children or distributing largesse, women made wills out of a need to thank and acknowledge small favours, out of a sense of personal attachment to material goods, in order to help out family and friends in need and from a sense of personal integrity. (Erickson 209)

Literary wills are the most obvious proof of this tendency,
as the writers consciously use the genre to a somewhat different effect than as part of a merely commercial strategy. The literary will offered a means of interacting with posterity on the basis of emotional intimacy and perceived closeness. Interpreting the genre in a metaphorical fashion, female writers of wills and testaments offered alternatives to the purely economic implications of the genre. “Metaphorical” wills—texts that are set up as testaments, but make immaterial bequests in the form of advice, received wisdom, and so on—obviously turn the will into a relational genre. This venture is most clearly visible in the case of mothers’ legacies, collections of advice and admonitions addressed to the female authors’ children and descendants, which became popular from the late sixteenth century onwards and detail the guidance that the female author intends to give to future generations. Crucially, the audience is positioned in the future and hence potentially transcends the immediate addresses. Although the author writes to specific contemporaries she is close to, the ultimate purpose of the text is to achieve an effect that lasts beyond the writer’s lifetime and is of public relevance.

The three-dimensional set-up of the will allowed women to transcend the present in both directions: towards the past by taking stock of their lives, and towards the future by leaving their material goods and/or advice to future generations (cf. Wall 285). Wendy Wall states: “[I]t is because of the strange time frame involved in the concept of the will, that the writer is able to express, sanctify and preserve his or her immediate desires” (285). However, this form of writing renders the female author’s position an inherently precarious one because, by virtue of the very genre she has chosen, her eventual death is always also implied. Wall captures the inherent paradox of this speaking position by drawing on Catherine Belsey’s argument that early modern women could only have access to a “discontinuous identity” (287; cf. Belsey 149f.). She claims that they used the genre of the legacy in order to create “a carefully formed re-presentation of that problematic position, a crafted self-portrait through which [they] . . . rhetorically recast their riven subjectivity” (Wall 287; emphasis in the original).

The question at the heart of their “riven subjectivity” is whether the writers’ self-stylisation as dead or death-prone is com-
mensurate with a sense of (self-)entitlement to a position of (public) authority that they would otherwise not be able to command, and to what extent this translates into a claim to future significance and remembrance. Certainly, we should have no illusions about the fact that, in any case, the very genre of the mother’s legacy dictates that the women’s authority is highly ambivalent. There is a subdued poignancy in Valerie Wayne’s observation that “[t]he mother’s text . . . became a substitute not for her material but her spiritual presence. It was a sign of her disembodied spirit. And that is the larger reason why its publication was likely to be acceptable – because it marked her absence” (70). Again, the question is in how far absence and authority can be reconciled.

In the address to her sons that opens her advice manual, *The Mothers Blessing* (1616), Dorothy Leigh explicitly stresses the fact that she feels (or imagines?) her life to be drawing to a close. The natural sequence of generations, which makes it the parents’ duty to pass on advice to their children, legitimises her writing: “And seeing my selfe going out of the world, and you but comming in, I know not how to performe this duty so well, as to leave you these few lines” (sig. A6v). In a sense, Leigh’s writing is predicated on death in a double sense, for she greatly emphasises the fact that it is only her husband’s previous death that has opened to her the role of advisor (cf. sigs. A6r f.). However, fulfilling her late husband’s will might be a merely strategic move towards humility because, effectively, Leigh devises a will of her own. The double death—her husband’s death in the past and her own at some point in the future—legitimises her legacy and allows her to usurp her husband’s authority and to claim it for herself. In Wendy Wall’s view, “[her] words comprise a self-constituting gesture based on self-annihilation as she constructs an identity precisely through the erasure of her body” (289). But she does more than that. As she takes over her husband’s extended authority beyond his death, she also claims an identity that confers “real” (masculine) power, whilst paying lip-service to the patriarchal order that “give[s] men the first and chiefe place” (sig. B5v). Not only does she circumvent the restrictions imposed on women’s writing, but also “the patriarchal law of primogeniture” (Brown 8) that presents as normative the passing of a legacy from father to son.
The wide currency of Leigh’s manual in seventeenth-century English households—between 1616 and 1674, twenty-three editions were printed (cf. Brown 3)—might be taken to suggest that she was indeed able to turn herself into a prominent figure of seventeenth-century conduct literature and thus contributed a female voice to a traditionally male-dominated genre.

Yet female publishing success alone does not, of course, necessarily point to a subversion of the patriarchal discourse. To the contrary, the very fact that Leigh’s treatise could be so successful in the literary marketplace hints at the unsettling dimensions of her authorial stance. It is quite obvious that her tactics of assuming an authoritative position are not simply and straightforwardly empowering. For throughout The Mothers Blessing, instances of confident self-assertion alternate with, or are undercut by, moments of self-abnegation. The motherlove that lends authority to Leigh’s writing also threatens self-loss, as she tells her children to “know therefore, that it was the motherly affection that I bare unto you all, which made me now (as it often hath done heretofore) forget my selfe in regard of you” (sigs. A11v f.). Together with death, motherhood is a trope that allows Leigh to evade judgement for her boldness of venturing into the public sphere of the written word. It is crucial to note that both—motherhood and death—cannot be conceived of as independent of one another.

Psychologically speaking, the alignment of motherhood and death is related to the mother’s ability to both enable and constrain the child’s identity formation, that is, its entry into the socio-symbolic contract. The mother thus embodies “the risk of losing identity at the same time as [she wards] it off” (Kristeva, “Mother” 238). Therefore, if the purpose of the maternal advice book is to facilitate the child’s choice of the “right” course of life, the mother needs to be erased for the child’s individuality to be established. Maternity as a self-authorizing stance is thus ultimately geared towards the mother’s death. In this sense, in order to fend off the threat of loss of identity associated with the maternal, the mother’s (self-) elimination is imperative. Needless to say, this lends great poignancy to the maternal speaking position as a means of self-authorization and self-preservation for times to come. In effect, its dialectical counterpart,
the threat of self-deletion, accompanies it. In spite of its assertive prose, Leigh’s *Mothers Blessing* cannot easily be taken as evidence of a confident stance towards the future.

In a similar way as Leigh, Elizabeth Grymeston, in her manual *Miscellanea, Meditations, Memoratives* (1604), addressed to her son Bernye, legitimises her writing by the impending loss of the self through death. In a striking parallel to Mary Stuart’s turn of phrase, she presents herself as already absent whilst performing the act of writing: “I am now a dead woman among the living” (sig. A3r). Paradoxically, it is her absence that allows her to use her manual as a forum for genuine self-representation, to leave to her son (and to her future audience more generally) “the true portrature of thy mothers minde” (sig. A3v). Also, the (assumed) imminence of her death lends a heightened authority to her advice: Her example is infinitely more insightful “since death hath overshadowed me, and . . . there is no pleading after sentence; . . . since my affecting what I should have desired is turned into a feeling of that I lost” (sig. C2r).

However, the flip side of this is the displacement of her authority that Grymeston thereby affects, as she prefigures her own disappearance. There accrues a similar ambivalence to her writing as can be traced in Leigh’s advice book. Hence Grymeston’s apparent self-confidence is based on an unsettlingly elusive ground. She urges her son “that being my last speeches, they will be better kept in the conservance of thy memorie; which I desire thou wilt make a Register of heavenly meditations” (sig. A3v). Her self-empowerment can only be considered effective with any certainty in the immaterial realms of memory and spirituality, failing to translate into a tangible form of authority. Conversely, her professed emphasis on the fact that she will only live on as a mother—the position from which she derives her literary voice—implies that Grymeston is trapped in the very mechanisms of self-erasure that I have traced in Leigh’s text. At first glance, she portrays mother-love as singularly powerful. Presenting it as the most passionate and unconditional form that love can take, she states that the mother’s will and reason have to succumb to the emotional intensity of her love:

[M]y mothers undeserved wrath [is] so virulent,
Death and Self

as that I have neither power to resist it, nor patience to endure it, but must yeeld to this languishing consumption to which it hath brought me: I resolved to breake the barren soile of my fruitlesse braine, to dictate something for thy direction . . . . (sig. A3r)

Clearly, motherly love sets free huge energies and enables Grymeston to access her full intellectual potential and to express herself in writing (“. . . to breake the barren soile of my fruitlesse braine”). Motherhood endows her with almost supernatural power in that it allows her to overcome her human, physical shortcomings: “[M]y aking head and trembling hand have rather a will to offer, than abilitie to afford further discourse” (sig. B1r). Yet the flipside of this extraordinary empowerment is the fact that her son is enabled to gain unmediated access to his mother’s self, to “see the true portrature of [his] mothers minde” (sig. A3v). The irrationality of motherly love might cause the boundaries of personhood to become fluid, if not to collapse altogether. By implication, to the extent that her identity merges with posterity’s representation of it, she is forced to surrender her future so as, paradoxically, to claim it in a partial and fragmented fashion.

Elizabeth Joscelin’s The Mothers Legacy to her Vnborn Childe (1624) presents us with a slightly modified and even more poignant situation. Joscelin uses similar strategies of self-stylisation as death-prone and heightens their impact to the utmost. Writing during her first pregnancy, she links her own dissolution with the coming-into-being of her addressee, her child that has not yet been born. There is a realistic basis for her fear of death, even if it can only be made out in retrospect. Joscelin did die shortly after the birth of her daughter Theodora, presumably of puerperal fever. Maybe some of the contemporary and subsequent critical attention that her manual has received stems from this somewhat chilling and gruesome coincidence.

Joscelin’s recourse to her possible death in childbirth also has a strong symbolic component. Independent of its actual likelihood, death in childbirth was a danger that loomed large in women’s
shared consciousness (cf. Pollock 41). Rather than being a realistic assessment of danger, however, the fear of death during or shortly after giving birth can be more accurately conceived of as an indication of a general cultural anxiety in connection with the “liminal period” of pregnancy, birthing, and lying-in (Wall 285). At least in the imagination, “pregnancy presented . . . a demarcated and culturally acknowledged time of jeopardy that made it natural for women to be both the authors of and the audience for articulations of wisdom and counsel” (Wall 285). The liminal experience of pregnancy and childbirth creates a sense of commonality between women, its existential precariousness triggering exceptional authority, and hence the urge to address a future audience beyond their lifetime. Having said that, it is crucial to emphasise that both poles of this dialectic weigh equally—to push the dimension of female authority is to neglect the very real danger and pain that the situation entailed. This duality is very obvious in the case of Joscelin, who uses her imminent labour and assumed closeness to death as an authorising factor. It is worth quoting in their entirety the first lines of her address to her husband, which precede her *Legacy*:

I no sooner conceyved a hope that I should bee made a mother by thee but . . . shortly after folowed the apprehension of danger that might preuent me for [from] executinge that care, I so exceedingly desired. I mean in religious traininge our childe, and in truthe deathe appeareinge in this shape was doubly terrible vnto mee[,] first in respect of the paynfullnes of that kinde of death an[d] next the losse my littell one should haue in wantinge mee but I thanke god theas fears wear cured wth the remembrance that all things worke together for the best to those that loue god [a]nd a certain assurance that hee will giue mee patience accordinge to my payn. (1ff.)

Obviously, the future, for Joscelin, is perceived in entirely negative terms, since, with eerie accuracy, she predicts her own death
in childbirth. Extending this concrete reference point, her speaking position can be placed in a wider cultural context. The commonplace association of femininity with death foregrounds its ambiguous implications. Such contextualization also highlights the inherently problematic dimension of motherhood, summarised in Julia Kristeva’s perception that there is no “unambiguously affirmative” stance towards maternity because of the “close relationship between the maternal, the poetic, and death” (Meaney 79). Providing an even closer parallel to Joscelin’s speaking position, Elizabeth Bronfen analyses women’s options for self-representation and observes that, in patriarchal literary discourse, “death in childbirth is such a poetic theme. For here the explicitly sanctioned feminine form of authorship, the creation of a child, falls together with the actual death of the feminine body” (404).

While Bronfen’s neutral and somewhat ironic wording is slightly unsettling because it covers over the poignancy of her statement, Wendy Wall’s reinterpretation of the trope is even more disturbing. She exclusively stresses the potentially disruptive implications for patriarchy of the femininity/death equation: “The specter of death and the gravity of maternity join to produce a powerful counterforce to the culture’s exhortations to silence” (284). Whether this counter-position is truly empowering certainly needs to be questioned. In Joscelin’s case, her recurrent emphasis on her future “payn” belies her professed certainty that “all things worke together for the best to those that loue god” (10f.). Throughout her Legacy, she voices her anxiety that “death <would> ^might^ depriue me of time If I should neglect the present” (18f.). She seems to be writing to her child under the clearly felt pressure that she might not be able to do so for much longer. This lends a sense of urgency to her writing, which heightens the impact of her admonitions; yet it also creates a self whose claim to authority is effortful.

In a more immediate sense, Joscelin’s case clearly shows that a speaking position close to death is in fact detrimental to the female writer’s authority. The Anglican clergyman Thomas Goad, who was also responsible for assigning The Mothers Legacy its title, edited her text posthumously. As Joscelin’s modern editor Jean LeDrew Metcalfe notes, “[n]aming the work as he did, Goad reinforced the iden-
Tancke

tification of the mother’s advice book as legacy, and thereby influenced the historical and critical reception of Joscelin’s writing” (23). Goad’s “Approval” to the Legacy is indicative of the manipulative strategies that his assignment entailed, but he cleverly conceals this interference by setting up Joscelin as the ideal of a virtuous woman and seemingly granting her authority:

This truly rich bequeather, taking that care for the providing an everlasting portion for her hoped issue, which too many parents bend wholly upon earthly inheritance, by her death already hath given unto her Testament that life and strength, whereof the Scripture speaketh, A Testament is of force after death. (12ff.)

Contrary to his own claims, Goad effectively disempowers Joscelin by relegating her personal impact to the merely ideational. Rather than allowing her legacy to prove its “life and strength,” Goad modifies Joscelin’s manuscript to fit his “own ideological commitments,” but he can do so only because Joscelin’s authorial presence has been eliminated, or at least rendered mute, by her death. Under Goad’s invasive influence, death, far from being empowering, becomes a moment of self-erasure for Joscelin. This conveniently reduces her to the aestheticised epitome of virtuous femininity, and by implication, she has no grasp on her own future. As Goad notes, relishing in Joscelin’s fading away with an abject fascination that is almost Victorian, “the course of her life was a perpetuall meditation of death, amounting almost to a prophetical sense of her dissolution” (94ff.). Joscelin’s own premonition of her impending absence materialises through Goad’s affirmation of her death, robbing her text of its author and making it manipulable. In so doing, Goad fails to account for the poignancy of Joscelin’s speaking position, her fear of death. In fact, his description of her personality even belittles her “meditation of death” (95), as it occurred “when she had not finished the 27 yeere of her age, nor was oppressed by any disease, or danger, other than the common lot of child-birth” (97ff.).

With an almost cynical sleight of hand, Goad overlooks the
fact that it was precisely the “common lot of child-birth” that made women experience existential anxieties. In my view it is not too far-fetched to argue that women’s immediate confrontation with death as a corporeal experience, combined with their general powerlessness under patriarchy, creates an urge to consciously project (parts of) the self onto the future, out of the constant preoccupation with self-loss. Yet the poignancy that characterises their presentations of self harks back to the more fundamental questions I have posed at the beginning. It casts serious doubt on the writers’ ability to draw on the idea of the future in order to construct an assertive sense of self. After all, a self that derives its authority from the threat of self-loss cannot be conceived of in entirely positive terms.

Hence, these women’s texts do not simply and straightforwardly replicate the time-worn narrative of the modern individual self and its self-positioning in time. Nor do they attest to a feminine temporality that transcends and replaces linear chronology with a cyclical, corporeal perception of time (cf. Kristeva “Woman”). Rather, my contention is that early modern women, whilst they were able to actively pursue the question of what ‘self’ they intended to project into the future, could do so only to veil their profound unease with their position in the patriarchal symbolic order. Moreover, they may not even wish to conceal this precariousness, but consciously and often painfully engage with it in order to shape an even more enduring yet poignant expression of self. Women writers’ claims on future significance are always threatened to be undercut by the very real fear of self-erasure, be it through literal death, as it is expressed in mothers’ manuals, or by the signifying practices of patriarchal culture, which allowed them only a shifting and insecure grasp of identity. Thus early modern women’s futures, paradoxically, command an assertive presence in their narratives of self, yet are threatened and unstable at the same time.
Tancke

Works Cited


Death and Self


<http://www.wwp.brown.edu/texts/wwoentry.html>.


“Wherefore these Women maie not improperly be called Hermaphrodit, that is, Monsters of both kindes, half women, half men” (Stubbes qtd. in Gilbert 77). So Phillip Stubbes condemned female cross-dressers in his *Anatomie of Abuses*, depicting them as monsters with hybrid genders. As this quote suggests, in early modern England, female cross-dressers could be conflated with hermaphrodites for rhetorical purposes. This was not because they were believed to be anatomically intersexed, but because they broke conventions of proper female conduct, a transgression most clearly displayed in their clothing (Gilbert 77). As Ruth Gilbert explains, women who were considered to be masculine during this period—such as cross-dressers—“enacted, rather than embodied hermaphroditism. It was gender (culture) rather than sex (biology) that was at stake here” (77). Modern scholarship has also recognized this conflation, and the Index of *Women in Early Modern England* offers one of the most succinct examples of this—readers seeking information on “cross-dressing” are advised to “see also hermaphrodites.” This essay examines the ramifications of this conflation for the perceived identities...
of cross-dressing women. It opens with a discussion of the self-fashioning perceived to be inherent in female cross-dressing and of the different conceptions of gender hybridity in early modern Europe. The essay then considers the Spanish play *Life is a Dream (La vida es sueño)* and the English autobiography *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith* to discern how hermaphroditism—real and rhetorical—becomes an important identity-crafting tool for female cross-dressers in two different literary genres.

The quote from Stubbes’s *Anatomie of Abuses* demonstrates that the label of “hermaphrodite” could be used to insult cross-dressing women; this use is echoed in a pamphlet published in London in 1620 (Velasco 25) entitled, *Hic Mulier: or, the Man-Woman*, where cross-dressing women are referred to as “these new Hermaphrodites” (Par. 26). The *Hic Mulier* pamphlet’s language, moreover, implies that cross-dressing is a form of personal agency, a way to rework the self. Concerning these women, the author demands, “What can be more barbarous than with the gloss of mumming Art to disguise the beauty of their creations? To mould their bodies to every deformed fashion, their tongues to vile and horrible profanations, and their hands to ruffianly and uncivil actions?” (Par. 5). There is an interesting interplay here between conceptions of gender as an essential property and as a state that the cross-dressers can construct and manipulate by and for themselves. The first sentence implies that these women are merely hiding their true female selves with the “disguise” of male clothing, performing (“mumming”) masculinity contrary to how God created them—and thus as they really are.

But the superficiality stressed in this description gives way to a more anxious conception of what these women are managing to do in the lines that follow. While the word “mould” in this context can mean that they are physically reshaping their bodies through wearing male clothing, it also carries the connotation that they are transforming their identities—especially given their transgressive words and actions. The OED lists one definition of “mould” as “To shape, alter, or influence the character, beliefs, or development of (a person or thing),” and quotes a line from Ben Jonson’s *Every Man in his Humour* as an example: “Into the likenesse of one of these Reformado’s had he moulded himselfe so perfectly, . . . thou would’st
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haue sworne, he might haue beene Serieant-Maior . . . the regiment.” The women attacked in the *Hic Mulier* pamphlet, with their perfor-

mance of “vile and horrible profanations” and “ruffianly and uncivil

actions,” seem to be altering themselves no less than Jonson’s con-

vincing imitation soldier.

The understanding that women who dressed as men during this period were both enacting a kind of hybrid gender and dem-

onstrating agency could lead to an intriguing conclusion. As Ruth Gilbert explains, discussing an insult almost identical to the one made by Stubbes, “In these terms transvestite women were self-con-

structed hermaphrodites (‘halfe male, and halfe female’)” (82). And although today usually regarded as a freak or a monster, during the early modern period, the figure of the hermaphrodite was subject to many different and conflicting representations and interpretations. Gilbert sees a crucial distinction between the “androgyne” and the “hermaphrodite,” which were the two prevailing models of gender hybridity during this time. Although the terms were often inter-

changeable, she argues that androgyny “is repeatedly (although not exclusively) linked to a condition of plentitude presenting a spiritual transcendence of the body. Hermaphroditism, in contrast, is usually (although again, not absolutely) used as a term that highlights sexual difference, whether in direct relation to the body or to the perfor-

mance of gender” (12). In other words, androgyny was an imagi-

nary ideal, one that was frequently used to signal the perfect union of opposites—such as the male and female in marriage (17). The hermaphrodite, however, raised the possibility of two different sexes physically embodied in one form—a concept, Gilbert contends, that was sometimes found exciting in theory but always troubling when present in the flesh (20-1).

The distinction drawn by Gilbert between androgyny and hermaphroditism is particularly useful and suggestive to keep in mind when examining literary and theatrical portrayals of cross-dressed women as gender hybrid figures. Although she cites critics such as Stubbes to display how cross-dressing women could be seen as monstrous, Gilbert also acknowledges that they could be seen as ideal androgynes in a different context: the theater of the period (87). The English practice of having boy actors play female charac-
ters may have contributed to this perception. Phyllis Rackin credits Shakespeare with a sophisticated handling of the androgynous potential of the male actors who played women dressed as boys on the English stage, noting that “he uses his boy heroines’ sexual ambiguity not only to complicate his plots but to resolve them” (31). Indeed, by successfully performing female roles in spite of their anatomies, early modern boy actors seem to have fulfilled a central tenet of androgyny: the transcendence of the body and of a single sex.

In his discussion of boy actors on the Shakespearean stage, however, Michael Shapiro warns against interpreting cross-dressed theatrical figures as androgynous, arguing that “[i]nstead of abstract symbols of androgyny, the stage offered images of physical bisexuality, or hermaphroditism, which was generally regarded as monstrous” (3). While Shapiro is right to recognize how troubling the representations of gender hybridity could be found to spectators in early modern Europe, he forgets that the gender hybrid images offered by the stage were carefully constructed illusions, not embodied realities. This seems especially apparent in early modern Spanish theater, where actresses who dressed as men actually revealed more of their female bodies than they did when dressed as women (Heise 368). The explicitly illusory nature of theatrical gender mingling raises the possibility of a more nuanced reading of the hybrid gender identities suggested by cross-dressed female characters. These figures could be portrayed as monstrous by a playwright, but they could also be shown as androgynous and held up for the audience’s approval.

One play that features the creation of a self that is both male and female is Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s *Life is a Dream*, which was first produced in Spain in 1636 (Worthen 387). The play concerns a man named Segismund, who has been kept chained in an isolated cave since birth by his father, King Basil, because it is prophesied that Segismund will one day kill his father and bring the kingdom to ruin. In particular, the play features the character of Rosaura, a woman who dresses as a man at the beginning and end of the play. But Rosaura mingles genders in more than just her cross-dressing: she quests in order to reclaim her errant fiancé Astolfo, a reunion that is the only way she can restore her honor. In her quest, Rosaura combines two archetypal male and female dramatic plots into
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a single story: the male plot of regaining honor and the female plot of marriage. Far from being monstrous, in *Life is a Dream*, Rosaura’s rhetorical self-fashioning as a kind of hermaphrodite is a remarkable—and necessary—transformation.

The play opens with Rosaura, who, “dressed as a man, appears on the rocks climbing down to the plain” in the stage directions. But although the text calls for Rosaura to be cross-dressed, as W.B. Worthen notes, because of official decree, she would be wearing “a man’s costume only down to the waist with a skirt below” (381). From the very beginning of the play, Rosaura’s clothing signals her hybrid gender associations. Rosaura’s associations with mixed states are only reinforced when she meets the self-described “human monster” (1.159) Segismund, a man “Clothed in the hides of wild beasts” (1.81) and bound by chains. Just as Rosaura’s cross-dressing places her between the genders, Segismund’s clothing places him between the categories of man and animal. Segismund seizes her and threatens to tear her to pieces, but Rosaura pleads for her life, saying, “If you were human born, it is enough / That I should kneel to you for you to spare me” (1.143-4). And suddenly, Segismund’s rage is tamed. He responds, “Your voice has softened me, your presence / halted me, / And now, confusingly, I feel respect / For you. Who are you?” (1.145-7).

Segismund explains that he has been kept captive and in isolation all his life, except for the company of animals and one man (Clotaldo, who is actually Rosaura’s long-lost father), but only Rosaura has “curbed my furious rage, amazed my vision, / And filled with wonderment my sense of hearing. / Each time I look at you, I feel new wonder!” (1.165-7). It is unlikely that Segismund is reacting to Rosaura’s successful disguise as a male, for why would a man inspire “new wonder” in him when he has been watched over since infancy by a male? The femininity in Rosaura’s voice and presence seems a likelier reason for his “bewitched” (1.175) response, given that this is the first woman he has ever met. And yet, his later responses to women make it also unlikely that he is reacting only to Rosaura’s innate femininity. He rudely expresses his desire for his cousin Stella in the next act, and he threatens to rape Rosaura when he sees her dressed as a woman later in the play, not realizing that she is the same
person who soothed his fury outside the cave.

Because the cross-dressed Rosaura inspires "respect" instead of violence or lust in Segismund, it seems more likely that he is responding to her apparent assumption of both genders. As an androgynous figure, Rosaura is the first to insist that Segismund might have some kind of innate goodness in him, simply by virtue of being human. The central plot of the play revolves around Segismund's learning to move from being "A man of the wild animals, a beast / Among the race of men" (1.160-1) to a prince worthy of taking his father's place. It is significant that during their first encounter, Rosaura calls upon Segismund's humanity and underscores the possibility that he could be more than a wild man. Tellingly, when the audience next sees Segismund's rage, it flares up to protect Rosaura and Clarion: "I'll sooner rend myself with hands and teeth / Amid these rocks," he warns Clotaldo, "than see them harmed and mourn / Their suffering" (1.228-30). Moments ago a beast who was threatening to "tear [Rosaura] into bits" (1.141), Segismund would now rather turn this violence on himself than see her and her friend suffer. He is learning to empathize with others, a distinctly human trait.

As Segismund begins his evolution into manhood, Rosaura continues to be marked by gender hybridity—not only in her person, but also in the nature of her quest. When Clotaldo takes Rosaura's sword, he realizes that this is the blade he gave to Rosaura's mother years ago, promising that he would treat any future bearer of the blade as his child. Clotaldo believes that Rosaura in her male disguise must be his son, but it is curious that Rosaura's femininity does not appear to Clotaldo as it does to Segismund. Perhaps this is because she presents herself to him as someone who is embarking on a traditionally male quest "to avenge a wrong" (1.275). Clotaldo highlights her masculine bravery in an aside, wondering "what more/ Could any nobleman have done than he, / Who, at the cost of so much risk and danger, / Comes to avenge his honour?" (1.325-8). Ultimately, this valor proves Rosaura's paternity as Clotaldo's son: "Since he's so brave" Clotaldo remarks in an aside, "He is my son, and my blood's in his veins" (1.328-9). In a world where manhood and bravery are equated with one another, Rosaura distinguishes herself as a nobleman and a son.
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Clotaldo’s first appearance in the play interrupts Rosaura’s response to Segismund’s wonderment over her; she tells him to “Listen attentively to my misfortune,” for “I am . . . ” (1.203, 5). But she is not able to begin her personal narrative before the arrival of her father. The narration of her story is interrupted a second time in the play’s first act, when Astolfo is stopped before he can explain his history with Rosaura to Stella. This deferral of her explanatory narrative only heightens the mystery surrounding her. Rosaura’s cross-dressing demands to be explained (both to her fellow characters and to the audience), ideally in her own words, and so her transgression becomes the occasion for personal narrative.

The audience is finally given a greater sense of Rosaura’s quest when Clotaldo returns her sword later in the first act. She reveals to him that the “foe” (1.664) she seeks vengeance on at all costs is Astolfo; when he urges her to abandon her mission, she tells him that “these men’s clothes / Are an enigma, not what they appear” (1.690-1) and that Astolfo is planning to wed Stella although he is betrothed to her. It is curious, however, that Rosaura never explicitly admits to being female—instead, she confesses it indirectly. Her refusal to acknowledge directly her womanhood facilitates her quest, and her eventual claiming of both genders. Because she does not overtly define herself as female, Rosaura allows her fellow characters (and the audience) to perceive her as both male and female. She can be a devoted fiancée but also a valiant son because she does not finally admit to being only one or the other—in her narration of self, these identities are not mutually exclusive.

Her final appearance in the play is her most striking, and expands on her earlier narration of self. As Segismund leads his followers to a rebellion against the king, Rosaura appears and joins them, this time “with sword and dagger in riding costume” (409). Rosaura’s return to cross-dressing inspires her to make an impassioned speech that she delivers to Segismund. Her monologue is one of the longest in the play, spanning 140 lines; in it, she fashions herself as a being who is both male and female, a rhetorical move that she uses to gain support for her quest. She begins by characterizing herself as “a woman and an unfortunate” (3.370) who deserves his protection under the code of chivalry, before explaining that Segismund has
Pietras

seen her now three times—the first time she was dressed as a man, and the second time she was clothed as a woman. But “The third time is today when, as a monster / Of both the sexes, in a woman's costume / I bear a soldier's arms. But to dispose you / the better to compass, hear my story” (3.383-5).

Rosaura claims to possess a hybrid gender because she pairs female clothing with male weapons: like the Englishwomen rebuked by Phillip Stubbes and by the author of the Hic Mulier pamphlet, she is enacting hermaphroditism. And because she defines this hybridity as monstrous, it allows her to segue into a personal narrative: she needs to explain why she has become a self-created hermaphrodite. Rosaura's appearance is visual proof of the desperate lengths that she has gone to in order to get Segismund's attention, and hints at dire situations that have left her with no other option but to become a hybrid monster. “Hear my story,” she urges him, and there can be no doubt that she has one that is worth hearing. During their first meeting, Rosaura pleaded for Segismund to show his humanity when he seemed a bestial monster; now she comes to him as a self-proclaimed monster and asks him again to show her “compassion” (3.385).

Rosaura's hybrid gender associations become even more explicit when she tells Segismund, “I come to aid you, mingling Dian's silks / With the hard steel of Pallas” (3.480-1). Here she characterizes herself as both the virgin huntress Diana and the warlike goddess of wisdom, Pallas (Tripp 442). Her self-identification with these divinities is all the more striking given that earlier in the play, Astolfo compares Stella with various goddesses (1.361-2). Instead of being characterized as a goddess by a suitor, Rosaura characterizes herself as different goddesses to gain Segismund's aid. In this sense, she is both the male suitor formulating a lover's praise and the female recipient of this verbal tribute.

In the culmination of her speech, Rosaura narrates herself both as a man and as a woman, and each gender has different motives for seeking his help:

I come, as a mere woman, to persuade you
To right my shame; but, as a man, I come
To help you battle for your crown. As woman,
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To melt your heart, here at your feet I fall;
But, as a man, I come to serve you bravely
Both with my person and my steel, and thus,
If you today should woo me as a woman,
Then I should have to kill you as a man would
In honourable service of my honour;
Since I must be three things today at once—
Passionate, to persuade you: womanly,
To ply you with my woes; manly, to gain
Honour in battle. (3.486-498)

Here Rosaura echoes and expands on the opening lines of her appeal to Segismund. First, she claims she comes to beg his help as a defenseless female, again positioning herself in relation to the code of chivalry. However, she also comes to him as a man, and in this gender she is a warrior; here she is not helpless, but an equal.

Rosaura continues her narrative by developing her female identity, alluding to her beauty and portraying herself as a passive supplicant. Rosaura thus narrates a female identity to play on Segismund’s sympathy for her supposed helplessness, and at the same time she narrates a male one to make him respect her honor as a warrior. What is most striking is that her adopted masculinity triumphs in this narrative. If Segismund were to “woo [her] as a woman,” she would kill him. Rosaura would react, therefore, in the male aspect that she has adopted, rather than remain fallen “at his feet” as a woman. What emerges most powerfully from Rosaura’s self-portrait, as a being with a hybrid gender, is that she is a person who must be helped: by claiming to possess both genders, her quest has double the claim on Segismund. Tellingly, what she must be in order to persuade Segismund—“passionate”—can be a characteristic of both genders. This third quality, mentioned before “manly” or “womanly,” seems to correspond most closely to androgyny.

Rosaura’s narration of her self and her quest makes Segismund realize that his earlier experience in the palace (where he was brought to live from the cave, but later expelled from) was not a dream, but reality. He questions himself again, but ultimately concludes that whether he is dreaming or awake, he must resist the initial tempta-
tion to take advantage of Rosaura and instead help her. “Rosaura's without honor. In a prince, / It's worthier to restore it than to steal it. / I shall restore it, by the living God, before I take the throne!” (3.540-3). Rosaura's presence functions as Segismund's final test, and helps prove that he has learned to act nobly, as befits his princely identity. Just as she did when she was first dressed as a man, Rosaura, in her gender hybrid state, inspires Segismund to act the man instead of the beast.

Segismund's ultimate renunciation of Rosaura echoes his earlier self-control on the march to the palace, and is the final evidence of his successful self-fashioning. At the end of the play, Rosaura is able to restore her honor not by killing Astolfo, but by marrying him. Her seemingly “male” quest for honor thus ends in a common conclusion for young single female characters in early modern drama. Rosaura's self-fashioning as an androgynous figure thus finally ensures the satisfactory—if loveless—resolution of her hybrid plot, as well as ensuring the overarching transformation of Segismund from man-animal hybrid to prince.

In *Life as a Dream*, Rosaura fashions herself as a kind of hermaphrodite, an identity that both allows for and is dependent on personal narrative for its fashioning. In Mary Frith's autobiographical work *The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith* (published in 1662 [Todd and Spearing 160]), Mary, too is portrayed as a kind of hermaphrodite by the anonymous authors of the work's two introductory sections. The first introductory section of Mary's *Life* is addressed “To The Reader,” and refers to Mary as “this Epicoene wonder” (3). Given that the OED defines “epicene” in the seventeenth century as “partaking of the characteristics of both sexes,” this description demonstrates that her cross-dressing is read as creating a kind of hybrid gender, but one that is far more androgynous (she is a “wonder”) than hermaphroditic. The hybridity results in her depiction as an unparalleled curiosity, a being who has no equal: there is “nothing appertaining to her, being to be matcht throughout the whole Course of History or Romance; so unlike her selfe, and of so difficult a mixture, that it is no wonder she was like no body” (4). Here Mary is portrayed as having no literary or historical forebears; her status as an “Epicoene wonder” is what makes her “selfe” utterly unique.
The theme of Mary’s hybridity—gender and otherwise—continues on the first page of the work’s second introduction, where the author declares that Mary “lived in a kind of mean betwixt open, profest dishonesty, and fair and civil deportment, being an Hermaphrodite in Manners as well as in Habit” (7). Here the author’s rooting of Mary’s hermaphroditism in her behavior as well as in her dress at first seems to echo the accusations of late sixteenth century moralists: cross-dressing women are hermaphrodites not because of the compositions of their bodies but because of their actions. The figure of the hermaphrodite is invoked not to depict Mary’s gender hybridity but to portray her as a figure that exists in an in-between space. Mary is neither wholly honest nor wholly dishonest—she lives “in a kind of mean” between these two extremes and is a kind of moral hybrid. Mary herself makes a similar analogy in her narrative when she describes her reputation as “like my Habit and Mind, equally Good and Evil; a kind of indifference or neutrality” prevails (57). The rhetoric of the hermaphrodite is thus flexible enough here to permit discussions of morality as well as gender, ambiguity as well as hybridity.

The same introductory piece also discusses the reasons behind Mary’s cross-dressing, explaining that because she knew no man would find her attractive, she decided to dress as a male and thus be respected by the male sex:

Generally we are so much acquainted with our selves and so often do we dislike the effect of too much familiarity, that though we cannot alter the inside yet we diversifie the outside with all the borrowed pomp of Art in our Habits; no doubt Mals converse with her self . . . informed her of her defects; and that she was not made for the pleasure or delight of Man; and therefore since she could not be honored with him she would be honored by him in that garb and manner of rayment He wore . . . she resolved to usurp and invade the Doublet, and vye and brave manhood, which she could not tempt nor allure. (13)
Here, Mary is credited with a considerable amount of self-awareness, an understanding that has the potential to inspire the transformation of personal appearance. Furthermore, she is very well-suited to the task of changing her appearance because she was made imperfectly in the first place—she is a person with a female body, but she was “not made for the pleasure or delight of Man” in a culture that believed women were intended for just this purpose. This is a position that demands to be addressed and necessitates that her self must rework her gender in order to compensate for her handicap in some way. As Ruth Gilbert observes about this passage, “The Life signals the constructed nature of gender but posits it as a response to a recognition of an essential inner self” (96). The author allows little room for self-fashioning, for the inner self is represented as one that cannot be changed or remade (“we can not alter the inside”). And yet, even as the inner self is unable to be altered, gender can be—the male gender is equated with male clothing (“the Doublet”), and then imagined both as a status that can be taken over and a geographical location that can be entered. The existence and knowledge of an inner self thus allows for the possibility of reconstructing one’s own gender through cross-dressing.

The author of the second introduction to Mary’s Life returns to the figure of the hermaphrodite once more at the end of the piece to describe her, claiming that when she embarked on a life of a crime, she decided “not to be guided either by the reservedness and modesty of her own Sex, or the more imperious command of the other,” choosing instead to “set up in a neutral or Hermaphrodite way of Profession . . . ” (17). Here again the label of “hermaphrodite” indicates not a monstrous embodiment of both sexes or enactment of both genders, but instead reflects on Mary’s in-between status, this time in her way of doing business instead of her honesty. Interestingly, this state is not one where she is associated with both genders, but seems to have eluded either, reinforcing her earlier reading as an androgynous “wonder” by the first author. This androgynous state, furthermore, appears to be a profoundly freeing one: Mary is guided not by the customs that govern male or female behavior—or any male overseer—but by her own will. In this instance, her singular nature seems to be both the cause and result of her androgyny.
The author moves from portraying Mary as somehow gender “neutral” to defining her as both male and female, characterizing Mary:

like the *Colossus of female* subtlety in the wily Arts
and *ruses* of that Sex; and of manly resolution in
the bold and regardlesse Rudenesses of the other,
so blended and mixed together, that it was hard to
say whether she was more cunning or impudent.

(17)

But here again, her portrayal is positive: Mary manages to integrate seamlessly the most useful attributes of both genders within herself as part of her criminal work. Her depiction recalls Gilbert’s description of androgyny: “a condition of plentitude presenting a spiritual transcendence of the body” (12). Mary has the advantages of both genders, and her physical sex has little influence on her behavior; if she has not transcended the body, she appears in this account to have moved beyond the societal expectations attached to either gender.

Furthermore, recalling the relationship between hermaphroditic identity and personal narrative seen earlier in *Life is a Dream*, the author’s acknowledgement of Mary’s hybrid gender status leads immediately to the promise of personal narrative: “As you may see here in this Diary of her own here following” directly follows the description of her “female subtlety” and “manly resolution” (17). Here a hermaphroditic identity is invoked to spark the reader’s curiosity. Similarly, in Calderón de la Barca’s play, Rosaura assumes that her depiction of herself as a “monster / Of both the sexes” will better predispose Segismund to hear her story, perhaps because she too believes his curiosity will be aroused.

But while personal narrative allows for a female cross-dresser’s self-construction of a hermaphroditic identity in *Life is a Dream*, this use of metaphor is less straightforward in Mary’s *Life*. Instead, an actual hermaphrodite appears in Mary’s narrative; and far from being a figure with whom she sympathizes, he is one that she rebukes and reviles. Called Aniseed-Water Robin, this figure appears to have been a real person based on the available (if incomplete) historical evidence, and was both a cross-dresser and a hermaphrodite (Gilbert
Mary clearly perceives him as a threat to her identity:

There was also a fellow a cotemporary of mine, as remarkable as myself, called *Anniseed-water Robin*: who was cloathed very near my Antick Mode, being an Hermaphrodite, a person of both sexes; him I could by no means endure, being the very derision of natures impotency, whose redundancy in making him Man and Woman, had in effect made him neither, having neither the strength nor reason of the Male, nor the fineness nor subtlety of the Female: being but one step removed from a Natural Changling, a kind of mockery (as I was upbraided) of me, who was then Counted for an Artificial one. (35)

From the beginning of her description, Mary highlights how similar Robin is to her: although the author of her *Life*’s first introduction insists that her utter uniqueness is what “makes her remarkable” (3), Robin is her equal in strangeness, a person “as remarkable as myself” (35). Her cross-dressing, which makes her so unusual and even powerful in her account (she describes elsewhere how it confounds her enemies), is replicated by Robin’s own; once a singular figure, she now finds someone has come “very near” to her indeed (35).

Yet Mary portrays Robin as an inversion of herself, for while she is praised for her wondrous mingling of the male and female by possessing the best qualities of both genders, Robin is “neither” man nor woman. He has none of either side’s positive attributes—he lacks the exact same traits, in fact, that are attributed to Mary (female cunning and male boldness). Mary makes it clear here that she is the androgynous wonder to Robin’s monstrous hermaphrodite, but his presence still creates problems for her identity. As Gilbert observes, “as a physical hermaphrodite” Robin:

presents a ‘kind of mockery’ of her artificial self-fashioning of ambiguous gender … Mary/Moll has created herself as a singular being, a figurative hermaphrodite, but Aniseed-Water Robin
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challenges her uniqueness with a deeper, more disturbing transgression—a ‘natural’, embodied hermaphroditism. (102)

And despite her attempts to use his embodied hermaphroditism to distinguish herself from him, Robin remains unsettlingly similar: Mary herself sees him as sent from nature “to Mate and Match me, that nothing might be without a peer” (35).

This invasion of her unique status is one that Mary can ultimately not stand, and she encourages her male friends to attack him and throw dirt at him until he leaves the neighborhood for good. Freed from a competitor to her gender transgressive position, Mary is also freed from the taunts of her neighbors, who would say at the sight of Robin, “here comes Malls husband” (36). His identity, then, not only came to be bound up in her own identity, but also came to represent the possibility that Mary could lose her status as remarkable. No longer an unparalleled androgyne, she would assume that most conventional female identity: she would be a wife (Gilbert 102). Ultimately, then, Aniseed-Water Robin’s threat to Mary’s singularity is also a threat to her narrative. Because her autobiography is supposed to detail the life of a woman who, as the introductory authors promise, is utterly unparalleled, Robin’s ability to “to Mate and Match” (35) Mary undermines her claim to fame and her reason for narration. Mary boasts in the opening of her narrative that she is one of nature’s “more considerate productions” (Nakayama 22), but Robin demonstrates that nature has produced other strange and similar wonders who could possess fascinating—and competing—stories of their own.

When examined together, Life is a Dream and The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith both reveal how the rhetoric of the hermaphrodite could be used to shape the identities of female cross-dressers. English moralists used this rhetoric to disparage women who dressed as men, but these two literary texts indicate that this concept was flexible enough to allow for different uses; the ambivalence inherent in early modern ideas of gender ambiguity could be exploited for the purposes of positive self-fashioning. In Rosaura, Calderón de la Barca creates a character whose self-proclaimed hy-
brid gender identity can resolve her own hybrid gender plot and bring the play’s central plot to a satisfactory end. Gender seems capable in this play of reworking the self—when the cross-dressed Rosaura calls herself “a monster / Of both the sexes” (3.382-3), it indicates that her gender hybridity has reconstructed her into someone (or something) else. In Mary Frith’s Life, however, gender cannot reshape the self, but the self can certainly remake gender—Mary not only “braves manhood” (13), but also claims a kind of plentitude in her male and female qualities that associates her with androgyny.

Ruth Gilbert argues that early modern hermaphrodites “represented stories that demanded to be told” (1), and as Life is a Dream and The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith illustrate, sometimes this demand could help female cross-dressing characters to tell their own stories. In some way, the charged and conflicting meanings attached to gender hybridity appear to have necessitated personal narratives to explain and organize the possibilities they generated, even in the theater. Moreover, both works demonstrate that this personal narrative exists in a kind of reciprocal relationship with gender hybridity: the claiming of a hybrid gender identity serves as an inducement for an audience or reader to listen to the female cross-dresser’s story, while personal narrative allows for the further development of unusual and exciting hybrid genders.
These New Hermaphrodites

Works Cited


Although Margaret Cavendish’s writing is receiving more attention now than ever before, there is still much scholarship to be done on gender and sexuality in her dramatic work. Cavendish, who seems to have an equal propensity for self-promotion and self-deprecation, once referred to her plays as “dead, dull statues,” (Payne 19) and many scholars have been similarly critical of (or perhaps simply baffled by) their unconventional structure, radical gender play, manipulation of genres, and alleged inability to be performed on stage. Linda Payne calls Cavendish’s plays “eerily modern,” (26) so much so that “they may have a greater appeal to the modern imagination than they did for her own time” (30). Indeed, Cavendish’s ability to play with the gender binary and challenge hetero-normative boundaries seems remarkably contemporary to the modern reader.

In Cavendish’s 1668 play The Convent of Pleasure, a group of women retreat from the public sphere and create a world of their
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own, secluded from men. Despite their leader Lady Happy’s (and her fellow converts’) abhorrence of men, a prince cross-dressing as a princess manages to gain admittance to the convent and (for a period of time) remain undetected. Although his true gender is eventually discovered, it seems somewhat remarkable that none of the women of the convent are immediately able to see past his disguise. This lapse in logic inevitably raises several questions: Why is the Prince, who is repeatedly described in masculine terms and seen dressed in men’s attire, recognized and accepted as a woman? How do we understand a man (often) in male clothing being identified as a woman? What aspects of gender are being performed here? Does the Prince’s ability to “pass” as a woman speak to fluidity of gender, or to a particular context in which the definition of difference has been renegotiated? How might we explain the build up and deflation of Lady Happy’s same-sex desire and striking autonomy? In this paper I hope to answer these questions and ultimately suggest a means of understanding the gender performances and their consequences in the text.

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler postulates that gender is not implicitly tied to an individual’s sex but a social construction capable of more fluidity than is generally thought. She states that gender “is . . . a kind of becoming or activity, and ...[it] ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort” (143). Thus, if gender is more an outward manifestation of culture than biology, it may instead be seen as “a corporeal style, an ‘act’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning” (177, italics original). This concept of gender as performance is continually investigated throughout Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*.

Although the most apparent example of gender performance in *The Convent of Pleasure* is the Prince’s cross-dressing, I think it may be useful to first discuss some of the other instances of gender performance in the play in order to establish a broader understanding of Cavendish’s purpose and how gender operates throughout the play as a whole. While the Prince’s ability to masquerade as a
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woman shows gender as an act, Lady Happy’s own interpretation of gender may also be understood as a subversive performance. Her open criticism of marriage and the patriarchy, as well as her desire to break away from society and establish her own all-female community, clearly reveal an ability to think outside traditional gender norms. According to Andrew Hiscock, Lady Happy’s focus on the enjoyment and self-fulfillment of women rather than their subservience and sacrifice renders the “female as cultural fugitive” and her “culturally deviant existence is . . . presented as the only means to social survival and erotic fulfillment” (409, 415).

Existing outside society does not result in deprivation or exclusion, but freedom and celebration, as is evident in Lady Happy’s soliloquies about her women’s luxurious lifestyle and the seemingly endless amenities her convent has to offer. Theodora Jankowski observes that for Cavendish, “restricting women to the private/domestic space, or providing them with the support of like-minded women, does not necessarily deny them the power to exercise their own talents for the production of pleasure for themselves or other women” (98). Much to their disbelief, Madam Mediator (the only woman who ever ventures outside the convent’s walls) tells a group of gallants that Lady Happy’s convent is self-sufficient: “She also has Women-Physicians, Surgeons, and Apothecaries” (103). Thus, within the confines of this utopia, public and private spaces have collapsed, and no distinction is made between men’s work and women’s work, as all individuals and their labor are valued equally. This breakdown of gendered labor reveals a “combination of fantasy and reality . . . [that] suggest[s] some avenues for female agency” (Bennett 190).

Butler maintains that “no one is born with gender—gender is always acquired” (142). The Convent of Pleasure, then, shows the tension created within a community when one’s acquired gender is questioned and altered. While the Prince is able to appropriate gender, Lady Happy and her women appear to do something similar through their lives in the convent. In their introduction to Paper Bodies, Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson speak to this sentiment, stating that in the play “the category of ‘woman’ does not stand as a single uncontested constant; its cultural meaning is explored, destabilized, and challenged” (21).
This contesting of gender and identity is also seen in the plays performed in the convent, and in particular, a series of skits the women perform that illustrate the ills of marriage and motherhood. Interestingly, even though men do not exist in their world, Lady Happy and her companions are still very concerned with gender relations and heteronormativity. The play, which portrays the hardships of a subordinate, domestic life, seems to act as both a guide and a warning, instructing and reminding the women in the convent what not to do, while also validating and reinforcing their preexisting beliefs. Males are parodied by women and portrayed in the most grotesque light possible, and because there are no men (aside from the undercover Prince) to contradict the performances, this depiction of the male as tyrannical, strange, and other is able to circulate as an uncontested truth. Furthermore, by donning the oppressor’s persona, the women are able to simultaneously act out and act against their oppression. Even when they are depicting the restrictiveness and brutality of a patriarchal society, the women are the individuals in control; they are the ones subverting gender norms, creating a fictive retelling that appears far more realistic than the patriarchal culture they are representing would care to admit. Through her idyllic utopian vision, then, Cavendish uses fantasy to reveal reality.

Perhaps the most humorous instance of gender performance in the play is the discussion the group of gallants has about the sneaking into the convent in drag. When Monsieur Takepleasure announces to his companions, “Let us resolve to put our selves in Women’s apparel, and so by that means get into the Convent,” (108, italics original) his proposal is met with nearly unanimous disapproval. The men protest that their voices, mannerisms, and behavior—attributes which Butler defines as “stylized repetition of acts . . . and not a seamless identity” (179)—would give them away. Furthermore, the men doubt their ability to “pass” as women due to their lack of knowledge of—or skill at—performing domestic/“women’s” work. Takepleasure then suggests that once inside the convent they could look after the pigs, a commonly male occupation that they would “be very proper for” (109). Although his companions miss the ludicrousness of his proposal, we as readers are aware of the irony in the men’s assumption that within the confines of an all-female world (in
which they would be disguised as women), it would still be desirable, necessary, or even possible to abide by traditional gender norms.

The Prince’s cross-dressing, then, undermines the men’s beliefs that a man would not be able to pose as a woman, and that gender is a fixed, absolute category. As Butler states, “in imitating gender, drag reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (175). There are multiple ways in which the Prince’s ability to “pass” as a woman, even while dressed in men’s attire, may be explained. Perhaps the most immediate and obvious rationalization pertains to the cloistered women’s expectations. Their failure to recognize the Prince’s maleness could be seen as the result of living in an environment in which men do not exist. Because they only expect to see other females within the walls of the convent, it would follow that they would identify the Prince as one of their own merely because they anticipate him being as such. Furthermore, Lady Happy’s and her followers’ break from societal conventions also suggests that the Prince’s masculine attire would not be recognized as male but a subversion of the gender stereotypes that the convent has rejected. Thus, the transgressive act of a woman in male clothing successfully allows the Prince to be identified by the convent as “one of the group.”

Another way to understand the convent’s acceptance of the Prince as a woman may be his distinction from other males in the play. The other men–Courtly, Takepleasure, Facil, and the Adviser–appear comical in their relentless and (mostly) oblivious greed, lust, and scheming, and their interest in Lady Happy seems largely to spring from the possibilities that her wealth, status, and beauty may afford them. While their plot to set the convent on fire (the result of being unable to figure out a means of gaining entry) is clearly ridiculous, the Adviser’s contention that through this act of arson “we do Nature a good service” (108) (presumably by setting wayward women on the right path) is both humorous and disturbing. Through the gallants’ buffoonery, Cavendish reveals the potentially destructive behavior of men frustrated by, and fearful of, women who function outside gender stereotypes.

Although these men view Lady Happy as little more than a commodity, the Prince appears to acknowledge her as his equal. During their first meeting, his innocent request to be her companion
bears a marked departure from the attitude the other men appear to have of her:

I desire you would be my Mistress, and I your Servant; and upon this agreement of Friendship you will grant me one request . . . I desire you will give me leave to be sometimes so accoustred and act the part of your loving Servant. (111)

Even though he does not approve of the depictions of husbands and marriage in the play that he watches with Lady Happy, he does not seem to resemble any of the men portrayed, and, while we can easily imagine the other men violently reacting to this feminist narrative, the Prince expresses his disagreement respectfully. If men are defined by their worst attributes, it would follow that the Prince, who does not seem to possess any of these flaws, would fail to be identified as such. Admittedly, not being a man does not invariably translate to being a woman, but in the context of the convent it seems to. Considering that male is usually the gender assigned to an individual, animal, or object when the gender is unknown or uncertain, we should note that in *The Convent of Pleasure*, Cavendish reconfigures female as the norm.¹

The Prince’s ability to simultaneously inhabit both genders eventually erupts into a moment of chaos when Madam Mediator discovers and then announces that a trespasser has entered the convent in disguise. She cries out to the women, “O Ladies Ladies! you’re all betrayed, undone, undone; for there is a man in the Convent, search and you’ll find it” (128). Sophie Tomlinson astutely observes Madam Mediator’s use of the indefinite pronoun as the ultimate disruption of gender. The Prince, by assuming both genders, ends up (momentarily) embodying neither. A cross-dressed man, then, is neither a man nor a woman, and must be allowed a separate and undefined category.

Thus, the Prince’s gender is only called into question after he is found out to be male. Once his marriage to Lady Happy is announced, Madam Mediator bemoans her obliviousness concerning the Prince’s true identity. She confesses to Courtly and the Adviser
that she had had her suspicions, although we suspect that she may be projecting her present knowledge onto a past event. She claims, “. . . only once I saw him kiss the Lady Happy; and you know Women’s Kisses are unnatural, and me-thought they kissed with more alacrity than Women use, a kind of Titillation, and more Vigorous” (130). Interestingly, Madam Mediator writes the lesbianism out of this scene of same-sex desire (which I will discuss momentarily at a greater length) and reconfigures the “unnaturalness” as heteronormative desire in disguise. Perhaps, then, the Prince’s ability to “pass” may speak to the performative nature of gender, but also to an environment in which difference has been redefined. Lady Happy’s convent has created its own ideas about gender to which conventional societal rules do not necessarily apply. Alexandra Bennett recognizes Cavendish as anticipating Butler in that Cavendish’s “depictions of gender, agency, and conduct . . . demonstrate that she was not wholly concerned with the notions of either class or gender as necessarily definable monolithic categories that must and do maintain particular, consistent characteristics” (180). If gender is not actually a static, fixed category, desire cannot be regulated by such mutable classifications.

This complex intersection of gender performativity and same-sex desire in *The Convent of Pleasure* complicates our understanding of the play and Cavendish’s intentions. Is Lady Happy attracted to the Prince’s masculinity or his femininity? Does their marriage at the end of the play suggest the possibility of restructuring gender roles or is it a submission to the very norms that Lady Happy had wanted to escape? Because of the ambiguous nature of the play, it is difficult to absolutely determine the source of Lady Happy’s attraction to the Prince, and perhaps, for our purposes, this mode of thinking is not terribly fruitful. Rather than attempting to untwine the Prince’s male and female characteristics, it may instead be more productive and engaging to focus on his negotiation of masculinity and femininity. Although this “foreign Princess” who often dons male attire is recognized by the rest of the convent as female, she clearly displays masculine attributes. When the Prince first arrives at the convent, Madam Mediator describes him to the other men as a “Princely brave Woman truly, of a Masculine Presence” (107).
Later, when Lady Happy expresses anxiety about loving the Prince (whom she believes to be a woman), he soothes her fears by saying, “These my Imbraces though of Femal kind, / May be as fervent as a Masculine mind” (118). Both of these examples seem to point to the Prince’s ability not only to straddle the gender binary, but also to simultaneously evoke and capitalize on what the convent recognizes as being the best of both genders. Although he may possess some stereotypically masculine characteristics, they seem to be attributes of a platonic ideal of man, and not traits that the other men in the play share. Perhaps, then, Lady Happy does not actually fall in love with just the masculine or just the feminine qualities, but rather with the androgynous ideal that the Prince represents.

Interestingly, the climactic moment of the play, Lady Happy’s discovery of her lover’s true identity, occurs offstage. We are not privy to the circumstances of when she finds out or how she reacts, and this omission further frustrates an easy, straightforward analysis of gender performance in the text. Did Lady Happy respond to her lover’s unveiling with disgust, relief, or something else altogether? With this break in narrative, Cavendish temporarily forces us into an authorial role as we are obligated to recreate this scene for ourselves. However we chose to envision this scene, it is clear that Lady Happy ultimately resigns herself to the idea of marriage and leaving the convent.

What is not quite so clear, however, is how she feels about this decision. It seems remarkable if not problematic that Lady Happy, who begins the play with a declaration that her convent will “bar the life from nothing else but Men,” (99) so quickly capitulates to the very norms against which she had recently railed. By the end of the play, we are equally uncertain about whether or not the Prince has been enlightened by his experience of cross-dressing and if he is actually any different from the other men in the work. Andrew Hiscock notes that once the Prince has shed his female identity (and declares to have Lady Happy by force if necessary), he hardly seems any less masculine for it: “By the end of the play, the Prince must employ brute force in order to restore the governing principles of heterosexuality, monogamy, and gendered behaviour” (416). Ironically, his patriarchal threat of violence recalls the other men’s de-
structive tendencies toward transgressive behavior. If the Prince has been enlightened by his time in the convent, we do not see any solid evidence of it.

If both the future happiness of Lady Happy’s married life and the Prince’s true identity seem equivocal, we are prompted to ask what then is being said about gender roles and performativity and possibilities for female agency. Like many recent critics who have focused on the celebration of women’s autonomy in Cavendish’s dramatic texts, Judy Peacock views Lady Happy’s and the Prince’s union as a positive negotiation of gender roles. She contends that, “the happy ending is the marriage itself” (97). I would argue, however, that Cavendish has no intentions of being quite so direct or definite. In “Dramatic Dreamscape” Linda Payne also recognizes the play’s ending as ominous and unsettled, and cites the dissonance between the traditional ending and the radical quality of the rest of the play as being indicative of Cavendish’s own conflicting opinions about women’s roles in society:

While Cavendish has envisioned and portrayed a fascinating and encouraging complexity of women’s roles in a man’s world, she also reveals a striking ambivalence about a woman’s choice of those roles. The utopian communit[y] . . . promise[s] rich and unusual fulfillment for women, frightening those outside by their potential for upheaving the social order, yet ultimately . . . turns out to be fruitless . . . . Cavendish’s ambivalence toward her heroines seems to mirror the insecurity that shines through all the apologies and prefaces about her own efforts to master the written word: she alternately portrays her vocation as a heroic assay into the male competitive sphere and a harmless diversion for days insufficiently filled with domestic duties in a wealthy and childless household. (26 – 27, 30)

Payne determines that for Cavendish, Lady Happy’s transfor-
mation at the end may reveal “more a collapse of faith than a failure of fancy” (31). However, Cavendish is not condemning Lady Happy’s attempt to create a life outside society. It would be shortsighted and unfair to Cavendish to simply suggest that the marriage at the end of *The Convent of Pleasure* negates the progressiveness of the play. When studied alongside her other works such as *Bell in Campo* or *The Female Academy*, it becomes clear that Cavendish is deeply invested in creating “worlds [that] increasingly gravitate towards celebrating the potential of autocratic female rule, female wit and the female initiative exercised in the public domain” (Hiscock 406).

Although she may be unable to fully realize an overtly feminist message in *The Convent of Pleasure*, this does not imply that Cavendish subscribes to the traditional interpretation a cursory reading of the play’s ending might suggest. Ultimately, Cavendish seems to believe in the capacity for gender fluidity and performativity in both men and women, although this elasticity is undercut by the fact that the preexisting hierarchy only permits biological men mobility and agency. Men may appropriate women’s identities with few repercussions, but women who dare to speak, behave, or look like men risk being mocked, attacked, ostracized, and/or brought back to the mainstream. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, traditional gender roles are ultimately too deeply ingrained to be overturned, and the patriarchal society appears too ubiquitous and overpowering for one to escape or resist. Thus, while gender performance is possible, sustaining the performance is not.

Cavendish seems equally ambivalent regarding the fulfillment of same-sex desire. Even though Lady Happy lives outside the male world, her anxiety about her attraction to the disguised Prince reveals that she is still susceptible to its heteronormative expectations. Interestingly, her unease does not come from a fear of going against God or defying religion, but rather from contradicting nature. She laments, “But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection I could love a Man? / No no, Nature is Nature, and still will be / The same she was from all Eternity” (118). Although fluidity may be possible with gender, the boundaries of desire and love (or at least the articulation and fulfillment of them) are rigid, and predetermined by an outside force. In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*,

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Valerie Traub contends that Cavendish is not actually censuring homoerotic desire, but showing the limitations of a hetero-normative understanding of gender and the corporeal:

from the perspective of romance, the problem posed by the *amor impossibilis* is less desire itself than the intractability of the physical body and the body’s social function as a legible marker of gender within the patriarchal organization of reproduction. If the body could be brought in accord with the *social* dictates of Nature, then all would be well. (288, italics original)

Theodora Jankowski seems a bit more optimistic about the possibilities for the articulation of homoerotic desire in *The Convent of Pleasure*, and reads the convent as a site of women “enjoy[ing] each other’s company (sexually and nonsexually)” (94). Lady Happy’s distress concerning her desire for the disguised Prince, however, seems to contradict this contention. Her attraction to the Prince may prompt us to wonder if Cavendish is suggesting that same-sex desire is contingent upon gender performance. I would argue that the text shows that it is only through the subversiveness of gender performance that hetero-normative standards may be questioned and alternative possibilities for desire can be proposed and explored. If “a lesbian is neither man nor woman,” (144) as Butler contends, Lady Happy’s anxiety about her erotic attraction to the Prince is the result of a fear not only of expressing a transgressive desire, but becoming a transgressive entity. Much like the Prince who becomes an “it” the moment his true identity is revealed, Lady Happy risks being relegated to a marginalized and deviant category if she admits her forbidden attraction. Although she is comfortable in her role as a social and gender transgressor, identifying herself as a sexual transgressor is far more upsetting and problematic.

Many scholars have noted a link between the unconventional structure of Cavendish’s dramatic works and the unconventional ideas they offer about gender. Hiscock states that Cavendish’s “plays effectively evade any taxonomy that we might wish to impose upon
them,” (406) and I would reinforce this by stating that attempting to categorize her plays is just as slippery a task as trying to categorize gender within her plays. Linda Payne dismisses the idea that the unusual structure of Cavendish’s plays are the result of her shortcomings as a fiction writer (as many critics have suggested), and instead suggests that “perhaps her complex and contorted structures may . . . be part of her struggle to project the full complexities of her ambivalences” (30).

The unique structure of Cavendish’s plays has often been cited as the reason for their supposed inability to be performed on stage, but Judy Peacock suggests that the insistence on Cavendish’s plays being read rather than performed was instigated by Cavendish herself, as the result of her concern about how a live audience would react to the radical gender play demonstrated in her texts.3 “Her depiction of alternative female environments, like the convent and the academy, in which women conduct their own lives, without interference from men or indeed society, would have been considered deeply disturbing by the audiences of the 1660s” (94). Not only would the gender performances in her dramas have seemed threatening to the audience watching Cavendish’s plays, but they also posed problems for anyone who would have wanted to produce them:

Her representation of gender and women’s ability to control their position in society by separation, withdrawal or controlled display may well have constituted a problem for any theatre manager who might have considered staging one of her plays in the 1660s or 1670s. (Peacock 100)

Peacock’s contention raises interesting questions about performing gender on stage, particularly in the context of a play in which a main character’s true gender is not immediately disclosed to the audience. Unlike other Early Modern plays that contain cross-dressing characters (perhaps the most well-known being Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, written nearly seventy years before Cavendish’s work), *The Convent of Pleasure* does not inform its audience of the masquerade taking place on stage; in fact, the audience is the last to find out.
While Peacock’s explanation of Cavendish’s resistance to the performance of her plays is immensely insightful, I would like to add that it is also important to acknowledge the ambiguity possible in reading a text that is not necessarily available in its performance. Cavendish’s privileging the act of reading over performing circumvents the problems that may be encountered with wary theater managers and audience reception, and also discretely robs the audience of the possibility at any point (even retroactively) to claim knowledge of the Prince’s true gender (as Madam Mediator does). The lack of textual and visual clues deprives the cynic of being able to view a production that would allow her/him to claim that gender performativity in *The Convent of Pleasure* could not succeed, and simultaneously insists upon her/him imagining a context in which it *does* succeed.

After the discovery of the Prince’s true gender, Madam Mediator appears distraught as she tells the gallants that “we have taken a Man for a Woman” (129). The Adviser, misunderstanding her remark, quips, “Why, a Man is for a Woman” (130). By this point in the narrative, patriarchal and hetero-normative standards have been reinstated and there is no longer any room for misunderstandings about gender or desire, although the confusion of language in this exchange suggests that tension and possibility still exist below the surface. In *The Convent of Pleasure*, gender performance is a means of both agency and oppression. Because it is available to both genders, it may be used by women to subvert their oppressors, but it may also be utilized by men to mimic and parody the oppressed. Although change and improvement do not appear to be possible within the text, I do not think that this suggests complete cynicism or defeat for Cavendish. On the contrary, the play reveals a hope for eventual progress, as Cavendish herself stated that her works were “not so much the present as future Ages” (Hiscock 404).
Here I am thinking of both psychology texts and feminist theory, such as Margaret W. Matlin’s *The Psychology of Women*, in which Matlin contends that because of the masculine generic, men are made configured as the norm and consequently “women are often invisible in language,” (40) and Simone de Beauvoir’s famous proclamation of women as the “second sex.”

Though there is not room to address it in this paper, I think it is important to mention Theordora Jankowski’s “Pure Resistance: Queer(y)ing Virginity in William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*” in which she positions Lady Happy and the Prince’s initial interaction as the first butch-femme relationship in Western literature.

Cavendish’s desire to see her dramatic works in print rather than performed on the stage was hardly a means of taking the easy way out, however. Adrian Johns enumerates the difficulties faced by woman writers during the seventeenth century:

> Conventionally, women were expected to cleave to a trinity of virtues: modesty, chastity, and silence. Aspersions cast on any one of these threw the other two into doubt. Besides, no woman was permitted to attend university, so very few attained the knowledge of Latin necessary for readers to respect their works. Women daring to venture into print were thus taking substantial risks, and not only economic ones. They had to defend their product with great care, and appear, even more than gentlemen, to repudiate claims to authorship altogether. (180)


Hiscock, Andrew. “‘Here’s No Design, No Plot, Nor Any Ground’: The Drama of Margaret Cavendish and the Disorderly Woman.” Women’s Writing 4 (1997) 401-420.


In Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, a fourteenth-century framed narrative, the Squire, “A lovyere and a lusty bacheler” who is attired in a modish “Short” “gowne” complete with “sleves longe and wyde” (Chaucer I. 80, 93), tells a character-appropriate tale: a “fashionable” Eastern romance (Benson 13) concerning the brevity of love and the power of “newfangelnesse” (Chaucer V. 610) [newfangledness or novelty]. While the Squire’s story about the conversation a Mongol princess, Canacee, has with a heartbroken peregrine falcon overtly criticizes male attraction to novelty—what the falcon describes as a bird’s foolish preference for the base life outside of a comfortable cage (Chaucer V. 611-17)—the Squire’s own attraction to newness, as well as the standard placement of the Squire’s Tale in the middle of what has become known as the Marriage Group, indicates that the Squire is addressing an issue that extends to, or perhaps primarily concerns, those fowls and humans who belong to the female sex. The female falcon’s draw to *newfangledness* and Canacee’s reaction to this falcon’s cautionary tale
reveal that the Squire’s Tale seeks to preserve masculine power by
detailing the negative consequences females face when they give in
to the desire for a life outside of the cage, a life filled with the trivial-
ized newefangelnesse of reason and mobility that males with gentillesse
[genteelness] enjoy each day.

While essays on the Squire’s romance include explorations of
Chaucer-poet’s attitude toward the Squire, investigations of incest
between Canacee and her brother, and studies of Edmund Spenser’s
sixteenth-century continuation of the tale, most research on the
Squire’s Tale is concerned with the power of language and, since
the advent of postcolonial studies, the relationship between oppos-
ing categories (West and East, male and female, and human and
animal). In the General Prologue of The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer-
pilgrim identifies only the Squire as a poet. Accordingly, many crit-
ics investigate the rhetorical abilities of the character who Chaucer-
pilgrim states “koude songs make and wel endite / Juste and eek
daunce, and weel purttye and write” (I. 95-96). Critical studies of
the language within the Squire’s Tale explore Canacee’s magical abil-
ity to understand and speak avian language. However, most writers
ignore the content of this communication and instead concentrate
on the implications of the Squire’s language.

In “It Lyth Nat in My Tonge”: Occupatio and Otherness
in the Squire’s Tale,” Alan S. Ambrisco argues that the Squire’s un-
traditional use of the rhetorical device occupatio works to erase the
boundaries between the “exotic” East (the Mongol court) and the
“domestic” West (the pilgrims and Chaucer’s English readers) (210).
By leaving out details about the Mongol kingdom, the Squire/Chau-
cer-poet allows listening and reading audiences to identify with a
foreign culture. However, Ambrisco molds his argument according
to postcolonial criticism (a newness that seems to have attracted
many critics of the Squire’s Tale) and contends that the Squire’s use
of occupatio works to domesticate the Other. Citing François Har-
tog’s “rule of the excluded middle” and Edward Said’s discussion
of Orientalism, Ambrisco contends that because the Squire paints
the Mongol people as “shadowy versions of Europeans,” the Squire
erases the difference and the power of the East. “One typical method
of ‘domesticating’ the East,” Said reminds us, “involves reducing the
East to ‘pseudo-incarnations of some great original (Christ, Europe, the West)’ that the Orient is ‘supposed to have been imitating’” (214, 212). Ambrisco asserts that the “sympathy” for the Other, which some critics believe is inherent in the Squire’s language, is simply one of the Squire’s rhetorical tricks (224). In addition, Ambrisco contends that the Squire’s rhetorical strength in the second part of his tale—specifically, his ability to translate bird language into English—domesticates the exoticism of the falcon’s speech and story and establishes the primacy of the English language (216). If the Squire situates the foreign peregrine (or “pilgrim” [DiMarco 894]) falcon as being like Canacee and the pilgrims who tell The Canterbury Tales, this falcon’s story, though less exotic, takes on significance as a cautionary tale that relates to the lives of both women and Westerners.

While Ambrisco concentrates on the Western desire to domesticate the East, critic Kathryn L. Lynch recognizes the influence Eastern culture has over Western literature in the Squire’s Tale. In “East Meets West in Chaucer’s Squire’s and Franklin’s Tales,” Lynch cites the frame story of the Arabian or Thousand and One Nights as a likely source for the Squire’s Tale, and she notices that the Squire adopts an Eastern-style “feminine” narrative. However, Lynch, like Ambrisco, argues that the Squire domesticates the differences of the East:

> While, on the one hand, [the Squire’s] rendering exaggerates the defects of a loose and episodic narrative structure, making it more Eastern, in a sense, than the paratactic plots he parodies, he also blunts the foreignness of the genre, and makes it less Eastern, by substituting highly courtly and Western motifs, especially where women and love are concerned. (541)

Considering Canacee and the falcon, Lynch argues that although they inhabit an Eastern setting and may be based on characters from Eastern texts, these two foreign females are “indistinguishable from the pale and virginal heroines” of Western literature (550). Accordingly, if the falcon’s story contains a lesson for Canacee, the falcon’s tale is one that Western women can learn from as well.
In addition to focusing on the possible Eastern source texts of the Squire’s Tale, Lynch addresses the role language plays in domesticating the feminine and Eastern Other—an exploration of Canacee’s conversation with the falcon that few critics of the Squire’s Tale undertake. Comparing the falcon’s complaint to Canacee in the Squire’s Tale with Dorigen’s lament to her husband in the Franklin’s Tale, Lynch notices that masculine discourse either replaces or interrupts female speech: “Both falcon’s and woman’s complaints break off because they are going nowhere” (548). However, Lynch argues that the literal death of the feminine in the Physician’s Tale illustrates Chaucer-poet’s dislike of both Western (masculine) and Eastern (feminine) extremes:

If Dorigen’s is a tale that warns against incautious flirtations and exotic liberties, Virginia’s demonstrates the dangers for both life and fiction of burying too deeply the spirit of play [that is, abiding too closely to Western law]; taken together, they show Chaucer’s hesitancy to embrace either the absolutism of the law of the Roman fathers or the chaotic relativism of the barbarous East. (551)

While Lynch argues that the Squire’s Tale may display the Squire/Chaucer’s dislike for the Other, she believes that the Squire’s domestication of the female and the East joins the equally stifling Western content of the surrounding tales as a part of Chaucer’s larger desire for balance.

Building on Lynch’s exploration of the conversations between Canacee and the falcon, Lesley Kordecki, in her essay “Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale: Animal Discourse, Women, and Subjectivity,” argues that Chaucer’s “attempt at alternative voice” in the Squire’s Tale ultimately perpetuates the dominance of masculine/Western discourse (294). Although the falcon’s story unites fowl and human and gives voice to the feminine Other, Kordecki states that the power of feminine/Eastern “magic” dissolves by the end of the tale:

In line 651, the Squire indulges in narrative
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housekeeping that contrasts tellingly with the nest-building to which he leaves Canacee and the falcon. The woman and bird are left marginalized, poignant, beautiful (but isn’t Canacee always?), and totally passive, as it seems, for the ‘mediation of Cambalus’ (656) to rescue them, right the wrong, and complete the story. (291)

Kordecki states that Canacee and the falcon are left waiting for their male saviors, yet she also contends that the falcon’s story assures that both the falcon and Canacee are aware of the falseness of men.

Fighting this seeming contradiction, Kordecki muses that the falcon’s cautionary tale (which Canacee can understand because of her special ring) combines with Canacee’s other magical gift (a mirror that reveals a person’s true character) to reassure the masculine subject of his power in the face of feminine magic/language/knowledge:

[W]hy does she [Canacee] need the power of the ring to teach her [not to trust men] when the mirror, the reflection of her identity and that of others, should reveal false men? And why does the feminine part of magic need this lesson reinforced, if not to stress the masculine subject’s own preoccupation with self-definition? (291)

Kordecki finds that the feminine power of the tale is relegated to the non-human Other in the exotic East, an approach that allows Chaucer to explore the voice of the Other while maintaining the authority of the masculine West (294).

Perhaps, though, Lynch’s and Kordecki’s investigations of the female language and male authority within the Squire’s Tale can be taken further. What if the Squire’s Tale, like the Franklin’s Tale, warns women against “exotic liberties” (Lynch 551)? Moreover, what if this tale does not confidently emphasize masculine power but, instead, nervously strives to maintain this power? Although commonly excluded from dialogue with the tales of the Marriage Group (which the Squire’s Tale organizationally interrupts [Benson 890]), the
Squire’s Tale can be read as a young, power-seeking male’s reaction to the female autonomy found in the preceding Wife of Bath’s and Merchant’s Tales. If readers approach the falcon’s cautionary story as only outwardly concerned with the falseness of men, this fowl’s tale functions as the Squire’s warning to women about the negative consequences of their attraction to the *newefangelnesse* of reason and domestic freedom as a means of securing these rights for men alone.

The concept of *newefangelnesse* first arises in the Squire’s Tale during the falcon’s explanation of her sorrow. Detailing her relationship with a tercelet, who eventually leaves her for a “kyte” (Chaucer V. 624), the female falcon situates her lover’s betrayal according to a general male love for novelty that she likens to a bird’s attraction to life outside of its cage:

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Men loven of propre kynde newefanghelnesse,
As briddes doon that men in cages fede.
For though thou nyght and day take of hem hede,
And strawe hir cage faire and softe as silk,
And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk,
Yet right anon as that his dore is uppe
He with his feet wol spurne adoun his cuppe,
And to the wode he wole and wormes ete;
So newefangel been they of hire mete,
And loven novelries of propre kynde,
No gentillesse of blood ne may hem bynde.
(Chaucer V. 610-20)
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As specified by the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word *newefanghelnesse* from this passage of the Squire’s Tale means “novelty, new things” (c). According to the conjectural date of composition for the Squire’s Tale (ca. 1395) given in the *MED*, Chaucer is the first known writer to use the word *newefanghelnesse* (a variant spelling of *newefangelnesse*, the noun form of the earlier adjective *newefangel* [or *neuefangel*]) and the only author noted to use this definition in addition to the more common use of the word as a “fondness for novelty, new things, or new persons” (a). Moreover, only one work, *The Proverbs of Hendyng*, has an earlier reported use of *newefangel*, showing
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that this word is indeed contemporary with Chaucer. By having his Eastern falcon use modern Western language, Chaucer identifies the foreign falcon with Western culture.

While telling her story, the falcon makes sure to warn Canacee that even those men who have “gentillesse of blood” (the type of men who would court Canacee) are susceptible to the attractiveness of newfangledness. The falcon states, “Men loven of propre kynde [”by nature” (DiMarco 176)] newefangelnesse” (Chaucer V. 620, 610). Moreover, the falcon tells Canacee that even the “gentillesse” in Canacee’s own “gentil herte” (Chaucer V. 483) cannot save Canacee from the misery the falcon currently feels. All the falcon can do is warn Canacee: “But for noon hope for to fare the bet, / But for to obeye unto youre herte free, / And for to maken othere be war by me” (Chaucer V. 488-90). For most critics, the falcon’s statement that a man will leave “the honest lady for the dishonest one”—that a man’s attraction to newfangledness overpowers his commitment to his partner—is the moral behind the falcon’s tale and, according to Kordecki, “a familiar societal injustice in the genre [of romance]” (288-89).

However, the Squire seems to have a different moral in mind for Canacee. The falcon’s story about a bird desiring to leave its cage (a story that is repeated in the later Manciple’s Tale) opens the possibility that there is a newfangledness other than the physical attractiveness of a female kite or the novelty of a new lover—perhaps there is a newfangledness against which Canacee and other women must be cautioned. According to the MED, the falcon uses newefangel to mean “Fond of novelty; enamored of new love; inconstant, fickle; of thoughts, ideas: novel” (a): “So newefangel been they [these birds that want to leave their cages] of hire mete, / And loven novelries of proper kynde . . .” (Chaucer V. 618-19). The falcon also mentions novelries, which according to the MED, refer in the singular to “a new or novel thing; an invention, innovation; innovative practice, new contrivance; new or revolutionary notion” (b). In the falcon’s story, the freedom to reason (the ability to choose meals) and the right to mobility (the license to go where one chooses) are among the novelries of life outside of the cage to which males are attracted. For men with gentillesse (such as the Squire and his father the Knight),
these privileges are simply two of the many that men can enjoy. However, for females the *novelries* outside of a cage may, in fact, be “new or revolutionary notion[s]” that relate to the female autonomy demonstrated by women such as the Wife of Bath, Alisoun from the Wife of Bath’s romance, and May from the Merchant’s Tale. As reported in the *MED*, *novelrie* is used most often in moral texts and has a negative connotation. While the negative aspects of infidelity (the overt moral of the falcon’s tale) are generally understood, if the falcon’s tale is actually a warning about female autonomy, the negative connotation of *novelries* is especially important in regard to a woman’s attraction to both reason and the freedom of mobility.

Contrary to popular belief, female autonomy would not have been a new concept for medieval men and women. However, female autonomy in the Squire’s Tale can be treated as such because of the expectations of women’s behavior inherent in the Squire’s Tale. The Squire subscribes to stereotypical ideals of femininity that ask women to fulfill very specific roles. As Elizabeth Archibald states in the chapter “Fathers and Daughters” from *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, “Heroines cannot have adventures that involve significant action initiated by them; they can only endure various kinds of ordeals, often involving unwanted suitors . . .” (181). While Archibald references Western heroines, Eastern women face similar restrictions. According to John of Plano Carpini, a thirteenth-century missionary/ambassador who writes a first-hand “authentic” description of his contact with Mongol people (Dawson vii), “Their [Mongol] women are chaste, nor does one hear any mention among them of any shameful behaviour on their part . . .” (15). As critics point out, Canacee is an Eastern woman who conforms to both Eastern and Western ideals of femininity. Canacee is expected to be beautiful, obedient, and “virtuous” (Archibald 181); she must follow her father’s (and, eventually, her husband’s) reason and represent the domestic ideals of her ruler’s kingdom.

Canacee seemingly fulfills her duty to be attractive and submissive. Commenting on Canacee’s appearance, the Squire states that Canacee is so beautiful that he cannot describe her:

*A doghter hadde this worthy kyng also,*
Canacee promotes her beauty by being a moderate woman. She goes to bed early so that she will look fresh in the morning: “Hir liste nat appalled for to be, / Ne on the morwe unfeestlich for to se, / And slepte hire firste sleep, and thanne awook” (Chaucer V. 365-67). According to the Squire, Canacee achieves her goal: “Up riseth fresshe Canacee hireselve, / As rody and bright as dooth the yonge sonne” (Chaucer V. 384-85). As for her second responsibility, obedience, Canacee appears at the beginning of the Squire’s Tale to be the perfect dutiful daughter. In the presence of her father, his subjects, and the foreign knight, Canacee receives the gift of the magic ring as a woman of her station should: “And unto Canacee this ryng is bore / Solempnely, ther she sit at the table” (Chaucer V. 178-79). According to the MED translation of solemnely as found in this passage, the ring is given and received “formally, ceremoniously, with attention to due propriety” (b).

Though Canacee seems to be an ideal beautiful and obedient princess, she also departs from these virtues by willfully exercising her own reason and seeking to leave the palace walls. Early in the morning after her father’s feast, Canacee, spurred by a dream “visioun,” decides to leave the domestic space of her bedroom and “walke aboute” (Chaucer V. 372, 380): “She cleped on hir maistresse hire bisyde, / And seyde that hire liste for to ryse” (Chaucer V. 374-75). While the Squire does not directly state that Canacee is being disobedient, he indicates that Canacee’s idea is unusual, or at least unexpected, by allowing a minor character, Canacee’s “maistresse,” to question Canacee’s decision: “Madame, whider wil ye goon / Thus
Canacee’s simple reply to her governess shows that she is intent on exercising both her reason and her freedom of mobility: “I wol,’ quod she, ‘arise, for me lest / Ne lenger for to slepe, and walke aboute’” (Chaucer V. 380-81). Significantly, Canacee’s mobility is limited when she does actually leave the palace, since she must be accompanied “Nat but with fyve or sixe of hir meyne” during her walk (Chaucer V. 391). While her attendants may be present to ensure her safety (and virtue), the necessity of escorts indicates that Canacee cannot be trusted to make reasonable decisions about how to govern herself and keep herself safe. Others govern Canacee’s reason and mobility even during her leisure time.

If readers consider the Squire’s Tale as a part of the Marriage Group, Canacee’s desire to reason for herself and travel on her own can be read as an expression of female autonomy, what the Squire would consider a “novelty” because of his concern for the tradition of masculine rule. In fact, Canacee’s attraction to novelty can be read as a decisive (and subversive) act in itself. According to the MED, fon, the root verb of both newefangelnesse and newefangel, includes the first definition “To grasp or seize (something), take hold of, pick up” (1a). While the falcon’s statement “Men loven of propre kynde newefangelnesse” (Chaucer V. 610) indicates that those males who act upon this attraction are merely giving in to a natural urge, the syntax of the falcon’s statement indicates that women are excluded from this generalization. As specified by the MED, men can be used as an indefinite pronoun to indicate “people,” but when used in this sense men usually takes a singular verb (a). Since the falcon uses a plural verb (loven), men is likely used as the plural form of the singular noun man. The presence of the plural verb and the larger context of the falcon’s personal story of rejection by her male partner indicate that the falcon is referring specifically to males and not to people in general. Accordingly, while male attraction to novelty may not be forgiven, it is at least understood. Conversely, if women do not have natural urges to follow novelty, those women who act upon their fondness for newfangledness must be doing so deliberately—in fact, they may even be read as going against feminine nature.

If the Squire is attempting to dissuade women from exer-
cising reason and acting upon their domestic freedom, it is only appropriate that Canacee’s moment of authoritativeness leads her to an example of the negative consequences of female autonomy. Canacee comes upon the female falcon as this bird stabs herself with her beak and shrieks in physical and emotional pain:

Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously  
With bothe hir wynges til the rede blood  
Ran endelong the tree ther-as she stood  
And evere in oon she cryde alwey and shrighte,  
And with hir beek hirselven so she prighte . . . .  
(Chaucer V. 414-17)

Like Canacee, the falcon at first appears to be an obedient female. In fact, the falcon seems to love her partner so much that she physically harms herself because of the emotional pain she feels at his betrayal.

However, regardless of her appearance and actions, the falcon’s speech repeatedly reveals her autonomy. Though the falcon tells Canacee that she [the falcon] has been submissive to her lover, the falcon ultimately uncovers that her affection is conditional. The female peregrine first states, “I yaf hym al myn herte and al my thoght— / God woot and he, that ootherwise noght— / And took his herte in chaunge of myn for ay” (Chaucer V. 533-35), and later adds, “And shortly, so ferforth this thyng is went / That my wyl was his willes instrument” (Chaucer V. 567-68). But the falcon’s love for the tercelet is not really based on his character. Instead, the falcon says, “I so loved hym for his obeisaunce [obedience]” (Chaucer V. 562). Moreover, this falcon did not truly replace her will with the will of her lover. By contrast, she comments that she used her sensibility to judge whether or not the tercelet’s will was right for her: “This is to seyn, my wyl obeyed his wyl / In alle thing, as fer as reson fil” (Chaucer V. 569-70). The falcon, like the Wife of Bath, acts upon her own reason. Even her self mutilation can be viewed as willfully against nature (or at least against masculine law), since in the Merchant’s Tale Januarie clearly states, “A man may do no synne with his wyf / Ne hurte hymselven with his owene knyf” (Chaucer IV. 1840-41). Though the pain she feels because of her lover’s betrayal is certainly
real, her obedience and domesticity are superficial attributes.

The falcon is not only attached to her ability to reason. She, like the bird she chastises in her story, is attracted to and acts upon the newfangelnesse of freedom. Telling Canacee of the simplicity of her early life, the falcon states:

Ther I was bred—allas, that ilke day!—
And fostred in a roche of marbul grey
So tendreley that no thyng eyled me,
I nyste nat what was adversitee . . . .
(Chaucer V. 499-502)

The literal equivalent of the metaphorical bird that foolishly decided to leave its cage, Canacee’s falcon left her young environment. While she was comfortable and cared for in the “roche of marbul grey,” the newfangledness of flying “hye under the sky,” venturing far from anything she had previously known, was more enticing for the falcon (Chaucer V. 503). However, the falcon recognizes that this freedom only causes her pain. She continues her speech:

I nyste nat what was adversitee
Til I koude flee ful hye under the sky.
Tho dwelte a tercelet me faste by,
That semed welle of alle gentillesse;
Al were he ful of treson and falsnesse . . . .
(Chaucer V. 502-06)

Perhaps foreshadowing the misfortunes that befall women who allow themselves to be seen (tragedies such as the defamation of Dorigen in the Franklin’s Tale and the death of Virginia in the Physician’s Tale), the falcon in the Squire’s Tale meets her tercelet—the male who causes her pain—when she gives in to the novelty of freedom. Because she sees and is seen, the falcon can be understood to cause her own misfortune. While this falcon outwardly warns Canacee about the newfangledness that attracts men, the falcon’s true cautionary tale concerns her own attraction to the dangerous novelties of reason and freedom.
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At the close of the Squire’s Tale, Canacee’s silence combines with her physical domestication of the falcon to reveal what she has learned from the falcon’s tale: Canacee understands her feminine role and is prepared to wait for the direction of male command. While the falcon tries to warn Canacee about the male attraction to novelty, Canacee seems to internalize the deeper lesson that the female falcon’s own attraction to reason and freedom is what leads to the falcon’s unhappiness. Canacee responds to the falcon’s distress by attempting to catch the falling falcon in her skirt (Chaucer V. 441). While this action at first appears maternal or perhaps even sexual (Kordecki 286), when combined with Canacee’s other binding actions it can be read as constrictive. Canacee “bereth hire [the falcon] in hir lappe / And softly in plasters gan hire wrappe, / Ther as she with hire beek hadde hurt hirselve” (Chaucer V. 635-37): these actions confine the falcon and limit her mobility, grounding her from the newfangledness of flying. Canacee even builds the falcon a pen:

Fro day to nyght
She dooth hire bisynesse and al hire myght,
And by hire beddes heed she made a mewe
And covered it with veluettes blewe,
In signe of trouthe that is in wommen sene.
And al withoute, the mewe is peynted grene,
In which were peynted alle thise false fowles,
As ben thise tidyves, tercelettes, and owles;
Right for despit were peynted hem bisyde,
Pyes, on hem for to crie and chyde. (Chaucer V. 641-50)

Day and night, all Canacee’s “bisynesse and al hire might”—the energy she has to reason and explore—go into building the “mewe.” In constructing a place to confine her falcon, Canacee effectively confines herself.

Canacee not only limits the falcon’s mobility but also influences her reasoning by painting a threatening scene on the outside of the falcon’s pen. Working to dissuade the fowl if she should decide to exercise her autonomy again (as Canacee seems to suspect the falcon
may), Canacee shows the falcon that a life outside of the cage is not novel but dangerous. For the falcon, the inside of the pen is the blue interior of “trouthe,” while for Canacee this safe interior is her bedroom. When confined to these interiors, the falcon and Canacee can be characterized by their static beauty and obedience: they finally fit the Squire’s definition of what it is to be a good woman. Moreover, the threatening green scene painted outside of the pen is not only a reminder of the tercelet’s falseness (Chaucer V. 511) but also of the nature into which Canacee ventured when she exercised her own will and freedom of mobility. This pen physically contains the falcon and, by being situated at the head of Canacee’s bed, psychologically contains Canacee with its constant reminder about the trouble that comes to women who attempt autonomy.

Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale provides a gentleman’s perspective on medieval men and women’s relations. Although generally excluded from conversation with the tales of the Marriage Group, the Squire sets his place as a man who wants to maintain authority. As many critics point out, the Squire explores the Eastern and female Other, yet he domesticates the power of the exotic individual. By situating the female falcon as an example of the negative consequences of female attraction to reason and mobility, the Squire creates a cautionary tale not only for Canacee but also for female pilgrims such as the Wife of Bath. While it seems unlikely that Chaucer wants his female readers to follow this cautionary tale (as Lynch points out, the Franklin’s and Physician’s Tales that follow the Squire’s Tale indicate the excessiveness of Western ideas about femininity), readers should at least recognize the Squire’s covert moral. At the close of the Tale, Canacee and the falcon are the passive females that the Squire seems to idealize. Beautiful and obedient, Canacee and her fowl wait in the domestic space for their heroes, hoping some day they will be freed but demonstrating that they will not seek this freedom for themselves.
Notes

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1 John M. Fyler’s “Domesticating the Exotic in the Squire’s Tale” and “Chaucerian Romance and the World beyond Europe” have also contributed to my understanding of the Squire’s domestication of the Eastern, female, and non-human Other.
Lillvis

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Lynch, Kathryn L. “East Meets West in Chaucer’s Squire’s and
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Although prostitutes do appear on the English Renaissance stage, the term “whore” is most often applied not to women who engage in sexual activity with a number of different men for money, but to women, and in particular wives, who are thought to sleep with men other than their husbands. The term “whore” itself is very slippery in definition, for while it is practically synonymous with “prostitute,” the limits of the term in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England extend from the common professional prostitute to a woman who cuckold her husband, from the sexually active non-married woman to the woman who either consciously or unconsciously provokes desire in men (Kahn 252). So the same term was used for prostitutes as for other females perceived to be sexually deviant; it made no difference whether or not money was involved. This suggests that it was a construction of indiscriminate lust that was the defining feature of the whore. Prostitutes were simply the market-orientated version of a more general phenomenon. And more importantly, because any female could be
demarcated “whore” regardless of whether or not she was paid for sex, any woman could be placed in the same category of insatiable sexual appetite as the commercial prostitute; any woman could find herself enmeshed in a discourse of whoredom.

This paper explores the way in which a discourse of prostitution is mobilised within Shakespeare’s *Othello* in order to become applicable to all women, even those who are, in fact, chaste. At the same time, the suggested social implications for women ensnared within discursive prostitution, as well as the apparent stimulus for men’s projection of whoredom onto apparently virtuous women, are of concern to me. *Othello* is a text that I consider central to my argument that the discourse of prostitution in early modern England is utilised by men as a far-reaching and effective means of justifying its subjection of women and its positioning of females within the gender order. Indeed, a discourse of whoredom runs through the play-text like a red thread, Shakespeare not only offering an image of the commercial whore in the figure of Bianca, but also dramatising the idea of the whore through the projection of whoredom onto a sexually pure wife. Reference to the word “whore” occurs twenty-two times in the course of the play, whilst distinct whore imagery can be discovered twelve times (Stanton 84). The combined total of whore references and associations contained in *Othello* is greater than in any other Shakespearean drama.

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the discourse of harlotry that centres upon Desdemona as a result of her identification by male characters with a discourse more commonly applied to the commercial prostitute. I shall begin by providing several examples of this discourse in operation, a discourse that disrupts the conceptual categories of whore and wife that are so prevalent in early modern literature and culture. I will then move on to illuminate the role that discursive prostitution, or the projection of whoredom onto women, serves in Shakespearean England. This serves to point up how, for men of the period, gender identity comes to rely on both the appropriation and the denial of sexuality troped through prostitution in order to make sense of society and instil a social hierarchy.

Perhaps the best place to start when examining the troping of prostitution evident in *Othello* is with the beliefs about women
registered by Iago. “You [women],” he tells Desdemona and Emilia, “are pictures out of doors / Saints in your injuries . . . Players in your housewifery, and housewives in your beds!” (II.i.109-13). To Iago, wives merely keep the appearances of respectability. Referring to women as “pictures” and “players,” he points to the inherent theatricality of women—their ability to deceive. Seemingly saintly, wives are in reality “housewives”; in other words, wanton in their behaviour. His subsequent comment, “You rise to play, and go to bed to work” (II.i.115) rather tellingly conflates female sexuality with labour. Iago gives this connection its clearest expression in describing Bianca, a courtesan of Cyprus, as “A housewife that by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes” (IV.i.94-95). Playing once again on the dual meanings of “housewife” (the domestic wife and the unrestrained sexual wanton), Iago here objectifies the female, just as commercial prostitutes are marked with an objectivity through their perceived identity as commodities. In Iago’s discourse, then, wife and whore become equated categories, and the play’s meanings behind wife and whore converge.

Regarding all women in the same light, and determined to exact revenge upon Othello, whom he suspects has cuckolded him (“it is thought abroad that ’twixt my sheets / He’s done my office” [I.iii.386-87]), Iago in the course of the play employs a discourse of prostitution to construct Desdemona as a harlot. And it is in this identification of Desdemona with whoredom that the boundaries between the conceptual categories of wife and whore can be seen most explicitly to disintegrate. While according to Brabantio she is “A maiden never bold” (I.iii.95), Iago believes that Desdemona will in the course of time reveal a “hidden loose affection” —that her, “very nature” as a woman “will instruct her... and compel her to some second choice” (II.i.239-9, 231-33). To Iago’s mind, Desdemona has the potential to be unchaste and so she arguably fits the cultural stereotype of whore.

It is through this very language, characterised by innuendo, that Iago successfully transfers the idea of Desdemona’s inconstancy to Othello. The fear and horror of female sexuality that permeate Tudor and Stuart discourses about women provide fertile ground upon which Iago can plant in Othello’s mind these seeds of doubt. Articu-
lating the notion of women’s lustful nature embodied in misogynis-
tic treatises of the day, Iago persuades him that women in general
betray their husbands: “There’s millions now alive / That nightly lie
in those unproper beds / Which they do swear peculiar” (IV.i.67-
69), women whose “best conscience / Is not to leave’t undone, but
keep’t unknown” (III.iii.202-04). Asserting that it is common prac-
tice amongst “millions” of women to lie in “unproper beds,” Iago
intimates that women do not possess a conscience when it comes to
sexual infidelity. Their only concern, he argues, is that their acts of
indiscretion may be kept “unknown.” Spawning doubt in Othello
about the capacity for chastity in women, Iago then intimates a rela-
tionship between Desdemona and Cassio by “abus[ing] Othello’s ear
/ That [Cassio] is too familiar with his wife” (I.iii.394-6). By means
of an aural penetration, the fantasy of Desdemona’s adultery is more
forcefully transferred; Iago’s tongue becomes a phallus with which to
impregnate Othello’s mind.

This process of transference is most powerfully conveyed to
the audience by the vision of Desdemona “topp’d” (III.iii.398) by
Cassio that Iago engenders in Othello’s brain. In response to Othel-
lo’s demand that Iago “make me to see’t”(III.iii.367) – the proof
of his wife’s infidelity—Iago invokes an image of Cassio copulat-
ing with Desdemona. This is an image in which Othello, “grossly
gape[ing] on,” becomes absorbed in a fantasy that makes him the
surreptitious onlooker or voyeur to the adulterous scene, and thereby
a kind of participant:

I lay with Cassio lately
   And...In sleep I heard him say ‘Sweet Desdemona,
   Let us be wary, let us hide our loves,’
   And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
   Cry ‘O sweet creature!’ and then kiss me hard
   As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
   That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh,
   And sigh, and kiss . . . (III.iii.416-27)

Iago creates here a theatre of sex that sees Othello located as spectator.
In this performance, narrative is the alternative medium to material
proof. That is, in response to Othello’s forensic request for “ocular proof” (361) of his wife’s infidelity, Iago in this dream episode reveals the “powerful effect of . . . concrete visual images” as created through representational eloquence (Smith 182). In other words, discourse becomes the means of conjuring images, just as in the course of the play discourse is the means by which chaste women are imbued with the characteristics of the harlot and branded whores.

Through the theatrical visualisation and projection of narrative enargeia, Othello is made to confront a sexual scenario that images his wife playing the whore. This internalised vision of sexual infidelity is one that “poisons sight”; it is the “monster in the brain too hideous to be shown” (III.iii.110-11), a vision that involves Othello gazing upon a freak show organised by Iago. This is an image to which Othello is made to respond with the feelings of the cuckold: “Death and damnation! O!” (III.iii.399). In conjuring up this optical illusion and inducing Othello to see what he wants him to see, Iago is essentially directing the play. He is constructed as casting Othello in the role of the cheated-upon-husband and Desdemona, more importantly, in that of the whore. It is also worth noting here that in this vision both Othello and Iago can interestingly be seen to occupy a number of roles simultaneously: Iago those of pander and director, Othello those of cuckold, spectator, and client. These are, of course, mutually constitutive roles. The invocation of whoredom in the image that Iago manifests can thus be seen to work at a number of different levels of cultural resonance and applicability.

Othello, moreover, in seeing himself as excavating from Iago’s mind the “secrets” (IV.ii.22) of Cassio and Desdemona’s supposed adulterous coupling, can be read as rendering the temptation scene doubly fictive in terms of the adultery that it conceives: in that Iago effectively seduces Othello, the suggestion of sexual dishonesty raised in this scene is made to seem doubly adulterated. This notion is authenticated by the dream experience being presented by means of a rhetoric that has overtones of homoeroticism: the punning references to “hand” (masturbation), “hard” (tumescence), “pluck” (coitus) and “root” (the phallus) are certainly suggestive of an implicit sodomitical element, as Mark Thornton Burnett argues in his analysis of monstrosity in Othello (105). Certainly, the idea
that Desdemona has cuckolded her husband is generated by means of verbal intercourse between the partnership of Othello and Iago. In this way, Othello allows himself to be whored by Iago, the play’s nuances of prostitution emerging once again as operating at a number of different cultural levels.

Further confirmation of Iago destabilising Desdemona’s identity as a chaste wife through the projection of whoredom onto her person is found in act four, scene one, at which point in the play Iago moves to a direct evocation of Desdemona’s fictitious adultery:

IAGO: Will you think so?

OTHELLO: Think so, Iago?

IAGO: What! To kiss in private?

OTHELLO: An unauthorised kiss.

IAGO: Or to be naked with her fiend in bed An hour or more, not meaning any harm?

OTHELLO: Naked in bed, Iago, and not mean harm?

(IV.i.1-5, italics mine)

In the above passage of stichomythia (dialogue in alternate lines), the marital bed comes into full imaginative view for the first time in the play. The concrete vividness with which the two naked bodies on the bed are conjured becomes a moment of rhetorical exposure or discovery. As Burnett puts it, “Iago thus puts a graphic gloss on a scenario which has so far lacked a fully realized visualisation” (105). In concentrating the attention upon the erotic act in the bedroom, and in evoking in lurid visual detail the sexual encounter, Iago through his image firmly positions Desdemona in the role of inconstant female. In short, the language that Iago employs when discussing Desdemona has the effect of casting her in a despicable hue, and the resulting concoction ensures that her chastity is subverted and her
body “bewhored.”

There are many other examples of Iago employing his discursive prowess in order to further cement Desdemona in the role of whore. However, I want to move on now to look at the discourse of prostitution that Othello himself can be seen to utilise when addressing his wife. Iago’s poison works. For, abandoning his trust in Desdemona for a conviction of her sexual betrayal, Othello, too, adopts a discourse of prostitution when referring to her, thereby further projecting a status of whoredom onto Desdemona. This is particularly evident in the temptation scene when, as Edward Pechter has pointed out, Othello’s contempt for his wife “situates itself with specific reference to [her] body” (207):

I had rather be a toad . . .
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others’ uses. Yet ‘tis the plague of great ones,
Prerogatived are they less than the base.
’Tis destiny unshunnable, like death -
Even then this forked plague is fated to us
When we do quicken. (III.iii.274-81)

The focus in the passage is clearly concentrated upon the “privities” of Desdemona, the “corner in the thing I love” foregrounding her genitals to the audience. The “forked plague” is suggestive of the cuckold’s horns, but as Pechter has noted, its demonstrative specificity, “this forked plague,” appearing just three lines after “keep a corner,” “summons the groin area to the mind’s eye” (207). The proliferating, evocative power of the passage under question clearly performs a compression upon Desdemona’s body, so that her transgression is seated in the female genitalia. Transformed into the very “thing” which makes her a woman, Desdemona is reduced to a sexual object. Indeed, the image Othello engenders renders Desdemona’s body open to the invited pornographic gaze of the audience. The graphic details which inform Othello’s speech about Desdemona define her in terms of her sexuality much like a common prostitute. By appropriating the language normally applied to the commercial prostitute (one thinks here of the construction of Bellfront’s body in
Price

Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton's *The Honest Whore, Part I* as a sewer spreading sin and disease to all and sundry [II.i.324-30]), Desdemona is firmly identified by Othello as a whore.

The alignment of the chaste wife with whoredom in Shakespeare’s tragedy is given its most forceful expression, however, in the brothel scene (IV.ii), at which point in the play the verbal schemata of Othello has the effect of explicitly delineating Desdemona as a common, professional prostitute. For, here the connection between his wife and the whore is so pronounced for Othello that his visit to Desdemona becomes a visit to a bawdyhouse. When Desdemona enters, she asks Othello: “My lord, what is your will?” (24), her first words ironically fitting the brothel scenario. Othello’s response, “Pray, chuck, come hither” (24), plays on the word “chuck,” with its double meaning of dear one and whore. Oblivious to this, Desdemona then utters another suggestive line: “What is your pleasure?” (25), thereby confirming in Othello’s mind the misconceived idea that Desdemona is inconstant. On turning to Emilia, he says:

Some of your function, mistress;  
Leave procreants alone and shut the door;  
Cough, or cry hem, if anybody come.  
Your mystery, your mystery: nay, dispatch!  
(IV.ii.27-30)

“Procreants” becoming synonymous with “adulterers,” Othello dispatches Emilia from the room as though she is Desdemona’s bawd—that is, as though she is conducting trade (“mystery”) through the sale of her mistress’s body. Through this discourse of whoredom, the exchange between wife and husband becomes transformed into an exchange between a whore and her customer, Othello mentally substituting his chaste wife for a woman who trades her body.

Having identified some areas of the play in which the discourse of prostitution is clearly manifest, I wish now to turn to the cultural work that is being served by such a projection of whoredom onto Desdemona. I want to begin by thinking briefly about two scenes in which the whoredom that Othello assigns to Desdemona is strikingly reinforced to the audience by the way that Shakespeare
deployes a visual image of the whore-stigma thrust upon the heroine. In act four, scene one, after sardonically taking on the role of Desdemona's bawd before Lodovico (Othello asking, “What would you with her, sir?” [250]), Othello goes on to strike his wife in public as though she were his “strumpet.” Similarly, at the closure of the brothel scene, Othello on leaving calls Desdemona the “cunning whore of Venice” (IV.ii.97) and throws money to Emilia as to a madam. Both scenes illustrate the complete denigration of Desdemona which results from the whoredom projected onto her person.

In particular, the violence that Othello uses towards his wife in the public arena demeans her person; Othello treats her as though she is a common prostitute that he has purchased. The shock which Lodovico expresses in response to Othello's actions registers the fact that, in striking Desdemona publicly, Othello is denying her a wife's dignity. In that the discourse of whoredom applied to Desdemona has the effect of reducing her person from the status of wife to that of whore, we are here confronted with the fact that a downward social trajectory is the condition of her perceived change from wife to harlot. Indigenous to this view is the concept that the whore carries a marginal status. As such, the appellation whore comes to signal not just an infringement upon a woman's chastity, but also upon her social standing; it constitutes a social belittlement. To label Desdemona “whore,” therefore, not only raises suspicion as regards her morals but takes away her position in society so that she experiences the degradation concomitant with a life of prostitution, as Othello's public beating of his wife clearly demonstrates.

And yet, Othello registers the social implications of positing a woman as whore in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England not only by the way in which Desdemona is seen to suffer loss of social standing, but also through locating her within a social and political situation in which she finds herself in a cultural straightjacket: disinherited by her father, a stranger in Cyprus, her only status being that of Othello's wife. On contemplating the possibility of divorcing his wife, Othello himself recognises that Desdemona would have nowhere to go: “I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind / To prey at fortune” (III.iii.260-61). Although, it is Emilia who makes the most astute comment on Desdemona's predicament when she says,
“Hath she forsook . . . / Her father, and her country, and her friends, / To be called whore?” (IV.ii.127-29). Emilia’s words here provide a telling index to the social placing implicit in the designation whore. A woman’s identity as a wife depends upon her husband’s recognition of her as such, and consequently Desdemona cannot wholly dispel the accusation of whoredom—she can do nothing but bow to the inequities of her lot having been reduced from the status of wife to that of a woman in the service of prostitution.

The tragic irony of Othello is, of course, that it is precisely because Desdemona is chaste that she is unable to protect her life. She is defenceless against Othello’s charges because in being sexually innocent she is unable to comprehend them. Indeed, the boudoir scene makes it abundantly clear that Desdemona figuratively cannot conceive of committing the sin of which Othello considers her guilty. She cannot believe that anyone would imagine such things. Even the word “whore” is not in her vocabulary, for she is linguistically limited by her culture. Having no identity apart from the chastity that her husband has discredited, Desdemona cannot therefore offer any defence that will convince Othello of her fidelity to him; she is unable to resist the interpretive gloss that Iago and Othello generalise. In this way, I believe that the textual representation of Desdemona points a finger at the holes in the patriarchal fabric that represent Othello and his inability to recognise an innocent woman. His inability to distinguish a whore from a chaste wife surely provokes, in the audience, a measure of self-questioning as regards the possible implications of this failure as arising from the merging together of the stereotypical categories of wife/whore promoted by patriarchal ideology.

Indeed, one of the animating impulses of Othello is the endeavour to separate, on the one hand, the categories of wife and whore, and, on the other, to confound them. This has the effect of destabilising the very distinctions between respectable and non-respectable women on which the social hierarchy seems to depend, as exemplified in the series of discursive transformations that produce Desdemona as whore. This points to how the construction of female identity in Othello is regularly to be seen operating through a dislocation between what is said and what is seen, between expecta-
tion and experience, between a discursive dialectic of the conceptual and the real. The result is the debauching of an innocent woman, the play-text alerting an audience to the dangers of mistaken identity as caused by an inability to read the female body accurately within the confines of conventional binaries. For the men of Shakespeare’s tragedy, just as for his male contemporaries, the female form must exist in spotless innocence or else in hopeless vice—there is no mid-region. It is this polarity that Iago and Cassio capture at the beginning of the play when they construct Desdemona respectively as whore and paragon (II.i.73).

That Desdemona is neither saint nor whore, Shakespeare makes very clear. Rather, Desdemona occupies an intermediate position; in that she is constructed as a normally sexed person, Othello’s wife is both pure and sexually desirous. This almost diffracted presentation of Desdemona accounts, I believe, for the moral ambiguities surrounding her depiction that so many critics find in the text. It is this bifurcation of the female self that Iago and Othello read as whoredom, for they both find the idea that Desdemona might be simultaneously innocent and sensual altogether inconceivable. The refracted images within Desdemona do not correspond to the traditional categories through which men identify women. Desdemona is a natural alternative to a saintly wife or a lustful whore, which is all along a tragically false dichotomy exploited by men of the period.

This leads me to my final point about the discourse of whoredom which concerns the male stimulus behind the cultural projection of whoredom onto chaste women. No matter how fervently Iago and Othello write her whore, Shakespeare does not. Othello is a play that draws heavily on the contemporary concern with the female sexual appetite, the roots of which lie in the turbulence about male honour and identity that the gender instabilities of the period exacerbated. Projecting whoredom onto one’s wife is indicative, I would argue, of an attempt to mask male vulnerability. That is, to my mind, Othello’s writing of his wife as whore is culturally implicated in his having internalised the cultural construction of the female form as insatiable. This is evidenced by the way in which he describes his wife in act one as coming with “greedy ear” to “devour” his tales of cannibals and anthropophagi (I.iii.150-51). For both
Iago and Othello, ideal femininity is essentially threatened by the sexual desires of women, by the inability of men to be sure of their wives’ constancy. In a society where male honour is dependent upon female chastity, a discourse of prostitution comes to signal male vulnerability to women.

Just as Desdemona can lose Othello’s handkerchief, so can she lose his honour. Through marriage, she has been invested with the capacity to preserve or threaten her husband’s reputation. If Desdemona has the potential to be a “subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets” (IV.ii.21-23), then she has the potential to defile Othello, to blemish his reputation. The dishonour that Desdemona would confer upon herself would, in turn, be subsumed by Othello. On considering the scorn due the cuckold (all the “sores and shames” that it has “pleas’d heaven” to rain upon his “bare head” [IV.ii.48-51]), Othello has the conception of his own worth as being less than that of “the vapour of a dungeon” (III.iii.275). It is only in proclaiming Desdemona whore that Othello can relocate himself in a position of control and regain a measure of dignity.

In this way, the projection of whoredom serves as psychic armour, protecting the male ego within. In projecting whoredom onto a chaste wife, the male is pre-empting the wife’s power to dishonour and emasculate him if she were to commit adultery. The desire to maintain control over the dissemination of his identity—even if it means dishonour as derived from his wife’s status as whore—overwhelms even the dissemination itself. He is able to actively represent himself as opposed to being passively represented by his wife as a cuckold. Discursive prostitution thus becomes a means of maintaining control over the performance of one’s identity, masculine vulnerability finding its compensatory articulation in the creation of monstrous female sexualities. In terms of Iago’s writing of Desdemona as whore, this can be read as a means of dishonouring Othello in an attempt to further his own career. To charge the wife of Othello as whore is a useful means of attacking his political enemy. To this end, the discourse of prostitution can be seen to function as a political tool.

To conclude, as a projection of the male characters’ illusions and as the “mark” of a discursive system, Desdemona is, in the words
of Beatrice Joanna in The Changeling (1622), “a prophet to the rest” of womankind in the destruction that the projection of whoredom onto her person has yielded. The final tableau showing Desdemona and Emilia dead on the marriage bed, the bed being the stage image of both Othello’s sexual anxiety and of the use to which the discourse of whoredom has been put in the play, alerts female spectators to the implications of being read by men as whores. Indeed, Shakespeare forces his audience to ask the very question that he ironically puts into the mouth of his protagonist: “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” (IV.ii.72-72), which—following in the footsteps of Kay Stanton—I use in my title to illustrate the concept of whoredom as a “male-initiated inscription” projected onto “the female as scapegoat” (95).

Given, then, that masculinity comes to rest on controlling the dissemination of the wife as text, one way of protecting masculine identity is to hide behind a fictional façade of semantics. Citing the female genitalia as proof of sexual wantonness and then subjugating Othello’s wife by branding her a whore, Desdemona becomes trapped and located within the prison-house of discourse. The effectiveness of the social trope of prostitution is evident in the applicability of the discourse, in that whoredom is a socially constructed phenomenon that has the potential to affect all women in all social spheres, as the final image of the lifeless bodies of Desdemona and Emilia strewn on the marital bed makes clear. A discourse that militates against all females, then, discursive prostitution has the effect of reducing women to the culturally constructed role of pawn, thereby functioning as a vehicle for “controlling” male fear of the genital wound that is castration.
Works Cited


Wedding Interrupted: Women’s Political Will in The Two Noble Kinsmen

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John Fletcher and William Shakespeare’s tragicomic drama The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613) famously commences when three black-veiled, imperial queens interrupt the wedding procession of Theseus and his conquered bride, Hippolyta.¹ ² Mirroring, doubtless, the classical heroine Antigone and her comparable plea for secular and temporal compassion and justice, the three queens solicit a proper burial for their mercilessly slain male sovereigns, and, therefore, wish for Theseus to go to war with the man whom they adamantly think is culpable, the sadistic autocrat Creon, and the Greek city-state of Thebes within which Creon rules.³ The three emotional queens’ entrance contextualizes the drama brilliantly because the scene epitomizes, and emblematically prefigures, the material and salient women-centered unsettling of masculine-governed romance, marriage, and sexuality, which is to be found throughout the rest of the drama. However, differing from several early modern dramatic women characters, women in The Two Noble Kinsmen do not undercut or challenge men’s sociopolitical will and authority as much as they assert and implement their own unique and unmistakably war-
ranted political authority. Indeed, due to the queens’ interruption of Theseus’s wedding procession, the dramatic and conceptual points of perspective shift from largely masculine-oriented nuptial merriment, celebration, and mirthfulness—which is, incidentally, quite literally the result of Theseus’s vanquishing of the Amazons Hippolyta and Emilia—to a clear-cut, explicitly depicted women-situated meditation upon somber “romantic” dilemmas and duties, most especially in relation to traditional masculine, paternalistic mandates. Moreover, it is this notable women-focused theatrical and thematic metamorphosis which evidences a worthwhile variation in genre as well; the events of the plot alter from the soon-to-be essentially comic and triumphant conjugal rite to the rather tragic and sober reflection apropos of women’s duties in the face of Theban machismo. Such a pointedly formal Euripidean “tragic” shift in genre no doubt is most symbolic in the drama for it sets the stage, if you will, for women to express their considerable political will and authority.

A rarity among early modern dramatic rarities, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* assesses the singular women-centered exploration of necessary participation and engagement in palpably masculine-driven social, political, and cultural enterprises, be they romance, marriage, honor, sexuality, or duty. To be specific, Fletcher and Shakespeare compellingly foreground women’s ability to assert and demonstrate their political authority; meanwhile, the drama deemphasizes the importance of specifically masculine concerns by juxtaposing such masculine concerns with the overriding concerns of women in order to illustrate the political fortitude and rhetorical success of its principal women characters. Incidentally, the competing male lovers, Arcite and Palamon, are shown to be highly effeminate, if not homoerotic, in their rhetoric, sentiment, and behavior, and it is they who obsess incessantly about marriage (Wells 4). It is rather a matter of supreme irony that so many of the women characters demonstrate their political will through what is commonly if incorrectly perceived as their emotional vulnerability; on the contrary, the fact that the women in the drama are emotionally conflicted and troubled informs them of their masterful ability to assert political clout within the strict confines of a highly paternalistic and hierarchical authoritarian culture. The emotional tribulation of the women characters in
the drama—Hippolyta, Emilia, and the Jailer’s Daughter—must be taken seriously then, because it is from this sense of bona fide emotional trouble and conflict that the women acquire the fortitude and impetus to assert and apply their political will.

Interestingly, Sir William Davenant’s Restoration-period adaptation of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a comic drama entitled *The Rivals* (1668), provides a sensible and lucrative contrast to Fletcher and Shakespeare’s abundantly women-centered, problematic, and combative discourse. Sir William Davenant’s drama rather tangibly reinforces the traditional phallocentric and paternalistic political ethos. For instance, his heroines, most notably Heraclia, are quite rational, loyal, obsequious, and harmless in their thoughts and actions. Too, Davenant’s women characters amazingly lack uniquely women-centered conflicts compared to the erotomania and blunt, bawdy discourse of the Jailer’s Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Furthermore, Davenant’s *The Rivals* highlights common masculine activities and values such as warfare, fortitude, and family lineage. It also eradicates Fletcher and Shakespeare’s Amazon women and the three queens, comicizes the conclusion, and elevates the status and histrionic importance of the Jailer’s Daughter’s parallel, Celania, in order to safely reconcile the plot. As Lois Potter succinctly states, “since all the characters are both honourable and rational, and Celania is not an unsuitable match for Philander, a happy ending can take place as soon as all four lovers decide where honour requires them to direct their affections” (76). Therefore, in order to illustrate the political and rhetorical might of the women characters in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, it is necessary and appropriate to allude to Sir William Davenant’s adaptation, *The Rivals*.

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the three distraught Theban queens in fact literally confront and challenge the overarching scepter of masculine political leadership and authority, and thus shift the theatrical and conceptual view. Their initial aim is to convince Theseus of the gravitas and seriousness of the situation; moreover, their final objective must be to compel Theseus to take practical action and to go to battle against the Thebans. Indeed, the opening lines of the drama remarkably illustrate the rather somber cause of the three queens. Queen I claims:
We are three queens whose sovereigns fell before
The wrath of cruel Creon, who endure
The beaks of ravens, talons of the kites
And pecks of crows, in the foul fields of Thebes
He will not suffer us to burn their bones. (I.i.39-43)

This ostensibly basic and perhaps even moot scene of protestation and pathos actually situates women’s political concerns into the forefront. “The queens’ desire to fittingly bury their husbands is not treated flippantly; rather, their desire in this regard becomes the essential matter of concern.” For instance, Theseus, Hippolyta, and Emilia all acknowledge and respond in a considerate and sober manner to the queens (I.i.). By contrast, The Rivals lacks these critical womanly concerns; its emphasis hovers instead over the masculine war exploits and, specifically, the masculine assassination of the despot Harpacus. For instance, Polynices, parallel to Kinsmen’s Pirithous, says to Arcon:

Your justice lyes in Harpacus, his death,
Rising more splendid in his being set.
He was a most unbounded tyrant, sir;
And though his actions in this bloody war
Merited life, yet his precedent deeds
Deserv’d a death more infamous than that,
your sword vouchsaf’d him. (I.224)

In the case of Kinsmen, however, Athenian authority legitimizes the queens’ unique dilemma; the queens are then given carte blanche to persuade Theseus and Athens to war with Thebes. The women can, therefore, exercise their ability to influence Theseus’s will, which they do indeed accomplish—but only with the crucial sisterly help of the Amazon women, Hippolyta, and Emilia. On the one hand, the Athenian political structure seems profoundly important in the first act. Queen I says to Theseus, “Oh pity, Duke; / Thou purger of the earth, draw thy feared sword” (I.i.47-49), thereby acknowledging that the masculine conqueror holds formal authority
over the state of Athens. On the other hand, all three queens address and beseech all three Athenians, presuming some kind of hierarchy in this order: Theseus, Hippolyta, Emilia. Rather than simply asking the duke alone to listen to their concerns, the queens find it most productive to speak to all family members and “informal” leaders (I.i).

Thus, the Athenian state seems to be composed of a triumvirate not dissimilar from that of the Romans in Shakespeare’s Roman tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*. But *Kinsmen’s* Athenian state only appears as a triumvirate because the queens consider it a triumvirate—to skillfully further their “noble” aims. That is to say, the queens know that Theseus governs, but the queens also recognize the immense power and influence that the Amazons hold over Theseus. The perceptive queens recognize that women—themselves and the Amazons—can successfully get Duke Theseus to act upon their behalf. The queens, rather than being disenfranchised and in total distress, manage to assert their own political authority. By contrast, in *The Rivals*, no equivocation or nuance exists as regards to political structure; it is uncontestable that Prince Arcon leads. The Provost says to Arcon:

Royal sir!
Supported by the justice of your cause,
I might do things perhaps beyond my age
But ne’er out-do my duty. I owe more
To this country and your sacred person;
Than my exhausted blood or life can pay. (I.225)

The insightful Theban queens recognize this Athenian-Amazonian political conundrum of sorts: That although the Amazons are formally subject to (etymologically: thrown under) Theseus, the Amazons actually hold considerable and valuable cultural and political sway over Theseus; the Amazons can, indeed, persuade Theseus to fight for the three queens. To this matter, Queen II admits to Hippolyta, Theseus’s wife, the following: “Soldieress, / That equally canst poise sternness with pity, / Whom now I know hast much more power on him / Than ever he had on thee” (I.i.85-88). Queen
II basically insinuates to Hippolyta that Hippolyta can control and overpower Theseus; Hippolyta the Amazon militant has political capital then. Furthermore, Hippolyta’s inimitable speech (“tenor”) can consequentially affect Theseus’s ultimate judgment. Too, Hippolyta’s rather substantial political power can be linked precisely with her Amazon cultural identity. For example, Queen II associates Hippolyta’s diplomatic prowess with Hippolyta’s former role as a fearsome woman warrior. Queen II first hails Hippolyta by saying, “Honoured Hippolyta / Most dreaded Amazonian, that hast slain / The scythe-tusked boar” (I.i.78-80). The three queens perceive that Hippolyta, although she may be legally subjugated and captive, has great influence over her husband Theseus; and the queens also link Hippolyta’s political ingenuity with her Amazon cultural status.

The principal women’s influence on masculine authority becomes more pronounced because the Amazons, Hippolyta and her sister Emilia, feel and express a mutual woman’s bond or sisterhood with the beggarly, desperate, and despairing queens. Both Hippolyta and Emilia are remarkably empathic in respect to the queens’ plights. Emilia states to Queen III: “No knees to me! / What woman I may stead that is distressed / Does bind me to her” (I.i.35-37). Such tangible Amazonian sensitivity can be associated with the important sisterly, womanly bond that the Amazons maintain within their culture. To demonstrate her solidarity with women Hippolyta claims:

Did I not, by th’ abstaining of my joy
Which breeds a deeper longing, cure their surfeit
That craves a present med’cine, I should pluck
All ladies’ scandal on me. (I.i.189-192)

Hippolyta relates what she considers her obligation to consider and speak for the queens’ distress because the queens, too, are “ladies” or women. Moreover, the sensitive Amazons can easily empathize with the queens’ obvious sense of injustice and dishonor. Emilia again says to Queen III:

Being a natural sister of our sex,
Your sorrow beats so ardently upon me
That it shall make a counter-reflect ‘gainst
My brother’s heart and warm it to some pity.
(I.i.125-128)

The Amazons, too, feel such an emotional, women-centered sense of dishonor themselves because they also are captives in the Athenian *polis*. And such a strong emphasis on the virtue of “pity” or mercy is derived from Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale”, the story on which *Kinsmen* is based (Waith 46). By contrast, in *The Rivals*, Emilia’s parallel, Heraclia, remains concerned solely with her brother Arcon’s post-war welfare; Heraclia displays no bona fide, serious women’s conflict or agon. Heraclia says to Arcon:

I know not but
Some sword, ambitious of the blood of Princes,
Might drink too deep of yours, although at ebb
Leaving your orphan-subjects to be drown’d
In floods of tears occasion’d by your fall
Weeping their own i’th Prince’s funeral. (I.227)

Also, when Heraclia believes that Arcon is safe and alive, she cedes: “The conflict of my passions here shall cease” (I.228).

In addition to the empathy shown by the Amazons in *Kinsmen*, Duke Theseus also empathizes with the three queens. But he only does so because he remembers their masculine lords, considers them noble, and wishes them justice. Theseus desires a proper burial for the lords, but not because the queens seek it necessarily. Rather, Theseus shows such empathy because he wishes to maintain the status quo of masculine-situated patriarchal honor and authority. He is very specific about being concerned about the three deceased lords themselves (Green 125). Theseus confesses: “I have heard the / fortunes / Of your dead lords, which gives me such lamenting / As wakes my vengeance and revenge for ‘em” (I.i.56-59).

The first act of *Kinsmen* portrays women in conflict, true, but also women whose rhetorical actions forcefully and pointedly affect patriarchal strength and leverage. In *Kinsmen* distressful women ironically also represent women with potent political capabilities,
and vice versa. Indeed, all three queens betray their conflicts due to their women-centered sense of honor for the beloved. Moreover, both Amazons reveal their conflicts by means of a women-centered sense of empathy and injustice because they empathize with the three queens. All women, therefore, successfully persuade Theseus to go to war with Creon. The women exhibit considerable influence on Theseus. For instance, Theseus, although he does maintain sympathy or empathy for the women, surely does not express a devotion to their specific cause; Theseus seems rather ambivalent on the matter. In response to Queen I, Theseus professes:

Oh, no knees, none, widow.
Unto the helmeted Bellona use them,
And pray for me, your soldier.
Troubled I am. (I.1.74-77)

It is rather interesting, too, that the stage directions note that Theseus “turns away” after his comments here (I.1.77). Theseus’s sympathies, then, can be justifiably called into question. Theseus may truly pity the queens, but he is uncertain of the proper action to take. It is rather unlikely that Theseus is wholly devoted to the queens’ cause. Theseus’s worthwhile line “Troubled I am” and his specific stage direction suggest that he remains unconvincing or ambivalent in respect to the queens’ desire for swift war and action.

Theseus may not be so “troubled” with queenly dishonor, but rather troubled with his conception of a germane response to the queens. The queens and the Amazons must convince Theseus of the importance of their cause, and then they must persuade Theseus to war on behalf of their cause. Such a clear emphasis on the behavior of the duke is entirely consistent with the Jacobean political and theatrical climate in which Fletcher and Shakespeare flourished. Andrew Hadfield writes, “Shakespeare’s plays written after 1603 concentrate far less on the legitimacy of the monarch than his earlier works had done, and far more on the behaviour of the monarch as a ruler in office” (188). The women in Kinsmen seek to alter the self-centered behavior of Duke Theseus. After Queen II begs for Hippolyta to persuade Theseus, Hippolyta says: “Heart-deep with your distress.
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Let him consider: / I’ll speak anon” (I.i.105-106). Hippolyta admits that Theseus must be convinced and that she must speak with him right away while he is distressed in order for necessary action to occur. Theseus, however, would rather celebrate his wedding first, and fight the war later. Theseus says, “Forward to th’ temple! Leave not out a jot / O’th’ sacred ceremony” (I.i.130-131).

Theseus undoubtedly does not find the queens’ cause all too critical. Queen I flatters and reminds Theseus of his duty and status in the world, the justness of timely action and the nobility of Theseus’s momentary suspension of his pleasure. She proclaims, “Remember that your fame / Knolls in the ear o’th’ world: what you do quickly / Is not done rashly;” (I.i.133-135). She also states most emphatically:

But, oh Jove, your actions,
Soon as they move, as ospreys do the fish,
Subdue before they touch. Think, dear Duke, think
What beds our slain kings have! (I.i.136-139)

Hippolyta and Emilia both echo and mimic the queens in their diplomatic measures. For example, Hippolyta, too, undervalues and degrades the duke’s masculine marital celebration. Hippolyta says to Theseus, “Prorogue this business we are going about and hang / Your shield afore your heart,” (I.i.196-197). Marjorie Garber notes Hippolyta’s political will, saying, “Hippolyta lends the force of her own persuasion, sounding . . . rather like Portia sending Bassanio off to rescue Antonio before he comes to her marriage bed—or like Othello postponing his own wedded pleasure in order to quell the Turks in Cyprus” (892). Hippolyta’s sister Emilia even promises not to marry if Theseus fails to act felicitously: “From henceforth I’ll not dare / To ask you anything nor be so hardy / Ever to take a husband” (I.i.202-204).

Ultimately, Theseus concedes to the passionate, disputatious, warring women. Theseus concretely states, “Now turn we toward your comforts” (I.i.235). Hence, women’s persuasion becomes invaluable: For it must be doubtful that Theseus would rush off to the theatre of war without a cogent women’s rhetorical influence upon
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him. By contrast, in *The Rivals*, the premise for warfare has nothing to do with women’s conflicts, but, rather, with territorial sovereignty and security. Of Harpacus, Arcon proclaims, “A grave contains him, that usurp’d a thrown, / Grasping at other’s crowns he lost his own” (I.224) and “Th’ invader of our country’s dead” (I.225). Arcon finds his counterpart Harpacus to be a veritable threat to his paternalistic, sovereign territory. Arcon, then, wars on behalf of national security, and not in order to seek justice on behalf of women.

Besides the three queens and their persuasive political capabilities, the Athenian women also exert their political will. The major and minor women in *Kinsmen*, Emilia and the Jailer’s Daughter, represent women’s conflicts and also the concomitant association of women’s power and ability to affect and successfully alter masculine and paternalistic conventions. Theseus’s conquered bride Hippolyta, although she personifies the seeming contrariness of women’s conflict and women’s might, has only a minimal influence on the drama’s events. Hippolyta’s impact, therefore, becomes more figurative, and to some extent even allegorical: Hippolyta stands for the necessary nexus between women’s troubles and women’s potential diplomatic capabilities; she is a figure for the main proto-feminist thread of the drama. But Hippolyta does resurrect herself in the third act.

Hippolyta and Emilia, in a scene that amazingly parallels the events of the first act, implement their womanly diplomatic persuasive technique. The two Amazon women seek to convince Theseus not to execute the competing cousins Palamon and Arcite. Only now the situation is reversed: Rather than three queens, two male cousins are in need of their charitableness. In this instance, Emilia and Hippolyta ostensibly levy their power devoid of women’s partialities and conflicts. In fact, during this scene the women secure a higher position; it is a position in which they now determine the fates of two noble kinsmen, two males, and not three imperial queens. The women, Emilia and Hippolyta, do achieve a higher political status, and they nevertheless remain distressed and obsessed, particularly as regards their belief in a women’s sense of pity and solidarity. Emilia states to Hippolyta:

Yet that I will be woman and have pity,
My knees shall grow to th’ ground but I’ll get mercy.
Help me, dear sister; in a deed so virtuous,
The powers of all women will be with us.
(III.vi.191-194)

Emilia, as she does with the queens, notes a sense of pity unique to her sex or gender; no doubt troubled, Emilia substantially influences paternalistic mandates nonetheless. Duke Theseus’s agitation shows as he responds to the women’s rhetoric: “Ye make my faith reel.” (III.vi.212). But Emilia remains inflexible and obdurate in her compassion: Clearly not in love with the two cousins, she will not let them perish or die either. Emilia says to Theseus’s request that one cousin die and the other marry, “I cannot, sir; they are both too excellent; / For me, a hair shall never fall of these men” (III.vi.286-287). By contrast, in *The Rivals*, Emilia’s parallel, Heraclia, appears not shocked but flattered that two cousins fight for her. Heraclia says, “What miracle is this? Both fight for me?” (IV.276). Further, she states, “The death of one alone then shall / suffice,” (IV.278). Though Heraclia is not in love at this point, it is most apparent that her predilections lean more toward the traditional comedic outcome of a happy marriage. Heraclia is curious and merry: The cousins’ quarrel rather titillates and augments her own personal interest in courtship.

As to the Jailer’s Daughter, the most conflicted and eccentric woman in *Kinsmen*, she ironically acts to essentially vex masculine-centered paternal mandates, most especially with regard to marriage and courtship. Notably, she and Emilia both speak via soliloquy, which, according to Julie Sanders, “emphasizes the essential loneliness of the female condition in the play” (449). While the Jailer’s Daughter may not be the most intelligent of characters in the drama, she is similar to Ophelia and pursues that which is impossible to attain, for “the Daughter does not even have a name, and her very kind knight is out of the question for her” (Bertram 228). Moreover, she allows herself to be victimized by the Wooer in a variation of the bed-trick dramatic convention (V.ii.), an occurrence which Marjorie Garber seems to advocate, saying, “In fact, she is recovered to her wits by a piece of extended role-playing undertaken by her faithful
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Wooer . . . ” (899). But in her main scenes, the Jailer’s Daughter revolutionizes women’s romantic and amorous concerns.

The Jailer’s Daughter pursues her own natural, libidinal impulses irrespective of paternal sentence, custom, and tradition, and she uses language as a main form to do so. As Douglas Bruster notes, “The Jailer’s Daughter, though partly in the tradition of the pathetic, often powerless heroine of Shakespearean tragedy and romance, also enjoys some of the strengths of these more powerful characters. Her madness . . . licenses speech freer than that of any other female character in Shakespeare’s plays” (288). The Jailer’s Daughter more than enjoys these strengths, she embodies them. The Jailer’s Daughter first appears exaggeratingly loyal and virtuous, and perchance an upholder of the male status quo. The Daughter initially admires the homosocial friendship between Palamon and Arcite; maybe she even envies and loves them (II.ii.41-46).

By contrast, in The Rivals, the Jailer’s Daughter’s parallel, Celania, expresses more directly and unambiguously her love for the prisoners: “What kindness wou'd he to a woman show / That is so enamour'd on his kinsman so? / How happy were a maid which shou'd receive / So sweet assurances of love!” (I.232). There seems to be no analogue in Kinsmen for Celania’s statements here. Celania’s clarity quite palpably betrays a temperament more favorably inclined toward marriage. Emilia also expresses a transparent penchant for homosocial friendship that is similar to the Jailer’s Daughter’s biases. Emilia comments on Theseus and Pirithous’s solid friendship; moreover, she relates a sentimental tale regarding her childhood friend, Flavina, to Hippolyta. But more importantly, Emilia steadfastly refuses to marry any man. Of friendship, Emilia holds “that the true love ‘tween maid and maid may be / more than in sex dividual” (I.iii.81-82).

By contrast, in The Rivals, Emilia’s parallel, Heraclia reveals her romantic curiosity as regards the two cousins. Absent from Kinsmen, Heraclia and Celania (the Jailer’s Daughter’s parallel) know each other quite well and intimately. For instance, when they discuss the two kinsmen, Heraclia states, “But, Celania! / I hear there are two pris’ners, whose repute / Fame speaks with great advantage, very lately / Committed to your father’s custody” (II.236). Both the Jail-
er’s Daughter and Emilia, then, express radical and unconventional women’s views insofar as both women vocally and unabashedly eschew heterosocial friendship and marriage. These women persist in their rather bohemian values through much of the drama, save for act five during which paternal authority finally reasserts itself.

The Jailer’s Daughter performs the role of the highly sexual, licentious maverick, whereas Emilia performs the role of the highly asexual, austere subversive, and her “chastity” is, then, a political virtue. Laurie J. Shannon writes, “For Emilia’s combined dedication to women and to chastity makes the case for chastity as an associative form. This chastity opposes not only tyrannical or coercive marriage, but also tyranny in its plain political sense” (296). Of course, due to their outré and uncommon roles, both women are, therefore, threatening to masculine political intentions. As regards masculine-controlled romance and marriage, the Jailer’s Daughter is uncontrollable, loathsome, and self-seeking and Emilia is uninterested, unimpressed, and self-centered. By contrast, in The Rivals, both Celania and Heraclia lean towards acceptance of marriage and, then, the traditional phallocentric values and conventions.

The Jailer and the Wooer scheme to control and marry off the Jailer’s Daughter for the Jailer’s financial gain. The Wooer says to the Jailer, “Sir, I demand no more than your own offer and / I will estate your daughter in what I have promised” (II.i.10-11). The Jailer’s Daughter, though, has other “desires,” as it were. Of Palamon, the Jailer’s Daughter’s newly beloved, she professes:

What should I do to make him know I love him?
For I would fain enjoy him. Say I ventured
To set him free? What says the law then?
Thus much for law or kindred! I will do it!
And this night, or tomorrow, he shall love me.
(II.v.29-33)

The Jailer’s Daughter amends her earlier worry with respect to her reputation (“To be his whore is witless” [II.iv.5]) and bravely proclaims that she will indeed attempt to go to bed with Palamon (Hedrick 55). In so doing, the Jailer’s Daughter appropriates the
masculine-oriented *topos* of “possessing” a woman, for she wishes to possess Palamon, and have him all to herself (Nietzsche 198). By contrast, in *The Rivals*, the Jailer’s Daughter’s parallel, Celania, acts not out of unfulfilled sexual desire, but because Heraclia gulls Celania into thinking that Philander will be executed, and because Celania wishes to marry Philander. Heraclia deceives Celania thus: “Theocles shall be / Acquitted, but it is presum’d the other / Being too considerable to be freed, / Will—” (II.238). Celania, therefore, is not motivated by a women’s sense of self-satisfaction, but rather by strict patriarchal mandates with respect to both duty and marriage. The Jailer’s Daughter, *per contra*, will wittingly violate the law and her father’s wishes in order to satisfy her woman-centered passion and corporal need.

The Jailer’s Daughter, then, willfully plans to disregard custom and commit fornication, and she will more concretely break the law by liberating Palamon from prison. In her second monologue, the Jailer’s Daughter “ecstatically” says that she has substantially influenced paternal mandates, and that she intends to meet with Palamon in the rural countryside for coitus. The Jailer’s Daughter states: “Let all the dukes and devils roar / He is at liberty! I have ventured for him / And out I have brought him; to a little wood” (II.vi.1-3).

Furthermore, the Jailer’s Daughter says:

I love him beyond love and beyond reason,
Or wit, or safety; I have made him know it;
I care not, I am desperate. If the law
Find me and then condemn me for ’t, some wenches,
Some honest-hearted maids, will sing my dirge.

(II.vi.11-15)

The Jailer’s Daughter becomes “desperate” and fiercely independent, insane even, because she suffers from unfulfilled carnal desire; her “love” is rather unfettered, untranquilized lubricity. Carol Thomas Neely explicates: “The source of her disorder is thematized in her obsessive expressions of her desire for sexual satisfaction through images of violent penetration and excessive reproduction far more explicit than Ophelia’s” (85). More importantly, the Jailer’s
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Daughter intimates that perhaps some women will truly apprehend her seeming perfidious but truly sincere political actions—because these “honest-hearted” women have mutual homologous desires which they either suppress or sublimate.

When Palamon fails to meet the Jailer’s Daughter in the woods, her thoughts, Job-like, revolve about her own sorrowful and suicidal impulses:

Alas, Dissolve, my life! Let not my sense unsettle,
Lest I should drown, or stab, or hang myself.
Oh, state of nature, fail together in me,
Since thy best props are warped! – So, which way now?
(III.ii.28-33)

By contrast, in The Rivals, the Jailer’s Daughter’s parallel, Celania, voices suicidal views, but her thoughts do not hover about a tortured, eroticized “state of nature,” but rather tediously upon her lack of food intake and sleep: “Alas, I grow mad! I’ve eaten / No meat these two days, nor have clos’d my eyes; / I find my sense unsettl’d. Which way now?” (II.258). The Jailer’s Daughter suffers severely from “lovesickness;” she is not seeking marriage, a male head, or a husband, but rather sexual fulfillment. On the contrary, Carol Thomas Neely situates the Jailer’s Daughter’s illness in the historical context of Jacobean masculine predatory society. Neely writes: “But the Daughter’s fantasies also unfold a graphic critique of predatory male desire and its consequences in an underworld peopled with the images of Jacobean social life, not the remnants of classical Hades” (85). When the Jailer’s Daughter cannot soothe her feelings, she becomes mentally distempered, suicidal, and delusional. She thinks Palamon may in fact be as naturally dead as she is sexually dead:

I am very cold and all the stars are out too,
The little stars and all, that look like aglets;
The sun has seen my folly. – Palamon!
Alas, no, he’s in heaven; where am I now? (III.iv.1-4)

Conversely, the Jailer’s Daughter, now singing, further fantasizes
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about risqué, amorous matters:

He’s buy me a white cut, forth for to ride,
And I’ll go seek him through the world that is so wide,
Hey, nonny, nonny, nonny.
Oh, for a prick now, like a nightingale,
To put my breast against. I shall sleep like a top else.

(III.v.22-26)

By contrast, in *The Rivals*, Celania’s speech is patently desexualized and sanitized: “O for hawthorn; like a nightingale / To lean my breast against, or else I shall sleep / like a top” (III.262). The Jailer’s Daughter becomes unstable in her mind due to her own individualized case of lovesickness, and most certainly this occurrence equally competes with pedestrian masculine notions of the “virtuous woman” and the proper, tame, unproblematic marriageable woman. The Jailer’s Daughter’s “madness” rather signifies a profound, unrealized counterpoint to paternal mandates, especially in regards to masculine conceptions of sexuality and marriage. As Eugene M. Waith observes: “The continual harping of the Jailer’s Daughter on Palamon’s sexual attraction gives a solidity and credibility to her desire, which might otherwise resemble a young girl’s crush on a popular entertainer” (57). The Jailer’s Daughter demonstrates her political will by way of her “credible” insanity.

While the Jailer’s Daughter becomes mad by ignobly (within the Athenian hegemonic culture) pursuing her personal sexual interests, Emilia remains uninterested in sexuality, romance, and marriage. Emilia represents very much the virtuous but mutinous “Madonna” character in *Kinsmen* (Campbell 297-314). Emilia undoubtedly controls and affects paternal conventions because she suppresses or sublimates her sexual desires, and thereby personally resists male interest. Paradoxically, Emilia’s chasteness and sense of women’s honor only incite and stimulate the interest. Hence, the cousins’ primitive chivalric competition from which the drama’s title derives stems from Emilia’s chastity and truth. Laurie E. Maguire incisively speaks to this matter; she notes that same-sex women friendship in the drama “makes doubly ironic Palamon and Arcite’s
enmity over a woman who expresses no interest in men” (59). The cousins Palamon and Arcite wish to conquer and marry Emilia, and Palamon eventually does. But throughout most of the drama, Emilia determinedly and unabashedly resists masculine patriarchal intrusion. As Geraldo U. de Sousa observes: “Retaining an independent perspective, Emilia defers choosing between the two kinsmen. Here, deferral becomes a metaphor for her own sexual indeterminacy and her rejection of marriage” (34).

In the first act, Emilia converses with her woman; Emilia voices her concern with respect to marriage and males. Also, Emilia imagines a highly romanticized vision of courtship in which the woman maintains her virtue or maidenhead; but her woman wittily responds, noting the intimidating components of courtship. Emilia first seemingly laments the fate of Narcissus: that he loved himself, that he found no wife, that his beauty was squandered. However, Emilia, ironically, identifies with Narcissus. For Emilia forcefully rejects love just as the male Narcissus did. Emilia’s woman says that she would not refuse Narcissus and Emilia says, “That’s a good wench. / But take heed to your kindness, though” (II.ii.123-124). Emilia exhibits caution and incredulity with respect to marriage, for according to Emilia “Men are mad things” (II.ii.126).

Emilia exhibits her political will and power by obscuring common patriarchal assumptions that insist women must be married, and that marriage is most beneficial for women. Emilia tells a story to her confidante about an impossibly fantastic and utopic virtuous and chaste courtship. For Emilia, the rose symbolizes such maidenly honor:

It is the very emblem of a maid.
For, when the west wind courts her gently,
How modestly she blows and paints the sun
With her chaste blushes!

(II.ii.136-139)

By contrast, in The Rivals, Heraclia does not express such frank caution and sensitivity, nor does she claim that men are barbarous and uncivilized – “mad.” But Heraclia does idealize courtship similarly:
"She locks her beauties in her bud again, / and leaves him then to blow on nought but briars" (II.240). However, Heraclia idealizes a courtship that she hopes to realize; as regards Emilia, that is not the case in the least. Notably, Emilia’s fantasies of virginal courtship parallel the Jailer’s Daughter’s fantasies of unfettered concupiscence. But Emilia’s woman points out the potentially sinister and perverse dimension of courtship:

Yet, good madam,
Sometimes her modesty will blow so far
She falls for’t. A maid,
If she have any honour, would be loath
To take example by her.

(II.ii.143-147)

Emilia’s woman basically reinforces Emilia’s original stance in relation to courtship and marriage. In act four, Emilia responds to Theseus’s insinuations regarding her supposed affection for either Palamon or Arcite; perhaps not surprisingly, Emilia fails to express love or a desire to marry either of the two love-struck, warring kinsmen. Emilia, on the contrary, does not concern herself with marriage or romantic love: Emilia quite simply wishes to save both cousins’ lives, nothing more. Emilia states that she “Cannot distinguish, but must cry for both!” (IV.ii.54). Emilia finds herself entangled amid an arduous circumstance in which her decisions will compromise her personal and conflicted views with respect to romance and virtue. Emilia wants no one to die dueling for her at all, but she is not in love with these combatants.

Theseus insists that if he exiles the cousins, they will continue to quarrel for Emilia. Moreover, if Emilia allows one cousin to die, she would be culpable for such a decision. As Julie Sanders enunciates, “It is her choice—or rather her steadfast refusal to make one—which determines the fate of Palamon and Arcite, and her presence which initially fissures their supposedly unbreakable homosocial bond” (452). Emilia’s refusal to choose is not so much an instance of subversive passivity as active political influence, and it is also evidence of her personal will. Most critical, though, is that,
if Emilia decides to marry the victorious knight, she will betray her loyalty to Diana, the virgin goddess to whom she prays. Emilia will, in effect, violate herself spiritually if she marries or consents to the death of one of the cousins. Dressed in white, within Diana’s altar, Emilia attempts to reconcile her emotional self and her dilemma with the goddess Diana (V.i.156-162).

By default, because Theseus reasserts his authority, Emilia prays for Diana to allow her to wed one of the warriors. But it is material to note that Emilia, also, prefers not to marry at all, and rather to continue serving Diana. Indeed, Emilia remains defiant even in light of the fact that Theseus presumptuously decides her future for her. Because Emilia recognizes the chaste Diana as her ultimate sovereign, Emilia, despite paternal mandate, maintains her own women’s sense of virtue and identity, and such behavior exemplifies her political will. Emilia affects male authority, this time in spirit, through her continual religious devotion to the goddess Diana. Even while the cousins’ duel occurs, Emilia voices her strong dissent: She says that she will not watch such a violent, shameful exercise in futility. Theseus orders Emilia to attend the fight; Emilia responds, “I am extinct. / There is but envy in that light which shows / The one the other” (V.iii.20-22) and later to Hippolyta, Emilia becomes more frank in her refusal when she says, “In faith, I will not” (V.iii.28). Furthermore, Emilia formulates a convenient and convincing excuse for her leave-taking that she may unfavorably influence the combatants: “If I were by / I might do hurt, for they would glance their eyes” (V.iii.60-61). Notwithstanding the eventual fact that Emilia finally marries, she strongly resists the brutal terms on which her marriage rests—until the ostensibly happy bliss of marriage. As Laurie E. Maguire puts it, “Marriage in this play comes at a high price” (59). But despite such a trial and tribulation, Emilia still remains a conflicted, but personally willful, and politically powerful woman.

The Two Noble Kinsmen is most remarkable, then, because it illustrates women who unabashedly display their singular political will. The queens are upset and become consummate diplomats. Emilia has an asexual penchant for women’s homosocial friendship, and she willfully frustrates masculine “chivalric” ideals of love by asserting her own authority. The Jailer’s Daughter becomes mad due to
lack of sexual satisfaction, and, too, betrays her cultural importance. Furthermore, the dramatic and conceptual perspective shifts in the first act symbolize the more thorough focus on women’s concerns and conflicts later in the drama. Thereafter, such concerns are taken seriously, and concomitantly, troubled women begin to assert their political and cultural power, and also influence masculine, patriarchal authority.

The three queens, Emilia, and Hippolyta rhetorically overpower Theseus and persuade him to war on their behalf. Emilia asserts her political might as she constantly refuses male approaches and actions: she prefers Diana to a husband, she saves the cousins’ lives, and she denounces the cousins’ violent battle. The Jailer’s Daughter resists masculine conceptions of marriage, and she demonstrates her unique political influence as she strives to soothe her sensual urges on her own terms. John Fletcher and William Shakespeare dramatize troubled, conflicted, even distracted women who powerfully and remarkably demonstrate an uncanny ability to counterbalance and influence men’s viewpoints, and dominant paternalistic structures of power.
Notes

1 Marjorie Garber notes: “Unlike [A Midsummer Night’s] Dream, a true comedy in which all dangers are averted or controverted and everything ends (relatively) happily, The Two Noble Kinsmen is a tragicomedy, so described by the publisher in the Stationers’ Register. One of its heroes dies, tragically and somewhat unexpectedly (at least to those unfamiliar with the plot of Chaucer’s tale)” (890).


3 Antigone, too, calls for the proper burial of her brother, Polynices. Interestingly, in Sophocles’s drama Creon is the tyrant too.

4 For instance, Wells states that, “the same play portrays in its title characters a pair of men to whom male homosexuals might respond with special sympathy” (4).

5 All citations are from Davenant’s original 1874 edition; act and page number are both cited.

6 Hadfield also notes that James encouraged debate and performances that he thought to be of some value: “The list of plays that were staged by the King’s Men, many of which were performed at court, as surviving records indicate, shows that James was certainly not averse to seeing plays that questioned and challenged his conception of how the monarch should behave and, often explicitly, his conception of kingship” (188).

7 In regards to the Jailer’s Daughter Hedrick states: “Her unfeminine, unhesitant vision is reprimanded by her father, who tells her to not to point at them because they would not do so to her. In contrast to Emilia, she is not reluctant to distinguish noble men in competitive and hierarchical terms. But that reluctance is, in Emilia, a positive force, a noble indecision. Indeed, the Jailer’s Daughter’s failure to be thus reluctant seems allied to her madness” (55).
I submit that the Jailer’s Daughter need not be reluctant to distinguish the two noble kinsmen in competitive terms. She would be construed as “unfeminine” from a common paternalistic and conventional point of view, to be certain, but her pursuit of her largely imagined lover, Palamon, should not be interpreted as a pursuit which would consummate in marriage. Her decisiveness should be considered in the context of her personal desire, and her own self-agency. Moreover, it is not tenable necessarily to argue that the Jailer’s Daughter is mad at the very time of her decision to pursue Palamon; rather, it is more probable that she becomes mad further in the drama, and, indeed, as a consequence of unrequited love.

8 Nietzsche writes in aphorism 401, “Women usually love an important man in such a way that they want to have him to themselves. They would gladly put him under lock and key, if their vanity, which wants him to appear important in front of others, too, did not advise against it” (198).

9 For instance, Campbell notes: “In mythologies emphasizing the maternal rather than the paternal aspect of the creator, this original female fills the world stage in the beginning, playing the roles that are elsewhere assigned to males. And she is a virgin, because her spouse is the Invisible Unknown” (297). Emilia is such a virgin woman figure, and she begins to take on male roles, especially with regard to her rather pointed diplomatic and political rhetoric.
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Works Cited


The Disappointment, stanza VI

Her balmy lips encountering his

Their bodies, as their souls, are joined.

Where both in transports unconfin'd

Extended their lives upon the moor.

Calmly they lived amidst the blustery day;

Her golden hair cast a hushed light,

While golden stars, whose fires decay,

The moon in rays of breeze shone.

But 'twas in that breath, what returns, and goes.

The brown-blonde oval gift from

N. E.
In her highly influential introduction to the 1997 *Three Tragedies by Renaissance Women*, Diane Purkiss takes issue with a modern tendency to impose Romantic individualism on early modern woman authors. Jane Lumley’s translation of Euripides’ *Iphigineia*, the story of an adolescent girl’s sacrifice at the behest of her father, is described as “a display of [the Earl of Arundel, Lumley’s father’s] wealth and prestige,” dedicated to him and a companion piece to her husband’s translation of Erasmus (Purkiss xv). For Purkiss, the aim of Lumley’s work was to position herself within a dynastic and political elite. However, unlike the manuscript translations of Isocrates’ orations “translated out of Greke into Latin…dedicated to my lorde of Arundell hir father,” cited in the 1609 Lumley Library catalogue—and, in fact, the rest of Lumley’s work preserved in the library—“the manuscript of Euripides’ tragedie called Iphygenia, translated likewise . . . ” has no such dedication, nor the customary self-effacing preface (Straznicky 126). Moreover, it adheres to principles of translation very different from both contemporary ideals and Lumley’s
other scholarly works, for the author goes to some lengths to present an original interpretation of her material.

Usually, the quality of a translation was judged on fidelity to letter and meaning of source text, a principle to which Lumley’s translations of Isocrates, known to have been presented to Arundel, strictly adhered (Straznicky 29-35). Lumley’s Iphigineia, however, renders such criteria practically invalid. Such Humanist luminaries as Roger Asham (tutor to Edward VI and Elizabeth) regarded verse-to-prose translation as dangerously corrupt, and only for the “pleasure” of “ripe heads and stayd judgments . . . not fit for yong men” (Ascham 258). (Young women, it appears, did not come into it.) The fact that the “elaborate humanist education” (Purkiss xv) enabling Iphigineia’s production served to enhance the status of Lumley’s father and husband in no way negates the possibility that a sixteen-year-old girl chose to utilise the tools it made available to her independently. Lumley’s adaptation, placing constant emphasis on masculine—and especially paternal—inadequacy and creating a defiant female heroism, seems more an expression of anxieties about her position within the patriarchal hierarchy than a consolidation of it.

Lumley foregrounds the responsibilities inherent in fatherhood and Agamemnon’s inability to fulfil them. Not only equals like Menelaus and Achilles, but also all the women of the play and Agamemnon’s old servant, feel his abdication of parental responsibility is sufficiently severe to justify abandoning conventional military, class, and gender hierarchies and criticising him openly. Euripides’ demonstrations of Agamemnon’s authority—such as his reprimand of Menelaus and the old man for indecency—are cut, whilst Euripides’ Chorus’ implied praise (“What you say now is contrary to what you said before; but your resolve to spare your child is right” [Vellacott 381]) is replaced with a generality emphasising the wrongness of Agamemnon’s conduct in the first place: “Thes saiyinges truly do not agree with that whiche was spoken before. Yet notwithstandinge they do teach us well, that we oughte not willingly to hurt our children” (Lumley 261-4). Lumley’s Clytemnestra roundly asserts her husband “must be half out of his witte to agree to such a cruel murther . . . ” (531-2), declaring the manifest inversion of traditional matrimonial roles thus implied to be both Agamemnon’s responsibility and the
equivalent of his misbehaviour: “take hede lest you compelle me to speake those thinges, that do not become a good wife; yea, and you yourself do thos thinges that a good man oughte not . . .” (674-7). Moreover, her defiant insistence that “I must needs tell you of your faute [fault] . . .” is supported by the Chorus: “It is mete, O Agamemnon, that you shulde folowe your wives councell. For it is not lawfull that a father shulde destroy his childe . . .” (692-4).

Male characters echo and reinforce the women:

I waiing the matter, consider what a grievous thinge it is to kill your own childe . . . For I considering how a father oughte to love his childe, have changed my opinion: for I knowe a good man oughte to follow that which is good,” says Menelaus. (Lumley 321-5, 329-31)

“Thou haste prepared grevous thinges, o kinge, for thou haste determined to sacrafise thy owne childe, under the colour of marriage . . .” says the old man (Lumley 111-3). Even Achilles “abhorres this cruell dede of [Clytemnestra’s] husband” (Lumley 554). Lumley changes Euripides’ interpretation of Menelaus’ motivation for changing his mind from fraternal loyalty (“For love of him who sprang from the same womb . . .”) to these failings as a father: “For I consideringe howe a father oughte to love his child, have changed clene my opinion . . .” (329-31).

Lumley also makes it clear that as figurehead, as well as father, Agamemnon is demonstrably inadequate. She portrays him as unreasonable, cowardly, and manifestly unable to control the men he supposedly commands: “I do this not of my selfe, nor yet for my brother’s sake, but rather by compulsion of the hooste . . . it lieth not in my power to withstande them: for I am not able to make any resistance against them . . .” (718-27). Continually wavering in his determination to sacrifice Iphigineia, he shrinks from acknowledging his decision once made, and thus enables Lumley’s Iphigineia to present herself as the decisive leader her father is not. Lamenting his troubles to the old man, Agamemnon initially emphasises his authority: “As sone as I hard of this, I commanded that the hooste shulde be sent home agayne. For I answered that my daughter shulde
never be slayne through my consent” (Lumley 86-7).

The dynamic verb-phrase “I commanded” and unequivocal “never”, coupled with “as soon as” and “For I answered” suggest decisiveness. However, this is undercut by use of the conditional tense (“\textit{shulde} never”, “\textit{shulde} be sent home”), and Lumley proceeds to depict Agamemnon as anything but incapable of convincing Menelaus, yet easily persuaded by him:

But I using all maner of meanes to persuade my brother to the contrarie, yet notwithstandinge I was so moved with his ernest desire, that at lengthe, I agreeing to his cruell request, wrote a letter to my wife, that she shulde send my daught-ter hither . . . but nowe I repentinge me of the message whiche I wrote to my wife of, have here in this letter denied all that I saide before . . . . (87-90)

Persuaded, Agamemnon cannot bring himself to tell his wife. Nominally resolved, he repents, and when reprimanded by the old man claims to have been “wonderfully disceived” (Lumley 114). The overall effect is to render him hypocritical at best and downright treacherous at worst, and these characteristics reach their apotheosis in his relations with Iphiginea.

Professing that “of all my children I love you [Iphiginea] best . . . ” (Lumley 382), he nevertheless shrinks from avowing his intention to either daughter or wife, proffering instead half-truths and evasions:

\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textbf{IPH}: & Shall I be at the sacrafise father? \\
\textbf{AGA}: & Ye daughter, for you must be one of the chefeste \\
\textbf{IPH}: & Why, shall I dance about it? \\
\textbf{AGA}: & Truly I counte myself more happy because you do not understande me, goo your way therefore and make you readie with the other virgins. But firste let me take my leave of you, for this daye
\end{tabular}
firste let me take my leave of you, for this daye shall separate you and me farre asunder; although this marriage shalbe verie noble, yet truly it dothe grieve me to bestowe you so farre of, whom with suche care I have broughte up.

(Lumley 446, 462, 465, 427-36)

The first sentences of this are Lumley’s creation; Euripides’ Iphigineia responds to Agamemnon’s initial mention of the sacrifice with a commonplace acquiescence (Vellacott 391). The addition of her question and her father’s ambiguous response enables her ironic, poignant misunderstanding, heightening the emotional tension of the scene and underlining Agamemnon’s cowardice.

Similarly, when Clytemnestra asks specific questions about the “place” of Iphigineia’s wedding feast, Agamemnon rebukes her with that gender-commonplace, female disobedience. Where Euripides’ Clytemnestra directly contradicts her husband (“Do as I tell you. / No, by Hera… you manage war and politics: I’ll run home affairs” [Vellacott 394]), Lumley’s is much more subtle, merely focusing instead on her maternal rather than marital duties for the proposed marriage (“I will not goo home yet . . . I must see all things made redie . . . ” [Lumley 471-3]). The excision of wifely disobedience only questionably justifiable in contemporary terms in favour of a much less confrontational devotion to maternal duty not only renders Clytemnestra more sympathetic, but also downplays marital relations in favour of the imperfect father-daughter ones we are shown.

As such moments indicate, relationships between women in the play are close and supportive, providing an alternative to the damaging conflict between patriarchal authority figures. Clytemnestra and Iphigineia, unlike the quarrelling brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, are obviously close and share the same interests—in Iphigineia’s marriage, and in interpreting Agamemnon’s strange behaviour. Iphigineia’s first words are an apology for embracing her father lest her mother feel slighted, and the pair go on to greet him in very similar terms:
Iphigeneia’s emphasis on feeling rather than obedience serves to emphasise the bond Agamemnon has betrayed, and Clytemnestra’s dutiful wifeliness stands in marked contrast to her husband’s abdication of his familial responsibilities.

Although Iphigeneia’s artless questions are fruitless, as soon as she is gone her mother continues to seek answers, robustly refuting Agamemnon’s accusation of disobedience. Clytemnestra is distraught at Iphigeneia’s demise for her own sake as well as her daughter’s, her emotion evident in amplification:

> How can I do otherwise [than mourn], seeing I shall loose you?/I will goo with you O daughter . . ./And will you go away, O daughter, leveing me here?/I praye you daughter tarie, and do not forsake me now . . . (Lumley 850, 879, 884-5, 889-90)

Iphigeneia, too is concerned for her mother, pleading with her to “be of good comforte . . . and do not teare your clothes so . . . ” and leaving quickly “for if I did tarie, I shulde move you to more lamentation” (Lumley 848-9, 882-3).

Clytemnestra persistently seeks to act as a conduit for her daughter’s last wishes, asking her for messages to her sisters, the “other virgines,” her “litell brother,” and finally, “any other thinge I may do for you at grece?” (Lumley 861-72), conveying both her own grief-stricken desperation and the bonds of female allegiance. As mother and also fellow woman, it is her job to speak for and support her daughter. And her ultimate loyalty is to daughter, not hus-
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band. Iphigineia attempts to avoid any strife between her parents, concerned lest Clytemnestra “do that which will not become you . . .” repeatedly asking her not to mourn, and making as a last request “I praye you not to hate my father for this dede: for he is compelled to do it for the welthe and honour of Greece . . .” (Lumley 880-1, 874-5). Clytemnestra, however, immediately responds with disdain for her husband: “If he hath done this willingly then truly he hathe committed a dede farre unworthy of such a noble man as he is . . .” (Lumley 876-7).

Iphigineia appears entirely aware of her mother’s partisan resentment, and in Lumley’s version at least, seeks to moderate it less for the sake of morality than for its possible inconvenient effects:

Herken O mother I praye you unto my wordes, for I perceive you are angrie with your husbande, which you may not do. For you cannot obtaine your purpose by those meanes: And you ought rather to have thanked Achilles, because he so genteelly hathe promised you his help, which may happen to ring him into a grete mischefe. I wolde counsel you therefore to suffer this troble patiently, for I must nedes die, and would suffer it willingly . . . . (Lumley 795-800)

Surface endorsement of the system of patriarchal authority seeking to kill Iphigineia is qualified here. Clytemnestra is reprimanded for being “angrie” with her husband, not on the grounds of inappropriateness or sinfulness, but because “you cannot obtaine your purpose by those means . . .” (Lumley 796). Anger at her husband’s wishes is not per se bad, but expressing it is unlikely to have the desired effect, and silence is therefore a much better tactical move.

In Lumley’s play, Clytemnestra “oughte to have thanked Achilles not because of his hierarchical position, or for his condescension in joining them despite heroic reputation or semi-divine ancestry, but because of his behaviour, his ‘gentel[ness].’” His worth is dependent not on his position, but on his actions—something that bodes ill for Agamemnon. The Chorus, too, “a companie of women”
(Lumley ‘Names of the spekers’, Purkiss 7) is part of this alliance, although without Clytemnestra’s and Iphigeneia’s royal (and, in the latter case, symbolic) status is unable to challenge or contradict Agamemnon independently. Whilst Euripides specifies a company of noblewomen from Chalcis, thus foreign and moderately detached, Lumley’s generic “companie” indicates a much more empirical perspective. Clytemnestra acknowledges their presence and nobility: “This trulie is a stroke of good luck, that so manye noble women meate us . . . ” (Lumley 373-4), unlike Agamemnon and Menelaus, who comprehensively ignore them and address them only to prevent them from speaking: “And I pray you also, O ye women, open not this matter . . . ” (Lumley 365). As well as supporting Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra, they eulogise the departing Iphigeneia in her own terms (“glorious victorie”, “perpetual renowne” (Lumley 914, 903-4) and give her sacrifice a disturbingly sexual edge: “Beholde yonder goeth the virgine to be sacrificed with a great companie of soldiers after hir, whose bewtfull face and faire bodi anone shalbe defiled with her owne blode . . . ” (Lumley 909-10). Such eroticisation serves to enhance the specifically age- and gender-related nature of Iphigeneia’s vulnerability, a status she shared with Lumley herself.

Accordingly, whilst paternal inadequacy remains the focus of the play, throughout the masculine world of politico-military, heroism is discredited. Continual emphasis on what is “mete”, “ought”, “shulde”, “fit”, and “lawfull” 1 plus ideas of “worth”, “honor”, and “nob[ility]” (Lumley eg. 579, 572, 578), particularly by the Chorus, opposes systems of law and social order to the men supposedly responsible for enforcing them. Even the hero Achilles is, in Lumley’s version, weak and ineffectual. In Euripides, his virtues and lineage are given a sixteen-line panegyric, and his dramatic entrance, showing a dynamism conspicuously absent in Agamemnon, is accompanied by assertions of his ancestry and merit. Lumley’s Achilles is far less forceful. No mention of divine forebears or military history is made, possibly because it would detract from the Christlike divinity later achieved by Iphigeneia.

Clytemnestra appeals to him as a hero, but he responds by transferring responsibility. Although she pleads for his help on the grounds that “I alone beinge a woman cannot persuade Agamemnon
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. . .” he rejects the initiative and asks her to speak first: “I thinke it beste, that you should prove firste if you can perswade her father not to deliver her” (Lumley 559-61, 594-5). Here he rejects not only Clytemnestra’s plea, but also her unequivocal invocation of male superiority: he thinks Agamemnon is more likely to listen to her than himself. In contrast, Euripides’ Clytemnestra “throws away all pride and falls before [him]” (Vellacott 400), prompting almost 60 lines of self-praise and predicted success culminating in the declaration: “Rest easy; I have come for your deliverance like a powerful god . . . ” (Vellacott 403). He uses various cognates of “I” or “me” forty-four times in fifty-eight lines.

Rather than Lumley’s equivocal “I thinke it beste . . .” the original Achilles’ reply takes the form of direct instruction: “First, kneel and beg him . . . ” (Vellacott 404), and while Euripides’ hero is stirred to Iphigineia’s defence by [his] “proud heart” or “[his] whole soul’s chivalry” depending on translation (see Vellacott and Way, both l.919); Lumley’s is moved instead by Clytemnestra’s “piteouse complainte” (Lumley 566), which instils that troublesome entity, female speech, with much greater power. Rather than her original’s aggressive anger, Lumley’s Achilles is “trobled” and “moved” by Clytemnestra’s story, and his charismatic dynamism is further reduced by repeated use of negative constructions such as “no small dishonour” and “no litell reproache” (Lumley 565, 566, 572, 575). Instead of swearing passionately and lengthily that he will save Iphigineia, Lumley’s timid Achilles repeatedly qualifies his offer of assistance, emphasising his limitations: “I am compelled to help your daughter as moche as shall lie in my power . . . ” (Lumley 572-3). The overall impact is to evoke the inadequacies and limitations of conventional masculine authority in all its forms. Agamemnon’s position as the locus of political and military leadership enables his paternal inadequacy to stand as synecdoche of all these failings, and Iphigineia to claim a symbolic and Christianised heroism in the face of iconographic victimhood.

In emphasising the undeserved nature of her death, she wrests decision and focus from Agamemnon to herself, becoming the driving dramatic force behind the rest of the play, and figuring herself as the saviour of her country:
Dothe not bothe the destruction of Troy and also the welthe of grece, whiche is the most frutefull countrie of the worlde hang upon my death? . . . I shall . . . get a glorious renowne to the grecians for ever . . . Wherfore I will offer my selfe willingly to deathe, for my countrie: for by this means I shall not only leave a perpetual memorie of my deathe, but I shall cause also the grecians to rule over the barbarians, which dothe as it were properly belong to them . . . (Lumley 794ff)

The succession of unashamed first-person pronouns and dynamic verb-phrases (“I shall . . . remedy,” “I will . . .,” “I shall . . . get,” “I shall cause”) defiantly position Iphigeneia as the active party. It is she, not the men who fight, that will be responsible for the Grecians’ “glorious renowne”. Not only does Lumley’s heroine visualise herself contributing to the dominant hierarchy on equal terms (“glorious renowne” was and is a term more usually applied to masculine military heroism), but she will be responsible for the re-establishment of “proper” racial and social hierarchies and the restoration of the natural order, “For the Grecians bi nature are free, like as the barbarians are borne to bondage . . .” (Lumley 821-3, emphases mine).

She seeks the same “perpetuall memorie” and “glorious renowne” that Euripides’ Achilles already possesses, but is conspicuously absent from Lumley’s. Her heroine\(^2\) has all the dynamic language (“I shall” without Achilles’ qualification “as moche as in my power”) and rhetorical grace. In fact, her rhetoric outweighs that of Achilles to the extent that he is ruled by it: “Because you seme so willing to die, I can not speke against you . . .” (Lumley 841-2). He “wonders” at the “bouldeness” of her mind, and declares “Trulie . . . would count myself happi if I might obtain the O Iphigineia to be my wife, and I thinke o Grece to be very fortunate bicause thou hast nourished such a one: for you have spoken verie well, in that you will not strive against the determinacioun of the gods . . .” (Lumley 826-30). The construction of this sentence is such that the post-colon clause (“for you have spoken verie well”) can easily be taken (given
Lumley’s habitual usage of parallel subordinate clauses, for example, 892-6) to apply to either Greece’s good fortune or his desire to marry her. We are a long way from silent subordination as the essence of female virtue.

Such dynamic female heroism is all Lumley’s invention. She has considerably reduced Iphigineia’s initial pathetic pleas for survival. The only two of Achilles’ speeches not cut heavily, presumably because they lack the reminders of his heroic nature so prominent in Euripides, are the two in praise of Iphigineia, but Lumley alters their emphasis. Euripides’ Achilles harps on her weakness as opposed to his own strength, patronisingly insisting that she is accepting her fate not through any independent desire for glory, but because she has “quit fighting against gods, which proves too hard for you; and made a virtue out of necessity,” (Vellacott 419). He contrasts this weakness to his own military prowess, persists in informing Iphigineia that she will change her mind, and positions his men near the altar in order to save her when she does: “I am going to place my weapons at the altar-side, ready to . . . prevent . . . even you will then . . . call upon my promise, when you see the knife near to your throat. You shall not, for a hasty impulse, lose your life . . .” (Vellacott 420). Lumley’s Achilles, by contrast, speaks in conditionals and possibilities, not declaratives (“I wolde count myself . . .” “if I might obtaine”) and Iphigineia’s self-determination is such that he is ruled by it: “I can not speake against you . . .” (Lumley 826, 841). Instead of anticipating an inevitable volte-face, he repeats his promise to help only “lest you shulde happen to change your mind . . .” (Lumley 842-3). Lumley’s hero recognises, as his original does not, Iphigineia’s remarkable self-possession, and stands in awe of it. He mentions the limitations of his own power, not the limitations of hers.

Finally, the imagery surrounding Iphigineia’s death becomes increasingly Christlike. She dies “that with my blode I maye pacify the wrath of the goddes against you . . .” (Lumley 897), and figures herself as literally a saviour: “I shall . . save all Greece with my death . . . I shall desire you . . not to put yourself in danger for my cause: but suffer me rather to save all Greece with my death . . .” (Lumley 855, 838). There are echoes of John 16 here, as in her repeated requests to others—“the other virgines,” her sisters, and her mother—
not to mourn her death:

**CLY:** What shall I not lament your deathe?

**IPH:** No truly you oughte not, seinge that I shall both be sacrificised…and also save grece. Desier them I pray you, not to mourne for my death… I wolde not have you to mourne for my cause, for I will not refuse to die . . . .

(Lumley 853-5, 859-60, 901-2)

Her body miraculously disappears just like Christ’s in the tomb, to be replaced by a white hart, its colour signifying purity and virginity and echoing the white robes of the angels that replaced Jesus’ body in Mark 16 and Mark 28. It is noticeable that during these climactic scenes, “goddes” or “the goddess” are often replaced with a simple “god” except when they refer specifically to the deity demanding sacrifice, indicating the Judeo-Christian God of contemporary England rather than the pantheon of Ancient Greece. This concept of Iphigeneia as feminine Christ actually uses her position of relative powerlessness and essential subjectivity—her ultimate vulnerability to masculine and divine whim—to enable another kind of feminine power, that of symbolic and spiritual significance that also serves to expose male deficiencies.

The changes Lumley makes to Euripides show a world of masculine inadequacy, encapsulated in a father’s irresponsibility, and contrast it to an assertive woman actively choosing death as her contribution to a military campaign and rewarded with the trappings of sainthood. It is tempting, therefore, to interpret this highly individualistic interpretation of a play about the abdication of parental responsibility and expressions of feminine power, not as a self-conscious gesture of assimilation into the dominant patriarchal hierarchy, but as an expression of anxiety and disquiet with the implications of such assimilation. This is not to declare Lumley merely the victim of an abusive patriarchal system; such an interpretation would be as simplistic as to say the same of Iphigeneia herself. But it is to suggest that Iphigeneia was not so much a conscious consolidation of her position within patriarchy as an expression of her anxieties about its consequences, and the parallels several critics have
pointed out between Jane Lumley and her cousin, the ill-fated Jane Grey, offer a possible, if ultimately unconfirmable, motivation for such concerns. Her father, Henry Grey, placed Jane Grey, Queen for nine days, on the throne and his participation in Wyatt’s Rebellion was, according to Holinshed, directly responsible for the “haste” of his daughter’s execution. Like Iphigineia, she was unashamedly aware of her father’s culpability, addressing him the night before her execution in language strikingly similar to Lumley’s:

Father, although it hath pleased God to hasten my death by you . . . I may account myself blessed, that washing my hands with the innocence of my fact, my guiltless blood may cry before the Lord, Mercy to the innocent . . . . (Helms 20)

The public nature of such letters, copied and recopied for popular edification, raises the intriguing possibility that the echoes were deliberate. For the other figure largely to blame for Jane Grey’s death was her uncle, Jane Lumley’s father, who confirmed her Queen only to betray his oath of allegiance and deliver the seal of England to Jane’s successor, Mary I. There are no records of the cousins’ relationship; they may not even have met. But given their similarities in age, position, and characteristics—both highly intelligent, devoutly religious, classically educated—it is hardly unlikely that the parallels raised questions for the young Jane Lumley about the security of her own position, caught between her father’s affections and his political machinations. Lumley’s reconstruction of Euripides’ Iphigineia, whether or not produced under the auspices of father or husband, emphasises women’s centrality to the dynastic and political concerns of a patriarchal power system for which her cousin and namesake was, to all intents and purposes, sacrificed, and offers an ideology in which such sacrifice not only equals but outweighs the contribution of men. As it turned out, Lumley and Arundel’s relationship in later life seems to have been amicable, with Jane and her husband returning to live at Arundel after the deaths of her siblings. But the existence of Iphigineia, a manuscript unlike all others extant in her hand, lacking a dedication to Arundel and fundamentally concerned
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with the abuse of paternal authority, implies that this might not have always been the case.

Notes

1 Lumley eg. 692, 590, 678, 689, 599, 717, 718, 263, 669, 639, 542, 571, 574, 590, 591, 596, 498, 638, 693.

2 This term is anachronistic in context, but I use it to differentiate her from Achilles. For discussion of the term ‘hero’ as applied to women, see Hopkins, Hero; Conn Lieber, ed., Female.
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“I Fear She Cannot Love at All”: Unnatural Female Sexuality in the Revenge Tragedy

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The Spanish Tragedy’s Bel-Imperia (1585) and Tamora of Titus Andronicus (1594) provide us with examples of the extremes of the early treatment of female sexuality in the revenge drama, powerful and sexual figures who demonstrate similar expressions of agency, but with very different moral bases; although the two women share certain central defining qualities, the plays judge their sexuality very differently. Both exert an active and forceful sexuality that exists outside male control. This active sexual agency undergoes a marked change across the course of Renaissance drama in which the majority of female revengers become disempowered and desexualized. By examining the women in Hamlet (1602) and The Broken Heart (1633)—plays written in anticipation of and after (respectively) the return to a male monarchy—with reference to their predecessors, we can discover ways in which this model
maintained a central consistency while simultaneously evolving far from the empowered and validated Bel-Imperia. Ania Loomba’s suggestion that “In Jacobean drama female transgression is no longer simply a spectre conjured up by the male imagination” (104), denies the aggressive and active agency possessed by the early female revengers, and assumes a trangressive authority on the part of later female characters that the women of \textit{The Broken Heart} and \textit{Hamlet} lack. She argues: “The general distinction between Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is that in the latter the aggressive woman does sexually transgress and is not only imagined to do so” (104). However, as we can see, the reverse seems to be true for the women of the revenge tragedies. While Bel-Imperia and Tamora are sexually transgressive and defy male control of their sexuality, the women of \textit{Hamlet} and \textit{The Broken Heart} lack the transgressive ability and sexual agency of their predecessors.

\textbf{Bel-Imperia and Tamora: Sexuality and Moral Decadence}

Although the figures of Bel-Imperia and Tamora are superficially similar, both taking lower-class lovers surreptitiously in order to indulge their active sexual desires, the respective plays judge them drastically differently. Bel-Imperia remains worthy of being ensconced with “vestal virgins and fair queens” (Kyd 4.5.22), while Tamora is condemned as a “ravenous tiger” (Shakespeare 5.3.195) and denied burial rites. Whereas Bel-Imperia’s sexual desire for a lower class man seems to find validation in her lovers’ moral superiority to their social betters, Tamora’s lover is explicitly the foulest character in the drama; Tamora’s sexuality is linked irrevocably to miscegenation, adultery, and moral depravity. Although Bel-Imperia is ultimately vindicated, Tamora is subjected to vilification, not just of her moral degeneracy, but also of her ultimate unnaturalness as a woman. However, despite her validation as an individual, the men around her, who repeatedly try to interpret her actions based on their understanding of “proper” female behavior, also implicitly represent Bel-Imperia as unnatural. Bel-Imperia and Tamora are linked by a constriction of their power and agency that necessitates their use
of male agents and that presages their eventual death as subversive elements that cannot function within the social system.

Bel-Imperia’s sexuality becomes a central consideration from the beginning of *The Spanish Tragedy*. In the first lines of the play, we learn of Andrea’s lower class station and his involvement with Bel-Imperia:

My name was Don Andrea; my descent,
Though not ignoble, yet inferior far
To gracious fortunes of my tender youth:
For there in prime and pride of all my years,
By duteous service and deserving love,
In secret I possessed a worthy dame,
Which hight sweet Bel-Imperia by name.
(1.prologue.5-11)

Andrea’s self-identification, immediately after declaring his national affiliation and profession, centers on his relationship with Bel-Imperia and his social inferiority to her. He lists his social status specifically by comparison to Bel-Imperia’s; though he is “not ignoble,” his identification is not as a noble, but as the socially inferior lover. Our initial impression of Bel-Imperia centers around her role as upper-class lover/love object. Despite Andrea’s mention of his “wanton” flesh, however, this love relationship is not depicted in a negative fashion. Robert Barrie argues that “courtly behaviour *in general*, with its emphasis on the fulfillment of secret sexual desire, is made to seem tawdry here” (66), but the other language of this passage does not support his assertion. Andrea speaks of his “duteous service and deserving love” as the vehicle by which he obtains Bel-Imperia’s favor, hardly the salacious scheming that Barrie’s interpretation would suggest. Andrea’s treatment of his “secret” relationship with Bel-Imperia seems more reverent than “tawdry,” and his being singled out for favor by Proserpine hardly supports a reading of the play in which we are to see this love relationship as morally degrading or deserving of punishment.

In Bel-Imperia’s first appearance, she is again identified with active sexuality and desire. Her speech begins with a request to Hor-
ratio to relate to her the circumstances surrounding the death of her “garland’s sweetest flower,” whose death “hath buried [Bel-Imperia’s] delights” (1.3.4-5), Don Andrea. She is thus presented not only as a lover, but also as an active agent in her love relationships. It is her delights that she misses in Andrea’s passing, and she identifies him by his relation to her; he is a flower on her greater garland. The aggressive nature of her desire is reinforced by her subsequent decision to take Horatio as a second lover. Both Andrea and Horatio share a valor and martial authority that the nobler men of the play lack. As Katherine Eisaman Maus argues, “Don Andrea and Horatio’s valor in battle surpasses that of their superiors and their reward is Bel-Imperia, who contemptuously ignores the obligation of highborn women to await arranged marriages to suitable patricians” (91). However, while Horatio and Andrea’s roles as martially and morally superior figures validate Bel-Imperia’s selection of these two as lovers, it is important to remember that she is not positioned as a passive reward. Her selection of a second lover reiterates her romantic agency for the audience, emphasizing the role her desire plays in this selection. As Frank Whigham notes:

When Bel-Imperia moves to take Horatio, she seizes what now, in light of Andrea, counts as another specimen of a type, the type she likes. Bel-Imperia’s sexual choices are marked as trans-individual and categorical; they tell us especially about her drives, seen as anterior to any external blow from Cupid’s arrow. (37)

Bel-Imperia does not merely wait for a new suitor, instead she actively seeks a new lover that fits her preexisting specifications. She is thus confirmed early on in the play as a desiring and sexually empowered female, one who is justified in her actions by the situation in which she finds herself. The play lacks any overarching condemnation of her actions and, indeed, seems to reaffirm the validity of her choices with her final relegation to “those joys / That vestal virgins and fair queens possess” (5.Epilogue.21-2). While she is both actively desiring and manipulative of the men around her (using first Horatio and
then Hieronimo to effect her revenge on Balthazar), she avoids any moral censure for her actions.

Nevertheless, Bel-Imperia operates explicitly outside her prescribed societal role. The men around her, who seem incapable of reconciling active female agency with their worldview, continually misidentify her motives. Balthazar suggests that Bel-Imperia “cannot love at all” (2.1.78): she does not operate within a social role that he understands. Bel-Imperia’s rejection of social mandates renders her love incomprehensible to Balthazar. The Spanish king argues that Bel-Imperia’s desire is potentially dangerous or subversive to the social order around her: “If she neglect him and forgo his love, / She both will wrong her own estate and ours” (2.3.45-6). And even Bel-Imperia’s ally and agent, Hieronimo, misunderstands her final suicide, claiming that “Poor Bel-Imperia missed her part” (5.3.169). He interprets her action as a belated response to Horatio’s death, a motive that fits into a social model of responsive female desire, rather than crediting her with the agency that she demonstrates in the play. Bel-Imperia’s sexual desire is thus not constructed as immoral, but nevertheless as socially disruptive and aberrant.

Tamora’s sexuality in Titus Andronicus is somewhat slower to emerge. The play initially identifies her by her role as mother to her soon-to-be-sacrificed eldest son: “Victorious Titus, rue the tears I shed, / A mother’s tears in passion for her son” (1.1.108-9). In this initial identification, Tamora’s role as desiring sexual agent is masked by her role as mother (a role ultimately perverted with her unintentional cannibalism of her sons and her desire for Aaron to kill their baby—a course of action that even the monstrous Aaron balks at). Her next appearance, though, is as the prospective bride of Saturninus. While she still attempts to elide the issue of her sexual agency, identifying her role as “handmaid . . . to his desires, / A loving nurse, a mother to his youth” (1.1.334-5), we can see her active involvement in her romantic negotiations, and power over the men around her in her direction of Saturninus: “My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last” (1.1.445). Here Tamora is identified as not only in control of herself, but also of Saturninus, directing him to her own ends. While her “unnatural” sexual desire is not visible here, she already represents a threat in her role as both a powerful and manipulative
woman, and as a foreign agent suborning the power of the empire for her own ends.

Tamora acts as a negative and threatening model of the dangers of unchecked female sexuality. After her manipulative agency has been established, we see her underlying sexuality in Aaron’s first speech, which represents Tamora’s agency as both aggressive and threatening to the social order itself:

To wanton with this queen,
This goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph,
This siren that will charm Rome’s Saturnine
And see his shipwrack and his commonweal’s.
(2.1.21-4)

Tamora is identified as both powerful and dangerous; she is a “siren,” luring the Roman ship of state to its doom with her sexual charms. To have the queen’s illicit lover revealed as a Moor reinforces the idea that her possession of this agency is dangerous and unnatural. Russ McDonald notes the effect that Aaron’s race would have had upon Shakespeare’s audience: “As a Moor (or blackamoor), Aaron probably would have served the Elizabethan audience as a magnet for revulsion. Much is made of his race, which the Romans regard Platonically, as if dark skin signified an evil soul” (xxxix).

The other characters of the play repeatedly link Aaron’s skin color to moral degeneracy. Bassanius chides Tamora that her “swart Cimmeran, / Doth make [her] honor of his body’s hue, / Spotted, detested, and abominable” (2.3.72-4). Bassanius argues that Tamora has herself become “spotted” with Aaron’s moral “darkness” through her association with him. In Aaron, Tamora chooses the most unsuitable of potential lovers; not only is he socially and racially inappropriate, but, as we discover by the end of the play, he is absolutely immoral except in his role as a father. The play figures Tamora’s sexual desire as ultimately unnatural in her selection of an ultimately inferior object of desire. She is concerned solely with physical desire; Tamora cuckolds the emperor of Rome for no other reason than to satisfy her lust. The description of Tamora as Semiramis reinforces this idea of unnatural sexual desire, with Semiramis serving as an
icon of “unnatural” and excessive female sexuality through her reputed affair with her son.

In addition to these implicit condemnations, Lavinia openly criticizes Tamora as unwomanly, “No grace? No womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name!” (2.3.182-3). Even Lavinia rejects Tamora’s agency, implying that her active sexuality is repugnant even to other women. Lavinia asserts that Tamora’s actions unmake her as a woman. Her refusal to assent to Lavinia’s requests for a merciful death shows “no womanhood;” she is a “beastly creature.” Indeed, her sexuality ruins not just her, but also Lavinia, the embodiment of chastity. It is with Tamora’s assistance that her sons rape and mutilate Lavinia; Tamora’s sexuality is infectious, dangerous not just to herself, but to everyone that she comes into contact with. We can see this danger most clearly with the play’s transformation of Tamora’s initial maternal concern into the cannibalistic consumption of her sons. Tamora, in her ingestion of their bodies, becomes complicit in the exact act that she begs to prevent at the beginning of the play, the destruction of her offspring. From her earlier pose of the mother protecting her children, here Tamora’s lust for vengeance results in her destruction of her maternal identity with the consumption of the sons from which her role as mother springs. Tamora’s unnaturalness is further emphasized by her willingness to destroy her adulterous child, an act that even Aaron, an otherwise totally corrupt figure, will not contemplate.

Despite the conflicting moral messages presented by the treatments of Bel-Imperia and Tamora, they are unified by their need to work through male agents. Bel-Imperia must use Horatio and Hieronimo to effect her vengeance upon Balthazar, as she is denied the opportunity to avenge herself upon him without the assistance of Hieronimo’s framing playlet. Tamora never acts directly against Titus or his family, but uses the men around her to effect their punishments. While Tamora manipulates and plans the action, she requires her sons, her lover, and her husband to actually do her dirty work. In this, Tamora is even more constrained than Bel-Imperia, as Bel-Imperia does manage to effect her vengeance with her own hands, albeit in a theatricalized and demartialized space. Where Bel-Imperia is ultimately able to enact her vengeance before the audience, Ta-
mora does not even remain onstage to see her vengeance enacted on Titus or his family. It is this estrangement from the physical process of vengeance that enables Tamora's ultimate punishment: having left her sons to punish Titus, she is unaware of their deaths and is tricked into consuming them and accepting Titus' apparent reconciliation and his “madness.”

Although Bel-Imperia is successful in enacting her revenge, she is ultimately incapable of maintaining her sexual and social agency, so central to her identity, within the social structure that surrounds her. Likewise, Tamora is doomed by her own sexual agency even without Titus' intervention; Lucius is prepared to use Aaron to condemn the queen and cause her downfall. Tamora's death at the hands of Titus is almost incidental. She is already set up to be excised by Roman justice without Titus' involvement. For both women, their eventual death is necessitated by their active sexual agency. Regardless of the contrasting moral positions of the characters, both plays acknowledge the inability of female agency to survive in a social structure that requires the subjugation of aristocratic female desire to political and social cohesion.

Bel-Imperia, Gertrude, and Ophelia: The Death of Female Revenge

In *Hamlet*, we see two potential female revengers: the chaste, mad Ophelia and the corrupt and unaware Gertrude. Ophelia extends the disempowered model of the female revenger to an extreme. Where each of the other characters exercises agency over herself and her surroundings, Ophelia is unable to even determine her own end. Rejected by her lover and with her father murdered, Ophelia is not only unable to exercise a revenging agency on the sources of her misery, she is unable to exercise any agency at all. Ophelia cannot even begin to desire revenge. When she is rejected by Hamlet, she does not voice anger, but instead misery: “And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, / That sucked the honey of his music vows” (3.1.155-6). We do not even hear a response from Ophelia to her father's death before she turns her revenge upon herself with her madness and passive suicide. However, where Ophelia at least comprehends the dif-
difculties of her role as chaste aristocratic woman, Gertrude does not even understand her own role in the revenge being played out in *Hamlet*. Gertrude demonstrates a brief defiance in drinking from the goblet, but whether this is an intentional self-sacrifice or an ignorant one, she remains powerless to avenge the death of her first husband or to save her son.

Ophelia seems to completely lack sexual agency. Although we can read her as swayed by Hamlet’s letters and protestations of love, she expresses no carnal desire towards him. Indeed, the play links female sexual desire to Gertrude, while Ophelia is instead warned to protect herself from aggressive male sexuality. While women are depicted as dangerously fickle and changeable, the play elides the issue of Ophelia’s desire. Laertes suggests that Ophelia is as yet incapable of desire, recommending that she keep herself “in the rear of [her] affection, / Out of the shot or danger of desire” (1.3.34-5). But in the Denmark of *Hamlet*, even this pre-desiring space is unable to keep Ophelia completely free of the corrupting taint of female sexuality. As Laertes adds, “The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon” (1.3.36-7). For the men of the play, there is no way that Ophelia will ever be able to contain her own desire without external restriction.

Ophelia is warned of the dangers of succumbing to male sexual advances, and the men around her attempt (successfully) to prevent her from control of her own desire or disposal. Her death only serves to underscore this complete powerlessness; not only is violence excised in her death, but Ophelia is denied control over her ending. Ophelia is passively overcome by the river; she is unable to resist or object to her disposal. Her sexuality is represented as childlike and innocent, in blatant contrast to Gertrude, Tamora, or Bel-Imperia, finding lewder expression only in the bawdy songs she sings unknowingly in her madness. Where the others possess an ability to affect and effect their situations and desires, Ophelia is, ultimately, completely void of agency or articulated desire. Her madness removes her from court society and robs her of any ability to exercise power. As Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues, “Madness is ultimately complicit with what Teresa de Lauretis calls ‘technologies of gender,’ and provides the illusion of power while locating the
mad (non)subject outside any sphere where power can be exerted” (4). Instead of attempting to strike back at Hamlet, the source of her misery, or to lay hands on herself, as Isabella does in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Ophelia instead loses her very identity to outside forces that she does not and cannot effectively interact with. Her madness, while allowing her to voice sexual desire and agency, in fact robs her of any agency, sexual or otherwise, and any ability to operate within the Danish society.

For Ophelia, *all* sexuality is unnatural and potentially destructive. *Hamlet* aligns female sexuality with the corrupt Gertrude, whose lust has precipitated the events of the tragedy. Ophelia’s role is not to desire, but to resist the desires of others, by absence if necessary, emphasizing her inability to check these desires. Where Bel-Imperia can “countercheck” (Kyd 2.2.37) Horatio’s passion with her own, Ophelia is forced instead to simply “be somewhat scanter of [her] maiden presence” (1.3.121). Even simply speaking to Hamlet is apparently a corrupting act for Ophelia, as Polonious notes: “I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet” (1.3.132-4).

Ophelia is denied the rhetorical skills that allow Bel-Imperia to consolidate her own position. Even speaking de-virginizes her and “slanders” her chastity. Where Bel-Imperia’s sexuality is defined by her speech, Ophelia’s is contained by it. Even chaste refusal apparently carries its dangers, and female sexuality cannot survive uncorrupted in *Hamlet’s* Denmark. Hamlet argues to Ophelia “If thou marry . . . be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shall not escape calumny” (3.1.135-7). There is no safe place here for female sexual expression, even within marriage. And for Hamlet, this corruption is inherently female, “wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” (3.1.150-1). Active female sexuality is not only a danger to the woman, but to the men around her, implying that the root of the corruption in the court of Denmark is Gertrude’s rampant sexuality. As Jacqueline Rose notes, “Hamlet’s horror at Gertrude . . . makes her a focus for a set of ills which the drama shows as exceeding the woman *at the same time* as it makes of her the cause” (101). The cause for the tragedy is thus laid at the feet
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of a female source, without retaining any space for female agency.

Ophelia possesses all of the necessary motives for revenge; however, she not only fails to attempt it, she seemingly fails to even possess the option. Gertrude, conversely, also possesses a motive for revenge and active agency, but is unaware of her situation. The two women thus become representative of a female “non-revenger.” The women in the play become objects, roots and tools of revenge, but lack either the agency or the understanding to effect revenge. Female sexuality, desire, and power are diminished or dismissed, depicted as dangerous, corrupt, and ultimately destructive to the social order. Gertrude’s lust is particularly inexcusable for Hamlet as she presents a mature vision of female desire, without even the excuse of youthful passion:

You cannot call it love, for at your age
The heydey in the blood is tame, it’s humble,
And waits upon the judgement . . .
O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
If thou canst mutine in a matron’s bones,
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
And melt in her own fire. (3.4.69-85)

The play depicts aggressive female desire as fundamentally unnatural and disruptive. If even Gertrude, a middle-age matron, is subject to overpowering lust, then no woman is potentially unaffected. Hamlet denies the possibility that Gertrude is motivated by natural affection, claiming that she “cannot call it love,” and instead ascribes her hasty remarriage to corrupt and lustful desire. Hamlet ascribes the root of the evils in the Danish court to this lack of control over Gertrude’s sexuality. Gertrude’s lust brings Claudius, a fratricidal agent to the throne, displacing young Hamlet, the proper heir. And neither Gertrude’s unbridled sexuality nor Ophelia’s chaste rejection can survive in a play that ends with all of its female characters dead and silenced.
Bel-Imperia, Penthea, and Calantha: The Containable Female Revenger

In *The Broken Heart*, we see the female revenger divided into the figures of Penthea and Calantha. Penthea is subject to male authority like Bel-Imperia and Tamora; unlike these figures, she does not defy social conventions but exercises her agency to conform to them. Instead of Bel-Imperia’s or Tamora’s active resistance in their revenge machinations, she takes her revenge through passive resistance in her starvation and death. Calantha, sitting enthroned as heir, manages to control events and to enact revenge while simultaneously operating within the bounds of society and law. While Bel-Imperia is unable to revenge what she sees as the wrongful death of her lover through her assigned social channels, Calantha uses legal proceedings to exact a “just” retribution for the murder of her beloved.

Calantha’s agency stems not from her rebellion or subversiveness, but from her assigned social position. She is unique, rather than an example of female potential. What makes this distinction especially significant is that Calantha is a female revenger without sexuality. She grants her romantic favor, but apparently does so without concern for sexual fulfillment. While she does *desire* Ithocles, her concerns seem emotional, not sexual.

Penthea also avoids sexual desire, expressing desire only in order to refute it as unsuitable. She goes so far as to deny submitting to her desire, even were it possible to meet it in a socially acceptable manner:

Should I outlive my bondage let me meet
Another worse than this, and less desired,
If of all the men alive thou shouldst but touch
My lip or hand again. (2.3.103-107)

Penthea considers her own desire to be so dangerous that, rather than consider deferring it, she utterly denies it. She argues that she has been turned into a whore by her enforced marriage and rejects Orgilus’ suit entirely, turning her willpower to reinforcing the dicta of her brother and society in her rejection of her own sexual desire.
As Marion Lomax notes, “In *The Broken Heart* men try to exert control over women’s bodies and women finally wrest this power from them, but often only to reserve the right to destroy themselves” (xiv). Penthea can resist and reject male control, but only to the extent that it attempts to make her either violate or live within social standards. Penthea is a model wife and sister, and her resistance emerges only in her own self-destruction. Her persuading Calantha to accept the suit of her brother, a socially inappropriate match, serves as a revenge, but an inherently passive one, since the destruction it causes comes through advancing her brother’s desires. By helping enable Calantha and Ithocles to fall in love, she undermines the social order that has condemned her, and (albeit unknowingly) sets the stage for Calantha’s dramatic death. For Penthea, succumbing to her own desire is more dangerous than misery or bondage, although living within this bondage is also fundamentally unacceptable.

Conversely, Calantha never acknowledges desire, exercising her agency without indicating a sexual motive. Although she does grant the suit of a lower class lover, as do Bel-Imperia and Tamora, she does so in a way that does not circumvent the social fabric. When Calantha requests a change of groom from her father, he is quick to validate her choice: “Still th’art my daughter, / Still grow’st upon my heart” (4.3.81-2). Where Bel-Imperia’s father and uncle are unwilling to brook any exception to their betrothal plans and threaten to disown her, Calantha’s father immediately reaffirms his paternal love and approval, despite her rejection of his approved suitor. Her proposed marriage nicely circumvents the issue of female sexual desire through its chaste expression. Calantha is not a sexual being, but a marriageable being, and Penthea’s rejection of her own desire echoes and emphasizes this desexualization.

Neither of the women presents a radical rejection of social roles. Penthea exercises her agency to strengthen and support societal expectations, rather than subverting them. Calantha is identified in her role as an object of desire, not as a lover, and she does not seek out or aggressively pursue her suit, but rather passively accepts and yields to the devotion of her suitor, despite her superior status. Calantha is careful to excise her agency or authority from her courtship, deemphasizing her actions. She casts her ring near Ithocles, but
avoids specific claim of her intent, stating that it can be picked up by any “who dares stoop for’t” (4.1.27). After Ithocles has picked it up and presented it to her, she once again denies her involvement, stating, “Let the man keep his fortune, since he found it” (4.1.33). Where Bel-Imperia tells Horatio to take her glove “for his pains” (Kyd 1.4.101), creating a sense of exchange, Calantha attempts to make the exchange entirely Ithocles’ act.

As Frank Whigham notes, Bel-Imperia’s gesture only serves to reaffirm her own authority:

Given the chivalric link between Bel-Imperia’s handkerchief (now Horatio’s), her glove (now also Horatio’s), and the (contrasting?) use of gloves as gages for challenge, it seems right to see the dropped glove as Bel-Imperia’s aggressive appropriation of the (masculine) chivalric challenge . . . Bel-imperia gives the glove to Horatio “for his pains,” thus marking the move as only symbolic.

Bel-Imperia’s favor serves to emphasize her authority and control, and Horatio’s part is minimized. However, Calantha’s act serves exactly the opposite purpose. In Calantha’s verbal rewriting of the incident, Ithocles “finds” the token (it is not granted or given to him) making Ithocles the active agent instead of the recipient of her active favor. Despite her authority, Calantha uses the same actions as Bel-Imperia to de-emphasize her own role in the courtship, making her a more traditional female figure, despite her station, than Bel-Imperia. Calantha does exercise choice with her suitor, but does so in a non-subversive manner. She possesses an ability that Bel-Imperia does not: to reject her father’s chosen suitor without social repercussions. This enables Calantha to manipulate events while still maintaining a more traditional gender role than either Bel-Imperia or Tamora. Where the other women are subject to the power structure of their societies, Calantha is the power structure of her society.

In this, Calantha represents a very different figure; she is not forced to extra-legal action to obtain her desires, but can rather
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neatly exercise her authority to obtain satisfaction. She uses the men around her to carry out the execution of the man who has murdered her betrothed, but makes sure specifically to place her act in a context of legal action: “We begin our reign / With a first act of justice.—Thy confession, / Unhappy Orgilus, dooms thee a sentence” (5.2.65-7).

Calantha makes clear that Orgilus’ punishment is necessitated by the demands of justice, not motivated by her own vengeful desires. Thus, while she effects a revenge for her lover’s death, it is neither subversive nor dangerous. Calantha’s actions do not suggest the unbridled agency that makes Bel-Imperia and Tamora such fearful figures; she is explicitly working within the social system, and her revenge serves only to de-emphasize the potential of the unincorporated female revenger.

Penthea, by contrast, is entirely devoid of power, except to unintentionally engineer the suffering of others by pressing her brother’s suit with Calantha. And Penthea’s revenge also fails to be subversive. She does not work against the structure of society and its systems, but rather operates entirely within them. Calantha’s elevated social position does not reflect a similar advancement for other women. Where Bel-Imperia and Tamora exercise their agency despite their social positions, Calantha exercises hers because of it. Her social acceptance does not represent a validation of female agency, but instead is linked to her unique social position. This uniqueness is only reinforced by the subject role of Penthea, who is not only denied agency, but is removed from even the limited social circle of the court. She is confined and absolutely removed from the sight of the audience in contrast to Bel-Imperia, who continues to act and speak even in confinement.

Penthea thus becomes a part of a broader movement towards the confinement and elimination of these female voices. As Ania Loomba notes: “The Duchess of Malfi, Beatrice in The Changeling, Bianca in Women Beware Women, Penthea in The Broken Heart, and Annabella in ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore are variously confined, locked up, and closed: the attempt to control female deviance becomes spatially explicit” (69). Where Calantha is able to move around the court environment as she wills, Penthea, a wife, loses both identity and
mobility, disappearing into female enclosure to reappear as a silenced corpse, an object to a revenge she has desired, but can participate in only as an inanimate prop. Penthea’s death demonstrates the powerlessness of aristocratic women in Ford’s play, only highlighted by Calantha’s unique status and agency.

As with Bel-Imperia, the deaths of these two are self-determined; however, they occur bloodlessly, and without severely disrupting the social order. Where Bel-Imperia pursues her revenge heedless of the damage that she causes to the social order, Calantha is careful to tie ends up neatly before she disposes of herself. Penthea does not possess enough influence to immediately disrupt the social order with her death, except in the working out of Ithocles’ revenge. These suicides work less subversively than Bel-Imperia’s. Where Bel-Imperia aggressively rejects her prescribed social role, Penthea passively resists hers while conforming to “female” behavior. Her bloodless and unseen death in “feminized” enclosure aligns her with traditional female roles that promote passivity and silence. And while Calantha does defy her responsibilities by committing suicide rather than continuing in her role as ruler, she does so passively with her bloodless surrender to love’s wounds. While willing herself to death does demonstrate an active and powerful agency, this agency seems to be circumscribed by standards for female behavior; it is softened and made bloodless. In addition, Calantha’s suicide highlights Penthea’s powerlessness. While Calantha is able to simply will herself to death and dies in full possession of herself and her faculties in a public space, Penthea is forced to starve herself, and dies mad and unseen. Where Penthea dies from a lack of food, Calantha dies from a sufficiency of will.

Calantha is a unique female figure, evoking the fetishization of the resurgent cult of Elizabeth. Her power seems almost that of Proserpina from The Spanish Tragedy; although she is not divine, she wields supreme material authority. This, coupled with her chastity, allows her to be an unthreatening female revenger. Calantha seems to function here as a cipher for the romanticized virgin queen, and, just as Elizabeth’s death does, her death restores the chain of male monarchy. She dies a virgin with the succession conveniently arranged and justice carried out. And her death underscores that even
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her virgin agency is ultimately unacceptable. She must die in order to reestablish a proper, patriarchal order. For the women in The Broken Heart, sexuality is unnatural. In her chaste willing herself to death, Calantha remains absolutely virginal, avoiding even the symbolic penetration of Bel-Imperia’s self-stabbing. Penthea rejects her own desire as unworthy, is trapped in a marriage that inherently excludes a consideration of her own desires, and explicitly works to refute her own possession of action or desire.

“As One Incapable of Her Own Distress”: The Eradication of Female Sexual Agency in the Revenge Tragedy

These plays thus track a gradual transition in the treatment of female sexuality through the English Renaissance. The image of the sexually and vengefully powerful Bel-Imperia is demonized as the foul Tamora, transfigured into the pairing of the disempowered Ophelia and the corrupt and unaware Gertrude, and finally subsumed into the social order with Penthea and Calantha. While female sexuality continues to be depicted as unnatural and destabilizing, control over this sexuality is removed to the men around these figures, and female characters’ control over their own sexuality extends only to its denial or a surrender to its corrupting demands.

This desexualization of the female revenger is significant. Contrary to Ania Loomba’s assertion that “the general distinction between Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is that in the latter the assertive woman does sexually transgress and is not only imagined to do so” (105), we can trace the opposite course with the development of the female revenger in these four works. Bel-Imperia and Tamora possess an active and self-aware sexuality that is denied their later counterparts. And even though Lavinia and Isabella do not demonstrate a similar sexual agency, they at least maintain an awareness and knowledge that is denied to Ophelia, Gertrude, and Penthea. Active female agency gradually disappears from the later works, or is explicitly connected only with corrupt sexuality, and active revenging removed from the female realm of possibility. Calantha’s agency, while apparently contradicting this trend, is actually highlighted by
the text as a specifically constructed exception, which serves to un-
dermine the possibility of female agency while simultaneously af-
firming it only for Calantha's unique authority.

The plays thus gesture towards a broader Early Modern con-
cern with the excision from, or subsumption of, female desire into
the prevailing social order. While the plays make very different ob-
servations about the nature of female desire, they are unified in their
conclusion that this desire, and those who embody it, threatens not
only their own relations, but also the very fabric of society. The trans-
formation and elision of female authority in these works thus serves
to reflect broader societal fears regarding the inability of society to
withstand and contain female agency and sexuality. It is significant
that even the demonized and fictional figure of the vengeful woman
finds itself contained and disempowered through these works, so
that even the suggestion of subversive female authority is contained
and silenced.
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Learning about Women: Proverb Usage in the *Roman de Silence*

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Medieval writers of romance, as well as writers of didactic treatises and religious sermons, relied on various compositional manuals and earlier works of literature for guidance concerning their own compositional and rhetorical style. As Edgar de Bruyne suggests in his *L’esthétique du Moyen Âge*, they had the formal education provided by rhetoricians and grammarians as exemplified in the works of classical literature, yet also learned from earlier religious scholars such as Philo, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine concerning Biblical exegesis (4.3: 302). Rather than innovate compositional strategy, poets created new works by bringing together traditional principles of writing and interpretation as outlined or exemplified by others with matière or content chosen by themselves or their patrons. In addition, as more authors chose to write in vernacular languages, oral sources also influenced their compositional strategies; these sources included localized proverbial materials and therefore should be examined for their role in the creation of what Douglas Kelly calls the “art of romance” (8).

Heldris of Cornwall, writing the *Roman de Silence* in the second or third quarter of the thirteenth century, exemplifies how medieval poets combined a variety of compositional styles while draw-
ing on genres such as historiography, hagiography, and romance to create their works. In this paper, I explore how Heldris of Cornwall incorporates both learned and common proverbs, as well as references to proverbial content, into his narrative and how they reflect a clearly identifiable compositional method utilized to establish the *auctoritas* or literary authority of the narrator and various speakers within the text while also serving to direct interpretation of the narrative, in particular, the role and meaning of the three primary female characters: Eufeme, Eufemie, and Silence. While complete examination of his proverb use is beyond the scope of this article, my goals are to argue for the importance of proverbs to Heldris’ compositional strategy, to place the poet’s usage of proverbs within a context of romance writers of the thirteenth century, and to suggest how this usage contributes to helping define a central area of debate surrounding the text, namely, whether the author presents a proto-feminist, ambiguous, or negative view of women (See, for example, the range of interpretations given by Brahney 54, Krueger 112, Gaunt 203).

**Proverbs and Compositional Strategy**

The use of proverbs by an author was governed by established practice and recommended by medieval educators such as Alain de Lille, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, and Matthew de Vendôme. A proverb is usually identified as such by a demonstrable recognition of its extensive use within a community of speakers or writers and can often be linked to either established written traditions or oral sources. Learned proverbs are transmitted through literary traditions, specifically classical and biblical traditions, while common proverbs typically reflect experiences any member of a community may have had. While the former were often used by writers to provide a moral lesson, the latter were cited to explain events or human behavior as described in the narrative. A poet’s use of proverbs can therefore indicate a familiarity with a certain body of written or oral content and can provide clues concerning the type of audience he or she may have expected to receive a work. The use of literary proverbs, for example, may imply that the author expects the audience to be familiar with
a specific body of literature, while a reliance on examples that reflect daily activities, such as hunting or fishing, may suggest that the audience could relate to the use of these images.

Mathew de Vendôme writes his *Ars versificatoria* around 1175 and here advocates the use of proverbs at the beginning of a work in verse, making reference to Horace’s *Epistles* 1.14.36, suggesting:

Ut aliquis utatur zeumatico principio [vel] secundum ipoeusim, prae(ter)mittendum est generale proverbium, id est communis sententia, cui consuetudo fidem attribuit, opinio communis assensum accomodat, incorruptae veritatis integritas adquiescit. (1.16)

[Just as one may use zeugma or hypozeuxis for a beginning, so may he also begin with a general proverb, that is, universal sentiments in which custom reinforces belief, in which common opinion agrees, and in which the purity of unalloyed truth inheres.] (Parr 29)

For Mathew de Vendôme, a proverb provides a way in which the poet could establish a common base of experience or knowledge that unites him with his audience. As examples, he cites classical authors including Ovid, Lucan, Horace, Cato, and Statius (1.17-29).

Likewise, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, writing his *Poetria nova* and *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi* in the beginning of the thirteenth century, recommends using several types of proverbial materials as valuable compositional tools for the writer of poetry or prose including exempla and sententiae (I.48). Of the eight ways he recommends a writer begin a work, three involve the use of a proverb, three others the use of *exempla*. Each of these writers provides implicit and explicit definitions of how to recognize or define proverbs. Geoffrey de Vinsauf, for example, provides the following definition: “Proverbium enim est generalis sententia, et illud quod datur per generalem sententiam ‘docetur,’ ‘probatur,’ ‘perhibetur’ per aliud speciale, quod subjungiter” (Documentum II.5) [A proverb is a
universal statement, and what is proposed through a universal state-
ment ‘teaches,’ ‘proves,’ ‘cites’ through something particular which
is connected with it (de Vinsauf 1968, 43).] Thus defined, proverbs
take on a variety of formal attributes, but should consistently remain
associated with an author’s intent or sens.

Proverbs became an accepted part of the poetic arts used by
the medieval poet, and were included as aspects of inventio, elocu-
tio, and dispositio. They were used by authors for various reasons
including the medieval need to appeal to authority as a resource for
invention, and as established rhetorical practice. In addition, the use
of vernacular proverbs that reflected common experience allowed
poets to communicate with both literate and illiterate audiences.
This became particularly salient in relation to the art of preaching,
as preachers were increasingly given the task of communicating re-
ligious beliefs and exhorting moral behavior among their congre-
gations. Alain de Lille, for example, urges the use of proverbs in
sermons and draws attention to the Book of Solomon as a source of
inspiration for preachers (20). His own sermonettes are full of prov-
erbs from both patristic and classical sources, including works by
Ovid, Virgil, and Seneca.

In Old French narratives, the use of proverbs increased
throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, yet seemed to have
had various periods of literary vogue, culminating in the second
half of the thirteenth century. The use of both learned and common
proverbs varied in frequency, contextual situation, and thematic use.
Many phrases that acquired a fixed and rhymed form in the ver-
nacular were adaptations of ideas evident in Latin sources. Through
linguistic and statistical analysis of 112 Old French narratives, Elis-
abeth Schulze-Busacker has found that proverb usage in narrative
literature rose in the period between 1150-1170, saw a period of
intense and varied usage between 1170 and 1230, and then saw a
reprise between 1270-1285 (151). Among twelfth-century works,
the romans d’antiquité stand out for their usage of proverbial materi-
als, as do the historiographical works of Wace. During the period of
Chrétien de Troyes, Gautier d’Arras, and Hue de Rotelande at the
end of the twelfth century, Schulze-Busacker has identified the de-
velopment of three specific uses of proverbial materials: for purposes
of ornament, didacticism, and humor (152). The frequency of use of proverbial materials and the contexts in which they appear, however, varies widely among authors.

**Proverb Usage in the *Roman de Silence***

Heldris’ use of proverbs is traditional, in that his usage can easily be reconciled with the standards outlined above. Yet, when compared to most vernacular romances, it is exceptional in terms of the sheer number of proverbs and clear references to proverbial materials he includes. He is also unique in that he often combines the use of proverbs with other compositional strategies. Like many romance poets, he integrates proverbs within the discourse of the narrator or characters for didactic purposes as well as to provide humor. The phrases often run across lines, and are sometimes clear references to proverbs rather than complete citations.

For identification of proverbs, I have used Joseph Morawski’s 1925 collection, *Proverbes français antérieurs au XVe siècle*, as suitable attestation of contemporary existence in the vernacular. In addition, I have consulted several of the original manuscripts originally edited by Morawski and have found additional proverbs he did not include in his edition. I have also incorporated the citations identified by both Schulze-Busacker and Sarah Roche-Mahdi in my discussion here. All translations of the proverbs are my own, though some have been left in the original as they are not of direct interest to my reading of *Silence*.

Heldris rarely uses complete proverbs that can be attested to be “actual proverbs” by their inclusion in contemporary or later proverb collections. In fact, only five proverbs appear in an almost identical form in the romance as they appear in proverb collections, most of which date from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Morawski #170, 440, 463, 637, and 1434). More often, he either adopts forms different from those found in collections extant today, or uses only fragments of a larger citation, which I classify as “integrated proverbs.” I have identified thirteen such references in the romance (Morawski #194, 509, 663, 850, 1098, 1154, 1295, 1757, 2080, 2158, 2338, 2365, 2481). Heldris also makes close
references to ideas expressed in extant proverbs, often expanding on the theme of a proverb in a sequence of three, which can be referred to as *proverbes en série.*

**Proverbs and Concerns about Women**

Though Heldris uses proverbs for a variety of didactic purposes, such as exploring concepts of loyalty and service as well as honor and shame, of particular interest are those that comment on the “nature” of women and their expected behavior. Heldris dedicates several short digressions to the exploration of how these themes and characters use proverbs to strengthen their arguments or positions about women. I will begin by outlining these particular sections of the text, relating them to the over-all usage of proverbs in the text. I then suggest that the vitriolic nature of Heldris’ discourse may reflect the poet’s adaptation of one version of the *Seven Sages* tradition, Johannes de Alta Silva’s *Dolopathos.* With this analysis, I hope to demonstrate that Heldris’ comments fit into a larger tradition of writers who are concerned with the “nature” of women.

Within the romance, characters consider the impact of their actions and often attempt to predict the reactions of others. They also seek support for their decisions from others or from the implied audience. At other moments, it is the narrator who steps in to endorse the position of one or another character. In all of these scenarios, proverbs are used to clarify a position; of interest to us here is how and when Heldris chooses to use proverbs about women and their nature.

One section of the text in which the poet uses proverbs extensively occurs near the beginning of the work when the narrator recounts the meeting of Cador and Eufemie, the parents of Silence. Both Cador and Eufemie illustrate a tendency towards introspective forethought. Before the two marry, Eufemie is concerned that Cador, though wise and courteous, may change his good behavior after he receives wealth and favor from the king. Likewise, Cador is worried about the changeability of Eufemie’s feelings and the way in which she, as a woman, makes important decisions. Cador dwells on the idea that gender determines behavior and expresses sentiments
similar to those enunciated directly by the narrator elsewhere concerning the volatility of women’s nature:

Et feme rest de tel afaire,
Ne fait pas al miols que puet faire.
Sa volenté tient por raison,
De soi honir quiert oquoison.
Son voloir trait contre nature,
Contre raison, contre droiture:
Ne prent garde u s’amor desploie
Et puet sel estre se desroie
Que marier puet a plaisir
Mais mioldres pooirs est taisir. (667-77)

[Yes, that’s the way a woman is: she doesn’t do better than she can, she holds her will to be reason, she seeks occasion to dishonor herself. Her will works contrary to nature, contrary to reason and to convention: She doesn’t care where she deploys her love, and can easily stray out of bounds if allowed to marry where she pleases. But it’s better to be silent.]

The first line, “Ne fait pas al miols que puet faire,” suggests that women have limited abilities to behave well, an idea reintroduced at the end of the narrative when the narrator comments on the low expectations one should hold for women’s behavior. It may also play on the negation of the proverb, “Qui mielz puet mieuls face” [One should do the best that one can] (Morawski # 1996). The next line, “Sa volenté tient por raison,” draws on the sentiments expressed in the proverb “On puet selonc raison ce c’on veut” [One takes for reason what one wants to] (Morawski, # 1538). The next line, “De soi honir quiert oquoison,” is a clear adaptation of one of the most popular proverbs about women as documented in romance by Schulze-Busacker, “Fame veult touz jours faire ce que l’en vee” [A woman always wants to do that which is forbidden] (Morawski # 742). In fact, Schulze-Busacker cites the quote as the second most popular proverb used by romance writers (33). Seen together, this section
also provides a good example of *proverbs en serie*, which is typical for Heldris’ compositional style. By using this proverb, the narrator suggests it would be dangerous to actually allow Eufemie, as a woman, to choose her own mate. Cador is thus afraid that if Eufemie is left to choose her own spouse, it would not be himself. Though Cador may enunciate a generality in which he believes, Eufemie proves herself to be “more wise” than the typical woman since she does indeed select Cador as a spouse.

The question of women’s nature appears again in the scene in which the king must decide how to react to the news, the lie, told to him by the queen, Eufeme, that Silence has tried to rape her. Elsewhere in the text, the king is concerned about “doing the right thing” so that he may satisfy his wife’s rancor while maintaining his own honor (a point at which he also uses proverbs). As the audience knows the queen has made false charges, it is not surprising that we find some commentary regarding the queen’s character as being typical for a woman:

Mais ne volt son dit blastengier  
Car feme quant se violt vengier  
En tel maniere est moult trençans,  
Cho set li rois, et trop tençans  
Est el. Quant on le roeve taire  
Dont s’esforce de noise faire.  
Sil violt li rois miols aquoisier  
Ensi qu’il le fesist noisier.  
Mais ne li valt pas une tille,  
Car la roïne est bien gopille  
En son corage et moult destroite. (4265-4275)

[But he also didn’t want to contradict her words, because a woman, when she wants to avenge herself in such a situation, is very stubborn and she is too defensive; this the king knows. When one asks her to keep quiet, she tries all the harder to make noise. So the king tries his best to quiet her, but it’s just as if he were making her louder. But it didn’t do a bit of good, for the queen is a real
vixen in her heart and very difficult.]

The references here cannot be clearly linked to specific proverbs but draw on common stereotypes associated with women, such as their shrewdness, their desire for revenge, as well as their talkativeness, as in the proverb “Ne dire a ta femme ce que tu celer weus” [Do not tell your wife anything that you want kept secret] (Morawski #1333). Here as elsewhere, the wisdom and temperance of a man are pitted against the plans and/or emotions of a woman. As Cador fears a woman’s tendency to besmirch her reputation and be guided overmuch by her desires as opposed to reason, the king fears her power and vengefulness.

It is the king’s scribe, thrown into prison for the queen’s crimes, who next turns to proverbs to express his disgust with women. This time, her faults are not those of poor judgment or talkativeness, but her more active attempts to deceive, conceal, and to harm men:

Mais nus hom ne puët feme ataindre
Quant el se violt covrir et faindre.
Feme vait par son bel samblant
Le sens del siecle tolt enblant.
Sens d’ome sage poi ataint
Por feme ataindre qui se faint…
Car feme nen est pas laniere
D’engiens trover en tel maniere.
Engignose est por home nuire
Plus que por un grant bien estruire.

(5001-5006; 5013-5016)

[But no man is a match for a woman when she is bent on concealment and deception. A woman goes about putting up such a fine front that she fools everyone. A wise man’s reason can achieve little against a woman who wants to deceive . . . A woman is always quick to think of something clever in such circumstances. She is much quicker at finding ways to harm a man than at thinking up something beneficial.]
Again, a home sage is no match for her deceitfulness—woman is powerful and evil. Any man will lose against a woman bent on deception. A wise man loses against a deceitful woman, and a man seeks to help others while a woman seeks to harm them. The sentiments echo that of the most popular proverb identified by Schulze-Busacker, “Qui croit et aimme fole fame, il geste avoir, cors et ame” [A man who trusts and loves a crazed woman will lose his future, his body and soul] (Morawski #1877) as well as another, “Femme scet ung art avant le deable” [Women are more crafty than the devil] (Morawski #740). This tirade against women gives way to the scribe’s meditation about his own options. He concludes that this situation must be a punishment for past sins. As the proverb goes, “Li viés pechié, on le tiesmoigne / Renovielent sovent vergoigne” (5037-5038) [Old sins, as we all know, are a constantly renewed source of shame] (Morawski #2481), which is similar to the proverb “Vieulz pechiez fet novele honte” [Old sins continue to cause new shame] (Morawski #2481).

However, the tirade, which also piles the comments one on top of another using proverbes en série, is not necessarily original. In fact, it mimics a passage from Johannes de Alta Silva’s Dolopathos, the early thirteenth-century Latin rendition of the matièrè of the Seven Sages. After Lucinius, a silent character who parallels the role of Silence, is freed from his imposed silence, the nature of the queen’s deceit, who had falsely accused him of sexual assault, is revealed. The revelation scene, similar to that at the end of Silence, then turns to the ranting of Virgil, who serves a role similar to that of Merlin. Virgil, one of the emperor’s principal advisors who is overcome with disgust at the queen’s behavior, begins a tirade against all women and exclaims to the entire court:

O ait furor, o scelus, o nequicia, o malicia mulieris, o uere monstrum, mulier, monstruosius cunctis monstris, quis tantum scelus uidit, quis auduiit, quis huic simile cognouit nec cogitauit! . . . Ecce uix tandem credidi quod audieram mulieram scilicet una arte uicesse diabolum nec esse maliciam que sue ualeat preualere. Quis enim etiam sapien- tium eius animum circumscribat, quis cordis eius
Here, Virgil summarizes earlier lessons told about women throughout the text’s inserted tales while holding up the queen for special consideration, much in the way the narrator of the Silence does to Eufeme. Though Virgil seeks to condemn women, his accusations also reveal the inherent fears he has of women’s powers. Far from being impotent, the women presented in the various tales, including the queen herself, are vocal, sexual, and clever. They have qualities which, though potentially neutral, are presented as negative
and evil in these situations, as the women involved are involved in disreputable acts such as adultery and regicide. One can see links between the negative portrayals of women illustrated in the various tales and of the frame tale of the Seven Sages’s tradition and that of Eu-feme. However, in Silence, a type of distillation takes place in which the most virulent critiques of women focus on only one woman—Eufeme.

The narrator takes over the role of commentator on the nature of women in two other narrative digressions. The first occurs at Ebain’s court following the successful triumph of Silence and her fellow knights over the rebelling English barons. This time, unlike earlier conflicts, the tension is not between a man and a woman, but between a woman (the queen Eufeme) and another woman (Silence, who the queen thinks is a man and thus treats like a man). The narrator uses the opportunity to add another dimension to his previous comments. So far we have seen discussion of woman’s relationship to reason, her ability to deceive, and her desire to harm others. Here, the narrator turns to the popular subject of woman’s incapacity to love honorably and faithfully.

Faintice feme paltoniere,
Quant violt d’ome estre parçoniere,
Pasmer et plorer est sa guise.
Mais ja n’iert d’ome si soprise,
Por cho qu’il n’ait de s’amor cure,
Ne voelle sa male aventure.
Feme faintice n’ainme mie,
Ains faint pur furnir sa folie.
Moult a a dire en fainte feme. (5232-5242)

[When a treacherous devious woman wants to get her claws into a man, she gets her way by weeping and swooning. Yet she’s never so taken with a man that she doesn’t want to destroy him if he rejects her advances. A deceitful woman never loves, she only deceives to feed her lust. There is much that could be said on the subject of woman’s deceitfulness.]
Clearly, the narrator adapts a familiar tone, yet one element is markedly different. Rather than talking about women in general, he specifies the type of woman to whom he refers—the faintice or deceitful woman. Perhaps Heldris feels this move is necessary for one of several reasons. First, he may not want to be accused of condemning all women, including by default those in his audience. Second, he may feel the need to further clarify the vast differences between the two characters in the scene, both of whom are actually women. Above all, the tirade reflects a common belief concerning a woman’s use of crying as a stratagem: “Femme se plaint, femme se deult, femme est malade quant el[le] le veult” [Women complain, cry and act sick as it suits them] (Morawski # 739).

Though there is not room here for a detailed comparative analysis of the various proverbs about women Heldris uses to those which were circulating in proverb collections of the period, a brief examination of the statistical information provided by both Morawski and Schulze-Busacker does provide additional context. In his collection of 2,500 proverbs, Morawski provides more than fifty which explicitly discuss women. Many refer to women in general, with only a few specifically commenting about bad or good women. An overwhelming number of these, some of which were not even edited by Morawski, appear in the fifteenth-century MS. Q., Bib. Nat. Latin 10360. Of the fifty cited by Morawski, only sixteen have been attested in other romances by Schulze-Busacker. Five stand out as the most common:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proverb</th>
<th>Proverb #</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Other MS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cueur de femme est tost mué</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femme scet ung art avant le deable</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame veult touz jours faire ce que l’un lui vee</td>
<td>742</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fous est cis qui feme weut gaitier</td>
<td>769</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qui croit et aime folle fame Il gaste avoir et cors et ame</td>
<td>1877</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A distinction between women in general, and bad or good women, appears in the following proverbs about specific types of women, all demonstrated in MS. Q:

A femme torte ung patin. (Morawski # 31)
Bonne femme honneure son seigneur. (Morawski #274)
Femme deshonteet met son pain au four.
(Morawski #732)
Femme mariée doit estre simple et porter la guimple.
(Morawski #724)
Femme seule est rien. (Morawski. #741)
Qui a belle femme ja il n’en soit lié. (Morawski #1781)
Qui a bonne femme si a bon chatel. (Morawski. #1783)
S’il n’avoit une belle femme est une veille elle seroit trop chiere. (not edited in Morawski, fol. 578.)

By the end of the narrative, the femme faintice is dead and the good woman, Silence, has recovered her female appearance and taken on the position as queen. Ebain has acknowledged that “Il n’est se preciose gemme, / Ne tells tresors com bone feme” [There is no more precious gem, nor greater treasure, than a virtuous woman] (6633-6634). This line can be linked to both the above proverb, “Qui a bonne femme si a bon chattel,” [He who has a good woman has a valuable asset] and the Biblical book of Proverbs, where a virtuous woman is seen as more valuable than rubies (Prov. 31:10-15).

At the end of the romance, a good woman is contrasted not with a bad or deceitful woman, but with a normal, everyday woman, who is, evidently, still less than honorable by her very nature:

Maistre Heldris dist chi endroit
C’on doit plus bone feme amer
Que haîr malvaise u blasmer.
Si mosterroie bien raison:
Car feme a menor oquoison,
Por que ele ait le liu ne l’aise,
De l’estre bone que malvaise,
S’ele ouevre bien contre nature. (6684-6691)
Proverb Usage

[Master Heldris says here that one should love a good woman more than one should hate or blame a bad one. And I will provide a good reason why: a woman has less motivation, provided that she even has the means or the opportunity, to be good than to be bad, for her good work is against her nature.]

He goes on to add that, though he has blamed Eufeme of being treacherous, good women should not be affected, but rather, they should work harder at behaving well (6695-6701). And besides, the story was more about praising Silence than blaming Eufeme (6697-6698). One may say that Heldris is trying to save face by putting the blame on only bad women, but this is clearly undercut by his suggestion that women have less motivation to be good. While Silence does provide a model of an active and positive woman, Heldris resorts to traditional stereotypes about women and thus does not particularly, in my opinion, suggest any real movement towards advocating positive or active roles for women in society.

We have seen that Heldris uses or adapts proverbs concerning women, and guides the reader to agree with his positions through their use. But does this make him particularly unique or misogynistic when seen in light of other French or Anglo-Norman romance writers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries? Clearly, Heldris is concerned about women, and their nature, but more specifically, does his proverb use reinforce his didactic message in an unusual or significant way? When seen in light of the large number of proverbs concerning women that have been attested to, and in comparison to how often proverbs about women were used by other romancers, Heldris’ frequency of use seems to be relatively high, but not strikingly unusual.

When proverbs about women are analyzed within the corpus of twelfth and thirteenth-century romances, and in relation to specific writers, nine romances stand out for their inclusion of numerous citations of, or references to, proverbs about women. These include two from the Seven Sage’s tradition (Herbert’s Dolopathos, Roman des Sept Sages de Rome in verse), two from insular romans
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d’antiquité (Roman d’Eneas, Roman de Troie), two by the same author (Gautier d’Arras’ hagiographical narrative, Roman d’Eracle and Ille et Galeron), and two others (Hue de Rotelande’s Ipomedon and Jean de Meun’s Roman de la Rose). In comparison to the rates of usage found in these works, Heldris’ use of identifiable proverbs about women is not exceptional, though he does make additional comments about women that are not clearly related to specific proverbs. In terms of time of composition, these romances have a spread of roughly one hundred years, the romans d’antiquité being early in the third quarter of the twelfth century and Jean de Meun’s work being the latest, in the third quarter of the thirteenth. We also see a high level of didactic romances in the group, including those of Gautier d’Arras and the two versions of the Seven Sages.

I believe that Heldris’ work does have important affinities with this group of texts. Two of the works in question, the Roman de Troie and Ille et Galeron, in fact, are included in the same manuscript, Nottingham (Mi.LM.6). The use of allegory and personification, as well as discussion of the nature of women, link Heldris with Jean de Meun. And perhaps most significantly, Heldris adapts materials from the tradition of the Seven Sages in his own work, which I believe is an important intertext for reading the narrative construction of Silence.

Conclusion

Heldris’ compositional style reflects an interest in following the use of proverbs as laid out by medieval rhetoricians, and he is particularly adept at utilizing proverbes en série at moments of narrative importance. Though many phrases do not exactly match attested proverbs, it is clear that Heldris understands both the forms and functions of proverbs. The paremiological tradition, as it existed in both Latin and Old French, clearly influenced the discourse within which Heldris chose to compose his narrative, and provided another didactic narrative tool with which he could construct his apparently unique work. Heldris uses proverbs as a central element of his program for teaching throughout the romance. Most important to him are the issues of honor and loyalty between lords and subjects, as well as the natures of both good and bad women, as
discussed here. The sentiments expressed in many of the proverbs are reinforced in narrative events. Seen as a whole, the use of proverbs is central to the establishment of both authority for the narrator and various characters, as well as essential to an understanding of the work. Through the author’s repeated concerns about concluding his moralizing digressions to return to his story, we see a clear recognition of these two distinct but complementary aspects of the work as defined by the author.

Notes

1 More specifically, by reexamining and reediting the proverbs in his Ms. Q, Bib. Nat. Latin 10360, I found several hundred additional proverbs that he did not edit, one of which referred to women.

2 See Schulze-Busacker 32-34; this format is not identified by her as being used in Silence, though she does identify such usage in several authors associated with the insular literary tradition, including Wace, Hue de Rotelande, and Gautier d’Arras. Of particular importance is Gautier’s Roman d’Eracle, in which the poet also uses this form to comment on the nature of women. See the discussion that follows.

3 All translations are by Sarah Roche-Mehdi unless indicated by italics, in which case I have amended or redone the translation.

4 Indicates the number of other manuscripts in which this proverb occurs as identified by Schulze-Busacker.
Dahmen

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Ollier, Marie-Louise. “Proverbe et Sentence : le discours d’autorité
Proverb Usage


In the first Letters of Direction between Abelard and Heloise, Heloise admits to Abelard how “nothing is less under our control than the heart” (Radice 159). Unable to “command” the heart, she must obey it. In place of command, and in order to displace unruly thoughts and actions, Heloise “demands” that the religious scholar teach her and her sisters Rule in their manner of life. Her second demand, as she articulates it to Abelard, is as follows: “Alterum vero est ut aliquam nobis regulam instituas, et scriptam dirigas quae feminarum sit præ inscriptam nostrae conversionis statum habitu- mque describat, quod nondum a Patribus sanctis actum esse conspexi-
Wrobel

Abelard responds by outlining three parts of devotional Rule: a life of continence, a life bereft of personal possessions, and the observance of silence (Radice 184; Muckle 253-281).

The prescription of sets of rules (regulae) and the offering of spiritual guidance has had a long tradition in the production of early devotional texts: St. Augustine wrote a letter of Rule to a group of nuns in Hippo (Regularis information c. 424), St. Benedict prescribed the conditions of monastic life (Regula monasteriorium c. 550), and later, Aelred of Rievaulx outlined holy life for his sister (De vita eremitica c. 1160-62). Similarly, Ancrene Wisse (c. 1215 – 1222) belongs to this tradition of devotional guides, one specifically written for the instruction of women. Like Abelard and like Aelred of Rievaulx, the anonymous author of Ancrene Wisse wrote the guide as a document of “benevolent counsel” for his three sisters (Grayson 4). The impetus for his text is the insistence of the very people subject to the Rules that the text commands.

This inserted insistence could be a rhetorical construction providing the exigency to write such regulae, but scholars studying the production and publication of the Ancrene Wisse do not doubt the existence of these requests. E.J. Dobson makes the point that despite its general quality, it addresses an ideal anchoress: “The recurrent address to ‘my dear sisters’ is no mere trick of style, but shows that the author has constantly in mind the women for whom he is writing” (1). Janet Grayson observes that while the author reveals little of himself, his text continually discloses the personal traits of his sisters, as well as details that tell the reader of their social standing and devotional habits (6-8).

While the devotional advice given in such guides does not deviate greatly from the triad of chastity, poverty, and silence, this insistence to write such a text already challenges the silence that these authors prescribe as a central tenant of regulae, and thus provides an interesting challenge to scholars studying the devotional practices of women in medieval culture. Rosalynn Voaden asks, “If women’s voices are barely heard in medieval Christian culture, would they be heard in the text?” Voaden assures her reader that women’s voices can be heard in the text, yet she also marks a distinction between women actively involved in the production of spiritual texts and women as
“passive subjects” of texts written about them (2). This insistence to receive Rule, which serves as the impetus for the text’s production, calls into question the relative simplicity of this binary. More interestingly, Ancrene Wisse, through both metaphorical and literal constructions of enclosures, problematises the material boundaries of textual production and spiritual devotion that would be needed to support such a binary. Aelred of Rievaulx’s interpretation of female chastity and devotion as enclosure becomes a mediated trope in Ancrene Wisse, which evokes enclosure as a central tenant of Rule through an embedded and porous series of boundaries (closures) and gateways (openings). By linking the corporeal to the spiritual through the senses, Ancrene Wisse deconstructs the oppositions of interiority and exteriority, the literal oppositions of inside and outside, and ultimately, the oppositions of speaking subjects and spoken-for objects.

Silence, and this demand or incitement to silence, becomes a central paradox in Ancrene Wisse. By regimenting her body and its practices, the obedient anchoress tames “her most dangerous weapon,” her tongue (Savage and Watson 18). At the same time, however, the anchoress’s goal of communication with Christ profoundly dissolves, whether consciously or not, the very boundaries needed for the vilification of the female body and its parts, since such a communication can only occur through the body. Ancrene Wisse does not dispute the necessity of enclosure, but while the author praises the devotion of his sisters to solitary life, he also maintains the impossibility of such solitary living. Aelred of Rievaulx’s prescription of being “dead to the world” is a lofty ideal. In Ancrene Wisse, it becomes impossible through the metaphorical dissolution of the spatial boundaries of inner and outer: the anchorhold and the outside world, the worldly and the divine, and the physical boundaries of the female anchoritic body, exposed to both worldly and divine influences. The metaphorical shifts and spatial contradictions in the text revoke the religious concept of absolute enclosure, and in doing so, have consequences for the female anchorite body in these spaces of enclosure.

The association of the feminine with the “fleshy” is extended to female piety and devotional practices. Caroline Walker Bynum
explains that because of this association, female piety was especially somatic (162). Often incorporating the body of the visionary and its love-object, Christ, female spirituality is not a simple abnegation of the body. If female piety was psychosomatic—the body and soul unified—then the anchoress experiences Christ in her soul, through her body. Bodily suffering became a practice of identification with the suffering of Christ (imitatio Christi). The prominence of illness and physical affliction in the lives of holy women, and the predominance of bodily metaphors and visions of Christ in the women’s medieval writing, not only somatize religious experience, but also endows the body with significance (Bynum 167-69).

In this sense, Ancrene Wisse, with its attention to the senses and the physicality of the anchoress’ devotion, is well aware of its female audience. The author of Ancrene Wisse organizes Rule as two sets: Inner and Outer Rule. Inner Rule is concerned with the heart and its regulation, with intention and interiority, and, by extension, with “schir heorte ant cleane inwit ant treowe bileaue” (CCCC 402, 6 / 21). Outer Rule regulates the outward body and its actions and exists for the service of the Inner Rule. The author makes a distinction here between Inner and Outer Rule: while the Outer Rule is variable, changing in accordance with the individual’s condition, nature, and particular orders, Inner Rule is constant. The chapter, “The Outer Senses,” deals explicitly with how the senses should function as “defenses” (warde) of the heart. Enclosing the “pure soul” (cleane sawle), the heart, enclosed in and inseparable from the body, is guarded by the senses, which, in turn, both maintain and threaten the condition of the soul.

The material conditions of life threaten the senses, and the author warns his sisters of the windows in their anchorholds, providing detailed instructions as to their symbolic and practical purposes and appearances. Each window connects the enclosed anchoress to various facets of life: one faces the parlour, by which to receive food, drink, and other necessities: one is turned towards the Church and the altar; and one, the world-window, connects the anchoress to the outside world (CCCC 402, 30-31; Savage and Watson 66-67). The window, as a source of temptation, is one that first entices the eye, and while the author proudly proclaims that his sisters are not “peep-
ing anchoresses,” in anticipating a wider readership, he cautions other anchoresses whose tendencies are to look out their windows. As he warns his “dear sisters” against their penchant for excessive asceticism, he warns not solely against female speech, but its excesses, for the anchorhouse has the potential to become a place for idle or excess chatter. At the windows, gossiping women, whom the author compares to cackling magpies, “feed” the anchoress’s ears:

Me seiid up on ancren _et euch meast haueð an ald cwene to feden hire earen. A meaðelilt _e meaðeleð hire alle _e talen of _e lond. a rikelot _e cakeleð al _et ha sið ant hered. swa _et me seid i bisehe. From mulne ant from chepinge. from smiððe ant from ancre hus me tidinge bringed. (CCCC 402, 48 / 14-19)\(^5\)

By comparing the anchorhouse to open places of idle chatter and gossip, the author draws on such physical spaces, and the dominant representations of female speech, to directly disavow the absolutism of enclosure and silence. Not all writings conform to this formula of cackling women at the window; there is a particularly interesting scene in *The Book of Margery Kemp*\(^6\) in which Kempe, placed under house arrest by the Duke of Bedford, inverts this common anxiety of the magpie-women outside the window:

_an stode sche lokyng out at a wyndown, telling many good talys to hem _at wolde heryn bir, in so meche _at women wept sor & sezde with gret heuynes of her hertys, ‘Alas, woman, why xalt _u be brent?’ (130-31 / 34-1)\(^7\)

Kempe’s speech, from inside her literal “cell” and projected to the women outside the window, is “edifying,” and thus enables conversion, rather than corruption; the “cackling” magpies turn into compassionate devotees.

The window, as an opening or gateway, becomes the organizing metaphor for the anchoress’s senses. Like the window as an
eye onto the world, the mouth also functions as a passage. If the senses and Rules are inherently interdependent, then one sense and one Rule functions alongside the other in the anchorhold and the anchoritic body. Grayson sees such a construction structured by the relationship of “Anchoress : Anchorhold :: Eye : Window :: Heart : Body,” with the spiritual core of the Heart protected by the various physical regimes of anchoritic life and the anchoritic body (39, italics original). This same construction exists if we replace the eye with the mouth. The open mouth functions as a window (or a door), endangering the closed silence of the anchorhold, the silent anchoritic body, and, finally, dangerously encroaching upon the spiritual core of the heart.

The female mouth—and the implications of female speech—reveals anxieties over the female body despite the heightened physicality of medieval devotional practices in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Linda Georgianna notes that the passages dealing with Inner Rule in the Ancrene Wisse are descriptive (9). In the discussions specifically regarding female speech, however, the tone of Ancrene Wisse clearly becomes proscriptive. The author discusses the specific senses of the mouth—of speech and taste—by turning, once again, to the anchorhold’s windows. While the anchoress may use the world-window and parlour window to speak to women or visiting clerics, the church window becomes a site of proscription:

\[
\text{Vt urh e chirche url ne halde 3e tale wið namon ah beo reð _er to wurdment for _e hali sacrament _et 3e seod _er urh. ant neomed oderhwile to ower wummen _e huses _url. to o_re _e parlur. Spoken neahe 3e bute ed tes twa _urles. (CCCC 402, 37 / 18-23)\textsuperscript{8}}
\]

The author makes reference here to St. Paul’s doctrine prohibiting women preaching when, in a similar tone he continues: “\textit{Ne preachi 3e to namon. ne mon ne easki ow cunsail ne ne telle ow. readeð wummen ane} (CCCC 402, 38 / 24-25).”\textsuperscript{9}

This proscription of female speech in religious practices is ultimately linked to many of the conceptions of the body already
Speech in Ancrene Wisse

discussed, since as a Rule, silence becomes a form of chastity. Silence also becomes, variously, a form of obedience to ecclesiastical authority. St. Paul says: “Women should remain silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, and should be subordinate, as the Law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34). In providing further instructions on worship, he states: “I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man; she must be silent” (1 Tim. 2:12-14).

St. Paul’s prohibition of women teaching or preaching in church or public (Docere mulierem non permitto) perceives a relationship between women and sin through a series of conflations between intellectual and moral authority. As Bynum explains, the Pauline Doctrine links the word flesh directly to sin, rather than to the physical entity of the body (189). Women, discursively linked to the corporeal, become ultimately linked to flesh-as-sin. It is significant that St. Paul’s prohibition of women speaking in churches appears in a passage concerning “orderly worship.” “All things should be done decently and in order,” says St. Paul (1 Cor. 14:40). In his elevation of order, St. Paul posits female speech with disorder and imbibes disorder with both moral and intellectual connotations. If disorderly speech defies reason, and by extension, intellect and Law, then the connection between women and flesh, in turn, stabilizes the connection between men and Word.

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton outlines Thomas Aquinas’ three justifications of St. Paul’s prohibition of female preaching: “teaching belongs to those in authority” and women are subject to such authority (“qui debet esse subditis”); women who speak can “inflame the desires of men” (“ad libidinem”); and finally, women are not “sufficiently perfected in wisdom” (“non sunt in sapientia perfectae”) (35). According to ecclesiastics, women, unable to retain wisdom, would be prone to heterodoxy if granted the authority to preach the Word. Moreover, Alcun Blamires makes the point that for many male theologians and scholars, female “astuteness” (astutia), as a character of female intelligence, was viewed with suspicion. Astutia became characterized by worldly rather than moral gain, a craftiness that undermined the moral purposefulness of teaching and preaching (219).

Similarly, in the Ancrene Wisse, preaching or theological discussion by the anchoress is linked to pride, rather than authority or
education, and thus the author cautions against the proud anchoress who wants to sit and talk with wise men and priests:

*Sum is se wel ilearet oðer se wis iwordet. _et ha walde he wiste hit _e sit ant spekèd toward hire. ant 3elt him word a3ein word. ant forwurðèd meistre _e schulde beon ancre. ant leared him _et is icumen hire forte learen. walde bi hire tale beon sone wið wise icuddet ant icnawen. Icnawenhe is. for _urh _et ilke _et ha weneð to beo wis ihalden he understont _et ha is sot. for ha hunteð efter pris ant keched lastunge. for ed te alre leaste hwen he is awet iwent _eos ancre he wule seggen is of muche speche.* (CCCC 402, 35 / 27-08)

The linkages between disorder, the female body, and sin find additional examples in ancient and medieval medical discourses. Bynum explains that the pervasive medical opinion in the latter Middle Ages saw the definitive pattern of human physiology as male, and women’s bodies, and their sex organs, as inversions of men’s (186). The female body then, by its physical makeup, becomes the very transgression of the boundaries of inside and outside, boundaries upon which, as Julia Kristeva notes, Christian subjectivity depends. Bynum herself evokes both the metaphors of disorder and enclosure when she describes women’s bodies, in medieval discourses, to be marked by “breaches in boundaries, with lack of shape or definition, with openings and exudings and spillings forth” (186). In *Ancrene Wisse*, the mouth threatens the enclosure of the body if left open, yet it also has implications for the anchorhold and its daily practices. The anchoress speaking improperly to others in her cell has definite consequences for her spiritual progression; as the author explains: “_e feond of helle mid his ferd wend _urh ut te tutel _e is eauer open in to _e heorte*” (CCCC 402, 40 / 12-14).

If we consider the psychosomatic unity that characterizes the medieval body, then the expressions and regulations of the body become the expressions of the soul. Through the regulation and maintenance of the body, and more specifically, the body’s (literal
and metaphorical) enclosures, the Guide provides a model of female chastity and female-centered devotion. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne explains that the Guide’s construction of virginity pertains to the whole practice and maintenance of the body—the sealing and enclosure of the whole body and all bodily practice—rather than only the hymen (26-27). Prohibitions of women preaching construct a gendered and metaphorical relationship between Word and authority, between authority and intellect, and between intellect and restraint or order—a series of transferences positing one as the other.

In considering Kristeva’s definition of the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order,” then female speech becomes the very “terror that dissembles” order (Powers 4), and endangers authoritative Word. For Kristeva, abjection is the recognition of want, the recognition of a desire that threatens the very oppositions of Self/Other and Inside/Outside (Powers 7). The abjection of female speech perils such oppositions, which are necessary for enclosure, as well as for the distinction between the speaking subject and the spoken-for object. More generally, such oppositions are also necessary for the elevation of male rationality, body, and speech. As a border, more specifically, as an ambiguity of borders, abjection marks the subject to be “in perpetual danger” of identifying with what threatens (or speaks for) it (Powers 9).

Regula, by imposing order, attempts to regulate this danger. Ancrene Wisse, however, imposes Rule, while at the same time, always endangering the boundaries of its practices. Indeed, the author of the Guide, through repetitions and contradictions, variously handles (and unsettles) the proscription of female speech. At times, the author’s treatment of female speech in Ancrene Wisse is one of gentle ridicule or caricature. Nowhere is this particular tone more apparent than in the depiction and caution of the “Cackling Eve” (cakele eue), the most popular example of the folly of female speech. It is this very “taint of Eve” that symbolically links woman to temptation (Voaden 7), while at the same time quite literally bars her from public teaching and preaching.

In Ancrene Wisse, the legacy of Eve becomes a cautionary example, but one countered with the legacy of the Virgin Mary:

*Vre deore wurde leafdi seinte Marie _e ah to alle*
Through Mary's words to the angel Gabriel, Christ “enclosed” himself in her womb (CCCC 402, 41-42 / 15-18; Savage and Watson 77), while in another instance, Mary's greeting to Elizabeth causes John the Baptist to “leap” into Elizabeth's womb and fills her with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:38; Luke 1:41).

While the author connects Eve to the disobedient anchoress who “talks a lot,” his example of the Virgin Mary unsettles any strictly proscriptive notions of female speech by providing an exemplum of female speech as a vehicle for communion with God. God’s will materializes through the very materiality of Mary’s words. The Virgin provides an important counterexample that refuses an absolute and definitive association of the speaking anchoress with the “Cackling Eve.” This example, however, is only one of a series of possibilities. Through the religious practices of auricular confession and devotions, Ancrene Wisse provides alternative, even necessary, instances of female speech. Confession, as the examination of soul or individual conscience (consciencia), becomes, in the latter Middle Ages, a disciplined self-examination. The Fourth Lateran Council’s requirement of annual confession granted a greater prominence to ecclesiastical authority in this examination, yet the Guide seems less concerned with this authority than with the anchoress’s exploration of her sins or temptations through minute attention to language and orderly disclosure.

Bella Millet points out the similarities between part five of Ancrene Wisse and confessional literature produced after the Lateran Council. The attention to the self here is paramount, since sin should only be blamed on the self or else it is not a confession. Millet explains that a “notable feature of the treatment of the ‘conditions’ of confession in Ancrene Wisse is its eclecticism” (211). In this section, and in contrast to the Biblical passages used to illuminate other sections, the author draws largely on oral sources, and as such, depicts confession as a spoken practice relying on personal memory, rather
than confessional guides (Millet 211). The mouth can be the gateway to worldly temptation, but in the case of confession, the mouth is the vehicle by which to expose the heart—the temptations and inner contrition of the anchoritic confessant—to God.

In chapter seven, entitled “Love,” the author describes Christ’s love for “the pure soul,” the obedient anchoress who guards well her heart, and constructs this relationship through a series of questions from Christ to the anchoress:

\[
\text{3ef hit is forte 3eouen hwer maht tu biteon hit be-
tere _en up o me? Nam ich _in ge feherest. nam ich
kinge richest. name ich hest icunnet. (CCCC 402,
202 / 6-8)}^{14}
\]

This string of questions continues and even if we assume it is rhetorical, the intended effect and structure is one of dialogue, and implicit in this, the responses of the anchoress. St. Ambrose wrote that in speaking there is “an abundance of sin” (37), but while St. Ambrose links silence with the Word, his quote in the epigraph of this paper provides an important exception: the door (the mouth or window) should not be open readily, except to the Word.

What the Ancrene Wisse shows is that the closing of the mouth to worldly distraction rearticulates the anchoress’s relationship to the Word by letting Christ speak, and by allowing her to speak to Christ through the body. Thus the anchoress is closed to the world but open to Christ. The Ancrene Wisse, and indeed, other female-centered devotional texts from the latter Middle Ages such as The Book of Margery Kempe and St. Katherine (De passione S. Katherine, sub Maxentio, in eadem lingua), also make apparent this intimate connection between the female body and the Word.

Like Kempe’s text, the namesake text of the Katherine-group, a collection of early thirteenth-century vernacular texts of alliterative prose for female anchorites, provides an interesting inversion of female speech. In St. Katherine, the apocryphal virgin martyr of Alexandria publicly denounces Emperor Maxentius’ worship of false idols. In declaring herself a Christian, and in publicly preaching, Katherine engages in rhetorical argument with the Emperor and
with fifty of his most learned scholars. While Katherine’s speech is partly a product of her position and learning, it is also a divine gift, bestowed upon her after she asks God’s permission to speak. God promises to pour into the saint’s mouth, “flowing waters of wise words which will quickly put enemies to flight” (Savage and Watson 268). In an interesting inversion, the beauty and eloquence of the young woman stun the fifty scholars to silence; St. Katherine’s words provoke silence in the scholars, and this silence, brought on by an unlikely source, enables their religious conversion.

Also written for the instruction of anchoresses, *St. Katherine* provides an exemplum of a relationship between women and Word via speech. Katherine’s gift of speech is not given for “profit or worldly honor” (Savage and Watson 266), but in profit and obedience to the Word. Voaden adds that it was as visionaries that women found a voice to teach and preach: “Because the woman visionary spoke as God’s mouthpiece, she was able temporarily to transcend her gender” (39). This is a rather broad claim; perhaps a more specific one would be that the female visionary, acting as mouthpiece, is able to transcend the stigma of her body and its senses, for indeed, like in many vita of female saints, St. Katherine never stops being figured as a young and beautiful female.

The saint’s verbal assaults and outbursts on the scholars and the Emperor are not expressions or consequences of her sex, but rather of divine inspiration and personal devotion to God. They are both of God and for God. The response implied, or intended, by the construction of dialogues between the divine and the devoted, provides a model beyond a strictly linear, verbal imposition from God to the silent body, heart, and mouth. In his introduction to the text, Hugh White has noted that with its repetitions and alliterations, *Ancrene Wisse* was written with the intention of being spoken out loud (xxii). Even solitary reading in one’s cell would not be silent. As auricular confession becomes a vehicle for clean and pure inner judgment, so do the devotions that the author instructs the anchoress to recite daily: “*_is word habbed muchel on us ant i mudd ofte euch time _et 3e mahen sitten 3e oder stonden*” (CCCC 402, 13 / 26-28).

As a discursive production, the text must be taken in, consumed, through the very senses from which it cautions restraint; the
senses, however, are always interpretative, which is why they are suspect. In Ancrene Wisse, the regulation of enclosures and openings, and its attention to the permeability of such sites, provides a means to rearticulate the prohibition of female speech that lies behind the regulae of silence. The Guide rearticulates this prohibition through the literal and metaphorical trope of enclosure. Enclosure is not strictly subjugation to regulae, but the development of that which cannot be regulated: the heart and the inner senses. Grayson notes how metaphor is the dominant structure of thought in Ancrene Wisse (9), and how by the end of chapter two, Christ emerges as the dominant figure. “His presence,” says Grayson, “is not only pervasive, but His sense experiences actually enclose those of the anchoress structurally” (54). The connection between Christ and the anchoress becomes one of sensory identification and selfless, unworldly love.

Kristeva explains that the religious and psychoanalytic subjects are both motivated to speak of the self (to another) by love. Both become amorous, “transferential discourses” of identification, revealing desires through speech but also bringing speech into “ostensibly nameless recesses of meaning” (Beginning 3,7). If transferential language is amourous language, by Kristeva’s claim, then metaphor, as a trope of transference, becomes vital to this amourous discourse of identification. Metaphor, by its very mode of selection and substitution, provides possibilities within dominant theological prohibitions. The embedded metaphors and metaphorical shifts between the anchoritic body and the anchorhold explore the possibilities of the anchoress’s daily practices and expand the possibilities of the anchoress’s relation to the Word by imploding the traditional relationship between gender and speech. In Ancrene Wisse, literal enclosure is an impossible goal to achieve, but as a metaphor, it provides a possibility of union with Christ through the very means of the abject or dangerous female body, and, in particular, female speech.
Notes:

1 All Latin citations are taken from *The Letter of Heloise on Religious Life and Abelard’s First Reply*, edited by J. T. Muckle; text cited by page number. English citations are from Betty Radice’s translation.

2 The other, that you will prescribe some Rule for us and write it down, a Rule which shall be suitable for women, and also describe fully the manner and habit of our way of life, which we find was never done by the holy Fathers (Radice 160).

3 All citations are taken from The English Text of the *Ancrene Riwle: Ancrene Wisse*, edited from the MS. Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, 402, by J. R. R. Tolkien, EETS OS 249, which will be referred to as CCCC 402; text cited by page/line. Abbreviated forms in the manuscript are cited here in their expanded forms and major pauses within sentences have been omitted. Modernized translations are from Ann Savage and Nicholas Watson’s *Anchoritic Spirituality*.

4 Pure heart and a clean conscience and true belief (Savage and Watson 47).

5 It is said of anchoresses that almost every one of them has some old woman to feed her ears, a gossip who tells her all the local tidbits, a magpie who cackles about all that she sees and hears, so that the saying now runs, “You can hear the news from a mill or a market, from a smithy or an anchorhouse” (Savage and Watson 81).

6 All citations are taken from *The Book of Margery Kempe, the text from the unique MS. owned by Colonel W. Butler-Bowdon*, edited by Sanford Brown Meech, EETS OS 212; text cited by page/line. The modernized translation is taken from B.A. Windeatt’s translation.

7 Then she stood looking out at a window, telling many edifying tales to those who would hear her, so much that women wept bitterly, and said, with great heaviness of heart, “Alas, woman, why should you be burned?” (Windeatt 169).

8 Do not talk with anyone through the church window, but hold it in honour because of the holy sacrament that you see through it. And use the house window for talking sometimes with your women; for others, the parlor window. You should not speak except at these two windows (Savage and Watson 74).
9 Do not preach to anyone. Let no man ask you counsel or talk to you; advise only women (Savage and Watson 75).

10 Someone, perhaps, is so learned or so wise in speaking that she wants him who sits and speaks with her to know it, and pays him back word for word. And she who should be an anchoress becomes a teacher, and teaches him who has come to teach her. She wants to be recognized and known once for her talk among the wise. Known she is—because on account of the very things for which she expects to be held wise, he understands she is a fool, since she hunts for praise and catches blame; for at the very least, when he has gone away, he will say, “This anchoress talks a lot” (Savage and Watson 72-3).

11 See Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*, chapters 4 and 5.

12 The enemy from hell and his army goes all the way through a mouth which is always open, into the heart (Savage and Watson 75).

13 Our precious St. Mary, who ought to be an example for all women, was of so few words that nowhere in Holy Writ do we find that she spoke, except for four times; but because of this rarity of speech, her words were heavy and full of power (Savage and Watson 76).

14 If it [love] is to be a gift, where could you bestow it better than upon me? Am I not the fairest one? Am I not the richest King? Am I not the highest born? (Savage and Watson 194).

15 The modernized translation is taken from Savage and Watson, which is based on the MS. Bodley 35.

16 Keep this prayer much in use and often in your mouth whenever you can, sitting or standing (Savage and Watson 53).
Works Cited


TRANSCEENDING THE IMBALANCE: ENGENDERING ETHOS IN THE RHETORIC OF SOR JUANA INEZ DE LA CRUZ AND CHRISTINE DE PIZAN

(With a synthesis of their theories in Maria W. Stewart’s “Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston” & “Lecture Delivered at the Franklin Hall”)

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In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, Paul states:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but [they are commanded] to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

Over the course of history, statements such as these have helped lay the groundwork for misogynist and racist indoctrination. They do, without question, have their derivation in texts that have no inlet for revision. The question to be
begged here thus becomes even more important than ever: How do women find a way around such indoctrination without resorting to a rewriting of mythic and Biblical texts? Women, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Christine de Pizan, and Maria W. Stewart among them, found it necessary to pursue and question such formalities through a re-envisioning of invention—by establishing authority through a new ethical treatment of common knowledge. This early manner of feminism, or proto-feminism, prepared a body of texts, knowledge, and influence that continues to inform women’s issues until this present day.

According to Aristotle:

The topics of invention serve to increase the ethos or credibility of the speaker insofar as these are logically persuasive, and insofar as one appeals to the kinds of proofs or authorities that are seen as authoritative to one’s audience. (qtd. in Silva Rhetoricae)

His focus concerns both the ethos of the audience and the speaker. An orator’s approach to an audience must take several things into consideration: the age of the audience, the various personality types, and the audience’s circumstances in life (Aristotle 2: 2213-2217). If an orator has a keen sense of the audience’s character traits (viewed by Aristotle to be familiar in all who exhibit these traits) then s/he can better invent arguments that play to common interests. Knowledge of an audience’s specific tastes is just as important as the appeal to the emotions (Pathos) and a logical argument (Logos).

In addition to considering the ethos of the audience, the orator must establish and develop his own ethos. Aristotle expends only a little time on this concept, but states some very important ideas to aid in its development. In Book II section 2.1, he writes of three aspects of the speaker’s character that help to persuade the audience: good sense, good moral character, and good will towards his/her audience (2: 2194-2195). Good sense illustrates intelligence, proficiency, and authority on the subjects. Good moral character illustrates a virtuous character and an exterior of trustworthiness. And
good will illustrates a show of empathy and sensitivity to the needs of the audience. None of these, though, can function to increase the ethical nature of the orator unless the logical argument they are presenting (Logos) is convincing. Nor can the argument’s goals be fulfilled without the orator’s attendance to the audience’s character: the orator must be able to communicate the argument through the language specific to his audience.

But what if one’s audience finds such “proofs or authorities” to be the antithesis of common understanding? How can one, at the margins so to speak, possibly establish an authoritative persona when their motives serve to undermine and subvert the foundations of class, race, and gender? To be more specific, how did Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz and Christine de Pizan establish good sense, good moral character, and good will towards their audience? And how did this initial emancipation inform Maria W. Stewart’s critique of slavery and racism in mid-19th Century America?

Prior to the first millennium A.D., few women had attained literacy. Those who did were generally part of an elite class, usually a religious order or a royal family. During the Medieval period the numbers increased with the addition of some middle class women. But only a small percentage of them practiced what can be considered rhetorical writing (Bizzel and Herzberg 540). Bizzel and Herzberg remark that rhetorical elements in texts written by (and generally for women) had to be stated tacitly:

If women did not have overt political power, they could yield considerable covert power, whether in a royal court, a wealthy mercantile house, or, more modestly, in the domain of a simple farmer or craftsman. (446)

Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, for example, apparently humbles herself in The Poet’s Answer to the most Illustrious Sor Filotea de la Cruz through the use of litotes (“. . . how much more fitting it is that I should keep quiet—not like the Saint from modesty, but rather because, in truth, I am unable to say anything worthy of you” [de la Cruz 39]) while actually undermining the overt and absolute
regulations that have been imposed by a male ruling class. Christine de Pizan uses the same strategy in the *The Book of the City of Ladies*. According to Christine Moneera Laennec, “the insistence on the limitations of her authority is a tactic she uses in order to justify her writing . . . the less authority for her writing she appears to have, the greater the force of her argument” (52).

**Sor Juana’s Ethical Balancing**

Sor Juana’s *Answer* is a written defense and explanation of a critique she had penned earlier of Antonio Vieria’s claim “to have improved on the arguments of the fathers and doctors of the church” (de la Cruz 12). When Bishop Manuel Fernandez de la Cruz, a long-time friend, gained knowledge of this, he responded with an admonition: retract the critique, return to a life befitting a nun of the order, or else face persecution (12-13). Her *Answer* silently admits to piety and confesses her lack of talent while venturing to turn the established mode of thinking on its head. By challenging prescribed notions of feminine inferiority (through sometimes ambiguous though tacit argumentation) Sor Juana invents—engenders—an ethos that undermines such notions, all the time remaining (or appearing to remain?) at the margins. Ultimately, the *Answer* is “a woman’s rhetoric, attentive to the specific concerns of the female body and female literacy” (Bokser 7).

Although the arguments Sor Juana poses to the recipient of this letter are founded upon equal rights and opportunities for women in scholarly and theological pursuits, it is still necessary for her to invoke a community of female counterparts that have modeled themselves as the epitome of achievement. According to Arenal and Powell, “To counteract the idea of her own rarity and to support her arguments, Sor Juana emphasized the number of women of achievement,” launching the idea that “active and creative intelligence was not the exception but the rule” (de la Cruz 31). Sor Juana’s list of prominent women throughout the history of the world establishes precedence of women’s roles in manifest aspects of private, public, political, artistic, and economic life. The list includes forty-four women of prominence discussed in paragraphs 30 and 31 (77; 79).
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By including herself in the vast list of women who have participated in or have been catalysts of important historical events, she establishes a strong ethos that is formed through and informed by acute genius: both men and women have acknowledged the authority of all the saints and women of prominence in the Bible; thusly, if one denies the authority of her argument, one inadvertently denies the authority of all these women.

Bokser notes in “Sor Juana’s Rhetoric of Silence” that “her writings are fundamentally concerned with the problems of language, the constrictions imposed by discourse, and the provision and acquisition of literacy in her multilingual society” (5). In paragraph 26, Sor Juana admits to humbling herself before “the very simply and saintly mother superior,” who promotes the idea that women should not participate in study (de la Cruz 73), and obliges by giving up book reading for the three month period that particular mother superior was in charge. She also admits that “such a thing does not lie within my power, I could not do it” (73), and argues that study cannot truly be avoided because all things come from God, and to deny seeing God in everything is to deny God Himself:

For although I did not study in books, I studied all the things that God created, taking them for my letters, and for my book all the intricate structures of this world . . . For there is no creature, however lowly, in which one cannot recognize the great “God made me” . . . (73)

Sor Juana adeptly dispels the myth that the study and elucidation of letters belongs solely to the sphere of men. She equalizes the sexes by de-gendering the concept that God made two sexes— one who rules the world and one who obeys the ruler—by stating “God made me” a non-sexual entity. It is through this kind of manipulation of patriarchal language that Sor Juana devalues the ownership of knowledge (because it is universal, everyone can have access to it) and gives women an equal role in its attainment and interpretation.

Throughout the Answer, Sor Juana questions the authority by which she is forced to be silenced, and questions whether the im-
balance between Vieria’s critique of the Church Fathers and her opinion regarding his critique is truly warranted (91; 93). In paragraph 40, Sor Juana justifies her actions in writing the critique (named by her peers the “Letter Worthy of Athena”) as something no more than an opinion, “with all the indulgences granted me by our Holy Mother Church” (91). She unites the recipient of this letter, Bishop Manuel Fernandez de la Cruz, and herself under the banner of “our . . . Church” [italics mine] but spells out the feminine authority of the institution: Holy Mother Church. She continues her argument by harkening back to the idea of the inequality between the minds of men and women, while focusing on engendering the church with feminine aspects:

For if she, with her most holy authority, does not forbid my writing, why must others forbid it? Is it bold of me to oppose Vieria, yet not so for that Reverend Father to oppose the Three Holy Fathers of the Church? Is my mind, such as it is, less free than his, though it derives from the same source? (91-93)

Sor Juana does several things in this passage. First, she creates a feminine identity for the church, thus giving her sex equal authority over spiritual matters. This creates a balance between the dominant male hierarchies and their subservient female counterparts while claiming that all women have the right to interpretive and exegetical powers. Second, she returns to the idea that all things come from God, and obliterates the double-standard established for acts of discourse. Sex, in this case, cannot determine whether a discourse is silenced or made public. By invoking Titus Lucius’ words (“Respect befits the arts”) (93), she states that the letter is solely a matter of respect, a matter that she has not disregarded. She will also invoke the name of Pliny and reverse the blame for the letter’s publication, defending that if she had known the letter would be published, she would have retracted its submission to the Bishop: “The situation of one who publishes a thing is different from that of one who speaks it by name” (Pliny, qtd. in de la Cruz 93). All in all, Sor Juana “displays her intellectual
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peerlessness while mouthing the expected clichés of the rhetoric of feminine ignorance and tendering the requisite offer of retraction, should anything be said that might be condemned as heresy” (25).

Sor Juana also attacks the myth that philosophy belongs to the masculine sphere of knowledge, and creates a feminized counter-space for such pursuits: the kitchen. Bokser notes that this space “becomes a pedagogical site” (12) while Arenal and Powell remark that Sor Juana “creates a new ‘space,’ cleared from the prohibitions against women’s full and free participation in the university, the legal court, the public sphere of intellect and power” (de la Cruz 35). After giving a full account of her expertise in the kitchen, she reinstates the tacit affirmation that a woman’s place is in the kitchen: “But in truth, my Lady, what can we women know, save philosophies of the kitchen?” (75). She consistently downplays the authority she has been establishing in order to explicitly emphasize that she is only a humble being of the fairer sex—all the while creating a serious argument for intellectual and creative equal rights. This ironic and apt situating of herself in a position of powerlessness in fact creates power in her ethical character and good will towards women. She goes on to say, while critiquing Socrates’ claim in *Gorgias*, that cooking cannot be considered a philosophy but a procedure (Bizzell and Herzberg 97): “It was well put by Lupercio Leonardo [sic] that one can philosophize quite well while preparing supper. I often say, when I make these little observations, ‘Had Aristotle cooked, he would have written a great deal more’” (de la Cruz 75). By this trick of repositioning, we once again see how intellectual matters cannot be confined to the space of the university—or any institution for that matter. Philosophy, by right, not by obligation, is a pursuit common to men and women alike.

Christine de Pizan and the *querelle des femmes*

Christine de Pizan’s *The Book of the City of Ladies* addresses, in Marina Warner’s words, the “querelle des femmes (the woman question)” of the early 15th century (de Pizan xiii). Being a product of the royal court, de Pizan was quite familiar with and conscious
of its traditions and manners—in her public and private life as well as in her writing: “her strategy in her attack is courteous, and her courtesy, with its appearance of frankness, even artlessness, conceals a fair bit of cunning, and a deal of rage” (xiv). The authority of this text is exhibited by Christine’s use of the three Virtues (Reason, Rectitude and Justice) to voice a manifesto of equal rights: it is at once a foundation for solidarity (under the umbrella of three distinct and universal feminine voices) and a subtle act of modesty. The irony of the *Book* lies in the fact that, although Christine, the character in the book, has humbled herself to the wisdom of the Virtues, it is still Christine, also the writer, who has written these words of her own accord. As Laennec points out, “This strategy of pleading weakness, though it outwardly conforms to misogynist notions regarding women, is used by de Pizan as a device for denying, so as to subsequently attack, misogynist accusations” (48). Like Sor Juana, Christine exhibits a great deal of aptitude and craftiness as she argues for women’s equality.

The underlying purpose of the *Book* is to establish, as its name suggests, a city of ladies (notice she uses the term “ladies” instead of women, as if to emphasize feminine integrity and enculturation). This attention to naming brings to light just how important it is for Christine to authorize her own version/vision of the feminine: “She cites tradition in order to remold the same tradition to meet her own needs in writing a history from the point of view of women, a radical break with all previous historiography” (xxviii). The *Book* is also similar in intent to Sor Juana’s listing of prominent women in the *Answer*, but its extensive chronicling is much better suited to fitting Christine into that lineage, thus strengthening her own ethical character as she attacks historically prominent men (such as Ulysses, Hercules, and Theseus), and traditional chauvinist values. The concept of building a city, in Christine’s case, is similar to fashioning an anthology, revising both the idea of a woman’s place in history and her role in the public/political sphere.

While Sor Juana works at the level of a Christian theological and institutional standpoint, Christine makes explicit the attack on the mythological foundation of masculine superiority. By refocusing the reading of the mythic through the female lens, she historicizes
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it, “attributing concrete historical existence to mythical characters” (Hawkesworth 457). One of Christine’s first acts of subversion refo-cuses the object of mythology as demonstrated by countless histori-ans, that is, to counter the mythos of feminine (goddess) inferiority. She does this by—literally—embodying masculinity (Hercules and Theseus) and femininity (two Amazonians, Menalippe and Hippolyta) as two opposing forces, thus creating a “battle of the sexes” (de Pizan 43-47). This battle, literary in nature, is a representation of the prominent male/female dichotomy concerning physical strength. Hercules, Theseus, and their armies charge the land of Amazonia in a pre-emptive strike and catch the women off-guard. But the women soon retaliate. Christine remarks that the attack was “without provo-cation” (de Pizan 44)—a suggestion that points to absolute agency in men’s actions concerning women. As if to appeal to the solidarity of all women, Christine writes how the Amazons moved to arms without delay; but two women, Menalippe and Hippolyta, initiate their own attack and strike both Hercules and Theseus, and both their horses down. In just a few sentences, Christine manages to manifest a determination of feminine powers that are more domi-nant than their masculine counterparts. Although both the Amazons and the Greeks eventually sign a peace treaty (a reference to political equalization between men and women), it is Christine’s mockery of the mythos of male strength that sums up her goal to rewrite history from a woman’s perspective:

This deed would be unbelievable without the tes-timony of so many credible authors. The same authorities, themselves astounded by this adven-ture, make special excuse for Hercules, since, con-sidering his unlimited strength, they say it could have been the horse’s fault . . . and they maintain that had he been on foot, he would not have been brought down. (46)

Christine not only discredits the mythological foundation of Her-cules’ strength, she goes one step further to critique the justifica-tion other men have made for the events in the story. At this point,
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Christine’s authority in matters once consigned to the realm of the masculine (institutionalized learning) is increased, and, more importantly, carries equal weight.

When considering de Pizan’s version of physical versus intellectual strength in women, Laennec argues that “the weakness of women’s bodies not only does not necessarily imply other weaknesses, but that in fact it implies other compensatory strengths” (52). Hawkesworth acknowledges this relationship, but takes it further noting that de Pizan understood that it would take more than a well thought-out argument to de-center patriarchy:

She understood that one of the most destructive aspects of the “authoritative texts” on women was their capacity to make women doubt their own senses and experience. Because women accepted society’s accreditation of male “superiority,” they internalized the accounts of male “experts” about the nature of women. (457)

Christine eventually turns from re-writing the physical attributes of the feminine to illustrating its ingenuity. First, she asks Reason “whether God has ever wished to ennoble the mind of woman with the loftiness of the sciences” (de Pizan 62), wherein Reason responds with a plethora of examples ranging from the Maiden Cornificia and Sappho to Medea and Circes (64-70). But such learning, in Christine’s eyes, is not enough to envision empowerment. Reason’s timid but insistent response—“My lady, I realize that you are able to cite numerous and frequent cases of women learned in the sciences and the arts” (70)—insists upon the necessity of ingenuity resulting from a previously undiscovered knowledge, a knowledge, so to speak, devoid of any masculine achievement. Her insistence implies a foundation of knowledge that is solely the institute of a purely feminine inventiveness: “For it is not such a great feat of mastery to study and learn some field of knowledge already discovered by someone else as it is to discover by oneself some new and unknown thing” (71). This assertion translates into another attribute that Christine wishes to bring to light: steadfastness. It is also a scoff
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at an institutional or, as I’ve mentioned earlier, masculine education. Reason notes several achievements by women that, without such feats, humankind could not have survived: Minerva, inventor of numerous sciences, and a technique of making armor from iron and steel (73-75); Ceres, first to discover the art of cultivation and its tools (75-76), and Isis, who complemented such ingenuity with the construction of gardens and planting (76-77); Arachne, inventor of the art of cultivating flax and making linen (81-83).

In the middle of this long list of women innovators, Christine expresses her insight into the bogus “expertise” men have forever laid claim to: “I greatly admire what I have heard you say, that so much good has come into the world by virtue of the understanding of women” (77). Reason responds:

Now you can clearly see how God, who does nothing without a reason, wished to show men that he does not despise the feminine sex nor their own, because it so pleased Him to place such great understanding in women’s brains that they are intelligent enough not only to learn and retain the sciences but also to discover new sciences themselves, indeed sciences of such great utility and profit for the world that nothing has been more necessary. (77-78)

De Pizan tacitly, but ingeniously, refocuses the authority of her masculine counterparts by equalizing the powers of the feminine and masculine intellect. Like Sor Juana, who achieves a brilliant understanding that knowledge does not have to come from institutionalized learning (de la Cruz 73), de Pizan develops—through these women innovators—a new standard of learning and education that does not involve masculine expertise.

For de Pizan, this standard of independence from masculine expertise also translated into the development of self-sustenance: not only does God “place such great understanding in women’s brains,” but He provides them with a natural survival method that is the hallmark of all women, that is, mother-instinct. The creation of the
City of Ladies becomes “a space insulated from male calumnies, a space in which women could recover their senses and see what could not be seen through misogynous lenses” (Hawkesworth 457). De Pizan allegorizes this recovery in the 11th chapter of the Book: “Concerning a Woman who Breast-Fed Her Mother” (de Pizan 115-116). A Roman woman is condemned to death, and it is forbidden for anyone to bring her anything to eat or drink. Her daughter, having great love for her, begged the guards for daily visits—they agreed, but searched her every time for food and drink. The daughter, who had just recently given birth, would daily give suck to her mother so that she could survive: “In this way the daughter gave back to her mother in her old age what she had taken from her mother as an infant” (115). Moved by such love, the guards report the story to the judge, who immediately puts the mother in her daughter’s care. The allegory performs two tasks: it endows de Pizan’s female audience with independence from male authority and expertise while refocusing the authority into women’s hands; for her male audience, it provides a prospect for unconditional relations, free from any past (mis)conception regarding their female counterparts. In a larger sense, a woman’s body is made equal to an absolute text such as the Bible, and, ideally, there is no way possible for any man (or woman for that matter) to tamper with it in any shape or form.

Latter Day Perspectives

It is necessary now to look at two texts that mirror the inventiveness of Sor Juana and de Pizan’s ethical arguments. This section will focus on Maria W. Stewart’s “Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall,” and her “Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston,” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1037-1039; 1039-1044). Stewart’s case is very hard to grasp: although she was a very influential rhetor and writer, “racism and perhaps also social class prejudice caused [women activists] to pass her over in favor of the white and upper class Grimké sisters” (1035). There is no doubt, though, that Stewart, like Sor Juana and de Pizan before her, has made enormous contributions to the plight of her oppressed and underrepresented sisters.

Stewart begins, in her “Lecture Delivered at Franklin Hall,”
with a spiritual interrogation: “Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?” wherein she responds, “If it is thy will, be it even so, Lord Jesus” (1037). Stewart’s first call to authority comes from God himself, as is mirrored in de Pizan’s affirmation of the three Virtues to take on the construction of the City of Ladies (9-14). Both claims to authority above the authority of man appear early on in both works, and set up an ethos that cannot be easily refuted. For Stewart, it is necessary to go on in the name of, but more importantly, with support from, the highest authority. She remarks in her “Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston” while still retaining her sense of humility:

Lord, if thou wilt be with me, then will I speak for thee so long as I live. And thus far I have every reason to believe that it is the divine influence of the Holy Spirit operating upon my heart that could possibly induce me to make the feeble and unworthy efforts that I have. (1040) [And] I believe, that for wise and holy purposes, best known to himself, he hath unloosed my tongue and put his word into my mouth, in order to confound and put all those to shame that have rose up against me. (1040)

Stewart claims that, although her position as a black woman prevented her from having “received the advantages of an early education” (1037), it had not prevented her from acquiring something more important: “moral capability – no teachings but the teachings of the Holy Spirit” (1037). She does, though, voice the idea that, even though “our girls possess . . . amiable qualities” that may even surpass those of their white sisters, “it is impossible for scarce an individual to rise above the condition of servant” (1037). It can only be by a turn “more assiduously to moral worth and intellectual improvement” that these women can even begin to “unloose those fetters!” (1037). Stewart’s ingenious irony sounds like Sor Juana’s tacit renunciation of institutional learning: “For although I did not study
in books, I studied all the things that God created, taking them for my letters” (de la Cruz 73). Both Sor Juana and Stewart use this playful inventiveness to undermine the notion that knowledge comes from a book—a book instituted by masculine-centered learning and ideology—and see past the restrictions and, ultimately, limitations, of such learning.

Stewart’s inventiveness also illuminates a new dichotomy: between women of color and their white counterparts. To imagine a black woman blasting away at her fairer sisters is to imagine a new taxonomy of femininity: black femininity:

O, ye fair sisters, whose hands are never soiled, whose nerves and muscles are never strained, go learn by experience! Had we had the opportunity that you have had, to improve our moral and mental faculties, what would have hindered our intellects from being as bright, and our manners from being as dignified as yours? Had it been our lot to have been nursed in the lap of affluence and ease, and to have basked beneath the smiles and sunshine of fortune, should we not have naturally supposed that we were never made to toil? And why are not our forms as delicate, and our constitutions as slender, as yours? Is not the workmanship as curious and complete? (1038)

Stewart continues Sor Juana and de Pizán’s task of re-visioning the feminine (through equal education and treatment) by bringing to light a new notion of the equality of the races, becoming an authoritative figure for, and forerunner to, numerous black men and women activists including Sojourner Truth, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Frederick Douglass (1035).

Stewart’s authority, although challenging a host of issues including race, gender, and the political influence of black Americans, is tacitly undermined by her claim to be “one of the wretched and miserable daughters of the descendents of fallen Africa” (1039). She takes a similar approach to increasing her own ethos as do Sor Juana
and de Pizan by the use of litotes. Stewart humbles herself to the inadequacy of her learning, then equates herself to those in her audience as “one of the wretched and miserable daughters of Africa.” Such a move to equalization of orator and audience provides a sense of shared values. She states, “it is upon you that woman depends” (1038), perhaps to instill in her audience a sense of right and responsibility that she herself has derived from the plight similar to theirs, as well as raise up their ethos to her level and give them the authority to carry on her mission.

In the introduction to her “Farewell Address to Her Friends in the City of Boston” she uses similar tactics to undermine her ethos, thus strengthening it by claiming humility and impurity in the eyes of God:

Borne down with a heavy load of sin and shame, my conscience filled with remorse; considering the throne of God forever guiltless, and my own eternal condemnation just, I was at last brought to accept of salvation as a free gift, in and through the merits of the crucified Redeemer. (1039)

Retaining a position of humble subservience (the position Sor Juana and de Pizan assume in their defense of women’s rights as an ironic implication of their feminine subservience) she implicitly creates an ethical argument that aspires to undermine pre-established notions of feminine inferiority. Again, she believes she hears “a spiritual interrogation” and, in her position of humility, answers, “Yea, Lord, I am able,” and yet, as de Pizan exhibits when confronted by the Three Virtues (6-8), with apprehension:

Yet amid these bright hopes, I was filled with apprehensive fears, lest they were false. I found that sin still lurked within; it was hard for me to renounce all for Christ, when I saw my earthly prospects blasted. O, how bitter was that cup. (1040)

But, like Sor Juana, Stewart must take the risk of “setting the record straight, by belittling antifemale rules and edicts” (de la Cruz 33). Just as Sor Juana’s Answer risks the penalties of the Inquisition (30-31), Stewart’s service to, or rejection of, God could spell
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out eternal salvation, or damnation. Both Sor Juana and Stewart are in a position of silencing (Bokser; de la Cruz 32-37): one deciding never to publish again, the other leaving her hometown of Boston. Both imply one last attack at chauvinist ideology. Stewart remarks, after making the decision to accept the responsibility inherent in the challenge:

I was at last made willing to be anything or nothing, for my Redeemer’s sake. Like many, I was anxious to retain the world in one hand, and religion in sounded in my ear, and with giant-strength, I cut off my right hand, as it were, and plucked out my right eye, and cast them from me, thinking it better to enter life halt and maimed, rather than having two hands or eyes to be cast into hell. (1040)

Where Sor Juana maps the territory of invention, of hosting one final attack before her ultimate silence on this earth, Stewart extends the attack to disqualify earthly silence as anything but that, for her words and deeds will outlast her body in eternal salvation.

Stewart, like Sor Juana and de Pizan, is also acutely aware of the importance of establishing an authoritative demeanor by placing herself in the lineage of women who have come before her. She lists women from the Bible like Deborah, Esther, Mary Magdalene, and other women who administered to Christ’s ministry. She also makes clear the ancient belief that, in many early cultures, “the Deity more readily communicates himself to women” (1041). The answer, then, to male expertise and Biblical authority becomes clear to all:

If such women as are here described have once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive, by their example both in public and private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely against us
at present. No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin. (1041)

In other words, Stewart is taking the entry into the lineage of historically important women one step further, a step Sor Juana and de Pizan only hint at: it looks to the future in order to establish a means for the continuation of the lineage. Her ethos is voluminous at this point, and she speaks with the authority of a sage by claiming, with righteous fire, that to inhibit the efforts of women from this point onwards is an act of sinning. Stewart’s final words on the subject transcend race and gender, breaking the silence she is forced, like Sor Juana and de Pizan, to acknowledge, but not without one final, the final, word:

What if such women as described here should rise among our sable race? And it is not impossible. For it is not the color of the skin that makes the man or the woman, but the principle formed in the soul. Brilliant wit will shine, come from whence it will; and genius and talent will not hide the brightness of its lustre. (1042).
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*Silva Rhetoricae*: <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/>
A s one of the most infamous female criminals to appear in seventeenth-century London, Mary Frith, alias Moll Cutpurse (1585-1659), was not only notorious for a wide range of illicit endeavors that included procuring, but considered equally (if not more) scandalous for creating herself as a gender ambiguous spectacle that destabilized dominant, essentialist notions of identity. Although Frith was brought before the courts (secular and ecclesiastical) on charges of theft, her most sensational encounters with the judicial system were as a transgressor of prevailing ideological distinctions between the sexes. On many occasions Mary Frith, London’s “Queen Regent of Misrule,” (Frith 59) craftily managed to evade the law as a thief, fence, bawd, embezzler, and political propagandist; however, she did not elude penal authority in conjunction with her artfully fashioned gender identity. She was briefly impris-
oned for suspicious conduct associated with “walking late [at night] and [dressing] in men’s clothing” (Nakayama 33). But her most conspicuous moment of social opprobrium came in 1612 when an ecclesiastical court insisted on her public penance at St. Paul’s church for the offense of indecent behavior—an offense occasioned by her “wearing undecent and manly apparel” (Nakayama 43), frequenting all-male establishments, and making an impromptu appearance on the stage of the Fortune Theater where she played the viol and sang.

One of Frith’s contemporary editors, Randall Nakayama notes: “sumptuary legislation had no provisions concerning cross-dressing . . . [but] one could be prosecuted for wearing indecent apparel by an ecclesiastical court, as appears to be the case here” (43). After this incident she seems to have adopted the more ambiguous practice of mixing male with female raiment, but her sartorial self-fashioning continued to intrigue dramatists, poets, and pamphleteers. She is alluded to in Brome’s The Court Beggar, has a not very flattering part in Nathaniel Field’s Amends for Ladies, and is mentioned in Thomas Freeman’s Rubbe and a Great Cast, and she is still known today as the inspiration for Middleton and Decker’s The Roaring Girl. English authorities seem to have assumed that Frith was disguising her true self by sartorial and behavioral means unnatural to her “real” position within the social and political hierarchies of the masculinist culture of mid-seventeenth century England. But as a public record, her autography, The Life and Death of Mrs. Mary Frith, Commonly Called Moll Cutpurse (published posthumously in 1662), demonstrates that this assumption was impossible to prove, because Frith continuously confounded the normative categories of identity that would distinguish between acting and being; natural and monstrous.

Just as judicial attempts to publicly shame her did not successfully suppress Frith’s transgressive behaviors, but rather inadvertently accentuated her defiance of gender categories, so too did the two anonymous prefatories to the first printing of The Life fail to reduce Frith’s multiplicity to the exclusionary singularity of an object that could be rationally known and mastered through language. Their attempts to strip Frith of her sartorial guise, though widely differing in their purposes and methods, are each frustrated by a subject
who eludes containment, not because the body beneath her clothes is inaccessible, but because the significance of her corporeal shape to her fashioned form is more radically disturbing than they are willing to admit to themselves. Instead of revealing the “true” Frith, these texts, which are representative of the conservative literary response to Frith, expose a deep-seated social anxiety regarding transgressive female identity and desire.

The authenticity of Frith’s text, it must be noted, continues to be questioned by critics, including Gustav Ungerer, who speculates on Frith’s illiteracy given her common status. He views *The Life* as royalist propaganda pieced together by a team of male authors commissioned by the publishers, William Gilberton and George Horton, who were noted for their pseudo-autobiographies. I take issue with this position elsewhere (Wagner 168-194), but there is critical consensus that two anonymous prefatories were written by different hands—both male. These two authors/editors read Frith respectively (and in contradiction to each other) first, as an ominous and incomparable sign of the civil strife that would ensue during her lifetime and, second, as a royalist hero whose ambiguous gender identity is a compelling mystery (to be solved through analysis that we would consider psychological, sociological, and even astrological).

The author of the preface “To the Reader” of *The Life* has as his primary aim in publishing her autography (a term I use to signify self inscription that need not correspond to extra-textual experience) the dissemination of a scathing attack on Cromwell’s government, as it contains both a critique of the commonwealth’s and protectorate’s policies and an account of Frith’s activities to undermine them. However, he is obviously very uncomfortable with the idea of promoting Frith as a royalist hero given the ambiguities of her gender identity, as well as her criminal past. His desire to reconcile these “two Friths” results in his presenting her as a supernatural and monstrous indicator of the civil strife that would ensue. Thus, he defines her as “the living picture and portraiture of a schism and separation, her doublet and petticoat understanding each other no better than Presbytery and Independency” (3), or, for that matter, Parliamentarian and Royalist. It is this schism embodied in the microcosm of Frith’s person that makes her a “prodigy of the times . . . presagious in her
habit and manner” (2), as well as an omen signifying the displeasure of “our angry fates” (2). By ascribing such portentous significance to the body he has constructed as monstrous in its “strange yet ridiculous corruptions and indispositions of humors” (2), the author of the preface hopes to situate Frith conveniently beyond the realm of the natural, and thus also beyond the need for (or even possibility of) explanation in regard to dominant notions of gender normalcy. According to him, she is so singular as to be incapable of being “sorted by any comparison or suited with any antic companion” (3), but he provides no evidence (beyond his own infallible opinion) for his assertion that there can be found “nothing appertaining to her being to be matched throughout the whole course of history or romance; so unlike herself, and of so difficult a mixture, that it is no wonder she was like nobody” (2-3).

In fact, the author undermines this assertion when he begins the preface (to The Life) by drawing an analogy between Frith, whom he terms the “Sybilla Tyburnia,” and the Cumaean sibyl of ancient Greece (with her nine volumes of prophecy), as well as such other prophets as the “mad Cassandra” (2). His short text actually abounds with comparisons of Frith to other transgressive women. He moves between “some admiration” (1) for the spectacular success of this “epicoene wonder” and “virago” as both a “Mercurialist . . . [and as one of] the procuresses of the college of Venus” (2-3), and his need to contain the possibility that her text might be read as a guidebook for other thieves and madams. For all of his references to Frith as singular, he inadvertently portrays her as belonging to many categories and traditions, and as capable of giving rise to reproductions of herself as a criminal and transvestite. Perhaps when he says “she was like nobody” he is referring specifically and only to her gender-crossed appearance. Even then it is hard to imagine that any seventeenth-century reader could have taken seriously such a strategy for isolating Frith from the rich cultural heritage to which she owed her emergence.

Popular literature contained representations of a number of women in history who had transgressed in a similar manner. The martyred transvestite warrior Joan of Arc appeared as a character in such popular literature as Shakespeare’s Henry VI and Long Meg, the
legendary early sixteenth-century occasional transvestite hero who had been the subject of myth and biography for more than a century and was still the “stuff” of common knowledge. As for romance, the genre (especially as it appears in the Renaissance) was filled with cross-dressing women (and men) who, though distinct from Frith in their nobility, nonetheless, equally disrupt gender categories. In *The Faerie Queene* for instance, Britomart, like Frith, is said to have always been inclined toward martial sports rather than needle and thread, and another virago, Radigund, challenges gender norms by going so far as to impose cross-dressing and “female” behavior on the males she defeats in battle.

British history has also provided numerous examples of cross-dressing women. Jane Ingleby, like a considerable number of other “Gallant She-Soldiers” including the ballad-famed “Mr.’ Clarke,” disguised herself as a man in order to take part in the English civil war. In fact, during the first half of the century (when, at the age of 20, Frith herself began to cross-dress) the fashion of women in male attire was so popular as to incite not only the reproof of James I, but also a scathing attack on *Hic Mulier*, which further fueled the pamphlet debate on the “woman question.” In continental literatures and histories as well, there existed many other women, such as Queen Christina and Eleno/Elena of Cespedes, whose gender non-conformity resembled Frith’s and whose lives made hers look barely scandalous by comparison.

Yet, although the preface’s author cannot successfully sustain his claim to Frith being an aberration, his emphasis on her uniqueness is somewhat in keeping with the sense of heightened individuality Frith herself promotes in *The Life*. He argues not only for her difference from others, but even from her own “true, originary” self: a split founded on what we might call a neurosis. He sees her cross-dressing as the sartorial representation (the outer manifestation) of a psychic split that is semiotically present in her text. He notes that her editors are “forced to take her as [they] found her . . . [since] it was impossible to make one piece of so various a subject as she was both to herself and others” (5). Clearly, what this author interprets as fragmentation could as easily be read as a multiplicity—as a oneness that is always at least double, and perhaps indicative of the androgyny
common to all women. The author of *Hic Mulier* voices a similar concern when he says that transvestism “is an infection that emulates the plague and throws itself amongst women of all degrees, all deserts, and all ages from the Capitol to the Cottage are some spots or swellings of this disease” (269). The preface’s author also fears that Frith’s habits might be contagious and that felons of all sorts might be tempted to use this text to prosper, as did Frith, through illicit trade. However, his anxiety that other women might begin to identify with Frith and be drawn to an ambiguously gendered lifestyle is equally pervasive, even though Frith repeatedly distinguishes between herself and the rest of womankind.

His containment strategies fail not only because the popular imagination could easily conjure memories of other such women, but also because he repeatedly deconstructs his own argument, sometimes in the space of a single sentence. This preface ends with the aforementioned admission that Frith is too “various a subject” for the author “to make one piece of” her, and although this is said in the context of an apology for the autography’s “abruptness and discontinuance” (5), it demonstrates his awareness that Frith, as she writes herself, defies a logic of coherence and singularity. While the aim of the preface, “To the Reader,” is to make Frith an “other” for whom a normative discourse on gender and sexuality does not apply, the biographical “Introduction” which follows attempts to suggest natural causes for the “aberration” that is Moll (as they both refer to her). Whereas the preface voices an anxiety about the possibility that Moll may not be so different from other women, the “Introduction” is concerned that she might be. From the start, its author marks his approach to Frith as a proto-sociological/psychological case study: “Equally distant it is for the purport and intent of this piece to favor her ashes, or to rake her in her grave” (7).

The author of the “Introduction” repeatedly tries to explain Frith according to various theories on sexuality and gender from which the preface’s author wishes to exclude her. He is much more comfortable with the idea of promoting Frith as a royalist hero, and her story as a tale of resistance to Parliamentary forces and Cromwellian rule, rather than as an oracle of the times. This author’s fascination with her gender ambiguity and possible sexualities speaks a
fear of the unknowable that ultimately has the same source in phal-locentrism as its opposite—the fear of the too familiar. While the “Introduction” engages speculative philosophies that sought, as did medicine and experimental science, to make the human subject a knowable object of study, it most forcibly speaks to the inability of any of these methods of inquiry and explanation to sufficiently decipher the cause or origin of Moll’s gender identity. Underlying all this scrutiny is the unspeakable fear of lesbian desire and its multiple threats to patriarchy. This is an obvious and possible motive for Frith’s gender identification, and yet it is never for a moment considered.

Throughout his essay, Nakayama argues that the author of the “Introduction” to the 1662 edition is fascinated with the prospect that Moll’s sartorial duality indicates a hermaphroditic body for which there can be no agreement on questions of gender and sexuality, since the hermaphroditic body is the site of conflicting medical theories regarding its nature and functioning. I would argue that although the anonymous author describes Frith as “an hermaphro-dite in manner as well as in habit” (7), he makes this assertion in the context of an analogy between her gendered appearance and her trade: “she lived in a kind of mean betwixt open, proposed dishonesty and fair and civil deportment, being an hermaphrodite in manner as well as in habit” (7). In no way does such a description assume a coincidence between her body and her sartorial self-fashioning. On the contrary, he, like the author of the preface, assumes the reliability of Frith’s own representation of herself as female sexed though ambiguously gendered by her “manly” deportment and affinity for “masculine” activities.

Although it would have been anxiety provoking for this author to imagine Frith a hermaphrodite, the possibility that she is actually sexed female would have more radically threatened her society’s always fragile and contingent construction of maleness and masculinity. Certainly the figure of the physical hermaphrodite was seriously disruptive of the gender distinctions that were being more stringently defined and defended precisely because there were so many challenges to them. Nevertheless, it was females dressing in male attire that incited the most vicious responses from detractors.
Consider this invective from *Hic Mulier*:

[They] will be manly not only from the head to the waist, but to the very foot and in every condition: man in body by attire, man in behavior by rude complement, man in nature by aptness to anger, man in action by pursuing revenge . . . and, in brief, so much man in all things that they are neither men nor women. (269-70)

Moreover, the hermaphrodite could more easily be otherized as outside the normative man/woman binary, whereas a masculinized woman radically ruptures that system of thought.

In fact, when “push comes to shove,” Frith never denies being female. On the contrary, she reverts to feminine stereotypes to prove that she has not “become” a man completely. When brought before the ecclesiastical courts on the charge of public immorality, she readily confessed to a masculinized lifestyle of dress and behavior, but maintained that she was nevertheless a woman as “any of them [who] would come to her lodgings . . . should find” (qtd. in Orgel 12-13). This testimony asserts a female body beneath the masculine veneer: one that appears heterosexual and promiscuous, confirming *Hic Mulier’s* supposition and condemnation of the masculine woman’s lascivious heterosexual appetite. However, I would argue that the threat of the *Hic Mulier* usurping male domain in intimate relations with other women is far more anxiety provoking, and too deep to be voiced except as an all-too-present absence.

Susan Zimmerman says in relation to the Moll who appears in *The Roaring Girl*: she “never denies her sexuality. She has and acknowledges her sexual dreams; she has and acknowledges her instrument, that viol with which she is so insistently linked . . . ” (177). Although Zimmerman is reading the latent homosexuality of the staged Moll constructed by Dekker, this nevertheless demonstrates that the playwright was sensitive to, and willing to confront, the possible sexuality these prefaces refuse to contemplate. In an earlier piece, critic Mary Beth Rose compares Moll’s insistence “on being recognized as a woman” to Shakespeare’s transvestite heroines, but
notes that “he assumes the social psychological freedom of the traditional disguised heroine without providing the corresponding reassurance implicit in that heroine’s eventual erotic transformation” (389). It is the erotic meanings transvestism might have for Frith’s sexuality as a female that most intrigue the author of the “Introduction.” Yet, the possibility of lesbian desire is confined to lurk at the margins as all too subversive subtext. In this context, the many and various uses to which both the “Introduction” and Frith’s own *Life* put the rhetoric of “nature” and the “natural” are even more problematic than they would be in relation to someone whose sex was undecipherable or hermaphroditic.

In the culminating moment of his extended argument regarding Frith’s disinclination for traditional female activities, labors, pastimes, and especially for those marital and maternal expectations that perpetuate patriarchies, the author of the “Introduction” notes, “but above all she had a natural abhorrence to tending of children, to whom she ever had an averseness in her mind equal to the sterility and barrenness in her womb, never being made a mother to our best information” (13). This statement, intended as it is to set Frith apart from other women by convincing the reader that despite her female biology (she has a womb) she has no maternal capabilities, opens the space for a completely inverse reading of the natural. Natural here would seem to connote “instinctive.” Still, this phrase cannot be read without recognizing the double valence of “natural.” If such abhorrence is “natural” (i.e. not abnormal, not monstrous) to Frith, who is to say that it could not be equally natural to other women? Or, are all women who cannot or will not conceive children not to be considered truly women? Many would have said yes, but then what of someone like Queen Elizabeth I? To consider such questions was to shake up the very foundations of female identity as constructed by a normative, patriarchal discourse.

By associating her “masculine” characteristics with “natural inclination,” the “Introduction” unwittingly introduces radical uncertainty into the distinctions that hold gender in place and it does so through the female, not hermaphroditic, body. Ultimately, this text defines Moll’s difference from her sex in essentialist terms that inadvertently defy such essentialism. The writer has said all along
that her masculine spirit predominated in her from an early age, but here it is shown to have even affected her womb itself, disrupting the foundational quality attributed to biology by this society. In the end, it is inconceivable to this author too (as to the author of the preface) that one could have Frith’s feelings and be a woman even according to the most reductionist anatomical definition. He wants to be able to contain Frith within already defined categories that can make her knowable, yet he must resort to emptying the category of woman of all that it usually signifies in order for it to accommodate Frith. Thus she has a womb, but it is barren and unable to perform its normative function.

Ultimately, neither editor successfully exposes a true Frith within his discourse, because the identity fashioned in *The Life* is so various in its possible meanings that even Frith herself cannot contain the way these proliferate in regard to her gender, sexuality, sartorial choices, or the body her clothes and her text intriguingly disguise, if not obscure. Instead, *The Life and Death Of Mary Frith*, like her sartorial self-representation, baffles and obfuscates meaning. She dresses herself in her autography as she did in life—so as to frustrate any notion of the female body as a transparent source of meaning.
Crime of Self -Creation

Works Cited


Wagner


On Monsieur’s Departure
I grieve and dare not show my discontent,
I love and yet am forced to seem to hate,
I do, yet dare not say I meant.
I seem stark mute but inwardly I brate.
I am and not, I pierce and I am burned.
Since from myself another self I turned.
My care is like my shadow, my
Follow me flying, his
Stands and totters with the weight of mine.
No means neither thing is, nor at the end of the way.
But in his path, I am.
For I am soft, and yet sensible too
Or be more cruel, yet I am to be had.
Let me or flatter, or through or let
Or let me live, I am more sweet content.
Or die and I am more endearing.

Queen Elizabeth
Poet
Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra concerns the imperial attempt of the titular lovers to achieve the “chief end” (4.13.27): supreme excellence in civic honor and personal love. Set in the Roman world, this tragedy is rooted in virtue, the ancient discourse of the excellent or complete life. The play asks, “Can love be sustained within lives of civic or martial honor?” Most of the scholarship on Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra divides on this very question, and most scholars have supposed that the basis of the imperial lovers’ tragedy lies in the incompatibility of love and honor in the temporal world. Indeed, the generic designation of tragedy predating failure suggests the sheer difficulty of such integration within the play’s backdrop of opposing values. This study argues, however, that love and honor are not inherently incompatible and that Antony and Cleopatra’s failure is determined by both external and internal forces. Externally, the lovers are beset by political and social forces inimical to a sustained attainment of the “heavenly mingle” (2.1.58) of love and honor. The ethos of Roman gravitas, as exploited by the
politically ambitious Augustus, distorts Antony and Cleopatra’s heroic erōs, their twinned pursuit of honor and beauty, into lust. This appetite, fraught with gender implications, is one that turns women into sirens of sexual desire and drives men to dishonorable dereliction of duty. At the same time, by the definition of tragic hamartia, Antony and Cleopatra themselves contribute to their downfall, especially Antony through his inability to free himself from the ethical imperatives of Roman gravitas.

The generic determinism of tragedy, however, does not have the final word. As critics like Carol Thomas Neely have observed, genre boundaries in Antony and Cleopatra are not dissolved but enlarged (Neely 26). Hence, the joyful visions of integration presented in the middle of Act 4, the scene of the arming of Antony, and its analogue, the final scene, 5.2, the “arming” of Cleopatra for her noble suicide, together exhibit a generic expansiveness. In both scenes, honor and love, the martial and the marital, converge in the erōtic pursuit, here meant in the Platonic sense of the infinite desire for “beautiful things and the power to acquire them” (Plato, Meno 77b–78b).³ In Plato’s Symposium, Erōs is rendered incarnate as a demigod, who, as the offspring of penury and resource, instantiates ceaseless striving for the beautiful and noble (Plato, Symposium 203c). Erōs, the wellspring of noble striving, is the essence of tragic greatness in both the Aristotelian and Senecan traditions of English Renaissance drama: in A. C. Bradley’s words, “the capacity of finding in something the infinite, and of pursuing it into the jaws of death” (Bradley 340). However, the sublime potential of erōs is fully realized in the world only through Aristotelian practical wisdom, or what I call virtuosity. In other words, erōs and virtuosity, love and honor, interanimate each other to enact an integrative virtue of disciplined passion. Against the backdrop of the Roman imperialist enterprise disseminating virtus, its ideal of manly excellence, and its accompanying civic ideal of gravitas, Shakespeare, I argue, presents a countermodel of excellence best appreciable through this integrative lens rather than through the rationalist ethos, which had come to prevail in the Latin and subsequently in the Renaissance culture.

Instead of pursuing a source study in the tradition impressively established by T. W. Baldwin’s William Shakspere’s Small Latine
and Lesse Greeke, my argument is founded on the assumption based solely on textual evidence that Shakespeare, working within a rich humanist milieu, was well versed in key ethical and political conceptions from Antiquity that had become Renaissance commonplace, such as the Platonic love of virtue and the Aristotelian golden mean. My ethical examination of Antony and Cleopatra, hence, does not depend on Shakespeare’s specific knowledge of classical ethics. I argue that his familiarity with classically derived Renaissance commonplace, combined with an intuitive sense of harmonizing the rational and the passional faculties of the human self, engendered Shakespeare’s integrative conception of virtue. In this regard the Aristo-Platonic lens serves as a helpful tool to illuminate Shakespeare’s dramatization of human action in a hitherto more complete fashion than what present scholarship on the play offers.

Platonic erōs grounds a powerful counter-model against the prevailing rationalist ethos and, thereby, recuperates sexuality from its traditional debasement to mere lust. In this regard, Shakespeare advances the marginal female protagonist rather than the dominant male protagonist as the ultimate agent of rational and passional integration, promoting virtue both in the personal and civic spheres. This essay examines the play’s final act as the crowning example of Shakespeare’s portrayal of Cleopatra as a virtuous virago. Unconventionally, Antony dies in Act 4, leaving the final act to be devoted solely to the action of Cleopatra. Throughout the play, Antony lacks both constancy toward the “chief end” and the political dexterity to achieve that goal, entailing a harmonized strategy of disciplined passion. Rather, it is Cleopatra, who shows herself steadily focused on this “chief end” of uniting love and honor, or erōtic integration. Counteracting her imprudent action at the battle of Actium, Cleopatra demonstrates supreme virtuosity in Act 5, “tak[ing] her way” (5.2.327) against Caesar’s political will through her sovereignly achieved suicide, the consummation of erōtic integration. Within the scholarship on the play, critics, if granting Cleopatra tragic stature at all, tend to do so by seeing her as an extension of her male counterpart. As Linda Fitz, a.k.a. Woodbridge, has asserted, “Cleopatra is repeatedly criticized for thinking of anything but Antony: this would seem to follow from the sexist precept that nothing but
love is appropriate to a woman's thoughts” (Fitz 304). In Act 5, Cleopatra achieves tragic grandeur, at first in her own right and then jointly with Antony, by redressing his flawed virtuosity (culminating in his botched suicide) to consummate the union of love and honor. In portraying Cleopatra as the virtuous virago, Shakespeare redefines the traditionally male-inflected virtue into more inclusive human ideal and valorizes the virago, the woman acting-as-man, from a strong-willed strumpet to an accomplished female. This consummate virtue is best appreciable as the effective, integrative action of disciplined passion.

Cleopatra’s refusal to descend from her monument to the dying Antony demonstrates self-assertion aligned with their mutual well-being—not “at the expense of her love for Antony” (Fitz 304) as though honor and love are wholly incompatible, as so many critics have supposed. Cleopatra achieves, in fact, the virtuoso balance between individual and joint being, which Antony fails to achieve throughout the play. Assailed on one side by Antony and Caesar on the other, Cleopatra retreats “To th’ monument,” the tomb she had built foreseeing her death, the play’s unifying conceit, its literal event preceded by numerous instances of her erotic dying and fainting and Eros’s death. Contrary to the bawdy insinuations of “monument” (Levin 250), suggesting that she might use sexual charms on Caesar to gain favor, Cleopatra’s action signals a dignified assertion of autonomy within the bounds of her tragic circumstance: “My resolution and my hands I’ll trust, / None about Caesar” (4.16.51-52). Cleopatra’s immurement in her monument serves dually to bring the wrathful Antony around, erotically and physically, and, thereafter, to prepare for her suicide, an act of individual dignity intermingled with absolute fidelity.

When the dying Antony requests that she come down, Cleopatra reveals, despite her love, a clear-headed decision to remain in the monument:

I dare not, dear,
Dear, my lord, pardon. I dare not,
Lest I be taken: not the imperious show
Of the full-fortune’d Caesar ever shall
Virtuous Virago

Be brooch’d with me, if knife, drugs, serpents, have
Edge, sting, or operation. I am safe:
Your wife Octavia, with her modest eyes,
And still conclusion, shall acquire no honour
Demurring upon me. (4.16.22–30)

If the lady doth protest too much, Cleopatra has been well instructed
by admonitions of her master, during one of his fits:

Let [Caesar] take thee
And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians;
Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot
Of all thy sex; most monster-like be shown
For poor’st diminutives, for dolts, and let
Patient Octavia plough thy visage up
With her prepared nails. (4.13.33–39)

The irony of Antony victimized by his own destructive passion aside,
Cleopatra’s capture would not advance their mutual interest because
Caesar would use her to adorn his triumph over the famous pair:
the humiliation of Cleopatra would be equally the degradation of
Antony in their interlocked fate.

Cleopatra faints with Antony’s final passing, mourning:
“The odds is gone, / And there is nothing left remarkable / Be-
neath the visiting moon” (4.16.68–70). Yet her momentary weak-
ness, “such poor passion as [of] the maid that milks / And does the
meanest chores” (76–77), has the opposite effect of mustering manly
strength and resolution to embrace Stoic death:

It were for me
To throw my scepter at the injurious gods,
To tell them that this world did equal theirs
Till they had stol’n our jewel. All’s but naught.
Patience is sottish, and impatience does
Become a dog that’s mad. Then is it sin
To rush into the secret house of death
Ere death dare come to us? (77–84)
Rebuking herself for fainting at Antony’s death instead of governing her grief stoically, Cleopatra, by the end of this speech rallying her girls to noble suicide, addresses them as manly soldiers:

What, what, good cheer! Why, how now, Charmian?
My noble girls! Ah, women, women! Look,
Our lamp is spent, it’s out. Good sirs, take heart;
We’ll bury him, and then what’s brave, what’s noble,
Let’s do it after the high Roman fashion,
And make death proud to take us. Come, away,
This case of that huge spirit now is cold.
Ah, women, women! Come. We have no friend
But resolution, and the briefest end.
(85–93, my italics)

Despite this noble address, many critics view Cleopatra with skepticism, censuring every word or action in Act 5 that betrays her devotion to Antony as though only love is an appropriate pursuit for a woman. Her women gravitate toward her, like Antony’s men toward him in 4.9, in a final magnanimous gesture of collaborative suicide. They do not fear death, like Aristotle’s virtuous man, “knowing that there are conditions on which life is not worth having” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1124b8-9). 6

A number of scholars explain Act 5 in terms of vindication. Several assert that “the entire fifth act, particularly Cleopatra’s magnificent suicide, vindicates the queen’s transcendent love for Antony, her demi-Atlas, her paragon of men.” 7 As Peter Alexander also states: “Cleopatra has to vindicate her right to his devotion” (Alexander qtd. in Fitz 309). Ruth Nevo claims:

What she has realized . . . is that it lies within her power to vindicate the passion that has ruined the triple pillar of the world: that it rests with her either heroically to affirm the rare quality of their love, its possession of heroic stature and value, of a supreme excellence among human things, or to
Virtuous Virago

leave it upon the pages of history as a royal strumpet’s lust for an infatuated libertine.”
(Nevo 351)

All three quotations reveal the extent to which critics are complicit in the Roman condemnation of “fatal Cleopatra,” an Eve figure responsible for Antony’s fall. From this misogynist view, Cleopatra redeems herself only as love’s martyr through an act of sati. Even Carol Neely, despite her keen insights into the integration of power and desire, reads Cleopatra’s conduct as opaque and open to misogynistic insinuations of being a political schemer: “We cannot be sure whether she genuinely seeks the ‘briefest end’ (4.15.99) as she claims at the end of act 4, or whether she stalls to bargain for acceptable terms. We cannot tell whether her suicide attempt as the monument is seized is faked or authentic” (Neely 158). Despite Shakespeare’s penchant for creating complex and ambivalent representations of human action, I argue that a nuanced reading of Cleopatra relies indispensively on the Aristotelian distinction between means and ends: “virtue makes us aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom [virtuosity] makes us take the right means” (Aristotle 1144a7-9). Practical wisdom, or virtuosity, entails “calculat[ing] well with a view to some good end” in terms of the right emotional response and action at the right time and towards the right objects and people (Aristotle 1140a28-32, 1106b20-23). Though her means might appear as female submission and ingratiation vis-à-vis Caesar, Cleopatra has always been and remains constant to the “chief end” of integrating honor and love. Despite her animated, variable action, her resolution to this underlying virtuous goal throughout the play is unshakable, hence her commitment to join Antony by suicide.

Thus, in the Seleucus episode of 5.2, when Cleopatra appears to ingratiate herself with Caesar, critics scrutinize her motivation and try to pinpoint the actual “firming” of her resolution, leading them to conclude that the tragic grandeur of her suicide is undercut by her “vacillation” and her final decision coming after her unfavorable interview with Caesar. Shakespeare, however, pointedly emphasizes Cleopatra’s resolution by ending with it in 4.16 and beginning with it in 5.2, interrupted only by a “Roman” scene of Caesar, receiv-
ing news of Antony’s death. Nonetheless, in response to Cleopatra’s opening lines, “My desolation does begin to make / A better life” (1–2), Richard Levin, for instance, quibbles that “she asserts only that her ‘desolation does begin’ to make her ready. Since she is not yet fully resolved on death, it may be inferred that she is still trying to decide whether to be or not to be” (Levin 252). The deduction that her suicide is a mere fallback following the aborted Seleucus episode is grounded on a post hoc fallacy. What appears to be Cleopatra’s vacillation to these skeptical critics, I argue, is the theatrical representation of her biding time through the interviews she must undergo, waiting for a chance to enact her suicide. This virtuosity is demonstrated at two levels: Cleopatra acting before the Romans, and the boy actor playing the Egyptian queen. Virtuosity, as the situation demands, can entail deceptive action to achieve best ends at both the dramatic and metadramatic level. While Neely remarks that Cleopatra’s “vacillation is redeemed when she grows ‘marble-constant’ (5.2.240)” (Neely 160, my italics), I contend that such redemption is superfluous because she has always been erotically constant. Constancy, from one instance to another, may appear inconsistent, as in Cleopatra’s “infinite variety.” Complex, multi-faceted characters such as Cleopatra and Antony, with heroic aspirations and exquisite needs in a world of intricate politics, can hardly express themselves or work expansively towards noble ends without appearing inconsistent at times.

Critics, who have from the beginning viewed the play more or less through Roman eyes, naturally see in this episode Cleopatra’s final attempt at saving her hide through her erotic charms. When she speaks of Caesar’s men hoisting her up and showing her “to the shouting varletry / Of censuring Rome” (5.2.55–56), the harsh audience includes literary critics as well. Their Roman bias, viewing Cleopatra as a scheming strumpet, disables them from catching the irony of her words and, instead, makes them fall victim to her virtuous subterfuge. Through dissemblance, Cleopatra exploits her feminine weakness and transforms it into a strength, combining soft and hard, feigned “feminine” frailty and “masculine” firmness, passion and reason, in the Seleucus scene as well as the ensuing suicide. In Cleopatra’s virtuosity, appetitive passion and reason are harmonized
in *erōs*, aiming for the “chief end” of joining with Antony, the “great spirit.” What Levin and others fail to recognize is that what Cleopatra enacts in the Seleucus episode is a virtuoso performance of “feminine” lust, so convincing through her consummate acting *as though* she becomes what she merely acts. At the dramatic level, a compelling boy actor must act *as though* he becomes what he merely acts to make credible a statement like “I shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I’th’ posture of a whore” (5.2.216-17).

Nonetheless, there are telltale signs that Cleopatra’s conduct is mere performance, specifically through a rare blend of sardonic scorn and ready obedience. In trying to achieve her purpose—to deceive Caesar into thinking that she wants to live⁠¹⁰—Cleopatra ostensibly takes the advice of Proculeius:

Pray you, tell [Caesar]
I am his fortune’s vassal, and I send him
The greatness he has got. I hourly learn
A doctrine of obedience, and would gladly
Look him i’th’ face” (5.2.28–33).

Cleopatra’s wording, however, suggests her “sense of superiority in conferring greatness upon Caesar.”¹¹ If we are to accept Cleopatra’s resolution on heroic death, as we should, her reply to Caesar is fully ironic, implying that she is a “slave’s slave,” since Caesar is “but Fortune’s knave” (3). Notably, Cleopatra does not subordinate herself to Caesar, only to his fortunes, and that even Caesar, “Not being Fortune” (3), is ultimately no greater than she, reduced to a beggar. This sardonic scorn permeates Cleopatra’s speech, blended with her feigned obedience, “hourly learn[ed].” The alacrity with which she dons her role shows the extent of her virtuosity. Once resolved on the virtuous end, Cleopatra skillfully adjusts her demeanor to achieve that end—quickness and steadiness combined.

When Caesar appears on scene, Cleopatra immediately “kneels,” following Proculeius’s advice of kneeling to him for grace (5.2.28), an action that seems to embarrass Caesar enough to tell her three times to rise (110). Despite this obsequious gesture, Cleo-
patra’s words reveal dignity: “Sir, the gods / Will have it thus. My master and my lord / I must obey” (111–13). Here, she indicates, consistent with her previous message to Caesar, that she is “fram[ing] herself / To th’ way she’s forced to” (5.1.55–56), obeying “injurious gods,” whom she scorns in 4.16, upon Antony’s death: “this world did equal theirs / Till they had stol’n our jewel” (79–80). Caesar, playing the princely overlord, indulges Cleopatra’s view of human powerlessness in her favor: “The record of what injuries you did us, / Though written in our flesh, we shall remember / As things but done by chance” (114–16). But undeceived Cleopatra, half-mockingly addressing him as “Sole sir o’th’ world,” makes a reply which beneath the decorous humility reflects the dignified self-reflection of a ruler who rues how her feminine frailty contributed to the defeat at Actium:

I cannot project mine own cause so well
To make it clear, but do confess I have
Been laden with like frailties which before
Have often shamed our sex. (5.2.116–19)

The feminine frailties here are less an allusion to Cleopatra’s use of erotic charms, as many critics think, but her previous weakness in heroic action, which the defeated queen now reprehends, especially in her resolution to take Antony’s course. Accordingly, this speech specifically recalls her “fearful sails” at Actium and her fainting in 4.16 as counterexamples to the resolution she “hourly” (5.2.30) re-vives.

This resolution is redoubled by Caesar’s threat of killing her children if she “lay on me a cruelty by taking Antony’s course” (5.2.125–26). Her alternative to suicide, to live “pinioned at [Caesar’s] court” (52), is inadmissible. Against this hard fate, Cleopatra can assert herself only through her sovereign wit and, later, body. Cleopatra ironically dilates on Caesar’s good-bye, “I’ll take my leave” (129): “And may through all the world! ’Tis yours, and we, / Your scutcheons and your signs of conquest, shall / Hang in what place you please” (130–32). Delaying his departure with her subversive submission, she shows masterfully that he will leave rather upon her leave—when she has attained her desired end: Caesar’s belief,
contrary to the truth, that she clings to life. Thrusting “a brief” of her possessions into his hand, Cleopatra dissimilates how eagerly she “appl[ies her]self to [his] intents” (122). She quickly calls for Seleucus, her treasurer, to confirm that she reserves “nothing” (140), a fact conveniently denied by Seleucus, launching her into a lively tirade—virtuously harmonizing feigned hot passion and cool reason. It is lie against lie regarding Cleopatra’s actual possessions. What Caesar believes in this regard is insignificant compared to his inference from Cleopatra’s hoarding possessions that she clings to life. Self-degradation as a “lady trifle” (161) and humiliation at the hands of her subordinate—these are a small price to pay for what Cleopatra gained: Caesar’s belief of her “sweet dependency” (26).

In this marvelous confrontation between the two greats, both characters masterfully dissemble what they are not: Caesar, an “honourable and . . . kindly” (5.1.57) overlord and Cleopatra, an imperial courtesan. Caesar is easily “hooked” (2.5.12), however, by Cleopatra’s superior “cunning,” because she suavely reflects back the projections of his orderly, objectified world: “Women are not / In their best fortunes strong, but want will perjure / The ne’er-touched vestal” (3.12.29–31). Through this subversive mirroring, Cleopatra commands the scene and “unpolicies” Caesar through her sublime suicide “that is simultaneously an allusive, carefully staged, theatrical dying; an orgiastic sexual dying, ‘as sweet as air, as soft as balm’ (5.2.311); . . . a literal dying,” and lastly, a lyrical dying, by which Cleopatra and Antony’s love transcends their temporal failure (Lindley 146). As an erotic integration, Cleopatra’s suicide consummately blends Egyptian beauty, carnality, and oneness with nature with Roman firmness of purpose in a heavenward mingle. Only through death do both Antony and Cleopatra escape the debasement of erōs—martial heroism and venereal sexuality—in Caesar’s hands.

Caesar, to his credit or as a mouthpiece for Shakespeare, gives the following apt tribute to Cleopatra: “Bravest at the last, / She leveled at our purposes, and, being royal, / Took her own way” (5.2.325–27). Echoing Antony’s praise of Fulvia at her death, “At the last, best” (1.3.61), the Roman eulogy indicates that Cleopatra has finally incorporated Fulvia and has become Venus armata. In so doing, she also redresses Antony’s botched suicide and immutably
consummates the *erotic* integration that they only briefly knew on earth. Last but not least, in taking “her own way,” Cleopatra “realizes her inalienable possessions, that she is above Fortune” (Bethell 130) and above the men who try to confine her divine combination of “infinite variety” and heroic constancy. Cleopatra “buried by her Antony” (348) presents the final image of *erotic* constancy, the famous pair lying together *beyond*, if not “standing with” one another *in* the temporal world.
Notes

1 All references to the text are from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

2 See Deats 3-12 for a helpful summary of this critical dialectic engaging various levels of opposition.

3 All references to Plato are from *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper.


5 Norton. 2689, n. 4.

6 All references to Aristotle are from *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon.

7 Horace Howard Furness, qtd. in Deats, 17.

8 See Dorothea Kehler, “Cleopatra’s Sati: Old Ideologies and Modern Stagings,” qtd. in Deats.

9 See, for instance, Levin, 252: “She asserts only that her ‘desolation does begin’ to make her ready. Since she is not yet fully resolved on death, it may be inferred that she is still trying to decide whether to be or not to be.”

10 The view of Adolf and Stahr (1864) and others, see Deats, 19.

11 Norton, 2697, n. 4.

12 See, for instance, Levin, 257, who interprets these lines as “Cleopatra’s flirtation,” arguing an unwarranted shift of “attention from her military improprieties to her improprieties as a sexual being and a female, ‘confess[ing]’ that she has been ‘laden with like frailties....’”
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It has become commonplace to relate the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* to the theme of the relation between fictional discourse and the prolonging of life. Time and again, writers and critics have shown in their various renditions of *1001 Nights* the intricate relation between storytelling and existence on the one hand, and the uses and abuses of power on the other. From Poe and Proust to Borges, Barth, and Ashbery, discourse, and specifically storytelling, has proven to be the conqueror of the ultimate and all-silencing event, death. The modern British novelist A. S. Byatt offers us some intimations on the relation of narration to life and death in her informative essay, “Narrate or Die: Why Scheherazade keeps on talking:”

During the bombardment of Sarajevo in 1994, a group of theatre workers in Amsterdam commissioned tales from different European writers to be read aloud simultaneously in theatres in Sarajevo.
itself and all over Europe every Friday until the fighting ended. This project pitted storytelling against destruction, imaginative life against death. It may not have saved lives, but it was a form of living energy. It looked back to “The Thousand and One Nights” and forward to the millennium. It was called Scheherazade 2001. (1999)

The figure of Shahrazad hovers over a number of recent fictional works by Arab women writers. A quick review of the various renditions of the book in modern fiction, however, will reveal an interesting contrast between the female renditions, which offer a counter or alternative writing of the text, and traditional Western and Arab use of the tales, both critically and creatively. This study will offer snapshots of literary and cultural currents that may reflect salient literary and cultural attitudes towards the text.

Ferial Ghazoul’s attempt to salvage the text from the fate it suffered at the hands of both Arabic traditional criticism and the “Orientalists and their disciples” (16), through a vigorous structural analysis of the tales, is a case in point. Referring to her critical methodology in approaching Shahrazad’s tales, Ghazoul asserts that traditional Arabic criticism in dealing with The Arabian Nights has “devalued the work partly because of ethnocentric biases and partly because traditional criticism has been unable to comprehend The Arabian Nights as a text” (16). Referring to the works of the Orientalists, Ghazoul refers to their dismissal of the text as being somewhat inferior or, at best, entertaining but frivolous on the whole. Ghazoul’s observations would have added significance if pitted against some of the most obtrusive critical writings on post-modern fiction. That Shahrazad’s tales had constituted a model for post-modern fiction in Western literature can hardly be debated. Scholars have seen the imprint of the storytelling mode of the tales on the post-modern novel with its conspicuous features of “fabulation,” “hyper-reality,” or “meta-fictionality.”

Needless to say, the “labyrinths” of narrative offered by the tales have long been considered the preferred analogy to describe the structure of modern fiction. Despite all this, one cannot over-
look Malcolm Bradbury’s comments on the text when he refers to the postmodern “intertextual layering of free play with traditional narrative” as some form of “stylistic promiscuity” (407). Nor can one dismiss Stevick’s statement in his article entitled “Scheherezade,” in which he refers to the new fiction’s tendency towards assimilating and transforming “the bad art” of “popular poetry into serious literature,” and views it as an act of “rebarbarization” or literary self-renewal (209). Such remarks reiterate the classical theme of the European narration of the Other with its “insistent claim that the East was a place of lascivious sensuality” (Kabbani 6). Hence, the text was established by the proponents of postmodern fiction as the exemplary playfully self-examining “metafiction” with its multiplied narratives that seeks to question the nature of texts along the authority of narrative “creation.” However, this fascination with and exploitation of the text, as it were, hardly offered an effective reading of the text that focused its attention on the tales, thus conducting the text to an informed, “serious” critical investigation.

In the Arabic literary and critical tradition, various attempts have been made to study the text after centuries of relative ignorance. Fatema Mernissi’s successive studies on Shahrazad may be considered an unrelenting effort to explore an intrinsic difference between Western and Arabic critical writing on the text. In an early chapter of her Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Childhood, Mernissi remarks in a footnote: “I was amazed to realize that for many Westerners, Shahrazad was considered a lovely but simple minded entertainer, someone who narrates innocuous tales and dresses fabulously. In our part of the world, Shahrazad is perceived as a courageous heroine” (15). Notwithstanding Mernissi’s compelling observations that are extended further in her subsequent studies on the subject (Shahrazad N’est Pas Marocaine [Shahrazad is not Moroccan] and Le Harem European [The European Harem], constituting what might be described as Mernissi’s Shahrazad project, the above citation stirs two main reservations. On the one hand, it ignores some of the Western exegetical engagements with the text that have been struggling to offer some kind of effective reading that involves a deliberate suspension of prejudgment; and on the other hand, Mernissi overlooks centuries of rejection of the text by the literary establishment in the
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Arab world on the basis of “poor” stylistic quality or for promoting immorality. In the first instance, Eva Sallis’s *Sheherazade Through the Looking Glass* (1999) is a valuable study in which the writer maintains that European criticism experienced different phases and trends concerning the interpretation of the book. What Sallis proposes is a “subjective endeavour,” which she believes can offer “an effective reading that communicates across the cultural divide” (78). The second reservation—the rejection of Western exegetical engagements with the text—instigated a series of charges brought upon its publisher. The trial in 1985 resulted in the banning of such critical texts in Egypt, a ban that was eventually liberated in an appeal in a Cairo court.

Despite the previous considerations, what traditional Western and Arab literary renditions of the tales seem to have in common is the treatment of Shahrazad as the endless weaver of narratives and the generator of an endless discourse based on the principles of *sui generis*, rather than a character with an organic identity in the strictly “noveletic” sense of the word. Thus, contemporary Arab fiction written by women has finally intervened in an attempt to engage in the struggle for narrative primacy and its subsequent social, cultural, and political transformation. In fact, the various Shahrazad(s) at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium reflect contemporary Arab women writers’ deployment of the character of Shahrazad as an agent of major social and political change. Indeed, Shahrazad is ubiquitous in a number of recent fictional works by Arab women writers. As they seek to reclaim the legendary figure of Shahrazad as a resistor, such writers attempt to bring Shahrazad back to life and to deliver, or rather “liberate” her from her boudoir in Shahrayar’s palace to the vast space of their respective fictional texts. In these modern texts, Shahrazad becomes a woman of flesh and blood worthy of narrative texts that offer counter or alternative writings of the “original” text. However, these texts are not without differentiation. This paper will reveal how each writer deploys the character according to each one’s respective fictional project. Hence the treatment is by no means monolithic. A number of recent texts that offer different perspectives to the representation of this traditional and folkloric character will be the focus of this study. Such represen-
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tations vary in approach, using the figure of Shahrazad to rewrite traditional Arabic folktales from a gender sensitive perspective (Qalat alRawiyya [The Rawiyya Said], to deconstruct Orientalist views on Shahrazad or Arab women in general (Sebbar’s Shérazade), to deconstruct history (Ashour’s Qetaa Men Oropa [A Piece of Europe], or to present a traumatic experience (Telmissany’s Dunyazad).

What The Rawiyya Said

If we recall some of the renditions of the character of Shahrazad in modern fiction, we will find that the question of discursive control has always been at the heart of the thematic and structural formations in these texts. To start with, in the frame-narrative, Shahrazad is presented as the erudite, knowledgeable woman who has read books and memorized verses. Ferial Ghazoul refers to her seminal role in transforming herself and her sisters from “sexual objects into erotic subjects” (95). She explains this idea of “transformation” in these terms: “Women are used by Shahrayar as objects of consumption totally without a will or a say, to be discarded once they had fulfilled their role. Shahrazad, in contrast, modifies this principle… She becomes a subject, in the sense of someone who performs an act” (95). One may add to Ghazoul’s insights a further dimension to Sharazad’s position as the one in control of the scene, as it is she, not Shahrayar, who dictates what should happen next.

Thus, Shahrazad’s role in redefining sexual politics, as postulated in the frame-story, has made her a pawn in the game of gender politics. Women writers and critics alike have used her control of narration and position as rawiyya (female narrator) in favour of the Arab woman’s access to discourse. Questions have been raised as to the appropriateness of feminist and gender-conscious approaches to non-Western societies. One would like to assert that gender-consciousness and the arguments about the roles of men and women were not brought to the Arab world through Western feminists alone. These issues have always been genuine and conscious preoccupations of classical Arab writers whose books are full of chapters on women and their roles in society. The turath, or Islamic tradition, is extremely gender conscious and the question of gender is a major
organizing principle in countless works. It is also noteworthy that the twentieth century has witnessed the establishment of a number of publishing houses that specifically promote women’s works in the Arab world. In Egypt alone, a number of periodicals and literary journals were issued during the 1990s, all devoted to women’s literary and socio-political issues. The second factor, however, has to do with the emergence of a new wave of feminism that has permitted contemporary women writers to challenge patriarchal assumptions of the Arabic literary canon.

The Egyptian feminist group, “Women and Memory Forum,” has presented a pioneering project in rewriting Arabic folk tradition from a female perspective. Al-Rawiyya Said (1997) is the group’s literary project that relies on the inspiration of the world of *The 1001 Nights* and attempts a rewriting of popular history, tales, and folktales from a gender-sensitive perspective. The group has, from the outset, managed to unmask the irony concealed in storytelling in general. Traditionally, with regard to the domain of women, not the least in oral societies, the same tales have systematically stereotyped women as conniving unfaithful wives or witches, as passive receivers of their fate, or as objects of desire. Thus, the goal of these academic women writers is to raise awareness in the audience by pushing the listener/reader to reconsider the fixed image of women in Arab collective memory. The relation of these “new” tales to their literary source, the tales of *The 1001 Nights*, is varied and reflects prolific storytelling and creative abilities. In general, the tales deploy such literary devices as parody, pastiche, and dramatic irony. *Al-Rawiyya* comprises tens of stories that are inspired by some tales from the original *Nights*. Below is a discussion of a few such tales that are representative of the group’s entire project.

Rewriting the frame-story has been the subject of three interesting tales by members in the group. Soumaya Ramadan’s *The Story of King Shahrayar and his Brother* is an apocryphal tale based on another “unpublished version of the frame” (*Al-Rawiyya* 80-86). This Borgesian tale, as it were, may be considered a *tour-de-force*, both thematically and structurally. It depicts the story of the “Woman and the Jirid,” which is embedded in the frame-narrative early on in the book. Shahrayar and Shazaman undertake a voyage in which they
encounter the kidnapped woman who urges them to satisfy her sexual needs or else face death. She has been doing this with more than a thousand (notice the hyperbole) men in revenge for her abduction by the “Ifrit”. The story is central to the conclusion of both brothers, that female nature is not given to matrimonial fidelity, hence Shahrayar’s decision to have his brides beheaded after the first night. Ramadan gives voice to the woman as she tries to exonerate herself from the charges laid upon her by Shahrayar and all subsequent storytellers and compilers of the various versions of the tale. Yet, when Shahrayar and Shazaman return to retell her tale, they, like their male predecessors, foster the same notion of women as vindictive, lustful and evil. The tale suggests that behind the female character, and underneath it, transgressing its right to exist lies the complicity of the male liar and reader, interlocutor and collaborator. In this web of liars, the end loops back to the beginning. The woman’s “true” tale is simply discarded in favour of the “original” lie.

In the short piece by Hala Kamal entitled “The Tale of The Thousand and One Nights” (1997), the narrator interviews Shahrazad about her tales that are full of contradictions with regards to the representation of women. Shahrazad answers that most of the tales in the “original” are contrived ones; moreover, they were mostly told by Shahrayar after he learned from his mentor, Shahrazad, the art of storytelling. Another story entitled Na’am and Ne’ema by Sahar al-Mogi and Daliah Bassiouni is a parody of the same story in the “original” 1001 Nights. Although both tales bear the same number, eighty-nine in the order of the tales in the frame, the setting cannot be more distinct. Ne’ema, in the new version, is a social worker in an urban administrative office that spends his evenings in the café bragging about his sexual adventures to his fellow male café-goers. The valiant Ne’ema here is no more than a male macho who sexually harasses his female colleague, Na’am. The latter is a modern working woman who makes fun of Ne’ema and refers to him as “that tall fellow who keeps molesting me.” She stands in sharp contrast to the “original” Na’am, a helpless slave-girl who marries her master, Ne’ema, and who is then abducted by the sorceress, Kahramana, and is handed over to the Caliph Abdel-Malik Ibn Marwan.

The version of the Rawiyya clearly deploys the theory of gen-
der roles in an attempt to deconstruct traditional social, economic, and cultural roles of men and women in modern Arab societies. However, the project of the “Women and Memory Forum” is by no means conclusive, as indeed some members of the group would like to maintain. Mona Ibrahim, a writer and critic, has attempted an auto critique of some of the group’s tales. Ibrahim criticizes the pitfalls of the “cultural feminist” outlook as expressed in some of the group’s tales. She warns against the kind of “overt essentialism” that considers women essentially “good” if not ideal, which has a counter-effect in maintaining the male/female duality that the group consciously aims at deconstructing. She explains that this “idealistic” image of women represents another form of marginalization (Ibrahim 55-61). This cultural feminist approach, she explains, paradoxically falls in the same trap of male/female polarity that it tries to confront. However, the writer views this as a viable mechanism of resistance: it is a form of idealizing the self, while at the same time demeaning the male as “other” (60). So while the image of Shahrazad has been invoked in the creative writing project of Qalat al-Rawiyya, it has also been a favorite choice for a number of North African women writers.

*Shérazade: Concubine or Free Woman?*

Leila Sebbar’s trilogy is an exemplary text that aims at voicing postcolonial issues such as language and ethnicity, and exploring concepts of métissage, or racial and cultural mixing, as well as important material practices such as education, hegemonic modes of representation, and resistance. This discussion will be confined to Sebbar’s first novel in the trilogy, namely *Shérazade* (1982). The book is subtitled *Missing: Aged 17, Dark and Curly Hair, Green Eyes*. It is about an Algerian girl living in Paris who becomes the object of fascination for a modern Orientalist, Julien, who is attracted to Shérazade mainly for her resemblance to the green-eyed woman in Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger* [The Women of Algiers]. Sebbar uses the figure of Shahrazad to come to terms with and deconstruct the violence of Orientalism (in literature and art) with regards to the presentation of Arab women. The starting point here is, undoubtedly,
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Edward Said’s claim that “what is commonly circulated [as the truth about the Orient] … is not ‘truth’ but representations” (Said 21). It is not surprising, then, that women writers from Algeria, and especially Francophone writers, would engage themselves in the study of such representation, thus offering a critique of Orientalism.

Postcolonial subjects, however, like Sebbar and indeed Said himself, have been functioning in and out of the same Orientalist parameters that they posit to deconstruct. And of course, no good reader of Said would lose sight of the fact that he put women at the center of the colonial project of Orientalism. Said noted that the Orientalists created an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. Furthermore, he used sexual metaphors to insist on the link between sexuality and colonial context: “A certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege: because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate the Orient” (Said 44). Sebbar’s project is certainly written against the backdrop of such considerations as Said. More acutely, though, her fictional project is composed at a time in France and England, where a long acrimonious debate about Muslim women demanding to wear a headscarf in school has been taking place over the last few years. In her Veiled-Half Truths: Western Traveler’s Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women (1996), Judy Mabro refers to the fact that Europe has always viewed Arab women from two divergent angles: the veil and the harem (1). Sebbar herself has a first-hand experience, which gives her book an undeniable “authenticity,” as will be shown later.

A reading of Sebbar’s trilogy, though, reveals that the writer’s purpose is twofold. She tries to overcome Said’s monolithic view of colonial discourse as a closed or fixed hegemonic system, and at the same time, she deconstructs traditional Orientalists’ representation of women. Sebbar’s Shérazade is a runaway who is involved in shoplifting in Paris. She’s a beure (Parisian slang for Arab) who has a pied-noir (a French born and raised in North Africa) lover, Julien, who studies Orientalists’ paintings. Central to this act of disruption of Orientalists’ clichés of Arab women as passive and silent, yet attracting curious Western eyes, is the image of the Odalisque. Shérazade, who is always on the move, contrasts with the idle state of Matisse’s Odalisque à la culotte rouge [Odalisque in Red Trousers] (1921). How-
ever, we know that Shérazade too wears red panties, which she stole from a store in Paris. This is a “typical” gesture of a beure living in a Parisian suburb. Julien, who is unable to appreciate Shérazade’s ambivalent relation with regards to the Odalisque, receives an unsigned message in which she proclaims: “I am not an odalisque” (222). By giving new meanings to the word, Sebbar is able to subvert the original connotation. Indeed, this “Odalisque évadée” [the escaped odalisque], to use Shérazade’s self description towards the end of the novel, refers to Sebbar’s strategy of re-appropriation (Anne Donadey 118). In this sense, Sebbar is engaged in using Western representation of women rather than circumventing it. Donadey refers to this strategy as subverting an image by appropriating the same image, thus bringing to light the various elements at work in the formation of that image.

Another strategy is of course intertextuality and metaficiton. The trilogy overtly refers to its raw material of colonial archives, travelogues, letters, novels, essays, as well as 19th and 20th century paintings, and photography. In a library scene in Shérazade, the Librarian refers to the names of a number of contemporary Maghrebian writers who have become popular among Beurs and French alike. Shérazade’s identity in Sebbar’s trilogy is constructed, negotiated, and established through the power relations existing between the different cultural sites at work in the novel. Her encounter with the Orientalist scholar, Julien, her relationship with other members of the Maghrebian immigrant community in France, as well as her family ties in Algeria, all play equal roles in the formation of this seventeen-year old girl’s consciousness. Indeed, her categorical declaration “I’m not an odalisque” seems to put an end to Julien’s subconscious attempts to objectify the Occidental in the form of the women portrayed in the Orientalists’ paintings.

The fact that such paintings fascinate and repel Shérazade at the same time does not mask her adamant determination to be independent. The novel ends with a wonderful scene in which Shérazade reappropriates and reverses the act of “voyeurism” inherent in all paintings, not least in the Orientalists’ series of paintings of North African women in their boudoirs and hamam(s) [baths], as she probes to unmask the motives of such painters yet at the same
time to look for such women as a source of inspiration:

She wrote the description of the odalisque in her notebook without any details, without stating that she thought this woman rather ugly but that she was nevertheless moved by her... Her mind is made up. Shérazade will go to Algeria. She no longer hesitates. She'll leave this evening with Pierrot if he's going... without Pierrot if he's staying in Paris. (Sebbar 264-65)

Thus, Matisse’s painting becomes a major impetus that allows Shérazade the freedom to forge her own identity away from her parents, but also to become independent of Julien and other fellow “Orientalists”.

**Shahrazad and the Questions of History**

Radwa Ashour’s last novel, *A Part of Europe* (Qetaa Min Orooba 2003) is about Khedive Ismail’s dream of transforming downtown Cairo or Wesst el Balad into a part of Europe. Ashour reappropriates Ismail’s dream to deconstruct it and to expose the fact that indeed it has become a nightmare as the main protagonist/narrator, El-Nazer, literally the Looker, grapples with fragments of memory and documents trying to make sense of the dream. In his attempt to trace the origins, observe the vicissitudes of the dream, and register the influence of the dream on the present, el-Nazer and we, as readers, discover that the dream was nothing but a long nightmare. The question of history has always been at the center of Ashour’s works. An understanding of the legitimacy of the major historical questions posed in this novel by Shahrazad, the narrator’s granddaughter, can only be understood in the light of some of Ashour’s previous works like *Serrag* (1992), her trilogy *Granada* (1994), and *Atyaf* (1999).

The novel’s central question is posed by Shahrazad: “What have you done, grandpa, how have you got us to where we are today?”(*A Part of Europe* 167). This question summarizes the younger generation’s quest for meaning. This is not to say that her grandfather
has the answer. In fact, throughout the novel, E1-Nazer struggles to write about what he has witnessed, heard, or read. The novel invokes the *1001 Nights* on various levels. On one level, it deploys the frame-narrative tradition in storytelling, in this instance, the frame-story of el-Nazer and his granddaughter, Shahrazad. It also has a succession of scenes that may act as the interpolated stories of *The Nights*. Yet these interpolated tales are far from entertaining as in the source text. Included are historical accounts of Napoleon in Egypt, documented information about the digging of the Suez Canal, and the selling of its shares to European shareholders. Also given are Benjamin Disraeli’s letters to his sister and his role as entrepreneur in this historical transaction. Further, there are accounts of the Balfour agreement, the 1948 *nakba* (disaster), the 1967 *naksa* (defeat), and the Palestinian *intifada* (uprising), in addition to references to the 2003 war on Iraq prior to its occupation by American troops. Some of the interpolated “anecdotes” are truly significant and purely informative. For example, el-Nazer uncovers the story of the first Zionist flag flown over Jerusalem in 1917, thus disclosing the fact that it was made in Cairo by Morineau Cicurel and Eliezer Slotkin, the owners of Cairo’s famous department stores.

Thus, Ashour’s novel functions as a historical palimpsest in which she tries to reconstruct Egyptian history. She has recourse to a variety of intertexts, like historical accounts, written archives, and newspaper clips, and she deploys multivocalism to foreground Egyptian and, by extension, Arab partially erased and hence fragmented history. In its final analysis the novel is about al-Nazer’s (re)membering of the past. However, the role of Shahrazad here is indispensable. One of the major themes in this text is the challenge any writer finds in putting together fragments of the personal and national history in a meaningful order. Shahrazad puts an end to her grandfather’s writing block through her relentless attempt to salvage the past, and also the present, from a collective historical amnesia. Her unfailing aid comes as an unexpected surprise to her grandfather, especially because she is a girl:

> When [she] offered to help with collecting material for his research, he accepted thinking he
could encourage her and she could learn. Shahrazad surprised him. It was not his gratitude for the effort she exerted for his sake, nor discovering her wonderful abilities to read attentively and to present her findings in a coherent manner, but something else, as though this child has unexpectedly… (134)

From then on the text takes after *The 1001 Nights* structurally, as the narration seems to be punctuated by the refrain “Speak Shahrazad,” “and Shahrazad said” or “and Shahrazad kept silent.” However, unlike Shahrazad who tells stories of medieval Arab grand cities like Baghdad and Cairo, the two classical seats of the successive Caliphates in the classical tales, present-day Shahrazad in Ashour’s novel offers a modernist vision of an alienated and distorted city that threatens its subjects, thus evoking an interrogation of urban space. Ashour’s attempt to offer an account of the superstructure of modern Egyptian culture by writing a contemporary fiction concerned with the urban dynamics of a Cairo marked by moral and physical decline, while still remaining a metropolitan centre, necessitates the presence of a youthful vision. This is the role of the young, Shahrazad who will be in charge of “arranging, publishing and distributing the papers” of her late grandfather (213).

**Representing a Traumatic Experience**

If discourse is indispensable to life, then death, the ultimate all-silencing event, can be conquered by discourse through storytelling or writing. This seems to be Shahrazad’s message: surviving can be an unrelenting struggle against silence. One of the most expressive books written in Arabic in the late nineties that seems to articulate such a theme is May Telmissany’s *Dunyazad* (1997). The novel is a semi-autobiography that offers an account of a woman’s slow and long recovery from the trauma of the death of her baby in her womb. Memory is the organizing principle of the novel that involves this personal tragedy. The book is an exploration of the protagonist’s private journey through grief. By naming her stillborn child Du-
nyazad, the writer establishes the link between her experience, her tale, and that of the frame-story in *The 1001 Nights*. It is noteworthy that, by and large, the role of Dunyazad in *The 1001 Nights* has been overlooked despite the fact that she is the driving force behind the narration. Without her help Shahrazad would not have been able to tell her tales. Does this suggest that the cure to the mental agony and psychological ailment of the protagonist lies in telling the story, or, by extension, writing it?

Both texts by Ashour and Telmissany can be described as “genotexts” or “texts in-process,” to use Kristeva’s term. El-Nazer in Ashour’s novels cries as he grapples with the material at hand: “What foolishness makes me imagine that I can bring together all these pieces in one notebook, raise it high and say this is my story? And what makes things worse is that I’m not a professional writer, what will I do with all this wreckage... This wreckage is my life and my story” (134). Similarly, towards the end of *Dunyazad*, the narrator announces: “This is the end of writing” (86); but a few paragraphs later, she digresses saying, “I’m still writing, although I’ve claimed it’s the end of writing” (87). The implied author then appears in the penultimate paragraph, in a purely metafictional gesture, to announce: “I write: Dunyazad, invoking the letters of her name to give me the ability to forget” (88).

We have referred earlier to the fact that Telmissany has seized upon the shadowy figure of Dunyazad in the original tales. Compared to her sister Shahrazad, she is both mute and forgotten, but the narrator in Telmissany’s novel chose to give her name to her own stillborn daughter. Telmissany’s tale of loss and emotional devastation as a result of a personal and overwhelming event is unprecedented in Arabic fiction. Although the novel is written against the backdrop of Egyptian social and economic changes, the personal trauma is more pervasive. While Ashour attempts to narrate the city in her novel, Telmissany seeks to present her womanhood and maternity through the traumatic experience of abortion and loss, which is neither socially recognized nor accepted. The feeling of isolation, grief, and anguish experienced by women who go through this tragedy is precisely due to the fact that in most societies, and among them Arab society, this trauma is either silenced or, at best, ignored.
Thus, Telmissany seeks to represent the un-representable, or silenced experience, through writing. The writer’s use of polyphony, in which different voices are superimposed, is a common feature of the text. However, the voices of the husband, the friends, and the elder son, together with the text’s historical and cultural consciousness, never overshadow the writer’s primary aim to write a chronicle of her “inner space” as she probes her inner self.

Conclusion

What I have proposed in the above sections is an overview of the use of the character of Shahrazad, the proto-feminist heroine in Arabic literary tradition, in some of the recent fiction written by women. The texts that use *The One Thousand and One Nights* as a model of storytelling prove yet again that the richness of the original text is flexible enough to account for a variety of adaptations that foreground Shahrazad’s powerful use of storytelling to defy death. The text has provided a model for negotiating gender and social equality (*The Rawiyya Said*) or hybrid identities (*Sebbar’s Shérazade*); writing the self through writing about a personal traumatic experience (*Telmissany’s Dunyazade*) or reclaiming history through engaging in a complex rewriting of the fractured Egyptian colonial and postcolonial histories (*Ashour’s A Part of Europe*). However, these fictional projects do not seek to create “master narratives.” What they have in common, despite their thematic and stylistic differences, is their tendency to use fiction as a privileged medium with which to contend with various hegemonic powers common to patriarchal, colonial, or postcolonial politics. Indeed, the writers’ very choice of one of the most protean and fragmentary texts ever written points to their continuous effort to reopen the past and question the present, thus making their silenced voices heard and enforcing their long underrated agency. The works discussed above by contemporary Arab women writers have demonstrated that Shahrazad, the contemporary writer, has come out of her boudoir, where she used to weave her nocturnal tales to the “eye of the sun,” thus assuming her rightful place in contemporary Arabic letters.
Notes

Whenever the spelling “Shahrazad” is used it will refer to *The One Thousand and One Nights’* character or to the transliterated form of the name as used in the Arabic texts.

All translations from the Arabic texts are the author’s unless English translations are available and these are listed in the works cited.
Sheharazad

Works Cited


Morsy


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