“Author of Prodigies”:
Representing the Female Letter-Writer in English Renaissance Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to show that the figure of the female letter-writer in English Renaissance literature, rather than reflecting the culture’s desire to contain, undermine, or destroy the notion of women’s textual production, in fact represents the culture’s desire to imagine and see women as writers. The image of the female letter-writer was sufficiently pervasive both to normalize the idea that real women might properly engage in textual production, and to function as a literary trope which was used to investigate issues beyond gender ideology. “Author of Prodigies” explores representations of women’s epistolary creation in a broad selection of fictional texts, primarily drama. Based on these representations, I argue that the figure of the female letter-writer functioned as a means through which the fragile and epistemologically fraught relationship between the subject and the writing in which she engages was explored. In Chapter One, I focus primarily on the history of early feminist criticism, issues of how letters are related to non-epistolary texts, Renaissance notions of subjectivity and its relationship to gender, and how subjectivity was understood to adhere in epistolary writing. In Chapter Two, I examine texts in which female characters pen letters in their own blood. Blood letters figure the fragility, marginality, and vulnerability associated with self revelation in a context in which female subjectivity was not comfortably acknowledged. Chapter Three features texts that contemplate the fantasy of female characters wooing their beaux by merging epistolary production and metadramatic performances of femininity. These characters use gendered social constraints to their advantage, revealing themselves to be sufficiently skillful to manipulate social and material signs of their marginalized position in order to achieve their personal desires.
Chapter Four focuses on male fetishization of women’s intellectual labour through letter-writing, and the ways in which women writers anticipate and manipulate this response. These depictions of women’s mental work are infused with mystery, which is integral to the pleasure of imagining women engaged in letter-writing. However, as the terms of the fetish are being established in these texts they are also in the process of being normalized.
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   Drink to me, only, with thine eyes,
       And I will pledge with mine;
   Or leave a kiss but in the cup,
       And I’ll not look for wine.
   The thirst, that from the soul doth rise,
       Doth ask a drink divine:
   But might I of Jove’s nectar sup,
       I would not change for thine.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my step-father, Thomas Brush (June 19, 1933-December 23, 2006).
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Chapter One: Introduction

Imagining the Female Letter-Writer

This dissertation seeks to show that the figure of the female letter-writer in English Renaissance literature, rather than reflecting the culture’s desire to contain, undermine, or destroy the notion of women’s textual production, in fact represents the culture’s desire to imagine and see women as writers. The image of the female letter-writer was, I will show, sufficiently pervasive both to normalize the idea that real women might properly engage in textual production, and to function as a literary trope which might be, and was often, used to investigate issues beyond gender ideology. “Author of Prodigies” explores a variety of representations of women’s epistolary creation in a broad selection of fictional texts, primarily drama. I focus on texts featuring letters written in blood, letters written as part of female characters’ metadramatic performances of their own gender, and letters in which women’s intellectual labour is the object of readers’ fetishistic gaze. Based on these representations, I argue that the figure of the female letter-writer functioned as a means through which the fragile and epistemologically fraught relationship between the subject and the writing in which he or she engages was explored.

By “subject” I mean a “fully conscious or thinking” individual (OED def. 9), whose consciousness is present to others in some ways but is also never fully decipherable. Two important aspects of the idea of the subject arise in this dissertation. First, there is subjectivity, which I define simply as the condition of having thoughts and feelings; this is universal to all human beings. But being capable of having one’s thoughts and feelings recognized as meaningful by others, or to be able to make them the
origin of action or of discourse, are not universal; these collective potentialities I term subjecthood. Subjecthood manifests in many different ways and with different implications on both the levels of the cultural and the individual. Individual agency as an expression of desire (in all desire’s infinite forms) in the plays I examine in the following chapters is intimately linked to textual authority. Authority, like the subjectivity and subjecthood behind it, in my primary texts exists in myriad forms: as moral authority, emotional authority, rhetorical authority, but in all cases, the authority to self-govern.

Early New Historicism posits that literature tends to reproduce rather than reject, rebel against, or significantly question the ideology it represents, regardless of authorial

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1 When I refer to an “author” or “authors” in this dissertation, I generally have in mind Michel Foucault’s definition thereof: “‘literary discourse’ was acceptable only if it carried an author’s name; every text of poetry or fiction was obliged [during the Renaissance] to state its author and date, place, and circumstance of its writing. The meaning and value attributed to the text depended upon this information” (126)—hence the detailed list of facts that tended to grace the frontispieces of published texts during this period. While Foucault’s formulation of what constituted “literary discourse” may be somewhat too rigid in the lines it draws between meaning and meaninglessness, his point that meaning was determined according to the circumstances of textual creation is important here. Authorship, as Foucault imagines it, involves making claims on one’s own text; it means taking responsibility for it; it means acknowledging (and sometimes enhancing, via discussing one’s authorial labour within the text, aligning oneself with influential literary precursors, asserting moral and intellectual (if not financial)) ownership over one’s text. This authorial relationship is also largely dependent upon the publication of such texts—ownership and responsibility are rendered nearly meaningless when applied to texts circulated only amongst a small coterie of either family and friends or intellectual peers. So, authors then, in this dissertation, refer primarily to the playwrights and fiction-writers who penned and published the texts I address—Thomas Kyd, George Chapman, John Marston, etc.

On the other hand, when I use the term “writer” I am referring to the characters in these texts who engage in epistolary production—Bel-imperia, Annabella, etc. A writer generally does not make the kinds of claims of ownership and responsibility for his or her texts that an author does; a writer, as I am using the term, definitely does not publish; indeed, a writer’s texts are generally limited to a very small audience, and secrecy may well be attached. Those who pen letters, in other words, would seem to exist quite comfortably in the realm of writing and not authoring. What is striking in the texts I address here, however, is how claims of authorship are increasingly applied, both by the letter-writers and the readers of their works, to letters, how the fine line between writing and authoring is constantly blurred.

In Chapter Two, the bloody letters are intended for very small, personal, and specific audiences; yet, because of their associations with the medieval Charters of Christ (published and very widely read religious pamphlets, described below and in Chapter Two) these letters take on an authorial and cultural currency not usually accorded to private missives. Indeed, it is the others characters’ failures to grasp the implications of the authorial cadences of bloody ink that lead to their and their culture’s further denigration and destruction. In Chapter Three, writing and authorship begin to become intertwined when the main female characters engage in metadramatic performances of their femininity in order to woo the men they love; while they write love letters, they author larger social dramas in which they perform the leading roles and their letters are the primary stage props. Their letters, while ostensibly private writings, begin to
intention. Early gynocritics, who “rescued” Renaissance women’s literature from the anonymity of a decidedly androcentric literary canon, tended to follow this same basic line of reasoning, but with particular emphasis on the now clichéd “chaste, silent, and obedient” model. The foundational feminist critics who focused on women in Renaissance England tended to begin their examinations by identifying the ideology of silence and cultural repression and then reading all texts through this lens. The polarized function instead as symbols of a larger authorial discourse that is no less effective for not being set to paper and published. Finally, in Chapter Four, the line between author and writer is rendered almost entirely invisible as Isabella Whitney, Nicholas Breton, and Jacques du Bosque publish letters which are represented as both private writing and, via their emphases on female intellectual labour, authorial exercises which (whether intended or not) are designed to appeal to audiences much broader than they claim to be directly addressing. I argue that it is precisely this boundary-crossing between writing and authoring which is so attractive to readers; it culminates as the signs of authorship associated with women’s letter-writing are brought more increasingly to the fore and end (at least within the purview of this study) in the fetishization of women’s intellectual labour; the latter, I suggest, reveals a growing cultural investment in imagining women, first fictional and then real, as authors, and not just writers of private texts.

2 The reclamation of Renaissance women writers began with the efforts of scholars such as Betty Travitsky (The Paradise of Women, 1981), Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara McManus (Half Humankind: contents and texts of the controversy about women in England, 1540-1640, 1985), Elaine Hobby (Virtue of Necessity, 1988), and Elspeth Graham (Her Own Life, 1989); without these studies and anthologies, the study of women's writing (and by extension, a feminist approach to female characters in male-authored texts) would not have become possible.

Unfortunately, the initial critical result of bringing women’s early texts into scholarly consciousness was to see them only in terms of straightforward oppression, which in turn made it possible for other early gynocritics to imagine that the only possible topic of women’s writing (when not reflecting successful androcentric oppression) is the paradise of female authorial community model, which Betty Travitsky began and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski has continued to lead the charge in, with Lewalski’s focus being on “the textual gestures through which…Jacobean women claimed an authorial identity and manifested their resistance within their repressive culture” (3). Elaine Beilin’s 1987 study Redeeming Eve: Women Writers of the English Renaissance has been another central text in this early feminist approach, and it has at its centre two crucial ideas: first, that women’s writing only became possible by “placing women at the very heart of Christianity” which, she argues was considered “women’s proper place” both in life generally and especially in textual production. She asserts, however, that confining women’s writing to religious composition and translation is not necessarily problematic because this religious authorial position “if lower than men’s in the hierarchies of the world, is often higher in the beauties of the spirit” (xv). Beilin’s second assertion and practice, which like her insistence that women’s writing was only validated during the Renaissance if it was very heavily steeped in acceptable Christian dogma, is that we must analyze “women writers of the English Renaissance as a group” because “they form an early modern tradition of women’s writing” (xvi).

I agree with Margaret Ezell’s claim that at the heart of these overly simplistic and binary views of early modern women’s writing (and by extension representations of women’s writing) is the field’s early attraction to the figure of “Judith Shakespeare.” Judith Shakespeare was “the literary creation of Virginia Woolf, attempting to imagine the fate of a talented woman contemporary of Shakespeare. Her lot is to be denied an education, to rebel against paternal authority, to attempt and fail to earn a living in a commercial setting, and to self-destruct” (10). Woolf’s vision, based as it was on a lack of resources surrounding Renaissance women’s writing and lives, simply reflects holes in the historical record, holes which are still
and polarizing result has generally been that texts written by women were read as
consciously constructed in ways designed to either elude and reject the quandary in
which the “chaste, silent, and obedient” paradigm placed them or to essentially confirm it
by self-censorship through the use of pseudonyms, anonymity, and/or confinement to
certain genres (Ferguson 1996, 149). Further, early gynocritics tended to see male-
authored texts as working in collusion with this misogynist position by “speaking”
automatically and without reflection the ideology that woman’s goodness may be defined
in direct proportion to how silent, chaste, and obedient she is.

This early critical mis-step, as Christina Luckyj points out, originated in Peter
Stallybrass’s 1986 essay “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed;” in this essay,
Stallybrass insists that historically, women’s silence and their chastity were understood to
be essentially equivalent in Renaissance England (7). The problem is not so much
Stallybrass’s argument per se (although Luckyj shows how he could only convincingly
make it by ignoring important counter-evidence in his own essay’s primary text), but that
“its equation of feminine silence with subjection is cited as fact by” various other
influential feminist critics studying Renaissance women’s access to writing and speaking
in early modern England (Luckyj 7). Luckyj rewrites the critical connection between
women and silence in relation to the English Renaissance, arguing that “in the hands of
neo-Stoics and recusants, silence became a recommended form of strength and defiance
literalised in the rejection of the ex officio oath in Tudor England. As an expression of

being filled; more importantly, Judith Shakespeare reflects the concerns Woolf was trying to resolve around
her own position as a professional writer barred from the universities and struggling to find the bare
minimum to survive: the now proverbial 500£ a year and a room of her own. The problem has been, as
Ezell goes on to point out, that this powerfully evocative fiction has been sorely misused in critical circles:
“We…have taken a text designed to be provocative and to stimulate further research into women’s lives in
the past and canonized it as history” (50).
open defiance silence could thus become a rhetoric parallel to speech. In addition silence was increasingly associated in early modern England with the unreadable, ‘inscrutable’, private subject who cannot be fathomed or decoded” (6-7). Megan Matchinske also considers a more complex relationship between gender, authority, and power in Renaissance England; she argues that “early modern women’s articulations and negotiations collide with, negate, and support more pervasive, frequently masculine-based, cultural directives” in relation to English statehood (6-7). Matchinske argues that women writers of the period could not “question dominant masculine literary modes of production” or “defy generic expectation” (7), but she does insist they were both able to and choose to “insert[] themselves into established dialogues, negotiate[] positions from which to claim authority or define self, and change[] the very forms that identity would take” (7).

Margaret Ferguson and Marta Straznicky, like Matchinske and Luckyj, also examine the ways in which representations of women writing and real women writers very often during the period engaged with, usurped, subverted, co-opted, and rewrote dominant masculinist modes of understanding the female. In *Dido’s Daughters*, Ferguson considers literacy as a cultural term inflected by gender, but in ways which might be used by either gender and to various effect, specifically in terms of redrawing the definitions of what constitutes literary authority (2003, 10, 13). Straznicky uses women’s closet drama to revisit the question of public and private literary modes in relation to gender, arguing that privacy is not the cage other critics claim it to be for women, but rather “a tactical construct” which allowed for the “possibility of women’s playwriting” (3); indeed, Straznicky goes on to show that “private space can be construed
as the site of theatrical display, both literally and metaphorically” and that privacy may strategically be adapted to “a variety of social, political, and economic agendas” (4).

What these critics (as well as Jennifer Summit and Jonathan Goldberg, whom I discuss below) commonly assume is that the terms drawn to divide feminine and masculine virtue were not as clear cut and restrictive for women as early gynocritics have assumed; further, these critics explore the ways in which such ostensibly restrictive terms may be used in very complex and diverse ways indeed to the advantage of those they are meant to keep quiet and writing only religious tracts, if anything at all.³ In “Author of Prodigies” I also question the early gynocritical binaries imposed on Renaissance literature heavily inflected with concerns of gender; my way of reading representations of women in Renaissance literature is not, however, determined tout court by the gender of either the author or the writer. Rather, I focus on one particular and pervasive image of women in the literature of the period, that of the female letter-writer. The female letter-writer appears repeatedly in the literature of the period, across a broad range of genres and sub-genres, in texts designed for a variety of audiences, and penned by a wide variety of authors. I am thus focusing not on female authors and writers (although I do discuss texts by Isabella Whitney and Elizabeth I), but rather on the idea, the image of the female writer. In other words, I treat the female letter-writer like any number of other familiar elements which are deployed repeatedly in literature throughout the period. The female letter-writer is a trope whose primary meaning, I will argue, does not necessarily have ³ I have thus far been mixing my review of critical approaches to Renaissance women’s writing with critical approaches to how women were represented in fictional texts. The two are, of course, not equivalent (although they intersect in fascinating ways in texts by Elizabeth I and Isabella Whitney, for example, which I will discuss in Chapter Four); however, critical approaches have generally treated the two as equivalent. In my work here, I try to keep the image separate from the reality in close analysis even while I suggest that generally speaking, representations of women’s writing did affect real women who wrote.
only to do with gender. On the contrary, the female letter-writer in the texts I address is utilized to explore the complex epistemological relationship among writing, reading, subjectivity, and subjecthood—a relationship which, as it is being worked out, of course comments on gender but also represents and comments on issues beyond gender ideology. That the trope of women’s epistolary production may be used to explore issues beyond its immediate and surface meaning is an assumption made throughout this dissertation, for example, when I discuss the medieval Charters of Christ lurking behind the lurid blood letters in Chapter Two. The result is that gender and gender ideology are necessarily transformed by the ways in which they are employed to explore issues such as writing, reading, and the subject. Thus, one perhaps ironic result of using the image of the woman writer to explore issues beyond gender is that it actually creates new ways of imagining women (both real and fictional), their capabilities, and their motivations.

The image of the female letter-writer in the texts I discuss is created not only through individual acts of epistolary creation, but also through female characters’ actions leading up to their letter-writing; their motives for writing and the results they hope to create; the consequences resulting from the dissemination of their completed texts to both intended and unintended readers; how their letters are circulated; how their letters are either dismissed or acted upon; and what is both known and conspicuously unknown about all of these things, but particularly about what motivates these characters to write and the conditions under which they do so. Renaissance authors working in all the genres represented in this thesis (primarily drama, but also romance, epistolary poetry, real letters between real people, “found” letter collections, and so-called letter-writing manuals) create characters (or in the case of Whitney and Elizabeth I, fictional versions
of themselves) which on the one hand reflect cultural ideology and desires, but on the
other imbue these characters with the striking appearance of very individual personalities,
desires and perhaps most importantly, power. The implications of creating female letter-
writers, in primarily fictional texts, who function outside the constraints (or subversively
within them, to their own advantage) of the ideology their cultures attempt to impose on
them is that the trope begins to look very much like a complexly and independently
operating subject-writer; hence, the multiple and multifaceted implications which arise
out of the widespread use of the trope in the literature of the period.

**Why Letters?**

At this point, I will take a moment to answer the question which must arise out of
the preceding assertions—why letters? What complicated set of meanings do letters
possess in Renaissance England that allow them to be recruited for literary considerations
beyond those of simple communication? Lynne Magnusson, James Daybell, and Ronald
Huebert have persuasively argued that letters in Renaissance England were always
negotiating a complex set of social uses, needs, and problems. The basis of my readings
of the variety of literary works in this thesis is that there are certain constants about the
way letters work and the way they were understood during the period.

Fundamentally considered, letters can function as either public (news, contracts)
or private documents, but just as often as not they function as both, even when their
writers proclaim them to be one or the other. So-called private letters, exchanged
between close family members, spouses, or friends were usually circulated amongst
either a familial or a friendly coterie the members of which might comment on the
contents of a letter, and whose comments would sometimes be included in the recipient’s
response to the original letter-writer (Dorothy Osborne’s letters to Sir William Temple are an example of this). On the other hand, ostensibly public epistolary documents containing news intended for public circulation, contracts for use in public transactions such as trials, or epistolary poetry which was either circulated amongst a literary coterie and/or published, often functioned in public as well as private realms by addressing both intended and implied readers (Margaret Maurer’s comments on John Donne’s epistolary poems suggest such a practice). Indeed, the most well-known and well-studied manuals of the period, especially those penned by Desiderius Erasmus, represented letters as the most personal form of communication even as they simultaneously negotiated a very public set of social standards surrounding class, gender, age, occupation, education level, etc. Thus, given letters’ defining combination of private and public concerns, contents, and audiences, they are essentially documents which mediate between the ostensibly contradictory extremes of privacy and secrecy, self-display and revelation. This mediation between the private and the public is at the heart of the letters represented in the primarily fictional texts I here discuss, and is therefore also central to what made the image of the female letter-writer such a compelling figure to both authors and audiences.

It may seem strange that this should be so given that women were so commonly excluded from the most influential letter-writing manuals of the period. However, it is in this marginalization and absence in official epistolary theory, that female subjectivity and

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4 Like Marta Straznicky in her examination of women’s closet drama, I treat privacy as a “tactical construct” (3) which allows the creators of these female letter-writer characters to appear to inhabit realms both physical and mental which are not immediately or completely accessible to others. I would suggest that if privacy is a “tactical construct” then the public may also be considered as such and used in similar ways. At the same time, I also acknowledge a basic and more tangible distinction between the two with the private realm comprising the space that includes the home or other physically removed space and a known audience for one’s writings or spoken words; further, I assert that as constructed as the meanings surrounding private and public may have been, some people had to believe in them as tangible realities for the constructedness thereof to be used in the complicated ways Straznicky suggests (and which I agree with).
therefore the symbolic and literal implications of female subjectivity to the meaning of letters reside. Of primary importance in Renaissance England’s collection of epistolary instruction manuals is Erasmus’s *On the Writing of Letters*, which is designed for those who are already “well-instructed” in the epistolary arts but especially “petty schoolmasters” (12); of course, it is assumed that such schoolmasters and their students are exclusively male (24). Erasmus sees letter-writing as a pedagogical tool through the extensive practice of which boys will become qualified to later “preach fluently in churches, guide the senate with eloquence, serve with credit on missions of public importance, and to be competent on any matter both in judgment and in speech” (*On the Writing of Letters* 34). Erasmus does not, of course, limit his epistolary directions to the creation of the kinds of letters associated only with public duties; in fact, his definition of what comprises a letter is surprisingly basic: in *A Formula for the Composition of Letters*, an epistle is described, simply, as a kind of “conversation between two absent persons” (258).

Yet, despite the quotidian aspects of epistolary production described in his manuals (Erasmus provides instruction on how to write letters to family members, to lovers, to enemies, and to neighbours, to name just a few examples), he never portrays women as letter-writers except when advising boys to learn different rhetorical styles by writing in the manner of fictional women (such as Helen writing to Paris to try to convince him to abandon their affair) (*On the Writing of Letters* 24). Women are, rather, imagined almost exclusively as recipients of epistles, and their literal absence (as pupils and future letter-writers) from Erasmus’s texts is reiterated as rhetorical absence when Erasmus encourages students to learn what he terms the “masculine style” of writing.
This style he defines as “majestic, impetuous, fiery, and rapid,” not to mention “robust, impressive, and vigorous” (*On the Writing of Letters* 90). Erasmus does concede that “the flowery, elegant, and witty have charm” in some sorts of letters, but that the masculine style is generally preferable. This alternate, “flowery” style is no more fully described than I quote above, yet strikingly, Erasmus sets it up specifically in contradistinction to the masculine style. The irony inherent in Erasmus’s attempt to delineate a preferred masculine style is that he cannot effectively do so without simultaneously delineating another style to which women (or writers who wish to sidestep the masculine style he prescribes) implicitly have access. Erasmus undermines the primacy of his own preferred style by acknowledging this alternative rhetorical style, an option that, because it is not more clearly defined, is available to anyone not included in Erasmus’s projected community of male students and schoolmasters.

Erasmus’s letter-writing manuals were extremely influential in Renaissance England and imitators such as Angel Day tended to replicate rather than revise or add to Erasmian epistolary theory. In Day’s *The English Secretary*, women are never seriously addressed as letter-writers and consequently receive no direct instruction by him in the rhetorical arts. Some girls did, of course, receive formal writing instruction in Renaissance England but as James Daybell points out, “evidence of female readership of epistolary manuals is slight” and “women’s familiarity with conventions…is more likely to stem from contact with the form, through receiving letters” (“Introduction” 7). The fact that women are not represented in epistolary instruction manuals I suggest provided them with more possibilities for unique writerly and subjective expression than educated

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5 Like Erasmus, Day initially excludes women as letter-writers (1586), but in the second edition of *The Secretary* (1599), he provides examples of women’s letters but only those written in response to letters received from men.
boys had access to. Erasmus and his Renaissance imitators created rhetorical guidelines for every conceivable male-centred social relationship, for both writer and recipient, and listed every imaginable reason for men to write either to one another or to women; strict social relations, as Lynne Magnusson persuasively argues in *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue*, were embedded firmly within the norms of written discourse. Thus if real women’s writing was not as rhetorically proscribed as men’s, it follows that female characters in literature who write could be used symbolically by both male and female authors to delve into the nature of and connections among writing, the subject, and the world. The images of the female letter-writer mobilized in the various texts I address here allow writing to become transcendent of gender precisely by representing writing by characters who are perceived as ineducable because of their gender. In other words, writing becomes something “natural” and independent of cultural tuition rather than something which needs to be learned from a manual.

Beyond the manuals, letters held a particularly complex position in both everyday life and the literature of the period. They functioned as regular correspondence for all forms of everyday topic amongst all literate classes; they functioned as the medium through which news was conveyed to both reading and non-reading community members; they were used to entertain; they were used as legal documents; they were used in literary romances as plot devices to lend a sense of realism; and they were used on stage for all these things, as well as self-consciously deployed theatrical properties. What real and fictional letters have in common, however, (referring back to Erasmus’s formulation of letters as simulacra of conversations between distant persons) is that they are, ironically, as Janet Gurkin Altman discusses a “real-life form” in which “fiction
conveniently masquerades as a real-life product” (5-6). Letters, regardless of either medium or audience, are almost always written as though they are intended, without qualification, to reflect some aspect of a verifiable reality. At the same time, however, they are also always functioning in ways that suggest they are fictional; there are, after all, no essential differences to distinguish between letters that are real and those that only emulate reality. This interplay between real and fictional epistolarity is seen as well in the fact that letters, by their nature, seem entirely removed from their originating contexts. Thus, what is omitted from any given letter in part necessarily defines the meaning of what is contained in the letter, to anticipate my discussion below of the epistemological problem inherent in reading. In other words, the “reality” presented in any given letter is a fiction closely crafted to resemble an unverifiable reality that always exists elsewhere, beyond the immediate purview of its recipients. This epistolary combination of fiction and verisimilitude, their interdependence, their indistinguishableness, and their teasing reliance on always absent and mysterious referents of reality explains why letters are so easily adapted to explorations of the epistemological problem of comprehending the subject through the act and products of writing. The subject, like the reality that may or may not be behind the letter, is both absolutely present and absolutely unverifiable in easily comprehended social terms.

It is not, I think, coincidental that the majority of the letter-writing characters I examine appear in drama rather than in literary forms not generally given to performance, in either public theatres or semi-public places, such as universities or noblemen’s homes. The performance and witnessing of letter-writing, letter-reading, letter distribution, and all of the actions both leading to and resulting from epistolary production in Renaissance
drama highlight how the intermingling of private writing and private motives becomes closely linked to the display of these desires, other sub-texts, the skills of the writer, and/or the presence of a subjecthood not previously detected or understood. Indeed, letters are strikingly script-like in ways which mirror drama itself: they are inherently performative, replicating social relations according to recognizable turns of phrase, cues, and always with audience in mind. Real people, whether or not they live in a period and place as well-scripted out as Renaissance England was, via conduct manuals, letter-writing manuals, sumptuary laws, class restrictions, and so on, are always speaking and writing within a set of culturally constructed scripts defined by gender, age, class, genre of communication, etc.

Ironically, despite the gynocritical emphasis on the subjugation of women based on the chaste, silent and obedient model, female writers in Renaissance England were not as explicitly defined by the same well-defined cultural scripts as their male counterparts. Women’s absence from many common scripts of social identity has generally been understood to have been entirely repressive; they were officially judged, as it were, according to essentially negative or empty scripts which defined what they should not do or say rather than what they should do or say. However, such blank spaces in the meticulously scripted and closely watched social “document” of accepted and expected behaviour, in fact, leaves real women, and authors who create female characters, a significant amount of room in which to imagine a wholly new set of scripts for women. The letter as script is explored through various other forms in this dissertation, specifically through publicly circulated religious pamphlets (the medieval Charters of Christ), through the metadramatic performance of gender with letters as the primary stage
properties, and through the fetishization of women’s intellectual labour. The multiple layers of epistolary and social meaning explored through these three ways of representing the female letter-writer are integral to the construction of the idea of both female subjectivity and subjecthood bound up in textual production.

If letters are then understood to be essentially performative and their performativity is increased and highlighted in these texts, we must consider what exactly these literary letters (and their writers) are performing. The letters themselves, with varying degrees of success, perform the work their writers overtly intend them to perform, whether that involves seeking vengeance, saving lives, wooing, or self-display through the fetishization of their own mental work. At the same time, however, the script-like nature of letters and their negotiation of private and public needs and languages make it possible for them to contain and disseminate meaning that either transcends or denies the meaning with which their writers either appear or intend to imbue them. In fact, misunderstanding and misuse are common responses to the female characters’ letters discussed in the following chapters. Yet, this does not speak to a failing in either rhetorical style or the authors’ desire to silence the female characters in their works. Rather, the misunderstandings and misuses of the women’s letters function on the one hand as invitations to audience members and readers to consider the cultural blindness that leads to these failures in responding appropriately to the letters; on the other hand, readers and audience members are invited to become part of an elite group with more complete access to and understanding of the complex epistolary productions they witness, as well as the female subjects the existence of which such productions both assert and represent. Both of these points, but especially the latter, encourage the
expectation of some kind of access into the private world, both mental and material, of the writers. Audience members’ and readers’ ability to completely accept this invitation is necessarily incomplete, though; they may know more than other characters in the texts with which they engage but they do not know *everything*; indeed, the information that is conspicuously absent in most cases is full disclosure surrounding the moments of actual letter-writing. In all cases save George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, letter-writing occurs either off-stage or off-page, so even when the letter-writer’s intentions are clearly stated and the letter is placed in the intended recipient’s hands, there exists a mysterious space in which textual production is performed, a space which no one save the fictional letter-writer and text author can be imagined to access. This space both asserts the presence of and metaphorizes the not entirely accessible or knowable subject identity of the letter-writer, which is designed in turn to increase desire for such access and asserts the enduring presence of a subject whose mental and metaphysical boundaries cannot be breached by another.

*The Female Letter-Writer*

The foundational feminist literary critics who brought Renaissance women’s writing into the mainstream of critical investigation have based their work first on the identification of Renaissance ideologies surrounding women’s conduct in literature and then on reading texts (written by either men or women) through that lens. Generally speaking, this approach has been based upon the assumption that on the one hand, male-authored texts reiterate ideology that, if not anti-feminist, was not sympathetic to views of woman as something other than chaste, silent, and obedient. At the same time, this critical approach has assumed that texts penned by women must in some way speak to
proto-feminist concerns and/or an imagined “paradise” of female, often female authorial, community. Betty Travitsky, Elaine Beilin, Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and the other early feminist scholars discussed above may be considered the foundational gynocritical voices addressing English Renaissance literature; all contributed greatly to prising open the until-then almost entirely androcentric canon to include writers such as Mary Wroth, Aemilia Lanyer, and Elizabeth Cary. Such texts have made works like “Author of Prodigies” possible; at the same time, such texts also effectively backed feminist criticism into a corner in which texts were generally deemed to be either misogynist or proto-feminist, and too often in direct correlation to the gender of their authors; another result is that women’s texts were consistently and primarily read through the lens of gender, and even texts not addressing women’s position in Renaissance society were nonetheless investigated for what commentary they made thereon. The historical assumptions underlying such readings are explored in Ian Maclean’s historical study *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*.

In this book, Maclean painstakingly lays out the Aristotelian theories underpinning notions of gender in Renaissance England. Maclean outlines how Aristotle viewed gender in quite simple binary terms, with the “male principle” being essentially active and the “female principle” passive and in need of direction or rule (8); all beings, of course, were understood to exhibit both the male and female principle, but in men, obviously, the male principle was dominant, thus making them fit to sit as head of the household, participate in politics, work outside the home, etc. Men, Aristotle asserted, were the only beings to have full powers of judgment while women, like children and slaves, possessed only imperfect or incomplete abilities to judge and respond (Maclean
50). Because of this, women could not be considered as autonomous beings; rather, they were conceivable only in relation to marriage, which was considered to be their natural state as the caretakers of children (Maclean 57), a notion which was expanded somewhat in Renaissance England with women being legally defined in relation to either their fathers or their husbands as maidens/daughters, wives, or widows. Because women were considered to be both naturally given to maternal activities and to be possessed of limited reasoning capabilities, Maclean notes that this translated into very limited support for women’s participation in intellectual spheres in Renaissance England. Maclean also points out that late Renaissance thinkers and scholars were beginning to see Aristotle’s theories of gender as outmoded (67), but in terms of actual cultural practice, girls’ common exclusion (even if their parents could afford it) from school and the impossibility of them ever attending one of the universities indicates that this theory was still influential with respect to everyday reality.

The Aristotelian ideas that Maclean outlines in his monograph infuse a great deal of the writings addressing gender produced during the English Renaissance, and early gynocritics took even the most sensationally misogynist texts to be straightforward representations of widely accepted views on gender; Joseph Swetnam’s raging evisceration of all things feminine or female (reproduced in Henderson and McManus’s *Half Humankind*) is a great example of this. “The Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women” has been taken to be representative of the culture’s basic and general feelings concerning women. This text, of course, was part of a larger collection of texts extending the medieval *querelle des femmes* into the Renaissance, a quarrel in which writers displayed their rhetorical prowess at either the expense or to the benefit of
each gender. While issues of gender were certainly being worked out in this textual
quarrel, by the time it reached the Renaissance it had become the stuff of cheap
pamphlets and was more about showmanship, sensationalism, and selling copies than
about serious philosophical or literary inquiry. Nonetheless, gynocritics have persistently
treated such texts as both entirely earnest and historically accurate representations of
dominant attitudes, thus echoing Aristotle’s uncomplimentary binary of the genders.⁶
Indeed, early feminist critics have based so much of their work on the notion that
Renaissance people saw men as superior and complete and women as essentially inferior
that they have had necessarily to see only insidious misogyny behind all representations
of female characters by male authors, as well as in other male-authored defenses of
women; as Pamela Benson argues, “in defending woman in the particular ways they do,
they defend their society and their own literary voices against new womankind, and I
suggest that this self-defense succeeded. The male remains the authoritative author of
literary texts and the governor of social institutions” (2).

In “Author of Prodigies” I both draw on and question 1980s and 1990s feminist
literary criticism, which in its recovery of “lost” texts (either authored by women or in
which representations of women figure prominently) positioned its project firmly in the
realm of the socio-political. In her discussion of male authors’ appropriations of
women’s voices in literary texts, Elizabeth Harvey argues that “ventriloquizations of
women in the Renaissance achieved the power they did partly because so few women

⁶ Henderson and McManus assert the straightforwardness of all the texts in their collection while in
Redeeming Eve Elaine Beilin, even while acknowledging that “Linda Woodbridge has persuasively
demonstrated that the formal controversy over women was…an elaborate literary game” (xviii emphasis
added), asserts that a pamphlet attacking Eve insists that “women should be…obedient, silent, and chaste—
and indeed, these are precisely the virtues that women’s defenders [in the pamphlet war] claim” (xix). The
field of feminist criticism as focused on Renaissance literature has evolved since Beilin and others were
writing but this early gynocritical influence is still felt in the criticism (see in particular the feminist critics I
address in Chapter Four when discussing Isabella Whitney).
actually wrote and spoke, but the representations of feminine speech that were current in literary and popular accounts, as well as in ventriloquizations, fostered a vision that tended to reinforce women’s silence or to marginalize their voices when they did speak or write” (5). By “ventriloquization,” Harvey means those instances in which male authors create speaking or writing female characters that also seem strikingly real and recognizable. Harvey’s concern about such literary technique “is not epistemological at all, but ethical and political. It is not whether male poets can adequately represent the female voice, but the ethics and politics of doing so” (6).

While Harvey imagines a cultural silencing of women’s discourses through male authors’ representations of them, Margaret Ferguson, in an early article, addresses such representation through the lens of real female writers. In “Renaissance Concepts of the Woman Writer,” Ferguson, in spite of complicating the male/female binary so commonly used in the early stages of feminist literary criticism, also asserts that while “the concept of the ‘woman writer’ in the early modern period signifies a shifting mix of illusion and empowerment” (163), this concept is self-nullifying, because when the term “writer” is “unmodified” it is automatically “gendered masculine,” the result, she claims, being that the term “woman writer” is essentially an oxymoron (145). Both Harvey and Ferguson claim that such representations served powerfully to subordinate women in those instances in which male authors created writing female characters. Such notions of the essentially anti-feminist nature of all representations of women by men in the literature and philosophy of the period combined with woman’s legal status as their husband’s property led, critics assumed, to both men and women being unable to “conceive of [women] owning their own writings” (Ferguson 1996, 148), hence the ostensibly
impossible notion of anyone in the Renaissance being able to conceive of a woman writer. Thanks in large part to gynocritics, we know that women did write and publish; yet, some gynocritics have, ironically, asserted the impossibility of the woman writer.

The moral bent of early feminist criticism, and its paradoxical tendency towards containing its own central figure of the “woman writer,” simply does not accurately reflect the myriad ways in which the mere idea of Renaissance women writing defies the categories of gender, sex, and morality. Or, to take a step back to a simpler and more direct point drawn and slightly altered from Jonathan Goldberg’s introduction to *Desiring Women Writing*: “if gender is taken as *eo ipse* oppressive, then there is no…way to understand how a woman could *ever* be empowered enough to write and publish” (11 emphasis added). To this I would further add, if gender for women in Renaissance England was truly only oppressive, then it is unlikely that authors of *either* gender would ever have been able to imagine women writing and publishing; and yet, as even Harvey acknowledges, there is an abundance of extant Renaissance texts in which women are represented as writing, writing well, writing for a wide variety of reasons, writing in a wide variety of genres, and most importantly, writing in ways which substantially affect their social milieux.

Yet, for all my questioning of the negative binaries which define early gynocritical approaches to Renaissance literature, annihilation and loss are nonetheless central to the image of the female writer that forms the basis of my critical approach. My approach differs from preceding feminists’ critics approach, however, by treating annihilation and loss as precisely the keys to writerly freedom. Like Jennifer Summit, “instead of seeing women writers as literally lost from literary history,” I focus on “the
idea of loss…as a powerful fiction that shaped the cultural place of the woman writer as well as the abstract model of a literary history that excluded her” (5). Summit also argues that women’s “perceived opposition to literary tradition” is precisely what allowed them to exist in the culture’s literary consciousness as “emblems of loss and figures of a literature that tradition fails to enshrine. In so doing, they give shape to the question of what it means to write outside tradition in ways” that “became instrumental for the conception of English literature” overall (5). According to Summit, therefore, gender functions simultaneously in two domains—the culturally symbolic and the socially real—and I too make this assumption.

Jonathan Goldberg, on the other hand, sees the uses to which gender can be put as at best only ever partially connected to reality and always as pre-emptive of other modes of identity formation. He asserts that “for a woman to write, it may be that she cannot write as a woman, or that ‘woman’ must be transported to registers or territories usually not thought of as a woman’s, but not necessarily barred either” (1997, 136-37). This may or may not be true of real female authors, but in relation to the fictional female letter-writers I examine in this dissertation it is absolutely not true; indeed, it is striking how naturally writing presents itself as the proper means to enable these characters to satisfy their various needs and desires, how there is absolutely no process of re-imagining gender as a precursor to the penning of epistles in any of my primary texts. Indeed, the juxtaposition of “woman” and “writing” is in these texts so natural that it becomes the site of often playful manipulation of characters who do not see women and writing as properly and naturally associated (this is especially true in the texts I discuss in Chapter Three).
Concerns of propriety are consistently abandoned in these texts in favour of
collections about representing women’s epistolary production and the conditions
surrounding it in the most compelling and natural ways imaginable. The female
characters’ writing activities addressed in this dissertation are construed as entirely
natural and surprisingly common; it is the combination of naturalness and frequency
which here makes female epistolary production so compelling—there is, after all, nothing
unusual about a male character writing a letter in a play or romance during this period.
That said, these representations are interesting not simply because female characters write
letters; these characters and their letters are interesting because their playwrights and
authors move them directly into territory beyond mere textual production, and seem to
assume that such basic notions of women being able and motivated to write need not
even be addressed. Rather, the authors included in this study begin by assuming the
naturalness of women writing, then force readers to consider the idea that women’s
writing could symbolize complex subjectivities as immune to investigation. Against all
Aristotle’s notions, the female subject is in a wide variety of Renaissance texts both
constantly asserted and represented as transcendent of gender.

Audiences and Readers

The figure of the female letter-writer in Renaissance literature could only have
become pervasive because it was somehow appealing to readers and audience members;
Danielle Clarke cites the following story: “Sir Thomas More reports the reaction of the
Bishop of Exeter to his daughter’s writing in Latin: ‘when he perceaved it by the
salutation to be womans, he beganne more greedily to read it, noveltie inviting him
thereunto’” (38). The figure of the female letter-writer in Renaissance literature was, I
argue, inherently compelling for much more than mere novelty’s sake, however, because she is constructed in ways which invite readers and viewers to participate in imagining her. Authors and playwrights, I suggest, purposefully omit certain key details around her central act of writing precisely to compel involvement and therefore implicate readers and audiences in the construction of a figure whose internal complexity is both asserted and shielded from full revelation to those “watching” her, both within and beyond the literary setting in which she is represented. This figure is attractive, in other words, precisely because she is created in a way that gestures invitingly towards full disclosure of her writerly actions and motives and because that full disclosure will never be accomplished; indeed, that the female letter-writer is constructed as purposefully and essentially unknowable is key to her attractiveness.

As Lewalksi points out, “it is easy enough to produce the familiar argument that all subversive images of female power, wit, and rebellion are finally contained by catastrophes in the tragedies or the marriage finales in the comedies, and that patriarchal power is reinforced by allowing and then controlling such gestures. But if we admit the power of literary and dramatic images to affect the imagination, we might expect the very presence of such a galaxy of vigorous and rebellious female characters to undermine any monolithic social construct of woman’s nature and role” (9). In other words, even if such representations of complex and socially misfit women were originally intended only to contain women as Lewalski argues (but which is unlikely), they soon begin to take on more complex meaning as they are observed and interpreted by an imaginative and desiring reading and play-watching culture.
Also key to making the female-letter writer a compelling enough figure to reappear so often across so many genres and sub-genres is that she is associated with cultural symbols and ideas that transcend the idea of the individual woman and because the feminine itself carries signification beyond individuals, even beyond literal gender itself. The female, in the texts addressed in this dissertation, while in each case made to appear as a unique and fully developed character with a complex subject identity, is also used to represent the notion of a culturally circumscribed subject, but a subject whose marginalization does not simply isolate and disempower it. Marginalization is a sign of the subject’s social and sometimes physical vulnerability but is also, ironically, the site, source, and proof of their powerfully unknowable and private subjectivity, untouchable and out of reach to others. Renaissance society, as Elizabeth Hanson has shown, was deeply averse to the concept of the unknowable, internal subject but it is precisely this resistance to its existence that gives the private and autonomous subject, here represented by the literary figure of the female letter-writer, her power. By denying her existence, the culture ironically creates space for her to exist, and space to exist on terms beyond those the culture dictates. This paradox is reflected in the absence of women in the popular letter-writing manuals; this absence allows authors imagining women as letter-writers to create their own epistolary theory. This, in turn, makes it both conceivable and possible for real women to create other writing spaces, and the internality that authorship implies, outside the purview of their androcentric culture’s official “party line” on what constitutes either a subject or an author.

Textual and subjective authority is established in the texts I address through absence and loss, to recall Summit’s and Goldberg’s arguments about the relationship
between gender identity and writing. But this emphasis on writing as inherently inadequate to the presentation of the writing subject would be better assigned to the readers represented in the texts I study because it is they who proceed on the assumption that the subject is only entirely knowable to herself, an assumption authors manipulate to particular epistemological effect for their audiences. Reading at heart contains an epistemological paradox that is central to the compelling nature of the female letter-writer in Renaissance literature. Reading, like direct scientific investigation, is understood basically to lead directly to the acquisition of knowledge of some kind. During the Renaissance especially, as textual production (both writing and printing) and literacy increased exponentially, the investigation of text began to become more closely associated with the investigation of truth (whatever that might mean in any given instance and to any given reader). Yet, because reading is itself an investigation, it is also in part a skeptical activity; reading demands that readers question what they read, and this in turn leads to questions about authority, veracity, completeness, bias, etc. In other words, reading is both the grounds for acquiring knowledge and the grounds for questioning the truth of those who author texts. Reading first assumes but ultimately destabilizes the possibility of either expressing or attaining complete knowledge of anything through textual production. And as authorship came increasingly to be established through publication and self-referential emphasis on the intellectual labour required to produce text, the necessarily interpretive experience of reading also became entwined with the necessarily incomplete knowledge of how text is produced. Indeed, the relationship between a text and a reader nicely metaphorizes the relationship between the subject and those who would seek to know her: behind the signs of intention, identity, and social
position imperfectly deployed in writing is the mystery not only of the existence of the writer-subject herself, but also of her motives both for writing at all and in the particular way she chooses. The mystery of the subject lies in its position as existing within the culture that seeks to quash, control or ignore it without being either completely present or completely disappearing from view. This is why the letter with its complex reliance on the rhetoric of both the private and public realms, as opposed to other textual categories, is so well suited to functioning as a medium through which subjectivity and subjecthood may be examined, represented, and created.

In Chapter Two: “with her owne blood writ” I examine texts in which the primary female letter-writers pen letters in their own blood. Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters, although initially appearing to be mere instances of sensationalist sexual transgression, are in fact laden with profound spiritual significance. Drawing on the tradition of the Charters of Christ, Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*, George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* figure female characters’ struggle to articulate both social and individual responses to their cultures’ views of them as merely objects of male desire and control. This struggle manifests in all three plays through the female characters’ attempts to both envision and enact less violent and more reparative responses to wrongdoing in their corrupt societies. By having these characters write their epistolary calls to justice and redemption in a manner which echoes the Charters of Christ, their authors construct these characters to look like agents who,

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7 The Charters of Christ were pamphlets which were widely read and circulated throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. Written in red ink, they purported to be written literally by Christ himself in his own blood. In these pamphlets, Christ describes his sacrifice and how it will result in humankind’s inheritance of heaven.
while experiencing illicit sexual desire, are defined much more by their desire to save others from the more dangerous moral quandaries in which they flounder. Further, by situating these female characters within such a redemptive framework, Kyd, Chapman, and Ford imbue their respective letter-writers with both authorial and subjective power in spite of other cultural discourses which would reduce them to mere caricatures of the stereotypically unchaste, unruly, and fallen woman. In these three plays, blood letters figure the fragility, marginality, and vulnerability associated with revealing one’s subjectivity in a context in which female subjectivity is not generally acknowledged to exist. As a coda to this chapter, I consider how Richard Johnson’s prose romance *Tom a Lincolne* uses the convention of the bloody letter’s unheeded redemptive power to criticize English military invasions of foreign countries.

The second chapter, entitled “Spite of custom, we will sue to you,” focuses on texts which more playfully contemplate the fantasy of the female letter-writer. In Robert Wilmot’s *Tancred and Gismund*, William Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, George Chapman’s *Sir Giles Goosecap* and *The Gentleman Usher*, and John Marston’s *The Fawn*, female letter-writers actively woo the men they wish to marry by merging epistolary production and metadramatic performances of their own gender. What is striking about these representations is how gender is so casually revealed to be performative rather than essential. Not only do Gismund, Julia, Eugenia, Margaret, and Dulcimel use the “proper” feminine roles assigned them in order to woo covertly, but it is also precisely their linguistic and dramatic skills evident in their construction of these roles which enable them to win the men they love. These female characters use gendered social constraints to their advantage, and in so doing reveal themselves to be complex
subjects who are both sufficiently skillful and comfortable to manipulate social and material signs of their marginalized position to achieve their personal desires. Social conventions, like gender, become simply more stage properties in the theatre of the subject, not strictures by which the subject is necessarily constrained.

The final chapter, “my eyes haue often-times stood at gaze,” focuses on male fetishization of women’s intellectual labour in the writing of letters, and the ways in which women writers anticipate and manipulate this response. It is in this chapter that my reformulation of Goldberg’s theory of women’s writing as either loss or absence is most thoroughly explored. The conditions under which women’s intellectual-authorial production occur are both constantly gestured towards and kept steeped in secrecy in Isabella Whitney’s Certain Familiar Epistles, Elizabeth I’s letters to the Duke of Alençon, Nicholas Breton’s A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters, and Jacques du Bosque’s The Secretary of Ladies. These literary depictions of women’s mental work are infused with mystery, and this mystery is integral to the pleasure of imagining women engaged in epistolary production. However, at the same time that the terms of the fetish are being established in these texts they are also being rendered in terms which contribute to their own normalization; indeed, it is through first situating the female letter-writer in the realm of the taboo that she may end up firmly in the realm of the quotidian.

That this figure resides ultimately in the quotidian in these texts in no way diminishes the mystery surrounding either her verisimilitude as subject or the material and mental conditions of her production of intellectual property. On the contrary: the notion that the female subject possesses an interiority that is unavailable to the intrusive male reader is what makes her so compelling and at the same time speaks to a cultural
desire not only to imagine, but also to *witness* women writing. In other words, it is through the fetish of the female writer becoming commonplace in these texts (those in Chapter Four in particular, but all the letter-writers studied in this dissertation) that English Renaissance culture articulates its desire to acknowledge that which it officially proscribes: the female subject whose desires are expressed via the pen.

What, then of the relationship between real women writing and perhaps asserting their status as authors, and female characters being represented as writing in primarily male-authored texts? As has been noted above, gynocritics have tended to assume that male-authored representations of women’s textual production (or female characters at all) are designed to contain notions of female subjectivity, subjecthood, and interiority—even when these representations include characters who appear to be complex, strong-willed, wily, etc. To be sure, containment of the female subject-writer is one possible result of how their authors represent them, particularly for the bloody letter-writers discussed in Chapter Two. At the same time, however, representation is always transcendent both of authors’ intentions and of representation’s actual details. Simply imagining women writing both makes women’s writing possible and invites readers and audience members, of both genders, to envision such images’ potential incarnations beyond their immediate form. And such incarnations beyond the “present” form of the literary representation of women writing letters includes real women writing real letters and texts beyond the simply epistolary. Isabella Whitney and Elizabeth I exploit this slippery boundary between the real and imagined possibilities of women’s intellectual labour being manifested through writing; they do so by creating personae that simultaneously represent them and create characters which stand in for them, in part obscuring their
identities as real people. Representation allows for increasing social acknowledgement and acceptance of the woman as writer and author, while obscuring biographical truth asserts the subjectivity and subjecthood which necessarily forms the basis of complex textual production, not to mention the compelling mystery behind it. Such representations thus both allow the culture to come to accept the presence of real women writing and authoring, and for real women to imagine themselves fulfilling such roles. This, I believe, had much to do with the emergence of real women writing and publishing their own original texts near the end of the sixteenth century and especially in the seventeenth century.
Chapter Two

“with her owne blood writ”: Blood Letters, Redemption, and the Female Subject

Discussing plays which stage “the spectacle of a woman using a pen,” Eve Sanders argues that such dramatic portrayals overturn “the received notion of writing as a male prerogative” (7). Further, as Jennifer Summit claims, writing defies the categories and codes that identify and define gender because it can so easily hide the gender of the body that writes (8). To both complicate and contribute to Sanders’s and Summit’s claims about the relationship between gender and writing, in this chapter I examine Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582-92), George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois* (1603-04), and John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1629-33), which all feature female characters who write letters in their own blood. Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters and the actions that surround them reflect English culture’s intensely ambivalent consideration of what it means to be a subject; as the result of this, the letter-writers’ gender is more symbolically than literally important. Gender is nonetheless integral to our understanding of these characters as it speaks precisely to the vulnerability and liminality of the subject in the early modern imagination. Blood writing in particular intensifies the sense of the subject as marginal to the world the subject inhabits because bloody writing conflates the body with the text it produces (thereby suggesting the writer’s subjective interiority); at the same time, such unity is denied because the association of the body with the text suggests that the subject’s body (especially the female body) is akin to a blank page upon which others’ discourses may be inscribed. In order to unpack the contradictions and implications present in these representations of
women’s epistolary production in blood, it is important first to understand the generic contexts and genealogy of blood writing.

Kyd’s, Chapman’s, and Ford’s representations of blood writing are, I would suggest, traceable to the most famous and earliest instance of blood writing on the English stage—Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, in which to sell his soul in exchange for knowledge and power, Faustus pens “a deed of gift with [his] own blood” (v.35). Having sold his soul to Lucifer, Faustus’s quest for knowledge of astronomy, geography, and philosophy quickly devolves into an insatiable interest in the basest forms of sexuality. Similarly, Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella are defined primarily by their sexual transgressions; both Bel-imperia and Annabella write their letters after their sexual indiscretions have caught up with them and they have been imprisoned, and Tamyra is tortured by her husband into writing a letter to lure her lover to his death. This connection between illicit sexuality and bloody writing would seem simply to correlate women’s writing with lapses in feminine morality; yet, unlike Faustus, whose blood

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8 Marlowe and Kyd’s co-habitation, the discovery of dangerous papers amongst Kyd’s belongings, Kyd’s attempt to pass them off on Marlowe (by then deceased), and Kyd’s torture at the hands of the Privy Council are all well known. Whether or not we believe Kyd’s claim that he and Marlowe “were ‘wrytinge in one chamber twoe years synce’ and their papers were shuffled together” (Mulryne xii), we can surmise that their ideas, and possibly source texts, mingled. Marlowe’s, Kyd’s, Chapman’s, and Ford’s dramatic works have been shown to be connected in various ways, but no one has produced a comprehensive study of the pervasive presence of women writing in their own blood in English literature. All that has been discussed is that Annabella’s bloody letter in *'Tis Pity* “invokes a long theatrical tradition that includes Bel-imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*” (Lomax 177), and that *Bussy D’Ambois*’s Tamyra writes a bloody letter that “has a theatrical lineage reaching back to Bel-imperia’s bloody letter in *The Spanish Tragedy*” (Kiefer 1996, 144).

9 In an article addressing the use of rubrics in Early Modern texts, Bianca Calabresi argues that “When blood on the page is gendered as female, the body from which it is imagined as emerging is correspondingly read according to certain social regulations…as insufficiently ‘singular’, as dangerously in circulation, as a social object that resists categorization or methods of ordering” (239). This is a familiar argument that too much subsumes historical context in contemporary theory. While Calabresi’s notions of dangerous circulation and resistance to categorization may be applied to Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters, they should not be so uniformly applied in the negative. As described in this chapter, it is precisely in their disruptive circulation and difficult classification that these letters’ potentially redemptive power lies.
writing initiates his fall, Kyd’s, Chapman’s, and Ford’s characters write their letters only after they have begun to see the danger for others in their illicit behaviour.

In their use of bloody letters, Kyd, Chapman, and Ford indicate their familiarity with the same tradition of religious blood-writing which Marlowe drew upon in his construction of Faustus and his covenant. Faustus’s contract, and therefore these female characters’ writings, echo the Charter of Christ tradition, which is predicated on the sacrifice, in both literal and textualized terms, of the testator, Christ. The Charters (see Figs. 2.2 and 2.3 in section IV of this chapter) were medieval pamphlets written in red ink but which claimed to be written by Christ himself, literally in his own blood. These pamphlets, which remained widely read and disseminated throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, feature Christ’s first person narration of his death at the hands of the faithless, and a reiteration of his relationship with humanity and its inheritance of heaven following a Christian life well lived. The Charters functioned, in other words, like a contract between Christ and humanity; Faustus’s bloody contract with Lucifer can thus be seen as a satanic inversion thereof. Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s bloody letters, on the other hand, signal not only their repentance but also their deaths, either literal or figurative. This fact suggests that “The scene of writing...is always associated with violence” and that “the body and its natural life are menaced by writing” (Goldberg 1990, 69, 98). This connection between death and writing would seem to ensure the writers’ confinement “within a regulated scriptive domain” (Goldberg 1990, 59), in which attempts at subjective expression would necessarily be quashed. In spite of its associations with vulnerability, however, writing in blood exists firmly at the
intersection between the physical and the spiritual, and so has significance beyond “the body and its natural life.”

Indeed, as C.L. Barber points out, “The identification of [Faustus’s] blood with his soul (a very common traditional idea) is underscored by the fact that the blood congeals as he is about to write ‘gives to thee his soule’” (117). Early English Protestants believed the Bible was both literally and figuratively signed and sealed with Christ’s blood (Stott 34), and so Faustus’s contract appears to be blasphemous. Indeed, the crux of Faustus’s blasphemy appears to be located in the fact that his contract “clearly resembles an inverted Charter of Christ, a popular late-medieval convention, poetic and prose versions of which are extant in fifteenth-, sixteenth-, and even seventeenth-century manuscripts, in which Christ writes with his own blood a charter presenting the terms of humankind’s inheritance of heaven” (Galloway 36). As in the Charters, Faustus writes “from ‘þe enke of hys wounde’” and then “seals the pact with Christ’s dying words;” he also “echoes the words Christ uses in most English versions of the Charter to seal his bill: ‘Consummatum est þis chartre es done’” (Galloway 36, 37). In contrast, Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters, in a less sensational but more complicated way, re-enact Christ’s sacrifice as imagined in the Charters of Christ. These characters attempt, with varying degrees of success and consciousness, to provide those around them with

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10 As Johannes Birringer argues, Faustus’s act of “writing himself over to the Devil...looks like a subversive parody of Christ’s obedient fulfillment of his role” (338), while Barber points out that Faustus “seals his bargain by performing in effect a black mass—by giving his blood and testament instead of receiving Christ’s” (114). Further, by speaking aloud the phrase “Consummatum est” and signing his contract therewith, Faustus is arguably blasphemy “because these are the words of Christ on the Cross (John 19.30)” (Norton, I, v.74, n.6).

11 This “explicit Christological element[, the reference to the Charter of Christ, is] suggested nowhere in the E[nglish] F[aust] B[ook]” (Galloway 36) (Marlowe’s primary source for Doctor Faustus), so we may imagine Marlowe and Kyd in some undeterminable instance of creative cooperation claiming a tradition of Christian blood writing to striking dramatic effect. While Marlowe’s play must have influenced Kyd’s (or vice versa), neither can be read as merely derivative of the other.
the Christ-like “grant[s] of Heaven’s bliss…made to mankind by the Saviour” (Spalding vii) that define the Charters. In the Charters, Christ functions both “as the sacrificial victim slain…to confirm the covenant with mankind” and as “the testator who grants a charter to man as his dying bequest” (Spalding xlii). Most of the extant Charters (both short and long) explain their function thus:

Ihesus Christ his Charter great  
That blood & water so did sweat  
And had his Heart I-wounded sore  
To saue Mankinde for euermore  
Christ hath cancelled the writt of Mans dett  
And by this Charter him free hath sett[.] (Spalding 4)

The Charter also explains how it has been created through Christ’s crucifixion, which is both the occasion for and the site for the writing of the covenant. The Long Charter describes how Christ’s body is scourged in ways resembling the act of putting pen to parchment:

Hyreþ now & ʒe shul wyten  
How þis charter was wryten  
Vpon my face was made þe ynke  
With Iewes spotel on me to stynke  
Þe penne þat þe letteres was with wryten  
Of scorges þat I was with smyten[.] (Spalding 27)

This torture is both a text imposed upon Christ and his own writing that will save humankind; because the Jews “Ne myȝt þey fynd no parchemyne / ffor to laste wyþ-oute fine[,]” Christ his “owne skyn y tok þer-to / To gete my frendes y ȝafgood mede” (Spalding 23-25).

Christ’s sacrifice is consistently linked with the textuality of salvation as represented and offered in the Charters, so much so that textuality seems to become integral to salvation rather than simply its medium. This conflation of the sacrificed body
and the saving text, in the Charters, is especially complex because at different points throughout both the long and short versions of the text, Christ’s sacrifice is alternately something he writes on his own body and something inflicted on him by his torturers. On the one hand, Christ is represented as choosing his sacrifice purposefully for humankind’s benefit:

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But for to yeue þe had y no more
ffor thy soule that was for-lore
Then my-selfe to yeue for the
That for the dyed vpon a tree
Vpon a thursday a soper y made
To frende & foo to make þem gladd
Of bredd and wyne the sacrament
ffor euyr to be my testament
whych ys my flesche & my blode
To them þat leuen in mylde mode
And tho þat dyen owt of charyte
Ther damnacioun for euyr to bee
Here wold y my wordes yow teche[..]  (Spalding 55)
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On the other hand, Christ is victimized and the text imposed upon his body; nonetheless, the text his body both becomes and makes possible is his entirely and solely to bestow upon humankind:

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And so ij stoode boundene al þat nyghte
Tyl one þe morowe þat it was daye lyghte
Strayned well herde vppone A tre
As parchemente myghte to be
heryth nowe And 5e schul wetyne
how thys charture was wretyn
Vppone myne hede A crowne þey sett
thornes thorowe myn brayne þei mette
The pennes þat þe letteres wretyn
Werene scourges þat I was wyt smetene
how many lettyrs there-one bene
Rede and þoue maye wete & seene[..]  (Spalding 58)
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The paradox that defines Christ’s sacrifice in the Charters is the same paradox of writing and intentionality that defines the bloody letters in *The Spanish Tragedy, Bussy*
D’Ambois, and *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. That is, the female characters peopling these Renaissance texts are representatives of subjectivity under physical and social constraint who nonetheless use that constraint precisely to assert their subjective power both over their own bodies and over the texts they write. The interdependence of constraint and assertion of self, of subjectivity and objectivity, is crucial to Christ’s covenant and Charters, as well as to Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters.

Further, the Charter form of the medieval texts is easily translated into the epistolary in Renaissance drama because of the way in which the Charters function as personal communications; Charters represent and embody personal communication at the same time that they gesture towards larger social relationships and not necessarily only those addressed directly in the letters, just as in the majority of drama foregrounding letters during the period. As Emily Steiner points out, the Charters were by their nature inviting of translation into forms beyond their original form: “as the Charters of Christ literature suggests, documentary culture, when translated into the vernacular [as the Charters were], provided an intergeneric framework that might be stretched to accommodate an astonishing variety of spiritual, political, and literary agendas” (194). In the case of the plays I examine in this chapter, there is a multiplicity of agendas inspiring the penning and dissemination of bloody epistles; these include the spiritual, the political, and the literary, but the foregrounding of the subjectivity behind the text is what ties these all together. The combination of letters and religion, especially as examined through the liminal position of the feminine, provides ample opportunity for exploring the nature of the subject—for in this period, they are all considered in some way either essentially unknowable or representative of something unknowable. As Katharine Eisaman Maus
points out, “Christianity suggests a variety of analogues to the difficult social tasks of intersubjective understanding. The hidden Christian God provides a prototype of the invisible object of knowledge comprehended but partially through visible works” (1995, 8). This limited comprehension is part and parcel of trying to gain knowledge through the written word of another for, in letters especially, words are intended to convey truth or experience, yet they deny the reader’s participation in, and therefore real knowledge of, the conveyed experience and the conditions of authorship. I would suggest that it is thus that writing mirrors religious truth and what explains the appeal of the writing image in the Charters of Christ. It is also what complicates a purely sensationalist reading of Kyd’s, Chapman’s, and Ford’s use of blood letters in their plays. Maus continues: “Renaissance religious culture…nurtures habits of mind that encourage conceiving of human inwardness, like other truths, as at once privileged and elusive, an absent presence ‘interpreted’ to observers by ambiguous inklings and tokens” (1995, 11)—ambiguous tokens like letters, written in blood. To the extent that Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters invoke the Charters of Christ they also invoke a complex and only partially conceivable inwardness beyond the purview of those who would observe and control them.

These characters occupy a strange position in relation to this tradition of bloody writing, the worth of which is cemented specifically through the testator’s death: not only do Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella re-enact Christ’s sacrifice in their own destructions, but they are also the ones to do the sacrificing insofar as they knowingly place themselves directly in harm’s way through the writing and distribution of their letters. As subjects emerging from the margins, they threaten social order in order to re-
establish it on better terms. Yet, they are revealed as subjects only to be destroyed, destruction which speaks to both the culture’s and individuals’ ambiguous feelings about human subjectivity and the possible agency, desire, and authority it implies. Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s positions reflect shifting cultural identities and relations resulting from the emergence of Protestantism. The surviving Charters of Christ span England’s move away from the one faith of Catholicism to a fragmented faith precipitated by Henry VIII, and bloody writing in other forms continued to be celebrated as powerfully spiritual in literature during this transition. Of particular interest is the late example of George Herbert’s The Temple, which strikingly reiterates Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s motivations, struggles, and the suffering resulting from penning bloody letters. Herbert constructs The Temple on the same model of the contract between humankind and Christ that epitomizes the Charters:

Christopher hands, though nail’d, wrought our salvation,
............................................................................................................
His drops of blood paid the full price,
That was requir’d to make us gay,
And fit for Paradise. (“Sunday” 48; 54-56)

Herbert also emphasizes the mutuality of the Christ-human blood contract in

“Obedience”:

On [this paper] my heart doth bleed
As many lines, as there doth need
To pass it self and all it hath to thee,
To which I do agree,
And here present it as my special deed. (6-10)

In spite of their differences in ideology and purpose, Doctor Faustus, The Spanish Tragedy, Bussy D’Ambois, ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore, and The Temple all reveal, through the sacred language and images that define the Charters, that the regular, fallen, human
being can imitate Christ’s covenant. What then separates Faustus from Kyd’s, Chapman’s, and Ford’s characters, or from Herbert? I suggest that the difference rests in the causes to which they sacrifice themselves. Herbert’s devout life is well enough known and need not be described here.\(^{12}\) Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella use their bloody letters to sacrifice themselves, not to their baser instincts as Faustus does, but to ideas and people they see as superior to themselves. Like Herbert, the three heroines struggle with their inescapable humanness; yet, as Herbert suggests, this struggle is born of a profound hopefulness and nascent faith in an abstract but divine “good”:

\begin{quote}
I am both foul and brittle; much unfit  
To deal in holy Writ. 

Yet have I often seen, by cunning hand  
And force of fire, what curious things are made  
Of wretched earth. (“The Priesthood” 11-15)
\end{quote}

This sense of possibility in the face of humanity’s essential imperfection leads Herbert to pose the question central to our understanding of the dramatic letter-writers, and of course, \textit{The Temple}: “But how then shall I imitate thee, and / Copy thy fair, though bloody hand?” (“The Thanksgiving” 15-16). These lines ask how a sinful mortal can function as both the creator of a new testament and as Christ’s secretary, and how one can possibly replicate a text of salvation which has already been written; that these questions are asked at all, I suggest, reveals not a sense of despair, but rather the writer’s hope that such imitation is somehow truly possible.\(^{13}\)


\(^{13}\) Claudine Raynaud argues that such poetic moments betray spiritual presumption bordering on arrogance in Herbert, citing “the impossibility of a literal sacrifice of the speaker which would equal Christ’s and, on the other hand...the presumption of rivaling the sacred text” (39). Raynaud then claims that Herbert proposes to “re-place the Redeemer as agent, free-willing victim, and in so doing, he dis-places the Redeemer to that of Writer” [sic] (44). But Raynaud misses Herbert’s point. Herbert imagines upholding
It is this combination of necessity and possibility that makes the question—“how then shall I imitate thee, and / Copy thy fair, though bloody hand?”—so significant. In spite of the chaos in which they find themselves and to which they contribute, Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s letters reflect their earnestness to repair those situations. Perhaps more importantly, their letters also represent spiritual and psychic conversions that become possible as the result of even imperfect attempts to affect social reparation. Even though “Protestant England had turned away from visual language in worship...on the stage the visual signs of religion retained their power” (Leggatt 57); thus, Renaissance audiences would likely have understood the letters as related to Christ’s Covenant. However, as Frederic Jameson argues, “in its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form” (140-41). While the Charters infuse the letters with religious meaning, the demonism explored in Doctor Faustus also necessarily remains and threatens to at least partially destabilize the positive religious meaning present in dramatic portrayals of bloody letter-writing.

Further, as with any symbol frequently and powerfully deployed, blood letters were also parodied. In Cynthia’s Revels, Ben Jonson portrays bloody epistle-writing as the mutual bargain made in the blood covenant, not usurping divine power. In his discussion of “The Thanksgiving,” Robert Watson gets closer to this sense of mutuality in Herbert’s poetry: “The speaker finds apt ways to repay (often through writing) several of the blessings that Christ so painfully won for him, but each response falls two syllables short of paying its metrical debt; and in the end the speaker must be simultaneously saved and defeated by the Passionate sacrifice which no mortal can reciprocate, since we have no immortality to abjure” (289). Watson correctly identifies the contractual obligation between Christ and Man as laid out in Herbert’s poems, but simply to stress the metrical failure as representative of human failure is to ignore the fact that it is precisely this human imperfection that makes the blood covenant both necessary and possible.
mere self-indulgence through Philautia’s enumeration of the pains she wants suitors to suffer on her behalf:

I would…let…this gallant express himself in dumb gaze; another with sighing and rubbing his fingers; a third with play-ends and pitiful verses; a fourth with stabbing himself and drinking healths, or writing languishing letters in his blood. (53-54)

Jonson’s cynical reference to bloody love letters is more fully developed in Thomas Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the Exchange*. Phyllis is beloved of brothers Anthony, Ferdinand, and Frank. Ferdinand writes Phyllis a letter in his own blood to emphasize the sincerity of his intentions (ll. 979-81), but is doomed to fail because Frank is wiliier than he is in making epistolary advances. Not only does Frank write love letters to Phyllis, but he also ensures that she does not receive Ferdinand’s bloody letters at all. The only characters who achieve their desires in this play are those who can control others’ discourses (that they can also control their own is oddly secondary). In Jonson’s and Heywood’s plays, blood writing, in spite of either its religious resonances or the sincerity fuelling its creation, is as susceptible to counterfeit, theft, and misunderstanding as any other kind of writing. Associated as they are with the Charters of Christ and the attendant sacrifice and possible redemption, bloody epistles function as symbols of the fragility of written discourse to convey a subject’s intentions—paradoxically, however, it is through this fragility that parodic and serious representations of blood writing to some extent come together. While Jonson and Heywood mock the vulnerability and potential meaninglessness of the subject’s discursive creations and actions, Kyd, Chapman, and Ford explore the tragic consequences of such dismissals and potential losses.

Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s bloody letters embody the “conflict between the older deep-structural form and the contemporary materials and generic
systems in which [they] seek[] to inscribe and reassert [themselves]” (Jameson 141). Further, their letters exemplify Jameson’s view that “the text as a socially symbolic act, as the ideological...[is a] response to a historical dilemma” (138-39). In these fictions of women writing letters in their own blood, there are two different but interdependent “dilemmas” being worked out. The first is dramatic: the female characters write their letters to define themselves as subjects and to save others from the moral corruption in which they flounder, blood being both representative of interiority and related to Christian redemption. The second dilemma relates directly to the English Renaissance world out of which these plays were produced. Kyd, Chapman, and Ford engage with issues of subjectivity’s social dangerousness and restorative potential by conflating into single figures the marginalized female writer and the writer of the redemptive blood covenant. As a religious icon, Christ exists in a complex dichotomy: he is both powerful and powerless, both subject and object. He is at once a powerful subject sacrificing himself to save others and an object, sacrificed like a lamb according to the whims of others. The idea of the sacrificial lamb also reflects the space of women: the lamb symbolizes innocence, purity, and powerlessness, and is ultimately sacrificed by more powerful men. Likewise, women in the period were objectified (most obviously and literally as property), they were understood as delicate (the “weaker vessels”), and their virginity was symbolic of purity and innocence—and to a lesser extent, they too could be disposed of according to the desires of their androcentric culture.

At the point of sacrifice, however, there is a key departure between the role of woman and that of Christ as lamb-of-God: the Christ figure is sacrificed as a redemptive act for humankind’s sins, whereas Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, and Annabella’s sacrifices
are consequential—they are sacrificed as the result of their sins, even though their letters are written to varying degrees towards redemptive agendas. What is important to note when considering Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella is that their attempts to realize themselves in the subject/object dichotomy by writing in their own blood are necessarily incomplete, for they ultimately find themselves to be understood only as consequential sacrifices rather than redemptive ones. These letters are intensely personal productions, both in terms of the circumstances and materials of production. Yet, other characters consistently deny the connection between the letter and the writer specifically in terms of the existence of female subjectivity and the female subject having an active role in the workings of their societies. As such, these characters exemplify the work Summit argues the idea of the “woman writer” performs in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance: they give “shape to the question of what it meant to write from a position of estrangement from tradition” (7), a question which, she argues, was asked principally by male English writers. Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella exemplify male authors’ concerns about the relationship between authorship and identity; they also, however, necessarily stand as important figures in another related debate about the relationship between gender and subjectivity.

II

Thomas Kyd’s *The First Part of Hieronimo* and *The Spanish Tragedy* “were probably the most popular and influential of Elizabethan plays” (Cairncross xii), but despite this, *The Spanish Tragedy* especially was the subject of fairly widespread parody throughout the early Renaissance. We must then recall Jameson’s discussion of how past and present generic incarnations inflect one another; not only did Jonson famously
parody Hieronimo’s grief for his dead son, but he also parodied Kyd’s bloody letter, perhaps indirectly, in Cynthia’s Revels. Indeed, there are elements of The Spanish Tragedy which suggest that Kyd himself is parodying blood writing even as he establishes it as central to our understanding of the play’s tragic action. Reading The Spanish Tragedy then becomes difficult—what is the nature of its tragedy? Is Bel-imperia the play’s only hope for redemption? Or, is she a sad joke about Spain’s chances for transcending its own moral depravity? After all, when The Spanish Tragedy was first written and performed, audiences were often reminded “from pulpit, pamphlet, and ballad that Spain was bad because of the Roman Church, and that the Roman Church was bad because it had rejected Christ’s new dispensation” (Justice 287). Kyd’s choice to use a bloody letter then is remarkably pointed. The medieval Charters of Christ, which Bel-imperia’s epistle calls to mind, were written from the era of late Catholicism through to early Protestantism in England without either losing cultural currency or having their purpose altered. Because of this, I would argue that the Spanish setting in which Bel-imperia’s bloody writing is situated signals her as pointedly different from her male contemporaries. Considered in light of the Charter of Christ tradition, her bloody letter’s failure, and her complex motives for writing it, Bel-imperia appears both ridiculous for attempting the impossible (establishing her status as a subject and agent, and attempting to redeem, in a very particular way, her corrupt society), but also admirable for undertaking such an impossible attempt. Thus, the tragedy of the play resides not only in Spanish society’s inability to heed an opportunity for a different approach to justice, but also in its need immediately to contain those who attempt to transcend the social roles created for them. In this play, these two failures are focused in Spain’s refusal to take
seriously the values it codes as feminine, values enacted through Bel-imperia’s transformation, her attempt to inspire in Hieronimo a more than usually peaceful retribution for Horatio’s death, and her ultimate self-sacrifice.

In Kyd’s Spanish plays, blood, writing, and revenge are consistently linked, and this linkage begins in *The First Part of Hieronimo* when Balthazar challenges Andrea:

I bind thee, Don Andrea, by thy honor,
Thy valiancy, and all that thou hold’st great,
To meet me single in the battle’s heat,
Where I’ll set down, in characters on thy flesh,
Four precious lines, spoke by our father’s mouth,
When first thou cam’st ambassador; these they are:
“’Tis said we shall not answer at next birth
Our fathers’ faults in heaven, why then on earth?
Which proves and shows that what they lost by base
captivity,
We may redeem with wonted valiancy.” (*1 Hieronimo* x.83-92)

Balthazar not only links bloody writing and death via personal ambition and aristocratic honour, but he also rejects spiritual accountability. Even familial devotion is validated only insofar as it gives Balthazar something to “set down” in Andrea’s skin when he kills him. The inscription of mortal wounds Andrea receives also becomes indelibly linked with deception and injustice because just as Andrea is about to kill Balthazar fairly in one-to-one combat, “Portugales [enter who] relieve Balthazar and kill Andrea” (xi.106).

The relationship between blood, death, and writing established in *The First Part of Hieronimo*, and the presences of the Ghost of Andrea and Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*, suggest that ending the bloodshed in Kyd’s Spain will be next to impossible. As well, *The Spanish Tragedy*’s first characterizations of Bel-imperia do not suggest that she is either willing or able to consider alternative responses to violence.14 Meeting

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14 Rather than simply the practice of depraved characters, the shedding of blood is a legal institution in Kyd’s Spain. When Pedringano is duped by Lorenzo into confessing his crimes, Hieronimo responds
Horatio upon his return from Portugal, Bel-imperia expresses the appropriately feminine grief for Andrea, proclaiming, “his death hath buried my delights” (I.iv.5). In an aside, however, she is more honest:

Yet what avails to wail Andrea’s death,  
From whence Horatio proves my second love?  
Had he not loved Andrea as he did,  
He could not sit in Bel-imperia’s thoughts.  
But how can love find harbour in my breast,  
Till I revenge the death of my beloved?  
Yes, second love shall further my revenge.  
I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend,  
The more to spite the prince that wrought his end. (I.iv.60-68)

Bel-imperia’s thirst for vengeance and willingness to use Horatio’s feelings to this end place her in the same bloody league as Balthazar.

Yet, Bel-imperia’s brief relationship with Horatio transforms her. Horatio’s association with Christ’s sacrifice has been well discussed but is worth noting again because it defines Kyd’s construction of Bel-imperia. Horatio’s hanging in the arbour and the multiple stab wounds he receives iconographically re-enact Christ’s sacrifice, as do his father’s exclamations upon finding him. Further, Horatio is the only character in this play who can properly be considered an innocent; his sweet naiveté is often contrasted with other characters’ bitterness, vengefulness, and calculating tendencies. At the beginning of her relationship with this innocent young man, Bel-imperia is herself calculating, bitter, and vengeful; yet, a radical shift in her motives and language occurs when she makes plans to meet him in Hieronimo’s arbour. She expresses relief in having Horatio’s love, describing it “as th’only port, / Wherein my heart, with fears and hopes

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15 It has been noted that hanging Horatio in the arbour re-enacts “Christ’s death upon a tree” (Lomax 40), and that “Horatio, like Christ, is hung ‘on a tree’ and Isabella, like the Virgin Mary, embraces the wounded body beneath it” (Erne 25-26, n.22).
long tossed, / Each hour doth wish and long to make resort” (II.ii.12-14). The possibility of finding a space of peace to inhabit in Spain’s blood-drenched court is reiterated in the lovers’ sexy inversion of the terms of war and love:

BEL-IMPERIA
Let dangers go, thy war shall be with me,
But such a war as breaks no bond of peace.
Speak thou fair words, I’ll cross them with fair words;
Send thou sweet looks, I’ll meet them with sweet looks;
Write loving lines, I’ll answer loving lines;
Give me a kiss, I’ll countercheck thy kiss:
Be this our warring peace, or peaceful war.

HORATIO
But gracious madam, then appoint the field
Where trial of this war shall first be made. (II.ii.32-40)

Bel-imperia appoints Horatio’s “father’s pleasant bower” precisely because it is “safe” (II.ii.42;44); like the Garden of Eden, the arbour functions as a space of confined yet still essentially vulnerable purity.

In the bower, Bel-imperia reveals how her relationship with Horatio has altered her. Although she experiences a premonition of doom as they enter, she believes her servant Pedringano is “as trusty as my second self” (II.iv.9)—but he is the one who betrays the lovers to Lorenzo and Balthazar. When the predators attack, Bel-imperia tries to save Horatio’s life at the expense of her own: “O save his life and let me die for him! / O save him, brother, save him, Balthazar: / I loved Horatio, but he loved not me” (II.iv.56-58). Realizing that her pleas are in vain, she exposes herself, her brother, and the Portuguese prince to scandal by trying to awaken her lover’s father: “Murder! murder! Help, Hieronimo, help!” (II.iv.62). Bel-imperia’s sudden willingness to die both physically and socially for Horatio (as he would have died for Andrea) is just one of several indications that she has taken on Horatio’s sacrificial role. Kyd further
strengthens her association with Horatio by having Hieronimo confuse her voice with his son’s:

...it was some woman cried for help,
And here within this garden did she cry,
And in this garden must I rescue her.
But stay, what murderous spectacle is this? (II.v.6-9).

Realizing that the “murderous spectacle” is his son, Hieronimo cries,

Alas, it is Horatio, my sweet son!
Oh no, but he that whilom was my son.
O was it thou that calledst me from my bed?
O speak, if any spark of life remain:
I am thy father. Who hath slain my son? (II.v.14-18)

The repetition of “son” in tandem with Hieronimo’s emphasis on the father-son relationship both echoes and reinforces Kyd’s dramatic “transfer” of Horatio’s sacrificial role to Bel-imperia.

The iconographic connections Kyd makes between Horatio and Bel-imperia are made even more explicit in the woodcut on the cover of both the 1615 and 1633 quartos of The Spanish Tragedy (Fig. 2.1):

Fig. 2.1 Woodcut from cover of 1615 quarto of The Spanish Tragedy
What is striking about this woodcut is how similar Horatio and Bel-imperia appear. Both look towards the right-hand side of the panel, and their eyes, mouths, noses, eyebrows, and doublets are identical. Their bodily stances differ only insofar as Horatio’s head and arms sink limply to earth, while Bel-imperia’s are pulled forward by Lorenzo as he threatens her. Hieronimo’s role as moral centre in Kyd’s play is destabilized in this woodcut because it shows him mirroring Lorenzo’s posture: like Lorenzo, Hieronimo brandishes his sword in his right hand and his clothing and physical stance are similar to the murderer’s. Hieronimo’s association with Lorenzo is somewhat mitigated, however, by the cross his two hand-held objects form. The roles and relationships portrayed in this woodcut epitomize, though somewhat simplistically, the essence of the play: there is much to doubt in Hieronimo as critics have acknowledged, but Bel-imperia is more complex and important to our understanding of the play than has hitherto been recognized. Bel-imperia’s complexity as revealed in the woodcut and lines quoted above is focused most intensely in her relationship with Horatio and thus by extension in her relationship with Hieronimo. There is certainly much to question about Hieronimo’s choices. However, while Hieronimo is not responsible for sacrificing his innocent son, his status as the human representative of law in Spain is, via heavily Christianized language and imagery, reflective of God’s role as arbiter of spiritual law and his son’s sacrifice thereto. Bel-imperia has been carefully associated with Horatio as that sacrificed son here, and this sacrifice is re-echoed when Hieronimo, ostensibly inadvertently, enables and participates in Bel-imperia’s mortal sacrifice during the production of Solimon and Perseda.
Bel-imperia thus occupies two contradictory roles, and this defines and complicates the bloody letter she writes to Hieronimo. It is her relationship with Horatio that transforms Bel-imperia and it is this moral transformation that makes her capable of writing the bloody letter. Yet, the point at which she sufficiently transcends her past and her society’s murderous values to write this letter is also the point at which her letter-writing becomes doomed to fail. As the key to Spain’s reconciliation with Portugal through her arranged marriage to Balthazar, Bel-imperia is in a precarious position—she tries twice to assert her right to choose her own lover, and both times her lovers are murdered. Yet, the Spanish fail to force Bel-imperia to marry Balthazar to strengthen Spain’s “late-confirmed league” with Portugal (II.iii.11), and so imprison her instead.

Bel-imperia’s confinement reveals that she has been thrust back into the role of pawn in a high-stakes game played by men—as Stephen Justice aptly notes, “There is only one Bel-Imperia no matter how many men cannot live without her” (280). The male characters’ language and behaviour indicate that they view Bel-imperia only as an object: the Spanish King’s bestowal of her upon Balthazar is likened to offering “myrrh or incense to the offended heavens” (III.xii.43). Whoever owns her determines if Spain and Portugal become either friendly or destroy one another.

There are two aspects of her confinement that enable Bel-imperia to write the bloody letter and then to undermine its redemptive potential. First, “For want of ink” she writes in her own blood (III.ii.26), but while the power of Christ’s covenant rests in his absolute willingness to sacrifice himself, Bel-imperia’s readiness to self-sacrifice seems to disappear in the face of Lorenzo’s and Balthazar’s abuse. Their violent re-insertion of Bel-imperia into the role of female-as-object seems to erase all that changed in her as the
result of her relationship with Horatio; indeed, instead of revealing mankind’s inheritance of heaven in the peaceful but bloody rhetoric of the new covenant, her letter preaches vengeance:

Revenge thyself on Balthazar and [Lorenzo],
For these were they that murderéd thy son.
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio’s death,
And better fare than Bel-imperia doth. (III.i.28-30)

Her brief transformation into a salvific figure results from her assertions of her own desires but when forced to reoccupy the role of the helpless female, Bel-imperia has no recourse but to return to her role as hapless avenger. At the same time, however, by being pushed back into the role of helpless woman, Bel-imperia is, ironically, inserted into the role of sacrifice; initially, it was her choice to help Horatio that made the sacrifice meaningful, but resorting to her own blood as ink amplifies this meaning because this is a common stratagem of martyrs whom prison keepers refuse to provide with regular writing implements (see Coats 67). The meaning and worth of Bel-imperia’s letter appear for the moment to be indeterminable.

The redemptive potential of Bel-imperia’s bloody letter is further confused when, discovering Horatio’s corpse, Isabella asks “O where’s the author of this endless woe?” (II.v.39). Receiving no answer about who has killed her son, she tries to take solace in

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16 Here and in the following discussion of George Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois*, the word “author” presents repeatedly in the quotations from these Renaissance plays. In the introduction to this dissertation, I distinguished between the “author” as the creator of published texts who holds responsibility for their works and who maintains a social investment in being associated with the texts they produce; I defined a “writer,” on the other hand, as someone who pens a text but does not intend it for publication or an audience beyond a few people—letters, in other words, are generally written, while plays and romances in which characters are featured as writing letters are authored.

These words were used rather more interchangeably during the English Renaissance than they are now with “writer” being commonly defined from the late 9th to the late 19th century as “One who writes, compiles, or produces a literary composition; the composer of a book or treatise; a literary man or author” (*OED*). Similarly, “author” was used from the 14th until the 19th century to describe an almost equivalent person and their actions: “One who sets forth written statements; the composer or writer of a treatise or book” (*OED*).
the notion that “The heavens are just, murder cannot be hid: / Time is the author both of truth and right, / And time will bring this treachery to light” (II.v.57-59). Isabella unconsciously exposes the other crucial aspect of Bel-imperia’s dramatic identity: Horatio’s and Bel-imperia’s roles are, as C. L. Barber has pointed out, “shaped by religious prototypes” (152); thus, the same lovemaking scenes that signal Bel-imperia’s metamorphosis into a salvific figure also reveal her to be a kind of Judas figure. She is in part responsible for Horatio’s death. Her naiveté about the world in which she lives (her last lover was murdered, after all) implicates Bel-imperia in her second lover’s demise when she makes plans to meet him in a space public enough for them to be overheard (II.ii.6). They are overheard, but in fact it is her kisses that confirm what Pedringano discovers in her love letters to Horatio (II.vi.78-86), and those kisses mark Horatio for death.

Yet, in spite of her culpability, Bel-imperia’s letter still has spiritual value—value revealed in Hieronimo’s most anguished lament for having failed to secure justice for his son’s death:

O sacred heavens! if this unhallowed deed,  
If this inhuman and barbarous attempt,  
If this incomparable murder thus  
Of mine, but now no more my son,  
Shall unrevealed and unrevenge’d pass,  
How should we term your dealings to be just,  
If you unjustly deal with those that in your justice trust? (III.ii.5-11)

In this scene in *The Spanish Tragedy*, and in the torture scene between Tamyra and Montsurry in *Bussy D’Ambois*, Kyd and Chapman both use “author” instead of “writer” because of the former’s broader range of meanings; during the period, “author” also meant “The person who originates or gives existence to anything,” “The Creator,” and “He who gives rise to or causes an action, event, circumstance, state, or condition of things” (*OED*)—meanings which reflect the characters referred to as authors overstepping their boundaries of normal influence and affecting the lives of others. I note these things to distinguish my use of the terms against Kyd’s and Chapman’s use of “author,” but also to note that the action of writing/authoring was laden with notions as complex as the ones we use now, although somewhat different.
Hieronimo’s growing doubt in God is given a stunning check, however, when, calling for a sign, he receives an immediate response:

Eyes, life, world, heaven, hell, night, and day,
See, search, show, send some man, some mean, that may –
A letter falleth
What’s here? a letter? tush, it is not so!
A letter written to Hieronimo!

[Reads] ‘For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.
Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee:
Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him,
For these were they that murdered thy son.
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio’s death,
And better fare than Bel-imperia doth.’
What means this unexpected miracle? (III.ii.22-32)

Justice argues that “Hieronimo’s tragedy is not so much that of a man who makes the wrong choice as that of a man to whom the right choice is unavailable” (278). In fact, Hieronimo is given ample evidence to pursue justice for his son’s murder but he “consistently misinterprets the written messages placed before him” (Cutts 149). Bel-imperia clearly implicates Balthazar and Lorenzo, so Hieronimo cannot be said simply to misinterpret—he ignores and disbelieves the letter, even though he acknowledges its timely arrival as miraculous. Indeed, his failure to act is his failure, not Bel-imperia’s, even if the inheritance of heaven that should define Christ’s blood covenant has been degraded into an inheritance of facts and a call forbloody justice. Hieronimo rejects the truth Bel-imperia conveys for justice’s sake in favour of truth conveyed out of spite and vengeance, which he receives through Pedringano’s confession in a gallows epistle (III.vii.49-56).

Many opportunities for justice pass Hieronimo by, but the most strikingly fatal consequence of his disbelief in Bel-imperia’s letter and hesitation to act upon it is his wife’s descent into madness and eventual suicide. The last time Isabella appears on
stage, she destroys the arbour in which Horatio was murdered; this destruction signals her complete loss of faith in heavenly justice, and reflects Spain’s irrevocable descent into hellish chaos. Her language in this scene is apocalyptic:

Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs
Of this unfortunate and fatal pine:

I will not leave a root, a stalk, a tree,
A bough, a branch, a blossom, nor a leaf,
No, not an herb within this garden-plot.
Accursed complot of my misery,
Fruitless for ever may this garden be!
Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever
Imagines not to keep it unmanured!

The earth with serpents shall be pestered[.] (IV.ii.6-19)

The beauty associated with Bel-imperia and Horatio’s lovemaking in the bower is destroyed, and it is not coincidental that Isabella’s despair and death coincide with Hieronimo’s decision to produce Solimon and Perseda. Hieronimo’s play reveals that while he initially does not trust Bel-imperia’s letter, he ultimately rejects what it stands for anyway. Preaching vengeance, Bel-imperia’s letter nonetheless does so in a limited and articulate fashion—she clearly lays out where responsibility for Horatio’s death lies and encourages Hieronimo, as per his official station, to avenge only his son’s death; she does not ask him to act violently according to his general sense of injustice and corruption in Spain. Hieronimo, instead of heeding Bel-imperia’s words, rejects both restraint and dialogue, a rejection signaled by four things: 1) his decision to use the “handkercher besmeared with blood”\(^\text{17}\) found on Horatio’s body instead of the bloody

\(^{17}\) Marion Lomax points out that the bloody napkin Hieronimo removes from his son’s body “may be traced, in the drama, back to representations of the Holy Shroud or the Veronica napkin in medieval religious plays” (34). Molly Smith notes that the handkerchief also “recalls a conventional practice at hangings and executions; onlookers frequently dipped their handkerchiefs in the blood of the victim which was believed to carry curative and divine powers” (225). Andrew Hadfield, on the other hand, argues that
letter as inspiration to “take revenge” (II.v.51; 52); 2) his decision to present a play which, in its presentation in “unknown languages,” will “be a mere confusion” (IV.i.173; 180); 3) the reduction, via Solimon and Perseda, of all other characters into mere role-players directed by a madman who has rejected God; 4) his biting out of his own tongue and stabbing of the innocent Duke of Castile.

Bel-imperia is strangely situated in relation to Hieronimo’s reliance on dumb murder instead of an articulate and focused quest for justice. As has been noted, she is transformed from a scheming and vengeful woman into one who is an independent agent who must also be sacrificed, but is then forced back into the role of scheming female pawn in men’s political games. Indeed, she ultimately appears incapable of thinking outside the role assigned her, as Hieronimo laments her suicide during the performance of Solimon and Perseda:

Poor Bel-imperia missed her part in this:
For though the story saith she should have died,
Yet I of kindness, and of care to her,
Did otherwise determine of her end;
But love of whom they did hate too much
Did urge her resolution to be such. (IV.iv.140-45)

Hieronimo would have Bel-imperia remembered as a horrifyingly passive and obedient figure akin to Anne Frankford in Heywood’s A Woman Killed with Kindness. But Bel-imperia’s suicide at the conclusion of Solimon and Perseda is rather more complicated

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Hieronimo’s “decision to take action into his own hands is a sign of his own state of spiritual malaise...[and]...dipping his handkerchief in his son’s blood and promising grim revenge traps him within a pagan world” (1999, 197). Although I agree with Lomax and Smith about the presence of religious imagery in this scene, I am more persuaded by Hadfield’s interpretation: Hieronimo finds neither redemption nor relief from his pain in his excessive vengeance inspired by this bloody token.
than simple, misguided obedience. She, in fact, insists on playing a part in Hieronimo’s play:

**HIERONIMO**
Now my good lord [Lorenzo], could you entreat
Your sister Bel-imperia to make one [part in *Soliman and Perseda]*?
For what’s a play without a woman in it?

**BEL-IMPERIA**
Little entreaty shall serve me, Hieronimo,
For I must needs be employed in your play. (IV.i.95-99 emphasis added)

Bel-imperia’s involvement in *Solimon and Perseda* is her last opportunity to act according to her own motivations, and her suicide is her final opportunity to lend her epistle redemptive meaning through her sacrifice. Yet, by enacting this self-sacrifice she undermines the very subjective agency she is trying to reassert by performing the role of sacrificial lamb. Rather than simply functioning as “the text’s rejection of the author’s authority as well as a monstrous example of self-authorship” (Cutts 155), however, her suicide is simultaneously the most self-effacing and self-asserting thing Bel-imperia could possibly enact. Like everything else she attempts, it is doomed to be both rife with significance and bereft of clear and singular meaning. Her association at this point with Isabella should not be ignored—as the only female figures in Kyd’s androcentric Spain, they together represent Spain’s only hope. While Bel-imperia’s Christ-like transformation and bloody letter signal the unrealized but real possibility of social healing, Isabella’s initial faith in heavenly justice likewise signals a depth of patience none of the male characters (save Horatio) can even imagine. The alternatives that Bel-

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18 We can see the tragedy of Heywood’s play residing in Anne’s wifely obedience as much as in Frankford’s jealousy or ill-placed trust in Wendoll. Anne follows John’s directions with disturbing exactitude, from his first command that she allow Wendoll to “keep his table, use his servants, / And be a present Frankford in his absence” (vi.77-78), to his ultimate edict that she die (xvii.120-22).

19 While her letter does call for revenge against the murderers, it does not call for a massacre; further, Bel-imperia may be transformed, but she is still a product of her society and therefore a complete transcendence.
imperia and Isabella represent are precisely what make them so vulnerable in Spain’s vicious society.

Kyd seems to have devoted equal effort on the one hand to imagining Bel-imperia’s bloody letter as tragically ignored, and on the other hand to making it parodically extravagant. This problem of her letter’s epistemological irresolution comes to a head when Hieronimo asks “what’s a play without a woman in it?” (IV.i.97). This question can be read as a serious one about what values and codes of behaviour the feminine represents in Kyd’s Spain, asked through the fact of the male-dominated Renaissance stage. At the same time, invoking this theatrical fact here could just as well indicate that Kyd is suggesting parody and sarcasm; a play without a woman in it was, after all, the norm when The Spanish Tragedy was written. Bel-imperia’s final self-assertion here then provides a convenient way for patriarchal if not peaceful order to be restored in Kyd’s Spain; because of this, we can see The Spanish Tragedy as inhabiting the realms of both tragedy and parody. Tragically, Bel-imperia represents humankind’s doomed attempts to transcend its moral shortcomings. Parodically, we can see Kyd taking a glance at women who would step outside their socially sanctioned roles whether through sexual, writerly, or religious venues. While distinct generic choices necessarily inflect one another making, in this case, even the most serious representations of bloody writing appear mildly silly, I would also suggest that parody is not simply a symptom of scorn—it is a function of cultural anxiety. Parodying the blood letters ironically reveals that they have both the cultural attractiveness and capital necessary to threaten the status quo. The evidence for either interpretation can only lead one to believe that both are

of Spain’s “blood for blood” justice is unlikely; her desire to take vengeance against only the guilty parties, and not the entire society, is where the possibility for healing lies.
somehow true, that like Hieronimo, Bel-imperia “reflect[s] the writer’s anxieties about the changing nature of authorship” (Cutts 156); specifically, that authorship is not the exclusive purview of men which in turn suggests (and is suggested by) subjectivity’s transcendence of gender in spite of the period’s extensive rhetoric rendering the female in less developed and complimentary terms than the male. I would suggest that Kyd’s paradoxical construction of Bel-imperia and her bloody letter reflects a cultural awareness of female subjectivity, as comprehended through the act of writing and all its consequences, that simultaneously seeks to contain the possibility of women possessing and revealing a complex interiority that is recognizable in both human and spiritual terms simultaneously—an acknowledgment that both reflects the humanizing of Christ in the Charters and the spiritualizing of the fallible human in George Herbert’s poetry.

III

For the most part, George Chapman’s Bussy D’Ambois lacks the Christian language and imagery associated with Bel-Imperia in The Spanish Tragedy. In Chapman’s play, Tamyra progresses from faithful wife to adulteress to bloody letter-writer, and this progression initially appears to be one common to domestic tragedy. Indeed, in Bussy D’Ambois, female subjectivity initially manifests only as wayward sexuality; for Tamyra, the body becomes simultaneously the site of unwanted desire (metaphorized in this play primarily as “blood”), the medium through which subjective truth must be conveyed, and the barrier preventing others from understanding its meaning. Her status as subject is insistently present in spite of her society’s attempts to acknowledge her only as a clichéd example of either virtuous or corrupted womanhood; Tamyra herself even attempts to deny and destroy this in herself. Moreover, Chapman’s
emphasis on “blood” (and later Ford’s) itself invokes emotion only to elide its relationship to subjectivity. Yet, while Tamyra’s bloody letter leads Bussy to the very death it is meant to prevent, it is also the means by which the corrupt Bussy finally becomes cognizant of his failings, forgives his murderers, and attempts to reconcile Tamyra and Montsurry. The letter’s ultimate and unlikely redemptive powers place it firmly in the tradition of spiritual blood writing, but this religious validation undermines the letter’s significance as representative of Tamyra’s overwhelming desire and her agency at the same time that it legitimizes her writing. Instead of enabling other characters to understand her as a subject independent of androcentric cultural discourse, it pushes her into yet another role.

As “the site of thought and origin of action” the subject cannot be “fully expressed in the structures which constitute the givens of his world” (Hanson 2); the problem with this disjunction between social and personal expressions of thought and action is that it creates “the possibility of a subject for whom certain claims, to authorial or to legal rights for instance, or to control over nature, might come to seem natural” (Hanson 3). In response to such possibilities, in the world of Bussy D’Ambois female identity is reduced to moral principles so abstract as to deny even the possibility of a female subject. Virtue is feminized and relies on the same terms used to describe chaste women; as Bussy points out, “Nor doth she [virtue] use to seek out any man: / He that will win, must woo her; she’s not shameless” (I.ii.63-64). Envy is also feminized, but in order to distinguish manly generosity and confidence from the unmanly pettiness of jealousy.20 “Feminine” codes of behaviour and identity, and the women or unmanly men

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20 Henry. This desperate quarrel sprung out of their envies To D’Ambois’ sudden bravery, and great spirit.
to whom they are applied, would seem to exist firmly in the realm of the stereotypical in
this play, yet the jump from abstract principles to real women’s nature is a short one:

For as the moon of all things God created
Not only is the most appropriate image
Or glass to show [men] how [women] wax and wane,
But in her light and motion likewise bears
Imperial influences that command
In all their powers, and make them wax and wane;
So women, that of all things made of nothing
Are the most perfect images of the moon,
Or still-unweaned sweet moon-calves with white faces,
Not only are patterns of change to men,
But, as the tender moonshine of their beauties
Clears or is cloudy, make men glad or sad. (IV.i.9-20)

Women are made of “nothing,” are “patterns” and “images,” are likened to moon-calves
(that is, fools, dolts, or idiots), and they are inconstant. Richard Ide argues that these
“lunar association[s] are damning to Tamyra, the first suggesting that the female’s
maleficent power over the hero is a debilitating limitation placed upon him, the second
stressing her inherent inconstancy and frailty” (105); however, the play’s rhetoric belies

Guise. Neither is worth their envy.
Henry. Less than either
Will make the gall of Envy overflow;
She feeds on outcast entrails like a kite;
In which foul heap, if any ill lies hid,
She sticks her beak into it, shakes it up,
And hurls it all abroad, that all may view it.
Corruption is her nutriment; but touch her
With any precious ointment, and you kill her:
When she finds any filth in men, she feasts,
And with her black throat bruits it through the world
Being sound and healthful; but if she but taste
The slenderest pittance of commended virtue,
She surfeits of it, and is like a fly
That passes all the body’s soundest parts,
And dwells upon the sores; or if her squint eye
Have power to find none there, she forges some.
She makes that crooked ever which is straight;
Calls valour giddiness, justice tyranny;
A wise man may shun her, she not herself:
Whithersoever she flies from her harms,
She bears her foe still clasped in her own arms;
And therefore, Cousin Guise, let us avoid her. (II.i.1-24)
its own strident claims, either that women are “nothing” or that their inconstancy is wholly unattractive. That women can be inconstant, that is, that they are not only sufficiently aware of themselves to change their minds, but also to acknowledge and act upon desire that exists beyond the control of the men who use such clichéd language to contain them, betrays patriarchal society’s awareness of them as potential agents and subjects.

Just as importantly, this passage’s emphasis on women as “moon calves” and “nothing” barely obscures the anxiety present in such backhanded references to women’s ability to make choices and change. In spite of such an unwitting acknowledgment, most of the male characters have only either a cynical belief in women’s changeability, or they understand women as spotlessly chaste and devoid of desires outside the confines of marriage. Before he becomes the image of marital Tyranny to Tamyra’s image of Adultery in Act V, Montsurry believes in the latter idea of woman. Tamyra complains to Montsurry about Monsieur’s unwanted advances, but rather than acknowledging that Tamyra simply does not desire Monsieur, he uses it to affirm his belief that she is actually incapable of desire for anyone but him:

Pray thee bear with him:
...............................................................................
That prince doth high in virtue’s reckoning stand
That will entreat a vice, and not command:
...............................................................................
Take comfort, then, my comfort, nay, triumph
And crown thyself; thou partest with victory:
My presence is so only dear to thee
That other men’s appear worse than they be. (II.ii.118-31)

That Montsurry equates this perceived lack of desire in his wife with her identity as a possession is made clear in his shocking assertion that she should not be offended by the
prince’s advances because he does not, after all, force her to accept them as he legally might! Her desire that she not be molested by unwanted suitors is nullified by Montsurry’s confident belief that his object desires possession by no-one but himself.

The rhetorical affiliations between femininity and propriety and Chapman’s construction of marriage as ownership reveal that, as Albert Tricomi suggests, this play’s “obsessive concern is to read sexual conduct as a marker of the society’s core values” (108).

This “obsessive concern” with female sexual conduct reveals sex and marriage’s essential fragility as the bases for social stability. Tamyra reveals how futile androcentric attempts at quashing female subjectivity really are, either through rhetoric or marital and religious law. Tamyra has all that is supposed to make a happy marriage: her husband loves and trusts her, she has a spotless reputation, many female friends, and all the material comforts. Yet, her desire for Bussy cannot be contained:

...of a sudden, my licentious fancy
Riots within me. Not my name and house
Nor my religion to this hour observed
Can stand above it; I must utter that
That will in parting break more strings in me
Than death when life parts; and that holy man
That, from my cradle, counselled for my soul,
I now must make an agent for my blood. (II.ii.42-49)

Jane Melbourne argues that “Tamyra has inverted her responsibility as wife, not entirely by her act of adultery...but by desiring the act” at all (394); Montsurry would be enraged by her lust for Bussy even if she did not act upon it. By merely considering Bussy in this way, Tamyra destabilizes the marital identities created by patriarchal society in Bussy D’Ambois.

Tamyra is exposed as a subject (who signifies desire itself) by desiring Bussy because the play’s discourse with respect to women dictates that she desire nothing
except the fulfillment of her husband’s desires. But there is a problem here: Tamyra is unable to consider her own desires and agency (expressed to either constructive or destructive purpose) in anything other than the same repressive terms with which female subjectivity is meant to be contained. When she first acknowledges her lust for Bussy she imagines it “break[ing] more strings” in her than even death would; simply to become conscious of her desire is to initiate the death of her identity as she and others understand it. Until this moment, Tamyra has not considered that her socially imposed role might be just that: something separate from that which she is inside, which she terms her “blood.” That her desire forces her to consider her identity as separate from her social role is evidenced by her acting on her desire, as well as by her deception of her husband. As she awaits Bussy’s arrival for their first clandestine meeting, Tamyra berates her own infidelity in predictably misogynistic terms:

I love what most I loathe, and cannot live,  
Unless I compass that which holds my death:  
For love is hateful without love again,  
And he I love, will loathe me, when he sees  
I fly my sex, my virtue, my renown,  
To run so madly on a man unknown. (II.ii.171-76)

For Tamyra, inconstancy entails having desires and therefore being defined by some inner reality that is independent of her culture’s androcentric and two-dimensional view of women. But Tamyra can neither suppress nor accept these desires, so she attributes them to something external (“urgent destiny” (III.i.43)), not to exculpate herself of the guilt of adultery, but to explain to herself that which she does not understand.21 While

21 Melbourne suggests that Tamyra “asks forgiveness and embraces punishment, but not guilt” (394), while Ennis Rees counters that Tamyra “suffers greatly from remorse” (43). As the prerequisite for remorse is the contemplation of the consequences of one’s actions, I argue that not only is Tamyra remorseful but also that this remorse lends her the compassion necessary to try to save both Montsurry and Bussy in spite of their participation in her moral and physical suffering.
acknowledging women’s capacity to experience complex emotions and thoughts in the misogynist rhetoric meant to deny such a possibility, this dramatic culture’s discourse does not provide the vocabulary female subjects require to comfortably recognize themselves.

Early Modern anxieties about women’s subjectivities specifically and subjectivities generally ensured that social constraints placed upon uncontrollable desires pervaded the language with which both real people and literary characters defined themselves and others. But the culture’s agreed upon language of identity, wielded by Tamyra, her husband, or her lover, can neither control nor adequately characterize Tamyra’s real bodily desires. Although Montsurry’s language of wifely perfection is part of a larger social vocabulary that acknowledges female thoughts and desires at the same time that it is meant to contain them, he cannot comprehend that Tamyra possesses the desires of a subject until her affair is proven to him. Faced with the reality of “the unsounded sea of women’s bloods” (III.ii.288) that men can neither delve into nor control, Montsurry is forced to consider as autonomous his wife’s body and the desires that reside therein. Montsurry has failed as a husband because it has never occurred to him to “sound” his wife’s “bloods” on any emotionally or intellectually intimate level; his only option appears to be to compensate for his spectacular lack of understanding by torturing her and killing her lover. Montsurry’s punishment is thus intended for two people, the first being Tamyra, for daring to follow where her inclinations lead her, and

22 Hanson notes that the “mysterious inner power” that we now call subjectivity was commonly associated with “a subversive or even demonic quality” because it provided one with “the ability to operate secretly beyond the constraints of constituted authority” (17-18). That patriarchal society would see female subjectivity as subversive or demonic is not surprising and is given ample support in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Lady Macbeth or Joseph Swetnam’s infamous pamphlet “The Arraignment of Women,” for example. That Tamyra is frightened by this “inner power” is revealed not only in her guilt but also in her brief vision of hell as the Friar brings Bussy to her chambers: as “The vault opens,” Tamyra cries, “See, see, the gulf is opening that will swallow / Me and my fame for ever” (II.ii.176-78).
the second being Bussy, for coveting another man’s property. The secret Montsurr
claims to want to extract from Tamyra during the torture is the name of the pander that
arranges her meetings with Bussy. As Hanson points out, “torture was a desperate
measure, marking the outer limit of the state’s knowledge and control of its subjects”
(19); not only is Montsurr desperate, but the knowledge he seeks is also vitally
important. When he seeks to learn who facilitated the affair, Montsurr is really asking
where and with whom the social constraints that keep women mired in safe feminine
stereotypes broke down. By learning this name, he might evade acknowledging his own
failure to either contain or recognize his wife’s “blood.” Because of this, Hanson argues
that Tamyra “is not herself a repository of secrets so much as the vehicle through which
otherwise unrepresentable matters of state can be brought to light” (55).

Montsurr’s torturing of Tamyra also, however, recognizes her potential status as
subject more completely than either gendered rhetoric or her insistent sexuality do.
Having kept the secret of her pander’s identity until it is safe to reveal it, Tamyra would
seem to have no more secrets to keep. Yet, much is revealed about Tamyra that was
unknown, even to herself, as the result of this torture. That Tamyra possesses interiority
and is therefore capable of keeping secrets has already been admitted by both Bussy and
the Friar; Bussy knows that he, Tamyra, and the Friar have equal stakes in keeping the
affair secret:

In three of us the secret of our meeting
Is only guarded, and three friends as one
Have ever been esteemed, as our three powers
That in our one soul are as one united:
Why should we fear then? (III.i.29-33)
Bussy does not differentiate between the three of them as secret-keepers based on either age, gender, or class. Their common sin, articulated through the image of them as an inverted Holy Trinity united in wrongdoing, arises out of similar abilities to access internal desire and motivation. The Friar likewise does not differentiate Tamyra from either himself or Bussy as a desiring subject, but he does acknowledge that to reveal Tamyra’s secrets to the world would be singularly dangerous; he warns Montsurry that “It is a damned work to pursue those secrets, / That would ope more sin, and prove springs of slaughter” (V.i.26-27). Of course, the Friar is trying to protect himself. This brief warning, however, reveals much: while Tamyra’s survival depends upon Bussy and the Friar retaining their ability not to self-incriminate (Hanson 6), it also reveals that the men’s safety is equally dependent upon the same ability in her. Even Montsurry acknowledges the interdependence of individuals, regardless of gender, when he admits that not only can he not sound his wife’s blood, but also that he is defined by and trapped in “The errant wilderness of a woman’s face, / Where men cannot get out” (V.i.76-77).

This interdependence is nowhere better revealed than in the torture/blood-writing scene in which Montsurry places Tamyra on the rack. In trying to force Tamyra to write the fatal letter, Montsurry attempts to regain control over his wife’s body and to sever her connections to other people—in other words, to reassert his ownership of her secrets and desires. Her body becomes the text upon which he writes both personal and social ownership, just as Christ’s body is wrought by scourges in the Charters of Christ and described in terms of a horrifying textual production enacted by unbelievers. The text imposed on Christ’s body in the Charters, however, is undermined if not erased (because the first makes the second possible) by the writing of God’s covenant with humanity
through Christ’s torture (both symbolically and literally represented in the Charters’
signature red ink):

Montsurry. Till thou writ’st,
I’ll write in wounds, my wrong’s fit characters,
Thy right of sufferance. Write!
Tamyra. Oh, kill me, kill me!
Dear husband, be not crueller than death;
You have beheld some Gorgon; feel, oh, feel
How you are turned to stone; with my heart-blood
Dissolve yourself again, or you will grow
Into the image of all tyranny.
Montsurry. As thou art of adultery; I will still
Prove thee my like in ill, being most a monster;
Thus I express thee yet. Stabs her again.
Tamyra. And yet I live.
Montsurry. Ay, for thy monstrous idol is not done yet:
This tool hath wrought enough; now, Torture, use
This other engine on th’ habituate powers
Of her thrice-damned and whorish fortitude. (V.i.124-38).

Tamyra’s physical and emotional “fortitude” enable her to resist this violent compulsion
to write, and so all Montsurry’s attempts to “express” Tamyra fail. He tries to reduce her
to the image of adultery, yet she persists not only in expressing compassion by refusing to
“betray a friend with show of friendship” (V.i.114), but she also refuses to blame
Montsurry for his abuse of her.

Further, Tamyra remains lucid enough to recognize her responsibility for her
husband’s transformation:

Oh, who is turned into my lord and husband?
Husband! My lord! None but my lord and husband!
Heaven, I ask thee remission of my sins,
Not of my pains; husband, oh help me, husband! (V.i.143-46)

Rather than a capitulation to her husband’s formulation of her as the clichéd adulteress,
this speech signals Tamyra’s recognition not only of her position as a moral actor, but
also her acceptance of the consequences of her actions as such. Montsurry tortures his
wife to break her capacity for both desire and action independent of him but what occurs instead is the emergence of a transcendent self. The selfishness that characterizes Tamyra’s early interactions with Montsurry and Bussy is transformed into compassion and forgiveness by the painful revelation that acting indiscriminately on one’s desires profoundly affects others’ lives. Why, then, does Tamyra still write the letter?

Compassion for the Friar’s mortal shock at seeing her on the rack would not seem to account for her change of mind. When she finally agrees to write the letter, Montsurry exclaims, “Author of prodigies!” (V.i.150), an outburst expressing his self-congratulation at successfully forcing Tamyra to do his bidding. Yet, the line could refer either to Tamyra or Montsurry—both are authors/writers at this point, after all: he characterizes the torture as writing and through it seems to re-write her back into submission. But Tamyra is also an author of events since she agrees to write to Bussy and has already written Montsurry into the “image of tyranny.” If both are authors/writers then they are both also prodigies; further, the word “prodigy” is ambiguous and nothing in either the preceding or following lines privileges the word’s either positive or negative meanings. Tamyra’s bloody letter, however, is the result of the most prodigious writing in Chapman’s play.

Tamyra tries to use her letter as a warning to Bussy not to come to her: “I’ll write, but in my blood, that he may see / These lines come from my wounds, and not from me” (V.i.168-69). This scene stages the spectacular contradictions which arise from associating apparently uncontrollable female desire with conscious, articulate female

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23 During the English Renaissance, “prodigy” was a word rife with various and contradictory meanings: “1. Something extraordinary from which omens are drawn; an omen, a portent; 2. An amazing or marvelous thing; esp. something out of the ordinary course of nature; something abnormal or monstrous; b. Of a person: in bad sense, A monster; 3. Anything that causes wonder, astonishment, or surprise; a wonder, a marvel” (OED).
agency in a patriarchal society whose language in part revolves around the repression of both. Tamyra asserts her own desires as distinct from her husband’s when she differentiates between her actions and her intentions, between the letter’s appearance and its hidden message—in this case, to protect Bussy’s life, to save her husband from committing murder, and to protect herself from being an accomplice therein. Yet, she does so in a manner that seems to ensure the letter’s failure in its better purpose. Her history with Bussy and bloody letters makes this look like a very poor choice indeed for the excuse the Friar initially provides Bussy and Tamyra for being alone is to discuss Barrisor’s love letter to her, also written in blood:

\[
\text{Bussy. } \text{Give me the colour, my most honoured father,}
\]
\[
\text{And trust my cunning then to lay it on.}
\]
\[
\text{Friar. } \text{’Tis this, good son; Lord Barrisor, whom you slew,}
\]
\[
\text{Did love her dearly, and with all fit means}
\]
\[
\text{Hath urged his acceptation, of all which}
\]
\[
\text{She keeps one letter written in his blood.}
\]
\[
\text{.................................................................}
\]
\[
\text{....and with this,}
\]
\[
\text{To clear her hands of such a lover’s blood,}
\]
\[
\text{She will so kindly thank and entertain you,}
\]
\[
\text{Methinks I see how—ay, and ten to one,}
\]
\[
\text{Show you the confirmation in his blood,}
\]
\[
\text{Lest you should think report and she did feign,}
\]
\[
\text{That you shall so have circumstantial means}
\]
\[
\text{To come to the direct, which must be used[.] (II.ii.197-220)}
\]

Given that Barrisor’s bloody letter is associated with real love (Barrisor’s for Tamyra), it is not surprising that Bussy interprets Tamyra’s bloody letter to him as “a sacred witness of her love” (V.ii.90); upon receiving it he immediately goes to her, the direct result of which is his death. The moral meaning of Tamyra’s torture and attempt to save Bussy’s life would seem to be further undermined when we consider that Chapman probably
wrote *Bussy D'Ambois* after Jonson lampooned bloody love letters in *Cynthia’s Revels*. Bussy’s inability to detect anything ominous in Tamyra’s bloody letter seems to push her epistolary endeavour into the realm of the ineffective, if not the ridiculous.

This unsympathetic potential reading of Tamyra and her bloody letter can only stand, however, if we ignore all evidence of Chapman’s construction of Tamyra as a desiring subject, whose desires change from lust to compassion, forgiveness, and a desire for reconciliation. Based on these recognitions and alterations, I would argue that Tamyra writes the letter in blood because she believes that Bussy will relate it to Barrisor’s letter, not in terms of pure love, but in terms of the deception for which they used his bloody love letter to facilitate their adultery in the first place. If Bussy could make this association, he might not heed its summons, knowing that the letter is meant to be understood as deceptively loving. The failure here then is not in Tamyra’s choice, which, considered in light of her evolving status as a conscious subject makes perfect sense, but in Bussy’s interpretation of the letter. The complexity of the authorial agency implied by Tamyra’s use of blood (previously a symbol of uncontainable desire but now a symbol of impropriety used to proper ends), a dead man’s feelings, and their connection to her relationship with Bussy are all brought to bear through the intricate situation of writing. Tamyra banks on Bussy understanding writing as a process that on the one hand asserts her condition as a desiring subject in terms of writing and on the other hand alienates her through the separation of her blood from her body; further, she also relies upon him understanding that this paradox mirrors the truth in deception she intends her

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24 “*Bussy D’Ambois* was published in 1607;” however, “Elias Schwartz has argued for an early date (1597) for the composition of the play, but the general critical opinion follows Parrott in suggesting 1604 as a more likely date, an assumption based largely on the topical references to the old queen, to Leap year and to James’ Scottish followers” (Evans x). *Cynthia’s Revels* was published in 1601 but Chapman would already be familiar with the play from its first performance in 1600.
letter to convey. In the end, however, it never occurs to Bussy that Tamyra could be so complex.

It is in Montsurry’s and Bussy’s respective inabilities either to “sound” or “express” Tamyra that we see Chapman destabilizing the rhetoric of anti-feminism in this play. While inconstancy is meant to embody the worst of feminine vices, in the case of Tamyra it is in fact the only source of redemption in the corrupt world of the French court. The only character who truly changes is Tamyra, and she evolves from selfish and scheming adulteress into someone who can contemplate (and decide to atone for) the consequences of her actions. Montsurry does not change and continues to be able to relate to his wife only in extremes. Having told her earlier that “there’s no mean / In any passion I shall feel for you” (IV.i.166-67), he cannot continue to live with her even though he forgives her and wants to do so (V.iii.247-49). The Friar’s Ghost would like to attribute this promising but incomplete “Christian reconcilement” between Tamyra and Montsurry to Bussy (V.iii.201), but in fact it is only through Tamyra that it is possible. Having followed the bloody letter’s summons, Bussy is shot. Tamyra, in her new compassionate state, warns Bussy to flee (V.iii.75); as usual, Bussy vows to kill everyone in sight if they dare abuse either of them. Her startlingly compassionate response is to beg him to spare her husband: “Favour my lord, my love, oh, favour him!” (V.iii.118). Tamyra’s pleas for peace convince Bussy to grant Montsurry his life. It is through her calls for mercy that “Christian reconcilement” is made possible.

While Tamyra is inadvertently responsible for drawing Bussy to his death, she is also responsible for his ultimate repentance. Her compassion for both Bussy and Montsurry leads the former to exclaim “I forgive them all” (V.iii.159); this is a radical
change from the Bussy who killed three courtiers for looking at him strangely. Through the Ghost’s brief reference to Christian reconciliation in a play steeped in Classical tradition and Revenge Tragedy tropes, Tamyra’s personal transformation, and the transformative influence she has on Bussy all suggest that she belongs in the same category of Christian self-sacrifice as Bel-imperia. The final exchange between the lovers reveals that we are meant to understand Tamyra as both the primary author and the primary prodigy in Chapman’s play; moreover, like the Christ of the Charters, her ultimate assertion of her subject position through love for others necessarily results in and is facilitated by her destruction:

_Tamyra._ Forgive thou me, dear servant, and this hand
That led thy life to this unworthy end;
Forgive it, for the blood with which ’tis stained,
In which I writ the summons of thy death –
The forced summons—by this bleeding wound,
By this here in my bosom, and by this
That makes me hold up both my hands imbrued
For thy dear pardon.

_Bussy._ Oh, my heart is broken!
Fate nor these murtherers, Monsieur nor the Guise,
Have any glory in my death, but this,
This killing spectacle, this prodigy[.] (V.iii.171-81)

Tamyra is the author/writer of both Bussy’s murder and his final transformation; her racked body is the prodigy that both kills and saves. Like the Christ who writes the bloody testament, she must herself be both testator and sacrifice. Crucially, however, Tamyra does not die (although she would be happy to do so); she is, instead, merely banished. Therefore, we must understand Tamyra’s final transformation as the death of her former self, not of her body. Having been transformed from adulterous schemer to compassionate self-sacrificer, Tamyra longs for the final annihilation that would not only ensure her letter’s effectiveness for others’ complete reconciliation, but would also purge
her of her own sins. As a wife who has been rejected by her husband, Tamyra dies on a socially symbolic level; yet, it also allows her to become a sacrificial offering; for her husband’s and society’s comfort, she willingly departs.

Tamyra’s compassion and readiness to symbolically die for the sake of others is reiterated in her final speech:

```
Sweet lord, forgive me, and I will be gone,  
And till these wounds, that never balm shall close  
Till death hath entered at them—so I love them,  
Being opened by your hands—by death be cured,  
I never more will grieve you with my sight,  
Never endure that any roof shall part  
Mine eyes and heaven; but to the open deserts,  
Like to hunted tigers I will fly,  
Eating my heart, shunning the steps of men,  
And look on no side till I be arrived. (V.iii.237-46)
```

The forgiveness and spiritual hunger that infuse these lines reveal the extent of Tamyra’s transcendence of the baser desires that previously defined her. The image of her eating her own heart also reiterates her role as both author/writer and sacrifice; yet, this image of redemptive self-consumption (which disturbingly echoes her offer to “eat these arms / That have offended” rather than write the letter to Bussy (V.i.107-8)) also destabilizes Chapman’s careful construction of Tamyra as a subject. As much as Montsurry and Bussy are guilty of and suffer for misinterpreting Tamyra’s actions and intentions, even Tamyra cannot fully grasp her own either subject or spiritual meaning. She is shown to be capable of positive change insofar as she acknowledges that her actions affect others, but she can see these effects only as negative. She does not acknowledge that while she helped bring about Bussy’s murder, she is also responsible for his redemption. In the end, Tamyra cannot extricate herself from society’s view of herself as a fallen woman.
Herein lies the paradox of women as subjects as explored in *Bussy D’Ambois* (and *The Spanish Tragedy*): the only way in which patriarchal society can accept that women have internal truths and desires that cannot be controlled is when they are aligned with Christian sacrifice. While this sacrifice legitimizes both female desire and agency it also erases them, partly because the death of the testator is necessary for the testament to be meaningful, and partly because of the androcentric contexts in which these characters are figured. Further marginalized by gender (namely the tension between controllable social identity and unmanageable interiority), and the simultaneously truth-declaring and self-alienating process of writing in blood, Bel-imperia and Tamyra are figures in which the problematic relationship between the subject’s desires and the results and implications of her acting upon them is focused. In other words, it seems as though female subjectivity may be acknowledged by patriarchal society only once it is comfortably on its way to oblivion.

**IV**

John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* is the last of this series of plays that foregrounds the bloody letter device. In these plays, we see the curious interplay between desire, agency, and writing (and all the potential authority that implies) which allows Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella to imitate Christ. It is these characters’ simultaneously marginal and central positions in their androcentric societies that define them as figures of subjective identity; that these paradoxical roles are laden with religious meaning infuses their subject positions with complexity and profound significance. Thus, when Annabella concludes that her life is “A wretched, woeful woman’s tragedy” (V.i.8), we are not meant to understand this as ironic. Giovanni, of course, frets and struts, but he
does not experience the shift in perspective that characterizes most tragic protagonists; Annabella, however, does. This transformation is epitomized in her bloody letter, the symbol and expression of her repentance for the harm she causes through her relationship with Giovanni. Critics usually attribute Annabella’s death to her sexuality in some way, and they are partially correct. However, it is only after Annabella transcends the unabashed sexuality that initially characterizes her that she becomes doomed; in the face of her unexpected subjective strength, which is both manifested and metaphorized in the bloody letter she writes to Giovanni, society as a whole and Giovanni specifically, can no longer allow her to live.

Like Bel-imperia in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Annabella finds herself at the centre of her androcentric society’s violence. While the stakes surrounding any marriage she either does or does not make will not hold the same political ramifications as Bel-imperia’s, Annabella is treated similarly by all the male characters who have some stake in her marital choice. Florio asserts his paternal ownership of Annabella when he chastises Soranzo for being jealous of Grimaldi: “My Lord Soranzo, this is strange to me, / Why you should storm, having my word engaged: / Owing her heart, what need you doubt her ear?” (I.ii.52-54). During the banquet to celebrate the marriage, Soranzo adopts the language of ownership, describing Annabella as a “most precious jewel; such a prize / As earth hath not another like to this” (IV.i.10-11). The male characters’ view of women as property is taken to a darkly comic extreme in Bergetto’s attitude towards Annabella’s rejection of his marriage suit; when Donado tells him that “your mistress here will none of you,” Bergetto’s reply encompasses Parman society’s view of women: “Why, what care I for that? I can have wenches enough in Parma for half-a-crown
“apiece” (II.vi.106-109). Even Giovanni, the only man who appears to love Annabella truly, boasts of being her “king” (II.i.19), and later echoes Soranzo’s mining metaphor when explaining why he murders her:

You came to feast, my lords, with dainty fare;
I came to feast too, but I digged for food
In a much richer mine than gold or stone
Of any value balanced; ’tis a heart,
A heart, my lords, in which mine is entombed:
Look well upon’t; d’ee know’t? (V.vi.24-29)

The violence inherent in the woman-as-jewel metaphor is given horrifyingly literal power in Giovanni’s final act of vengeance. The colonial undertones associated with the male characters’ attempts to claim ownership of Annabella heighten the pathos of her tragic end because it points to Iberian culture’s increasing(ly unfriendly) presence in the New World.

Thus, even though Giovanni and Annabella “are each other’s only possible choices for spiritual and intellectual connection in a culture dominated by a host of dubious figures” (Mintz 269), Giovanni is in no way ideal. Murdering his sister is just the final logical step in an affair that is repugnant, not necessarily for its incestuous nature, but certainly for Giovanni’s attitude towards Annabella. As Susannah Mintz argues,

Giovanni is prone to jealousy, to a language of suspicion, to violent possessiveness. A[n] immediate analogue to Giovanni, in fact, is...Soranzo. Both make use of conventional courtly poetry to figure their feelings towards Annabella; both succumb to jealous accusation and ultimately violence to eradicate the insult of Annabella’s sexual body (an accusation that Soranzo, at least, has visible proof of). The fictionality of Petrarchan idealization is quickly exposed, revealing the dominance hidden beneath. (279)
That Annabella’s sexuality is offensive to Soranzo is unquestionable—it is her pregnancy by another man that prompts him to plot the deaths of both Annabella and Giovanni. But there is much more subjective substance in her than her sexuality: as a fully developed character, Annabella stands in sharp contrast to Ford’s other characters. The other female characters in this play (Hippolita, Putana, and Philotis) are mere stereotypes of the whore, the bawd, and the maid, respectively. Ford presents these three as caricatures to highlight Annabella’s uniqueness; she cannot be forced into any of these categories. Her close association with Giovanni also asserts her internal development in contrast to others’ flatness. In their “marriage” vows, they charge one another to “not betray me to your mirth or hate, / Love me, or kill me” (I.ii.251-52; 254-5). Of course, Giovanni does betray Annabella; in fact, he kills her rather than allowing her to claim any part in deciding how their tragic affair will conclude. Annabella is by no means not without fault, but after making perilous choices she ultimately recognizes her culpability, repents, and endangers herself to save her brother. Conversely, Giovanni is incapable of repenting his incestuous desires and the harm they cause—he cannot “wash every word [he] utter’st / In tears (and if’t be possible) of blood” (I.i.72-73) as the Friar counsels. In contrast, Annabella is capable of such change, which is epitomized in her letter, “double-lined with tears and blood” (V.i.34), to Giovanni.

Annabella is not a fully developed subject only in relation to other characters, however. Giovanni may be her only real choice for companionate love, but Annabella chooses him of her own accord; indeed, her love for him well precedes his declaration of his own affections, which she reveals when she confesses to him that “what thou hast urged / My captive heart had long ago resolved” (I.ii.241-42). Her resolution belies the
image of captivity she utilizes here, although it does suggest an internalization of the
courtship metaphors of mining and ownership discussed above. Yet unlike Tamyra,
Annabella is both aware of and unafraid of her knowledge of herself as the keeper of her
own secrets, and is particularly defiant towards Soranzo when he attempts to force her to
reveal who has impregnated her:

SORANZO
Tell me his name.
ANNABELLA Alas, alas, there’s all.
Will you believe?
SORANZO What?
ANNABELLA You shall never know.
SORANZO How!
ANNABELLA Never; if you do, let me be cursed.
SORANZO Not know it, strumpet? I’ll rip up thy heart,
And find it there.
ANNABELLA Do, do. (IV.iii.49-53)

Annabella is aggressively comfortable in her position as a subject with secrets; by
scoffing at Soranzo’s threat, she reveals her awareness that her secrets and inner reality
cannot easily be accessed by others. Soranzo should not be surprised by her defiance
since, when he tries to woo her, she makes clear her status as a self-contained subject. As
Soranzo plies her with empty love language, Annabella deflates it by responding in literal
terms. In astonishment, both at her rejection and her method thereof, Soranzo asks
Annabella “Is’t you speak this?” and her response is unequivocal: “Yes, I myself”
(III.ii.49-50).

Mintz argues that Annabella’s ultimate repentance implies “she has been cowed
by the Friar’s tale of hellfire and damnation” (290), but this argument stands only if we
accept Mintz’s preceding assertion that Annabella’s primary goal in expressing her
desires is to have “an experience of romantic and erotic equality that would be utterly unavailable to her through conventional marriage” (274). There are two arguments that qualify Mintz’s claim about this scene with the Friar. First, Annabella goes to the Friar for practical advice on how to deal with her pregnancy; before providing this advice, however, he informs her he will “read [her] a lecture” laden with images of what unrepentant adulteresses can expect to endure in Hell (III.vi.7-30). Her initial response to the Friar’s strident approach—“Wretched creature!” (III.vi.6)—has been assumed to express Annabella’s self-loathing and anxiety, but it is just as likely that Annabella is referring to the Friar, who relishes the suffering he causes her before giving her the help she needs. Second, while Annabella states that she is content with his proposition that she marry Soranzo (III.vi.41), she never lies to Soranzo about what she will bring to the marriage, vowing only “To live with you and yours” (III.vi.54). Annabella is frightened but her desire for self-assertion has not been subdued.

In fact, it is in her marriage to Soranzo that Annabella most compellingly reveals her role as both tragic protagonist and Christian sacrifice. Annabella is initially defiant of Soranzo’s rage over his cuckolding, but is later moved to pity for his professed misery:

SORANZO
...tell me, didst not think that in my heart
I did too superstitiously adore thee?
ANNABELLA
I must confess I know you loved me well.
SORANZO
And wouldst thou use me thus? O, Annabella,
Be thou assured, whatso’er the villain was
That thus hath tempted thee to this disgrace,
Well he might lust, but never loved like me.
He doted on the picture that hung out
Upon thy cheeks, to please his humorous eye;
Not on the part I loved, which was thy heart,
And, as I thought, thy virtues.
ANNABELLA  O my lord!  
These words wound deeper than your sword could do.  
(IV.iii.118-29)

Her recognition of culpability, and the consciousness it implies, would seem to be tempered by her failure to suspect Vasques’s and Soranzo’s duplicity in this staged reconciliation scene. Annabella’s acknowledgment of her guilt does not, however, lead to her subsumption into flat patriarchal notions of feminine identity. Instead, her agency is reaffirmed when she pens her bloody letter.

This letter, of course, saves neither of the star-crossed siblings, but Annabella’s mistake is not in writing her bloody letter to Giovanni; rather, it is in believing that he will respond appropriately to it. This error arises from her belief that Giovanni truly loves her; if, after all, she can be so easily convinced that Soranzo loves her for her “heart,” it is not surprising that she imagines Giovanni loves her for more than “the picture that hung out / Upon [her] cheeks.” As the audience, however, we know better. Annabella’s constancy is of primary importance for Giovanni and his constant refrain when contemplating his incestuous relationship with her is “you are still the same” (II.i.12). Giovanni’s final soliloquy of adoration for Annabella reveals not only that it is her constancy to him and their affair that he reveres, but also that her perceived similarity to him is integral to his affection for her:

...ere my precious sister  
Was married, [I] thought all taste of love would die  
In such a contract; but I find no change  
Of pleasure in this formal law of sports.  
She is still one to me  
..................................  
O the glory  
Of two united hearts like hers and mine!  (V.iii.4-12)
The selfishness and narcissism of Giovanni’s love for Annabella is nowhere better revealed than in this scene. To recall Soranzo’s surprisingly apt description quoted above of the unknown father of Annabella’s child, the picture hung out upon her cheeks is of Giovanni himself.

Annabella, however, is not the same; she is no longer able to either romantically love or kill her lover/brother. As Giovanni is reciting the above lines, she is elsewhere soliloquizing on her maturing mood of repentance. Proclaiming that “My conscience now stands up against my lust / With depositions charactered in guilt” (V.i.9-10), Annabella prays for the appearance of someone who will deliver her letter:

ANNABELLA
Forgive me, my good genius, and this once
Be helpful to my ends. Let some good man
Pass this way, to whose trust I may commit
This paper double-lined with tears and blood:
Which being granted, here I sadly vow
Repentance, and a leaving of that life
I have long died in.

FRIAR
Lady, Heaven hath heard you,
And hath by providence ordained that I
Should be his minister for your behoof.

ANNABELLA
Ha, what are you?

FRIAR
Your brother’s friend, the friar;
Glad in my soul that I have lived to hear
This free confession ’twixt your peace and you.
What would you, or to whom? Fear not to speak.

ANNABELLA
Is Heaven so bountiful? Then I have found
More favour than I hoped. Here, holy man –

Throws a letter
Commend me to my brother; give him that,
That letter; bid him read it and repent. (V.i.31-47)

Definition 1.c. of “genius” in the OED is of particular importance for interpreting this portion of Annabella’s speech: “(a person’s) good, evil genius: the two mutually opposed
spirits (in Christian language *angels*) by whom every person was supposed to be attended throughout his life. Hence applied *transf.* to a person who powerfully influences for good or evil the character, conduct, or fortunes of another.” Annabella aligns her letter and its potential effects with a benevolent Christian “genius” while she appeals to her own good genius; moreover, the double meaning of the word, and her letter’s purpose, indicate that she would also be a good genius to Giovanni. Annabella’s position to an extent conflates Bel-imperia’s and Hieronimo’s positions in *The Spanish Tragedy* for her prayer for help in delivering her potentially reparative letter is immediately answered by the Friar who gives Giovanni the epistle as she asks him to. Unlike Hieronimo, however, one of the characteristics of Annabella’s evolving subject identity is an overabundance of trust; it does not occur to her that putting her life to such “good use” might be either rejected or misunderstood.

Giovanni’s reading of Annabella’s bloody letter is the point at which the play begins moving inexorably towards its final scene of bloody chaos. Giovanni’s reaction to the letter and his decision to murder Annabella do not result from his having to consider “the insult of Annabella’s sexual body” as Mintz claims (279); on the contrary, he kills her because she changes:

’Tis her hand,
I know’t; and ’tis all written in her blood.
She writes I know not what. Death? I’ll not fear
An armèd thunderbolt aimed at my heart.
She writes, we are discovered—pox on dreams
Of low-fainted cowardice! Discovered?
The devil we are; which way is’t possible?
Are we grown traitors to our own delights?
Confusion take such dotage, ’tis forged[.] (V.iii.31-39)
He labels Annabella’s call for his repentance cowardly and treacherous, but what
Giovanni finds most unpalatable about this letter is the change in her it reveals; he cannot
comprehend it and it places her beyond the purview of his emotional control. Lisa
Hopkins argues that “the [letter’s] message is invalidated by the disbelief with which
Giovanni greets it” (1994, 148), but, in fact, his response reveals with more stunning
clarity than either his jealousy or his Petrarchan language do, how contingent his love for
Annabella really is. When he states that “She writes I know not what” he reveals that it is
really her, not her letter, that he cannot comprehend; when Giovanni concludes that the
letter is forged, he is in fact concluding that Annabella must die because she does not
confirm his beliefs about either himself or the world.

Giovanni’s disillusionment is enacted on Annabella’s body as he cuts out her
heart and then presents it to the banqueters impaled on his dagger. His display of her
bloody heart also signals the extent of his sense of her betrayal: removing and displaying
traitors’ hearts at executions was common practice from the early Renaissance and into
the seventeenth century. Further, Annabella’s heart can also be understood as “a new
religious icon, a replacement for the cross that signifies both Christ’s martyrdom and the
authority of the Christian religion” (Amtower 199). The interpretative disparity Ford
creates by having Giovanni brandish Annabella’s heart on stage reveals that “This heart
which as a symbol was the object of so many speeches is recognized by no one when
made truly visible at last” (Gauer 55). Yet, in light of the fact that the Charters of Christ
were usually stamped with a seal representing a “heart within a circle” (Spalding 4), the
iconography of the bloody letter as transformed into the final gory image of Annabella’s
physical heart encircled by uncomprehending characters, is deeply spiritual (see Figs. 2.2
Annabella’s ignorance of Giovanni’s and Soranzo’s objectification of her, as much as it reflects her growing naiveté, also further aligns her with Christ; indeed, Annabella is terribly surprised when Giovanni begins his assault, asking: “O brother, by your hand?” (V.v.87). Yet, she enacts Christian fortitude and forgiveness in the face of his Judas-like betrayal; as he stabs her, he tells her he will “save thy fame, and kill thee in a kiss” and Annabella responds, “Forgive him, Heaven—and me my sins” (V.v.84; 92).

Having been unable either to comprehend or to accept Annabella’s status as a subject who desires anything other than sexual relations with him, Giovanni tries to reduce her to a sexual stereotype. Having read her letter, the first thing he asks is, “What, changed so soon?” (V.v.i). Even though the bloody letter discusses only her concern for his spiritual and bodily well-being, Giovanni tries to deconstruct Annabella’s moral evolution into simple inconstancy: “Hath your new sprightly lord / Found out a trick in night-games more than we / Could know in our simplicity?” (V.v.1-3). Moreover, having promised to “save her fame,” Giovanni goes on to trumpet the details of their incestuous affair to the representatives of Parman society at the banquet. Indeed, Giovanni’s final revelations about his relationship with Annabella ensure that this androcentric society will never have to consider the broader implications of the fact that Annabella was not only able to experience desire and act on her own behalf and inclinations, but also that she was not ashamed to do so. When in Act V the Cardinal sums up the tragic events of
Fig. 2.2 Short Charter of Christ with hanging seal.
Fig. 2.3 Short Charter of Christ with hanging seal and crucified Christ.
the play, he “rewrite[s] the meaning of Annabella’s desire so that it fits into recognizable patriarchal narratives about female sexuality” (Mintz 277), proclaiming that

...never yet
Incest and murder have so strangely met.
Of one so young, so rich in nature’s store,
Who could not say, ’tis pity she’s a whore? (V.vi.157-60)

That the male characters expend so much effort trying to reduce Annabella to a sexual stereotype reveals that Mintz is right to argue that one of “The play’s most daring insight[s] is...that women, as autonomous and desiring beings, are the potential agents of social change” (275). By arguing that the bulk of Annabella’s desire is “erotic desire” (280), however, Mintz becomes implicated in the very narratives of patriarchal repression of the female subject she claims Annabella is disrupting. Annabella can neither permanently nor greatly disrupt any such narratives through sex because her society has the language necessary to identify and repress all aspects thereof, as we see in the Cardinal’s final speech, and in Ford’s portraits of Hippolyta and Philotis. 25 Critical emphases on female sexuality reassert rather than challenge the patriarchal views of the

25 There are two other counterarguments to the claim that Ford approves of his characters’ attempts to reduce Annabella to a stereotype. First, while the Cardinal does have the last word in the play, he has been consistently represented as notoriously corrupt, particularly in his confiscation of the dead’s riches (V.vi.149-51). Second, if the Christian iconography of the bloody letter, Annabella’s impaled heart, her attempts to save Giovanni, and her final forgiveness were not evidence enough to make such a final reading untenable, Ford himself ironizes the play’s title, noting that “The gravity of the subject may easily excuse the lightness of the title, otherwise I had been a severe judge against mine own guilt” (“To the Truly Noble...” 5).

Mintz’s article goes much further than previous critical studies of ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore have in arguing for Ford’s subtle development of Annabella’s character. Yet, Mintz’s claims are still steeped in preceding critics’ emphasis on Annabella’s sexuality to the exclusion of her other subject characteristics, and such exclusion has allowed critics not only to ignore Annabella’s complexity, but also and perhaps because of this, to assume that the play’s frequent references to biblical mythology are meant to be understood either as ironic or as signs of Ford’s judgment upon her wickedness.

Hopkins argues that “Annabella, her pregnancy discovered, defies Soranzo and wickedly parodies the tradition of Mary’s announcement to Joseph when she terms her unnamed lover ‘angel-like’ (IV.iii.37)” (1997, 6 emphasis added). Amtower discusses “the notorious banquet scene, where Ford introduces an elaborate iconography that deliberately modifies and distorts traditional Catholic ritual as a reification of the grotesque parody of religious discourse and ideology that takes place throughout the play” (181 emphasis added): having noted the spiritual significance of Annabella’s impaled heart, however, Amtower fails to consider the banquet as iconographically re-enacting Christ’s Last Supper.
female subject presented in *The Spanish Tragedy, Bussy D'Ambois,* and *'Tis Pity She’s a Whore.* Critics seem thus far to have been as unable as the male characters in these plays to consider Bel-imperia, Tamyra, and Annabella in terms either of sincere religiosity or of fully developed human subjectivity. Kyd, Chapman, and Ford were invested in exploring what constituted a female subject and her social significance and power through the medium of the historically and religiously complex bloody letter; reducing the female characters and their actions to more recognizable, less socially subversive forms, as Jonson and Heywood do, was not part of the agenda.

**V—CODA**

Richard Johnson’s prose romance *The Most Pleasant History of Tom a Lincolne* was written in two parts, between 1599 and 1607, and was in its sixth edition by 1631. 26 Significantly influenced by *The Faerie Queene,* the parallels in plot and characterization between *Tom a Lincolne* and Edmund Spenser’s poem reveal that Johnson was deeply critical not only of English military projects in foreign lands, but also of how writers like Sir Walter Ralegh used the rhetoric of Spenserian romance to white-wash the often ugly realities of such exploits. The figure in *Tom a Lincolne* in which Johnson centres much of his anti-militaristic moral is the pseudo-Spenserian Caelia, a figure most striking in the context of this study for writing a letter in her own blood. Johnson’s portrait of Caelia’s writing is crucial to our understanding of the romance, both because of the way it presents a woman’s authorship as both emotionally and spiritually compellingly but

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26 How widely read this work was during the Renaissance is not reflected in current critical circles, however. Lionel Stevenson and Naomi Liebler dismiss Johnson as a “hack” (21; 71), while David Margolies claims that *Tom a Lincolne* embodies “a well-proven commercial formula that Johnson exercises without reflection” (36). Even if Johnson’s romance is written in a way meant to sell the maximum number of copies, this does not negate the fact that it seems also to have been motivated by Johnson’s political beliefs about what England’s role should be in the “brave new world” of military adventuring.
tragically ignored, and because of how this legitimization is central to the romance’s critique of early English militarism. In *Tom a Lincolne*, English militarism is represented as antithetical to domestic English prosperity and social stability; indeed, *Tom a Lincolne* asserts that overseas missions inevitably lead to social and economic chaos at home.

Joan Pong Linton argues that Renaissance England was united by a “shared cultural fantasy” of colonial exploitation, and because of this, “commercial and colonial motives clearly find expression in romantic themes of chivalric love and adventure in other worlds” (8; 1). One of the most famous texts in which colonial interests are couched in romantic terms is Ralegh’s *The Discoverie of Guiana*, in which he writes, “if what I have done, receive the gracious construction of a pained pilgrimage, and purchase the least remission, I shal thinke all too little” (*Discoverie* 121). Ralegh echoes Book I of *The Faerie Queene* in which Contemplation instructs the Red-Crosse Knight “peacably thy painfull pilgrmage / To yonder same Hierusalem do bend, / Where is for thee ordaind a blessèd end” (I.x.61). Further, in Book IV of *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser directs British subjects to support Ralegh’s plans to colonize South America:

...shame on you, ô men, which boast your strong And valiant hearts, in thoughts lesse hard and bold, Yet quaile in conquest of that land of gold. But this to you, O Britons, most pertaines, To whom the right hereof it selfe hath sold; The which for sparing little cost or pains, Loose so immortall glory, and so endlesse gaines. (IV.xi.22)

I highlight Spenser’s connection to early English colonialism, not to engage in the “vigorous debate that has brought attention to a range of questions that had hitherto been studiously avoided by Spenserians” such as “Should *The Faerie Queene* continue to be read as somehow separate from (and hence uninfluenced by) Spenser’s problematic
Rather, I am interested in how Johnson uses aspects of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* to add another dimension to other authors’ already multivalent portrayals of the relationship between gender, writing, and subjectivity through the specific image of an epistle penned in blood.27

By aligning himself with Spenser’s Red-Crosse Knight, Ralegh attempts to transform his mercenary interests in Guiana into a sacred quest for English honour. Such romanticizing of conquest was complicated, however, by the rhetoric of attack that also imbued most colonial texts. Ralegh’s infamous “maidenhead” quotation is often taken as the epitome of these conflated and contradictory rhetorics of conquest:

> Guiana is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought, the face of the earth hath not been torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance, the graves have not beene opened for gold, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld down out of their temples. It hath never been entred by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possesed by any Christian Prince. (196)

Such colonial “rape” was normalized by construing colonizers as romantic Knights who nonetheless participated in the dehumanization of native peoples uncomfortably affiliated with a feminized land awaiting an English “husband.”28

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27 Both Ralegh and Johnson use the “indeterminacy of allegory” (Scanlan 15) to assert their respective ideals and projects. As a “structure of desire...allegory holds out the promise either of recovering something lost or of attaining a deferred desire” (Scanlan 16). Ralegh desires the recovery of his lost reputation and favour with the queen (Fuller 57), as well as the establishment of England’s rights in the Americas before Spain gains too strong a foothold. Johnson, on the other hand, imagines a patriotism defined by a commitment to England undiluted by foreign projects.

28 In “De Guiana, carmen Epicum,” his preface to Lawrence Keymis’s *A Relation of the second Voyage to Guiana*, George Chapman expresses support for Ralegh’s plans by describing Ralegh as “Bridegroom-like, / That is espousde for vertue to his loue” (A4). Cultural rhetoric surrounding early colonialism and militarism was often contradictory, and Chapman’s and Keymis’ defenses were no exceptions. In contrast to Chapman’s marital rhetoric, Keymis describes South American lands which “doe prostitute themselues vnto vs like a faire and beautiful woman” (F3).
Despite selling extremely well when it was published in 1596, Ralegh’s
*Discoverie* failed to win sufficient financial support to enable another trip to Guiana
(Greenblatt 164-65; Coote 249). Ralegh’s captain, Lawrence Keymis, published *A Relation of the second Voyage to Guiana* to remedy this dearth of practical interest in Ralegh’s project, but he too was unsuccessful in securing the necessary financial support. Adding to and reflecting this lack of either public or royal interest in the venture, Ben Jonson satirized Ralegh’s colonial dreams in *Volpone* (Greenblatt 164-65). As Hadfield points out, “English enterprises in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries” were “abject failures,” and it was not until the “establishment of the Virginia Company in 1606” that overseas projects started to look as though they might become truly viable for the English (1998, 111-12). Such cultural doubts qualify claims like Linton’s that England was uniformly in favour of conquest and exploration; thus, given Caelia’s status as both cultural Other and recognizable subject, it does not seem coincidental that as one of the key figures in Johnson’s tale, she is usually almost entirely absent from critical discussions of *Tom a Lincolne*. Linton notes that “Admittedly, Tom’s illicit love with Cealia [sic] remains a problematic episode[,]” but she ignores Johnson’s careful construction of Caelia as a subject; Linton reduces her to a feminine stereotype (29) just, in fact, as Tom does. I would suggest that part of the reason *Tom a Lincolne* has been ignored is that it does not fit comfortably into critics’ notions of the development of early English foreign policy.

Cultural doubt about English militarism also found poignant expression in texts not directly related thereto. A feminized land cannot be directly equated with foreign women, but such rhetoric of military conquest may be used to denounce violence against
women. Describing Lucrece’s body after she kills herself, Shakespeare uses such rhetoric to denounce Tarquin’s violation of her:

...bubbling from her breast, [her blood] doth divide
In two slow rivers, that the crimson blood
Circles her body in on every side,
Who, like a late-sacked island, vastly stood
Bare and unpeopled in this fearful flood.

(The Rape of Lucrece ll.1737-41)

In 'Tis Pity She’s a Whore, Giovanni uses mining imagery to describe Annabella’s heart on his dagger, exclaiming, “I digged for food / In a much richer mine than gold or stone / Of any value balanced” (V.vi.25-27); this imagery disturbingly reflects Ralegh’s obsession with Guianan land that has not yet been turned, wrought, etc—that is, has not yet been mined for its riches. Johnson uses similar language in Tom a Lincolne, but to foreground the reality of sexualized violence that the metaphor is often used to obscure.

In response to King Arthur’s sexual advances, Angellica replies, “before I will yeeld the conquest of my virginitie to the spoyle of such vnchast desires, I will suffer more torments, than mans heart can imagine...I will not loose that matchlesse Iewell, for all the treasure the large Ocean containes” (8). Nevertheless, Arthur eventually succeeds in coercing Angellica into a sexual relationship, and the result is the birth of Tom, whom Arthur leaves in a field to be found and reared by shepherds.

In spite of Tom’s questionable conception and “meane” upbringing as a shepherd, the narrator claims that

hee was of a valiant and inuincible courage, so that from his Cradle and infancie, it seemed he was vowed to Mars, and martiall exploits. And in his life and manners is deciphered the Image of true Nobilitie...bearing in his breast the princely thoughts of his Father. (11)
Driven by “princely thoughts,” Tom collects a band of followers who go to Barnsedale Heath, and survive a “long time upon the robberies and spoyles of passengers, in so much that the whole Country were greatly molest by them” (12). Tom invades and colonizes the Heath, as though in preparation for more ambitious future invasions. Upon hearing of the outlaws plaguing the area, King Arthur concludes that their leader must be his son, so Tom and “his lawlesse followers” are pardoned and Tom joins the Round Table (15). Soon after being welcomed into Court, Tom requests permission “to try his Knight-hood in forraine Countries, whereas yet did neuer Englishman make his aduenture; and so eternize his name to all posterity” (21), and Arthur readily grants permission. Arthur and Tom make the same kinds of errors, which are repeated often; in particular, both leave home in fundamental ways, to the detriment of those to whom they journey, and to those they leave behind. Besides his later abandonment of Caelia, of particular note is the damage Tom and his followers cause the citizens of Lincolne. Not only do they leave all their flocks untended when they abscond for the Heath, but they also break their parents’ hearts, literally to the point of death (12-14). Later, as Tom wreaks havoc in Portugal, Arthur tries to contain the “home-bred Mutinies, and treacherous rebellions” (16) that have arisen because of his inability to focus on England instead of his sexual and foreign military conquests.

Having completed his first mission abroad, Tom returns to England in great pomp. Leading the conquered royal family of the Portuguese Court through London, Tom gloats while his prisoners follow dejectedly. In their respective cultural and sexual conquests, Arthur and Tom rely on what Emily Bartels describes as a “discourse of difference that [comprises]...crucial, self-affirming distinctions between self...and other,”
distinctions that helped make military expansion more attractive to the English (4). Rather than celebrating Tom’s triumph, however, the crowds that line the London streets “grieued at [the Portuguese prisoners’] mishaps” (19). Johnson collapses cultural distinctions in *Tom a Lincolne* to show that believing in and acting upon the rhetoric of difference cannot help but produce negative consequences at home. Johnson also undermines the misused rhetorics of romantic quest and cultural difference by re-imagining key characters in *The Faerie Queene*. Tom, having been renamed the Red-rose Knight after establishing himself at Barnsedale Heath, is based on Spenser’s Red-Crosse Knight. Both characters are sprung “from ancient race / of Saxon kings” (*FQ* I.x.65), but cultural notions of an inherent connection between royal blood and virtue, either personal or political, are given short shrift in Johnson’s romance. While the Red-Crosse Knight engages in a spiritual quest culminating in his marriage to Una, who allegorically represents both spiritual and national unity, Tom embarks upon a journey for riches, fame, and ultimately a wife, but without ever contemplating the state of his soul. Because Tom abandons England in favour of foreign places and people (whom he also abandons), England, via the allegorically named Anglitorra, must also abandon him. That Tom’s conquests cause damage both at home and abroad is iconographically reiterated when Anglitorra deserts Tom and sails away dressed, much like Caelia, in “the attyre of an Amazon” (62).

Tom’s and Anglitorra’s affiliations with Red-Crosse and Una, respectively, are negatively reinforced when Tom arrives at Prester John’s land. In *The Faerie Queene*, Red-Crosse must slay the dragon that entraps Una’s parents and bars the way to the Tree of Life through which grace may be attained. But Tom slays the dragon terrorizing
Prester John and his people for the sake of a tree that bears golden fruit (46). In *Tom a Lincolne*, Johnson implies that the religious significance of Red-Crosse’s journey, which Ralegh employs to legitimate his Guiana plans, is merely a ruse disguising a shameless quest for material wealth. Prester John wants to keep both the gold-bearing tree and his daughter, in spite of his promise to grant her in marriage to whomever kills the dragon; Tom performs this feat not for honour’s sake, but to win the hand of Anglitorra. That possessing her has nothing to do with honour is made clear when, in the face of Prester John’s reneging on his promise to bestow his daughter on the winner, Tom kidnaps Anglitorra and escapes to England.

While Johnson’s inversions of Red-Crosse, Una, and their journey are integral to his anti-militaristic stance in *Tom a Lincolne*, Caelia is the most significant example of the way he uses Spenserian characters to collapse distinctions between Self and Other. Johnson conflates Spenser’s Caelia with the Queen of the Fairy Land (Elizabeth I’s primary double in *The Faerie Queene*) when creating his own Amazonian Caelia. Merging these central Spenserian characters makes Tom’s abandonment of Caelia akin to abandoning the English monarch, a figure Tom’s travels are in part supposed to honour. Caelia’s role in Johnson’s critique becomes even more complex when we consider that she is also a Dido figure. Linton argues that this Virgilian association “endows Tom’s travels with the imperial significance of Aeneas’ mission” (30); but while Aeneas leaves

29 Johnson may also have had in mind the Apple of Discord from the legend of the Trojan War. Like Paris, Tom finds himself in a situation in which no matter what he chooses, chaos will follow. However, while we can see Paris as a relatively innocent victim of fate and the gods, Tom consciously chooses to abandon his adoptive family, worry travelers on the heath, travel overseas, become involved with Caelia and then leave her, and marry Anglitorra (who eventually murders him). While he is fated to be the bastard son of Arthur, he causes the rest of his ensuing troubles himself.

30 Like Aeneas, Tom arrives unexpectedly at an unknown island and receives both formal and erotic welcome from the queen; like Aeneas, he leaves suddenly to engage in further adventure; like Dido, Caelia commits suicide in response to being abandoned by her lover, leaving their young son behind.
Dido because the gods command him to do so, Tom can claim no such divine compulsion. Tom leaves only because he wants to explore more unknown lands, and because after four months in the company of the Amazonian women, he decides “there is no greater dishonour to aduenturous Knights, then to spend their dayes in Ladyes bosomes” (28).

Indeed, Caelia’s bloody letter suggests that Johnson had Ovid’s *Heroides* as much in mind as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, with Caelia’s letter echoing both Dido’s and Canace’s epistles. Of most importance here, however, is how closely Canace’s letter associates blood and the epistolary expression of doomed love:

If anie blots doo blind, or blurre my lynes,  
The murther of their Mistresse makes the same.  
My right hand holdes the pen, the left a sword,  
And in my carefull lap the Paper lyes.  
Of Canace such is the griesly forme,  
Whilst to her brother shee deuisde to write:  
For so I may suffice my wrathfull Sire.  
Oh, that himselfe were here a gazer on  
His daughters death: Oh, that the Author sawe  
With present eye, the thing he gaue in charge.  
(Turberville ll.1-10, unpaginated)

As striking here as the affiliation between blood and writing is the sense that writing is something imposed upon women, that to write, someone else must first author (in the Renaissance sense of the word) them into becoming writers, a sentiment echoed in Dido’s epistle when she calls Aeneas the “author of my death” (Turberville I.6, unpaginated).  

The suggestion that Caelia’s letter to Tom is the result of his authoring of her identity inevitably presents itself because of the similarities between Ovid’s heroical epistles and Johnson’s romance. However, Caelia rejects the male inscription of

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31 Such elision of female self-construction through writing is seen as well in Michael Drayton’s *Englands Heroicall Epistles*, when Rosamond, in her epistle to Henry II, describes herself as “stayned by thy hand” and “blotted with [the] foule offense” of adultery (ll.14-15).
women’s identities, texts, and fates seen in Dido’s and Canace’s letters, and asserts in her letter that she “liued and dyed with an vnspotted m inde” (53). Further, Caelia’s bloody letter is also infused with religious meaning. In The Faerie Queene, Caelia (whose name means “heavenly”) is the keeper of the House of Holiness, where she abides with her three daughters, Fidelia, Speranza, and Charissa. Johnson’s Caelia has no such daughters, though without much convincing, she extends her charity to Tom and his starving shipmates. Caelia is so generous, in fact, that it were “as though Heauen had sent them present comfort” (24). Caelia then places her faith in the faithless Tom, and only kills herself after giving up hope that he will keep his promise to return. In The Faerie Queene, Caelia’s daughter Fidelia is described as holding “A booke, that was both signd and seal’d with blood, / Wherein darke things were writ, hard to be vnderstood” (I.x.13), the “sacred Booke, with bloud ywrit” (I.x.19) which Fidelia teaches the Red-Crosse Knight to read. In contrast, Johnson’s Red-rose Knight is too deeply ensconced in his militaristic dreams to imagine that Caelia could have anything important to tell him. That Caelia has some vital connection to heavenly power is not clear to Tom when she provides him and his men with heavenly charity, nor when she washes up against his ship and he finds the bloody letter on her corpse. Johnson reinforces Caelia’s bloody letter’s spiritual significance in other ways as well. Before stowing it in her bosom, Caelia wraps the epistle in cere-cloth, a waterproof material used chiefly as a winding sheet in which

32 Caelia helps Tom and his shipmates, in spite of her vow to ban men from the island because of her late father’s disastrous and “continuall warre against the bordering Ilanders” (23); this detail reminds readers of how Arthur’s political troubles result from his constant focusing of his attention outside his own country.

33 In Thomas Heywood’s dramatic adaptation of Tom a Lincolne, Caelia’s letter to Tom is not written in blood. The contents of the two letters are very similar, both Caelias commit suicide when they see Tom’s ship sailing by without stopping, and both their letters are wrapped in cere-cloth. By choosing not to include the detail of the bloody ink, however, Heywood disassociates his heroine’s letter from the tradition of spiritual blood writing which infuses Johnson’s text. In Heywood’s play, the cere-cloth in which Caelia encloses her letter becomes a device employed merely to protect it “from tincture of water” (75). This
to wrap dead bodies, thus linking Caelia’s bloody letter with her own sacrificed body. As Spalding points out, the Charters of Christ were commonly described as “written upon the parchment of the Lord’s skin...The letters are his wounds, the sealing-wax His blood, etc” (xliii). Having written her bloody letter, Caelia prays to God that “when my soule hath made passage out of this world, my body may be intombed in [Tom’s] boosome” (52). This prayer is answered immediately after she jumps off the cliff. In addition, Caelia describes herself in her letter in terms recalling Christ’s temptation in the wilderness: “for the space of fortie dayes, I stood vpon a Rocke, expecting thy returne” (53). Filtering such biblical images and tropes through the erotic context of romance would seem to negate Caelia’s heavenly status, but in fact, it places her, as Tom’s primary victim of conquest, in the role of a suffering saviour. Tom’s sin with respect to Caelia further amplifies his inability first to detect the pure charitableness that leads to her ultimate sexual vulnerability to him, and then to be unable to consider the implications of pillaging in such base fashion a Queen and land drawn in such clearly Edenic terms.

omission is perhaps not surprising given Heywood’s parody of blood-writing in The Fair Maid of the Exchange. Johnson also uses this detail to reaffirm his collapsing of the distinctions between Self and Other. Arthur confesses all his sins as an adulterer on his deathbed, the direct result of which is his court’s disintegration: “no sooner was Kinge Arthurs Funerall solemnized, but the whole troupes of Lords, Knights and Gentlemen, Ladies, and others, were (like to a splitted Shippe torne by the Tempest of the Sea) seuered, every one departed whither his Fancie best pleased” (62). In response to Arthur’s revelations, Guenevere sends guards to murder Angellica, whose body is “wrapped in Seare cloth” (69). Angellica’s failed attempt to resist Arthur’s conquest of her virginity eventually results in her sacrifice to Guenevere’s jealousy; further, the wrapping of Angellica’s body in cere-cloth reminds readers of Tom’s conquest of Caelia and the consequences thereof.

See, for example, Ralegh’s use of Guiana’s landscape to describe Eden in his History of the World, or Aphra Behn’s Oroonoko in which the narrator likens the Surinam natives to “our first parents before the Fall” (2172). Further, Arthur’s conquest of Angellica’s virginity is described in pseudo-biblical terms; Arthur plays Satan to Angellica’s Eve in the Garden: Arthur “went bouldly into the Garden; where taking Angellica by the hand as shee sate upon a bed of Violets, which as then grew vnder the Arbour, in this manner began to court her” (7).
Having tempted her with an unwanted affair, Tom then tempts Caelia to despair by breaking his promise to return to the Fairy Land. Caelia’s letter may be associated with Christian blood writing, but suicide is, after all, a sin; at the same time, the death of the testator is necessary for his or her covenant to be meaningful. This contradiction is further complicated because Caelia’s letter does not provide its recipient with the inheritance of heaven promised both in the Bible and in the Charters. Instead, her letter pronounces impending doom; she writes, “knowest thou not, that every noble mind is bound to keepe his word, vpon paine of reproach and shame? but thou hast infringed it, and hast broken thy oath of Knighthood: which no excuse can recouer” (53 emphasis added). Given the common colonial association between the New World and Eden, and Johnson’s apparent conflation of the two via Caelia’s double status as both heavenly (in Christian terms) and Amazonian, we can see that Tom’s rejection of Heaven was always already in effect. Just by leaving England, and then by abusing foreign peoples, Tom rejects his inheritance of Heaven, which has been at home in England from the beginning.

This notion is born out in the events of the second part of Tom a Lincolne, in which Tom suffers for the oaths he breaks in Part One. Returning to England from Prester John’s land, Tom learns of his origins; this knowledge results in Anglitorra abandoning him and ultimately murdering him. That “no excuse can recouer” Tom’s failings and errors seems to be right for the Christian inheritance of heaven has been converted into retribution. Tom cannot escape retribution, either for his own sins, or for his father’s. Yet, his sons ultimately receive the inheritance of Heaven as Johnson can most clearly imagine it: a virtuous life in England. The romance concludes with the two brothers, the Faerie Knight and the Black Knight (born of Caelia and Anglitorra,
respectively), returning to Lincolne together. The brothers “ended their dayes” in Lincolne, having “left the noble feats of Chiualry, [and] lived a life zealous, and most pleasing to God: erecting many Alms-houses for poore people, giuing thereto great Wealth and Treasure” (94).

John Simons notes that Johnson was “fiercely patriotic” (277), and in <i>Tom a Lincolne</i>, this patriotism is expressed via his constant consideration of the damage to both Self and Others that results from leaving home. Only when comfortably settled in Lincolne do Tom’s sons achieve any peace, either personal or national. Even in the more conventional romance-adventure <i>The Seven Champions of Christendome</i>, Johnson criticizes the figure of the English adventuring knight by describing St. George and the other English champions threatening Lucina (a nun resistant to seduction) with death unless she accepts St. George’s advances: “shaking their bright swordes against her vertuous brest, they protested...that except she would yeeld vnto Saint George her vnconquered loue, they would bathe their weapons in her dearest bloud” (241). While the champions threaten her without actually intending to murder her if she continues to resist the knight’s advances (241), the consequences are nonetheless dire. Lucina publicly rejects St. George’s offer using the language of conquest: “I had rather offer vp my soule into the societie and sacred bosome of Diana, than to yeeld the castle of my chastitie, to the conquest of anie Knight in the world” (243). She then aligns herself with Lucrece (and therefore St. George, England’s hero, with Tarquin) by committing suicide.

The popularity of <i>Tom a Lincolne</i> (reflected in how widely read and printed it was, as well as in Thomas Heywood’s play, based on Johnson’s romance, which was performed at Grey’s Inn), alongside the dearth of practical support for texts like Ralegh’s
Discoverie of Guiana, complicates critics’ notions that early English military conquests were universally attractive, particularly for the merchant and working classes to which writers like Johnson belonged. Further, Johnson’s decision to address these issues through the image of a woman creating text in a tradition of redemptive blood writing reiterates his refusal to engage in odious discrimination between an English Self and a foreign Other. Yet, Johnson himself uses blood writing for varying purposes. In The Seven Champions, he describes the wicked enchantress Kalyb as having gained her powers via an “Obligation which shee subscribed with her dearest blood” (11). Yet, also in The Seven Champions, Johnson describes an old man who presents St. George with a book written in his own blood; this bloody book describes not only his two daughters’ Christ-like sufferings and deaths at the hands of the Knight of the Black Castle, but also the old man’s yearning for Christian justice: “In…dumbe silence and sorrow of minde I remained three daies and three nightes, numbring my silent passions with the minutes of the day, and my mightie griefes, with the starres of heauen” (184). In spite of blood letters’ cultural affiliation with the Charters of Christ, and Johnson’s intricate construction of Caelia’s epistle as part of that tradition, blood letters remain epistemologically unstable in English Renaissance literature. That Johnson was simply conflicted about the nature of blood letters, that he changed his mind, or that he was merely a hack relying on a sensational plot device are all arguments that might be made to explain his contradictory use of bloody writing. I would suggest, however, that Johnson’s myriad use of blood letters reflects a larger cultural attempt to articulate and define the nature of Others’ subjectivity (whether female or foreign), and English identity as defined by the often irreconcilable demands of religion on the one hand, and economic
imperatives on the other. That Johnson has been so summarily dismissed suggests a

certain reluctance not only to pay serious critical attention to writers who challenge,
rewrite, or parody both more famous contemporaries like Spenser and Arthurian legend,
but also a certain unwillingness to acknowledge that Renaissance writers (and the culture
they represented) were neither uniformly in favour of military conquest nor uniformly
misogynist.

The cultural conflict Kyd’s, Chapman’s, Ford’s, and Johnson’s texts suggest is
one between written authority and subjectivity. Both are drawn in tenuous lines, and are
then even more tenuously connected by being figured through female characters who are
essentially de-authorized by their gender, by their transgressions as women, and by their
physical vulnerability. Indeed, Bel-imperia’s, Tamyra’s, Annabella’s, and Caelia’s letters
are not only partially effective at best, but these characters are also doomed either
mortally or socially, or both. Nonetheless, these figures of bloody epistolary production
represent a growing cultural awareness in Renaissance England that between accepted
notions of what constitutes familiar and unthreatening (to the status quo) social identity
and textual production as the sign of the subject unfettered by social mores and needs
there is a grey area in which both more than simply coexist—they define one another.
More specifically, these texts represent a space where this interdependence of seeming
contradictions (accepted identity versus private and autonomous subjectivity) permits on
one level an acknowledgement that female authorship speaks directly to and from a
subjectivity that is unsuccessfully denied women, either fictive or real. On another level,
such images of the brittle relationship between subjectivity and writing speak to a larger
question of how the subject fits into culture when writing is potentially also the site both
of social disruption and the subject’s repression of her real desires and power to act autonomously.
Chapter Three

“spite of custom, we will sue to you”: Metatheatricality, Letter-Writing, and the Female Lover

I

In The Spanish Tragedy, Hieronimo ironically asks, “What’s a play without a woman in it?” (IV.i.97). Ostensibly barred from acting on public stages in England until 1660, women nevertheless fairly commonly performed in household dramas, pageants, and masques throughout the Renaissance.\(^\text{36}\) Despite recorded occurrences of real women’s (usually private) performances during this period, however, Bel-imperia’s performance in Solimon and Perseda seems to suggest that women’s performance is inherently dangerous. Instructed to murder Balthazar, Bel-imperia does so, but then abandons Hieronimo’s script and commits suicide; Hieronimo laments that she has “missed her part in this” (IV.iv.140). I argue in Chapter Two that Bel-imperia knows exactly what she does, that committing suicide is her last opportunity to “perform” according to her own inclinations. But while English public stages did not employ real women, they were the sites of numerous female characters represented as consciously and metatheatrically\(^\text{37}\) “performing” their gender in order to realize their desires as

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\(^\text{36}\) Responding to the widespread assumption that women were legally prevented from acting on the Renaissance stage, Stephen Orgel notes that “there is counterevidence bearing on the matter to be found even in the standard histories” (4). Drawing on a wealth of evidence, Orgel concludes, “until the 1530s, at least, women seem to have performed unproblematically in guild and civic theatrical productions. The evidence for actresses on the stage is not, however, limited to pre-Elizabethan times. I myself found two women apparently routinely performing professionally as theatrical singers in 1632” (5).

\(^\text{37}\) I draw on the basic meanings of “meta-” and “metatheatre” here. The latter is defined as “Theatre which draws attention to its unreality, esp. by the use of a play within a play; (also) those particular parts of a drama which exemplify this device” (\textit{OED}); metatheatre highlights the constructed nature of its representations rather than asserting verisimilitude. The prefix “meta” more specifically contains my aim: “1. Denoting change, transformation, permutation, or substitution. 2. With sense ‘beyond, above, at a higher level’. a. Prefixed to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions” (\textit{OED} emphasis added). Metatheatre raises questions about the
subjects—sometimes in keeping with patriarchal order, sometimes in contradistinction to it, but most often in combined deference and rebellion. Theatrical performances of letter-writing are intimately related to performances of “feminine” modesty, chastity, and silence in *Tancred and Gismund* (1591-92), *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1590s), Sir Giles Goosecap (1605-06), *The Gentleman Usher* (1606), and *The Fawn* (1604-06). Like many Renaissance Comedies, these plays conclude with marriage as the sign and symbol of a restored social order; at the same time, however, the letter-writers I discuss here recognize the fragility of the status quo and reassert it only strategically, for their own ends. Gismund, Julia, Eugenia, Margaret, and Dulcimel simultaneously perform their own desires and the restoration of social order, which suggests that integral to their playwrights’ creation of them was imbuing these characters with the knowledge that gender is performative. In particular, letters function (both practically and symbolically) to situate letter-writers within recognizable social categories, including gender; but rather than simply confirming gender identity, these dramatic letters suggest that it is in fact performative and therefore open to (meta)theatrical manipulation.

Letter-writing is inherently performative. The act of writing is a performance of particular social roles via precise linguistic markers and maneuvers (described by experts such as Erasmus and Day) designed to invite responses which also conform to accepted social codes; at the same time, writing figures either real people or characters actively fashioning themselves according to their own needs and inclinations. Thus, the individual motivations and discourses lurking beneath the conventional rhetorical forms

assumptions and practices of real life primarily through language: “Over and over again in his early work, Shakespeare takes advantage of those play metaphors which are inherent in the nature of the English language itself. He delights in the use of words like ‘act’, ‘scene’, ‘tragedy’, ‘perform’, ‘part’, and ‘play’ which possess in ordinary usage both a non-dramatic and a specifically theatrical meaning” (Righter 90).
that comprise proper letter-writing posits an agent—what I am terming the “subject”—with a mind engaged in conscious self-fashioning. A paradox therefore emerges: while letters represent the presence of a developed subject behind epistolary creation, that subject cannot be fully present in the text meant to represent them; indeed, the presence of a controlling subjective force is only detectable precisely because of the mysterious distance between the writer and the text.

This distance between creator and textual object mirrors the relationship between performer and role that is the essence of metatheatricality. In the plays I address in this chapter, metatheatrical language and metatheatrical behaviour infuse the penning of epistles; the female characters’ wooing letters function as stage signs for the very problem of performativity in social relations and identities that are meant to be immutable. In other words, because letters are inherently performative, they are also imbued with latent theatricality; indeed, in these plays theatricality and epistolarity function as reciprocal referents. Because of this reciprocity, we are confronted with the possibility of a subject who is antecedent to her performance of her own gender—she is a subject who happens to be performing femininity. Because of the strangely secondary nature of gender in relation to subjectivity, these specifically female characters are able to manipulate to their own ends traditionally feminine qualities such as modesty, obedience, chastity, shrewishness, etc. Put another way, the fissure between femaleness and the characteristics thought to define it (defined and recognized as femininity) reveals that the subjects in these plays are in fact simultaneously gender neutral and female. And this gender neutrality then is what creates the possibility of these characters creating friendships with their beaux. Renaissance social theory insisted upon likeness as the
basis for friendship (hence the abundance of texts lauding male friendship over heterosexual union). So with gender as the prime differentiator between subjects undermined, real companionate marriage becomes not only imaginable, but also the ultimate and sole aim of these plays’ letter-writing performances. The implications, however, are startling. The tension created by female subjects subverting the status quo only to then re-establish it results not in a simple denial of the viability of female subjectivity. Indeed, rather than disempowering the female subject, such eruptions and containments in fact reveal both the essential instability of an androcentric culture wishing to deny the presence of the female subject and said culture’s dependence on the approbation of such subjects.

Given the conservative results of such potentially subversive representations of female subjectivity, it is perhaps surprising that real women’s presence at theatres seemed to elicit so much cultural anxiety. Famous anti-theatricalist Stephen Gosson warns women they are in danger at theatres because “you can forbid no man, that vieweth you, to noate you, and that noateth you, to iudge you, for entring to places of suspition” (Schoole of Abuse 115). Gosson’s anxiety about women being regarded in theatres is not, however, so much that they will be judged, or that “those wanton spectacles of lyght huswiues, [will] draw[,] gods from heauens, & young men from them selues to shipwracke of honestie” (Schoole of Abuse 87), but that “they which shew thēselves openly, desire to bee seene” (Schoole of Abuse 115, emphasis added). That women might “desire to be seene,” I would suggest, illuminates an understanding of women as subjects, because to desire and to act on one’s desires—and I would add, to have the power and willingness to arouse others’ desires—denies the ostensible erasure of
women’s subjectivities seen in their absences in letter-writing manuals and on the public stage. Gosson thus unwittingly construes women as occupying equal subjective footing with both male spectators (because they actively assert desire) and actors (because they might perform those desires) in specifically theatrical terms. Because of this, his claim that theatrical cross-dressing is a “breach of Gods cōmaundement” (*Playes Confuted* 178) reveals an awareness of the relative ease with which individuals might step outside social boundaries, including class, age, and gender.

Therefore, as Jean Howard argues, “the scene of theatrical production…made its spectators aware of representations as representations and not as reflections of absolute truth” (1995, 11). I argue that this understanding (even when articulated in texts as anxiety-ridden as Gosson’s) necessarily went in two directions; acknowledging theatrical representations as such made it possible to acknowledge social identity as inherently performative, and as the performative nature of identity came more and more to be consciously explored in plays performed on the public stages, the less anxious such representations became. Accordingly, in Wilmot’s *Tancred and Gismund* there is real terror associated with not playing one’s assigned part, but by the time Shakespeare’s *Pericles* was produced, female characters are often represented playfully performing their parts in collusion with sympathetic male characters. In *Pericles*, Simonides receives a letter from his daughter, Thaisa, in which “She tells me here she’ll wed the stranger knight” (II.v.16). Simonides is not offended either by Thaisa’s choice or by her insistence on marrying Pericles “whether I dislike or no” (II.v.20); yet, he asserts that while “I do commend her choice, / And will no longer have it be delayed... / ...I must dissemble it” (II.v.21-23). For reasons not clearly indicated in this aside, Simonides tests
and torments Pericles, first presenting him with the letter and then accusing him of being a traitor for bewitching Thaisa. Pericles passes this test of his mettle by asserting that “Even in his throat—unless it be the King—/ That calls me traitor, I return the lie” (II.v.55-56); he is then permitted to see Thaisa, during which meeting she and Simonides briefly prolong their performance of familial discord:

PERICLES
Then, as you are virtuous as fair,
Resolve your angry father if my tongue
Did e’er solicit, or my hand subscribe
To any syllable that made love to you.

THAISA
Why, sir, say if you had, who takes offense
At that would make me glad?

SIMONIDES
Yea, mistress, are you so peremptory?
(Aside.) I am glad on’t with all my heart.
I’ll tame you, I’ll bring you in subjection! (II.v.67-74)

This scene is remarkable because it is so unnecessary. Thaisa writes her father a letter declaring her love for Pericles when, as well as living in the same house with him, she enjoys a relationship of mutual respect with him. By writing the letter instead of verbally proclaiming her desire to marry Pericles, Thaisa sets up this scene in which her father may play the domineering patriarch to her alternately chaste and rebellious child. Thaisa and Simonides toy with gender roles, knowing they will be subordinated to personal desire, but because Pericles is unable to perceive relations as performative, he easily falls prey to Simonides’s apparent entrapment. This ignorance also explains why Pericles is so slow to realize that Antiochus and his daughter are disguising their incestuous relations with public performances of filial devotion, is unaware that Dionyza is playing the good hostess to cover up Marina’s apparent murder, and is unable to recognize his daughter when she is dressed as a poor music tutor. Characters unable to distinguish
between the essential theatricality of identity and social interaction used for either deceptive and dangerous reasons and identity and social interactions metatheatrically used for playful and socially constructive reasons suffer themselves and threaten to harm others through their ignorance.

Wilmot’s, Shakespeare’s, Chapman’s, and Marston’s plays bear out Howard’s claim that in metadramatic plays, “power is shown to lie with the theatrically skillful” (1989, 44). Indeed, one of the Renaissance theatre’s most attractive aspects was “the pleasure [it afforded] of knowing that the secret of the theater is artificial” (Jones-Davies 80). As discussed in the previous chapter, secrets are essential to the defining of subjectivity; to recall Hanson’s arguments, to act a part is to keep one’s truth—“the heart of one’s mystery”—a secret. Thus, anti-theatricality represents perhaps the most anxious recognition of individuals as to some degree independent of cultural norms; rather than expressing concern that identity is mutable and unstable, metatheatrical representations of (female) subjectivity playfully assert the unknowability of that which they signify.

Lionel Abel argues that it “is essential for the hero of metatheatre [to] be conscious of the part he himself plays in constructing the drama that unfolds around him” (167 emphasis added). That such conscious and subtle dramatic behaviour, (even) when assigned to female characters, was so attractive to early modern audiences speaks to the culture’s shifting sense both of what constituted a subject and how that subject could and should represent him- or herself in the realm of the social.

II
Frederick Kiefer notes that Robert Wilmot’s *Tancred and Gismund*38 “is both the earliest surviving English play based on a *novella* and the earliest extant tragedy of romantic love in English” (1977, 36). More important than the play’s status as historical artifact, however, is its articulation of early English confusion about the extent and desirability of human agency (particularly women’s). These issues are addressed but not fully attended to in Wilmot’s portrayal of Tancred’s incestuous love for his daughter, which leads him to refuse her request to marry Guiszard and ultimately leads all three to their deaths. Integral to these issues of agency is Wilmot’s portrayal of Gismund as a desiring young woman who circumvents her father’s edict of celibacy, woos Guiszard with a letter, and then follows her lover to the grave. Kiefer argues that in this play love is “a menace to familial loyalty and even a threat to one’s moral probity,” and that “As a violation of virtue, Gismond’s passion has to be made unattractive” (1977, 40; 43). Kiefer also argues, however, that “the severest kind of moral condemnation is juxtaposed with the most eloquent pleas for the fulfillment of physical desire” and that “this drama [is] devoted no less to castigating the lovers than to heralding their love” (1977, 43). Kiefer is right to point out these contradictions, but does not explore how they are related, or the implications thereof. I argue that *Tancred and Gismund*, as historical artifact, is also the first English play to begin to explore the connection between female subjectivity, writing, and performing. While it does not as explicitly conflate letter-writing and dramatic production as the plays I discuss in the following sections, *Tancred and

38 “Somewhere between 1566 and 1568 five gentlemen of the Inner Temple composed a classical tragedy entitled *Gismond of Salerne*...Wilmot, one of the five gentlemen who had originally written the play, rescued it ‘from the deuouring iawes of obliluion’ by publishing it, after extensive revision, in 1591 or 1592, under the title of *Tancred and Gismund*” (Seufert 319). (I refer only to Wilmot as the author here, but it ought to be noted that the four other original authors include “Act I—Rod. Sta(fford); Act II—Hen. No(ël); Act III—G. Al; Act IV—Ch. Hat(ton); Act V—R. W(ilmot)” (Murray 387).)
Gismund does articulate a conflict between the perceived reality and the performance of gender through the act of letter-writing. Addressing the Ladies Marie Peter and Anne Gray in one of his prefatory epistles, Wilmot figures Gismund as a negative exemplum, asserting that the

*perusing of some mournfull matter, tending to the view of a notable example, will refresh your wits in a gloomie day...[and] may serue ye also for a solemne reuell against this Festiuall time, for Gismunds bloudie shadow, with a little cost, may be intreated in her self-like person to speake to ye.* ("To the right Worshipfull" 2-3)

That proper feminine behaviour might be learned from a young man dressed as Gismund’s “self-like person” highlights Wilmot’s perhaps unwitting acknowledgment of gender as written and performed; this implies an awareness of gendered virtue as learned rather than inherent, which in turn suggests that women require constant reminders of their proper behaviours and desires. 39 Kiefer may be right about Wilmot’s essentially moral motivations in revising *Tancred and Gismund*, but the playwright disrupts a clearly gendered moral at the same time that he attempts to establish its terms.

Accordingly, the performance of daughterly duty comes to the fore early in the play. Having returned to her father’s house after her husband’s death, Gismund laments “how soone my youth withdrawes / It selfe away, how swift my pleasaut spring / Runnes out his race” (II.i.297-99). Asking herself “if I should, my springing yeares neglect. / And suffer youth, fruitles to fade away: / Whereto liue I? or whereto was I borne? / Wherfore hath nature deckt me with her grace? / Why haue I tasted the delights of loue?” (II.i.302-6), Gismund concludes that she was made to be married. She

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39 This play was performed sometime before its publication around 1591-92 “before the queen by the gentlemen of the Inner Temple” (*Tancred and Gismund, Intro. v*).
therefore presses her Aunt Lucrece to persuade her father to allow her to remarry but he refuses anyway:

Is this the end
Of all our hopes, that we haue promised
Vnto our selfe, by this her widowhood?
Would our deare daughter, would our onely ioy,
Would she fersake vs? would she leaue vs now?
Before she hath closde vp, our dying eies,
And with her teares, bewaild our funerall?
No other solace, doth her father craue,
But whilst the fates, maintaine his dying life,
Her healthfull presence, gladsome to his soule[.]

(II.ii.414-23)

In spite of its eminent reasonableness, Wilmot implies that Gismund’s desire to remarry is inherently selfish, for it exists in direct opposition to her duty as daughter. When Lucrece reports Tancred’s refusal to Gismund, Gismund vows to behave according to filial expectation: “loue and duetie force me to refraine, / And driue away these fond affections, / Submitting them vnto my fathers hest” (II.i.324-26); yet, she merely performs the role of daughterly duty in order secretly to fulfill her real desires.

Living in her jealous father’s house, Gismund sees only one possibility for communicating with her lover—she writes Guiszard a letter and seals it in a cane which she then presents covertly to him. In the Argumentum Tragediae Wilmot provides the interpretative lens through which he claims to want us to interpret this letter and its delivery: Gismund, “waxing wearie of that her fathers purpose, bent her mind to secret loue of the County Palurin: to whom (he being likewise inflamed with loue of her) by a Letter subtilly inclosed in a clouen cane, she gaue to vnderstand a conuenient way for their desired meetings” (A2). Gismund’s “subtlety,” the fact that the cane is “cloven,” that their love is “inflamed” all associate Gismund’s rebellion against her father’s edict of celibacy as either hellish or demonic; this hellishness is reiterated in Wilmot’s association
of Gismund’s chamber with a medieval hell mouth. Having received the cane from
Gismund, Guiszard wonders if “Perhaps herein she hath something inclosde” and then
according to the stage directions “He breaks it” (III.iii.751). The breaking of the
material cane reflects Gismund’s refusal to perform her assigned role as the metaphorical
prop of her father’s old age. Not only does this cast her in an extremely cruel light but it
also prefigures her own impending self-destruction.

While Wilmot portrays Gismund’s rebellion as dangerous both to herself and to
her father, he complicates his own negative reading of her letter in his presentation of
Guiszard and Gismund’s love in the play proper. Wilmot himself did not write the first
version of Act III wherein we witness the lovers’ revelations of their feelings, but in his
revision he did not alter the attractiveness of that love. Before reading Gismund’s letter,
Guiszard laments the “greeuous pain they dure which neither may / Forget their Loues,
ne yet enioy their loue. / I know by proofe, and daily make assay, / [That] Loue hath
brought my Ladies hart to loue / My faithfull loue with like loue to requite” (III.iii.699-
703). This mutuality exemplifies companionate marriage—Guiszard loves Gismund for
taking the initiative to woo him, praising how in Gismund “wit with beautie hath chosen
their place” (III.iii.754). He also imagines Gismund as equal with himself: “Heauens
haue ye seen, or hath the age of man / Recorded such a myracle as this? / In equall loue
two noble hearts to frame / That never spake one with anothers blisse” (III.iii.729-32). In
her letter, Gismund echoes this rhetoric of equality through the metaphor of
interchangeable identities; she addresses him as “Mine owne, as I am yours, whose heart
(I know) / No lesse than mine, for lingering help of woe / Doth long too long” (III.iii.663-
65). Since Wilmot revised the play, one cannot simply attribute conflicting
representations of Gismund’s letter and love for Guiszard to poor collaborative writing. Rather, I suggest that Wilmot maintained these aspects of the play because they would delight the play’s mixed courtly audience. The way Guiszard describes Gismund’s presentation to him of the cane is particularly sexualized, but this aspect of their exchange is brought to the fore only after the legitimacy of their love has been established. Guiszard reports that “as we danst, she dallied with the cane, / And sweetly whispered I should be her king / And with this cane the scepter of our rule, / Command the sweets of her surprised heart” (III.iii.784-89). The sexual image of Gismund “dallying” with the cane and the description of her “surprised heart” contribute to her sexual demonization. At the same time, however, by having Gismund refer to Guiszard as her “king,” Wilmot gestures toward the relationship between God and humankind that was often deployed in both fictional and non-fictional literatures to legitimate companionate marriage (Rose 4).

Gismund is ostensibly demonized because her daughterly duty is only performative and stands in contrast to her real desires; at the same time, it cannot be ignored that Tancred wants his daughter to remain unmarried regardless of her happiness. Wilmot is therefore not setting up a simple ethical opposition between acting according to social prescription as negative and acting upon one’s real desires as positive, or vice versa. As well, the contents of the letter further complicate things, as they provide directions to Guiszard about how to reach Gismund’s chamber undetected: “My chamber floure doth hide a cave, where was / An olde vautes mouth: the other in the plaine / Doeth rise Southward, a furlong from the wall, / Descend you there” (III.iii.667-70). Wilmot also describes this vault in the Argumentum Tragediae: “she gaue him to
vnderstand a conuenient waie for their desired meetings, through an old ruinous vaut, whose mouth opened directly vnder her chamber floore” (A2). For the play’s first performances, Tancred and Gismund reportedly relied on “‘simultaneous scenery’ like that of the medieval stage” (Murray 388); because Wilmot twice emphasizes that this medievalesque vault opens into Gismund’s room, we must assume that he intended to affiliate this vault with the hell mouths seen in Mystery and Morality plays. Gismund’s chamber is accessible through a door resembling a hell mouth, and her love for Guiszard is qualified by the hellish symbolism surrounding the cane and letter; Kiefer’s claims about Wilmot’s harshly didactic purposes here would seem to be confirmed. Yet, in fact, the negative connotations of the hell mouth in medieval culture were hardly uniform—as Cecile Williamson Cary points out, “An angel locking the door of hell is a typical medieval icon” (197) and, in fact, Gismund must perform just this sort of un-locking and locking to admit and then bid farewell to Guiszard when he visits her chamber. Gismund must first unlock the door to admit Guiszard, releasing him from the hell of their enforced separation. Having admitted him to her chamber, she must re-lock the door to prevent the entry of any of the representatives and enforcers of their separation, such as her father and her aunt.

Wilmot’s complex presentation of Gismund’s attractiveness undercuts his professed didacticism. In spite of the reservations about women’s desires already articulated here, Gismund is shown to be acting as properly as she possibly can in an untenable situation. Tancred claims that wanting to keep her in his home at his beck and call will fulfill the needs of his old age, but Wilmot indicates that the needs of Tancred’s
old age are incestuous—a fact most strikingly imagined in the scene in which he learns of his daughter’s secret affair:

When I (as is my wont) oh fond delight,  
Went forth to seek my daughter, now my death,  
Within her chamber (as I thought) she was,  
But there I found her not, I demed then  
For her disport she and her maidens were  
Downe to the garden walkt to comfort them,  
And thinking thus, it came to my mind  
There all alone to tarry her returne:  
And thereupon I (wearie) threw my selfe  
Vpon her widdowes bed (for so I thought)  
And in the curten wrapt my head. (IV.ii.976-86)

Not only does Tancred entwine himself in his daughter’s bed linens while he awaits her return, but he also watches Gismund and Guiszard’s consummation of their love in its entirety: “The Countie Palurin, alas it is too true, / At her beds feete this traitor made me see / Her shame, his treason, and my deadly griefe. / Her Princkelie body yeelded to this theefe” (IV.ii.991-93). Had Tancred not prevented his daughter from legally acting upon her natural desires for union with Guiszard, she would not have been forced into iconographic hell, and she and Guiszard would not die in the end. Further, Tancred plunges himself into turmoil by pushing Gismund to perform the role of bloodless widow interested only in pleasing her father; he rails, “Oh could I stampe, and therewithall commaund / Armies of Furies to assist my heart, / To prosecute due vengeance on their soule” (IV.ii.971-72), he certainly would. This Faustus-like desire to command dark forces leads to Faustus-like torments in which Tancred “sunke downe to this paine, / As

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40 John Murray insists that “There is no suggestion of an incestuous love on Tancred’s part” (391), but a close reading of the play simply cannot support this claim. Besides the scene in which Tancred hides in his daughter’s bedchamber we also see him revealing his incestuous desire for Gismund when he promises to act “As father, and as husband” (I.iii.188 emphasis added), when he asks that his servants “lay my bodie by my daughters side” (V.ii.1824) in the tomb in which she specifically asks to be sealed alone with Guiszard, and when in emulation of Oedipus’s response to discovering that his wife is his mother, he tears out his own eyes (V.i.1843-49).
greedie famin doth constraine the hauke, / Peecemeale to rent and teare the yielding praiе: / So far’d it with me in that heauie stound” (IV.ii.998-1001).

Tancred is consequently correct to assert that he is the “author\(^1\) of this Tragedie” (V.ii.1793); he is also the director and primary actor therein. Gismund tries to write a counter-script with her letter (a counter-script that enacts more socially legitimate relations than either enforced celibacy or incest), but Tancred responds with a final bloody tragedy. The conflict between father and daughter here manifests in Gismund’s conflict between fulfilling her own desires and fulfilling her father’s; that this conflict is played out through the writing of a letter that becomes subsumed, at least in part, in her father’s ultimate textualizing of their relationship speaks to the fact that writing is her only recourse. Yet, it also speaks to her ability to remain subjectively complex while others attempt to force her into the one-dimensional role of an emotionless but dutiful daughter. Further, that Guiszard is attracted to Gismund both because of and in spite of her rebellion as manifested primarily in the letter she writes him belies a sub-cultural, if not subconscious, desire to relate to women outside culturally created gender roles.

III

The most common critical approach to William Shakespeare’s *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has been the application of “the ideals of Medieval and Renaissance ‘friendship literature’” (Chandler 404). Most critics accept the primacy of male friendship in interpreting this play, whether or not they focus on its either disturbing or lofty implications. Even those who suggest that the play is either “a burlesque” or “a good-humored satirical lark” (Rossky 210) accept male friendship as the play’s focal

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\(^1\) Again, this term is used here in the Renaissance sense, as both interchangeable with “writer” but also as indicative of one who directly shapes, causes, or influences human events.
point. Of particular relevance to this chapter is Jeffrey Masten’s argument that in *The Two Gentlemen* “we find not the opposition of male friendship and Petrarchan love but rather their interdependence” (41). Masten further claims that this interdependence serves the purpose of establishing and maintaining “a homosocial network” (41). While Masten is correct to note interdependence here, one of his terms is not quite apropos. In *The Two Gentlemen*, Petrarchan love is rejected for something more substantial but not as well-defined; male friendship is reevaluated both because of and at the same time that the possibility of romantic friendship between men and women is being worked out. In fact, this play constantly contrasts Proteus’s and Valentine’s homosocial bonds with Julia’s and Proteus’s relationship, and the former is ultimately found wanting. Valentine’s and Proteus’s initial failures to become friends with Silvia and Julia, respectively, not only endanger their marital futures, but also imperil their friendship with each other. Their friendship is tested primarily through Silvia’s and Julia’s respective attempts to teach Valentine and Proteus both how to woo them and how to be friends with them in spite of gender.42 This proves to be challenging because Valentine and Proteus are continually likened to actors who speak their lines but understand nothing either of what they say or the implications thereof. Yet, Silvia, who initially recognizes Valentine’s letter as a “tissue of conventional figures” (Kiefer 1986, 81) fails to recognize that in spite of her early attempts to teach him to match his heart to his words, he does not learn. Julia, on the other hand, realizes that gender is enacted, and perhaps more importantly, that if she

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42 William Carroll argues that Renaissance women were not considered capable of friendship, either among themselves or with men (10). Not only do Julia and Silvia actively try to disabuse Proteus and Valentine of this erroneous idea, but this was not a universally held belief in the period: see Hermia and Helena’s discussion of their childhood friendship in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (III.ii.192-235), for example.
is to succeed in winning Proteus back, she must appropriate metatheatrical methods to her own purposes and advantage.

Silvia specifically associates Proteus’s falseness to herself, to Julia, and to Valentine with acting; yet, she cannot see the same habits of interaction in her lover. In their first scene together, Valentine and Silvia engage in indirect epistolary wooing: having accepted Valentine as her servant, Silvia commands him to write a love letter in her name to a “nameless friend” (II.i.101). Via his letter-writing on her behalf, Valentine learns (with coaching from Speed) that Silvia returns his love. This scene has been interpreted variously as an instance of Silvia’s silencing by discourse she cannot control (Goldberg 1986, 68), as a device to “amuse the audience while the plot stands still” (Kiefer 1986, 70), an overly “adolescent/romantic approach to love” (Carroll 60), and as the writing “in a fundamental way...[of] a homosocial text—a letter between man” (sic) (Masten 42). On the contrary, this scene reveals the extent to which Silvia is, like Valentine, unable to distinguish between enacted, conventional language and language that reveals an individual’s internal reality. Valentine discusses the letter with Speed:

VALENTINE  Last night she enjoined me to write some lines to one she loves.
SPEED  And have you?
VALENTINE  I have.
SPEED  Are they not lamely writ?
VALENTINE  No, boy, but as well as I can do them. Peace, here she comes.
[Enter] Silvia
SPEED  [aside]  O excellent motion! O exceeding puppet! Now will he interpret to her.  (II.i.83-92)

The word “puppet” appears to be specially chosen here—it is the same word with which Silvia rebukes Proteus for his empty wooing and false friendship later in the play. It also suggests, because of the theatrical connotations of the word, that Valentine’s epistolary
self-sacrifice reveals his comfort with *playing* the self-sacrificing lover, not that he is actually so in love with Silvia that he would consciously sacrifice his own chances with her to make her happy.

Just as important as his desire to act in a socially appropriate fashion is Valentine’s attempt to deliver the letter he has written to Silvia, for it reveals his epistolary skills to be at best “clerkly” and the letter “quaintly writ” (II.i.104;118). Silvia appears to recognize Valentine’s reliance upon clichés, but her dissatisfaction is simply a ruse designed to ensure that Valentine keeps the letter:

VALENTINE
What means your ladyship? Do you not like it?
SILVIA
Yes, yes. The lines are very quaintly writ,
But since unwillingly, take them again.
Nay, take them. [She gives back the letter.]
VALENTINE Madam, they are for you.
SILVIA
Ay, ay. You writ them, sir, at my request,
But I will none of them. They are for you.
I would have had them writ more movingly.
VALENTINE
Please you, I’ll write your ladyship another.
SILVIA
And when it’s writ, for my sake read it over.
And if it please you, so; if not, why so.
VALENTINE
If it please me, madam? What then?
SILVIA
Why, if it please you, take it for your labor. (II.i.117-29)

By forcing Valentine to keep the letter, Silvia signals her acceptance of him as her lover. Her criticisms are thus clichés of another kind, not recognitions of the difference between lovers’ roles and their real selves; whether or not she intends it, she is playing the cold mistress to his courtly servant. The irony is that Valentine is so unaware of the fact that
they are playing stereotypical gender roles that he does not comprehend what her refusal to keep the letter means—Speed must explain it to him.

This letter scene is important to our understanding of Silvia for another reason. Kiefer notes that “Alone among the lovers in the play, she fails to write a single letter” (1986, 81), but this is to ignore the fact that according to the common Renaissance practice of employing amanuenses, Silvia is still considered (both legally and socially) the author of this letter—her denigration of Valentine’s clerkliness highlights this. Assuming that Silvia has given Valentine writing instructions, she is as responsible for the letter’s clichés and failures as Valentine. She does not recognize the emptiness of her lover’s words because she uses the same sort of language—she is as unable to distinguish herself from her role as he is. Valentine and Silvia’s love is based on the reflections of themselves as seen in one another, but what they see are merely images, arising out of stereotypical romance language. When describing his love for Silvia, Valentine does not even refer to her directly:

O gentle Proteus, Love’s a mighty lord,
And hath so humbled me as I confess
There is no woe to his correction,
Nor to his service no such joy on earth.
Now, no discourse except it be of love,
Now can I break my fast, dine, sup, and sleep
Upon the very naked name of love. (II.iv.134-40)

The mere “discourse of love” is sufficient; the reality of either the woman or his relationship with her are strangely secondary.

That Silvia and Valentine are two sides of the same clichéd coin is made clear in their language beyond the letter scene. Valentine describes Silvia as his mirror image:

To die is to be banished from myself,
And Silvia is myself. Banished from her
Is self from self—a deadly banishment!

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She is my essence, and I leave to be
If I be not by her fair influence[.] (III.i.171-83)

The awkward pseudo-logic of the first few lines here and his earlier “clerkly” “discourse of love” highlight Valentine’s inability to transcend the script of literary lover. He refers often to Silvia’s name but only because it confirms his image of himself as a passionate lover. Ultimately, she is no different. Silvia assures Proteus that if Valentine is, in fact, dead then “so suppose am I, for in his grave, / Assure thyself, my love is buried” (IV.ii.110-11). She accuses Proteus of “worship[ing] shadows and ador[ing] false shapes” (IV.ii.127), but it is painfully clear that she does the same in her love of the puppet-like Valentine. Silvia uses the same romantic language as her lover, although it must be acknowledged that such entrenchment of the self in the image of the other means different things to them. For Valentine, his image of himself as a generous friend supersedes his image of himself as constant lover; this shocks the previously unreflective Silvia into silence at the play’s conclusion. Had she been aware of the possibilities inherent in her metadramatic enactment of mistress when instructing Valentine in the writing of love letters she might have taught him how to distinguish role from self, something Proteus learns from Julia.

Yet it is Julia and Proteus whose relationship initially appears doomed, with Julia’s consciousness of her role as a woman appearing to be the main obstacle. Her response to Proteus’s epistle suggests an uneasy vacillation between the roles of chaste, silent, impressionable woman and independently desiring subject. Receiving Proteus’s first letter from Lucetta, Julia responds in conventional terms:

Dare you presume to harbor wanton lines?
To whisper, and conspire against my youth?
Now, trust me, ’tis an office of great worth,
And you an officer fit for the place.
There, take the paper. See it be returned,
Or else return no more into my sight.

[She gives the letter back.] (I.ii.42-47)

But Julia is consciously playing a part here, for which she laments Lucetta will not play
the proper foil: “What fool is she, that knows I am a maid / And would not force the letter
to my view” (I.ii.53-54). Lucetta, however, soon takes up her role, and a complicated
scene ensues in which the letter is dropped, picked up, ignored, attributed to a lover of
Lucetta’s, and then finally accepted by Julia. Once Julia accepts the letter, her intense
desire to read it is tempered by her desire to play the cool mistress and she “tears the
letter and drops the pieces” (I.ii.100). Kiefer argues that Julia’s extreme response to
Proteus’s letter “dramatize[s] the internal conflict between propriety and passion” (1986,
67), but I would argue instead that Julia engages in a complex enacting and shedding of
her prescribed part as modest, chaste, passive female, a shedding that will eventually
enable her and Proteus to become friends while Valentine and Silvia remain mired in
their roles.

The connection between acting and epistolarity is most startlingly dramatized
when Julia picks up the pieces of Proteus’s letter. Inga-Stina Ewbank argues that “when
Julia rips up her letter from Proteus and then changes her mind and from the torn pieces
picks out simple phrases like ‘kind Julia,’ or ‘passionate Proteus,’ or just ‘Proteus,’ then
we feel that she probably has the essence of the letter and has not lost much by losing the
conventional decorations” (100). Julia does not overtly criticize her lover for using such
“conventional decorations” (such as his claim that he is literally dying from love), but her
response reveals her awareness that the language of their love must be rewritten. Tearing
up the letter and then keeping only the pieces containing their names, Julia “fold[s] them, one upon another” (I.ii.129); this simplification of the letter reflects the ideal relationship that Julia will with so much difficulty achieve—to be with Proteus on equal terms not complicated by either clichéd romance rhetoric or other relationships. In the next scene, Proteus reads a letter from Julia; that she responds in writing to his epistle increases his ardour for her not only as a reciprocating lover, but also for taking on the active role of a lover, rather than that of a cool, passive mistress.

They are, however, immediately brought up short: Antonio sends Proteus to the Duke of Milan’s court because “he cannot be a perfect man, / Not being tried and tutored in the world” (I.iii.20-21). Separation of Julia and Proteus at such a critical juncture appears to be the cause of all their ensuing troubles, but I argue that Proteus, as much as he is attracted to Julia’s assertion of her equal subjectivity via her letter, is not yet capable of being equal with her. His response to her letter reveals real attraction to her epistolary activity but also reveals he is not yet able to rise above his own absorption in playing the part of lover:

Sweet love, sweet lines, sweet life!
Here is her hand, the agent of her heart;
Here is her oath for love, her honor’s pawn.
O, that our fathers would applaud our loves
To seal our happiness with their consents!
O heavenly Julia! (I.iii.45-50)

In her letter, Julia proclaims her commitment to loving him. This oath means a great deal to him, but it does not mean enough to enable him to cease using Petrarchan love clichés in which the woman is both reduced to body parts (hand, heart) and elevated to abstract principles (heavenliness, life). Antonio is correct: Proteus is not yet a “perfect man”—he must be taught many more lessons before he will become anything approaching
“perfect.” His inconstancy in friendship and in love, his attempt to violate Silvia, and his
deception of the Duke of Milan all reflect his imperfection. Proteus does not know that
he is playing the role of a lover but not being a lover; the same may be said of his persona
as a friend:

[Silvia] is fair; and so is Julia that I love—
That I did love, for now my love is thawed,
Which like a waxen image ’gainst a fire
Bears no impression of the thing it was.
Methinks my zeal to Valentine is cold,
And that I love him not as I was wont.
O, but I love his lady too, too much,
And that’s the reason I love him so little.
How shall I dote on her with more advice,
That thus without advice begin to love her?
’Tis but her picture I have yet beheld[.] (II.iv.196-206)

Because Proteus plays the roles of lover and friend without reflection, he is able to fall in
love with images—in this case, his first visual impression of Silvia leads him to beg and
then cherish a physical portrait of her. That he acknowledges the ridiculousness of loving
Silvia based first upon her appearance and then upon her portrait, but does not reflect
upon the implications of his desire, highlights his flawed personality.

It is therefore no surprise that Proteus’s “villainy...is associated quite deliberately
with the stage” (Righter 101); both Silvia and Julia negatively affiliate Proteus with
acting, referring to him as a “counterfeit,” a word much employed by anti-theatrical
polemicists (Righter 102). Yet, Julia’s response to and solution for Proteus’s inability to
distinguish the theatrical from the real is startlingly more theatrical than Proteus’s
villainy. Her initial performance of feminine modesty, her cross-dressing and
performance of friend/page to Proteus, and her dramatic unveiling of her real identity at
the play’s conclusion all ironically allow her and Proteus to become real friends. Acting
then is not the problem; the problem is that like Valentine and Silvia, Proteus is initially unaware of roles (whether social, gender, or class) as enacted rather than inherent. He mistakes images, parts, and performances for reality (epitomized by his falling in love with Silvia’s portrait and his failure to recognize Julia in disguise). This inability to distinguish the enacted from the real is one of Gosson’s concerns about the theatre, but while role-playing is dangerous when done unconsciously in *The Two Gentlemen*, it is *only* through conscious play-acting that social order is restored.

Julia must then be understood as the moral centre of *The Two Gentlemen* because it is her actions and her words, not Valentine’s, that reform Proteus. Valentine berates Proteus as a “common friend, that’s without faith or love” (V.iv.62), which inspires a brief exclamation of remorse from Proteus, a remorse which Valentine quickly attempts to overturn by offering him Silvia. This moment is critical; Julia’s faint is the grande finale in her reconstructive performance, which, if not delivered before Proteus can respond to Valentine’s offer in the performative rhetoric that has previously defined their friendship, might prove ineffective. Having presented the rings and removed her disguise, Julia pronounces judgment upon Proteus:

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Behold her that gave aim to all thy oaths
And entertained ’em deeply in her heart.
How oft hast thou with perjury cleft the root!
O Proteus, let this habit make thee blush!
Be thou ashamed that I have took upon me
Such an immodest raiment, if shame live
In a disguise of love.
It is a lesser blot, modesty finds,
Women to change their shapes than men their minds. (V.iv.101-109)
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Julia’s association of her cross-dressing with shame would seem to undercut my claims about her negotiation of identity roles; in fact, she highlights the immodesty of her
disguise to suggest that women transcending their gender is a much less serious breach of either social or moral decorum than men breaking oaths of friendship and love; Proteus is transformed by Julia’s revelations:

Than men their minds! ’Tis true. O heaven! Were man
But constant, he were perfect. That one error
Fills him with faults, makes him run through all th’ sins;
Inconstancy falls off ere it begins.
What is in Silvia’s face but I may spy
More fresh in Julia’s, with a constant eye? (V.iv.110-15)

When Antonio proclaims that Proteus is not yet perfect, he means Proteus is not yet mature or educated; I would add also that it means he is not yet able to contemplate his own motivations and weaknesses. Valentine inspires a sense of guilt in Proteus, but Julia teaches him what is required to be complete, as she is: the awareness of the subject behind the face, the subject that may only be related to with a “perfect” and “constant eye.” This perfect and constant eye is one that looks inward and outward simultaneously.

While Julia and Proteus finally establish true friendship, Valentine and Silvia do not. That Valentine so readily offers up his lover to Proteus indicates that he has failed to learn the difference between real friendship and the façade thereof. What Silvia thinks about all that passes is a notorious mystery—her final words are “O heaven,” which she exclaims when Proteus tries to rape her (V.iv.59). Theories abound about what Silvia does as the final scene progresses and she remains silent—she may faint, she may be too shocked to respond to Valentine’s terrible offer, she may be angry, she may be “barred at last from any attempt to own discourse” (Goldberg 1986, 68), she may even be “comically speechless” (Rossky 212). I posit as an alternative the possibility that she is in fact overwhelmed to the point of silence by the surprising role changes being enacted before her. As the most naive of the four lovers, Silvia cannot comprehend Proteus’s
metamorphoses from ardent lover to potential rapist to truly constant lover and friend, Valentine’s transformation from staunch defender to bawd offering her to a potential rapist, or to Julia’s alteration from young male servant to constant female lover. In other words, Silvia, who initially seems wise to gender roles and able to manipulate them through dictating and overseeing the writing of a letter, is dumbfounded by the extent to which reality defers to role-playing, and the extent to which she has been unable to distinguish the two. Rather than The Two Gentlemen of Verona being about the primacy of male friendship, it is a sometimes painful look at how true friendship (both homosocial and heterosexual) is and is not established. Rather than the proclamations of undying devotion and the high-blown rhetoric of entwined souls, friendship is about the performance of certain roles as the signs and symbols of the actor’s status as complete and independent subject. Thus, not only does The Two Gentlemen destabilize and send up of the rhetoric of conventional, Petrarchan love in which the female object merely reflects the male lover’s abstract emotions, but it also harshly questions male friendship that supplants such romantic idealization when it may be just as empty and fragile. This is a comic commentary that threatens constantly to move into the tragic, a tragedy that would perhaps have become as bloody and irreversible as ’Tis Pity She’s a Whore were it not for Julia’s flexible and savvy play-acting—play-acting that she initiates and begins to build upon in her complicated reception of Proteus’s love letter to her.

IV

The connections between performance, gender, and romantic love seen in The Two Gentlemen of Verona undermine the notion that male friendship was venerated without either reflection or qualification in the Renaissance. Through the qualifications
discussed above, Shakespeare imagined a world in which men and women could form real friendship as the basis for marriage. This must be understood as part of the culture’s growing emphasis on companionate over arranged marriages, but it also reflects an acknowledgment of women’s status as subjects; this acknowledgment is reflected and established in both Wilmot’s and Shakespeare’s conflations of letter-writing and dramatic performance. These suggestions are also the primary foci of George Chapman’s Sir Giles Goosecap and The Gentleman Usher, two plays that investigate male friendship as the means of developing emotionally viable heterosexual marriage. Chapman’s teasing out of these issues over two plays was not, however, comfortably evolutionary. In Sir Giles, a clean divide between the heterosexual and the homosocial is ultimately neither possible nor desirable; in The Gentleman Usher, the young lovers take their sophisticated metadramatic letter-writing too far, ultimately threatening their marriage and own lives thereby. In Chapman’s plays, the line between subjective assertion and annihilation is razor thin.

The initial focus of Sir Giles Goosecap is the long-term and all-encompassing friendship between Clarence and Momford. Momford sees Clarence as the “sole divider of my lordship” (Liv.22):

    Clar. That were a most unfit division,
    And far above the pitch of my low plumes;
    I am your bold and constant guest, my lord.
    Mom. Far, far from bold, for thou hast known me long,
    Almost these twenty years, and half those years
    Hast been my bed-fellow, long time before
    This unseen thing, this thing of naught indeed,
    Or atom, called my lordship, shin’d in me;
    And yet thou mak’st thyself as little bold
    To take such kindness as becomes the age
    And truth of our dissoluble love[.] (Liv.23-33)
The rhetoric of passionate male friendship is more convincingly drawn here than in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Clarence feels the discomfort of class difference, but his friendship with Momford is sincere enough both to enable him to confess that he has fallen in love, and to imagine this love as another way to strengthen his friendship with Momford:

*Clar. …only to fit myself better to your friendship, have I given these willful reins to my affections.*

*Mom. …Come, brother twin, be short, I charge you, and name me the woman.*

*Clar. Since your lordship will shorten the length of my follies’ relation, the woman that I so passionately love is no worse lady than your own niece, the too worthy Countess Eugenia.* (I.iv.94-107)

Clarence’s choice of wife, his reasons for choosing her, and Momford’s reaction to these proclamations suggest a clear case of homosocial (if not homosexual) bonding. Like Clarence, Momford sees the marriage as a means of becoming even closer to his friend; he exclaims, “What, friend and nephew both? Nephew is a far inferior title to friend, I confess, but I will prefer these backwards as many friends do” (I.iv.113-14). When Momford then touches Clarence’s chest and notes “Does not thy heart pant apace?” (I.iv.153), it is not clear whether it is the thought of marrying Eugenia or becoming that much closer to Momford that makes Clarence’s heart beat so quickly. In any case, his increasing closeness to Clarence excites Momford himself enough to caress his friend openly. Eugenia would seem to be a mere “surrogate” for Momford in Clarence’s bed (Grant 67).

His promise to approach Eugenia on Clarence’s behalf (I.iv.204) begins Momford’s role as director of the romantic action. Both Eugenia and Clarence are reticent about marrying because of their class differences, and their hesitation makes
them vulnerable to Momford, who seems both willing and able to reduce them to actors in his drama of passionate male friendship. Momford’s key tactic is to force Clarence and Eugenia to write letters to one another. Clarence tries, “for her sake [to] pour my poor soul forth / In floods of ink” (II.i.13-14), but is unable to articulate his own emotions; he can only find inspiration when he decides to write “but to satisfy my friend” (II.i.37). With Clarence’s letter to Eugenia in hand, Momford confronts his niece to “strike, and take Occasion by the brow” (II.ii.97). This meeting is a rather disturbing one for all its comic effect. Act IV, Scene i features Momford forcing Eugenia to respond to Clarence’s letter. Insisting that whether or not she desires it he will be her secretary, Momford gives Eugenia two options: sign whatever he writes or dictate to him what she would say to Clarence. That Momford forces Eugenia to play dictatrix to his secretary does not, however, undermine the resulting document’s status as legally authored by Eugenia. The fluid definition of writer in the period ensures this, as does Eugenia’s ultimate capitulation to Momford’s demands first to dictate and then to sign. Momford writes nothing of what Eugenia dictates and then tricks her into signing the document before he reads it aloud; even this does not alter the fact of her moral culpability as writer, because her signature functions as a legal sign that she has both created and approved the text, even if she did not engage in the required physical penmanship.

Eugenia is shocked when Momford narrates what he has actually written:

Mom. …Your love, being mental, needs no bodily requital, but in heart I embrace and repay it; my hand shall always sign the way to felicity, and myself, knit with you in the bands of marriage, ever walk with you in it, and so God prosper our journey

Eugenia

Eug. God’s m[y] life, ’tis not thus, I hope!
Mom. By my life, but it is, niece!
Eug. By my life, but ’tis none of my deed, then!
Mom. Do you use to set your hand to that which is not your deed? Your hand is at it, niece, and if there be any law in England, you shall perform it, too. (IV.i.187-98)

Clarence is able to perform his epistolary lovemaking to Eugenia only out of duty to his friend, while Eugenia is tricked into reciprocating. As easily controlled actors in Momford’s epistolary-based homosocial drama, Eugenia and Clarence stand on the verge of committing to a marriage that shields from the world’s view the real relationship being consummated—Momford’s and Clarence’s. Indeed, the letter’s emphasis on Eugenia’s and Clarence’s love being more mental than bodily speaks to Momford’s control over the lovers’ relationship—and the letter itself, as a form of communication defined by the distance between correspondents, can be made to represent a union that is purely intellectual and therefore need not be consummated in person. Yet, as much as Clarence is emotionally satisfied by his friendship with Momford, Momford is more deeply invested in their relationship; having tricked Eugenia into betrothing herself to Clarence, Momford proclaims “’Tis performed. / … / Oh such a friend is worth a monarchy” (IV.i.234-38)—a loaded reference, perhaps, to the king’s throne-sacrificing friendships with Piers Gaveston and Hugh le Depenser in Marlowe’s *Edward II*.

Having delivered Eugenia’s letter to Clarence, Momford arranges a dinner during which he instructs Clarence to “counterfeit with all thy skill” to be “most extremely sick” (IV.iii.83-84). With smug satisfaction, Momford applauds his directorial skills, noting that “Ladies whom true worth cannot move to ruth / True lovers must deceive to show their truth” (IV.iii.96-97). The irony is that Eugenia soon reveals to Hippolyta and Penelope that she also wields directorial and performative control over her relationship with Clarence:
Eug. Come on, fair ladies, I must make you both
Familiar witnesses of the most strange part
And full of impudence that e’er I play’d.
Hip. What’s that, good madam?
Eug. I, that have been so more than maiden-nice
To my dear lord and uncle not to yield
By his importunate suit to his friend’s love
In look or almost thought, will of myself,
Far past his expectation or his hope,
In action and in person greet his friend,
And comfort the poor gentleman’s sick state. (V.ii.129-39)

Eugenia then intensifies her self-serving performance by playing a “jest” on Momford, pretending to go “away displeas’d” (V.ii.171;180). While Momford frets about Eugenia’s apparent displeasure, however, she is in Clarence’s chamber revealing her feelings directly to him; it is revealed that she, not Momford, has the most control here:

Let the world,
That lives without a heart and is but show,
Stand on her empty and impoisoned form;
I know thy kindness and have seen thy heart
Cle[f]t in my uncle’s free and kindly lips,
And I am only now to speak and act
The rites due to thy love: oh, I could weep
A bitter show of tears for thy sick state,
I could give passion all her blackest rites,
And make a thousand vows to thy deserts;
But these are common; knowledge is the bond,
The seal, and crown of our united minds,
And that is rare and constant, and for that
To my late written hand I give thee this.
See, Heaven, the soul thou gav’st is in this hand;
This is the knot of our eternity.
Which Fortune, Death, nor Hell, shall ever loose.

[She draws the curtain concealing Clarence, herself, and her attendants] (V.ii.205-21)

Eugenia has used the “maiden-niceness” society expects of a woman of her class to conceal her real desires and motives. Moreover, she characterizes this “soul” not only as heaven-sent but also as tied specifically to performance and writing. Having dismissed
the usual “show” and “rites” of heterosexual wooing as too common, Eugenia draws the curtain around herself and Clarence, further displaying her superior directorial, acting, and authorial skills, as well as drawing herself and Clarence into a physical closeness her uncle designed the letter to defer if not entirely pre-empt. The knowledge that unites their minds, then, is her knowledge of herself as subject, her knowledge of her uncle’s limited knowledge of her, and her knowledge of how to play to her advantage the role assigned her by society.

It appears that Clarence and Eugenia establish a closed circle of marital friendship, and Momford’s “sudden exclusion, after thinking he has arranged all… appears to seal the sacred bond: the marriage of true minds needs no intermediary” (Grant 69). In fact, Momford’s meddling is a necessary stepping stone to the kind of friendship found in companionate marriage. Clarence learns how to be a husband to Eugenia by being a friend to Momford; specifically, by being the financially and socially inferior member of that friendship, Clarence is prepared for companionate marriage by having inhabited the role of dependent traditionally reserved for wives—it teaches Clarence to become a companion rather than a superior to his wife. Clarence’s use of male friendship enacts a larger societal transcendence (ideal if not actual) of hierarchical in favour of companionate marriage; Clarence and Eugenia socially legitimate their class-imbalanced marriage by appearing to have married out of obligation to Momford. Moreover, Eugenia shows Clarence and her uncle that while she sometimes behaves submissively, she does so only when it suits her. As much as Clarence and Momford’s friendship is manipulated to the lovers’ advantage, however, one cannot forget that Momford has achieved his primary aim too—Clarence’s permanent presence in his life:
Mom. For where you think you have contracted hearts
With a poor gentleman, he is sole heir
To all my earldom, which to you and yours
I freely and forever here bequeath.
Call forth the lords, sweet ladies, let them see
This sudden and most welcome novelty;
But cry you mercy, niece; perhaps your modesty
Will not have them partake this sudden match.

Eug. O uncle, think you so? I hope I made
My choice with too much judgment to take shame
Of any form I shall perform it with. (V.ii.297-307)

Eugenia draws the curtain about herself and Clarence in a metadramatically symbolic moment that creates their private marital space; this space will, however, always also belong to Momford, both for bequeathing them literal space through the marriage, and for his emotional and physical ties to them both, but especially to Clarence. Bequeathing his earldom to Clarence ensures the latter’s position as both heir and “widow(er)” to Momford after he dies.

Chapman reworks this epistolary-dramatic triangle in The Gentleman Usher, which is a much more disturbing consideration of the potential for manipulating male friendship in the service of matrimony. Nothing seriously stands in the way of Clarence and Eugenia’s marriage—Eugenia resists in part to playfully punish her uncle’s presumption in deciding who she will marry, and to confirm the engagement on her own terms. In The Gentleman Usher, on the other hand, Margaret and Vincentio’s union is nearly prevented by Duke Alphonso’s lust for Margaret and Cortezza’s evil machinations. Yet, while they are denied public endorsement of their love until the final scene of the play, the young lovers are deeply implicated in their own struggles, precisely because they, like Eugenia, intentionally turn their epistolary wooing into a dramatic performance dependent upon a third person. Both plays’ lovers require a male friend to
cement their marital bonds, but there are striking differences in their executions of these triangular affairs. Momford is duped, but in no way harmed, and he gets exactly what he wants; Bassiolo, on the other hand, has much to lose by serving as Margaret’s and Vincentio’s pawn. Momford implicates himself in the triangle by forcing his desires on Clarence and Eugenia; Bassiolo is manipulated and threatened into his role and kept there through further manipulation and blackmail. By abusing the bonds of male friendship, Margaret and Vincentio threaten the strength and propriety of the relationship they build thereupon.

Yet, critics have tended to see *The Gentleman Usher* in terms of a simplistic moral dualism in which the Duke’s dependence on “misused, over-formalized ceremony” (his hunting trips and masques in the service of being allowed to act upon his lust for his son’s lover) stands in sharp contrast to the lovers’ “properly employed, sensibly formalized ceremony” (Weidner 124). Of greatest importance in this discussion of proper and improper uses of ceremony is Vincentio and Margaret’s private exchange of marriage vows. In response to Vincentio’s concern about his father trying to force her into a May-December marriage, Margaret asks

> may not we now
> Our contract make, and marry before heaven?
> Are not the laws of God and Nature more
> Than formal laws of men? Are outward rites
> More virtuous than the very substance is
> Of holy nuptials solemniz’d within? (IV.ii.132-37)

These simple words’ profundity, particularly when considered in the murky light of the corruption of the court, cannot be denied. Yet, Margaret and Vincentio’s selfish use of Bassiolo, sanctioned by Strozza (the play’s presumed moral centre), undermines the sanctity of their rites:
*Stro.* …to the outward figures of [Bassiolo’s] mind
He hath two inward swallowing properties
Of any gudgeons, servile avarice
And overweening thought of his own worth,
Ready to snatch at every shade of glory:
And, therefore, till you can directly board him,
Waft him aloof with hats and other favours
Still as you meet him.

*Vin.* Well, let me alone:
He that is one man’s slave is free from none. (I.ii.170-78)

Vincentio’s wooing of Margaret is dependent upon his mistreatment of the ceremonies and demonstrations of male friendship; this false friendship and the malicious pleasure Vincentio takes in gulling Bassiolo ultimately defines and nearly destroys the lovers’ union.

Having convinced Bassiolo of his undying friendship in spite of their class differences, Vincentio entreats Bassiolo to deliver a love letter to Margaret on his behalf:

*Bas.* Well, Vince, I swear thou shalt both see and kiss her.
*Vin.* Swears my dear friend? By what?
*Bas.* Even by our friendship.
*Vin.* Oh, sacred oath! Which how long will you keep?
*Bas.* While there be bees in Hybla, or white swans
In bright Meander; while the banks of Po
Shall bear brave lilies; or Italian dames
Be called the bona-robles of the world.

*Vin.* ’Tis elegantly said; and when I fail,
Le[t] there be found in Hybla hives no bees;
Let no swans swim in bright Meander stream,
Nor lilies spring upon the banks of Po,
Nor let one fat Italian dame be found,
But lean and brown-fall’n; ay, and scarcely sound.

*Bas.* It is enough, but let’s embrace withal.
*Vin.* With all my heart.

*Bas.* So, now farewell, sweet Vince! *Exit*
*Vin.* Farewell, my worthy friend! I think I have him.

*Bas. [aside]* I had forgot the parting phrase he taught me.–

I commend me t’ye, sir. *Exit instanter*

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43 It has been argued that, as an “ape of gentility,” Bassiolo’s abuse at Margaret and Vincentio’s hands is acceptable (MacLure 96). However, the noblesse, eloquence, virtue, and graciousness MacLure claims for Margaret and Vincentio are too feeble to support such class-based moralism.
Vin. At your wish’d service, sir.
Oh fine friend, he had forgot the phrase:
How serious apish souls are in vain form!
Well, he is mine and he, being trusted most
With my dear [l]ove, may often work our meeting,
And being thus engag’d, dare not reveal. (III.ii.191-213)

As ridiculous as Bassiolo may be, he is also sympathetic because he truly believes in Vincentio’s protestations of friendship. Bassiolo’s earnest desire to perfectly execute the actions and ceremonies of friendship make Vincentio look as morally repellant as his father. That Bassiolo swears to deliver the letter “Even by our friendship” increases the usher’s credibility and foreshadows Margaret’s and Vincentio’s imminent suffering.

For the moment, however, Bassiolo’s position is further destabilized when he delivers Vincentio’s letter to Margaret. The letter scene between Bassiolo and Margaret is clearly drawn from Sir Giles Goosecap, but Margaret’s manipulation of Bassiolo as part of her epistolary wooing of Vincentio is as calculatingly malicious and blackmailing as her lover’s protestations of friendship are. Margaret allows Bassiolo to believe he is forcing her to respond to Vincentio; by doing so she not only makes a fool of him, but she also ensures that she may blame him if her correspondence with Vincentio is discovered, for unlike Eugenia, she does not sign this letter:

Bas. Well, you shall answer; I’ll fetch pen and paper.
Exit
Mar. Poor usher, how wert thou wrought to this brake?

Men work on one another for we women,
Nay, each man on himself; and all in one
Say, ‘No man is content that lies alone.’
Here comes our gulled squire.
Bas. Here, mistress, write.
Mar. What should I write?
Bas. An answer to this letter.
Mar. Why, sir, I see no cause of answer in it;
But if you needs will show how much you rule me,
Sit down and answer it as you please yourself;

141
Here is your paper, lay it fair afore you.

_Bas._ Lady, content; I’ll be your secretary.

_Mar._ [aside] I fit him in this task; he thinks his pen
The shaft of Cupid in an amorous letter.  (III.ii.381-94)

The usher has been “wrought” by Vincentio, while Margaret will “fit” him. She refers to Bassiolo as “our gulled squire,” but at this point in the play, there is no evidence that Vincentio and Margaret have ever been alone; nonetheless, the sense that this epistolary play-acting is a co-production is inescapable. Vincentio’s earlier observation that “Now will the sport begin; I think my love / Will handle him as well as I have done” (III.ii.308-09) indicates that Vincentio and Margaret are already sufficiently in contact with one another to be sure of their relationship—their complicated (mis)use of Bassiolo as go-between is an egregious, if sometimes amusing, abuse of male friendship merely for the pleasure of “sport.”

Rather than dramatizing moral polarities, _The Gentleman Usher_ portrays ceremonies as enactments of symbolic and social power. In Duke Alphonso’s court, those who most effectively perform their parts win; morality is only imposed upon less fortunate characters to explain the suffering they endure. Attractiveness in this play then is not about the ephemeral quality of “goodness” but about skillful play-acting. The Duke’s loss of Margaret to Vincentio is less about the inevitability of the socially proper reasserting itself than about the former’s limited talents as an actor. Margaret’s superior talents are revealed at the conclusion of her letter-writing scene with Bassiolo:

Pitiful usher, what a pretty sleight
Goes to the working up of everything!
What sweet variety serves a woman’s wit!
We make men sue to us for that we wish.
Poor men, hold out awhile, and do not sue,
And, spite of custom, we will sue to you.  (III.ii.524-29)
These lines suggest that while she and Vincentio are co-directing Bassiolo, Margaret is also directing Vincentio’s actions. How Margaret directs Vincentio and how they come together to use Bassiolo in the first place are never revealed; Margaret’s and Vincentio’s dramatic maneuvering is made so smooth as to be undetectable, even by audience members.

Why then do Vincentio and Margaret suffer near-death and mutilation, respectively, before being reunited not by their own devices but by the remorseful Duke Alphonso? Mario DiGangi argues that in spite of his careful directing of Bassiolo as go-between, “Vincentio, like Volpone, is finally unable to extricate himself from the sodomitical effects of his own homoerotics of mastery” (193). DiGangi defines the Renaissance “homoerotic” as that which “in the early modern context signifies not only allusion to or representation of sexual activity, but the range of rhetorical and physical gestures through which a same-sex emotional or sensual affinity can be expressed” (181).

Momford’s physical intimacy with Clarence is echoed in Vincentio’s use of similar techniques in his “friendship” with Bassiolo. When Vincentio convinces the usher of his friendship, they embrace, “lie down together,” and refer to one another as “Even man and wife” (III.ii.122;126;135). Unlike in Sir Giles, however, this is not real friendship fairly used to establish another form of friendship; this is male friendship abused in the name of a marital friendship that has already been established.

Yet, Vincentio and Margaret cannot extricate themselves from their relationship with Bassiolo, not simply because “secrecy between master and servant guarantees not trust, obedience, and friendship, but distrust, disobedience, and self-interest” (DiGangi 196); rather, in spite of their confidence in Bassiolo’s stupidity, he eventually realizes the
truth and exclaims “what an errant ass was I / To entertain the Prince’s crafty friendship” (IV.iv.91-92). At the same time, Vincentio and Margaret become so caught up in their roles as Bassiolo’s co-directors that they eventually become unable to imagine their own romantic roles without Bassiolo; initially so canny and self-conscious, Vincentio and Margaret appear to forget that they are playing roles and thus lose control over their gull. When their letters are discovered, Margaret threatens Bassiolo that she will “tell my father, then, how thou didst woo me / To love the young Prince; and didst force me, too, / To take his letters” (IV.iv.113-15); these threats compel Bassiolo to continue playing the go-between. Yet, in the very next scene, Bassiolo uses his new awareness against the lovers:

_Bas_. Now must I exercise my timorous lovers,
Like fresh-arm’d soldiers, with some false alarms,
To make them yare and wary of their foe,
The boist’rous, bearded Duke: I’ll rush upon them
With a most hideous cry.—The Duke! the Duke! the Duke! [Vincentio and Margaret run out]
Ha, ha, ha! Wo ho, come again, I say!
The Duke’s not come, i’faith!

[Enter Vincentio and Margaret]

_Vin._ God’s precious, man!
What did you mean to put us in this fear?

_Bas._ Oh, sir, to make you look about the more: Nay, we must teach you more of this, I tell you[..] (V.i.98-107)

Bassiolo’s decision to “exercise” the lovers reveals that simply learning that they have been manipulating him allows him to begin to direct _their_ actions. This court is run by those with the greatest understanding of the power available in dramatic discourse.

Their increasing susceptibility to Bassiolo’s dramatic control leads to Vincentio’s and Margaret’s brushes with death. Having unknowingly relinquished dramatic power to Bassiolo, Margaret and Vincentio lose their ability to use him to their advantage, indeed
to continue to play any roles to their advantage. The symbolic dropping, in Bassiolo’s eyes, of their dramatic guises irrevocably exposes them to the very real dangers around them. Immediately after Bassiolo’s false alarm, Alphonso proclaims his son’s choice of either banishment or death (V.i.122-23). Bassiolo is, of course, not believed when he delivers this news, but the problem is not that Bassiolo earlier “cries wolf,” but that Margaret and Vincentio can no longer distinguish acting for pleasure from enacting the truth. For their inability to differentiate acting from the real, Vincentio is mortally wounded; Margaret further increases their peril by earnestly begging to be allowed to “go into exile with my lord” (V.ii.139) instead of seeking a dramatic exit through which she may save them both. She also fails to recognize Cortezza’s tempting her to self-mutilation as a dramatic performance reminiscent of both Despair and the Devil in Medieval Morality plays:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cor.} & \text{ I have an ointment here, which we dames use} \\
& \text{To take off their hair when it does grow too low} \\
& \text{Upon our foreheads, and that, for a need,} \\
& \text{If you should rub it hard upon your face} \\
& \text{Would blister it, and make it look most vildly[.]}
\end{align*}
\]
\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mar.} & \text{ Oh, give me that, aunt!} \\
\text{Cor.} & \text{ Give it you, virgin? That were well indeed;} \\
& \text{Shall I be thought to tempt you to such matters? (V.iii.53-60)}
\end{align*}
\]

By associating Cortezza with such notorious Morality Play figures, Chapman highlights the extent to which Margaret’s hold on dramatic—and therefore social—power has slipped. Rather than this being a moral judgment, however, this is integral to the play’s overarching commentary on the link between social order and dramatic performance. It is not that it is improper for Margaret, as a woman, to engage in dramatic social engineering, but that it is inherently dangerous to let go of that dramatic control, even for
a moment. Vincentio and Margaret grow too comfortable in directing their own play, and as a result become subject to other actor-directors: Bassiolo, the Duke, and Cortezza.

While I do not think that Chapman’s examination of dramatic/social control in *The Gentleman Usher* casts judgment upon Margaret as a woman, it is striking that it is her face that Cortezza tempts her to disfigure. Rather than a back-handed comment on the ability of women’s beauty to “burn[] the topless towers of Ilium” (*Doctor Faustus* xii.82), I suggest that this is further commentary on Margaret’s progressive inability to distinguish the dramatic from the real. Benevemus, when confronted with Margaret’s destroyed beauty, offers a solution: a “recureful mask” which will after “three days’ eclipse…fall off, / And your fair looks regain their freshest rays” (V.iv.132-34). Margaret’s association with Everyman being tempted by Despair suggested above is here transformed into her association with the Christ of the Medieval Mystery Plays in which Christ, after three days, is resurrected and always shown masked. Margaret’s physical beauty is restored, but these echoes of Christian resurrection make this scene much more significant than a neatly tied up conclusion to a tragicomedy. Rather, Margaret is dramatically reformed into the meek woman she previously only pretended to be to hide her relationship with Vincentio. She loses her sense of her own power as a subject able to negotiate social constraints to her own ends and to attract Vincentio; in the end, she views herself only as a body waiting to be given meaning by someone else, and concludes that “When wives want / Outward excitements, husbands’ loves grow scant” (V.iv.120-21). That dramatic skill is at issue here, not gender, is made clear in Vincentio’s comparable subservience to his father. Vincentio becomes a stock figure of the good son, having been drained of pith along with blood at his father’s command, and
his last words proclaim unqualified filial allegiance. His “princely father” then, and only then, grants that he and Margaret may now “take thy love, which heaven with all joys bless, / And make ye both mirrors of happiness” (V.iv.292; 296-97). Having failed to successfully play the part of ardent lover to Margaret, Alphonso slips easily into the (proper) role of benevolent patriarch able to aid two hapless youths unable without his help to negotiate the world’s many pratfalls. Vincentio and Margaret begin as sophisticated manipulators of the lines between the dramatic and the real but end as simple mirrors reflecting a happiness which they no longer recognize as their own. The hand that writes the letter (and the social play it represents) rules the world in The Gentleman Usher, if only temporarily.

V

John Marston’s The Fawn appears initially to address the relationship between gender identity, performance, and epistolarity in a much less intricate manner than the plays heretofore discussed. A lusty old Duke stands in the way of the proper marital arrangement between Dulcimel and Tiberio, but is easily defeated. Dulcimel’s performance as epistolary wooer seems unsullied by either the moral discomfort or cynical opportunism that characterizes Margaret and Vincentio’s affair. Moreover, there is neither any tension nor sense of loss as male friendship is either displaced or abused in favour of male-female friendship. Dulcimel’s letter, stitched into a scarf rather than written on paper, achieves Dulcimel’s desires and attests to her position as subject and agent while at the same time situating her in the feminized world of the domestic arts. Some critics posit a straightforwardly repressive relationship between domesticity and female identity (Parker 75); Margaret Ferguson, on the other hand, while viewing
domestic arts generally as tools mobilized to discipline and subjugate women, also sees practices such as needlework as sites of potential subversion. It was a “cultural commonplace,” Ferguson writes, “that women should use needles and distaffs instead of pens.” Yet, “given the cultural opposition between pen (masculine) and needle and distaff (feminine), women from the middling and upper classes sometimes used needle and thread as material substitutes for pen and ink” through which “complex, sometimes subversive, messages” could be “worked into tapestry and other ‘fancy work’” (1996, 153). Achieving her desires (which directly subvert her father’s) is Dulcimel’s motivation for stitching her epistle to Tiberio. Duke Gonzago insists that Dulcimel marry Duke Hercules in spite of the vast differences in their ages, while the latter’s disinterested son, Tiberio, is of the proper age to marry her. Through her letter, Dulcimel ultimately succeeds in winning Tiberio’s love and social order is restored in both Hercules’s and Gonzago’s courts. It seems that in spite of needlework’s potential subversiveness, Dulcimel is the most orthodox of all the letter-writers I address in this chapter; however, because Dulcimel’s letter and her behaviour surrounding its creation and dissemination are imbued with the idea of domesticity and secrecy, and reminiscent of Ovid’s tale of Philomele and Progne, it is revealed to be the most socially subversive of all the letters I discuss in this chapter.

Dulcimel and Tiberio’s first meeting is not promising. Dulcimel’s clever repartee with her silly father and cold lover make clear to the audience, if not to her male interlocutors, both the ridiculousness of her marrying Hercules and the extent of her linguistic wiliness:

DULCIMEL.
I wonder he would send a counterfeit to move our love.
GONZAGO [to Granuffo].
   Hear, that's my wit. When I was eighteen old [sic] such
   a pretty toying wit had I, but age hath made us wise. Hast
   not, my lord?
TIBERIO.
   Why, fairest, princess, if your eye dislike that deader piece,
   behold me, his true form and livelier image. Such my
   father hath been.
DULCIMEL.
   My lord, please you to scent this flower.
TIBERIO.
   'Tis withered, lady; the flower's scent is gone.
DULCIMEL.
   This hath been such as you are, hath been, sir. They say
   in England that a far-fam'd friar had girt the island round
   with a brass wall, if that they could have caught “Time is”;
   but “Time is past” left it still clipp’d with aged Neptune’s
   arm. (I.ii.106-19)

After Dulcimel undercuts all Tiberio’s arguments in favour of his father (I.ii.120-37), she
declares that “Your father hath a fair solicitor; / And be it spoke with virgin modesty, / I
would he were no elder” (I.ii.138-40).

Neither Dulcimel’s cleverly delivered proclamations of her love for him nor her
biting wit initially attract Tiberio to her, however. It is her letter, stitched into a scarf,
that ultimately melts his icy resistance to her charms; this letter, however, is the climax of
a long process during which Dulcimel plays the part of the obedient daughter and
vulnerable maid to her own advantage. Basing her performative strategy on Gonzago’s
overconfidence in his control over her and in his own intelligence, Dulcimel demurely
tells her father,

   I am of years apt for his love, and if he should proceed
   In private urgent suit, how easy 'twere
   To win my love, for you may say (if so
   Your wisdom please) you find in me
   A very forward passion to enjoy him.
   And therefore you beseech him seriously
   Straight to forbear, which such close-cunning art
To urge his too-well-graced suit: for you  
(If so your lordship please) may say I told you all. (II.i.472-80)

Dulcimel reveals her feelings for Tiberio to her father, ensuring she may never be accused of dissembling; at the same time, she knows that by instructing him to warn Tiberio against wooing her, Gonzago will reveal her feelings to her lover, thus absolving her of appearing too forward. Indeed, Dulcimel’s forwardness is always subtly and smartly played; she never woos Tiberio without her father’s consent, even if he is unaware that he is granting it. Knowing that Dulcimel is indirectly wooing his son, Hercules (disguised as Faunus) encourages Tiberio in the same direction; yet, Tiberio still remains cold, his only response to Gonzago’s wooing on his daughter’s behalf being “I love, when? how? whom? Think, let us yet keep / Our reason sound. I’ll think, and think, and sleep” (II.i.546-47).

Dulcimel is shrewd, however, and alters her approach in the face of Tiberio’s apparent imperviousness, creating her own unique form of dramatic-epistolary wooing. Using the scarf as her only stage property, Dulcimel plays the hard-pressed maiden to perfection, ensuring her father will act as letter-bearer:

DULCIMEL.
He hath now more than courted with bare phrases.  
See, father, see, the very bane of honor,  
Corruption of justice and virginity,  
Gifts, hath he left with me. O view this scarf.  
This, as he call’d it, most envied silk,  
That should embrace arm, or waist, or side,  
Which he much fear’d should never—this he left,  
Despite my much resistance.

GONZAGO.
Did he so? Giv’t me. I’ll giv’t him. I’ll re-give his token  
with so sharp advantage.

DULCIMEL.
Nay, my worthy father, read but these cunning letters. (III.i.337-47)
These “cunning letters,” written by Dulcimel in the hand and “voice” of Tiberio, signal Dulcimel’s status as primary writer; she creates and wields stage properties to inspire Tiberio to fall in love with her. The text of the “cunning letters” that Dulcimel drafts as secretary for the unwilling Tiberio, is the same text that she stitches onto the scarf as her own proclamation of love. Dulcimel authors Tiberio into being a lover by being the perfect example thereof. The propriety of Dulcimel’s convoluted epistolary love-making is officially reiterated when, at the trial of Don Cupid, she is not charged under the “act against forgers of love letters” (V.i.283).

Initially impervious to Dulcimel’s wooing, Tiberio finally responds when he receives the “cunning letters” and the letter stitched into the scarf:

Tiberio reads the embroidered scarves.

TIBERIO.

“Prove you but justly loving and conceive me,
Justice shall leave the gods before I leave thee.” –
Imagination prove as true as thou art sweet! –
“And though the duke seem wise, he’ll find this strain,
When two hearts yield consent, all thwarting’s vain.” –
O, quick, deviceful, strong-brain’d Dulcimel!
Thou art too full of wit to be a wife. (III.i.431-37)

Tiberio is attracted to Dulcimel for her “strong brain;” yet, he is still too committed to his role as dutiful son to reciprocate comfortably, so he denies his feelings, in order not to “break faith to him / That got me” (III.i.449-50). At this point, Hercules disguised as Faunus serendipitously enters to play devil’s advocate against his own right to Dulcimel:

HERCULES.

Nay ’tis injustice, truly,
For him to judge it fit that you should starve
For that which only he can feast his eye withal,
And not digest.

TIBERIO.

O, Fawn, what man of so cold earth
But must love such a wit in such a body?
Thou last and only rareness of heaven’s works,
From best of man made model of the gods!
Divinest woman, thou perfection
Of all proportion’s beauty, made when Jove was blithe,
Well filled with nectar, and full friends with man. (III.i.485-91)

Hercules’s encouragement⁴⁴ at this critical moment gives Tiberio permission to begin to venerate love over intellect. It is Dulcimel’s use, however, of the most feminine of domestic arts in tandem with her “deviceful” directing of the action that overcomes Tiberio’s resistance to her.

For all Dulcimel’s embroidery’s subversive but ultimately reparative power, it also contains echoes of one of the most horrendous stories in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—that of Philomele and Progne. Progne and Tereus, King of Thrace are united in a political marriage, but Tereus “burn[s] in his desire” for Progne’s sister (Book VI, l. 582). Convincing Philomele to come to his kingdom to visit her sister, Tereus rapes Philomele in the woods when she will not consent to his lust. When she threatens to tell “all the world” of his violence against her (Book VI, l. 696), Tereus cuts out Philomele’s tongue, imprisons her, and tells Progne she has died. To reveal what has really happened,

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A warpe of white upon a frame of Thracia [Philomele] did pin,
And weaved purple letters in betweene it, which bewraide
The wicked deede of Tereus. And having done, she praide
A certain woman by hir signes to beare them to her mistresse.
(Book 6 ll. 736-39)
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This famous story of a stitched letter between two vulnerable women somewhat alters our understanding of Dulcimel’s letter. Dulcimel’s letter looks like something much less

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⁴⁴ Joel Kaplan argues a common refrain when he claims that Hercules is the “play’s controlling figure” (337). While Hercules’s presence is certainly helpful at this key moment, there would be no key moment without Dulcimel’s machinations leading up to it. Both Hercules’s and Faunus’s attempts to convince Tiberio of Dulcimel’s attractiveness have failed. Thus, he is, rather than the play’s controlling figure, a symbol of patriarchal control that can no longer maintain its own prerogatives, and must rely on the young to subvert and then reestablish it for themselves. That Hercules is meant to be understood as a primarily symbolic figure is reiterated in his role as judge in the trial of Don Cupid.
attractive than the simple expression of her desire I have read it as—it looks as though Dulcimel chooses to eroticize her stitching-writing specifically in terms of a rape fantasy. Admittedly, there is nothing in Dulcimel’s letter that overtly suggests rape and there is nothing to suggest that Tiberio would respond favourably to such a violent epistolary sub-text. Rather, I suggest that the spectres of Philomele and Progne are meant to be understood as muted reminders of the dangers of not taking women’s desires into account by forcing them into loveless marriages. Considered in this light, Dulcimel’s letter must be read as the most unsettling of all the letters addressed in this chapter, in spite of its veneer of non-threatening domesticity and because of its subtle suggestions of rape.

While all the plays present, in varying degrees, companionate marriage as the ideal, The Fawn most clearly emphasizes the socially restorative potential of companionate marriage on the one hand, and the potentially fatal consequences of arranged marriage and the reduction of women to tokens of exchange on the other.

VI

The conflation of letter-writing and metadramatic performance destabilizes traditional gender roles and marital relations, even when manipulating the former in the service of the latter. Anti-theatricalists like Stephen Gosson would therefore seem to be responding directly to such representations of the unstable nature of gender and its relation to what defines a subject. However, there is a fine but essential difference between what Gosson and company fear and what is actually occurring in plays such as those I have been discussing here. For all their commitment to maintaining the status quo and their lamentations about the theatrical abuse and misuse of identity markers, the anti-theatricalists see nothing lurking behind those signs of social difference save perhaps a
sort of demonic principle of disorder and desire. In other words, to perform those signs of difference on stage reveals the constructed nature of the social and invites Renaissance audiences not only to imagine the collapse of the whole system but also and more importantly to imagine using those signs to personal advantage. In the plays I consider in this chapter, however, the interplay between theatricality and epistolarity presents the possibility of a stable, recognizable, and ultimately socially acceptable subject, even if her only fixed or recognizable social trait is that of theatrical mastery. The paradox of this strange new idea of what constitutes a subject is that her primary purpose is to (re)establish the conservative social order she appears to varying degrees in each play to subvert. Indeed, the performance of epistolary wooing, in spite of functioning in ironic distinction to established gender ideology, does so precisely at the expense of other non-heterosexual bonds such as those of either family or male friendship. The effect of such “hetero-privileging” is to force audience members to see not a boy actor playing a female role, but a more abstract female subject whose presence not only asserts her own existence but also implies the initially novel but ultimately conservative idea that marriage is, in fact, superior to the male bonds displaced within the plays and implicitly represented in England’s all-male theatre companies. In Renaissance Comedy, after all, “The defeat of patriarchy…[usually] results only in its replication; it is to the point that the sole option imagined by the young in their quest for freedom is marriage—this is all that freedom permits, the transformation of the son into another patriarch” (Orgel 15). In Tancred and Gismund, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Sir Giles Goosecap, The Gentleman Usher, and The Fawn female characters woo the men of their choice “spite of
custom;” but regardless of their success or lack thereof in this regard, they all reaffirm traditional social customs that negate the need for women to woo men in the first place.

Such a devil’s advocate’s reading of the plays in question cannot help but inspire some of the Petrarchan claustrophobia one experiences reading Sir Philip Sidney’s “Fourth Song.” Like so many Renaissance poems addressed to chaste mistresses, Sidney’s lover betrays his involvement in his own image as lover. This mistress as letter-writer is subsumed by the lover as both poet and dictator of her letters:

Your fair mother is abed,
Candles out, and curtains spread;
She thinks you do letters write:
Write, but first let me indite:
Take me to thee, and thee to me. (ll.37-41)

The Norton editor notes that “indite” means to “dictate” (p. 928); however, it also means “To put into words, compose (a poem, tale, speech, etc.); to give a literary or rhetorical form to (words, an address); to express or describe in a literary composition” (OED). This slightly different definition of “indite” gets to the heart of the matter in this poem and ostensibly the plays I have been discussing: the female lover as subject and letter-writer is attractive as long as she is claimed back into the patriarchal social space she metadramatically plays with, subverts, and reorders.

But to claim that these plays either only subvert or only re-establish patriarchal order is to mimic the moral dualism that has plagued critical approaches to The Gentleman Usher. Rather, what we have here are several playwrights using their art to consider their culture’s fluctuating sense of what constitutes a subject and the possibilities and limitations inherent in attempting to either represent or comprehend it. This manifests as a diminishing need for female characters to woo their beloveds via complex
metadramatic-epistolary means, and a concomitant increase in the pleasure of doing so simply because they may. As the female subject comes to be accepted for her own sake and on her own terms, the more playful she becomes and the more pleasure all subjects (regardless of gender) take in the game (recall Thaisa and Simonides’s gentle tricking of Pericles). This increasingly attractive portrayal of female epistolary play-acting precisely reflects the essential performativity of letter-writing generally; more specifically, it reflects the ways in which those operating from the margins can co-opt essentially unstable means, like letters, to establish both themselves and their tools in positions of more centralized power—and this potential for redefining the boundaries between the genders and therefore between subjects is both tantalizing and disturbing. This process of fearful fascination transforming eventually into playful approaches to the conventional is seen in more extreme form in the texts I address in the following chapter on fetish.
Chapter Four

“my eyes haue often-times stood at gaze”: The Fetish of Women’s Intellectual Labour

I

Alongside sanguine and metadramatic representations, women’s letter-writing in Renaissance texts is often designed to invoke a visual experience for readers. Indeed, this cultural interest in watching women write or, more precisely, in imagining watching women write was so intense, I argue, as to constitute a cultural fetish. The fetish here is located in the letters as physical objects, but an integral part of their fetishization is the obsessive focus the authors create upon the disjoint between the physical letters and the inaccessible objects of readers’ real desire—to witness women engaged in the intellectual work of writing letters. In *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, Katharine Eisaman Maus discusses the centrality of two cultural fantasies to the works she addresses: “one, that selves are obscure, hidden, ineffable; the other, that they are fully manifest or capable of being made fully manifest. These seem to be contradictory notions, but again and again they are voiced together, so that they seem less self-canceling than symbiotically related or mutually constitutive” (1995, 28-29). I argue that this is what is occurring in all the representations of women’s letter-writing I address in this dissertation, but especially in the material addressed in this chapter; however, I would also make an important distinction—part of what constitutes the fetish of imagining women write involves the notion that women would choose not to manifest themselves fully through their writing, or not to every set of inquisitive eyes. Rather, the essence of the desire to see others reveal themselves is predicated on the notion that they
will choose not to, not that they cannot or that were they to do so observers would not be able to comprehend them.

The object of such voyeuristic desire in the texts examined in this chapter is specifically women’s intellectual labour. Such fetishization is localized in the figure of the isolated female letter-writer, whether her isolation is physical, economic, social and/or emotional. This isolation is not merely representative of vulnerability, however; rather, the mysteriousness of the conditions of writing, and the writers’ creation and preservation of internal secrecy that implies, are central to the images of female letter-writing in Isabella Whitney’s “Certain familiar Epistles” (1573), Elizabeth I’s letters to the Duke of Alençon (1579-1583), Nicholas Breton’s *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* (1603, enlarged 1637), and Jacques du Bosque’s *The Secretary of Ladies* (1638). In these texts the link between writing and subjectivity becomes simultaneously most clear and most intangible; indeed, fetish is located precisely in the compelling inaccessibility of these personae’s and characters’ performances of intellectual labour through letter-writing. That they produce objects that could only result from a conscious exercising of the intellect is clear. The mysterious conditions under which such activity occurs are hinted at, but kept obscure; this obscuring of the intellectual labour behind epistolary production paradoxically affirms its reality just as secret-keeping signals subjectivity. Subjectivity and intellectual labour are not synonymous, of course, but in these texts they are interdependent: the private production of intellectual objects in the form of letters both represents and metaphorizes female subjectivity. It is striking and perhaps counterintuitive to state that these representations depend upon the privacy that ostensibly renders women’s lives and labour inferior to men’s. In fact, as shall be seen,
the private conditions under which women’s writing is imagined to occur are integral to
the fetishization of women’s intellectual labour, and this fetishization (also perhaps
counterintuitively) ensures that the notion of women’s writing ultimately becomes
commonplace.

A fascination with the mystery of women’s solitary epistolary production is
detectable at least as far back as the early sixteenth century. “A lettre sende by on yonge
woman to a-noder, whiche afortyme were felowes to-geder” (c.1520, anonymous)
functions much like a familiar letter between friends, save for its rhyme scheme and its
preservation in a manuscript miscellany dating from around 1636 (Stevenson and
Davidson 269). The writer’s solitude (she represents herself as separated from all of
her friends, and alone in her corner of rural England) is at the centre of this piece:

My loving frende, amorous Bune,
I cum ambelyng to you by the same tokyn
that you and I have be to-geder,
and settyn by the fire in colde wether,
and wyth vs noo moo but our Gullett,
with all the knakes in hur buggett;
hur trumpett and hur merye songe
now for to here, I thinke itt longe.
Come amble me to hur, I you praye,
And to Agnes Irpe as bright as daye.
I wolde you were here to lokke our gates,
but alas itt ys to fare to the jakes.
Fare-well Agnes Blakamoure,
I wolde I hadde you here in stoore,
for you wolde come with al your harte;
farewell! farewell! my ladye darke. (ll.1-16)

Solitude is central to this piece for it is solitude that both occasions the letter-writing and
functions as its unifying theme. This solitude, however, does not appear to be a site of
vulnerability for the writer. The gates are unlocked (l.11) and the writer is therefore

45 Stevenson and Davidson do not, unfortunately, explain how they come to the conclusion that this poem
was penned in the early sixteenth century.
literally and symbolically unprotected against would-be invaders, yet the tone of the poem is playful and relaxed; the reference to the unpleasant distance to the outhouse (“jakes”) at line 12, and the writer’s final assertion that she writes to “make you all merye” (l.43) further dispels any potentially sinister associations between this woman’s writing and her solitude. Written in doggerel and addressing no very interesting topic, this poem nonetheless found a place in a miscellany compiled over one hundred years after its composition. As compelling here as the writer’s solitude is the self-conscious textuality of the epistle. The writer describes herself “ambelyng to you by the same tokyn / that you and I have be to-geder;” this suggests that Bune and the writer are usually only ever together through the medium of “tokyns” (letters). The focus of the poem shifts subtly here, from the physical relationship the writer initially seems to crave to the transmission of text, which she conflates with her absent self—thus when she instructs Bune to “amble me to” Gullett and to “Agnes Irpe bright as daye” she is really instructing her to pass her letter around to these friends, and by so doing, is keeping the writer symbolically if not literally “in company” and therefore safer from isolation. The writer also consciously highlights her letter as textual by lending Bune a certain romantic flair when she puns on her proper name, Agnes Blackamoure, by calling her “my ladye darke.” Yet, while the writer is conflated with her letter and she relies in part on such literary puns to suggest an intelligence beyond the poem’s doggerel rhymes, the mysterious production of the text is represented as central as the writer’s solitude—it is revealed only that “Att nyne off the clokke thys was wrytten” (l.45). The letter gestures evocatively towards hidden reserves of intellectual capacity exercised under undisclosed circumstances.
In Chapter Three, I argue that in Sidney’s “Fourth Song” from *Astrophil and Stella* Petrarchan self-obsession functions to contain female authorship. The same lines there quoted can here be read as articulating a fantasy about displacing women’s writing:

> Your fair mother is abed,  
> Candles out, and curtains spread;  
> She thinks you do letters write:  
> Write, but first let me indite:  
> Take me to thee, and thee to me.  (ll.37-41)

The lover commands rather than requests, and highlights both the woman’s and her mother’s isolation to psychologically weaken the former’s defenses. His tactics apparently fail, however, and he asks

> Sweet alas, why strive you thus?  
> Concord better fitteth us:  
> Leave to Mars the force of hands,  
> Your power in your beautie stands[.]  (ll.43-46)

The lover focuses most on trying to control her hands, whether those hands are attempting either to write or to strike out in self-defense. Yet, it is precisely her attempts to use her hands to express her own desires (to write, to be unmolested) that inspires the lover, for it is in relating her rejection of him that the poet’s language becomes most sexualized: “Cursed be my destinies all, / That brought me so high to fall: / Soone with my death I will please thee” (ll.51-53). Her resistance leads directly into metaphoric descriptions of his sexual arousal and its natural conclusion.

> This eroticized interest in the work of women’s hands is revisited in Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, particularly in the scene in which Hammon stands outside the sempster’s shop watching Jane work:

HAMMON Yonder’s the shop, and there my fair love sits.  
She’s fair and lovely, but she is not mine.  
Oh, would she were! Thrice have I courted her;
Thrice hath my hand been moistened with her hand,  
Whilst my poor famished eyes do feed on that  
Which made them famish...  
............................................  
How prettily she works! Oh, pretty hand!  
Oh, happy work! It doth me good to stand  
Unseen to her. (xii.1-6; 13-15)

Hammon’s pleasure derives as much from regarding Jane while he is unseen as from seeing her at all; this distance lends her sewing a fascination exceeding its rarity, difficulty, or physical distance, and this in turn allows Hammon to begin confusing the hand and the work it performs. Hammon consciously creates for himself the circumstances under which fetishization becomes possible.

Gabriel Metsu’s *The Letter Writer Surprised* (Fig. 4.1) figures this tension between what is and is not discoverable, between intrusion and exchange, and between the physical letter and the intangible labour that produces it. The man peering over the woman’s shoulder appears to have approached her unnoticed; the care with which he tries both to read what she is writing and to remain undetected are indicated by his awkward stance and intense facial expression. While the writer’s wimple prevents her from noting the man who lurks behind her, it also symbolizes her self-enclosure—what she sees are her own hands creating a physical manifestation of her private thoughts on paper. Further, the writer’s self-enclosure is predicated on the paradoxical fact of her solitude, a solitude that is so complete as to make her vulnerably unaware of the man looking over her shoulder. Those who look at the painting are in the same position of eternally limited knowledge as the lurker; we will never know what the writer writes, and that is why the painting is so gripping. That she is illuminated while he is (both literally and figuratively) in the dark figures her unknowability whether or not he is able to decipher
Fig. 4.1 Gabriel Metsu, *The Letter Writer Surprised*, 1662.
her text—at the very least, he cannot discover what motivates her to write it. As well, her illuminated position suggests the propriety of her writing while the lurker’s intrusiveness speaks to the indecorousness and irresistibility of his spying, both of which are increased by the fact that while she remains oblivious to the man behind her, we are both aware of and complicit in his intrusion into her space.

Critics such as James Daybell, Ronald Huebert, and Jonathan Goldberg have argued that the letter was understood as the most private form of writing in the Renaissance—and indeed, privacy and its susceptibility to invasion are crucial to “A lettre,” “Fourth Song,” The Letter Writer Surprised, and The Shoemaker’s Holiday. While the association of letter-writing with privacy is also complicated by such critics, they still tend to associate it with the containment of women’s authorship. Huebert claims that “To put it crudely though not inaccurately, privacy is a cage for the woman, a refuge for the man” (2001, 37). Huebert elsewhere lays out the myriad definitions of privacy current during the Renaissance; two of his definitions are important here: the “second cluster of meaning…has to do with ownership and property” while the “third semantic grouping…draws an implicit equation between privacy and secrecy” (1997, 31-32). Huebert argues that these definitions negatively associate women with the private because the latter represented “the absence of status” (1997, 29). Further, the combination of privacy-as-secrecy and privacy-as-ownership, to recall Hanson’s arguments, are integral to the threat suspected to be lurking in the “heart of one’s mystery.” However, it is this very marriage of privacy-as-secrecy and privacy-as-ownership that is the basis of an increasingly positive fetishization of the female letter-
Yet, letters and linens (to recall The Shoemaker’s Holiday) seem neither sufficiently unusual nor taboo to serve as fetishes, that is, as “the stimulus to or the end in itself of, sexual desire” (“Fetish” OED). The etymology of this word, however, evokes not just sexuality but also created things: “‘Fetish,’ like ‘fashion,’ is derived from the Latin facere: to make” (Jones and Stallybrass 8). In the texts I address in this chapter, it is not only the created objects (letters) which are so compelling, but the acts themselves of making letters. Writing of the history of European contact with Africans’ fetish practices, Jones and Stallybrass argue that physical fetishes were “demonized” because they contained “the possibility that history, memory, and desire might be materialized in objects” (11); the paradox is that such transference of values from subjects to objects made possible the idea of “the transcendental subject, a subject constituted by no place, no object” (11). The displacement of objects from their origins, and the way objects come to substitute for their absent creators, is the essence of fetish. It is also the essence of human labour in exchange, as Karl Marx discusses in Capital.

Marx’s chapter on “Commodities” outlines how the value of a commodity is defined, not by its use-value or physical characteristics, but by the labour that creates it. He argues that it is not, however, “the labour of the joiner, the mason, the spinner, or of any other definite kind of productive labour” that is of value, since “we put out of sight…the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in” the products we buy (440-41). Rather, “all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour
in the abstract” (441). The production and exchange of published texts between producers and consumers (and letters between monarchs and suitors) was always mediated in the Renaissance (by publishers, book-sellers, the censor, gift-givers, letter-bearers). Renaissance textual exchange thus anticipates Marx’s model of how labour was valued under industrial production; because of this, “the specific social character of each producer’s labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange…It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status” (447 emphasis added). It matters little whether in exchange for letters writers receive fame and financial success (Whitney), others’ letters and the political advantages that may be accrued therefrom (Elizabeth I), or patronage (Breton and du Bosque)—such exchange legitimates women’s intellectual labour, heightens the fetishistic attraction of their letters and the minds they represent, and ultimately infuses both with cultural value that transcends the simply fetishistic. Marx argues that “the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses” (446)—in other words, female intellectual labour is imaginable but not observable. What is key to note here is the public/private association between labour and gender. Broadly speaking, men’s labour roles were open, external, and public (or at least acceptably public, if necessary); women’s roles were interior, private, and beyond the gaze of the public. Thus, to either view or imagine viewing female labour is to gain privileged or even illicit access to a realm that is supposed to be closed to the gaze. Thus, when readers imagine women in the physical act of writing, they are always left wanting; how, when, why, where, and with (or without) whom epistolary production occurs are questions Whitney, Elizabeth, Breton, and du Bosque
generally leave unanswered. The existence of such epistolary commodities both forces and invites readers to imagine the letter-writers as outside the physical and social boundaries intended to define early modern women. Whitney’s, Elizabeth’s, Breton’s and du Bosque’s texts illuminate the compelling tension between the limited extent to which one can access another’s thoughts and the (im)propriety of attempting it.

Taking up the issue of how and why Renaissance writers imagined exploring the hearts of others, Maus cites *Skeptic, or Speculation*, a short pamphlet likely penned by Sir Walter Ralegh, which “argues against the authority of sense perceptions on the grounds that each individual, necessarily limited to the evidence of his own senses, cannot know whether the perceptions of others correlate to his own, nor to what extent anyone’s perceptions give an accurate idea of ‘outward objects’” (1991, 37). This acknowledgment of the limits of perception “destabilizes a commonsense notion of direct access to things-in-themselves by insisting that the internal working of other minds, what [Ralegh] calls their ‘inward discourse,’ is remote and inaccessible” (Maus 1991, 37).

What Maus finds surprising is that “this perspectivism seems to strengthen, not weaken, the impulse to investigate those minds” (1991, 38). Maus does not note Ralegh’s slip from the epistemological to the phenomenological here, but this slippage is important because it both articulates and denies the essentially different processes involved in deciphering inanimate objects’ meanings and deciphering living subjects’ meanings. This inability completely to distinguish these two forms of investigation accounts I believe for the creation of fetish objects—it creates the possibility for the substitution that defines the relationship between physical letters and the labour that produces them.

Patricia Fumerton gestures towards the other part of this equation: “the subjectivity that
formed within the collective cosmos of Elizabethan cultural exchange...wished at once to exist in exchange with others and to bar all exchange capable of unlocking its closed miniature or sonnet of meaning” (27). These two impulses—to discover and to self-contain while engaging with others who likewise wish to engage with others and to self-contain—speak to a social trade that is necessary but also simultaneously and necessarily incomplete; this exchange depends on the mystery of women’s writing being only partially revealed via writers and readers treading the fine line between proper exchange and indecorous intrusion.

In Isabella Whitney’s and Elizabeth I’s letters, tension between proper and improper exposure and exchange is reflected in the distinction of their female writers-personae from the creators thereof. Whitney and Elizabeth create fictive identities meant to be wholly detectable as such by their reading audiences; but while the letters invite the readerly gaze they also insist that they are imperfect substitutions for the labour that created them. Fetishism “is impregnated with the self-consciousness of absent value” (Apter 2), and this “absent value” becomes both increasingly removed from the safety and secrecy of the private and more strikingly familiar in Breton’s and du Bosque’s texts. These two letter collections present variations of a quotidian fetish; it is everyday women in their closets who are represented, not extraordinary figures who, for example, write in their own blood. The texts here discussed suggest that representations of women’s epistolary productions are fetishized only ultimately to become acceptable and commonplace. This occurs through the counterintuitive process by which culture attempts to define its subjects’ positions and meanings—by attempting to create such stasis, the possibility for change becomes imaginable. Or, as Emily Apter phrases it
specifically with reference to fetish: “a consistent displacing of reference occurs, paradoxically, as a result of so much fixing. Fetishism, in spite of itself, unfixes representations even as it enables them to become monolithic ‘signs’ of culture” (3).

II

Appended to Isabella Whitney’s A Sweet Nosgay are “Certain familier Epistles and friendly Letters by the Auctor: with Replies.” More famous for her Ovidian Copy of a Letter than for the Nosgay, Whitney has tended to satisfy feminist critics’ desire to read early modern women’s writing as concerned exclusively with women’s issues on the one hand and autobiography on the other. Some critics are now, however, beginning to recognize that Whitney is perhaps more complex than has been assumed. Laurie Ellinghausen, for example, views “Whitney as more self-interested than we have envisioned her previously” (19), while Lynnette McGrath argues that Whitney writes “from a sense of power and a place of abjection” (135). Whether or not the real Isabella

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46 Such turns away from the “community of women” approach that has long defined critical analyses of early modern women’s writing are promising. Ann Rosalind Jones’s argument that Whitney creates between herself and her sisters “an alliance of women at work” (31), and Jane Donawerth’s claim that the epistles create “a supporting network of extended family [that is] an enactment of an exchange of love” (15) are coming to be regarded as rather too simplistic. Approaches to Whitney’s work still fall short in one important way, however: while Ellinghausen, McGrath, and Jones acknowledge that in her poetry, Whitney creates a persona that is distinct from herself, they all also continually conflate the real Isabella Whitney with the persona they identify. Ellinghausen observes that “Several critics…tend to posit the real Whitney as a maidservant. Given the lack of biographical information on her life, we must be careful in assuming this” (4). Yet, Ellinghausen herself bases much of her argument on assumptions of “a distinct autobiographical strain” in the poetry (19), claiming repeatedly that Whitney “makes it clear that she writes because she must” (9; 1, 10).

Besides basing their work on the presumed autobiographical truth of Whitney’s texts, critics have never considered the possibility that Whitney herself wrote the letters addressed to her in the Nosgay. Lynette McGrath argues that Whitney’s printer, Richard Jones, had a “‘stable’ of poets…[including] Thomas Berrie, who contributes a commendation of Whitney and one of the ‘familiar epistles’ in the Nosgay volume; [and] R. Wite and C.B., unidentified contributors to Whitney’s two volumes” (127). The unidentified epistle-writers could easily be pseudonyms for Whitney; indeed, close reading of A Sweet Nosgay does not present any authorial “voices” that are truly distinct from Whitney’s, save perhaps T.B.’s (author of “T.B. in commendation of the Author”).

As well, there are three references to Nestor in Whitney’s corpus: the phrase “Nestor’s days” occurs twice in the Nosgay—in a letter by Whitney (“To her mistress A.B.”), in “In answer by C.B. to Is.W.,” and in The Copy of a Letter (ll.21-28). McGrath also notes that not only is it possible that Whitney
Whitney wrote from such a position matters little; what does matter is that her canny deployment of an “abject” writing persona lends her work rhetorical power by creating the appearance of a lack thereof. This persona’s proclaimed abjection couches her intellectual labour in terms of financial necessity. This, in turn, separates her from others, thereby infusing her persona with the solitude and mystery that defines the fetish of women’s mental labour; it also, paradoxically, gives her the authority to dispense the moral advice that comprises the Nosgay.

While I will not focus much on the Nosgay proper, it is worth noting that Whitney’s first four rewritings of Hugh Plat’s aphorisms from The Floures of Philosophie reveal the constructedness of her female author-persona. The first three “flowers,” but particularly the third, suggest pleasure in solitude, or at least pleasure in imagining a mental withdrawal from the physical world into the self:

The presence of the mynd must be preferd, if we do well:
     Aboue the bodyes presence; for it farre doth it excell.

The fourth aphorism, however, highlights the potential dangers of solitude:

Yet absence, sometimes bringeth harme, when Freends but fickle are:
     For new acquaintance purchase place
     and old doo lose their share.

Of Plat’s almost nine hundred “flowers,” Whitney chose to rewrite only one hundred ten, and approximately half of her choices emphasize alienation, solitude, and inwardness:

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anonymously wrote A Handful of Pleasant Delights (1584) for Jones, but also that “it is likely she contributed to the lost predecessor of A Handful” (125)—a text cited in the OED for its use of the phrase “Nestor’s days”: “Then shall they say that see the same, where euer that they goe: And wish for ay, as for thy pay, all Nestors yeares to know” (sig. d8). This rather strange preoccupation with one turn of phrase increases the possibility that Whitney, not other unidentifiable authors, wrote C.B. et al’s epistles in the Nosgay.
He that is voyd of any friend,  
him company to keepe:  
Walkes in a world of wyldernesse,  
full fraught with dangers deepe. (#52)

Whitney constructs her persona floundering in the “dangers deepe” of financial distress and social alienation which critics have tended to take as straightforwardly autobiographical. However, to advertise such extreme solitude via publication is as likely to speak to a purposeful appeal to her audiences’ reading pleasure as it does to simple requests for help.

That it is the persona and her labour, not the poet, we are meant to understand as the object of fetish here is indicated by the publisher’s reticence with respect to providing biographical information about Whitney—very little of the real woman is revealed and her mysterious anonymity is amplified by the fact that she is represented as either I.W. or Is.W.; like the social tableaux she creates but from which she excludes herself, the choice of using only her initials as identification invites readers to speculate on her identity.47 Indeed, self-conscious foregrounding of either incomplete or inaccessible knowledge, such as the use of initials and other forms of withholding biographical information, is integral to fetishism. McGrath argues that the publisher “equivocated the issue of her gender under the generic ‘yonge Gentilwoman’…[so as not] to risk violating his readers’ sensibilities by playing up the factor that was really new—the gender of the writer” (129). McGrath does not explain how this claim is reconcilable with her other claim that when T.B. reveals the poet’s name in his “commendat ion of the Authour” he does so in order to “imply the expectation by the printer, at least, of a sympathetic audience for this

47 It was common practice during the period for publishers to cite only their authors’ initials on frontispieces, even for authors as well-known and respected as William Shakespeare. However, in the case of Isabella Whitney, this common practice becomes infused with unusual layers meaning when considered in tandem with the way both she and her publisher play with the
‘philosophical’ work and its attachments” (124). Rather, this calculated vacillation between mysteriousness and information about the writer, coupled with both the “flowers”’ and the “Last Wyll and Testament”’s presentation of a writer unmoored from the safe social bonds of marriage, employment, and family, is intended to spark imagination rather than sympathy.

Elaine Beilin reads this portrayal of the solitary female writer as Whitney’s “frustration or despair of isolated, undirected study that has no immediate application in the world” (1990, 253). While Whitney’s text can undoubtedly be read as criticism of humanism’s gendered double standards about education, it must also be read as a confident assertion of her ability not simply to write, but also to write within an established tradition of moral advice-giving. One might be tempted to read Whitney’s “translation” of Plat’s text as a “safe” form of authorship for a woman; yet, she uses the act of “translation” specifically to create a sense of peril surrounding her writing:

...some may say, God speede her well
that dyd this Nosegay make.
And eke that he who ought the Plot,
wherein the same did grow:
Fume not to see them borne aboute,
and wysh he did me know.
And say in rage were she a man,
that with my Flowers doth brag,
She well should pay the price, I wolde
not leaue her worth a rag. (“A farewell to the Reader” ll.23-32)

She may be protected from Plat’s imagined rage because she is a woman, but that immunity serves simply to remind readers that she would be unable to withstand Plat’s violence should he choose to inflict it. Rather than aligning herself with a coterie of writers who pen philosophical flowers, Whitney refuses the protective claims inherent in
both translation and *auctorite*, and places her authority firmly within the articulation of her alienation.

Her use of Plat contributes to Whitney’s creation of her persona, but her letters to her siblings form the real basis of her simultaneous authorial power and solitude. She writes that her brother G.W. “must be chiepest staffe / that I shal stay on heare” in London (ll.15-16), yet she also claims she is unable to find him:

Good Brother whē a vacāt time
doth cause you hence to ryde:
And that the fertyl feelds do make,
you from the Cittie byde.
Then cānot I once from you heare
nor know I how to send:
Or where to harken of your health
and al this would be kend. (ll.1-8)

Whitney claims the same ignorance about B.W.’s location:

Good Brother Brooke, I often looke,
to hear of your returne:
But none can tell, if you be well,
nor where you doo soiurne:
Which makes me feare, that I shall heare
your health appaired is:
And oft I dread, that you are dead,
or somthyng goes amys. (ll.1-8)

McGrath argues that even though Whitney does not know “the whereabouts of her two brothers…the genre of the personal or ‘familiar’ letter and the conventionally assumed closeness of familial and friendly relationships warm [Whitney’s] epistolary community” (145). First, it is unlikely that the real Isabella Whitney would have been so completely unaware of her brothers’ whereabouts. If G.W. is the Geoffrey Whitney of emblem book fame, the same brother who ostensibly introduced Isabella to printers and other writers in the first place (McGrath 130), then finding him via such a network of connections could
not be so difficult. Secondly, there is nothing warm or connective in published letters which accuse family members of hiding their whereabouts and being unwilling either to respond to or help their unemployed, unmarried sister.

The letters to G.W. and B.W. further highlight her seclusion by portraying her as luckless (“For on my side, no luck will byde, / nor happye chaunce befall” (“B.W.” ll.19-20; “G.W.” ll.9-12)), as receiving no letters in response to these ones, and in conflating her physical and mental vulnerability with the material letter: “I wyll show, / you more when we doo speake, / Then wyll I wryt, or yet resyte, / within this Paper weake” (“B.W.” ll.21-24). Yet, Whitney’s “feare, and deepe despaire” (“B.W.” l.13) must be understood as rhetorical constructions, if only because the sing-song rhyme schemes and metres of both poems belie their gloomy subject matter. “To her Brother G.W.” is written in lines of varying length (nothing longer than eight syllables) with an abcdefghih rhyme scheme, while “To her Brother B.W.” utilizes internal rhyme for all odd-numbered lines and alternating end rhymes similar to those seen in “G.W.” Whitney uses several different rhyme schemes for other poems in the collection, which suggests that one of these epistles’ primary purposes is to showcase Whitney’s skill with various poetic forms. Whitney’s concurrent displays of her isolation and her poetic repertoire must be understood as different techniques targeting the same end: aligning the terms “woman” and “author” via the tempting prospect of intellectual labour undertaken under circumstances of financial and social duress.

Whitney’s letters to her sisters are more complex than those to her brothers as they invoke a set of ostensibly unbreakable familial bonds; yet, she invokes these bonds
only to reveal and emphasize their limitations. In “To her Sister Misteris A.B.” Whitney writes,

Because I to my Brethern wrote,
and to my Sisters two:
Good Sister Anne, you this might wote,
yf so I should not doo
To you, or ere I parted hence,
You vainely had bestowed expence.

Yet is it not for that I write,
for nature dyd you bynde:
To doo mee good: and to requight,
hath nature mee inclynde[.] (ll.1-10)

Whitney follows these claims of sisterly devotion with assertions of desire for a lifelong relationship with Anne’s children, hoping that her “luck it bee, / to linger heere so long: /
Til they be men: that I may see, / for learning them so strong” (ll.19-22). But Whitney immediately overturns this projected familial comfort by imagining the physical weakness of old age as co-existent with her enjoyment of her nephews’ company:

By that tyme wyl my aged yeares
perhaps a staffe require:
And quakyngly as styll in feares,
my lims draw to the fire:
Yet ioy I shall them so to see,
Yf any ioy in age there bee. (ll.25-30)

Rather than using letters to “mingle souls; / For, thus friends absent speak” (Donne, “To Sir Henry Wotton,” ll.1-2), Whitney creates absence and loss (both her own and her addressees’) as the central imaginative effects of letter-writing.

Critics often cite the conclusion of the epistle to A.B. as proof that the writing persona’s abjection and depression must also be the real Whitney’s abjection and depression:
Good Sister so I you commend,  
to him that made us all:  
I know you huswyfery intend,  
though I to writing fall[.] (ll.31-34)

Ellinghausen correctly reads the contrast between Anne’s “huswyfery” and Whitney’s writing as the poet consciously “deploying cultural discourses and locating [her]self in the spaces in between” (2); but she then suggests these lines prove only that in “the interim between service and marriage” will writing be Whitney’s “companion and her property” (1). The irony of Whitney’s apparent subordination of her life’s worth to her sister’s is the line that seems most to assert it; indeed, the irony is focused in one word. While Anne attends to her house, Whitney indicates that she will “to writing fall.” Picking up on Wendy Wall’s discussion of the word “fall” in The Imprint of Gender, McGrath notes that the sexual connotations of the word are “uniquely applicable to women” (155-56). Whitney’s word choice thus serves paradoxical but interdependent purposes: first, it infuses the text with an intriguing hint of illicit sexuality. Secondly and ironically, there is in fact nothing improper in either this poetic epistle or any of Whitney’s other writings in the Nosgay; the bulk of the work comprises moral aphorisms, while the appended epistles focus on Whitney’s performance of intellectual labour through letter-writing and advice-giving.

Whitney plays on clichés about women’s sexual and mental purity by creating a hairline fracture in her persona’s image with her use of “fall.” It subtly highlights the latent notion within the text that publication might after all, as Wall has argued, be akin to sexual looseness—and this fracture invites readers to imagine precisely under what physical and mental circumstances such complicated letters might be penned. Whitney’s suggestion of impropriety is vague enough not to seriously damage her moral and
authorial credibility; in fact, this suggestion makes her authority all the more interesting for being threatened, perhaps from within. At the same time, “falling” to a particular activity suggests an energetic engagement therewith; while A.B. labours in the home, Whitney labours with her pen to produce poetry. Yet, while she privileges her own work over A.B.’s, both are integral to Whitney’s project. The intellectual labour she performs to create her poetry is made more appealing because it emphasizes what she is not doing; it reminds us that she is unmarried and seemingly uninterested in changing this condition—Whitney forces readers to imagine her in some space more fragile than the physically and socially safe space of the home of a married woman. The letter itself suggests only one explanation—she simply prefers writing to a future life defined by the needs of a home and family. The comparison between household and mental activity is the basis for Whitney’s creation of a poetic stand-in capable of dispensing morally and intellectually sound advice, writing poetry, and asserting her own status as subject in the supposedly repressive realms of female weakness, poverty, and privacy.

This curious interplay between moral authority and social fragility is explored again in “An order prescribed, by IS.W. to two of her younger Sisters seruinge in London.” Jones reads this epistle as Whitney’s evocation of “a concentric set of alliances [in which she] advises her sister[,] aligns herself with all maids against those who would corrupt them by deed or word[,] and...celebrates the shared routine through which all of London’s households are secured by servants against the dangers of the night” (27). Whitney, however, describes such alliances and safe places only to highlight her own disconnection from them: “Good sisters mine, when I / shal further from you dwell: / Peruse these lines, obserue the rules / which in the same I tell” (ll.1-4). Whitney advises
her sisters to engage in regular prayer and the impeccable performance of their household duties. Yet, as Jones points out, “the center of the poem has to do with sexual risk. By her third stanza, she is linking proper labor with the banishment of erotic preoccupation” (25): “iustly do such deedes, / as are to you assynde: / All wanton toyes, good sisters now / exile out of your minde” (ll.21-24). Jones asks who it is that might “soone infect” (l.28) her sisters’ minds (28), but Whitney provides no clear response:

Your busines soone dispatch,  
and listen to no lyes:  
Nor credit euery fayned tale,  
that many wyll deuise.  
For words they are but winde.  
yet words may hurt you so:  
As you shall neuer brook the same,  
yf that you haue a foe.  
God shyld you from all such,  
as would by word or Byll.  
Procure your shame, or neuer cease  
tyll they haue wrought you yll. (ll.33-44)

Suggesting that the sexual threat to which her sisters are most likely to succumb will be offered in words, including letters (“Bylls”48), further legitimates Whitney’s discursive position by demonizing any other discourses with which her sisters might come into contact. At the same time, this epistolary poem sets her sisters up as objects of readers’ imaginative gazes, the same imaginative gaze she has been inviting towards herself.

Highlighting her sisters’ vulnerability serves several functions here: it establishes the need for and therefore moral authority of the advice Whitney gives; it also further complicates her persona’s authority by suggesting striking differences between letters’ contents and intentions. The advice Whitney gives is appropriate for young women in service positions who may be vulnerable to male servants’, their masters’, and perhaps

48 “I.a. A written document (originally sealed), a statement in writing (more or less formal); a letter, note, memorandum” (OED).
intruders’ impositions; she commands them to “See Dores & Windowes bolted fast / for feare of any wrack” (ll.83-84). The idea of young women locking up the house reflects Whitney’s instructions that they lock up their secrets. Rather than simply inviting a potentially unsafe gaze into the home, however, Whitney makes secret-keeping a significant part of the moral instruction she provides for her sisters. The vulnerability of the body versus the impregnability of the mind (a mind which sometimes purposefully keeps to itself) speaks to a subjectivity that is not only realized through the paradox of the weak body/strong mind, but also transcends it. As in the epistle to A.B., the contrast between Whitney’s intellectual labour and the household labour from which she exempts herself is key to understanding “An order prescribed.” It is crucial that the sisters are imagined as engaging in both kinds of labour—household duties do not eclipse their ability to interpret and respond to any letters they might receive. Admonishing them to let God shield them from letter-writers who would “procure [their] shame,” Whitney also advises,

See that you those secrets do seale
tread trifles vnder ground:
Yf to reversall oft you come,
it wyll your quiet wound.
Of laughter be not much,
nor ouer solemne seeme[.] (ll.45-50)

This epistle figures Whitney teaching her sisters to become critical readers on the one hand, and controllers of their own discourses on the other.

Whitney’s images of women as secret keepers and manipulators of words ensure that the rhetoric of pleasure in the Nosgay transcends the merely conventional. In “T.B. in commendation of the Author” we are told that Whitney wrote the Nosgay “to pleasure thee” (the reader) (l.47), and that T.B. takes pleasure not only in perusing Whitney’s
flowers but also in revealing her identity (ll.23-26). Further, in her dedicatory epistle to George Mainwaring, Whitney writes of her desire that he “take pleasure in them” (her writings) (4). Why Whitney would want to “pleasure” her readers with such complex ideas of female intellectual labour in letter-writing is open to speculation, but simply selling more books cannot be at the bottom of the list of possibilities. Recalling Marx’s claims about exchange infusing labour with value, giving the gifts of advice and pleasure creates the cultural desire for more books by Isabella Whitney. Securing future projects (either for fame or money), however, is not the only possible motivation behind Whitney’s construction of a fetishized writing persona. It is also possible that this persona was created for Whitney’s own pleasure; more likely, the idea of a poet creating something for her own pleasure is part of the persona’s appeal. T.B. hints at such authorial pleasure:

She doth not write the brute or force in Armes,
Nor pleasure takes, to sing of others harmes,

But mustred hath, and wrapped in a packe
a heape of Flowers of Philosophie[.] (ll.34-37)

T.B. contrasts Whitney’s pleasure in writing peaceful aphorisms against those who would write of “force in Arms,” but the fact that he uses the verb “muster” to describe the act she finds so pleasurable speaks to something more active than a peaceful, almost passive gathering of others’ “flowers.”

Whitney’s apparently active enjoyment of writing is also suggested in “To her Sister Misteris A.B.” This epistle contrasts her and her sister’s different forms of labour, and it does so precisely to reveal the pleasure she takes in the writing life she has chosen:

Had I a Husband, or a house,
and all that longes therto
My selfe could frame about to rouse,
as other women doo:
But til some household cares mee tye,
My bookes and Pen I wyll apply.  (ll.37-42)

The language Whitney uses here suggests reluctance with respect to, not desire for,
mARRIED LIFE. She relies on the spectre of household labour, but she imagines it as
something she would have to “rouse” herself to, and once she did so, “cares” would “tye”
er her to the home. 49 In contrast, while the mere possibility of marriage inspires Whitney to
utilize the language of bondage and to shift her persona out of the subject and into the
object position, her writing is determined and definitive. Further, she imagines marriage
as aligning her too fully with other women—having spent the entirety of the Nosgay
separating herself from others, the last thing she is going to do is express a believable
desire to do “as other women doo.” Whitney’s pleasure (or her persona’s) resides, rather,
in the writing solitude she claims to lament and in inviting the reading public to imagine
her solitary pleasure.

III

Carole Levin argues that Elizabeth I’s royal status ensured that “every aspect of
Elizabeth’s life contained its public element; as she herself once stated, her life was

49 Two definitions of “rouse” are applicable here. The first is the obvious one: “3.b. To raise or lift up.”
The other, however, increases the claustrophobia Whitney expresses about being tied to the home: “1.a. Of
a hawk; to shake the feathers.” The idea of wifely submission to the whims of a husband and the needs of
the household is given disturbing articulation in Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew; Petruchio uses the
same methods to “tame” Kate that were used to train wild hawks:

   My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,
   And till she stoop she must not be full gorged,
   For then she never looks upon her lure.
   Another way I have to man my haggard,
   To make her come and know her keeper’s call,
   That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites
   That bate and beat, and will not be obedient.  (IV.i.171-77)

Through this strategically placed word, Whitney strengthens her subtle rejection of the domestic bliss for
which she claims to yearn.
conducted in the open. We might well wonder if there were any place for Elizabeth to ever be privately the subservient and submissive wife, even if she would choose to be so, which is dubious” (44). This openness was perhaps the source of Elizabeth’s often reiterated concerns about her reputation, and I would suggest her negotiations between her personal and her public identities. Levin argues that Elizabeth did not have a real private identity, but as I will show in this section, whether or not she had one, Elizabeth was invested in having others believe that she did. Indeed, in her letters to the Duke of Alençon, Elizabeth mobilizes a private persona most clearly to negotiate a complex public marriage negotiation but as I will show, also with the apparent aim of pleasing herself privately. Elizabeth emphasizes the tension between her public identity and her private self in these letters in particular to show that while she could not engage in the same strenuous physical activities as a king could, she could instead mobilize her intellectual power to labour for the good of England. 50 Relying so heavily on her mental talents to perform her monarchical work, Elizabeth’s power would have to appear entirely natural and effortless to be effective; she had, in other words, to employ Baldesar Castiglione’s theory of *sprezzatura*, the essence of which is to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and *almost* without any thought about it. And I believe much grace comes of this: *because everyone knows the difficulty of things that are rare and well done;* .......................

Therefore we may call that art true art which does not seem to be art; nor must one be more careful of anything than of concealing it, because if it is discovered, this robs a man of all credit and causes him to be held in slight esteem. (32 emphasis added)

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50 This awareness turned to rhetorical and political advantage is epitomized in Elizabeth’s famous proclamation that she has “the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king and of a king of England too” (“Speech to the Troops at Tilbury” 326).
Castiglione claims that any slippage between the appearance of effortlessness and the reality of working to achieve that appearance will “rob a man of all credit,” but his own rhetoric undermines this claim. One’s accomplishments must “appear” to be effortless and “almost” without thought, but that appearance is important precisely because “everyone knows the difficulty of things that are rare and well done.” It is the slightly imperfect façade of sprezzatura, the concealment of effort just short of perfectly obscuring the extent of that effort that is the essence of the fetishization of female intellectual labour here; it reveals, however subtly, that the acknowledged exercise of her mental power was absolutely necessary to the deployment of Elizabeth’s royal authority. This disjoint enables a similar kind of exchange of labour value seen in Whitney’s works, but much more is at stake: in her letters to the Duke of Alençon, Elizabeth creates compelling images of her own and England’s vulnerable but receptive bodies in order to sustain a courtship designed not to conclude in marriage, but to maintain friendly relations with France. In these letters to Monsieur, Elizabeth foregrounds the tension between her public and privates selves in a way she does neither in other letters nor in other forms of textual communication; indeed, she foregrounds this conflict via a complex interrelation of the sexual and the intellectual—both of which she appears to offer up to her addressee while strategically and teasingly keeping both out of reach.

A 1549 letter to Edward Seymour (written when Elizabeth was under the protection of the Privy Council due to Thomas Seymour’s alleged attempt to marry her) reveals how Elizabeth began developing her considerable rhetorical skill:

And as concerning that point that you write—that I seem to stand in mine own wit in being so well assured of mine own self—I did assure me of myself no more than I trust the truth shall try. And to say that which I knew of myself I did not think
should have displeased the Council or your grace. And surely the cause why that I was sorry that there should be any such about me was because that I thought the people will say that I deserved through my lewd demeanor to have such a one, and not that I dislike anything that your lordship or the Council shall think good (for I know that you and the Council are charged with me), or that I take upon me to rule myself. For I know they are most deceived that trusteth most in themselves, wherefore I trust you shall never find that fault in me... (Letter 16)

Elizabeth’s complicated vacillation between asserting her inner truth and declaring that she would not presume to rule herself speaks to her precarious position. She must appear both submissive and self-possessed to be considered innocent of treachery; yet, her combination of submissiveness and self-possession might also be interpreted as dissembling and dishonesty. This is not, I would argue, a rhetorical failure; rather, this letter’s invitation to read her claims of innocence in more than one way reveal her burgeoning power with the pen.

Elizabeth’s early letters could only have been written by a politically vulnerable young princess using the seemingly incompatible rhetorics of royalty and interiority to negotiate her tenuous position. In a 1552 letter to Edward VI, Elizabeth smartly equivocates about her feelings on her brother’s illness: “What cause I had of sorry when I heard first of your majesty’s sickness all men might guess but none but myself could feel, which to declare were or might seem a point of flattery, and therefore to write it I omit” (Letter 18). This confident use of “silence” both to seem to say what is expected and to refuse to do so establishes a fissure between her meaning and others’ interpretation thereof. Elizabeth was cognizant of the fact that as heir, threat to the throne, and ultimately queen, her letters were circulated and copied, and in a 1556 letter to Queen Mary she reveals her anxieties about her many readers’ reception of her letters. She also
confidently iterates that her internal “truth” is immune to slander; this “truth” paradoxically reflects Mary’s inability to comprehend her, and as in her letter to Edward Seymour, Elizabeth here reveals her latent royal and rhetorical power:

…among earthly things I chiefly wish this one: that there were as good surgeons for making anatomies of hearts that might show my thoughts to your majesty as there are expert physicians of the bodies, able to express the inward griefs of the maladies to their patient. For then I doubt not but know well that whatsoever other should suggest by malice, yet your majesty should be sure by knowledge, so that the more such misty clouds obfuscates the clear light of my truth, the more my tried thoughts should glister to the dimming of their hidden malice. (Letter 23)

What is striking here is that this letter is addressed as much to Mary’s courtiers and Council members sure to read it and to continue to accuse Elizabeth of treachery, as it is addressed to Mary herself. The letter alludes to the courtiers’ and Council’s contributions to Mary’s paranoia, but it is also designed to increase Mary’s paranoia—but as to the untrustworthiness of her advisors, not her sister.

Jennifer Summit argues that Elizabeth’s use of “her reputation as a poet” was “an important part in her royal self-fashioning” (165); moreover, Elizabeth’s contradictory position as both woman and queen “enabled her to negotiate the paradoxes and politically delicate dilemmas that came” therewith (Summit 166). Nowhere is Elizabeth’s seemingly effortless intellectual labour more strikingly mobilized to political advantage than in her letters to “Monsieur,” the Duke of Alençon. In these epistles, Elizabeth engages in elaborate rhetorical game-playing with a young man she was likely never willing to marry, but to whom she constantly asserted her devotion. That politics must be considered closely in relation to any marriage she considered is made clear in many of Elizabeth’s letters and speeches, but especially in “Queen Elizabeth’s Answer to the
Lords’ Petition that she Marry, April 10, 1563” (delivered by Nicholas Bacon with
Elizabeth present): “For though I can think it best for a private woman, yet do I strive
with myself to think it not meet for a prince. And if I can bend my liking to your need I
will not resist such a mind” (Speech 6). Elizabeth is being very cagey here—while she
cannot marry just anyone she pleases, she will also not marry solely for political reasons.
While claiming to be entirely tractable to her country’s needs, she is in fact asserting that
she holds the power to decide, a power over her body and mind that is exercised via her
control of language.

Marriage talks with and about the Duke of Alençon began in 1572 and did not
conclude until 1583. In early letters not addressed to Monsieur, Elizabeth continually
asserts the impossibility of marriage with him—she cites the “youngness of the years of
the duke” (he was seventeen and she was thirty-eight in 1573) (Letter 34, July 23, 1572);
she often notes the French royal family’s willful misinterpretations of her polite
rejections of the young man: “they did understand our affection to be very great towards
this marriage and that we have sought out the means how the interviews should be made.
Whereof we had much marvel” (Letter 40, March 15, 1574); she is aware of France’s
motives for pushing the marriage, which “manifestly appeareth by their insisting upon
points chiefly incident and depending upon our fortune—giveth us just cause to suppose
that the mark that is shot at is our fortune and not our person” (Letter 44, May 1579).
Yet, in her first known letter to Monsieur (December 1579), Elizabeth overtly woos him:

My dearest, I give you now a fair mirror to see there very
clearly the foolishness of my understanding, which I once
found so suited to hoping for a good conclusion, weighing
the place where you reside with the company that is there.
We poor inhabitants of the barbarous isle must be careful in
appearing for judgment where such ingenious judges of our
knowledge hold their seat in so high a place in your favor.
But in making my appeal to Monsieur alone and undivided,
I will not let my suit drop. And if you would have me given
over to the rack, I will not put a gloss on this text, assuring
myself that you understand it only too well. (Letter 45)

Elizabeth here presents herself as a persuasive suitor on the one hand, but “foolish,”
“poor,” and “barbarous” on the other. She is timid in the face of French “judgment” but
claims she would submit to torture to prove she is dedicated to Monsieur and that her text
is not “glossed.” The image of Elizabeth allowing Monsieur to participate in placing her
on the rack is a complicated one: it invites Monsieur to imagine her body exposed and
stretched in a (sexually) vulnerable fashion; it stages the fantasy of a Queen (the one
person in England who could officially sanction such torture) being tortured; her claims
about England’s inferiority to France figure her body as synecdochic for her poor,
barbarous (read Protestant to his Catholic) country awaiting French improvement.

Yet, in spite of Elizabeth’s wooing of Monsieur, this passage also strongly
suggests that she intends that the marriage never be realized; she writes “I give you
now a fair mirror to see there very clearly the foolishness of my understanding, which I
once found so suited to hoping for a good conclusion.” Even more striking than this
acknowledgement of the impossibility of the union, is that it occurs at the beginning of
the long passage of invitation quoted above. Elizabeth had charged Sir Edward Stafford
with “following up marriage negotiations after Monsieur’s first visit” (n.2, p.237), but in
a letter to him written circa August 1580, Elizabeth does not equivocate on the matter;

51 During Monsieur’s final visit to Elizabeth, it is reported that her “behavior veered from one extreme to
another. On November 22, 1581, she reportedly told Leicester and Walsingham that she and Monsieur
would marry, drawing a ring from her finger and putting it on his hand, while he gave her a ring in return”
(n. 1, pp. 251-52). We cannot necessarily take a reported incident as absolute fact; further, Elizabeth’s taste
for dramatic self-representation is well known, and so we can imagine this scene as having been of dubious
sincerity if in fact actually occurred.
Monsieur has just invaded the Netherlands and seriously displeased the English Queen:

“For rather will I never meddle with marriage than have such a bad covenant added to my part. Shall it be ever found true that Queen Elizabeth hath solemnized the perpetual harm of England under the glorious title of marriage with Francis, heir of France? No, no, it shall never be” (Letter 48). Elizabeth’s radically different rhetorical stances on this topic reveal that while marriage with Monsieur was not politically worthwhile, appearing to negotiate it was. This is, in other words, a form of intense play, the point of which is to not decide the issue of the marriage; and no medium could be better suited to such play than letters, for in Elizabeth’s case, no matter how private they may be made to appear, they are because she writes them also public documents (public insofar as they are sure to be read by others than the addressee).

That this is a game is made clear by the fact that Elizabeth’s references to being placed on the rack to prove her sincerity, to not glossing her text, to England being a barbarous isle, to her ingenious French judges, and to writing to Monsieur alone and undivided are not unique to her first letter to him. The above passage from her December 19, 1579 letter is repeated almost verbatim in her January 17, 1580 letter; such repetition suggests that in using what amount to stock phrases in this context, Elizabeth was consciously revealing the intellectual labour that she put into the first letter by highlighting how little she put into the second. That Elizabeth is showing off her complete rhetorical control over her identity (and therefore their relationship) is suggested by her abrupt switch from the rhetoric of submission to the rhetoric of the pastoral and the bounty and innocence it suggests. In a March 17, 1581 letter to Monsieur, she thanks him “very humbly for the sweet flowers culled by the hand that has
the little fingers that I bless a million times” (Letter 49). The idea of Elizabeth and Monsieur meeting in such a pastoral world unaffected by politics is pure fantasy and I suggest, is meant to be understood as such. Moreover, Elizabeth’s reference to the “little fingers” of a man engaged in military conquest can only be understood as intentionally incongruous, a backhanded literary allusion to the vast difference between the world of these letters and their writers’ realities. At least some of the people on the Duke’s side who read her letters to Monsieur seem to have recognized Elizabeth’s game-playing, and as she acknowledges, many of his advisors distrusted her:

It is so difficult in these times to know the difference between seeming and being that I wish the wisdom of Solomon to reside in your mind to separate the false ones from the true ones and such as look further beyond rather than setting you up as the target of their arrows. (Letter 47)

Warning Monsieur that his advisors are untrustworthy, Elizabeth subtly implies that he should also not confuse her seeming with her meaning. Thus, when she writes, “I purge myself of the calumnies imputed to me, in France and elsewhere, of having used subtleties or changefulness in what I promised you” (Letter 52), she is not dissembling per se because her rhetoric of commitment has been so finely qualified all along.52

52 While Elizabeth’s wrangling over an untenable marriage with the Duke of Alençon might have been a case of necessary if distasteful political strategizing from the English perspective, it appears to have rankled quite deeply in France. The Secret History of the Duke of Alencon and Q. Elizabeth: A True History was translated from the French and published in England in 1691. In his study of the Nouvelles d’Elisabeth, reyne d’Angleterre (1674), John Watkins challenges “the conceptual dichotomies that have lead scholars to neglect them: distinctions between ‘fiction’ and ‘history,’ between ‘romance’ and ‘novel,’ and above all, between ‘government behind the scenes’ and the ‘inner and privy bed’” (152). Watkins’s purely theoretical approach coalesces in part with my interest not only in how the Secret History reflects France’s distrust of England, but also in how this fictional Elizabeth performs the same kind of rhetorical game-playing as the real Elizabeth did in her real letters to the real Duke. Such trickiness is constantly demonized in the Secret History, and yet, her clear intellectual superiority renders France’s erstwhile hero, the Duke, as ineptly playing a high-stakes political game he does not fully comprehend—which was also the case in reality. The Secret History, then, replicates Elizabeth’s own subtle chastising of Monsieur’s rhetorical blindness by rendering his character completely ineffectual in the face of Elizabeth’s tricks and evasions.
Indeed, most of the letters’ images of a vulnerable Queen/England contain their own negation. Writing of some indeterminate future when “the little priest had already performed his office,” Elizabeth assures Monsieur that she would then “perform in such a sort that you will not justly be able to impute any deficiencies in your behalf” (Letter 52). By aligning herself with stage actors by writing of her own “performance” of marriage to Monsieur, Elizabeth presents the compelling but startling image of a woman acting in the dramatic, performative sense. Adding to her double use of “perform” in this context, which highlights the unfeasibility of their marriage, is Elizabeth’s reference to the priest who will perform the holy rites of marriage; taken by itself, this reference would not be notable but here it serves further to align the real but imagined ceremony with the counterfeit weddings performed by actors on the stage.\(^{53}\) Elizabeth’s final “come hither” rejection of Monsieur occurs in a September 10, 1583 letter. Seeming to anticipate Helena’s self-abasement to Demetrius in Shakespeare’s \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} (“I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius, / The more you beat me I will fawn on you” (II.i.203-2-4)), Elizabeth equivocates (again) about why they cannot be married: “as long as God does not permit such a pact, so long will I never cease honoring, loving and esteeming you like the dog who, often beaten, returns to his master” (Letter 55). While it initially seems that it is Elizabeth who, like a dog, will continually return to Monsieur, the correct reading of this somewhat convoluted syntax indicates that he is in fact the “dog” to which she refers. She claims to love him because he is like an abused dog who insists on returning to \textit{her}, but the indirect way she says this suggests also a certain scornfulness—it

\(^{53}\) In the late sixteenth century, “perform” was defined much the same as it is now: “4.a. To do, carry out, or execute formally or solemnly (a public function, ceremony, rite, etc); 4.b. To present (a play, ballet, opera, etc.) on stage or to an audience. 4.c. To act or play (a part or role in a play, ballet, etc); to represent (a character) on stage or to an audience” (\textit{OED}).
is, after all, only because “God does not permit such a pact” that she will “never cease honoring, loving and esteeming” him.

The affair, while unofficially but irrevocably concluded when Elizabeth bribed Monsieur to leave England in 1583, is rhetorically rewritten as a case of star-crossed love in “On Monsieur’s Departure.” This poem, while purportedly conveying the Queen’s grief over being forced to let him go due to political constraints, refers to Monsieur specifically only in the title:

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 ever meant;
I seem stark mute, but inwardly do prate.
    I am, and not; I freeze and yet am burned,
    Since from myself another self I turned. (ll.1-6)

The letters do not support a reading of this poem as a sincere articulation of sorrow; rather (if Elizabeth actually wrote it—it exists in copy form only), it continues the game she has been playing with Monsieur beyond the end of the affair and is reminiscent of Valentine’s empty blandishments about Silvia in The Two Gentlemen of Verona. That this game-playing, enacted with all the appearances of privacy through the epistolary form, is here extended into the poetic further highlights Elizabeth’s often literary take on the intellectual exercise of seeming to woo Monsieur while rejecting him. The Petrarchan style and the use of paradox in this poem speak more to the pleasure of pain, or to the pleasure of writing about pain, than to true suffering—just as her letters mimic the rhetoric and appearance of conveying true love.

Elizabeth’s post-affair game-playing extends into a letter to Catherine de Médicis, written upon Monsieur’s death (July, 1584):

Madame,
If the extremity of my unhappiness had not equaled my grief for his sake and had not rendered me inadequate to touch with pen the wound that my heart suffers, it would not be possible that I would have so forgotten myself as not to have visited you in the company that I make with you in your sorrow, which I am sure cannot be greater than my own. For inasmuch as you are his mother, so it is that there remain to you several other children. But for me, I find no consolation except death, which I hope will soon reunite us. Madame, if you were able to see the image of my heart, you would see the portrait of a body without a soul. (Letter 56)

What is most striking here is Elizabeth’s invocation of “the image of her heart.” Elizabeth does not refer to her heart itself, only to the idea of it—an idea which is itself only a “portrait of a body without a soul.” This multi-layered emptiness sums up her emotional engagement with Monsieur—that is, there is none at all, or at least not enough ever to have made their marriage a serious consideration in the face of deep political, religious, and national opposition. This would seem to explain Elizabeth’s mean-spiritedness of undermining Catherine’s grief with her own.

While this letter seems excessively heavy-handed, it must be understood as Elizabeth’s final assertion of superior rhetorical skillfulness in this political affair. France’s aggressive bartering for a political union was defeated through her canny manipulation of the language of deference, commitment, and loyalty, language that on the surface cemented it. Claiming to look forward to death so as to reunite with a boy she does not appear to have much liked increases rather than alleviates the fetishistic distance she uses throughout the courtship. Indeed, the distance between Elizabeth’s personal desires and the language of monarchical control (howsoever deployed and in whatsoever form) is the basis of a great deal of her negotiations of her position. Critics like Carole Levin have attempted to distinguish Elizabeth’s “true” self from the personae she utilized
during her reign; but the point of Elizabeth’s rhetorical machinations is that they ensure that the source of her power and its relationship to her interiority remain ambiguous—and this ambiguity is heightened by being expressed in the socially complex form of royal letters that are neither fully private nor fully public. The substitutions and displacements that define fetish in large part shaped Elizabeth’s governing style, and her letters to Monsieur epitomize the *sprezzatura* with which she wielded that style.

IV

Nicholas Breton’s *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters* is a fictional letter collection, a literary genre popular in England and the rest of western Europe during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Most such collections were intended to teach the art of letter-writing through imitation, as opposed to explanation, the primary mode in Erasmus’s and Day’s manuals. Breton’s text, however, does “not provide examples which could be imitated with advantage by the ordinary correspondent” (Robertson 26), and neither is there any explanation of proper epistolary practice. That Breton had something other than pedagogy in mind when he wrote *A Poste* is signaled in his address “TO THE READER”:

_Gentle if you be, be you so, gentle Reader; you shall understand, that I know not when, there came a Poste, I know not whence, was going I know not whither, and carried I know not what: But in his way, I know not how, it was his hap with lack of heed, to let fall a Packet of idle Papers, the subscription whereof being only to him that finds it, being my fortune to light on it, seeing no greater style in the direction, fell to opening of the inclosure, in which I found divers Letters written, to whom, or from whom I could not learne._

The complete lack of information about destination and origin, and the address “to him that finds it” serve to remove readers’ moral hesitation about reading other people’s lost letters, and allows them to imagine delving into others’ lives without consequence. That
Breton classifies his letters as “idle” eliminates any remaining possibilities for reading this collection pedagogically; without the framework of utility that is usually attached to fictional letter collections, all that remains here is the pleasure of imagining these unknown figures engaging in epistolary production.\textsuperscript{54,55} Such unmooring of the letters from the social, cultural, national, or regional contexts that might explain either their composition or their intended audiences defines Breton’s fetishization of female letter-writers. Their solitude—usually literal but also often symbolic—exists in three primary forms in \textit{A Poste}: letters written to women for which no response is included, letters by and to wives separated from their husbands, and letters by and to widows surrounded by hordes of suitors. While Breton emphasizes the connections between epistolary

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{OED} 3.a: “Of things: Serving no useful purpose, useless.”
\textsuperscript{55} It must be noted that the letters in this collection presented as written by male correspondents (save those written in dialogue (either real or imagined) with the kind of vulnerable female correspondents I discuss below) closely resemble the kind of pedagogical example used so frequently by epistolary theorists like Erasmus and Day. For example, the \textit{Poste} opens with \textit{1. A Complementall Letter}, which follows a common pattern of polite salutation, assurance that the recipient is the most important person in the writer’s life, and a concluding wish to see him soon:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Deare friend.}

The elegant composure of your lines make me to esteeme you a deepe scholler, and the remonstrance of your loue towards me, makes mee glory in so exquisite a friend… if I euer be depriued of your society, which I acount as the greatest moity of all terrene happinesse, who am resolued stil to continue my sorrow for your continued absence, and request you to hasten the hower wherein I may congratulate your safety, and to abridge my time of mourning with a speedy and most welcome returne vnto

\textit{Your devoted friend, A. B.} (6)
\end{quote}

Likewise, the collection’s second epistle (\textit{2. From a Sonne to his Father.}) is stiffly expressive of familial duty and there are no tantalizing glimpses into a hidden sub-text of either authorial vulnerability or desire:

\begin{quote}
Whereas it is the part of euery child, being by duty and nature chiefly bound, daily to solicite God with importunate prayers for his Parents prosperity: I therefore good Father being a sonne more bound then any through the fluent bounty of a Fathers loue, doe now in all reuerence, obediently remember my zeale… (6)
\end{quote}

I would suggest that the representation of male writers’ letters in the pedagogical style that defines the official epistolary manuals versus the representation of female writers’ letters as smart, saucy, self-possessed, and beyond the constraints of either epistolary or social norms speaks to the culture’s fascination with the possibility of female subjectivity existing in a realm outside that which is considered textually and socially normative.
production and women’s solitude, the letters in *A Poste* provide few details about the act and nature of writing itself. Rather, the letters convey just enough information to allow readers to imagine, but imperfectly, the surprising extent of women’s intellectual skills and their surprisingly variant motives for mobilizing those skills.

The first group of letters addresses the mystery of women’s mental labour through a lack of evidence, a lack which invites readers to wonder under what circumstances women will choose to engage in epistolary production. These responseless letters, while they do not figure women’s labour, do set up the terms for readers’ enjoyment thereof in fetishistic terms. In *4. A Letter admonitory to a Gentlewoman living in London*, the writer reminds his “cousin Dorothy” that “when a man hath a glasse of a brittel substance and for the worth of a great price and value, he is very chary and heedful thereof, because if by a fall it should bee broken, it is impossible to haue it repaired” (6-7). It is her “Mayden-head” with which he is so concerned, especially given that

your Sex (Cousin) is of it selfe prone and propense vnto pleasing, and *London* is a place fuller of prouocations to Sinne: your beauty shall thereoure meeet with forcible temptations, though haply in the harmlesse country the fortresse of your chastity found no assaylants. (7)

“Cosen G.D.’s” laments about the dangers he worries Dorothy will encounter in the city are compelling both for what they do and do not reveal. G.D. describes Dorothy’s natural weakness as a woman, her residence in dangerous London, and her beauty; it is not disclosed whether or not Dorothy has friends or guardians to monitor her. Why she is there is also not revealed, but we are invited to speculate—perhaps her beauty had already met with an “assaylant” in the country and she is in the city to deal with the consequences. G.D. mentions London’s “prouocations to sinne” but what those might
include are left up to readers to imagine. That his admonitions are met with silence lead one to ask why Dorothy has not responded—perhaps she is being tempted as he writes the letter, perhaps its failure to arrive has had dire consequences, or perhaps she simply receives it too late.

5. A Letter to his Mistris desiring marriage represents a financially vulnerable single woman being wooed by a lover of superior means:

   Courteous Mistris Amee, the only joy of my heart, I thought it fitting to declare my minde in writing to you: long time haue I rested your true and constant loue, hoping to finde the like true affection from you: I write not in any dissembling sort, my tongue doth declare my heart, assuring you that I doe not regard any portion, but your hearty loue to remaine firme to me. (7)

The writer claims to have loved Amee for a long time, so one wonders why he also needs to defend himself against accusations of dishonesty. His assertions that he requires no “portion,” that “I haue been proffered good mens daughters in mariage, but I could neuer fancy any so well as your selfe,” and that “though I receiue you in your smocke, I haue sufficient meanes to prouide for you and me both” (7) seem more predatory than open-minded, and Amee’s lack of response suggests hesitation. Based on H.K.’s constant assertions of her pennilessness, we can imagine Amee vacillating between accepting his proposal out of necessity and declining out of concern about what such an unequal marriage might involve.

Such silences both introduce and conclude A Poste. In 64. A valedatory Letter to his inconstant Mistris, A.B. writes that “I would haue beleued that a man might sooner remoue the Rocks out of the Ocean, and the Mountaines out of their station, than me out of your affections” (51). While this rhetoric articulates the extent of A.B.’s sense of his
mistress’s betrayal, it conveys a very different idea to readers familiar with Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. In “The Franklin’s Tale,” Chaucer tells the story of how Dorigen marriage is threatened by her husband Averagus’s brother’s aggressive attempts to seduce her. To dismiss the persistent Aurelie, Dorigen advises him,

> Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
> Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
> That they ne lette shippe ne boot to goon –  
> I seye, whan ye han maad the coost so clene  
> Of rokkes that ther nys no stoon ysene,  
> Thanne wol I love yow best of any man[.] (ll.992-97)

In spite of Dorigen’s backhanded rejection, the crafty and desperate Aurelie decides that he will “At Orliens som oold felawe yfynde” to conjure “To mannes sighte, that alle the rokkes blake / Of Britaigne weren yvoyded everichon” (ll.1153; 1158-59). Faced with the disappearance of the rocks, but afraid to kill herself to save her and her husband’s honour, Dorigen confesses her dilemma to Averagus, who believes that fulfilling her promise is better than breaking her “trouthe” (l.998). Chaucer’s story turns out well—faced with her grief and his brother’s dishonour, Aurelie releases Dorigen from her promise. Breton’s epistolary tale does not conclude so happily, however; A.B. cannot comprehend that his “inconstant mistris” may have been tricked into being inconstant to him and concludes, “I justly abandon your seruice, and here cease to write or loue any more” (51).

The final letter in *A Poste*, 67. *A love letter*, contains even less back story than the other responseless epistles preceding it; I.N. writes,

> The beauty which nature hath so lauishly imparted vpon you (absolute Mistris) makes her play bankrupt with most of the world beside: at the discouery whereof, as my eyes haue often stood at gaze, so is my minde altogether captiuated to doe homage to your perfections...I haue taken
humble boldnesse to let you vnderstand how ready I am to performe you any seruice that possibility shall inable me vnto[.] (52)

What is striking here is I.N.’s admission of having “often stood at gaze” watching his beloved. Reminiscent of both Metsu’s painting and Hammon’s furtive contemplation of Jane in *A Shoemaker’s Holiday*, this final letter leaves out all the tantalizing half-details seen in Breton’s other letters and thereby reveals the essential attraction of *A Poste* as a whole—the occasions it offers for *watching* and *imagining*, and their curious relationship to epistolary engagement (or lack thereof). Yet, while most of the letters focus solely on the male gaze intruding upon women’s epistolary production, many also enact an epistolary dialogue in which both male and female authors participate in the fetishization of women’s letter-writing.

In Breton’s text, the objects of most intense scrutiny are married women, and their solitude (sexual, physical, emotional, and/or financial) is central both to the writing and to the receiving of letters. In 55. *A Traveller beyond the Seas, to his Wife in England* and 56. *Her Answer* familial comforts are rendered very fragile. The title of the husband’s letter expresses a hopelessness about the couple ever meeting again, while T.W.’s letter proper emphasizes his physical danger:

> Dear Wife, the miserie of my fortune is more than can easily be borne, and yet the most griefe is to be absent from thee, and my little ones...from many dangers God hath deliuered me, and I hope will after many stormes send mee a faire day to doe me good, and a faire winde to bring me home[.] (48)

The irony is that while his letter arrives safely to her, T.W. can still only offer his wife a paper stand-in for himself. The fragility of the paper reflects his physical cares and distance, as well as his wife and family’s emotional and financial instability resulting
from his absence. E.W. exists in an in-between social space in which she is both married and husbandless, and her response increases both the sense of her own and her husband’s precarious positions by conflating her heart with her own fragile letters. Trying to comfort T.W., she indicates that she is sending other shorter epistles, none of which are included here: “for thy kind Letters and tokens I thanke thee: somewhat by this Bearer, I haue sent thee, my notes in my Letter will tell you what, with my hearts loue, which can hold nothing from you” (48). The irony of her claim that she can “hold nothing” from her husband is that she can hide things from Breton’s readers. The absence of the letters meant to be tucked into the one included in A Poste symbolizes E.W.’s subjective space, which seems victim to readerly intrusion but is in fact imagined as absolutely inaccessible.

The figures of the distant husband and the solitary wife are also imagined in 29. A Letter of comfort to a Sister in Sorrow and 30. Her Answer. E.W. writes to her sister-in-law E.G. to comfort her for her husband’s “recent departure for the Indies” (14), and suggests that E.G. is not being entirely successful in her attempts to appear strong in the face of this loss: “I know your state is weake, how fair souever you make your weather” (14). E.G., however, rejects this claim about her weakness by choosing to reassert her commitments to her husband and to remaining solitary (save for E.W.’s company); by so doing, she invites readers to imagine her physical isolation (and therefore her subjective interiority) as both self-imposed and impervious to intrusion:

touching my husband, though his wants were grieuous, yet to want him is my greatest sorrow for in the stay of his loue was the stay of my liuwing...though I had deuoted my selfe to solitarinesse in his absence, your company shall be to me a light in the darknesse, and noting the nature of your kindnesse, will ever be beholding to your loue: come then to me when
These letters represent the only articulation of female friendship in *A Poste*, and it defies easy classification because it represents neither women’s exclusion from male social practices nor proto-feminist community. Rather, this all-female family arising as it does out of both loss and desire, creates a social circle closed to either emotional or mental incursion from the outside; it seems, in other words, a natural solution to the problem of an absent husband.

Breton’s female characters’ savvy and rhetorical skill undermine the helplessness attributed to them for having either lost or been separated from their spouses. 15. *A Letter of a Jealous husband to his wife* features T.P. writing a letter to H.P. to chastise her for entertaining young men while he is away. Warning her that “your light behauiour doth much dislike me,” T.P. rhetorically asks, “shall I make you fine to please another, and displease my selfe? shall I leaue you my house, to make an hospitality of ill fellowship” (10)? T.P. characterizes this epistle as a “secret admonition” (10) to his naughty wife, but the contents thereof imply that although he claims to be jealous, he has purposefully left her alone to be entertained by young gentlemen callers. H.P. further complicates her position and her relationship with her husband in 16. *Her cunning answer*. In it, she claims to “haue no skill in writing” (10), but systematically dismantles her husband’s jealous arguments by turning the rhetoric of wifely propriety against him:56

If I were sullen, you would sure suspect my humour, and doe you mislike my merrie behauiour?...Women must talke when they meet, and men not be scorned, though not entertained: and he that keepeth a house, must seeke to defray the charge: and so hoping that you will leaue your jealouisie, and thinke of some matter of more worth, as

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56 Like Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, H.P. appropriates and re-imagines the language of wifely submission in such a way that places her comfortably outside such language’s associated behavioural codes.
I suggest that Breton’s use of “cunning” to describe H.P.’s letter is meant to be understood primarily in the positive sense, but with hints of the negative arising out of our inability to determine whether or not her behaviour is in fact improper. Further, her adept linguistic recontextualization of her behaviour without either denying or affirming her husband’s accusations places H.P. in a class of superior rhetorical prowess. Her savvy use of language, coupled with her husband’s suggested complicity in her sexualized exposure to young men, is striking because it reveals the extent to which sex is merely substitutive for the intellectual labour being employed here; H.P.’s cagey letter-writing abilities are of greater import than the sexual improprieties she may or not be committing.

Usually represented in Jacobean literature (especially drama) as surrounded both literally and symbolically by avaricious suitors, widows are also portrayed in sexually and linguistically complex ways in *A Poste*. T.M. begins 15. *A Letter of a Batchelor to a rich Widow* by pointing out that “if you would be sowre I would call you sweet: for though you know I loue you, yet you will say I flatter you” (36). One is reminded of Petruchio’s tactics in *The Taming of the Shrew* in which all compliments and protestations of affection are actually designed to break Kate’s spirit. In this case, T.M. draws attention to the emptiness of romantic language, but uses it anyway. He does not disguise the fact that his protestations of love are more strategic than sincere; rather, he uses the social pressure on widows to remarry, and their concomitant fears of marrying a tyrant, to, he hopes, his rhetorical advantage:

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57 While the modern sense of “cunning” as negative was current when *A Poste* was written, so was “Possessing practical knowledge or skill; able, skilful, expert, dexterous, clever. (Formerly the prevailing sense; now only a literary archaism.)” (OED 2.a).
What I am or haue you shall haue all, my loue, my seruice, my life, and what can you haue more? A little more drinke to make the cup run over, and perhaps marre the drink that was good before: a little more coyn to fil the other bagge, and perhaps fall out to proue a piece of false money, when commanded by a costrell, that will serue for nothing but a Cuckold, or curb’d by a Cub, that will grate you to the bones for an old Groat, you will curse your treasure that was the cause of your destructiō: No, no, be good to thy selfe in being kind to mee[.]. (36)

The widow’s lack of response to his epistle calls into question the effectiveness of such fear-mongering; the implication is that her motivations and desires do not align with the prevailing social clichés about widows as sexually voracious and therefore both desperate and destined to remarry. Her lack of response suggests she is sexually, emotionally, and mentally beyond both the mental and physical reach of suitors who do not please her.

Letters 39 and 40, *An old mans Letter to a young Widow* and *Her Answer*, reveal the close relationship between Breton’s imaginative representation of women’s ability to resist sexual pressure, their ability to control their own language, and their ability correctly to interpret others’ rhetorical strategies. Attempting to convince the young widow that as an old man he will make her a better husband than a young man would, T.P. writes,

Widow, I haue neither a smooth Face, nor a filed Tongue to cheat your eyes, nor abuse your eares withall...[those] who knoweth the woe of want, can tell you the difference betwixt an old mans Darling, & a young mans Warling:58 Why? how can they loue, that scarce know how to like? I know you haue many Sutors of worth, but none that I thinke more worthy then my self: for none can loue you so much, or esteeme you so well: for I haue knowne the World, and care not for it, nor for any thing but you[.]. (43-44)

58 Warling: “one who is despised or disliked” (*OED*); although Whitney’s text comes much this phrase is first noted in John Heywood’s *Proverbs* (1604). Aligning the elderly suitor with the morally stodgy Heywood could only have increased the former’s unattractiveness.
Like H.P. in her cunning letter, P.M. uses the rhetoric of plain-dealing; like H.P., she also recognizes that straightforwardness can be as strategically deployed as any other form of more complicated rhetoric. Indeed, the young widow uses her old suitor’s rhetoric against him at her letter’s conclusion:

…hoping your owne reason will perswade you to haue patience with your passion, and leaue me to my better comfort, meaning to be as you wish me, my selfe, and none other, I rest.

Not yours, if mine owne, P.M. (44)

Breton further increases P.M.’s untouchability by having her assert not only that she will marry only according to her own inclinations, but also that she enjoys being courted nonetheless: “for my Sutors, they sute my time, and serue their own: and for their worth, I shall judge the most worthie” (44). That some suitors “sute [her] time” suggests that she has other reasons both for delaying her decision and for taking pleasure in being courted; what those reasons might be, however, remain as mysterious as the conditions under which her letter was penned.

Breton’s final exploration of widowhood in A Poste is unabashedly lurid and sensational. A.N., the writer of 51. A kind sister to her loving brother, begins her letter thus: “My deare Brother, as you know our loue began almost in our Cradles: so I pray you, let it continue to our graues” (47); now that they are rid of her “bad Husband” and his “no good Wife,” A.N suggests they set up house together:

write vnto me how you doe in body and mind, and when I shall bee so happy as to enjoy your good company: for being alone, you may be as a Husband and a Brother, to controle my servants, and comfort my selfe: beleue me, I long to see you, and in the meane time to heare from you[.] (47)

The image of a lonely widow at the mercy of uncontrollable servants and potential intruders is made even more compelling by the suggestion of incest in this letter. A.N’s
proclaimed loneliness and implied sexual hunger are at first deflected by her brother’s epistolary musings on the corruption of the world: “I see three things that doe much grieue me, a Foole rich, a Wise man wicked, and an honest man poore” (47), but like Giovanni in *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, E.B. sees his sister’s affections as his refuge from that corruption: “as we are neerely linked, so let vs liue inseparable: shortly I hope to see you, and till then and euer will love you” (48). E.B.’s and A.N.’s language of affection goes beyond the merely familial and looks remarkably like protestations of romantic love found elsewhere in *A Poste*. What is striking about this exchange is that it is predicated on a mutually agreed upon rhetorical game of invitation and deflection; A.N.’s proposal both invites and denies incestuous interpretation—A.N. refers to him as husband *and* brother (two things which cannot truly coexist), but what she is really doing is asking him to choose one. E.B. makes a similar move by prefacing his unqualified acceptance of her offer with a moralistic condemnation of the world outside in favour of their future life together, a life in which the paradox of the “husband-brother” ceases to hold any meaning by coming to exist beyond the purview of either social condemnation or approbation.

Breton’s representations of wives and especially widows are important because of the extent to which they reveal that the notion of subjectivity (whether expressed through writing or rejecting marriage proposals) is integral to fetish specifically. Fetish is created out of a careful combination of invitation to and denial of access—the same combination that defines English Renaissance culture’s attempts to delve into the “hearts” of others’ “mysteries” discussed by Hanson and Maus. If human subjectivity can be said to have been treated fetishistically in 16th-/17th-century England, then this is especially true for female subjectivity because it exists in the even more marginalized realm of the private.
Writing figures and increases the inviting inaccessibility of female subjectivity because it provides physical evidence thereof, physical evidence that reveals its own limitations precisely by inviting one to investigate its source. It seems ironic then that Breton’s widows are never addressed as anything but “Widow;” their suitors are only able to imagine them inhabiting an in-between status of availability and distance that effaces all other aspects of their identities. Tracing the history of dramatic portrayals of the lusty widow in English Comedy, Jennifer Panek argues that “The wealthy widow, the bevy of suitors, the courtships tinged with lust, aggression, and trickery” are “stock characters and situations in early seventeenth-century comedy” (3). Panek then offers the important coda that “there are limits on the value of judging saleable dramatic fantasies by how well they measure up to real-life situations” (4). Breton is offering his own saleable fantasies in A Poste: the conflation of solitary wives and widows with confident, savvy, and skilled female letter-writers. Panek argues that “The remarrying widow and her suitors in early modern English comedy can only be understood in terms of cultural history that recognizes the specificity of time and place” (13 emphasis added).

Breton’s (and Whitney’s, Elizabeth’s, and du Bosque’s, to varying degrees) letter-writers, conversely, provide the fantasy of the lack of context. While we may speculate on when and where Breton and du Bosque “found” their letters, there is nothing to indicate either when they were meant to have been written, or how and why they were collected together instead of delivered to their recipients. Just as importantly, where these female letter-writers learned their advanced writing skills, to what other purposes they use them, and to what other unrevealed purposes they use them within these letters are shrouded in mystery. We must see this lack of information as notable because of the
way Breton sets up *A Poste* as an exercise in irresistible investigation generally and because of the way his female letter-writers specifically are represented as keeping their intentions and actions surrounding writing to themselves. This lack of context, of course, contributes to the fetish of unavailable female subjectivity; more importantly, it allows readers to imagine women engaging in intellectual labour in circumstances almost unfettered by social and gender-based constraints. Possibility is, in other words, central to the fetish of female intellectual labour—the possibility not only that female subjects capable of such mental and rhetorical sophistication exist, but also that such subjects may transcend the conditions and discourses that would silence them by labelling their labour as either dangerous or merely the products of their private and idle hours.

The complexity of Breton’s *A Poste with a Mad Packet of Letters* makes one regret that critics have had so little to say about it, although Jonathan Goldberg makes the intriguing comment that seventeenth-century “epistolary novels would take their cue from such sixteenth-century letter collections as those provided by Nicholas Breton” (1990 255). Indeed, Breton draws readers in via the dissimulative novelistic practice of providing just enough information about what motivates his characters to make what he does not reveal the real subject of the text. What we do learn about female letter-writers here, generally speaking, is that they know more—about everything, but most interestingly about themselves and about language—than they are given credit for. Thus, it is both the mystery of women’s intellectual labour and the mystery of how these female characters came to possess either the learning or the wherewithal to apply it that is at the core of Breton’s text. Breton often presents female characters rejecting their suitors’ empty romantic language, not only for its cliché nature, but also for the deception it is
often used to obscure and perpetuate. Some even, like Lorina in a hyper-Petrarchan exchange with the lusty Rinaldo, imagine bringing the legal system to bear against deceptive language: “in flattery of my perfection you haue deceiued my expectation, who imagining you wise, am sorry to see the contrary: and if I might be judge, the Law would quickly haue his course, where dissimulation appearing, should be condemned to perpetuall disdaine” (25). Like Isabella Whitney and Elizabeth I, Breton writes his female letter-writers in ways that begin to dismantle the fetishistic Petrarchan image of the chaste, cold, silent mistress and to replace it with the image of the woman, who not only asserts her subjectivity over the distance of her writing, but who also uses her liminal position to her advantage as both a subject and a writer.

V

The popularity of “found” letter collections, as Breton notes in his preface to *A Poste*, spanned Europe: “I Find in *Latine, French, Italian,* and *Spanish,* Bookes of Epistles, dedicated to men of good account” (“To the Right Worshipfull Maximillian Dallison”). While many such collections do function as exemplary, neither Breton’s nor Jacques du Bosque’s do so; instructing erstwhile letter-writers how to pen epistles in the style of either “A faire proud tit” (Breton) or a shameless gossip (du Bosque), for example, seems unlikely. Rather, that Breton’s *A Poste* was a bestseller and that du Bosque’s *The Secretary of Ladies* was sufficiently popular to be translated into English, speaks to a widespread interest in the mysteries of others’ epistolary production. Du Bosque’s *Secretary*, like Whitney’s, Elizabeth I’s, and Breton’s texts, appeals to readers’ attraction to intruding into women’s private lives; however, the *casualness* with which women’s intellectual labour is represented in *The Secretary* deflates the possibility of
reading these letters as fetishistic. Du Bosque never qualifies his characters’ epistolary production by either overtly or obliquely suggesting their letters are born out of financial, emotional, political, or household necessity; in this text, the quotidian is the dominant mode. Indeed, one of the first moves du Bosque makes in presenting his text to his patroness is to proclaim that the Secretary is intended to “vindicate the honour of dames, and to make it appeare that Letters are not the peculiar heritage of one sexe; and that men are out, when they vant themselves sole Monarchs in the Empire of the sciences” (“The Authors Dedication to Madame de Pisievx” A5). This claim gains cross-cultural currency through Jerome Hainhofer’s decision to translate the Secretary into English, and by his concomitant concern that he has not done the original justice: “this English habit, made by a stranger to the tongue, more to the Courtly dresse, may much blemish their native beauty” (“To My Lady the Countesse of Dorset” A3). The desire this text expresses (both in French and in English) is that its letters be represented and read in a way that reflects their worth, and not be either judged or appreciated for the conditions of their production, particularly the conditions of epistolary production associated with gender. Yet, in spite of du Bosque’s proclaimed desire to present the ladies’ letters as transcendent of their material and intellectual origins, they instead transcend the traditional (masculine) epistolary ideals as defined by such experts as Erasmus and Day. While it purports to exist entirely in the realm of the everyday, The Secretary alludes to some of the key fetishes/anxieties explored in Whitney’s, Elizabeth I’s, and Breton’s texts. For example, all of du Bosque’s women appear to be alone, or separated from their friends; yet, the danger and vulnerability that surround Whitney’s, Elizabeth’s, and Breton’s female letter-writers are replaced with boredom in du Bosque’s collection.
Because they are so uninterested in their “real” lives, the female characters in the Secretary take refuge in letter-writing and have sufficient confidence in their writing skills to discuss a diversity of topics, from scurrilous gossip to religious, social, and linguistic philosophy.

Yet, even gossipy letters emphasize the normalcy both of women’s writing and of the attractiveness of women’s intellect. In “The third Letter,” the writer complains about her friend Belinde being abandoned by her lover in favour of an older woman:

…this young man hath marryed the old woman,
Tis a choice worthy of shame for himselfe, of envy for many, of admiration for all…I cannot cease to admire that any man could fancy her with all her knowledge. If she deserved to be sought unto, it was like some Sibil, I meane to be consulted, not beloved, I thinke she is more fit to teach, then to please, and more worthy to have Schollers then Sui ters[.] (19-20).

This writer betrays a great deal of respect for the “Sibil” she claims to be denigrating, and this admiration (in the modern sense) belies her disapproval of the match. As well, given early modern culture’s growing emphasis on companionate marriages over marriages of convenience, that this “Sibil” is “neither faire, nor rich, nor young” (19) speaks to other women’s envy, rather than real concern about the match being ill-considered by the individuals involved. Further, the envy to which she refers is imprecisely explained—she could be referring to young women envious of an older woman who has wooed away an eligible young bachelor, or she could be referring to envy felt by those who wish they could marry for intellectual compatibility rather than beauty, riches, or youth. This ambiguity serves to privilege the intellectual older woman over the gossipy writer of this letter (who situates herself as representing the opposing camp of riches, beauty, and youth).
The writer of “The third Answer,” in contrast, directly privileges the mental over the physical and the material when it comes to female attractiveness, and writes in favour of the match:

You will change your opinion, if you consider what is necessary for Lydian. He hath neede of a governesse as well as of a wife: and seeing they are both obliged to enjoy their goods in common, their marriage shall have of all sorts. He hath for her, riches, and beauty, she hath for him wisedome, and age. He looketh upon that in her, which least perisheth in al others, I meane the qualities of the soule, rather than those of the face. (17-18)

This rejoinder serves two purposes: first, while it seems to belittle Lydian by suggesting he is still child-like enough to require a governess, it in fact undermines the previous writer’s complaints about this marriage of opposites, by arguing for Lydian and the older woman’s complementariness. Second and more importantly, it reveals that these two letters are not simply gossip—they together form, rather, philosophical debate. While the first writer argues for marriage as a social contract that should be governed by social needs, the second argues for the personal choice and compatibility that define companionate marriage.

Indeed, most of the exchanges in The Secretary of Ladies are philosophical debates, and no topic is either too taboo or too complicated for du Bosque’s ladies. One exchange wades confidently into the seemingly endless debate about the nature of gender, focusing on how constancy can be understood in relation thereto. In “The ninth Letter,” the writer turns the stereotypical feminization of inconstancy upside down and without qualification argues that it is a specifically masculine failing:

I know well that lightnesse to their sexe is like death to all the world, which arrives to some sooner, to others later, but with a little difference of time is inevitable to
all. How could he, being but a man doe a miracle, and remaine constant? (61)

The reversal of rhetoric usually deployed to disparage women reveals the writer’s familiarity with the debate and her comfort with appropriating the language of the dominant culture to her advantage. Her respondent, however, dismantles both this writer’s arguments and the anti-feminist rhetoric which it both turns upon and defies:

Madam, it is no great glory to be such a Prophet as you: it is easie to judge that men may change: they are no more immoveable than immortall. Their designes are capeable of alteration, as well as their life: but what say you in this, that men cannot say of women? Albeit, either Sexe may invent for their advantage, I beleev that inconstancy is no lesse common to both, then death it selfe. (62-63)

This letter denies that any personal failing is gender-based; more importantly, it implies that if failings are not gender-based, then neither are talents or skills—these letters, after all, prove that rhetoric, argumentation, and philosophical discussion are in no way limited to men. Just as striking as this dismissal of the terms of a decades-long Renaissance gender debate, is the lack of anxiety present in the second writer’s refusal to acknowledge gender differences; it is also striking that this writer is not worried that her assertion that women are as fallible as men will cause any backsliding in the world’s increasingly positive view of them as thinkers. Rather, the woman who pens “The ninth Answere” reminds her reader(s) that she writes “only for truth, not against you nor my selfe” (63).

59 In England, this controversy was most intense between 1540 and 1640, and was expressed in various forms but particularly in the pamphlet. Joseph Swetnam’s ragingly misogynist The Arraignement of Lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women (1615) represented a climax in this controversy and inspired many angry published responses by real women such as Rachel Speght (A Mouzell for Melastomus 1617) and authors of unknown gender writing under clearly pseudonymous names like Esther Sowernam (Esther hath hanged Haman 1617) and Constantia Munda (The Worming of a Mad Dog 1617). See Katherine Usher Henderson’s and Barbara F. McManus’s Half Humankind for documents and historical background addressing this controversy.
The issue of women’s learning is something addressed frequently in *The Secretary*. “The II Letter” and “The Second Answer” debate which of either ignorance or education is the most likely to lead to personal happiness. The writer of “The II Letter” denies that ignorance and happiness can coexist because “hee is not happy but because he is ignorant, nor hath hee a quiet soule, but because it is insensible” (10-11); thus, not only does she equate happiness with learning, but she also implicitly defines happiness. According to the writer of “The II Letter,” real happiness arises out of becoming educated, even if said education is sometimes uncomfortable:

I love better the restlessnesse of your Spirit, than the tranquility of his, I speake of those noble cares which knowledge bringeth forth; and of that moderate feare which serves but to awake the soule, and not to trouble it. The happinesse of these people whereof you write unto me, is like to that of men asleepe, their spirit is quiet, because it is not capable of disturbance. (12)

This is a reflection on the nature of consciousness as much as it is on the nature of happiness; interior awareness, she argues, is worth any pain it might either produce or invite precisely and only for its own sake. The author of “The Second Answere,” however, insists that

Madam, write what you list for great spirits, it seemes to mee they have more glory, than happinesse. And that it is difficult to have great splendor and little care. It is true they are much esteemed which outshine others: Notwithstanding I thinke that with all this advantage, they may be compared to the bush in holy Scripture, which had as much brightnesse, but yet was full of thornes. (14)

She then goes on to assert that these “thornes” are of the educated mind’s own making, citing as proof those “whose understanding seemes to mee unlucky, since it onely serves to leade them into many Labyrinthes, but not conduct thē out” (17). She then concludes
the letter by asserting “albeit I am without wit, I am not without perturbation. I suffer the misfortune of those who have but little knowldg, and am deprived of their advantage” (18); this, however, must be understood not as support for her own anti-educational statements, but as an ironic claim in favour of women’s more complete education. In other words, she defies her own claims about her lack of wit by citing biblical authority to argue her point, and by admitting to her own suffering from a lack of knowledge which (like Whitney’s) paradoxically arises out of having sufficient knowledge to be aware that there is much more to learn.

Women’s education is addressed again in “The XII. Letter” and “The XII. Answere.” While this exchange is as heavily steeped in theoretical concerns as the previous exchange is, it expands the parameters by addressing gender issues directly and pragmatically. The author of “The XII. Letter” writes in response to a letter both she and her addressee have received: “Madam, I have read her Letter, who takes it ill that women should study. But it seemes to mee that her faire fancies favour nothing of the ignorance she commends: and that she appears knowing, by blaming those that are” (94). This salutation is central to understanding du Bosque’s text because it exposes the essence of all the letters here as debate designed to assert, even through what we would now term internalized misogyny, the equality of women’s writing abilities with men’s. The writer continues, “I cannot suffer the injury they doe our sexe, to thinke wee cannot be innocent, except we be ignorant. It is a great disposition to doe good, but to know how it must be done” (95); in support of this claim, she points out that “in this the fable and Philosophy speake in the same fashion: Pallas was not so vitious as Venus, and the Poets that faine the goddesse of love without modesty, have fained her also without knowledge. I assure
my selfe you will laugh when you reade this, where I cite passages, as if I would shew my reading” (95-96). Having dismissed women who can argue against women’s learning only because they are themselves learned, she then denies that anything is actually at stake in these debates by casually mocking her own use of textual authority.

Her addressee, in “The XII. Answere,” argues against women’s learning but in a way that lends further credence to the claims of “The XII. Letter.” First, she is, like the third letter-writer discussed above, educated enough to engage in this debate and therefore an unconvincing opponent to women’s education. Second, she makes stereotypical associations between female propriety and writing: “I allow a woman so farre knowing, till she come to writing, & making of books, but when she sets upon this, she is in danger oft times, not to gaine the reputation of being eloquent, without losing that of being modest” (96-97); but she then challenges any authority inherent in such clichés by repeating the argumentative circularity of most of the period’s misogynist rhetoric: “perhaps if many Ladies of quality should undertake to write, they would make the custome bee received” (98). Thus, du Bosque emphasizes women’s ability to engage rhetorically and linguistically on any number of topics, and he asserts their right to write through both favourable and oppositional standpoints. This is strikingly cagey, for it figures women engaging with the culture that would keep them mired in concerns about the relationship between sexual propriety, writing and education; it also figures women transcending that culture to begin to define their own terms of what constitutes a female subject, of writing, and of gender.

The transcendence gestured at in the one epistolary exchange between women in *A Poste with a Packet of Mad Letters*, is foregrounded here; *The Secretary* is a closed
circuit of women’s epistolary production, and the idea of women transcending androcentric culture is imagined in many forms in *The Secretary*, not the least of which is sexual. The author of “The XV. Letter” tells her addressee about her friend, “Mistris *Lucinde* [who] speaks no more, but of religion, and the cloysters” (110), and of her resolve to follow Lucinde in her worldly renunciation. Anticipating her addressee’s objections, the writer of XV makes a stunning admission:

…you will tell me perhaps, this is not to renounce the world, but to seek the world where it is not, that it is an effect of friendship, not devotion: and that to run after her into the cloysters, is not to seeke God, but Lucinde. It imports nothing, it may be having begun to be religious by complacency, I shall be so by affection[.] (113)

The writer of “The XV. Letter” does not pretend to be devout, does not imagine becoming religious for spiritual reasons, and provides no indication that she is concerned by her own questionable motives. Her cavalier dismissal of her addressee’s imagined objections speaks to a real disinterest in the world’s opinion of her actions; she will single-mindedly pursue her friend into a transcendent space in which she will find her own reasons for appearing to be devout.

In “The XV. Answer,” her addressee completes the hermetic circle which her epistolary partner begins; she seems initially to chastise her, but in the end articulates the same desire for female friendship unobserved and unaffected by the outside world:

Your resolution is good, you neede onely change the cause… But I bring you newes which perhaps you looke not for, if you be two, I promise you to make the third. It is not new to me to have a great distaste of vanities: I had not stayed so long to abandon them, but for the great grieve I had to lose your company. (114)
While she is more hesitant to admit it, the writer of “The XV. Answer” is as single-mindedly motivated by friendship as her friend is. What is compelling about these letters is the nature of female friendship gestured towards but not described therein; we are given no indication of how these three women came to establish bonds so strong that they could be so easily inspired to enter into permanent religious retreat just to see one another. What they will do and talk about when they are together in the cloister is tantalizingly unrevealed, but du Bosque partially diffuses the fetishistic implications inherent in such mystery into the normalizing rhetoric of religious withdrawal. Their future intellectual and physical labours will be in the service of the church (at least officially) and thus ostensibly beyond the either moral censure or interested gaze of a secular reading public. Yet, this normalization is still only partial—these women’s withdrawals are predicated on distinctly unspiritual desires, desires which not only gesture intriguingly towards the sexual, but which also deny the possibility for either imagining or comprehending that sexuality in androcentric terms.

This eroticized rhetoric is made more explicit in “The XXVII. Letter,” whose writer expresses a desperate need to see her addressee that is usually seen only in the rhetoric utilized by separated lovers:

Excuse me if I write thus unto you, since the soveraign remedy of my solitude, is to thinke that you have promised to love me. I hardly know my selfe, when I consider that which I not long since possest…tis but eight dayes for you, but a whole age for me; see to what I am reduced; I can neither forget you without crime, nor thinke of you without griefe. …I tell you once more, that I know not where I am, when I thinke on your conversation. It hinders me to taste any sweetnesse in all others. (167-68)
What is more striking here than the writer’s longing for the physical presence of her friend, is how this desire for physical presence is centered in conversation. Women’s intellectual labour is, I have argued, so casually central to this text that it inhabits the realm of the quotidian more than the realm of the fetishistic; this does not negate the possibility for imagining female desire, however. Indeed, in all the texts addressed in this dissertation, writing is figured as a direct product of intellectual labour performed in the service of articulating some form of desire; in other words, as the nature of that desire evolves, fetish itself begins to evolve into the commonplace. That such evolution is imagined to comprise the transcendence of the original terms that made women’s writing possible at all—that is, the tantalization of skeptical but also deeply curious androcentric reading/play-going public—speaks to the culture’s burgeoning acceptance of women’s writing, if not tout court, then at least on terms much less qualified than had hitherto been imagined or witnessed.

Gerard ter Borch’s Curiosity (Fig. 4.2) represents such self-containment. It is not clear if the figure at the centre of the painting is writing a letter or not, but what is clear is that, like in Metsu’s painting, her text is the subject of the painting. As in Metsu’s piece, the writer here is being observed from behind; the difference is that the observer behind her, considered in tandem with the other woman and the dog, functions to physically close the writer off from intrusion—including intruders from outside the confines of the painting who would decipher her text. The title—Curiosity—would seem to refer to the right-hand observer’s interest in the text under production; however, her position in the protective triangle and the expression on her face suggests instead participation in the writing process. The title, then, invites our curiosity—about what is being written, about
Fig. 4.2 Gerard ter Borch, *Curiosity*, 1660.
how women’s writing may be collaborative and defined in terms exclusive of outside male influence or supervision, and why ter Borch imagines the central figure of this piece as surrounded in such protective fashion at all. The curiosity this painting is meant to inspire is not extreme enough to be fetishistic, however. The lack of a sense of intrusion, the lack of the writer’s potential vulnerability thereto, the relaxed postures of the two women attending the writing, and the dog’s relaxed posture on the chair make this a scene rife with the activities and comforts of the everyday. What she writes is mysterious; that she writes is not.60

This fantasy of normalized female intellectual activity is most strikingly iterated in du Bosque’s ladies’ rejection of Erasmian epistolary theory. While all the letters follow the Erasmian style of polite salutation and farewell, they represent an epistolary world in which it is one another’s letters, not male-authored manuals, that define both their individual and collective writing styles. The author of “The LIV. Letter” urges her addressee thus:

forbeare not to write, albeit there be no body worthy of your Letters. They shall serve mee for copies, and at least you shall gaine this advantage, that if I be happy in imitation, those you shall receive from mee shall bee more polite, and pleasing to you, so much as they shall resemble yours. Perhaps little by little, I shall become a good scholler in your schoole[.] (271-72)

As the concluding letter in the collection, this (like ter Borch’s painting) envisions women not only teaching one another, but also removing themselves from the androcentric rhetorical strictures and traditions from which they surely began to write.

60 Gerard ter Borch’s Curiosity was actually completed two years before Gabriel Metsu’s The Letter Writer Surprised (1662), and thus does not represent historical transformation of ideas surrounding women’s writing. Rather, these paintings together in part represent western culture’s multi-faceted views of the topic, with the fetishistic and the everyday co-existing.
While du Bosque in no way refers to Humanism’s failures with women’s education and its applications, the Secretary is in many ways the best possible response to those failures. Whitney’s frustration arises from the fact that she can imagine only limited ways to apply her learning; unlike du Bosque’s writers, she does not know enough to be able to imagine transcending her limited educational background.

Du Bosque’s letter-writers also affect transcendence of the circumscriptions inflicted upon them through anti-feminist rhetoric and social expectations through their denials that letters function as simulated conversation, as Erasmus and Donne so famously claim. Rather, as the authors of “The XXVII. Letter” (discussed above) and “The XXI. Answer” assert, “to speake truth, A Letter is but a copy, which makes us curious of the originall, a table which augments the desire to see the person represented” (145). Rather than “mingling souls,” letters are construed as things which increase longing and loneliness because they perform imperfectly their work as physical stand-ins for their writers. Personal losses, exacerbated by women’s ostensible rejection of the comforts letters are said by male epistolarians like Erasmus and Donne to provide, are mirrored in the absence of “masculine” traditions of rhetoric by which women’s writing was meant to be defined and contained. This loss of traditional, masculine influence (both personal and linguistic) in The Secretary is what allows writers and readers to imagine that women’s subjectivity is not in fact defined by men’s. Goldberg asserts that du Bosque’s text figures “female subjectivity as the most delimited and circumscribed space within the artifices of the letter” with “Woman constructed as the repository of privacy” (1990, 255). He is correct, but only insofar as that circumscription is a necessary part of the evolution of the fetish of women’s letter-writing into something
quotidian. The very circumscription of which Goldberg writes is in fact the site from which women’s subjectivities may begin to be asserted. Thus, not only did female writers and authors give “shape to the question of what it meant to write from a position of estrangement from tradition” (Summit 7), but so did male authors who explored in published form the complicated position of women writing letters. Critics have relied upon a “gynocritical[al theory which] valorizes the female author, construed as a stable, historically verifiable woman” to such a degree that proto-feminist male-authored texts have largely been ignored (Harvey 24). Indeed, as Summit so convincingly argues, “the very notion of the modern subjectivity [sic] came into being as a feminized entity” (55-56). Gynocritical theory denies the possibility that what is proto-feminist might also simultaneously be exploitative, and that the authors and readers (of both genders) of such texts might enjoy them precisely for being both. Rather than reading texts that turn on fetishization as simple expressions of misogyny, we must accept them as the products of astute writers and authors using social constraints placed on women’s intellectual labour not only to their advantage and pleasure, but also to the ultimate loosening of those constraints.
Conclusion: The Story of Women’s Writing

By way of conclusion to this discussion of the relationship between female epistolarity and subjectivity, I would like to mark a departure from the texts discussed to this point. Instead of reaching backward to sum up female epistolary production, I rather look ahead, to a form which is generally taken to mark the “rise of the novel” and which explicitly depends on the assertion of a connection between the representation of subjectivity and the female letter writer: the epistolary novel. To do this, my excursus begins with Dorothy Osborne, who in a letter to future husband Sir William Temple, famously takes a glance at contemporary author Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle upon the publication of her Poems and Fancies: “first let mee aske you if you have seen a book of Poems newly come out, made by my Lady New Castle for God sake if you meet with it send it mee, they say tis ten times more Extravagant then her dresse. Sure the poore woman is a little distracted, she could never bee soe rediculous else as to venture at writeing book’s and in verse too” (Letter 17, 14 April 1653, p. 75). The disbelief with which Osborne relates the news of Cavendish’s publication is reiterated once Osborne actually reads the volume: “You need not send mee lady Newcastles book at all for I have seen it, and am satisfyed that there are many soberer People in Bedlam” (Letter 20, 7 or 8 May 1653, p. 79). Osborne’s reaction to Cavendish’s book of poems might well be taken as a sign both of Osborne’s individual aversion to women publishing and of the culture’s larger social if not legal strictures against it. Osborne’s feelings about women’s publishing, however, must not be understood as an aversion to women’s writing. For all her incredulity about Cavendish’s audacity, Osborne reveals both a profound personal involvement in published literature and a telling interest in women’s
writing, interests which are strikingly fused in her own writing. Indeed, I would argue that Osborne and Cavendish (in her *Familiar Letters*) are doing similar kinds of work; specifically, both invest letters with a literary significance that speaks to and anticipates the rise of the epistolary novel in England.

For Osborne, publication for women is unthinkable and shocking; for Cavendish, it is the ultimate expressive extension of her works’ representations of female subjectivities existing on equal footing with men’s. Yet, they both anticipate the epistolary novel by creating texts in which fiction and reality are seamlessly interwoven and which, in turn, gesture towards women being understood in literature as writers and characters simultaneously—without the interpretive disjoint between the two seen in the works of Isabella Whitney and Elizabeth I. For Osborne and Cavendish, and to a much more intense and complicated degree in early epistolary novels like Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, writing letters is directly related to women’s participation in larger social stories in a manner which exceeds simple fetishistic inspiration. Women’s letter-writing becomes, in other words, its own story rather than an aspect of a larger story (as it is in all of the texts with which this dissertation has been concerned).

The other most famous quotation drawn from Osborne’s letters to Temple reveals her investment in the language of fictive literature. Having enjoyed a rare visit with Temple, Osborne writes: “Good god the fear’s and surprises, the crosses and disorders of that day, twas confused Enough to bee a dream and I am apt to think sometimes it was noe more[.] but noe I saw you, when I shall doe it againe god only know’s, can there bee a more Romance Story then ours would make if the conclusion should prove happy”
Two notes of etymology must be made here. First, Osborne uses “Romance” in a previous letter to Temple to give news of her other “Servants”: “if hee may be believ’d, hee is resolve d to bee a most Romance Squire and goe in quest of some inchanted Damzell” (Letter 21, 14 or 15 May 1653, p. 80). As editor Kenneth Parker notes, “OED gives this sentence, and the one in letter 54, as the first examples of the use of ‘romance’ as ‘having the character or attribute associated with Romance, chivalrous, romantic’” (n.2, p. 297). Renaissance Romance usually comprised tales of questing knights and distressed damsels; indeed, the Romance, having become widely popular in the Middle Ages, was still, as Kenneth Parker points out, the most popular fictive genre when Osborne was writing (33). Second, Osborne’s use of the word “Story” to describe her relationship with Temple is striking for, then as now, the primary meaning of the word was “A narrative of real or, more usually, fictitious events, designed for the entertainment of the hearer or reader; a series of traditional or imaginary incidents forming the matter of such a narrative; a tale” (OED). Osborne, well known amongst her editors for her thoughtful and extensive editing, cannot have been using these literary terms by accident.61,62 Indeed, when asked to describe how she spends her days to Temple, she does so in the terms of Romance pastoral: “about sixe or seven a Clock, I walke out into a Common that lyes hard by the house where a great many young wenches keep Sheep and Cow’s and sitt in the shade singing of Ballads” (Letter 24, 2-4 June 1653, p. 89).

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61 As Parker notes, “It is a noteworthy feature of the letters that D.O. was always seeking for the most apposite word: the manuscript shows countless examples where a word, or words, have been meticulously inked out and replaced” (20).
62 Osborne demanded that Temple keep her up to date on the latest fashions in phraseology: “I cannot Excuse you that proffesse to bee my friend; and yet are content to let mee live in such ignorance, write to mee Every week and yet never send mee any of the new Phrases of the Towne…Pray what is meant by wellness and unwellnes, and why is, to some Extream, better then to some Extreamity[?]” (Letter 33, 6 or 7 August, 1653, pp. 112-13).
While Osborne did not seem to approve of women publishing, she did seem to be invested in herself as a writer, in spite of never calling herself one. Not only are her editing skills exercised beyond the normal purview of one not intending to publish, not only does she employ the terms of literary Romance to discuss everyday events and concerns, but she also spends a great deal of her time writing about literature and the proper use of epistolary rhetoric and conventions. Osborne does not appear to value letters differently than fiction; for her, good writing is essential:

> All Letters mee thinks should bee free and Easy as ones discourse, not studdyed, as an Oration, nor made up of hard words like a Charme. Tis an admirable thing to see how some People will labour to finde out term’s that may Obscure plaine sence, like a gentleman I knew, whoe would never say the weather grew cold, but that Winter began to salute us. I have noe patience for such Coxcomb’s…I have noe Patience neither for these Translatours of Romances. I mett with Polexandre and L’Illustre Bassa, both soe disguised that I who am theire old acquaintance hardly knew them…

(Letter 41, 24 or 25 September 1653, p. 131)

Osborne here and elsewhere in the letters sets herself up as an authority on the proper use of rhetoric, and her areas of expertise include letters, Romance, translation, and history. Neither does she in any way devalue her own textual production—indeed, she takes pleasure in learning that Temple believes she “write[s] better then the most Extreordinary person in the Kingdom” (Letter 44, 8 or 9 October 1653, p. 137). Nor does she object to other women writing per se; referring to a Romance she has sent Temple to read, Osborne writes: “They say the Gentleman that writes this Romance has a Sister that lives with him as Mayde and she furnishes him with all the little Story’s that come between soe that hee only Contrives the maine designe and when he wants something to Entertaine his company withal hee call’s to her for it. Shee has an Excelent fancy sure, and a great deal
of witt” (Letter 40, 17 or 18 September 1653, p. 128). The way in which Osborne intertwines reality and stories begins what will become so essential in later epistolary novels: it makes women’s letter-writing the story in and of itself. Instead of functioning as tools of a plot, stage properties, or fragments of some larger but unknown tale, in Osborne’s letters, the stories and the letters are the same. Although Osborne does not condone or respect women publishing, her letters anticipate how central a woman’s letters as story will become in the next century.

Margaret Cavendish also anticipates this conflation of story with women’s letters in her 1664 collection *Sociable Letters*; editor James Fitzmaurice argues that “the development of character in eighteenth-century fiction” may be traced back to Cavendish’s epistolary collection and other early character writers (xii). Cavendish’s letters in this collection represent a wide variety of topics and display Cavendish’s ambition to be ranked among the best male thinkers and authors of her day. More important than the content of Cavendish’s letters, however, is the way in which she frames them; indeed, she is deeply invested in shaping how they will be received and perceived by a skeptical reading public. The first text in Cavendish’s volume is a poem written by her husband, William Newcastle. In this piece, Newcastle frames the following text as a sort of negative invocation of the Muses; instead of calling on the Muses to sanction this work or inspire his wife to continue writing, Newcastle anticipates that anyone reading the *Sociable Letters* will be unable to write anymore and that the Classic authors would burn their own books out of shame:

When all Epistles you have read, and seek,  
Who write in Latin, English, French, or Greek,  
Such Woful things, as they are only fit

63 I will refer to William by the surname Newcastle instead of Cavendish simply for clarity’s sake.
To stop Mustard-pots, to this Ladie’s Wit,
Nay were they all Alive, I swear, I think,
They’d burn their Books, and Throw away their Ink[.]
(ll.1-6, p.3)

Cavendish’s book is designed to move outwards from her. It is designed to make the story of women’s letter-writing a public one and Newcastle’s aggressive bragging on behalf of his wife speaks to an investment in locating her in current literary discourses even as it asserts that she transcends them. Cavendish likewise differentiates herself even as she asserts her proper place amongst an androcentric literary coterie in a prefatory letter to her husband. In this epistle, the first thing she does is address those who would object to her publishing her works based solely on her gender: “It may be said to me…Work Lady Work, let writing Books alone, For sur ely Wiser Women ne’r writ one; But your Lordship never bid me to Work, nor leave Writing…the truth is, My Lord, I cannot Work, I mean such Works as Ladies use to pass their Time withall” (4). These assertions of difference are reminiscent of Isabella Whitney’s *Certaine Familiar Epistles* discussed in Chapter Four, but there are two key differences here: first, Cavendish’s assertion of her inability to do anything but write is prefaced by Newcastle’s epistolary approbation and assertion of her skills within accepted ideas of literary production; second, Cavendish does not need to publish to make money as Whitney (or her persona) seem to need to do: Cavendish enjoys all the privileges of money and class and so while she does not need to publish in order to feed herself, she chooses to expose herself to public scorn and criticism by doing so anyway. Osborne’s relationship with Temple does turn out to be a “Romance Story” when they successfully marry; Cavendish is interested in the much larger story of a woman writing simply because she desires to do so.
While Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters* are directed outwards to a larger reading public, they are also directed inwards; they comprise the story of a woman who writes because she enjoys doing so. In a final dedicatory poem prefacing the *Sociable Letters* proper Cavendish is described thus:

This Lady only to her self she Writes
And all her Letters to her self Indites;
For in her self so many Creatures be,
Like many Commonwealths, yet all Agree. (ll.1-4, p. 10)

That a woman would write to and for herself at the same time that she writes with a broad public audience in mind is an idea which extends quite naturally, I argue, from the articulations of subjectivity in letter-writing I discuss in this dissertation. The difference is that in Osborne’s letters and especially in Cavendish’s *Sociable Letters*, writing is represented as something which must also please the writer—the writer becomes, in other words, a subject both projecting out and looking inwards. In her preface addressing her “Noble Readers” (7), Cavendish reveals that her letters are no mere exchange of information or civilities with a correspondent; they represent as well a double view of the inside and the outside worlds:

I have Endeavoured under the Cover of Letters to Express the Humors of Mankind, and the Actions of a Man’s Life by the Correspondence of two Ladies, living at some Short Dis-
tance from each other, which make it not only their Chief Delight and Pastime, but their Tye in Friendship. (8)

Yet, every single letter that follows this proclamation is addressed to an un-named lady whose responses are never included in *Social Letters*. The point is not that this is an actual conversation or set of conversations; rather, the volume puts on display Cavendish’s considerable rhetorical skills as applied to a wide variety of topics. At the
same time, however, the appearance of verisimilitude in the exchange of letters is something that Cavendish attempts to maintain until the conclusion of the book:

    But, Madam, I know your Nature and Friendship is such, that what is Fit and Convenient for me to do, you will Approve, and upon that ground, I am Confident you will not be Angry with me, that I do not Joyn the Answers to those Letters, wherein you were pleased to Propound several Philosophical Questions to me to Resolve, to this Book, for truly, Madam, they are so many, and my Answers to them so Long, that if I should have Joyned them to these, it would have been as a Type, or Resemblance of Infinite Nature, and I am careful not to be too Tedious, or Wearisom to my Readers…I am Resolved to put your Philosophical Questions and my Answers in a Book by themselves. (228-29)

This passage, which comes from the final epistle in the *Sociable Letters*, establishes a number of important things. First and foremost, Cavendish asserts complete control over her own discursive activities. Not only does she represent herself as writer and editor of her own text, but she also sets herself up as editor of her female correspondent’s text. This is reminiscent of the way Jacques du Bosque creates a closed circle of women’s epistolary production in *The Secretary of Ladies* but the most important difference here is that Cavendish asserts the readability and publishable nature of both the *Sociable Letters* and the future text which will arise out of her philosophical debates with her correspondent. The readability of women’s letters is neither defended nor asserted here; rather, it is assumed and the next big step, publication, taken.

    Of greatest importance to this study has been the way in which the female letter-writer is imagined simultaneously to inhabit consciously the space of both story-teller and the subject of the story she tells. When I use the terms story and story-teller here, I am assuming that stories are intended and understood to be discourses which are properly
disseminated beyond both the subject-body who pens them and their originally intended or officially named audiences. Indeed, this is where the most basic connection between the epistle and the early novel may be seen to reside, as Homer Obed Brown argues: “to become Novel or to play a role in the novel, letters must be read by someone other than the one to whom they are addressed. They must be Purloined” (33). Brown is correct about the diffuse audience which ties early epistolary writings to the novel proper but purloining is not necessary; what is more to the point in the rise of the novel as a representation of characterological consciousness is the intentional dissemination of the text beyond its officially addressed recipient(s).

Reaching beyond officially addressed recipients is central to what is considered one of the first early English novels, or at least a crucial precursor: Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684-87). This book is not purely epistolary; indeed, it became increasingly less so as each of its three successive volumes were published; but it is, as Joe Bray argues “a key text in the development of…the consciousness novel,” which he argues is epitomized in the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, such as Richardson’s *Pamela* (34). Yet, one of the most striking things about Behn’s *Love-Letters* is how intensely Philander attempts to force Silvia, the female protagonist, textually to inhabit a kind of flattened echo of the complex and fetishistic representations of female subjectivity discussed in Chapter Four. In his first letter to her, Philander uses terms to describe Silvia reminiscent of Proteus’s unschooled love rhetoric in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

Though I parted from you resolv’d to obey your impossible commands, yet know, oh charming Silvia! that after a Thousand conflicts between Love and Honour, I found the God (too mighty for the Idol) reign absolute Monarch in my Soul, and soon banish’t
that Tyrant thence. That cruel Counsellor that would suggest to you a Thousand fond Arguments to hinder my noble pursue; Silvia came in view! her irresistable Idea! with all the charms of blooming youth, with all the Attractions of Heavenly Beauty! (11)

In response to this, Silvia appropriates and complicates Philander’s objectification of her as an Idea. Much like the writers I address in Chapter Four, Silvia emphasizes the physical and social vulnerability she experiences as a result of her epistolary exchange with her sister’s husband: “if you are false, if you have forgotten your poor believing and distracted Silvia, why do’s not that kind Tyrant Death, that meager welcome Vision of the desparing, old, and wretched, approach in dead of Night, approach my restless Bed, and tole the dismal tidings in my frighted listening ears, and strike me for ever silent[?]” (24). Silvia here represents herself as waiting for death but the disjoint between her active physical waiting and her writing a story about it to Philander reveals that she has replaced her lover’s Idea of her with a lover/letter-writer figure; here and throughout the book, Silvia rewrites herself in response to Philander’s letters and she achieves her desires in a way which clearly expresses them to him but also tells another story to a less understanding world who might at some point read these letters: she writes herself into the role of the weak woman unable to resist the advances of a brother-in-law who as both a family member and a man should know better than to take advantage of her vulnerable position.

This narrative appeal to multiple audiences is, of course, Behn’s decision as much as it appears to be Silvia’s and it prefigures the increasingly central role third person narrative plays in the Love-Letters as it progresses to an almost entirely letter-free Part Three. This progression is important for two reasons; the first reason relates to the history of the early novel. Behn clearly anticipates how letters may be used to represent
characters’ complex consciousnesses and how easily, and arguably more efficiently, such revelations of character may be done from the distance of third person omniscience. The second reason relates to the way in which the phenomenon of the story-teller functioning simultaneously as story threatens always to render the subject’s control over the telling and revelation of her own tale unnecessary. The latter of these two ideas is most strikingly articulated in the many letters in which Silvia describes to Philander, in great detail, events for which he was fully present with her and thus requires no such detailed recaps:

how did’st thou swear that happy blessed night, in which
I saw thee last, clasp’d in my arms, weeping with eager love, with melting softness on my bosome—remember how thou swor’st—oh, that dear night—let me recover strength—and then I’ll tell thee more—I must repeat the story of that night…that glorious night when…you met and grasp’d me at the door, taking my trembling body in your arms… (98)

Such pseudo-pornographic moments of course reflect Behn’s cagey anticipation of what would make for a best-seller, but it is striking how at some point the convergence of the story-teller as story and epistolarity ceases to provide an effective representation of subjectivity through letter-writing. The reason for this is obvious; at a point such as this, the letter is too obviously a vehicle for reaching out to audiences beyond those proclaimed; the letter as simultaneous revelation of story and story-teller depends upon such external points being made to appear accidental, unintended, or at the very least secondary to the narrative clearly addressed to the proclaimed recipient. This passage and the abundance of others like it are too obviously intended for Behn’s reading public. Further, letters like this signal Silvia’s increasing lack of control over her own narrative and life. As the book progresses, she is represented as writing fewer and fewer letters
while more are written about her by men (primarily Philander and Octavio) who seek to
decline what physical and social spaces she will inhabit in the world. Silvia’s excessive
story-telling about her status as a subject ironically leads to a narrative erasure thereof
and by the end of Love-Letters, her stake in the overall tale has been reduced to a mere
footnote which quite notably makes no reference to her previous work as a letter-writer;
we are told only that she “daily makes considerable Conquests where e’er she shows the
Charmer” (439).

Given how thoroughly Behn ultimately subsumes her epistolary heroine into her
own narrative control, it might seem surprising that Love-Letters Between a Nobleman
and His Sister is still widely considered to be an important precursor to the great
epistolary novels of the eighteenth century. Yet, it is precisely this danger of the
epistolary story-teller who tells her own story being lost in a larger narrative that is at the
heart of the period’s most influential example of the genre: Samuel Richardson’s Pamela
(1741). Critical approaches to Pamela have generally taken Johnson’s “view of
Richardson as the creator of ‘characters of nature, where a man must dive into the
recesses of the human heart’” as their basis and then expanded from there to discuss
generic, historic, or gender-related issues (Todd xvi). Yet, Richardson strenuously
worked to distinguish Pamela from other works written contemporaneously: novels. To
distinguish his books therefrom, Richardson insists on his editorship rather than
authorship of the text; he not only introduces Pamela with his own “Preface by the
Editor” (3-4) but he also includes two dedicatory epistles addressed to him in which he is
explicitly referred to as Editor: “In short, Sir, a Piece of this Kind is much wanted in the
World, which is but too much, as well as too early debauched by pernicious Novels…All
that I have hitherto read, tends only to corrupt their [young readers’] Principles, mislead their Judgments, and initiate them into Gallantry and loose Pleasures” (9). Richardson likewise proclaims his moralistic intentions for *Pamela* on the frontispiece in which he explicitly states that it has been published “In order to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the Youth of Both Sexes” (1). The moral anxiety of all these prefatory signposts reveal has been well discussed by Nancy Armstrong who discusses how “Richardson enclosed the tale of [Pamela’s] seduction within a framework that, like the conduct book, redirected male desire at a woman who embodied the domestic virtues” (109-10). The anxieties surrounding social order as expressed in the eighteenth-century conduct book are certainly being worked out in *Pamela*, the story of a relationship based on radically imbalanced power structures of gender, class, and physical freedom. This approach, however, does not adequately address Armstrong’s later question about the book’s uniqueness: “When in the history of writing before *Pamela*…did a female, let alone a female servant, have the authority to define herself so?” (113). Bracketing out the “servant” one might point to Isabella Whitney, Elizabeth I, and the variety of female letter-writers “edited” by Nicholas Breton and Jacques du Bosque in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, if not to Behn’s Silvia. More importantly, Armstrong’s question points to another unvoiced question: if Richardson was so intent on controlling how his epistolary novel was to be received, why did he insist on maintaining the arm’s length persona of an editor? Why not conspicuously and straightforwardly present a novel designed to reclaim all those other novels to the project of social reform he insists is at the heart of *Pamela*?
The answer, I believe, is that Pamela’s virtue and the rewards she receives for maintaining it are only meaningful if she is represented as negotiating them entirely on her own. The physically invasive role that Mr. B. tries constantly to force Pamela to accept from him—he repeatedly tries both to rape her and to convince her to accept becoming his kept mistress—is absolutely inseparable from the control he tries to exercise over her discourse, which is represented entirely through letters she writes, primarily to her parents. Indeed, the very first letter in the novel concludes with Pamela writing a postscript in which she describes the tangled bodily and textual relationship she will be forced to participate in with her lady’s son from there on in:

I have been scared out of my Senses; for just now, as I was folding this Letter, in my late Lady’s Dressing-room, in comes my young Master! Good Sirs! How I was frightned! I went to hide the Letter in my Bosom, and he seeing me frighted, said, smiling, Who have you been writing to, Pamela? (12)

Mr. B, of course, takes the letter and returns it to her only after he has perused it and found it in no way objectionable. But soon he is confiscating and reading her letters before sending them on to her parents, sometimes keeping letters from being delivered to her parents at all, and he ultimately kidnaps her and forces her into confinement in his country home. Once she is confined, her letters cannot possibly be delivered and Mr. B. has Mrs. Jewkes control how much access she has to writing materials, giving her only two sheets at a time and forcing Pamela to show her everything she has written.

Pamela, of course, has come prepared with hidden writing materials and so continues to write letters to her parents, even though she knows they might never receive them:

_O my dearest Father and Mother,_
LET me write and bewail my miserable hard Fate, tho’ I have no Hope that what I write will be convey’d to your Hands!—I have now nothing to do but write, and weep, and fear, and pray[.] (98)

Pamela frequently expresses hope that somehow these letters will someday be conveyed to her parents and that writing is all she has to do; yet, she also reveals something that complicates this: “I am going on again with a long Letter; for I love Writing, and shall tire you. But when I began, I only intended to say, that I am quite fearless of any Danger now” (17). What is striking here is not just that she so comfortably and happily proclaims that she loves writing, but that the real reason for the letter (that she thinks she has over-reacted to Mr. B’s perceived advances) is included as an afterthought. This moment, as brief as it is, I believe lies at the heart of Richardson’s attempts to control how Pamela is received without appearing to exercise any control whatsoever over what or how his character expresses herself textually.

For Richardson to usurp the narrative control of his heroine the way Behn does with Silvia in Love-Letters would not only render Pamela’s virtue in less than realistic terms, terms which are key to making for convincing polemic, but would also represent the kind of invasive and power-imbalanced textual assault that Mr. B so constantly threatens Pamela with. This potential for assault is described in one of the novel’s most frequently quoted passages. Having decided that he will see what letters Pamela has been writing while under his confinement, Mr. B (as reported in another letter of Pamela’s) makes the following threat:

But say, Pamela, tell me Truth; Are they above? I was more affrighted. He saw my Confusion. Tell me Truth, said he. Why, Sir, answer’d I, I have sometimes hid them under the dry Mould in the Garden; sometimes in one Place, sometimes in another; and those you have in your
Hand, were several Days under a Rose-bush, in the Garden.
Artful Slut! said he; What’s this to my Question? Are they not about you?...I have searched every Place above, and in your Closet, for them, and cannot find them; so I will know where they are. Now, said he, it is my Opinion they are about you; and I never undrest a Girl in my Life; but I will now begin to strip my pretty Pamela[,] (234-35)

This scene is so intensely anxiety-ridden because Pamela does have her letters about her; in an earlier epistle, she reveals that she will “stitch them hitherto in my Under-coat, next my Linen” to try to keep them out of Mrs. Jewkes’, and therefore Mr. B’s, hands (131). It is key that as “editor,” Richardson is seen not to interfere with Pamela’s person, which in this case, means interfering with what she writes, for to do so would not only be to align himself too closely to Mr. B but also to lose that which is meant to distinguish Pamela from characters in those pernicious other novels: an investment in virtue that defines itself, which means creating a protagonist who is both fully the story-teller and the subject of the story she tells.

Yet, Richardson does not allow Pamela to have the last word about her own story. As “editor,” he concludes the tome with some brief narrative intrusions to inform readers about how various other characters have fared, and to remind readers that Pamela really ought to be understood as a paradigm of good conduct which transcends differences of gender and class (501-03). Yet, for all of Richardson’s attempts to control how Pamela was received, his simultaneous attempt to appear as though he was not controlling Pamela’s discourse seems to have been more powerful in one very crucial way. I would posit that having written Pamela, Richardson found himself (and the reading public) confronted with a piece of compelling polemic he had not intended to write: a polemic in which by associating female subjectivity in its most positive form with writing, real
women’s writing in general is asserted to be both attractive and socially acceptable, and indeed, potentially reparative. The reparative polemic adhering to Pamela’s epistolary production is not, of course, without serious complications: not only does Pamela fall in love with her would-be rapist but she also continues to celebrate the power imbalance that made her suffering at his hands possible in the first place by continuing to call him “Master” after they have wed. I would argue that this uncomfortable reiteration of the social power imbalances Richardson so harshly critiques in the novel in fact contributes to its unintended polemic in favour of women’s writing, for writing, even in stories with happy endings, is where women’s and women’s stories’ power is imagined to reside—and for Richardson, virtue is absolutely dependent upon the exercise of personal power by a subject who chooses, rather than by someone who, like a character under the heavy hand of an overbearing narrator, is simply forced to conform.

The texts I have examined in this thesis, I have examined chronologically; this structure implies a sort of literary evolution of the imagined female letter-writer leading inexorably towards the (first) golden age of women writers in the eighteenth century. Such literary evolution is a dangerous claim to make; indeed, there are always counter-examples to scupper one’s attempt to draw such clear and straight chronological lines. Rather than a direct evolution in which English Renaissance culture begins in earnest to explore, through literary representation, what it means for a woman to write letters (which tend always to transcend a merely epistolary function), I have tried in “Author of Prodigies” to trace the lines of a culture working out what the figure of the female letter-writer might mean to and for it. Joe Bray argues that “the style of the [eighteenth-century] novel-in-letters had a penetrating influence on the way the nineteenth- and
twentieth-century novel represents consciousness,” with Bray’s use of “consciousness” being intimately related to the way I have been using “subjectivity” in this study (2).

Bray asserts further that John Locke’s conception of consciousness was so original as to “overthrow an entire vision of the world” (13). I would posit rather that Locke, like all of the authors I address in this thesis, were engaged in developing a vocabulary for ideas about what constitutes a subject which already existed in their cultures; thus, rather than arguing for evolution here I am arguing that English culture’s ongoing attempt to engage this essential question about its members’ inner lives created what appears to be an evolving, albeit complicated acceptance and investment in the development of the real woman writer.
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