CHAPTER 8

"Deep-brain'd sonnets" and "tragic shows": Shakespeare's late Ovidian art in A Lover's Complaint

In *A Lover's Complaint*, Shakespeare offers his most concentrated fiction about the relation between poetry and theatre. Among Shakespeare's poems – and even among his plays – his third and last narrative poem is valuable for its lucid narration of a story directly about the cultural function and social interchange between "deep-brain'd sonnets" (209) and "tragic shows" (308). Since recent scholarship concludes that Shakespeare composed this poem in the first decade of the seventeenth century, it joins its companion piece in the famed 1609 quarto in calling into question the dominant models regarding the presence of the poems within a predominantly theatrical career (see chapter 1). By recalling what recent editors of Shakespeare's poems emphasize, that Shakespeare was working on *A Lover's Complaint* at the time that he was composing such "mature" plays as *Hamlet*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well*, and *Cymbeline* – that indeed he was redeploying the very discourse from the plays – we might come to find his fiction about the professional relation between poetry and theatre late in his career of considerable value.[1]

As with the Sonnets, admittedly here we do not know what Shakespeare's intentions were. We do not know why he composed this poem or whether he authorized its publication. In other words, *A Lover's Complaint* is another work situated on the borderline between manuscript and print. While some readers will be more comfortable operating on the manuscript side of the border, in this chapter (as in the last) we will acknowledge the question but attend to what does appear in print. Precisely because of the question over the poem as a work of the print poet, we might find the direct representation of poetry and theatre here all the more noteworthy.[2]

[1] On *A Lover's Complaint* and the plays, see Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 393–94; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 70–72; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 139–40; Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 117–69. On the special link with *Hamlet*, see Craik, "*A Lover's Complaint*," 439, 444–46.

[2] Shakespeare's predecessors in the complaint form (see Kerrigan, *Motives*) do not include a sustained discourse of poetry and theatre. Daniel's *Rosamond* includes a discourse of "show" (173, 279, 280, 300,

THE FICTION OF SONNET AND SHOW

Briefly, the fiction in *A Lover's Complaint* tells of a male narrator hearing and seeing a "fickle maid full pale" (5). She reaches into her "maund" or basket (36), pulls out "folded schedules" and "many a ring of posied gold and bone" (43, 45), "[T]ear[s]" the "papers," and "break[s] . . . rings a-twain" (6), throwing both sets of artifacts into "a river . . . / Upon whose weeping margent she was set" (38–39). The narrator then sees a "reverend man" (57), once "Of court, of city" (59) but now a cowherd "graz[ing] . . . his cattle nigh" (57), draw near "this afflicted fancy" (61) to inquire "the grounds and motives of her woe" (63). The country maid tells the cowherd a story that takes us through the final words of the poem. In her story, the maid narrates how a young man with the sophistication of a courtier seduces her with an exquisite physical beauty and a compelling internal character that are served by two modes of literary art: the "deep-brain'd sonnets" that the maid receives from the young man; and the "tragic shows" that he performs to win her sympathy. At the core of her story, the maid quotes the young man's own rhetoric of courtship (177–280), including his haunting tale about seducing a nun (232–66), in what constitutes one of Shakespeare's most spectacular versifications of a dangerous sexual theatre.

The story about sonnets and shows – situated in "the familiar Shakespearean territory of sexual betrayal" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 73) – is even more complex. As part of his seductive performance, the young courtier tells the maid that the sonnets he has given her are compositions he has received from girls he has seduced previously (204–10), leading most critics to assume that these compositions are the ones the maid throws in the river (e.g., J. Kerrigan, *Motives*, 46). Yet Colin Burrow rightly complicates this assumption: "they are a little less transparent than that" ("Life," 28). Burrow goes on to emphasize that "[S]eeing these objects does not give access to the emotions behind a love affair in material form . . . [i]n Shakespeare's poems objects do not reveal emotions; they encrypt them intriguingly, and start his readers on a quest for mind. An object is held up as something which offers a point of access to an experience, but the experience which it signifies, and whatever those mysterious 'deep-brained sonnets' actually relate, is withheld from us" (28).

If Burrow rightly emphasizes the closed contents of the "sonnets," he simultaneously opens Shakespeare's own text to the possibility that the

398, 623, 657, 692), with a vague theatrical ring (173, 278–80, 300, 657), but such discourse is detached from the commercial theatre (see Kerrigan, *Motives*). By contrast, Daniel includes an important and sustained discourse of poetry: "Thames had Swannes as well as ever Po" (728).

young courtier might well have composed the "papers" himself. Certainly, the reader is invited to make this inference up to the moment of his bold declaration to the maid (218–24), but perhaps even afterwards, given the youth's notorious falsehood. In short, we are not certain just who has composed the "papers" or "sonnets," or whether these different words represent even the same documents, and it is reasonable to see that the ambiguity of both their form and their authorship might be part of the representation. The ambiguity extends to the gender of the author(s), which could include both men and women. Is it possible that the country maid is even tearing up documents she has herself composed, furious that the young man has sent as his own the very documents she once sent to him? In short, *A Lover's Complaint*'s representation of the first half of the literary compound, the sonnets, is itself of "double voice" (3) – and on two counts: both double-authored and double-gendered. However we construe the literary economy here, men and women are implicated in both the writing and the reading of the paper forms.

We may extend this principle to the second half of the literary compound, "shows." The maid describes the youth as a tragic playwright when she accuses him of performing "a plenitude of subtle matter," which, "Applied to cautels [deceits], all strange forms receives,"

> Of burning blushes, or of weeping water,
> Or sounding paleness; and he takes and leaves,
> In either's aptness as it best deceives,
> To blush at speeches rank, to weep at woes,
> Or to turn white and sound at tragic shows.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 302–08)

To "turn white and sound at tragic shows" evidently means to stage a dangerously chaste theatre empty of artistic and moral integrity. As we shall see, this is not the only theatrical discourse in the poem but rather part of a larger network from the place of the stage. If in a simple reading Shakespeare genders the author of the sonnets female, in an equally simple reading he genders the author of tragedy male. While readers might feel inclined to sympathize with the maid, and thereby to blame the youth for his theatricality, John Kerrigan has encouraged us to press the verity of the maid herself: "Shakespeare indicates that the 'context' of the maid's 'utterance' [the opening echo that the narrator hears resounding through the hills] pre-emptively endangers what is said. The received landscape of complaint (realm of Spenser, William Browne) takes a 'voyce' and makes it 'doble'" (*Motives*, 44). While Kerrigan warns that we "should resist the

prompting of 'doble' either wholly to credit what she says or to judge her account mendacious" (44), he nonetheless opens the maid to further scrutiny. For instance, she is the one to unleash theatre into the discourse of the poem as a site of sexual falsehood, prompting us to wonder how she knows about this particular domain. Like the dyer's hand in Shakespeare's famous sonnet on the theatre (111), perhaps her nature is subdued to what it works in.

In short, in *A Lover's Complaint* both poetry and theatre are potentially double-voiced and double-gendered. As the phrases for these twin forms of production suggest – "deep-brain'd sonnets" and "tragic shows" – Shakespeare presents the forms authored and gendered as themselves in opposition, even in conflict. The genre of Petrarchan poetry in which men and women are complicit is fundamentally a subjective, mental, and internal art ("deep-brain'd"), while the Senecan tragedic genre in which men and women are also complicit is fundamentally a material, performative, and external one ("show").[3] Despite the poem's phrases for the two arts, however, we can extend the principle of doubleness to their status in the narrative. Since we are not privy to the contents of the "deep-brain'd sonnets," as Burrow observes, they appear paradoxically as *materialized texts*; similarly, the "tragic shows," for all their superficiality, penetrate the brain deeply, as the narrative reveals.

CRITICAL CONTEXTS

The workings and implications of the opposing doubleness of content, form, gender, and authorship for poetry and theatre require some patience to sort out, but that shall be our goal in this final chapter. Surprisingly, critics have neglected the topic. They have, however, touched its perimeters. Most comment on the presence of "deep-brain'd sonnets" in a collection of verse titled *Shake-speares Sonnets* (as does Burrow), prompting fruitful detail about the connections between the Sonnets and *A Lover's Complaint* (see Bell "That which"; Laws, "Generic Complexities"): both poems present narratives of sexual infidelity that feature three erotically related principals in a tragedic triangle, consisting of two men and a woman. By contrast, while most critics discuss the theatre through comparisons with the plays, and occasionally identify the young man as an "actor," only Kerrigan has

[3] Critics discussing "Shakespeare's Petrarchism" (Braden), tend to neglect *A Lover's Complaint*. On the European development of Petrarchan authorship, including in England, see Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch*. On Seneca in the plays, see Miola, *Tragedy*; Helms, *Seneca*. On complaint, Seneca, and Renaissance tragedy in *A Lover's Complaint*, see J. Kerrigan, *Motives*, 55–59.

probed more deeply.[4] Discussing the commonplace intertextuality with Spenser's complaints, both *The Ruines of Time* (which opens in similar terms) and Spenser's contributions to Jan Ver der Noot's *Theatre for Wordlings*, Kerrigan observes: "Like Spenser's Rome . . . [the maid] inhabits a 'theatre for worldlings'" (*Motives*, 42), to the extent that "early readers, attuned to the theatricality of the [complaint] genre, might have thought in terms of a well-known playwright writing for the paper-stage" (43). Later, Kerrigan notes "the impact of the larger [complaint] genre upon drama" – for instance, *The Mirror for Magistrates* upon "Renaissance tragedy" – even raising the question "about the stage worthiness of grief": "complaint is problematic because stagey before it is staged" (55–56). What is left to do is to locate theatre, along with poetry, *in the discourse of the poem itself* and to speculate more fully what it might mean for *this* "well-known playwright" to be "writing for th[is particular] . . . paper-stage."[5]

SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP: OVID AND MARLOWE

We may contextualize Shakespeare's double-voiced fiction in terms of the new figure of the Ovidian poet-playwright. One way to read Shakespeare's fiction is as a self-conscious narrative about the arts of poetry and theatre in his own Ovidian career.[6] Even more directly than in his two early experiments in narrative poetry, in this late one Shakespeare makes his fiction about the incompatibility of the sexes and the deadly nature of desire pertain to his writing career.

Moreover, as in *Venus* and *Lucrece*, in *A Lover's Complaint* Shakespeare presents Ovidianism as distinctly Marlovian. Although recent scholarship and criticism neglect Marlowe's presence in the poem, we know too much

[4] On the young man as an actor, see Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 588–89; Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 83; Rees, "Sidney," 159; Craik, "*A Lover's Complaint*," 442.

[5] The songs and shows are not quite of the same representational economy, but they are close: the sonnets are material artifacts, but the shows tend be more metaphorical, a term for the young courtier's deception. Nonetheless, J. Kerrigan and Burrow allow us to see how *A Lover's Complaint* complicates the distinction, to see that this is exactly how Shakespeare's mind represents the two forms at this point in his career. Cf. Craik: Shakespeare "raises questions we can call theatrical since they concern performativity and audience" ("*A Lover's Complaint*," 443).

[6] Unlike modern editions of *Venus* and *Lucrece*, those of *A Lover's Complaint* contain little annotation on Ovid: Duncan-Jones and Burrow record no intertextuality, while Kerrigan mentions Ovid only once (*The Sonnets*, 400). Among critics, Rees, Kay, and Sharon-Zisser do not mention Ovid; among those who do, see Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 589; Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 2, 3–9, 15–16, 47, 50, 55–56, 59; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 64, 66n1; J. Kerrigan, *Motives*, 55–57, 67; Craik, "*A Lover's Complaint*," 438.

about Shakespeare's ongoing struggle with Marlowe's ghost to follow suit.[7] Critics can observe that "Thomas Whythorne and George Gascoigne both wrote poems of courtship and seduction to numerous Elizabethan women" (Bell, "That which," 463), but we might also recall that this mode is virtually Marlowe's signature, especially in his poetry, from *Ovid's Elegies* to "The Passionate Shepherd" to *Hero and Leander*. The country maid's voice at times sounds Marlovian, recalling the narrator's voice in *Hero and Leander*: "For when we rage, advice is often seen / By blunting us to make our wits more keen" (160–61). More particularly, the young courtier's seduction of "a nun, / Or sister sanctified, of holiest note" (232–33), echoes Leander's elaborate seduction of "Venus' nun" in Marlowe's Ovidian narrative (1. 45); indeed, the stories are remarkably similar in outline. But it is the young courtier himself, an Ovidian figure of desire deploying both poetry and theatre, who most compellingly conjures up the perturbed spirit of Christopher Marlowe, his Ovidian career, and what it serves: a counter-Virgilian nationhood – that is, a nonpatriotic form of nationalism that subverts royal power with *libertas* (*Amores*, 3. 15. 9; *Ovid's Elegies*, 3. 14. 9).

If we wonder how Shakespeare's portrait of a heterosexual male bent on female seduction could conjure up a self-avowed writer of homoeroticism, we might recall that Kerrigan traces the complaint in the early modern period to a "common language" (one that we are historicizing in terms of Marlowe), and he speaks of "the sexual ambivalence in *A Lover's Complaint*," citing "the youth's face, a bower for Venus, his voice 'maiden tongu'd'" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 20–21). Moreover, the young courtier is not merely androgynous; he attracts both men and women: "he did in the general bosom reign / Of young, of old, and sexes both enchanted" (127–28). If this figure's artistic forms are both double-voiced, so is their author.

By attending to the conjunction of poetry and theatre in *A Lover's Complaint*, we can see Shakespeare plotting his characters' aesthetic and subjective struggle for identity amid a love affair in Marlowe's terms, drawn along an Ovidian path of amorous poetry and tragedic theatre. While acknowledging Shakespeare's representation of doubleness in the agent of authorship for both literary forms, we can nonetheless discern a critique of literary production in which both men and woman are complicit in an economy not merely of cultural shame but also of artistic sham.

[7] Editions that provide no annotation on Marlowe include J. Kerrigan, Roe, Duncan-Jones, and Burrow. The considerable annotation collected in Rollins' *Variorum: Poems* includes only one reference to Marlowe, by Theobald in 1929 (601). Like editors, critics more often mention Sidney and Daniel (e.g., Rees; Bell; Laws).

THE VIRGILIAN PATH RE-TAKEN: SPENSERIAN AUTHORSHIP

As we should expect, Shakespeare once more plots his Ovidian narrative about Marlovian poetry and theatre in a Virgilian landscape. Amid hills and riverbanks, cattle graze and two conventional pastoral figures preside, the country maid and the cowherd.[8] A third figure, the male narrator, has entered the pastoral domain, evidently for retreat, while the fourth figure, the seductive young man, appears to have made a sojourn to the pastoral world at some point in the past, but hardly for retreat. Yet each of these "pastoral" figures can also be connected to the "court" or "city." Shakespeare makes this principle of dual cultural affiliation explicit in the figure of the "reverend man," who

> graz'd his cattle nigh,
> Sometime a blusterer that the ruffle knew
> Of court, of city, and had let go by
> The swiftest hours, observed as they flew.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 57–60)

Kerrigan notes how rare the reverend man's life-pattern is in Elizabethan literature, comparing it to the career of old Melibee in Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene* (cantos 9–12), since both pastoral figures have engaged in what Isabel G. MacCaffrey calls the "formula of out-and-back," which begins in the country, moves to the court, and comes home again.[9]

The life-pattern of the Spenserian character is applicable to the poet who pens it. As we have seen in previous chapters, Spenser was famous among his contemporaries for being a shepherd who began his literary career by writing pastoral and then moving on to epic. While the three-part life-pattern of the reverend man may be rare for Elizabethans, the figure of the shepherd-king, present in a narrative evoking the generic grid of pastoral and epic, is among the most dominant fictions of the period, from Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender*, *Faerie Queene*, and *Colin Clouts Comes Home Againe*, to Sidney's *Arcadia*, Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, and Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.[10] While various writers use the Virgilian fiction for complex and diverse reasons,

[8] In *Variorum: Poems*, Rollins reports that "An anonymous reviewer in *Fraser's Magazine* (Oct., 1855, p. 411) characterized the poem as 'one of the most successful pastorals in the English language'" (586; see 593, 594). Late twentieth-century commentators follow suit: see Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 61; J. Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 403–04, *Motives*, 13–14, 21, 46; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 264; Rees "Sidney," 165; Sharon-Zisser "Similes," 206–09; Laws, "Generic Complexities," 81, 86–89.

[9] J. Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 402. Quoted in MacCaffrey *Spenser's Allegory*, 366, who emphasizes that "Spenser evidently attached important meanings to this pattern, for it occurs at least four times in his poetry."

[10] In *The Shepheardes Calender*, Colin Clout may well be the first important figure to leave the pastoral world for the "walled townes" (*August*, 157–62) and then to return to the country in lamentation

including to process their middle-class obsession with social mobility, they also process its literary form, a self-reflexive fiction about an author's literary career, especially one structured on a maturational, developmental model.[11]

Thus, just as we may label Shakespeare's Ovidian conjunction of poetry and theatre Marlovian, so we may label his Virgilian conjunction of pastoral and epic Spenserian. In 1790, Malone was the first to observe of Shakespeare that "in this beautiful poem . . . he perhaps meant to break a lance with Spenser. It appears to me to have more of the simplicity and pathetick tenderness of the elder poet, in his smaller pieces, than any other poem of that time" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 586; see 590, 591, 592, 594, 601). The judgment has held steady for over 200 years: "Spenser [is] . . . a poet to whom *A Lover's Complaint* is more deeply indebted than to any other" (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 708; see 140, 695, 699, 707).[12] While the opening of *A Lover's Complaint* has long been understood to imitate the opening of *The Ruines of Time* – and more recently of *Prothalamion* – we might take Kerrigan's cue to see the reverend man (in particular) not simply as indebted to Spenser's Melibee but as a fictionalized type of Spenserian figure – an anticipation, if you will, of Milton's "sage and serious poet Spenser . . . a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas" (*Aereopagitica*, 728–29). Kerrigan is on the verge of voicing this idea: "Shakespeare clearly enjoys . . . the 'reverend' man's Spenserian trappings" – adding, "somewhat arch even in 1609" (*Motives*, 66). Indeed, the reverend man voices one of the recurrent beliefs of *The Faerie Queene*: that articulation of a problem can bring consolation, especially through counseling. Thus, Prince Arthur counsels Una in Book 1: "wofull Ladie let me you intrete, / For to unfold the anguish of your hart: / Mishaps are maistred by advice discrete, / And counsell mittigates the greatest smart" (7. 40).

Yet part of Shakespeare's enjoyment of the reverend man likely derives from his shading of the portrait into parody. The word "blusterer" arouses immediate suspicion; the *Oxford English Dictionary* cites Shakespeare's usage as its first example for its first definition: "One who utters loud empty boasts or menaces; a loud or violent inflated talker, a braggart." That last

over sexual betrayal. The biographical pattern pertains not merely to Spenser but also to Shakespeare (see Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 587).

[11] Critics also neglect Virgil; the only commentary comes from Underwood, who traces Shakespeare's use of the female complaint through Ovid's *Heroides* to Dido in the *Aeneid* (*Prolegomena*, xiv, 3–4). Cf. Rees "Sidney," 161.

[12] Following Malone, modern critics routinely find Spenser. See Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 39–42; Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 15, 390–92; Rees, "Sidney," 157; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 61–65; Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 436, 441; J. Kerrigan, *Motives*, 21, 30, 32–34, 41–42, 53; Jackson, "Echoes"; D. Kay, *Shakespeare*, 145, 147–49; Laws "Generic Complexities," 88.

word takes us where we need to go: to Spenser's great figure of bluster in *The Faerie Queene*: Braggadocchio. It is as if Shakespeare conjoins Braggadocchio with the gentle shepherd Melibee, the foster-father of Pastorella and future father-in-law of Calidore, Knight of Courtesy, in order to parody Spenserian pastoral retreat, wisdom, and authority. If so, the reverend man recalls Archimago, the magician in disguise as a hermit who uses his smooth tongue to bring the Redcrosse Knight and Una home to his hermitage in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene* – with unholy consequences. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare's reverend man even conceals the sexuality that Florimell discovers in the old fisher in Book 3, canto 8 – an impotent old man who, like Archimago, derives from a figure in Ariosto. Indeed, not merely has Shakespeare's old cowherd been "Sometime a blusterer," but he moves a little too "fastly" to the maid, wishing to "know" only "in brief" the "origin of her woe," while his mode of operation is itself tinged with erotic desire: "So slides he down upon his grained bat, / And comely distant sits he by her side, / When he again desires her, being sat, / Her grievance with his hearing to divide" (64–66). That last word is ominous, and is a favorite of Spenser's, recalling Archimago's pleasure at seeing Redcrosse and Una "divided into double parts" (1. 2. 9). Apparently, Shakespeare turns Spenser against himself, conflating several of his figures of virtue and vice into an ambiguous old man who blurs the boundary between caring wisdom and sexual hypocrisy.[13]

Like the other two narrative poems, *A Lover's Complaint* is not an allegory about an artistic confrontation between Spenser and Marlowe over the question of female chastity, but Shakespeare does appear to evoke precisely such a confrontation. Thus he tells a fiction in which Spenserian and Marlovian figures function in oppositional relationship with the country maid. The Marlovian figure of the young courtier uses Ovidian poetry and theatre to take female chastity away, while the Spenserian figure of the reverend man uses his Virgilian life pattern of pastoral and epic counsel to bring (more than) solace to her suffering. By recognizing Shakespeare's penning of such a fiction during the first decade of the seventeenth century, we can revise the received wisdom that Shakespeare passed beyond Spenser back in 1593–94 (Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, 194).

In the 1609 quarto, Shakespeare treats the Spenserian/Virgilian characters with the unsettling doubleness of an arch-magus. Usually, critics identify the maid as a figure from the country, citing her hat, "a platted hive of straw"

[13] Editors usually gloss the reverend man's "grained bat" with the "handsome bat" of the false Ape in *Mother Hubberds Tale* (217; see Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 436). On the reverend man as "the incestuous, non-erectional desire of a feminized Father," see Sharon-Zisser, "Similies," 208.

(8). Editors, however, suggest that even though such a hat was worn in the country, it was also worn by women from the court, including Queen Elizabeth (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 432). Like the reverend man, the maid could either be a country girl (who has even perhaps sojourned to the court) or a court girl (who has retreated to the country). The identity of the narrator is even more enigmatic: while his voice and poetic art mark him as courtly, he appears first as a visitor to the pastoral world. Thus he has performed a telescoped version of the pattern outlined for the reverend man: he has left the city for the country. Finally, we may extend this Virgilian narrative pattern to the young man, who, as we have said, appears to join the narrator in being a courtier who has made a visit to the pastoral world. In short, we may plot all of the fictional principals moving along a Virgilian path.

In trying to determine what Shakespeare might be up to here, we need to recall that Marlowe's ghost was still in competition with Spenser's over the writing of the nation, his art grounded in a "counter-nationhood." In *A Lover's Complaint*, Shakespeare removes the action from the obvious site of nationhood, the court and city, but he does follow Spenser and Marlowe in linking the pastoral domain with the political one. The maid is not a figure for Rome, as Spenser's complaining female is in *The Ruines of Rome*, or Verlame, as in *The Ruines of Time*, but nonetheless Shakespeare's "woman is a city (176)" (D. Kay, *Shakespeare*, 145), as the woman herself laments: "And long upon these terms I held my city, / Till thus he gan besiege me" (176–77). Long ago, J. M. Robertson observed that *A Lover's Complaint* "employs no Greek Mythus (like *Venus and Adonis*), no Roman Tale (like *Lucrece*)" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 600). Unlike both earlier narrative poems, too, *A Lover's Complaint* contains no concrete reference to a "queen" or in other ways evokes Elizabeth (cf. "monarch" at line 41). Nonetheless, the straw hat preserved in the historical record just happens to have been worn by Shakespeare's former monarch, and readers have occasionally identified the maid with his recently deceased queen (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 592, 602).

Moreover, as an "Elizabethan minor epic" composed around the time of the queen's death in 1603, *A Lover's Complaint* contains other epic topoi: the canon imagery describing the maid's "levell'd eyes" (22); the young man's chivalric excellence in riding his horse (106–12; cf. *Fairie Queene*, 1. 1. 1); and the young man's reference to the female as an androgynous warrior (like Britomart, a well-known Elizabeth figure) who escapes the "scars of battle" with her "flight, / And makes her absence valiant" (244–45). Yet, as to be expected in an Ovidian minor epic, Virgilian "arms" are eroticized

through verbal play, as voiced by the duplicitous rider of chivalric romance himself: "'Love's arms are peace, 'gainst rule, 'gainst sense, 'gainst shame'" (271). Such details are sustained enough to suggest an Ovidian form of nationhood.[14] In the clear opposition between the young man who has seduced the maid with "sonnets" and "shows" and the old man who has left the epic world of the court for the pastoral world of the country, Shakespeare appears to represent a struggle between Marlowe's counter-nationalism – the writer's narcissistic service of his own art – and Spenser's royal nationhood in communal service to the Virgilian state. Intriguingly, in the middle of this dispute over the body politic is the body of female chastity itself.

From this more detailed review of the fiction, *A Lover's Complaint* can be seen to present a complexly nuanced fiction in which Marlovian and Spenserian characters write and read Ovidian poems and perform Ovidian dramatic roles along the Virgilian path of court and country, epic and pastoral, in a competition between two forms of nationhood: Ovidian liberty and Virgilian monarchy. While *A Lover's Complaint* may not be either an allegory of art or a biography of the artist, it does represent a literary collision important to early modern England and a professional dilemma at the heart of Shakespeare's own professional career.

ART OF CRAFT

Indeed, *A Lover's Complaint* tells a disturbing, tragic story of a male and a female who enter a cultural economy in which poetry and theatre conjoin to "daff" the era's most treasured ideal: the "white stole of chastity." In the maid's haunting narration:

> "For lo his passion, but an art of craft,
> Even there resolv'd my reason into tears,
> There my white stole of chastity I daff'd,
> Shook off my sober guards and civil fears;
> Appear to him as he to me appears,
> All melting, though our drops this diff'rence bore:
> His poison'd me, and mine did him restore."
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 295–301)

Through the young man's performance of "passion," his "art of craft," the young maid "melt[s]" into sympathy for and with the suffering youth. The

[14] Muir observes, "The largest group of images . . . is taken from war, and these express the battle between the sexes" ("'Complaint,'" 164).

moment of sympathy reduces the maid's physical frame to "tears," shakes off her protective rational armor – "sober guards and civil fears" – creates the psychological "Appear[ance]" of mutuality, and leads swiftly to a moment of undressing, the final consequence of which is an exchange of (coital) "drops" – an exchange that, as Sonnet 129 more famously laments, swiftly separates the sexes, in all their "diff'rence": "His poison'd me, and mine did him restore." As if in parody of Cordelia with "holy water" in her "heavenly eyes" (*King Lear*, 4. 3. 30), the maid has become a martyr to the male cause. In this astonishing depiction of the loss of female virginity, Shakespeare apprises himself, and certainly his reader, of what is finally at stake in the use and abuse of the twin arts he himself produces – especially in his role as the heir of Spenser and Marlowe. Not surprisingly, then, the "passion" that is an art of craft has both poetic and theatrical associations, as Burrow's gloss indicates; "emotion; but also 'A poem, literary composition, or passage marked by deep or strong emotion; a passionate speech or outburst' (*OED*, 6d), with potentially a theatrical edge to it, as when in *Dream*, 5. 1. 310 Theseus says of Flute playing Thisbe, 'Here she comes, and her passion ends the play'" (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 715).

That *A Lover's Complaint* is about the discourse of poetry and theatre is clear from the outset, where poetry appears in the opening stanza, in more ways than one:

> From off a hill whose concave womb reworded
> A plaintful story from a sist'ring vale,
> My spirits t' attend this double voice accorded,
> And down I laid to list the sad-tun'd tale,
> Ere long espied a fickle maid full pale
> Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain,
> Storming her world with sorrow's wind and rain.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 1–7)

Not merely does the maid tear "papers" that likely include "deep-brain'd sonnets," and not merely does the narrator lie down to hear her "sad-tun'd tale," but also the landscape in which these literary events occur is humanized as a type of poet – a female poet. Thus a "hill" (or displaced *mons veneris*) bears a "concave womb" that *reworks* a "plaintful story" from the "sist'ring vale." Like Lavinia in Virgil's imperial epic, the *Aeneid*, or Shakespeare's own Ovidian tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, the female is identified with the land. She sings her sad-tuned tale, and the hills echo it harmoniously, making the tempest of her private grief available to a listening audience. As Kerrigan and others note, echo is an ancient trope of poetic fame, and whether the

author of the tale wishes it or not, we are witnessing here a process of poetic succession and thus of poetic immortality, the precise import of which we cannot sort out here at the beginning (we shall return to it at the end). What we can say now is that the opening stanza invites us to read into the gender mythos a literary representation about the author and his (or her) art.[15]

While listening to the maid's tale, the narrator also sees her tearing "papers," breaking "rings," and throwing them into the river, in a concerted effort to consign them to oblivion:

> Of folded schedules had she many a one,
> Which she perus'd, sigh'd, tore, and gave the flood,
> Crack'd many a ring of posied gold and bone,
> Bidding them find their sepulchers in mud.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 43–46)

Here we see more fully a process of literary reception: from initial reading, to subjective or internal response, to physical violence of the papers' material form, to their final burial in the watery earth. While Burrow is right to emphasize the closed contents of the papers – indeed, they are "seal'd to curious secrecy" (49) – we are nonetheless privy to their effect on the intended reader: "in top of rage the lines she rents, / Big discontent so breaking their contents" (55–56). Whatever the specific "contents" of these documents, they produce a Senecan "rage" in the female who inherits them. Recalling Lucrece with the Trojan painting of Sinon in the 1594 narrative poem, the maid here seeks revenge on the author by attacking his artifact. This time the artifact is poetry itself.

OF TIME AND THE RIVER

To grasp this representation more fully, we might glance briefly at one story that resembles Shakespeare's: Ariosto's story of Father Time, his literary plaques, and the river Lethe in the *Orlando Furioso*. In canto 35, Ariosto narrates how St. John helps Astolpho recover Orlando's lost wits on the moon, pausing to insert his most famous verse treatise on the art of poetry and its *telos*. The two travelers see an old man filling his lap with a "precious load of plaques" and throwing them "in the stream, named Lethe" (11), yet "Out of a hundred thousand thus obscured / Beneath the silt, scarce one, he saw, endured" (12). Suddenly, the travelers see a "flock of

[15] Cf. Kerrigan, *Motives*, 43; D. Kay, *Shakespeare*, 148; Sharon-Zisser, "Similies," 196.

vultures" and other birds of prey swoop down and bear away "These shining tokens of renown" (13); however, "when such birds attempt to soar on high, / They lack the stamina to bear the weight, / And of the names they choose, howe'er they try, / Oblivion in Lethe is their fate" (14). Ariosto contrasts these birds with "Two silver swans" that "can sing the praises of the great: / . . . in their mouths fame is secure" (14: 7–8). Accordingly, the travelers witness the swans bearing certain plaques to "a noble temple crowned . . . / Sacred it is to immortality," and presided over by a "fair nymph": "These plaques the nymph so consecrates and tends / That their renown will shine for evermore / In poetry and legendary lore" (35. 15–16). Soon St. John interprets the allegorical sight to the wondering knight: the old man is Father Time; the river, Lethe; the plaques the man seeks to throw into the river and the birds of preys' futile effort to recover them, the temporal process of poetic oblivion; the swans who succeed in carrying the plaques to the temple of the nymph, the great poets who can render their poems immortal in the Temple of Lady Fame.[16]

We need not determine whether Shakespeare knew this story or had it in mind in order to see its significance for the opening action of *A Lover's Complaint*: like Father Time with the plaques in the River Lethe, the maid is reversing the process of poetic fame by burying the documents in the "sepulchers of mud." In an astonishing way, the *telos* of these "deep-brain'd sonnets" *reverses* the fiction of fame so renowned in Shakespeare's Sonnets themselves. The subjectivity of the author dooms his documents unwittingly, precisely because he has misused them. Only as the story unfolds do we understand what has compelled the maid to become involved in this complex process of literary entombment.[17] If, as critics believe, Shakespeare's river is the Thames, the great English symbol of poetic fame, we may witness here more than simple imitation of the opening of Spenser's *Prothalamion* (see Jackson, "Echoes"); we may find instead a concerted critique of Spenser's (pastoral) claims to poetic immortality.[18] Here, then, we can discover Shakespeare's historic revision of the Spenserian erotic project: whereas the New Poet had foregrounded the masculine representation of virgin consciousness, turning this fascination into a new genre, the betrothal

[16] On this episode, see Cheney, *Flight*, 123–24, 276n17.

[17] As such, the maid appears to reverse the project of Renaissance humanism itself, as excavated by Greene in *The Light of Troy*: "The Renaissance . . . chose to open a polemic against the Dark Ages. The ubiquitous imagery of disinterment, resurrection, and renascence needed a death and burial to justify itself" (3). See also 30–31, 92–93, and esp. 220–41: "At the core of humanism lies this instinct to reach out into chaos, oblivion, mystery, the alien, the subterranean, the dead, even the demonic, to reach out and in the act of reaching out already to be reviving and restoring" (235).

[18] On the river in *A Lover's Complaint* as the Thames, see D. Kay, *Shakespeare*, 149. On *Prothalamion*, see Cheney, *Flight*, 225–45; Cheney and Prescott, "Teaching."

poem (Cheney and Prescott, "Teaching"), Shakespeare takes us into the "territory of sexual betrayal," representing the feminine consciousness of betrayed virginity.

Shakespeare's Ovidian critique of pastoral in general – and of Spenserian pastoral in particular – is evident in his use of the "maund" or basket holding the "deep-brain'd sonnets." In the opening to *Prothalamion*, Spenser presents himself leaving "Princes Court" in a state of "discontent" after "long fruitlesse stay" (6–7) and walking down to the Thames, where he espies a vision: "A Flocke of Nymphes" with "greenish locks" gather "flowers," each to fill "a little wicker basket," in order to "decke their Bridegromes posies" (20–34). Usually, editors gloss the baskets with Ovid's *Fasti* – either 4. 435 on the baskets Proserpina's girls use for gathering flowers before her abduction or *Fasti* 5. 217–18 on the similar baskets the Hours use for flower-gathering.[19] No doubt Shakespeare's basket has these Ovidian baskets as its intertexts, but for a basket literally associated with the art of poetry and the genre of pastoral we probably need to recall the most famous basket of all: that which Virgil twines in the concluding lines of his *Eclogues*: "These strains, Muses divine, it will be enough for your poet to have sung, while he sits idle and twines a basket of slender hibiscus. These ye shall make of highest worth in Gallus' eyes" (10. 70–72). Effectively, Shakespeare's country maid empties out the baskets of Virgil, Ovid, and Spenser, discarding their pastoral contents in the (Ariostan) river of oblivion.

CRAFT OF WILL

As in Ariosto, so in Shakespeare an old man appears, but Shakespeare's interest is not in the discarded documents so much as in the maid herself, whose "suffering ecstasy" the reverend man seeks to "assuage," for "'Tis promis'd in the charity of age" (69–70). The reverend man convinces the maid to tell him her story, and it is here that we learn of the young man's use of theatre, as she herself narrates:

> Small show of man was yet upon his chin,
> His phoenix down began but to appear
> Like unshorn velvet on that termless skin,
> Whose bare outbragg'd the web it seem'd to wear;
> Yet showed his visage by that cost more dear,
> And nice affections wavering stood in doubt
> If best were as it was, or best without.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 92–98)

[19] McCabe cites *Fasti* 4. 435 (ed., 730); Brooks-Davies, *Fasti* 5. 217–18 (ed., 392).

From the outset, the maid theatricalizes the youth's body in terms of the actor's falsifying costume.[20] Introducing a subtle strand of stage discourse that she will consolidate later in the phrase "tragic shows," she imagines the emergence of manliness on the youth's face as itself a "Small show of man," his budding beard a "web" that he has put on as a kind of "visage" – or mask – simply to "wear" for the sake of appearance (see Roe, ed., *Poems*, 269). Yet it is precisely such a "show" that affects the maid, since he appears "by that cost more dear" – the word "cost," as J. W. Mackail long ago observed, picking up the costume imagery (see J. Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 405), punning on the French word "*coste, côte* = 'coat'" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 269). Significantly, the young man's physiognomial theatre of the chin affects his audience's "nice affections," creating "wavering" and "doubt" whether "his *visage* was better with its *cost* . . . or better without" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 406).

The young man's physiognomial theatre is particularly effective, though, because it extends to a more internalized, materialized locale within his body:

> So on the tip of his subduing tongue
> All kind of arguments and question deep,
> All replication prompt and reason strong,
> For his advantage still did wake and sleep.
> To make the weeper laugh, the laugher weep,
> He had the dialect and different skill,
> Catching all passions in his craft of will.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 120–26)

Craft of will: the phrase is indeed a catching one. According to John Roe, it is "a dense phrase meaning 'shrewd application of appetite'" (*Poems*, 271). Supplying more detail, Kerrigan observes,

> Craft simultaneously suggests the young man's accomplishment in general (as in "the shoemaker's *craft*") and his "skilful exercise" of this ("the shoe was a work of *craft*"). As so often in Shakespeare, *will* operates across a range of senses from "purpose, powerful expression of volition" on the one hand to "desire" in the sense of "affective emotion, lust" on the other. Enriched still further by its collocation with the ambiguous phrase *Catching all passions, craft of will* compromises several shades of significance, from "cunning lust" to the "crafting of language into persuasion" and "verbal power" or "discourse, the articulation of volition." (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 408–09)

[20] See Muir, "'Complaint'": "clothing imagery" expresses the "underlying theme . . . the difficulty of distinguishing between appearance and reality" ("*A Lover's Complaint*," 164).

The maid's phrase *craft of will* is a perfect one for describing the young man's use of both poetry and theatre to seduce her. It anticipates the word "craft" in "an art of craft" (already discussed). *Art of craft, craft of will*: these phrases echo throughout the maid's story, drawing attention to the young man's use of a deceptive art that both originates in the will and targets it:

> What with his art in youth and youth in art,
> Threw my affections in his charmed power,
> Reserv'd the stalk and gave him all my flower.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 145–47)

The word "charmed" derives from *carmen*, meaning *song*, and during the period magic and witchcraft are indeed a recurrent metaphor – not simply a cultural practice – for the literary arts (see Cheney and Klemp, "Spenser's Dance"). As the "flower" reference further suggests, the young man's magic art does double duty as a form of pastoral gardening – an idea soon amplified:

> For further I could say this man's untrue,
> And knew the patterns of his foul beguiling,
> Heard where his plants in others' orchards grew,
> Saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling,
> Knew vows were ever brokers to defiling,
> Thought characters and words merely but art,
> And bastards of his foul adulterate heart.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 169–75)

The conceit of the orchard as the female womb is conventional, but it may glance at the climactic moment in Marlowe's Ovidian narrative poem: "Leander now, like Theban Hercules, / Entered the orchard of th' Hesperides, / Whose fruit none rightly can describe but he / That pulls or shakes it from the golden tree" (2. 297–300). Spenser had foregrounded virgin consciousness, while here Marlowe poignantly maps the violent consensual loss of female virginity, yet Shakespeare overgoes both by charting the masculine betrayal of the female. His young man's gardening skills turn out to be prodigious, and what this stanza carefully traces is a process of reception for his "art" – a process that moves ever inward toward the fruit of subjective revelation: she "Heard . . . Saw . . . Knew . . . Thought." And what she finally realizes is indeed haunting: that "characters and words" are "merely but art," the ultimate breakers of (marital) faith, the illegitimate children of his "foul adulterate heart."

Among readers, George Steevens was the first to catch the authorial significance of "craft for will" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 345), but more

recently Ilona Bell has discovered Will Shakespeare making a "punning allusion to [his] . . . own 'craft of will'" (465). This idea encourages us to see Shakespeare's portrait of the maid – a female who, on the one hand, has lost her chastity through Marlovian subjection to Ovidian poetry and theatre, and, on the other, is receiving an ambiguously reverend courtesy from a Spenserian pastoral-epicist – as a kind of authorial stamp grimly afflicted with a literary crisis. Such an authorial portrait is available today through Wendy Wall's superb work on Elizabethan authors, from Gascoigne and Spenser to Daniel and Shakespeare himself, all of whom precisely use the genre of the female complaint to "cross-dress" their authorial voices, literally "taking on the voice of a fallen woman" (*Imprint*, 260): "The female respondent becomes one of the doubles that the writer uses . . . to introduce his own authority through masquerade. The fallen woman's critique becomes a central part of the architecture of poetic authority, as it establishes an acceptable idiom through which the new poet can be presented and formally contained" (260).[21] Wall briefly suggests that in *A Lover's Complaint* "Petrarchan poet and female auditor are associated and disassociated as complaining publishers. And again this complaint adds a layer of voices to the sonnet book that renders the work more plural and multivocal" (259).

THE COMPOSITOR'S EYE

To this line of thought, we can add a corresponding discourse about the theatre, as the cross-dressed "Petrarchan poet" finds him/herself subjected to a penetrating androgynous theatrical show. Interestingly enough, the primary textual crux of *A Lover's Complaint* occurs over just this discourse, as the compositor for the 1609 quarto repeated one of Shakespeare's theatrical terms; in her cross-dressed voice, the maid repeats the young courtier's dramatic voice to the reverend man:

> But, O my sweet, what labor is't to leave
> The thing we have not, mast'ring what not strives,
> *Playing* the place which did no form receive,
> *Playing* patient sports in unconstrained gyves?
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 239–42; emphasis added)

[21] Wall also relates this authorial strategy to the Virgilian idea of a literary career, mapped onto the transition from a manuscript to a print culture (*Imprint*, 230). D. Kay says of the maid's straw hat and river-site complaint: "As the Globe's wooden structure took shape, with 'upon her head a platted hive of straw' (8), there could have been no better place in England than the 'weeping margent' of the Thames from which to contemplate the broad shapes of history and meditate on the relationship between the gilded monuments of princes and the powerful rhymes of poets" (*Shakespeare*, 149).

In that repetition of "Playing" in the two initial line positions, all editors see a compositorial slip. Back in the eighteenth century, Malone observed, "the compositor's eye after he had printed the former line, I suppose glanced again upon it, and caught the first word of it instead of the first word of the line [242] he was then composing" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 357). Yet we might pause here a bit longer than conventional bibliography has done, to discern how the poem's most famous textual crux fixes and elongates the theatrical discourse during an extremely intense poetic moment, as if the compositor himself were caught in an authorial craft of will. Shakespeare's original readers would no doubt have read – and most likely breezed through – the doubleness of "Playing." Significantly, as Malone also noted, Shakespeare's theatrical trope imitates Spenser's versification of theatre in *The Faerie Queene*: "Playing their sportes, that joyd her to behold" (1. 10. 31; see also 5. 1. 6; quoted in Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 358). The *playing* here is "double" – not just textually but intertextually – and it presents the compositor's slip as a testament to the Craft of Will.

THE THEOLOGY OF EPIC THEATRE

At the end of the poem, the theatrical discourse intensifies. In fact, each of the last four stanzas contains a theatrical term or image. In addition to "tragic shows" in the fourth to last stanza, in the third to last we see a fusion of tragedy and epic, theatre and poetry:

> That not a heart which in his level came
> Could scape the hail of his all-hurting aim,
> Showing fair nature is both kind and tame;
> And veil'd in them did win whom he would maim.
> Against the thing he sought he would exclaim:
> When he most burnt in heart-wish'd luxury,
> He preach'd pure maid, and prais'd cold chastity.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 309–15)

The presence of theatrical imagery in this stanza is important, because the maid lucidly articulates what readers find so intriguing and original about the young man's theatre of seduction: "Against the thing he sought he would exclaim."[22] In an image that picks up the confessional or theological

[22] Roe calls the young man's strategy "the most interesting thing in the entire poem" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 69): "firstly, he presents himself as a sinner in need of redemption: secondly, he presents himself as emotionally untouched and therefore chaste, a male virgin, no less; and lastly he presents *her* as a redeemer – not only of himself but of all those wounded hearts who have suffered through him" (70; Roe's emphasis). See D. Kay, *Shakespeare*, 148.

profession from the figure of the "reverend man," the young man *preaches* "pure maid" and praises "cold chastity." In his theologically epic theatre of the hunting marksman, the young man successfully "level[s]" against every "heart" coming within military sight of his "all-hurting aim," successfully staging a "show" in which "a good disposition ('fair nature') is generous and acquiescent" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 281). As Roe points out, the word "veil'd" means "disguised," while the phrase "in them" refers back to the "strange forms" of line 303 that the young man adopts as his disguises (282). Not merely does the youth preach the purity of maidenhood and praise chastity in this "tragic show," but as an actor "veil'd" in his costume he cross-dresses himself by speaking "like a chaste or virginal young girl" (282). Finally, then, the youth's theatre manages to hold a mirror up to the maid's natural character, creating perfect sympathy between feminine subject and masculine object, their androgynous discourse being the tragic point of identification.

The next or penultimate stanza continues the theatrical imagery of disguise and costume but moves it more formally into the theological domain:

> Thus merely with the garment of a Grace
> The naked and concealed fiend he cover'd,
> That th' unexperient gave the tempter place,
> Which like a cherubin above them hover'd.
> Who, young and simple, would not be so lover'd?
> Ay me, I fell, and yet do question make
> What I should do again for such a sake.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 316–22)

Playing the role of actor on the stage of sexual seduction, the young man *covers* the "naked and concealed fiend" with the "garment of a Grace." In this Ovidian theatre, he uses the costume of character to metamorphose from demon to angel. The metaphysical metaphors confuse the boundaries of the Christian cosmos (as in Shakespeare's Marlovian Sonnet 144), so that in the mind of the "unexperient" the "tempter" appears a "cherubin." As the earlier floral imagery anticipates, the maid's simple utterance "I fell" transplants the local loss of virginity into the re-productive site of the Edenic Fall.[23]

[23] Cf. Underwood, *Prolegomena*, 101: "The hovering 'cherubin' finally reminds one of *Doctor Faustus*"; see 102 on "Marlovian resemblances." On the Reformation context of *A Lover's Complaint*, see Kerrigan, *Motives*, 39–41.

The word "Grace" appears several times earlier – six to be precise (79, 114, 119 [twice], 261, 285). In its first appearance, the word pertains to female body space, meaning maiden virginity or the concave womb itself: "I attended / A youthful suit – it was to gain my grace" (78–79). Despite neglect in modern editions, the word "suit" is exquisite; in the context of the poem's theatrical discourse, are we not invited to read the word doubly: not merely as "the request of a youthful suitor" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 436) but also as *the performance of a youthful suitor*, as the theatrical ring in "attended" would seem to confirm? For a young woman to attend a "youthful suit" is thus to audit a theatre of young masculinity; at center stage is a concept that, for Spenser as for Shakespeare, is not merely sexual but theological, as the last word of this stanza, "deified," makes plain: "gain my grace" (see, e.g., Spenser, *Hymne of Beautie*, 27, 277). As in Sonnet 146 famously, Shakespeare economizes the high stakes of salvation with business "terms divine" (11). The young man's theatre is a "Small show of man" oufitted in "youthful suit," economized to purchase the white stole of chastity. As the maid laments, she "attended" this Satanic theatre of dis-grace "too early," even though she would "do [so] again for such a sake."

In the second, third, and fourth uses of *grace*, all of which appear in the same stanza, Shakespeare again dresses the word in theatrical guise, in a remarkable interlacing with the theological:

> But quickly on this side the verdict went:
> His real habitude gave life and grace
> To appertainings and to ornament,
> Accomplish'd in himself, not in his case;
> All aids, themselves made fairer by their place,
> [Came] for additions, yet their purpos'd trim
> Piec'd not his grace but were all grac'd by him.
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 113–19)

While the word *grace* and its cognates appear three times in seven lines, six other terms pertain to clothing, costume, and thus theatrical disguise, as modern annotation confirms. Katherine Duncan-Jones glosses "case" as "container, outward clothing," and "trim" as "adornment, trappings" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 439), while Roe glosses "real habitude" as "regal bearing" and "appertainings" as "appurtenances (trimmings, costume)" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 270). Kerrigan catches "Piec'd" as "patched, mended" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 407). Editors do not gloss "ornament," because it so obviously contributes to this dressing of the young

man in outward garb. Among these terms, however, "habitude" is the most engaging, because it means both inward "character or disposition" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 439) and outward habit or attire. The drift is clear when we recall that such a remarkable portrait of a young man results from the "verdict" of those beholding him. In the young man's theatre, the audience is to judge his character – both his inward and outward person – in order to become complicit in his role as a contradictory figure of grace: "Piec'ed not his grace but were all grac'd by him."[24]

The fifth use of *grace* also includes an intriguing theatrical linkage: "'My parts had pow'r to charm a sacred [nun], / Who disciplin'd, ay, dieted in grace, / Believ'd her eyes'" (260–62). Editors usually miss the pun on "parts," glossing it merely as both "limbs, parts of the body" and "accomplishments, good qualities" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 418), but Duncan-Jones prepares us to see a theatrical pun: "talents, attractions" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 448). One of the youth's "talents" *is* his "attraction": his ability to perform a "part," to put his body parts and his accomplishments to play on the maid's interiority, working here as a form of magic, with "pow're to charm" even "a sacred nun." This second young woman is not merely institutionally protected by the sanctity of the holy cloister, but she is morally trained ("disciplin'd") and physiologically regulated ("dieted") in the order of divine "grace." Here the work of Michael C. Schoenfeldt on the early modern regime of self-regulation amplifies the absolute danger of the young man's power to seduce both the nun and the maid (*Bodies*). For, unlike Spenser in the Castle of Alma in Book 2 of *The Faerie Queene*, or Shakespeare himself in Sonnet 94 ("They that have pow'r to hurt"), in *A Lover's Complaint* only men have access to self-regulation, and they use it to imperil the "physiology and inwardness" of their tragic victims – those women who have regulated themselves successfully, whether in the cloister or in the country.[25]

The youth's inset story, of a nun who believed in God's grace but then haplessly sold it for the sexual grace of a young courtier, is among the most stunning parts of the poem. Like *Hero and Leander*, the story calls into question the entire project of Christian humanism, including that in Spenser's Legend of Chastity, the dream of which is to fulfill the "generall end" of The *Faerie Queene*: "to fashion a gentleman or noble

[24] On the theatre and the "livery guilds" in ways that inform *A Lover's Complaint*, see Stallybrass, "Worn."

[25] As Kerrigan adds, the wording here "was often applied to those who had, sometimes fiercely, mortified the flesh" (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 419).

person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (*Letter to Ralegh*). Specifically, Shakespeare's young man appears to be modeled not only on the Marlovian author but on Spenser's Paridell in Book 3, who similarly specializes in the Ovidian art of love, as the famous imitation of the spilt wine at *Faerie Queene*, 3. 9. 30 – from *Amores*, 2. 5. 17–18 and *Heroides* 17. 75–90 – makes patently clear (see Hamilton, ed., *The Fairie Queene*, 388; Maclean and Prescott, eds., *Spenser's Poetry*, 354). A descendent of Paris of Troy fame, Paridell woos the ominously named Hellenore, who is no nun:

> when apart (if ever her apart)
> He found, then his false engins fast he plyde,
> And all the sleights unbosomd in his hart;
> He sighed, he sobd, he swownd, he perdy dyde,
> And cast himselfe onground her fast besyde:
> Tho when againe he him bethought to live,
> He wept, and wayld, and false laments belyde,
> Saying, but if she Mercie would him give
> That he mote algates dye, yet did his death forgive.
> (*Faerie Queene*, 3. 10. 7)

Paridell's theatrical strategy of seduction does not merely anticipate that of Shakespeare's young man; so does the literary art of Spenser's "learned lover" (*Fairie Queene*, 3. 10. 6): "And otherwhiles with . . . / . . . pleasing toyes he would her entertaine, / Now singing sweetly, to surprise her sprights, / Now making layes of love and lovers paine, / Bransles, Ballads, virelayes, and verses vaine" (3. 10. 8). If here Paridell functions as a dangerous Ovidian (and Petrarchan) poet of courtly love, earlier he functions as a false Virgilian epic poet when he narrates the story of the fall of Troy to Britomart (3. 9. 33–37) – not just as Aeneas did in Virgil's *Aeneid* but more importantly as Ovid attenuated Virgilian epic in the *Metamorphoses*. Spenser overgoes both classical epicists by having his learned lover contain the epic story in five nine-line stanzas. Just as Spenser makes Paridell falsify his own Virgilian and Ovidian art – "Fashioning worlds of fancies evermore / In her fraile wit" (3. 9. 52) – so Shakespeare makes his young man falsify his own Ovidian art of poetry and theatre.

The young man's story also recalls that of Tarquin in *The Rape of Lucrece*, when Shakespeare writes that "hot burning will" has the power to *freeze* "conscience" (247). In the case of the nun, sexual love for the young courtier blinds her to God's grace: "Religious love put out religion's eye" (250). Deftly, Shakespeare suggests how sexual desire evaporates Christian

faith. This is a haunting idea, and must have been especially so to readers during the Reformation. In the context of Spenser's poetry of grace, the haunting acquires a literary force: Christian grace is subject to (Marlovian) poetry and theatre; human art is more powerful than the grace of God.[26]

Among Shakespeare's seven uses of the word *grace*, the last is the only one not cohabiting with theatricality; it does, however, occur at a climactic point in the maid's narration, when the youth breaks into tears, the very moment when speech gives way to emotion, staged in terms of chivalric epic: "This said, his wat'ry eyes he did dismount, / Whose sights till then were levell'd on my face . . . / O how the channel to the stream gave grace!" (281–85). His tears of grace prove to be the final seduction in the maid's fall, leading to the crucial stanza declaring his "passion" to be "but an art of craft."

If *A Lover's Complaint* begins with poetry, it ends with theatre:

> O, that infected moisture of his eye,
> O, that false fire which in his cheek so glowed,
> O, that forc'd thunder from his heart did fly,
> O, that sad breath his spungy lungs bestowed,
> O, all that borrowed motion seeming owed,
> Would yet again betray the fore-betray'd,
> And new pervert a reconciled maid!
>
> (*A Lover's Complaint*, 323–29)

Roe glosses "borrowed motion" in line 5 above as "imitated or feigned show of feeling," but adds, "A 'motion' was a puppet-show or mime, as in WT 4. 3. 96–7" (Roe, ed., *Poems*, 282). The reference to *The Winter's Tale* points to a neglected link between *A Lover's Complaint* and Shakespeare's late plays: the young man joins one of Shakespeare's greatest poet-playwright figures, Autolycus, who reports that his art is able to "compass . . . a motion of the Prodigal Son." As we shall see further in the Epilogue, the trickster joins a whole host of Shakespearean dramatic characters in putting poetry and theatre to use, whether like Edgar for benevolent purposes or like Iago for that of pure malevolence. Rhetorically, the theatrical phrase "borrowed motion" occurs as the center of the poem's final stanza, functioning as both the summarizing idea for the incredible initial anaphora of lines 1–4 – the "succession of disjointed exclamations" that becomes a "collective rhetoric which betrays the maid even as she re-invokes it in her attempt at self-purgation" (Duncan-Jones, ed., *Sonnets*, 452) – and

[26] For a recent book-length study of Spenser's "biblical poetics," see Kaske.

the closing idea in lines 6–7 that haunt's the poem's final utterance: the youth's theatre is so *real* that the maid would entertain it again if she could.

Perhaps critical attention to the word "reconciled" has interfered with our interest in the theatrical form of the poem's conclusion. Critics rightly understand the theological and doctrinal significance of the larger utterance (Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets*, 425). Kerrigan nicely compares the structural frame with that of both Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* and Spenser's *Ruines of Time*, wherein (especially in the latter) "the poet's reaction provides a measure for our own," noting that "Shakespeare, characteristically, unsettles our sense of the ending by omitting both the *maid*'s departure and the poet's re-emergence" (425; Kerrigan's emphasis). Kerrigan's final comment leads us to our own "dramatic" conclusion: "In *A Lovers Complaint*, the opening cannot close the text; line 5 remains intractable; and the heroine grows beyond the conventions which enclose her, developing an intense and human inconsistency which might be called *dramatic*. If the poem starts in the territory of Spenser and Daniel, it ends, like the problem plays, with the incorrigibility of passion" (425; emphasis added). Let us take Kerrigan – and Shakespeare – at his word.

In their terms, *A Lover's Complaint* literally migrates from the "territory" of Spenserian poetry to the dramatic landscape of Shakespeare's own problem plays, from the poetic "papers" of the opening stanza to the "borrowed motion" of the last: effectively, from "deep-brained sonnets" to "tragic shows." What is especially disturbing – or heroic – about the conclusion to *A Lover's Complaint* is the way it uses poetry to challenge one of the dominant projects of Shakespeare's plays – from *Titus Andronicus* to *The Tempest*: we become fully human only through compassion for the other. ". . . if you now behold them," Ariel says to Prospero of the inhabitants shipwrecked on the island, "your affections / Would become tender"; and Prospero agrees: "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5. 1. 18–19, 27–28). Perhaps the fickle maid knows about Shakespearean poetry and theatre because she has become not merely their greatest auditor but also their purest author.

THE SISTERING VALE

The ending of *A Lover's Complaint* remains the most baffling denouement in the canon. We are baffled because Shakespeare does not complete the narrative with which he began. We know that both the narrator and the reverend man have listened to the maid's story, and we know that the

reverend man has wanted to hear the story in order to offer "charity." We expect some narrative resolution, but we do not receive it.[27]

Yet critics remain divided over just how to interpret this baffling event. Kerrigan argues that "Shakespeare refuses to disentangle self-justification . . . from the intractable problem of honesty": "To be true to her experience (seeking spiritual 'reconciliation'), the 'fickle maid' must recoil into a rapt subjectivity which excludes us . . . In place of articulate 'example', Shakespeare writes towards perplexity" (*Motives*, 50). By contrast, Shirley Sharon-Zisser believes that Shakespeare writes toward fulfillment, even (feminine) "orgasm," as the maid voices her complaint against the young man – and to the reverend man – in order to experience the "*jouissance*" of psychological "transference" – a process that "transforms the poem as a whole from 'complaint' to an epithalamium" ("Similies," 218–19).

While acknowledging the difficulty here, we might observe how effectively Shakespeare's narrative technique manages to transfer the landscape of the poem to the mindscape of the reader: it is we who read the story and are left with it; it is not just the maid who is left in a state of "rapt subjectivity" – and it does not exclude us. We, too, have overheard the Shakespearean maid's story about the abuse of poetry and theatre as active agents in the losing of chastity. The author makes her story available to us; it has applicability to our experience. Indeed, of all the works in the Shakespeare canon, *A Lover's Complaint* is singular for its power to perform cultural work, today as well as yesterday: in living through the maid's tragic choice – to daft her white stole of chastity in order to grace masculine charisma – male and female reader alike discover the strongest grounds and motives to protect their own chastity.

For his part, Shakespeare's combined engagement with the works of Spenser and Marlowe in a narrative poem late in his career helps us to redraw our profile of the world's most famed man of the theatre. In *A Lover's Complaint*, Shakespeare's simultaneous rivalry with Spenser and Marlowe as late as 1609, together with his exceptional intertwining of a discourse of theatre with a discourse of poetry, compels us to see Shakespeare as more than a Marlovian man of the theatre or simply an immature rival of Spenser. Within just a few years of his retirement, he is working vigorously to reconcile the Virgilian poetry of Spenser with the Ovidian poetry and theatre of Marlowe, and to fictionalize a culture besieged by these twin

[27] As Kerrigan reminds us, the complaint tradition sets up the expectation that we will receive a gifted lesson for having endured so much woe. Yet no such gift is forthcoming (*Motives*, 50). Lukas Erne reminds me that the baffling denouement is "mirrored . . . in the ending of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which has an induction but does not have a frame" (personal communication, 9 May 2003).

literary powers. It is as if our greatest English poet-playwright were making one final plea for court and country to use both "sonnet" and "show" with care. Above all, he appears to be making that plea to himself.

Through the criticism of Kerrigan and Duncan-Jones in particular, readers today have come to see Shakespeare's 1609 volume of sonnet sequence and narrative poem as part of a larger literary practice, best known through volumes by Daniel and Spenser. What criticism has not registered, however, are two follow-up points. The first is that both Daniel and Spenser published their volumes as distinct points along the continuum of their "laureate" careers. Daniel understood *Delia* and *Rosamond* as preparation for his higher flight to national epic, while Spenser understood *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion* as a regenerative bridge between pastoral and epic.[28] Second, Shakespeare may have followed Daniel and Spenser in understanding his 1609 volume to be more than simply an isolated publication gotten up during yet another closing of the theatres; it, too, could be an announcement for a distinct phase of a career – a late version of the kind of announcements he had made in his prose dedications to *Venus* and *Lucrece* – as when (most famously) he promises Southampton that after his "idle houres" spent in writing *Venus* he will go on to pen "some graver labour" (*Riverside*, 1799).[29] Unlike both Daniel and Spenser, however, Shakespeare did not bequeath an epic in verse, or, like Jonson, an (unfulfilled) plan to write one.[30] Nonetheless, like Marlowe in *Hero and Leander* and *Lucan's First Book*, Shakespeare did bequeath an "Ovidian" pre-figuration for such a national art – one that subsequent ages have been content to locate elsewhere in his canon.

Yet *A Lover's Complaint* is important in the Shakespeare canon because it maps out a sad, complex model of national literary production. In this model, Marlowe's Ovidian, counter-national art "takes" chastity away and "leaves" the victim to complain like a lover, while Spenser's national art hypocritically fails to provide the advertised counsel and consolation. Shakespeare's own art, a formal fusion of the two, becomes complicit in the shame and sham of psychic female "reconciliation." To read through *A Lover's Complaint* is to witness the failure of Elizabethan masculine literature's greatest art to achieve its intended cultural goal: the theological protection of the "concave womb" within the "sist'ring vale."

[28] On Daniel's volume in his laureate career, see his dedicatory poem to Mary Sidney prefacing his *Works* (chapter 2). On Spenser's 1595 marriage volume, see Cheney, *Flight*, 149–94.

[29] Critics follow Heminge and Condel in speculating that Shakespeare had plans for an edition of his plays: Wells, "Foreword," v; Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle*, 264; Erne, *Literary Dramatist*, 109–13. We might further speculate that such an edition would have included the poems, like Jonson's *Works*.

[30] On Jonson's plan to write "an epic poem entitled *Herologia*, of the worthies of his country," see "Conversations with William Drummond" (*Ben Jonson: Poems*, ed. Parfitt, 461).

And yet, as often in Shakespearean tragedy, perhaps we find ourselves wondering at the marvel created – wondering whether the river with which the poem opens is not simply Ariosto's Lethe but Spenser's Thames, English literature's great river not of oblivion but of immortality: "Sweete Themmes runne softly, till I end my Song" (*Prothalamion*, 18). As the sustained praise for *A Lover's Complaint* between Malone and Kerrigan suggests, within the poet's opaque fiction of artistic failure, we may witness a supreme art of unperverted reconciliation.

Contents

List of illustrations *page* ix
Acknowledgements xi
Note on texts xiv

Proem Shakespeare's "Plaies and Poems" 1

PART ONE THE IMPRINT OF SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP
Prelude: Shakespeare, Cervantes, Petrarch 13

1 The sixteenth-century poet-playwright 17

2 Francis Meres, the Ovidian poet-playwright, and Shakespeare criticism 49

PART TWO 1593–1594: THE PRINT AUTHOR PRESENTS HIMSELF
Play scene: "Two Gentlemen" to "Richard III" 75

3 Authorship and acting: plotting *Venus and Adonis* along the Virgilian path 81

4 Publishing the show: *The Rape of Lucrece* as Lucanian counter-epic of empire 108

PART THREE 1599–1601: THE AUTHOR BROUGHT INTO PRINT
Play scene: "Love's Labor's Lost" to "Troilus and Cressida" 143

5 "Tales . . . coined": "W. Shakespeare" in Jaggard's *The Passionate Pilgrim* 151

6 "Threne" and "Scene": the author's relics of immortality in "The Phoenix and Turtle" 173

PART FOUR 1609: IMPRINTING THE QUESTION OF AUTHORSHIP
Play scene: "Measure for Measure" to "Coriolanus" 199

7 "O, let my books be . . . dumb presagers": poetry and theatre in the Sonnets 207

8 "Deep-brain'd sonnets" and "tragic shows": Shakespeare's late Ovidian art in *A Lover's Complaint* 239

Epilogue: Ariel and Autolycus: Shakespeare's counter-laureate authorship 267

Works cited 284
Index 309