EVANDER’S MOTHER: GENDER, ANTIQUITY, AND AUTHORSHIP IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by

BRIAN JOHN PIETRAS

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School – New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Jacqueline T. Miller

And approved by

________________________
________________________
________________________
________________________

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2016
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Evander’s Mother: Gender, Antiquity, and Authorship in Early Modern England

By BRIAN JOHN PIETRAS

Dissertation Director:
Jacqueline T. Miller

This dissertation traces how the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient women writers led to the emergence of new theories and practices of English vernacular authorship. In the sixteenth century, Greco-Roman women writers became famous for writings that were largely fragmentary, of dubious origin, or entirely lost. Indeed, a number of these purported female authors—such as Carmentis, the mother of Evander in the Aeneid—were purely legendary. My dissertation argues, however, that this lack of surviving texts was precisely what made ancient women so useful to early moderns. Vested with the prestige of classical antiquity but untethered from any concrete body of writing, ancient female authors functioned as what I call a “canon without a corpus” in Renaissance England. The first three chapters of Evander’s Mother show how sixteenth-century male writers appropriated figures from this now-forgotten female canon to decisively reshape inherited models of authorship: how Thomas Elyot employed the rebellious historian Zenobia to defy the humanist emphasis on classical imitation; how John Donne and John Fletcher experimented with non-Petrarchan forms of love lyric through fantasies of Sappho; and how William Shakespeare and Edmund Spenser reworked the role of the divinely inspired poet by evoking legendary female prophets known as the sibyls. The fourth chapter examines how Mary Wroth drew on the first-century historian Pamphila to
expose the long history of textual loss that made such appropriations possible. Finally, the epilogue explores how, by the late seventeenth century, ancient female authors shifted from serving as figures for humanist-trained male writers to providing a history for English women writers.

In charting this shift, my dissertation historicizes the very concept of “women’s writing” as a distinct field. At the same time, however, *Evander’s Mother* demonstrates that, prior to the seventeenth century, authorship was theorized along much less strictly gendered lines. While scholars often argue that the “birth of the author” entailed a constitutive repudiation of women and femininity, my dissertation reveals that strategies of cross-gendered (and cross-temporal) identification were crucial to the development of vernacular models of authorship. Moreover, in recovering the importance of England’s canon without a corpus, my dissertation both employs historicist methods of literary study and critiques them—demonstrating that early modern studies requires a historicism attuned to the oddly generative nature of textual loss and fragmentation. This more nuanced model of historicism, *Evander’s Mother* shows, could powerfully reshape our understandings of gender, antiquity, and authorship in Renaissance England.
Dedication

For my grandparents
Acknowledgements

As all students of Renaissance romance know, the English word “error” derives from the Latin *errare*, to wander. Oddly, perhaps, I took a certain amount of comfort in this etymology as I wrote my dissertation, hoping that my wanderings through old books would eventually produce something worthwhile. If they have, it is largely due to the help and encouragement of my friends, family, and teachers.

My interest in scholarly work began during my undergraduate years, and I want to thank the many mentors who first fed my curiosity and modeled what the life of the mind might look like: first at Canisius (Amy Wolf, Joseph Grossi, and Judith Dompkowski) and then at Bennington (Sonia Pérez Villanueva, Jonathan Pitcher, Brad Verter, Becky Godwin, and Marguerite Feitlowitz). The wonderful friends I made during those years deserve thanks, as well—including Marti Verso, Keith Eyrich, Russell Melia, Esther McPhee, Luna Galassini, Audrey Shulman, and the legendary Sarah McAbee. (Chrissy Osmulski, I wish so much you could have been here to see me finish; we miss you every day.)

Rutgers has been an incredible place to pursue graduate study, and for years my friends and colleagues have made me a smarter scholar and a better person. Many thanks are due to Anne Terrill, Tasia Milton, and April Graham (the MGC!); precious Michael Monescalchi and Amy Cooper; Joseph Bowling and Kristina Huang; Alex Mazzaferro and Kelly Sullivan; and Erin Kelly, Stephanie Hunt, Mimi Winick, Becca Klaver, Andrew Carlson, Chris Kempf, and Alex Duym. My final year or so of dissertation writing was considerably enlivened by the marvelous appearance of Scott Harris, Emily Banta, Maria Vreck, Jenny Lalli, Alex Leslie, Nani Durnan, and Ariel Martino. I’ve also
benefited from the mentorship of several older students in the program (many of whom are now professors!), including Sarah Balkin, Josh Gang, Debapriya Sarkar, Kat Williams, Amanda Kotch, Naomi Levine, Greg Ellerman, Manuel Betancourt, Scott Trudell, and Colleen Rosenfeld. Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack remain some of the kindest and most helpful people I know; Murray Hall is very lucky to have them.

In terms of institutional support, I must thank the English Department and the Graduate School for generously funding my project at various stages of its existence; I’d also like to thank the Folger Institute for a grant-in-aid to participate in its 2013-14 seminar, “Constructing and Representing Authorship in Early Modern England.”

The faculty at Rutgers is a remarkably generous group, and I am very grateful to Tom Fulton, Emily Bartels, and Stacy Klein for their incisive feedback on my work. My committee deserves special attention here. Ann Baynes Coiro has helped to guide me since I first arrived at Murray Hall, encouraging me—and sharpening my work—with every year that passed. Henry Turner consistently shows me how to frame my ideas in the biggest and most compelling ways. Thanks are due as well to Julie Crawford, who was an insightful and inspiring outside reader.

But of everyone at Rutgers, I am most grateful to Jackie Miller, who read not only countless drafts of my dissertation, but everything else, as well—from my very first conference paper abstracts to proposals for travel grants and fellowships. No matter what it was, Jackie always gave me the great gift of her careful, patient scrutiny, and for that I will always be grateful.
Most pressingly, I need to thank my family. My father, my mother, my sister, and my aunts and uncles have all given me so much love and support over the years that I’ve been in graduate school, and I am so, so grateful to them.

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents, Henry and Dorothy Pietras. Neither was able to go to college, and I think that, if they could read these pages, the project would make little sense to them. But I like to think that they would somehow feel a different kind of truth: that their love helped make every word possible.
I say someone in another time will remember us.

—Sappho, Fragment 147
# Table of Contents

Abstract .................................................. ii

Dedication ............................................... iv

Acknowledgements ......................................... v

Table of Contents ......................................... ix

Introduction: A Canon Without a Corpus ................. 1

1. Leontium’s Babble and Zenobia’s Chains: Gender, Eloquence, and *Auctoritas* in Early English Humanism 26

2. Echoes of Sappho: Petrarchan Authorship and Female Desire .................................................. 73

3. Author’s Pen, Sibyl’s Voice: Shakespeare, Spenser, and the *Vates* ........................................... 130

4. Pamphilia’s Past: Wroth, Literary History, and the Fate of Women Writers 178

Epilogue: Ancient Sisters, Modern Rivals .................. 219

Bibliography ................................................. 230
Introduction

A Canon Without a Corpus

“It may be said that the people called the Latines lent us much learning, but it must be saide that a woman named Nicostrata first taught them their letters.”

— George Pettie, A petite pallace of Pettie his pleasure (1576)

Midway through the first edition of John Donne’s Poems (1633), a remarkable vision of authorship emerges: one that brings together ancient and modern, female and male. In “A Valediction: of the Booke,” the speaker urges his beloved to “write our Annals,” and, in so doing,

...out-endure
Sybills glory, and obscure
Her who from Pindar could allure,
And her, through whose helpe Lucan is not lame,
And her, whose book (they say) Homer did find, and name.¹

Donne’s speaker invokes in miniature a catalog of ancient women, all of them famous—in his time, if not in ours—for their writing. In quick succession, the speaker alludes to the sibyls, who were believed to have predicted the coming of Christ in prophetic verse; to Corinna, who reportedly bested Pindar during several poetic competitions; to Lucan’s wife Polla Argentaria, who was credited with helping him to compose his works; and finally to Phantasia, an Egyptian woman who some texts suggested was the true author of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Elsewhere in his Poems Donne takes on the voice of Sappho, the most famous woman writer of antiquity; here, however, his speaker evokes an ancient

world populated by numerous female authors who rivaled their male peers. But this is no simple tribute. The speaker at once piques the reader’s curiosity over these ancient female authors and refuses to provide their names. He both celebrates and occludes them—a double movement that draws attention to the request that the speaker makes of his beloved. He wants her to become an author who will surpass and thus “obscure” the women writers who have come before her. And yet, her projected success is recognizable as such only if the female authors of antiquity cannot be entirely eclipsed—if some record of these women remains in order to testify to his beloved’s literary achievement.

I begin with Donne’s poem because it demonstrates a phenomenon that will be central to this dissertation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, English authors began to meditate in highly self-conscious ways on the potential purposes and meanings of vernacular literary authorship. Of course, they were not the first to do so; medieval writers such as Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate were already contemplating the role of the English poet in the late fourteenth century. But early modern England was a nation quite different from the one Chaucer knew. Among other developments, it saw the rise of the printing press, the violence of the Protestant Reformation, the emergence of permanent theaters, and the advent of humanism as a cultural and pedagogical force. When explaining the rise of early modern English authorship, scholars often pay particular attention to this last development. The humanist curriculum, they argue, made classical authors such as Virgil, Ovid, and Cicero into a kind of literary pantheon to be studied and

---

imitated by English schoolboys. And it was this all-male canon, they claim, that former
schoolboys such as Spenser, Shakespeare, Jonson, and Milton worked to emulate and
surpass in the vernacular. But this traditional narrative ignores a crucial group of
classical authors. As Donne reminds us, when early moderns thought about literary
antiquity, they remembered more than ancient men: they also remembered ancient
women. This dissertation will argue that, in their struggle to define vernacular literary
authorship, early moderns found ancient women writers to be a uniquely productive
resource—what I will call "a canon without a corpus.”

3 The most recent proponents of this argument are Patrick Cheney and Philip Hardie:
“We argue, then, that it is useful to define the English Renaissance in terms of classical
authorship because the seminal literary achievement of this period was to invent an
originary English authorship out of an engagement with the classical idea of the author”
(6). See their “Introduction” to *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English
claims here reflect his earlier monographs, which argue that the careers of early modern
English authors developed through intense dialogue with ancient models; see his
*Shakespeare’s Literary Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2008);
*Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession: Ovid, Spenser, Counter-Nationhood* (Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 1997); and *Spenser’s Famous Flight: A Renaissance Idea of
a Literary Career* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993). Other important critics
who trace the emergence of Renaissance authorship to interaction with classical models
include Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the
Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), and Thomas Greene,
*The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and
London: Yale University Press, 1983). It should also be noted, however, that numerous
important recent works on early modern authorship have turned away from emphasizing
the influence of classical models, focusing instead on the shaping effects of the print
marketplace (Loewenstein); the rise of literary biography (Pask); and the mechanical arts
(Long). See, respectively, Joseph Loewenstein’s companion volumes *Ben Jonson and
Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and *The Author’s
Due: Printing and the Prehistory of Copyright* (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Press, 2002); Kevin Pask, *The Emergence of the English Author: Scripting the Life of the
Poet in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and
Pamela O. Long, *Openness, Secrecy, Authorship: Technical Arts and the Culture of
Knowledge From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Baltimore and London: The Johns
Given that very little writing by women survives from antiquity, insisting on the importance of classical female authors to the rise of Renaissance authorship might seem to be an odd line of argument. The editor of the most recent collection of ancient women’s writing estimates that we now know the names of approximately one hundred female authors from the Greco-Roman world, though we possess texts by only about half of them; much of this writing, moreover, is very fragmentary. The female authors from Donne’s poem vividly illustrate this textual loss. Although she reportedly composed five books of lyric poetry, no complete poems by Corinna survive: what remains are three substantial fragments, and numerous shorter ones. (By contrast, the poetry of Corinna’s purported rival Pindar is much better preserved.) Polla Argentaria presents a different kind of dilemma for the post-classical reader. The claim that she helped the first-century Roman poet Lucan perfect his writing comes not from herself or her contemporaries, but from a much later source of dubious authority. The historical evidence behind the sibyls

---


6 As the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* explains, Pindar’s victory odes “constitute by far the largest single body of Greek choral poetry to have been read continuously from classical antiquity to the Byzantine era and from the Renaissance to the present day” (227). See ibid, *Volume I: Greek Literature*, eds. P.E. Easterling and B.M.W. Knox (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

7 That source is the fifth-century Gallo-Roman bishop Sidonius Apollinaris; see his *Poems and Letters*, vol. 1, eds. and trans. W.B. Anderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
and Phantasia is even shakier. Believed by medieval thinkers to be proto-Christian prophets, the sibyls’ reputation began to crumble in the early seventeenth century, when the verses attributed to them turned out to be forgeries. Finally, the legend that an Egyptian woman named Phantasia was the true author of Homer’s works was disputed even in Donne’s day. The story likely came to the poet’s attention through Justus Lipsius’s *On the Arrangement of Libraries* (1602), which skeptically mentions Phantasia—an attitude that Donne’s poem seems to share (“they” merely “say” that a woman wrote Homer’s works). Donne’s catalogue of ancient women writers is thus a very shadowy and speculative assembly, premised on texts that are by turns fragmented, apocryphal, and mythical.

Indeed, if contemporary classicists often remark on how few texts by women survive from the ancient world, it was during the Renaissance and its “rediscovery” of classical antiquity that many of these bibliographical gaps first became apparent. As Donne’s poem suggests, humanist scholars found the *names* of numerous ancient women
writers (and stories attached to these names), but few corresponding works. There were, of course, exceptions—though they are telling ones. The fourth-century Roman author Faltonia Betita Proba was originally published in 1472, making her one of the first ancient women to see print. But although Proba is a woman writer, her words are not her own: her Cento retells selections from the Old and New Testament using lines from Virgil.\textsuperscript{11} She was not the only ancient female centon-maker to be printed during the Renaissance. The year 1502 saw the publication of the fifth-century Byzantine Empress Eudocia’s Homeric Centos, which use lines from Homer to retell Biblical narratives.\textsuperscript{12} Writing actually composed by classical women tended to resurface in much less complete forms. Sappho’s surviving poetry, for example, began to be published in the mid-sixteenth century; by 1566, her known corpus consisted of one complete poem (“The Hymn to Aphrodite”) and approximately forty fragments.\textsuperscript{13} Texts by other ancient women writers fared even more poorly. Although female poets such as Telesilla, Praxilla, and Anyte were known during the Renaissance—indeed, they were even anthologized along with Sappho and Corinna in a 1568 collection of ancient Greek verse by women—their writing survived in only a small handful of fragments.\textsuperscript{14} Telesilla’s entire extant poetic corpus, for instance, consists of nine fragments; Praxilla’s consists of five.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{11} See Jane Stevenson’s invaluable \textit{Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 64-71, 533-34.
\textsuperscript{13} For the early printing history of Sappho, see Joan DeJean, \textit{Fictions of Sappho, 1546-1937} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 29-42.
\textsuperscript{14} The anthology of ancient Greek women poets is Fulvio Orsini’s \textit{Carmina Novem Illustrirum Feminarum} (Antwerp: 1568).
\textsuperscript{15} On Telesilla, see I.M. Plant, 33; and Campbell, \textit{Greek Lyric IV}, 70-83. On Praxilla, see I.M. Plant, 38-40; and Campbell, 370-381. There are two other problems around the
Faced with this large-scale textual loss, classicists often lament the ravages of time. One twentieth-century translator of Sappho compared the experience of reading her highly fragmented poetry to “hearing faint snatches of a human voice, coming up through a vast chasm of deep silence.”\textsuperscript{16} But while post-Enlightenment thinkers associate textual disappearance with the melancholy workings of oblivion, sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers more often found creative opportunities in these gaps. As Evander’s Mother will show, ancient women writers became a potent intellectual resource for early moderns precisely because their fame revived in the absence of their texts. Like Homer, Virgil, and Lucan, ancient women writers were vested with the cultural prestige of classical antiquity; their largely missing texts, however, meant that these female figures could be easily appropriated according to the needs of the moment. As such, ancient women’s lack of a secure or “authentic” textual corpus led not to their disappearance and obscurity, but to their ongoing circulation in early modern England.

Of course, certain male writers from antiquity survived into the Renaissance in highly fragmented forms, as well. The Greek dramatist Menander is one example. The sixteenth-century English pedagogue Roger Ascham wrote sadly about the loss of his plays, observing that, “Som peeces remaine like broken Jewelles, whereby men may

---

\textsuperscript{16} Groden qtd. in Snyder, xi.
rightlie esteeme and justlie lament the losse of the whole.”\textsuperscript{17} But ancient women were unique in that they were an entire group of classical authors whose texts were largely missing. As Abraham Cowley wrote in 1667, “Of Female Poets who had names of old, / Nothing is shewn, but onely told.”\textsuperscript{18} His claim that ancient women poets exist only as stories told by others is, as we have seen, inaccurate. At this same time, however, Cowley’s couplet suggests both that ancient women writers were thought of as a group unto themselves in the early modern period, and that this distinct group was known primarily through texts written by others.

Such representations of ancient women were facilitated, moreover, by a long tradition of gender-based intellectual appropriation. The historian Peter Brown has discussed what he calls (following the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss) the “deeply ingrained tendency” of early Christian authors to “use women ‘to think with.’”\textsuperscript{19} Though they wrote centuries later than the writers Brown describes, Renaissance authors operated in a similar fashion. By invoking ancient female author-figures such as Sappho, Telesilla, and the sibyls, early moderns thought through issues central to the emerging culture of English letters. More specifically, they considered questions about the complex

\textsuperscript{17} Roger Ascham, \textit{The Scholemaster}, ed. John E. B. Mayor (London: Bell and Daldy, 1863; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1967), 140. Most of Menander’s works were not recovered until the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{18} Abraham Cowley, “On the Death of Mrs Katherine Philips,” in \textit{Poems by the most deservedly admired Mrs. Katherine Philips} (London: 1667), n.p. EEBO Wing P2033. That these lines come from a poem in praise of Katherine Philips is significant: Cowley downplays the survival of ancient women’s writing in an attempt to make Philips’s status as a female poet more remarkable. I discuss Cowley’s poem in greater detail in the Epilogue.

issue of vernacular literary authorship: What predecessors could a “modern,” English poet legitimately claim? Could he or she abandon the languages of classical Greece and Rome and still use their authorial models? Was poetry written in the vernacular really poetry at all?

To illustrate this phenomenon, I will turn now to the example of Carmentis (or Nicostrata), from whom I take my dissertation’s name. Like Phantasia, Carmentis is not a historical woman writer, but a mythical one; her reputation in the Renaissance derived from the *Aeneid*. In Book VIII of the epic, Aeneas forges an alliance with his distant kinsman Evander, a Greek who founded the city of Pallanteum on the future site of Rome. Evander tells Aeneas that he was led to this location by his mother, Carmentis, a “prophetess” “who first foretold the greatness of Aeneas’ sons, and the glory of Pallanteum.” In the fourteenth century, Boccaccio enhanced her status by crediting her with inventing Latin. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that early moderns believed Carmentis to be a famous author of the ancient world. Alexandre Pontaymeri’s *A Woman’s Woorth* (1599), for example, claims that Carmentis “was so learned in poesie, as she surpassed al the men of her time, & had indeed such a general name, as not any to this day did euer attaine the like.” One would expect that the lack of any extant “poesie” composed by Carmentis would throw her reputation into doubt. But early moderns

---


interpreted this textual absence as evidence of her literary abilities. In 1599, Robert Allott alleged that, “Had not that which Carmenta … writ of the warrs of Troy, beene at that tyme [through] envie throwne into the fire, the name of Homer had (without doubt) at thys day remayne obscure.” For Allott, the disappearance of her writings becomes the proof of their excellence. Paradoxically, then, Carmentis’s Renaissance reputation as a preeminent ancient author rested on her lack of surviving texts.

Yet the missing texts of Evander’s mother also meant that she could be appropriated in other directions—made to represent not marvelous eloquence, but meaningless speech. In his prefatory “Epistle” to Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), the glossator E.K. defends the work’s many archaisms, claiming that Spenser’s “auncient” English words confer “great grace” and Chaucerian “auctoritie” on his verse. Only fools, he continues, would believe “an olde word” to be “gibbrish, or rather such, as in old time Evanders mother spake.” We have seen how, in the *Aeneid*, Carmentis anticipates Virgil’s own song about the beginnings of Rome; in Boccaccio, she stands at the origins of Latin. By contrast, Spenser’s glossator associates Carmentis with unintelligible words (“gibbrish”), and thereby turns her into a figure for linguistic collapse.

---

23 Robert Allott, *VVits theater of the little world* (London: 1599), 248. STC (2nd ed.) 381. (Allott, it should be noted, mistakenly refers to Carmentis as Evander’s “wife.”)  
25 Ibid, 16.  
Tracing the early modern transformations of Carmentis reveals how easily—and completely—later authors could reshape ancient women writers. She reveals, as well, the kinds of thinking typically done at these moments of invocation. In the first example, Allott uses Carmentis to question the origins of the Western literary canon. Literary history, he implies, is not a precise record of all the eminent authors from antiquity onward, but a biased account shaped by violence and erasure—a narrative that reflects certain interests and obscures others. If Allott uses Carmentis to think about the constructed nature of literary history, E.K. uses her to define what sorts of writing should be produced by England’s “newe Poet.” We have seen how the prefatory “Epistle” defends Spenser’s archaisms, ridiculing those who do not recognize his “good and naturall English words.”

E.K.’s transformation of Carmentis from esteemed author to speaker of “gibbrish” is a key part of this defense. In effect, the glossator wards off the fear that Spenser’s archaisms will fail to communicate—that they are “no English”—by preemptively displacing this failure onto Carmentis. She becomes Immeritô’s foil: an ancient, maligned, and feminine anti-poet who makes visible the successes of the modern and masculine “newe Poet.”

Valorizing Spenser’s archaisms, in turn, aids the Calender’s larger defense of the vernacular. Against charges that the “mother tonge” is a “bare and barrein” language, unfit for the production of poetry, E.K. insists on the literary capacities of English: it is “both ful enough for prose and stately enough for verse.” His portrayal of “Evanders mother” ultimately works in service of this argument, supporting the claim that to be an English poet is not an oxymoron.

Carmentis is only one example of how early moderns appropriated ancient women writers. In some ways, however, it is misleading to isolate one female author of antiquity and make her representative of the group, precisely because early moderns so often thought of ancient women as a group. As Donne’s poem suggests, when Renaissance writers invoke one classical female author they often begin to list more, creating catalogs of varying length. On one hand, the idea that female authors constituted a specific subset of the literary field is an old one. It can be traced back to at least the first century CE, when Antipater of Thessalonica composed a list of nine preeminent female poets that included Sappho, Corinna, Praxilla, and Telesilla; he praises their “godlike tongues for songs,” and insists (with a now-ironic certainty) that their words “will last for all time.” On the other hand, Renaissance humanists exhibited a special zeal for organizing knowledge about antiquity into lists and catalogs, and ancient female authors benefited from this enthusiasm. In the late fourteenth century, Boccaccio created the most enduring post-classical collection of ancient women writers in his hugely popular work De mulieribus claris (On Famous Women). While Boccaccio also describes women who were famous in other capacities—such as Penthesilea, Medea, and Cleopatra—this text features accounts of nine classical women writers drawn from history and myth. As such, De mulieribus claris became a crucial source for later writers interested in ancient female authors.

Boccaccio proved particularly important for those writers involved in the querelle des femmes, the Renaissance literary genre that debated the nature of women—and, in the

---

30 I quote from Jane McIntosh Snyder’s translation; it provides the epigraph to her book The Woman and the Lyre (cited above).
31 For more on this organizing impulse, see William West, Theatres and Encyclopedias in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
process, spread much information about ancient women writers across England and the Continent. 32 One point of controversy for the debate’s participants was female intelligence and learning: could women be educated? Should they be? Defenders of women frequently turned to Boccaccio’s list of ancient female authors to prove that women could be both learned and virtuous, translating his Latin entries into their vernacular tongues. But these writers did not simply recycle the humanist learning found in De mulieribus claris; they often revised its exempla to fit their purposes. Alexandre Pontaymeri’s pro-female querelle text A Woman’s Woorth exemplifies this tendency. As noted earlier, Pontaymeri claimed that Carmentis was the preeminent poet of her day; as part of his defense of female learning, he also claims that Carmentis “enstructed Pithagoras himselfe (true Prince of the very best Philosophy among the Pagans.)” 33 In Pontaymeri’s telling, then, Carmentis is not only a famous ancient poet—she is also a forgotten cornerstone of the Western philosophical tradition.

32 For an overview of the querelle in its English context, see Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640, eds. Katherine U. Henderson and Barbara F. McManus (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), esp. 3-132. For a brief overview that sets the debate in a Continental context, see “Querelle des Femmes,” in Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England, eds. Diana Maury Robin, Anne R. Larsen, Carole Levin (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007), 307-311. It should also be noted that Petrarch played an important role in setting the terms of the debate. As Virginia Cox explains, Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris was written as a companion piece to Petrarch’s De viris illustribus (On Famous Men), and likely drew on a 1358 letter of Petrarch’s in praise of women. These two humanist texts (treatise and letter) “established a set of rhetorical norms for the praise of women posited on their capacity to win fame through activities generally considered ‘masculine,’ notably intellectual and literary endeavor and political and military leadership” (19). See Cox, Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400-1650 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), esp. 1-36.

33 Pontaymeri, sig. 18v. This claim perhaps derives from the tradition that Pythagoras was instructed by a Delphic priestess named Themistoclea; see Diogenes Laertius, “Pythagoras,” trans. R.D. Hicks, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), VIII.6-8.
The *querelle* thus did more than simply disseminate pre-existing knowledge about ancient women writers: it actually helped to *produce* new narratives and anecdotes about them in the vernacular. And just as importantly, the information generated by the *querelle* did not remain within the subgenre; over time, it began to circulate outside the bounds of the debate. Donne’s poem is evidence of this fact: scholars believe that the list of ancient women found in the “Valediction” comes from a mid-sixteenth century French text written in defense of women.34

The Renaissance tendency to conceptualize ancient female authors as a distinct group—a subset of literary antiquity with its own major figures and famous (if often missing) texts—therefore has deep roots; it also has important implications for our understanding of early modern literary culture. Because ancient women became famous for texts that were fragmented, apocryphal, or entirely lost, they functioned as what I call a “canon without a corpus” in early modern England. In many ways, this female canon took shape in opposition to the all-male literary pantheon emerging in the humanist classroom. If that canon of authors was one designed for schoolboys to imitate as they learned Latin, then ancient women functioned differently. By virtue of their missing texts, these female figures did not invite imitation—at least, not in any sustained form.35 Instead, ancient women provided early moderns with a highly malleable set of classical precedents.

---

34 The French text seems to have been *Le Fort inexpugnable de l’honneur du Sexe Feminin* (1555); see Mueller, *Donne*, 519.
35 The one exception to this rule is Sappho, though her Renaissance imitators tended to be French. Additionally, as Joan DeJean points out, “almost all of what is introduced as Sapphic imitation in Renaissance poetry explicitly deals at least primarily with Sappho only as already radically recast by Catullus” (34).
As Evander’s Mother will show, furthermore, the uses of this canon without a corpus changed over time. Beginning in the sixteenth century, humanist-trained male writers used ancient women to explore different facets of vernacular literary authorship. By writing about—and, sometimes, even as—the female authors of antiquity, England’s former schoolboys sought to establish what it meant to be a “modern” male writer. This started to change, however, in the seventeenth century. During this period, increasing numbers of English women began to publish their writings—a development that led to the creation of female literary histories that reached from the present back to antiquity. In short, by the late seventeenth century, ancient female authors no longer served as intellectual vehicles for the English male author; instead, they started to provide a literary lineage for early women writers.

By tracing the varied uses of early modern England’s canon without a corpus, Evander’s Mother challenges traditional scholarly narratives about gender, authorship, and literary history. Over the past few decades, scholars have profoundly enriched our understanding of early modern literature by recovering its neglected women writers. New editions of these female authors have revealed that women wrote in much greater numbers—and to much greater acclaim—than previous generations of scholars realized. At the same time, studies often continue to argue that women fought to write in a culture that attempted to deny them both creative expression and literary authority, implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—suggesting that authorship was primarily gendered male during this period. Maureen Quilligan, for example, argues that female authorship in the early modern period was a “fundamentally radical act”: “not only a transgression of the
female role, but also an incursion into an exclusively male domain.”36 For related reasons, critics often allege that the male-dominated historical record failed to preserve the reputations of early women writers; as one recent anthology on the subject argues, “Women’s presence in national literary histories, generally speaking, has been less stable than men’s, their niches more shallow or precarious, their memory more quickly occluded by time.”37

Though deeply indebted to this body of scholarship, my dissertation modifies a number of its conclusions. Contrary to scholars who argue that authorship became increasingly masculinized during the early modern period, I show how Renaissance writers developed new models of authorship through strategies of cross-gendered (as well as cross-temporal) identification. On the subject of literary history, building upon the

---


37 Strong Voices, Weak History: Early Women Writers and Canons in England, France, and Italy, eds. Pamela Joseph Benson and Victoria Kirkham (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 1. This volume argues both that early women writers achieved fame for their writings and that such fame was often ephemeral—especially in England, where poetry anthologies printed before the late seventeenth century usually excluded women writers (6). Despite initially emphasizing the admiration enjoyed by early women writers, then, Strong Voices ultimately reaffirms the narrative of women writers’ exclusion from English literary history.
work of scholars like Margaret Ezell, I argue that the Renaissance was itself the site of the first major recovery of women writers in the West, and that early modern women began entering the literary-historical record because of the kind of historical thinking encouraged by the rediscovery of ancient female authors. As such, I demonstrate that the feminist recovery projects of our era do not always conflict with early modern attitudes toward women writers; our contemporary efforts to recover forgotten female authors are in fact in keeping with early humanist attempts to recover ancient women writers.

In pursuing these claims, Evander’s Mother also reconsiders the cultural work done by early English fantasies of female authorship. One of the most insightful treatments of this subject comes from Jennifer Summit. Her monograph Lost Property argues that, in medieval and early modern texts, the figure of the “woman writer” comes to represent textual loss and “a literature that tradition fails to enshrine.” Because she is constructed as outside of the classical canon, the ghostly figure of the “lost woman writer” becomes a way for early English writers to consider both the dangers and possibilities of writing in the relatively new and unstable medium of the vernacular. The ancient female authors recovered and celebrated during the Renaissance, however, defy Summit’s paradigm. As figures marked with the prestige of classical antiquity, ancient women were not understood by early moderns to be outside literary tradition—indeed, as

---

38 Ezell has importantly critiqued the notion that women writers were marginalized from early literary histories, highlighting “the tradition of anthologizing women’s verse and recording women writers’ works and lives” in the seventeenth century and beyond (67); see her Writing Women’s Literary History (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. 67-103.

Carmentis shows, the opposite was often true. This difference is a crucial one. If Summit’s alienated and marginalized woman writer enables English authors to envision the possibilities of writing outside of tradition, then ancient women writers offer early moderns the opportunity to rewrite tradition from within. Sanctioned by antiquity but too incomplete to imitate, classical female authors offer invitingly empty spaces for later writers to occupy; to respond to Lost Property’s resonant central metaphor, ancient women writers are not ghosts, but Trojan horses.

* 

The first chapter of Evander’s Mother explores in greater detail how and why male writers of the sixteenth century began to appropriate the women writers of antiquity, suggesting that humanism created a surprising structural link between the two groups. Because ancient female authors were understood by early moderns to be subordinate to their fathers, husbands, and other male authority figures, their position as writers comes to approximate that of the humanist-trained male writer, who composes in the shadow of classical men and their inherited cultural authority, or auctoritas. My first chapter examines how three sixteenth-century humanist authors—Juan Luis Vives, Thomas Elyot, and William Painter—variously resisted and exploited their implicit link to ancient women writers as a way of shoring up their own uncertain literary authority. While Vives dismisses ancient women’s writing as “bablynge” in order to align himself with authoritative ancient men, Elyot and Painter pursue the opposite strategy. Through their positive depictions of rebellious women writers such as Leontium and Zenobia, Elyot and Painter allegorize their own attempts to break with the auctoritas of ancient men.
From here I proceed to consider ways in which early modern writers used the concept of the ancient woman writer to develop new forms of vernacular authorship. The second chapter turns to a model of authorship grounded in Ovidian myth, and developed by a man often called the “father” of humanism: Petrarch. The endlessly desiring Petrarchan poet is also an endlessly frustrated one, and, against accounts that stress the poet’s ability to safely recuperate this abjection by making it the ground of his authorship, I argue that the Petrarchan poet’s position as author remains constantly imperiled by the very misery that fuels his poetry. The rest of the chapter examines how the ancient poet Sappho becomes a way for early modern writers to posit forms of desiring authorship that do not depend on the self-fragmenting abjection of Petrarchism. Through Sappho, the poet John Donne and the playwright John Fletcher experiment with models of authorship that originate not from Ovid’s myths of male disappointment, but from satisfied—and even insatiable—female desires.

I then move to a question first discussed by Plato and given new urgency by early modern humanists: were poets divinely inspired? The classical conception of the poet as vates, or prophet, at once elevates the author to the role of divine spokesperson and potentially reduces him to a powerless instrument. And while early moderns considered Virgil to be the preeminent vatic poet, his *Aeneid* associates divine inspiration with rape, and the *vates* with violated female figures (including Cassandra and the Sibyl of Cumae). My third chapter argues that Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare both turn to the sibyls—legendary female prophets believed to have written oracular texts—in order to negotiate these contradictions. While Spenser attempts to recuperate the vatic role by burying its historical and literary connections to the sibyls, Shakespeare uses sibylline
figures in his poetry and plays to reimagine the poet’s status as instrument, ultimately claiming an uncanny agency for this ostensibly disempowered role.

While the first three chapters consider how male writers used ancient women as intellectual tools, my fourth looks at how an early modern woman writer—Mary Wroth—exposes the long history of textual loss that made such appropriations possible. She does so in part by naming her heroine and authorial avatar Pamphilia after “Pamphila,” a first-century Roman woman historian whose texts survived into the early modern period in only a few short fragments. Throughout Wroth’s romance the *Urania*, Pamphilia’s writings appear equally vulnerable to loss and destruction. But though her predecessors in the genre of romance (including Ariosto and Spenser) blamed male envy for the erasure of women from literary history, Wroth focuses instead on the dangers posed by *female* rivals: jealous women who threaten to replace Pamphilia both as a lover and a poet.

My discussion of the relationship between women and literary history in Wroth leads into my epilogue, which traces how the women writers of antiquity shift from being seen as figures for “modern” male authors to being understood as part of a history of women’s writing. This shift takes place, I contend, because England’s male writers increasingly establish their own *auctoritas*, and so are less likely to conceptualize themselves as subordinate to the male writers of antiquity. By the mid-seventeenth century, the homology between the ancient woman writer and the modern male author—always an unstable alliance—breaks down. At the same time, English writers such as Thomas Heywood and Edward Phillips begin to inscribe contemporary women writers such as Wroth, Katherine Philips, and Margaret Cavendish into exclusively female
literary histories that begin with Sappho; ancient women thus become the predecessors to (and, sometimes, the rivals of) modern women writers. In effect, by the end of the seventeenth century, ancient women writers become estranged from the same male authors whose auctoritas they helped to establish; consequently, their importance to the “birth of the author” in England is erased.

By telling this forgotten story, Evander’s Mother builds on recent studies of early modern canon-formation. Over the past decade, intellectual historians and others have begun to stress that there was no single, established literary canon in the medieval and early modern periods; as Pamela Benson and Victoria Kirkham put it in the introduction to their anthology Strong Voices, Weak History, “there was a lively sense that many different kinds of vernacular and Latin canons were in the process of formation.” On the subject of women’s writing, Benson and Kirkham claim that, “[b]y the sixteenth century, the notion of the woman writer as a member of a single-sex canon that began with Sappho had become a commonplace, regularly invoked by male promoters.” While this may be the case with Continental women writers, I demonstrate that the idea of an exclusively female literary line did not gain ground in England until the seventeenth century. Moreover, I argue that, before then, ancient women writers constituted a separate canon that was primarily used not to celebrate female authors, but to theorize and legitimize male authorship.

In recognizing ancient women as constituting a “canon without a corpus,” Evander’s Mother suggests that our standards for understanding early modern canonicity should reflect not only what authors were being taught in humanist schools, but also

---

40 Benson and Kirkham, Strong Voices, 2.
41 Ibid, 4.
those authors who were being appropriated and reimagined across texts—those writers, in other words, who possessed a wide cultural currency, regardless of the state of their surviving works. In his recent monograph *The Lucretian Renaissance*, Gerard Passannante provides a model for how studies informed by this kind of methodology might operate. As he traces the afterlife of Lucretius’ controversial ancient poem *De rerum natura*, Passannante observes that, even before the manuscript’s rediscovery in 1417, Lucretian fragments exerted a surprisingly potent influence on later writers. My dissertation traces a related phenomenon with ancient women writers, showing how their largely vanished corpus helped to facilitate their ongoing circulation in early modern England.

Because it emphasizes the importance of ancient author-figures whose texts often survived into the Renaissance in highly compromised and incomplete states, *Evander’s Mother* also contributes to the growing scholarly interest in the early modern fragment. Considering the complex allure of broken sculptures from antiquity, Leonard Barkan argues that such fragments helped to generate a kind of “exponential thinking” in which Renaissance viewers envisioned ever-greater versions of the past: “however ruined Rome is now, by that much more do we need to multiply the once living city in our imaginations. From this perspective, the fragment, far from containing a diminished

---

42 In making this argument, I also respond to John Guillory’s groundbreaking work on canon formation, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago University Press, 1993). Guillory focuses on the “systemic effects of the educational system in the determination of who writes and who reads, as well as what gets read, and in what contexts” (19); for Guillory, the school as institution produces the conditions for canonicity. My dissertation, however, examines celebrated authors not taught in humanist schools; as such, it offers us the possibility of theorizing canon formation outside of the institution.

immanence, points to a greater wholeness than would any complete works. The more ruined, the more it inscribes…”\textsuperscript{44} My dissertation uncovers a similar incitement to imaginative thinking in the textual fragments left behind by ancient women writers. In tracing the effects of this generative quality on the history of authorship, furthermore, my dissertation demonstrates that early modern studies requires a historicism attuned to the oddly productive nature of textual loss and fragmentation.

Ultimately, by recovering the central importance of Greco-Roman women writers to early English literary culture, \textit{Evander’s Mother} refocuses one of the foundational narratives about the Renaissance. Scholars have long seen the Renaissance as a period defined by its newly intense historical consciousness. One of the classic statements of this concept is Erwin Panofsky’s: “From the fourteenth through the sixteenth century, then… the men of the Renaissance were convinced that the period in which they lived was a ‘new age’ as sharply different from the mediaeval past as the mediaeval past had been from antiquity.”\textsuperscript{45} Thomas Greene builds on this claim by observing that the

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{45} Erwin Panofsky, \textit{Renaissance and renascences in Western art} (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 36. For an excellent discussion of Panofsky’s importance to the field of
Renaissance’s portrayal of the medieval period as “the Dark Ages” was an acutely self-interested one. “The creation of this myth,” he notes, “was not a superficial occurrence. It expressed a belief in change and loss, change from the immediate past and loss of a remote, prestigious past that nonetheless might be resuscitated.”

Donne’s “A Valediction: of the Booke” invokes the same story of cultural loss that Greene describes—but, more important for our purposes, it also proposes a solution to this dilemma. After describing how his beloved’s “Booke” will endure forever, providing “Rule and example” for all lovers to come, the poem’s speaker begins to imagine an even greater future for her writing. He claims that, “When this booke is made thus, / Should againe the ravenous / Vandals and the Goths invade us, / Learning were safe; in this our Universe / Schooles might learne Sciences, Spheares Musick, Angels Verse.” Should the barbarians return and the Dark Ages loom again, his beloved’s writings would guard against any cultural loss; her book alone could recreate the Renaissance.

By exploring early modern writings that, like Donne’s poem, trade in fantasies of female authorship, Evander’s Mother shows that women—both as conceptual vehicles and as writers and thinkers in their own right—played vital and heretofore unacknowledged roles in shaping English literature’s conflicted relationship with the classical past. My dissertation thus works to restore female voices to a familiar scholarly narrative about the Renaissance rediscovery of antiquity, even while examining how ancient women’s fragmentary textual record—their tendency to exist primarily as names,
and not as voices—licensed the developments in authorship that are now considered a key innovation of early modernity.
Chapter 1

Leontium’s Babble and Zenobia’s Chains: Gender, Eloquence, and Auctoritas in Early English Humanism

Were such idle fancies responsible…for the diatribe against Theophrastus [that] the courtesan Leontium had the effrontery to compose? To be sure she writes expertly in good Attic style, and yet—and yet!

—Cicero, On the Nature of the Gods

Zenobia’s knowledge of these languages enabled her to read voraciously and commit to memory all the Latin, Greek, and barbarian histories. Moreover, she is believed to have composed epitomes of these works.

—Giovanni Boccaccio, Famous Women

In The Scholemaster (1570), the humanist pedagogue Roger Ascham considers the practice of paraphrasis and finds that he cannot approve. Drawing on Quintilian, he describes the exercise as one in which the student must “strive and contend… to translate the best latin authors into other latin wordes.”

Paraphrasing the ancients would not seem to be a controversial practice—and yet Ascham deems it so. There is, he insists, a competitive angle to paraphrasis, for it invites the student not only to reword the “best latin authors,” but also to improve on them. And to attempt to improve on the ancients is, Ascham warns, to flirt with hubris: “It is a bold comparison in deed to thinke to say better, than that is best.”

Similar admonitions recur throughout The Scholemaster as Ascham discusses different rhetorical exercises. But the pedagogue’s reverence for “the

50 Ibid.
51 For example, when discussing epitome (the practice of condensing a text into a more succinct form), Ascham cautions, “a man ought to beware to be over bold in altering an excellent mans work” (127).
best latin authors” shows through most clearly in his discussion of *imitatio*. While emphasizing the value of imitating classical authorities in order to improve one’s style, he pauses to consider a possible criticism. One might object that “it were a plaine slauerie, & iniurie to[o], to shakkle and tye a good witte, and hinder the course of a mans good nature with such bondes of seruitude, in folowyng other.” It is not a criticism that Ascham places much stock in—he preemptively dismisses it as one that could be believed only by an “ignorant, unlearned, and idle student, or some busie looker upon this litle poore booke.” Nonetheless, Ascham goes on to answer the charge in greater detail, and the terms of his rebuttal are very telling. Those who would criticize *imitatio*, he writes, must “thinke them selves wiser then [sic] Cicero for teaching of eloquence,” for the great orator himself used this technique. As Ascham explains, Cicero did not “invent some new shape… to leave to posteritie the glorie of his witte”; instead, he imitated Plato. On one hand, Ascham’s citation of Cicero provides *imitatio* with a powerful classical precedent. But on the other, it does not truly refute the notion that the ancients are the intellectual masters of the moderns. Indeed, by relying so heavily on Cicero in his defense, Ascham seems to tacitly reaffirm the very charges that he seeks to refute.

I begin this chapter with *The Scholemaster* because it raises (albeit in a dismissive and begrudging way) questions that will be of central importance to what follows. Is the condition of the sixteenth-century humanist author one of necessary servitude? Can the “modern” English writer ever produce “new shape[s],” or must this writing always

---

52 Ibid, 142-143.
53 Ibid, 142.
54 Ibid, 143.
55 Ibid, 143-144.
“follow an other mans Paterne”?\textsuperscript{56} If the “best latin authors” cannot be improved upon, what is left for post-classical writers to say? Sixteenth-century pedagogues tend to skirt such questions, focusing instead on how humanist learning endows its students with the wondrous powers of eloquence.\textsuperscript{57} Thomas Wilson’s foundational work \textit{The Arte of Rhetorique} (1553), for instance, claims that “the power of eloquence” is so great “that most men are forced euen to yelde in that, whiche most standeth againste their will.”\textsuperscript{58} Wilson illustrates this idea by invoking the Hercules Gallicus. In this image of Hercules (much admired by humanists, and widely circulated in emblem books), the legendary hero’s tongue is linked to the ears of others by means of a chain, which allows Hercules to control “all men” and “leade them” as he pleases.\textsuperscript{59} George Puttenham repeats the image of Hercules and his enslaving tongue in his rhetorical treatise \textit{The Arte of English Poesy} (1589), where, much like Wilson, he interprets this emblem as demonstrating that “eloquence is of great force.”\textsuperscript{60} Both Wilson and Puttenham thus promise that proper humanist training will arm their readers with an eloquence that subdues the wills and wits of others. But for a brief moment, \textit{The Scholemaster} raises the possibility that the

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 143.
\textsuperscript{57} See Neil Rhodes, \textit{The Power of Eloquence in English Renaissance Literature} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), esp. 1-63.
\textsuperscript{58} Thomas Wilson, \textit{The Arte of Rhetorique} (London: 1553), A3v. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 25799.
humanist-trained writer might himself be the captive—not the one who holds the chains, but the one held by them.\textsuperscript{61}

Intellectual and social historians have long framed humanism as an educational movement intimately bound up with questions of power, control, and consent. In their influential monograph \textit{From Humanism to the Humanities}, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine portray Renaissance humanism as a kind of sinister machine whose rise reflected and served the interests of fifteenth-century Italy’s governing elites. This educational system, they argue, “stamped the more prominent members of the new elite with the indelible cultural seal of superiority,” “equipped lesser members with fluency and the learned habit of attention to textual detail,” and “offered everyone a model of true culture as something given, absolute, to be mastered, not questioned.”\textsuperscript{62} Ultimately, they claim, it “fostered … a properly docile attitude toward authority” “in all its initiates.”\textsuperscript{63} Working in a similar vein, Richard Halpern describes humanist pedagogy as a markedly insidious (and Foucauldian) phenomenon, one that employed “a model of indoctrination based on hegemony and consent rather than force and coercion,” and that “aimed to produce an

\textsuperscript{61} Rebhorn notes a related ambiguity in the image of the Hercules Gallicus; though meant to be read as an emblem of the overwhelming power of rhetoric, it could also suggest “the very constraints of rhetoric itself upon its practitioner” (75).


\textsuperscript{63} Grafton and Jardine, xiv.
active embrace of ideology rather than a passive acceptance.” In both accounts, humanism offers its adherents some small degree of autonomy—giving them culture “as something… to be mastered,” or encouraging them to willingly embrace its tenets—while ultimately working to ensure their political and ideological subordination. These accounts seem, in other words, to support the very scenario that Ascham would deny—one where the humanist-trained subject remains caught in the “bondes of seruitude.”

Investigating humanism’s power dynamics is not, however, a new phenomenon. As numerous literary critics have shown, Renaissance writers were themselves deeply concerned with the inherited cultural authority—the auctoritas—of humanist-sanctioned classical authors. Thomas Greene argues that, beginning with Petrarch, poets struggled with the problem of writing in the long shadow of the prestigious Greek and Roman authors whom they sought both to emulate and displace. The humanist writer, he explains, faced a dilemma rooted in his temporal and linguistic estrangement from the classical world: “How could he pursue the rebirth of a culture that he could not even praise in a prose style it might have acknowledged? How could he compose poetry that neither ignored nor travestied the overwhelming power of the alien idiom?” For English authors, this problem was exacerbated by what Thomas Elyot refers to as “that infelycitie, of our tyrne and countrey”—that is, by England’s classical reputation as an isolated and barbarous backwater. (Ascham alludes to this reputation in The

---

66 Ibid, 36.
67 Thomas Elyot, *The boke named the Gouernour* (London: 1537), 17r. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 7636. Catherine Nicholson also emphasizes this provocative phrase in her reading of
Scholemaster, describing how Cicero “rayle[s] upon poore England, objecting both extreme beggerie and mere barbariousnes unto it,” and recounting how the orator told a friend that “[t]here is not one scruple of silver in that whole Isle, or any one that knoweth either learnyng or letter.”\textsuperscript{68} Sixteenth-century English authors were thus doubly disadvantaged—barred from claiming \textit{auctoritas} due to both their temporal and geographic locations.

Yet despite these disadvantages, early moderns worked to counter their marginalized authorial positions through a number of methods. Mary Thomas Crane has shown how gathering and redeploying textual fragments from antiquity became a way for the English humanist to “divide and conquer his powerful predecessors,” as well as to shape a formidable political self.\textsuperscript{69} In this chapter, I will explore a different solution to the potentially overwhelming \textit{auctoritas} of the ancients. Confronted with the possibility that they were by definition subordinate to the great male writers of the classical world, male humanists began to identify with a different group of ancient authors: the women writers of Greco-Roman antiquity. Because early moderns believed that ancient women were always kept (in the words of the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives) “under the rule of theyr fathers, and bretherne, and husbandes, and kynsmen,” ancient women writers provided humanist men with a conceptual analogue for their own constrained position as the \textit{Governor}; see Uncommon Tongues: Eloquence and Eccentricity in the English Renaissance (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 20-38. For more on England’s bad reputation in antiquity, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12-19.\textsuperscript{68} Ascham, 183-4.

modern writers composing in the shadow of more authoritative men. This chapter examines how three sixteenth-century humanist authors—Juan Luis Vives, Thomas Elyot, and William Painter—variously resisted and exploited their link to ancient women writers as a way of shoring up their own uncertain literary authority. In his extremely popular female conduct book *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1529), Vives initially identifies with ancient women writers on the basis of a shared subordination to ancient men. By the work’s conclusion, however, the Spanish scholar institutes a strictly gendered paradigm for authorship in which men alone produce original literary work: a paradigm that enshrines Vives’s modern writing as a work of *auctoritas* equal to that of the ancients’. In short, Vives makes one’s gender central to the assumption of literary authority, instead of one’s place in time. But Thomas Elyot and William Painter suggest instead the productive possibilities of identifying with ancient female authors. Through their positive depictions of rebellious women writers such as Leontium and Zenobia, Elyot and Painter allegorize their own attempts to break with the inherited authority of ancient men.

In tracing these connections, I join a recent wave of scholars—including Sean Keilen, Catherine Nicholson, and Miriam Jacobson—who have re-framed humanism as a phenomenon that both invalidated English authors (by depicting them as barbarians alienated from the classical tradition) and enabled them (by providing the intellectual tools for challenging their marginal and stigmatized positions). I contribute to this

---

71 See Sean Keilen, *Vulgar Eloquence: On the Renaissance Invention of English Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006); Miriam Jacobson,
scholarship by demonstrating how gender played an increasingly pivotal role in humanist power struggles with antiquity. Because it excluded all but the most elite women from its purview, humanism is usually depicted as a deeply masculinist phenomenon. In Walter Ong’s foundational formulation, Latin language study served as a rite of passage designed to “initiate [the Renaissance gentleman] into an aggressively competitive man’s world.” By contrast, this chapter reveals a more complicated truth: that humanism also encouraged its male initiates to identify— provisionally and strategically— across the lines of gender. Indeed, as we will see, the adult male writers who aligned themselves with ancient female authors were not rebelling against humanist ideology so much as continuing the cross-gendered writing practices of its schoolroom.

Barbarous Antiquity: Reorienting the Past in the Poetry of Early Modern England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); and Nicholson (cited above). In his survey of Renaissance humanism, Charles Nauert claims that “female humanists were very few, and even those few were marginalized” (x). See his Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, second ed. 2006). See also Grafton and Jardine’s chapter “Women Humanists: Education for What?” in From Humanism, 33-57; and Margaret King’s essay “Book-Lined Cells: Women and Humanism in the Early Italian Renaissance” in Humanism, Venice, and Women: Essays on the Italian Renaissance (Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 66-90. (King’s essay was originally published in Beyond Their Sex: Learned Women of the European Past, ed. P.H. Labalme [New York: New York University Press, 1980]). Also important is the work of Jane Stevenson, who argues that early modern female humanists—and Latinate women more generally during this period— were not as few in number, nor as isolated, as is commonly believed; Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 141-403.


As I will discuss at the end of this chapter, Lynn Enterline also discusses the unexpected consequences of humanism on early modern understandings of gender, arguing that humanist pedagogy “fractured the unity of the masculine identities it was explicitly designed to produce” (65). See her monograph Shakespeare’s Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), esp. 65-88. See as well Alan Stewart, Close Readers: Humanism and Sodomy in Early Modern England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
“…and babbled forthe a boke”: Gendering Textual Production in Vives

In his massive work on educational reform, *De disciplinis* (1531), the eminent Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540) includes a short but important chapter on the subject of literary imitation. Defining imitation as “the fashioning of a certain thing in accordance with a proposed model,” Vives encourages schoolmasters to use this practice in their classrooms as a way of helping their students to polish their Latin style. And yet, he also warns against the improper use of this technique in ways that highlight its dangers. “That a boy should imitate is honorable and praiseworthy,” Vives writes, but “that an old man should do so, is servile and disgraceful.” This is so, he explains, because “a boy should have a master and guide, whom he should follow; but not so, an old man.” A grown man should not follow the ancients submissively—he should attempt to rival them. “Try to attain to [the classical model’s] great beauties,” Vives instructs his adult reader, “and afterwards even to excel them.”

Imitation, then, should only be a temporary stage in the process of learning eloquence in the Latin tongue; to rely too much on ancient models as an adult, Vives suggests, bespeaks a shameful dependence on the part of the modern writer.

But although Vives insists on the importance—even the necessity—of trying to surpass classical literary models, he also emphasizes that doing so is both difficult and dangerous. On the subject of style, he explains, “the attempt to excel or at least to equal the ancients in adornment and elegance, is not so much bad and blameworthy as

---

76 Ibid, 197.
77 Ibid, 197-8.
78 Ibid, 198, italics mine.
dangerous, for fear lest we depart from our own strength and fall into absurdities.”

Further, he warns that besting the ancients might at times be inherently impossible.

“Some parts of those passages which are proposed as models can never be completely imitated, owing to the natural genius of the original writer. Such must always be followed, since they cannot be rivaled. None but a madman would attempt it.”

So, despite Vives’s insistence on the importance of trying to rival ancient authors, he also suggests that certain literary works (and he does not specify which ones) can never be surpassed. Hence, Vives at once enjoins modern writers to challenge classical authorities and cautions that doing so might be impossible. To borrow the words of one former student of the humanist schoolroom, Vives urges would-be authors to be bold—but not too bold.

This contradictory set of imperatives is not a quirk peculiar to Vives, but a distillation of larger tensions inherent to the humanist project itself. When Vives compares servile imitation to competitive emulation, he is drawing on a distinction first made by Erasmus in his famous *Ciceronianus* (1528). There, Erasmus distinguishes between imitation (*imitatio*) and emulation (*aemulatio*) by observing, “Imitation aims at similarity; emulation, at victory. Thus, if you take all of Cicero and him alone for your model, you should not only reproduce him, but also defeat him. He must not just be passed by, but rather left behind.”

Later in the text Erasmus returns to this distinction,

---

79 Ibid, 197.
80 Ibid.
warning that the writer who simply and uncritically imitates is in fact “a slave to his model”—a notion that, as we have seen, briefly emerges in The Scholemaster. Erasmus encourages his reader to instead be an emulator: one who “strives to speak better, if he can.” In formulating this advice Erasmus builds on Petrarch, who insisted on his own agency as a modern writer. Discussing classical models in a letter to Boccaccio, Petrarch averred, “I think it better to do without a leader than to be forced to follow a leader through everything. I do not want a leader who binds me, but one who goes ahead; let me have my eyes with a leader, my judgment and freedom.” Stirring though these declarations of authorial freedom are, they exist in unresolved tension with the importance that humanist pedagogy places on the auctoritas of ancient authors—some of whom are so exalted that “they cannot be rivaled.”

Vives demonstrates a similar interest in the power dynamics behind humanist authorship in his De institutione foeminae Christianae (1524), which was first translated into English in 1529. Originally written as a guidebook for the young Mary Tudor, The Instruction of a Christen Woman (as it was known in English) is as preoccupied with the position of the modern humanist author as it is with proper behavior of an English princess. Vives’s concern with his own tenuous authority becomes apparent in his

---

83 Qtd. in Pigman, 25.
84 Ibid.
85 Qtd. in Pigman, 25. (As Pigman notes, Petrarch is himself reworking an idea of Seneca’s in this statement.)
dedicatory letter to Catherine of Aragon and her daughter. Vives opens by confidently asserting that the proper upbringing of a Christian woman is a “matter never yet entreated of any man, amonge so great plentie and variete of wyttes and writers” (8). But his claims for the absolute originality of his work begin to dissolve almost immediately. In the next sentence he admits that Aristotle and Xenophon have written about good housekeeping, and that Plato’s Republic discusses “many thynges apperteynynge unto the womans office and dewtie” (8). He follows this concession by acknowledging that all four of the Church Fathers have also previously written about how women ought to behave. And when Vives tries to distinguish his work from that of his predecessors, he ends up framing the Instruction as a supplementary and derivative text. He will not, he says, “exhort” his female readers to virtue in the manner of “those great wytted and holy men” who have come before him: such an effort would be redundant, for “every body shall chose and pyke out the wayes of lyvyng, out of these mennes authorite, rather than of my fantasie” (8). Vives’s task is instead to “compyle rules of lyvyng” (8). In the space of a paragraph, therefore, the humanist pedagogue’s claims for the originality and importance of his writing collapse. Because the Church Fathers write with recognized “authorite” that should—and will—be preferred above his writing (now equated with unreliable “fantasie”), Vives will act only as a humble compiler of preexisting rules.

As a modern writer, Vives stakes out an authorial role that is at once belated, derivative, and denigrated. But the Spanish scholar is not alone in his subordination to the men of the ancient world. This fact becomes apparent in Chapter Four of the Instruction, which defends female learning by invoking a catalog of the educated women of antiquity. There, Vives praises women such as Paulina, who was “enfourmed with the doctrine of
her husband,” the philosopher Seneca (21); and Thecla, the “disciple of [the Apostle] Paul,” who was “a scoler mete for such a noble maister” (21). The educator’s emphasis on defining learned women in relation to men applies as well to his discussion of female authors. For example, he praises the Roman noblewoman Hortensia—who in 42 BCE delivered a speech before Rome’s political and military leaders demanding that they reconsider taxing the city’s wealthiest women—by describing her as a daughter whose “eloquence” resembled that of her father, the famous orator Hortensius (20). The first-century Roman poet Sulpicia, meanwhile, is celebrated as a worthy wife who composed “holy precepts of matrimony” (20). Further, all of these accounts are framed by Vives’s later claim that the women of ancient Rome were always kept “under the rule of theyr fathers, and bretherne, and husbandes, and kynsmen” (179). Thus, in the Instruction, ancient women come to resemble modern men: both are capable of producing independent writings, yet they are also subject to the “authorite” of more respected male authors. While Hortensia composes in her father’s shadow, Vives writes after—and under—the Church Fathers.

As the Instruction continues, Vives exploits this parallel authorial positioning in order to reconfigure his own relationship to ancient male writers. We saw earlier how Vives’s introduction defines his authorial task as one of compilation: he promises to gather up and dispense classical “rules of lyvyng” (8). Such an activity might seem even more servile than imitatio. Yet Vives registers the surprising power of the literary

---

87 All that remains of Hortensia’s speech is a paraphrase by Appian; see Women Writers of Ancient Greek and Rome: An Anthology, ed. I. M. Plant (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 104-5.

88 For more on Sulpicia (one of two ancient female poets of that name), see Plant, 124-126.
compiler through the figure of Faltonia Betita Proba, a fourth-century Roman noblewoman famous for creating a centon, or text composed of selections from earlier writings. Vives explains that Proba “made the lyfe of our lorde Christe out of Virgils verses” (21). As a devoted wife who “loved her husbande singularly well,” Proba does not challenge the extant social hierarchy (21). Nevertheless, her method of writing relies on a subtle form of subversion. Proba does not simply repeat the words of the ancients; instead, she takes texts written by a highly respected classical author and rearranges them, forcing them to signify differently—to become Christian instead of pagan. As Jane Stevenson observes, Proba’s Cento “appropriat[es] and subvert[s] a text central to the Latin tradition, which is hardly an act of humility.”

If Proba’s rewriting of Virgil quietly challenges the earlier author’s auctoritas, a similar adversarial dynamic becomes explicit in the case of the poet Corinna Theia. Vives identifies her as “a virtuous woman [who] overcame the poete Pindar [five] tymes in verses” (21). Here the female poet produces original work, as did Hortensia and Sulpicia—only, instead of being defined as a daughter or a wife, she is the celebrated rival to a major male writer. The text repeats and expands on this victory narrative in the instance of Catharine of Alexandria, a late third-century female saint who, Vives says, “overcame in disputations the greatest and most exercised philosophers” (21). Once more, the female author-figure “overcomes” the male. Much like Proba, furthermore, Catharine is at once subversive and highly orthodox: she debates famous philosophers, but she does so in defense of Christianity, and later dies to preserve her chastity (56). The

89 For more on the historical Proba, see Plant, pp. 170-1, and Sigrid Schottenius Cullhed, Proba the Prophet: The Christian Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015).
90 Women Latin Poets, 62.
examples of Corinna and Catharine of Alexandria demonstrate that the “authorite” of ancient authors is not infallible. Indeed, “the greatest and most exercised philosophers” of the past have been proven wrong—and by women, with whom the modern male writer is tacitly linked. Ancient female authors thus offer Vives a way to imagine not only deference to the ancient world, but rivalry with it.

But the homology that Vives sets up between the modern male writer and the ancient female author is an unstable one. If, at places in the Instruction, Vives identifies with ancient women writers on the grounds of their shared subordination (and rivalry with established authorities), elsewhere in the text he invokes a different mode of affiliation. At such moments, he begins to ally himself with ancient male writers on the grounds on their shared status as men, and—in so doing—suggests that literary authority is the product not of one’s temporal location, but of one’s gender. And at moments like these, the female author’s capacity for competition becomes troubling—her position no longer embraced, but discredited and displaced onto others. Vives employs just such a strategy later in his preface to the Instruction, where he anticipates that young men who are “ignorant, wanton, and unthrifty” will not approve of his text (10). In order to illustrate this threat, he turns to a woman writer of antiquity:

Hit is no newes, that il folke hate them that avyse them well. For Theophraste whan he wrote of this same matter, and spake moche of mariage sadly and wisely, he sette comen harlottis in his toppe (i.e. angered common harlots [242]). And one Leontium, the concubyne of Metrodorus, started out and babbled forthe a boke without all reason, or shame, ayenst that man most excellent in wisedome and eloquence: whiche dede was thought so intollerable, that as though no more hope of goodnes were left, ther rose up a proverbe of that matter, that the next remedy was to seke a tre to go hange upon. (10)

In this parallel, Vives identifies himself with the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (third century BCE), that “man most excellent in wisedome and eloquence,” while he associates
his detractors with Leontium, a “concubyne.” As we will see, the story of the quarrel between Leontium and Theophrastus ultimately derives from Cicero, and was given greater currency by Boccaccio. Most important for our current purposes, however, is how Vives makes Leontium the philosopher-prostitute into a figure that conflates unrestricted female speech with unrestrained female sexuality. While the sage Theophrastus writes, the prostitute Leontium “babble[s] forthe a boke.” Elsewhere in his manual, Vives frets about female “bablynge,” claiming that “[s]ome [women] be so shutle mynded, that amonge theyr companyons they babble out all at large,” indiscreetly voicing “what so ever cometh on theyr tounges ende” (64). Resistant male readers of the text—men who “wolde have theyr foly to be allowable”—are thus gendered as female, and their complaints are condemned as disorderly and indecorous (10). Implicit to this figuration, moreover, is an understanding of writing in which gender provides the dividing line between a proper, “male” textual production (which is wise, sober, and learned) and an improper, “female” textual production (which is irrational, indiscreet, and lascivious). Vives groups himself with Theophrastus on the “male” side of this divide, while his detractors are pushed to the side of Leontium, where language becomes senseless—her “babble” akin to the “gibbrish” of “Evanders mother.”

If ancient woman writers serve as exploratory vehicles for Vives as he sorts through possible attitudes toward antiquity, then they prove equally useful as figures to identify against. The mid-sixteenth-century Bishop of Salisbury, John Jewel, employs the story of Leontium in a similar way when he identifies an enemy Catholic apologist with her in A defence of the Apologie of the Churche of Englande (1567). After accusing his
opponent, the Catholic priest Thomas Harding, of defending the courtesans of Rome,

Jewel sniffs,

> It was neither for your profession, M. Hardinge, nor for your grauitie, to become a Proctoure for the Stevves. Although it might wel become Leontium, an Heathen Courteghiane [sic] of lewde conditions, that wai to bestow her witte, and Eloquence againste Theophrastus, in the defence of that filthy state, yet may not the same likewise become a Christian man, and a professoure of Diuinitie.\(^91\)

For Jewel, Leontium represents an abuse of “witte” and “Eloquence” in writing. She functions, in other words, as a way to think about what literary forms or subjects might be unacceptable—a question that arises when Vives describes The Instruction’s length later in the Preface. He asserts that he has been very concise in writing the treatise, because when “gyvyng precepts, a man oughte specially to be brefe: lest he soner dull the wyttes of the reders, than teche them, with long bablynge” (9, italics mine). Male authors do not therefore naturally or inevitably produce “wisedome and eloquence” in the style of antiquity; they, too, might begin “bablynge,” articulating “what so ever cometh on theyr tounges ende.” Indeed, Vives’s association of Leontium with a “babbled forth… boke” seems a way to displace his own anxieties around modern authorship onto the figure of the woman writer—a figure that his writing can then work to contain.\(^92\) If Leontium comes to stand for a sexualized threat of linguistic disorder, Vives retrospectively asserts control over Leontium’s disorderly body and words by claiming that her act of writing resulted in a “proverb.” As a text defined by its concision, by its ability to distill sage

---


\(^92\) For a detailed discussion of humanist anxieties over “the ambiguous gender of men of words and of the activity of writing itself”—and how these anxieties influenced understandings of prose styles—see Patricia Parker, “Virile Style,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, eds. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 201-216.
information into a few words, the proverb as form is the opposite of “bablynge.” By transforming Leontium’s “boke” into the occasion for a proverb, Vives ultimately seems to depict the triumph of “masculine” concision over “feminine” babbling; he claims victory, in effect, over a form of writing that is both associated with his detractors and threatens to overtake his own text.93

Vives’s experimental identification with ancient women writers thus exists in tension with the competing desire to construct authorship along much more strictly gendered lines: to equate female writing with lascivious female speech, and male writing with speaking “sadly and wisely” (10). As the Instruction continues, so does the work’s focus on chastity as “the queene of vertues in a woman” (53). Consequently, classical female authors become less viable as vehicles for the modern male writer. Chapter Four’s images of female writers who rivaled the men of the ancient world are replaced with stories of virtuous women who repeat the words of men—a shift vividly illustrated in the figure of “Theano Metapontina.” Theano first appears in Vives’s catalog of learned women of antiquity, where he praises her as a “woman of singular chastitie” and a member of a college of virgins (20).94 Later in Book I, however, Vives cites Theano in order to support—in a seeming paradox—his emphasis on the importance of female silence. At the beginning of a passage that will equate female silence with chastity (and,

94 There are two ancient women writers of that name, a philosopher and a poet; Vives appears to conflate the two. As Plant notes, no writing by Theano the poet survives, although “some Pythagorean pseudonymous literature (mostly of the third century BC) [has been] ascribed” to Theano the philosopher (248).
by extension, female speech with uncontrolled sexuality), Vives affirms, “Theano Metapontina[,] a poet, and a mayde excellent counnynge, rekened, that silence was the noblest ornament of a woman” (63). Vives finesses the apparent contradiction of invoking a woman’s “voice” in order to silence other women during Theano’s next appearance in the text. Here, Vives manages to make her speak while removing her voice entirely. In order to explain wifely domestic duties, Vives quotes her quoting Homer: “Theano Metapontina, whan one asked her, what wife was the beste, she answered with a verse of Homer in this manner: She that worketh on wolle and webbe, / And kepeth well her husbandes bed” (138). Like the centon-maker Proba, Theano reuses the words of an ancient male authority; unlike Proba, however, Theano does not rearrange these words in order to make them signify differently. Instead of creating a centon, she speaks a proverb. And in so doing, Theano serves as a mouthpiece for two men at once: she speaks the words of Homer—and, through him, the words of Vives. By merely repeating the words of men, Theano is, paradoxically, a female poet who speaks and yet is silent.

Vives’s treatment of Theano encodes in miniature a gendered paradigm of authorship that arises in the work’s later sections—a paradigm in which men produce words that their female audience must remember and repeat. This paradigm also appears with particular clarity when Vives discusses how girls should learn to write. The female pupil, he cautions, should not imitate “voyde verses, nor wanton or tryflyng songes: but some sad sentence, prudent and chaste, taken out of holy scripture, or of the sayenges of philosophers: which by often writyng she may fasten better in her memory” (23, italics mine). Earlier we saw how, in De disciplinis, Vives positioned imitatio as the gateway to aemulatio: a young man must mimic classical authors until he is able to challenge them.
In the *Instruction*, by contrast, the female student’s *imitatio* never progresses to *aemulatio*. Instead, she ceaselessly repeats earlier and more authoritative pronouncements, her mind becoming a metaphorical storehouse of ancient texts.95

This gendered paradigm eventually allows Vives to usurp the *auctoritas* his text initially accords only to ancient men. In Book II of the *Instruction*, which concerns the duties of wives, Vives turns from reciting classical and Biblical *exempla* to offer a detailed account of a virtuous woman whom he knew personally (102). As a preface to her story, Vives asserts, “that [which] I have sene my selfe… I wyll declare, [so] that both they that nowe be, and they that shall come here after may knowe it” (102, italics mine). In a startling move, Vives makes his personal experience into a source of “authorite” equal to that of texts written by the Church Fathers and classical authors. What Vives has “sene [him] selfe”—and not what he has read or “pyked out” from earlier writers—is what deserves his reader’s attention. He concludes his anecdote by cautioning his female readers to remember his words: they will, he says, serve to remind “wyves of their dewtye” (104). Part of Vives’s assumption of the literary *auctoritas* of the ancients therefore depends on his claim that his work deserves to be remembered by women: his “sayenges” and *exempla* should be among those fastened in his female reader’s mind.

The Spanish humanist becomes, in effect, one of those “great wytted and holy men” whom he praises in his preface.

Thus, while Vives’s *Instruction* initially posits that modern men and ancient women occupy homologous authorial positions with respect to the “authoritees” of

---

antiquity—a space of overlap that allows Vives to explore different authorial roles—the text later moves to gender authorship more strictly. In this paradigm, women’s words can be easily dismissed as mere “bablynge”—unless, that is, they repeat the words of men. By giving “Christen gentlewomen” the duty of compiling male-authored texts in their memories, Vives frees himself to rival the ancients and enshrine his own writing as worthy of memory. Yet if The Instruction demonstrates how and why a male humanist might make auctoritas the product of his gender, the works of writers such as Thomas Elyot and William Painter suggest instead the possibilities inherent to the same cross-gendered and cross-temporal identifications that Vives ultimately disavows.

**Dinner with Lady Zenobia: Elyot’s Alternate Authorities**

Scholars have long speculated on the influence that Vives’s *Instruction* might have had on Thomas Elyot’s *The Defence of Good Women* (1540). Set in 274 CE and framed as a debate between a detractor of women (Caninius) and their defender (Candidus), Elyot’s text concludes after Zenobia—once the queen of Palmyra, now a prisoner in Rome—successfully refutes Caninius during a dinner party. Critics often find Elyot’s Zenobia a more appealing exemplum of female virtue than many of the figures proffered by Vives, and some have argued that she reflects Elyot’s more sanguine appraisal of the nature of

---

96 Charles Fantazzi, for example, argues that the *Defence* adopts many of Vives’s ideas (*Instruction*, “Prelude,” 33); scholars more often argue that Elyot refutes Vives’s more limited views of women (see footnote 47). Critics do, however, seem to agree that Elyot was most likely familiar with Vives’ writings, and perhaps even knew the Spanish humanist personally; see Catherine Curtis, “The Social and Political Thought of Juan Luis Vives: Concord and Counsel In the Christian Commonwealth,” in *A Companion to Juan Luis Vives*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2008), 113-176, 168.
women. As an admirable former warrior queen, Elyot’s Zenobia does indeed seem to challenge Vives’s emphasis on the necessary subordination of women—his warning that they are too intellectually frail to possess what he calls “the autorite of maistershyp” (24). And yet, Elyot and Vives’s disagreement over female authority also ties into a deeper debate over the position of the modern humanist author and the identifications that such a vexed position might elicit. While Vives’s Instruction ultimately refuses to link modern men to ancient women, Elyot’s Defence reaffirms these bonds. More than this, Elyot’s text continues to think through the subversive implications of Vives’s exempla, developing the figure of the female literary rival into that of the “mastresse”: the ancient woman who not only surpassed famous men in learning, but also instructed them. Through the concept of the “mastresse”—and, as we shall see, particularly through the captive but defiant Zenobia—Elyot aligns modern male writers with an auctoritas at once outside of and superior to Rome’s.

In his Preface to the Defence, Elyot explains that the character of Candidus will function as his stand-in and disprove the claims of Caninius the woman-hater. But the text soon offers up another, more surprising figure for Elyot as author—a figure that we first met in the Instruction. While defending women’s intelligence, Candidus invokes the ancient female author most despised by Vives: Leontium. Candidus asserts that Leontium

97 Constance Jordan sees Elyot’s text as a “refutation” of the Instruction’s unsupportive stance on female rule (119); see her monograph Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 119-122. Less optimistically, Sharon L. Jansen argues that the Defence advances (contra Vives) “some concession to the possibility of female sovereignty” (102); see her Debating Women, Power, and Politics in Early Modern Europe (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 98-103. For a valuable reading of the Defence that does not stress the text’s relationship to Vives, see Pamela Benson, The Invention of the Renaissance Woman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 183-204.
“excelled al menne of her tyme in wysedome and eloquence, in so moche as she wrate agaynsthe Theophrast, the most eloquent disciple of Aristotel, in womennes defence” (D6). He goes on to add that if Leontium’s “boke” still “remayne’d,” it would “haue ben sufficyent to haue put [Caninius] to silence” (D6). What Elyot does here is retell—and completely invert—the very anecdote that Vives employed in order to gender authorship the exclusive province of men. While Vives depicted Leontium as a babbling concubine who shamefully wrote against the somber and wise Theophrastus, Elyot removes any hint of lasciviousness from Leontium’s reputation, making her instead into a valiant defender of women.

As an author who composes a “boke” “in womennes defence,” Leontium is both Elyot’s double and his predecessor—but a predecessor whose work has been conveniently lost. Her differences from Theophrastus in this regard are instructive. A student of Aristotle’s (and, after the older man’s death, his “literary executor”), Theophrastus was known in the early modern period for his work Characters, which was recovered in the fifteenth century, eventually becoming “one of the most influential and most widely imitated of all writings surviving from [a]ntiquity, particularly in England and France.” By contrast, none of Leontium’s writings survive. In the early modern period, she was mostly known because of the brief reference to her quarrel with Theophrastus in Cicero’s On the Nature of the Gods (cited in this chapter’s epigraph),

which Boccaccio drew attention to in his *Famous Women*. Yet the loss of Leontium’s writings is not a stumbling block for Elyot. Instead, this bibliographical gap is an enabling absence: one that gives Elyot’s *Defence* a classical precedent without simultaneously making it dependent on an earlier man’s (or woman’s) writings. To borrow the words of Ascham, Leontium may be an “old worthie Author,” but her missing texts will never shackle or bind the modern writer.

This freedom is an important one in the *Defence*, which quickly becomes as much a debate over the principle of *auctoritas* as it is about the nature of womankind. Although the debate’s central speakers are ostensibly Romans living in the third century CE, they debate in the style of Renaissance humanists—that is, by citing authoritative ancient sources. When, for example, Candidus affirms that he has always personally found women to be faithful to their husbands, Caninius dismisses him by invoking support from the classical tradition: “Syr by the consent of al auctours my wordes be confirmed, and your experience in comparison therof is to be lyttell estemed” (B4v). By denigrating Candidus’ own “experience” in favor of the testimony provided by classical texts, Caninius affirms the importance of *auctoritas*. Like Ascham, Caninius believes that every modern thinker must follow a classical “mayster”—a belief that Candidus will challenge as part of his defense of women.

When pushed by Candidus to name an authority who can prove that women are inevitably unfaithful to their spouses, Caninius responds by paraphrasing Aristotle: the philosopher “sayth, that a woman is a worke of nature vnperfecte. And more ouer, that

---

her propertie is to delyte in rebukyng, and to be alway compla
contented” (C3v). Caninius’ answer does not quite address the subject of female fidelit
but Candidus does not point out this failing. Instead, he focuses on undermin
Aristotle’s auctoritas, portraying him as a bitter and unpleasant individual. The
philosopher’s claims about women, Candidus contends, “proceeded only of canker
d malyce, whervnto he was of his own nature dysposed” (C5v). In Candidus’ telling, it is
Aristotle who is inherently flawed, and not the female sex. He continues his ad hominem
attack by alleging that Aristotle constantly insulted other philosophers, and eventually
“rente with rebukes the immortall fame of Plato his mayster” (C5v). The claim is a
significant one. By criticizing Aristotle for shamefully breaking with his master Plato,
Candidus in turn frees himself to break with Aristotle. The Defence’s debate over the
nature of women therefore allows for a radical questioning of Aristotle’s auctoritas, a
questioning that leads Candidus—and, through him, Elyot—to refuse to accept the
classical philosopher as his “mayster.”

Elyot continues his critique of received authority in his catalog of the learned
women of antiquity. When Candidus begins to defend women’s capacity for learning, he
draws on a number of exempla also mentioned by Vives—including Cleobulina,
Cassandra, the sibyls, and Leontium. But where Vives especially praised women who
learned at the feet of wise men, Elyot emphasizes educated women who deserved

100 Jordan makes a similar point when she notes that, “Elyot’s decision to assign
Aristotle’s notions to a Caninius, a detractor of women, indicates a remarkable
willingness to contest the philosopher’s authority” (249). See her essay “Feminism and
the Humanists: The Case for Sir Thomas Elyot’s Defense of Good Women,” in Rewriting
the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, eds.
Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London:
positions of higher authority. For instance, while Vives identifies Cassandra merely as a "virgin" and "prophete" (20), Candidus insists that, if only Cassandra’s warnings about the Trojan War had been heeded, “the citie of Troye … hadde lenger remayned, And Priamus with his noble succession hadde many yeres rayned” (D6r). The King of Troy, in short, would have done well to listen to his daughter. Elyot further develops his trope of the learned woman who counseled ancient men through the Sibyl of Cumae (who, like Cassandra, was one of the legendary female prophets of antiquity). Revealing the degree to which he speaks from a “modern” vantage point despite his ostensible identity as a third-century Roman, Candidus exclaims, “Beholde our progenitours the ancient Romayns in al extreme dangers, whan other counsayle vtterly fayled, dyd not they resort to the bokes of Sibylla Cumana … & pursuing her aduise … dyd they not escape the perils whiche thanne were imminente?” (D6r). If Cassandra demonstrates the dangers of ignoring the counsel provided by women, then the Sibyl suggests the benefits that result from heeding their words.

Elyot’s assertion that women could and did counsel ancient men is more than a simple defense of female intelligence. It is also a vindication of the “subordinate” position: an insistence that authority may actually belong to those habitually denied it. Elyot continues his vindication of the subordinate position in his account of two legendary female philosophers of antiquity, Aspasia and Diotima. Candidus identifies them as “so well lerned” in philosophy that they instructed no less an authority than Socrates, who called Diotima “his mastresse” (D6v). \(^{101}\) Elyot is also careful to remind the

\(^{101}\) The claim that Aspasia taught Socrates seems to derive from Plutarch’s Pericles; see Plant, 41. Diotima figures prominently in Plato’s Symposium, and both women are praised in Castiglione’s The Courtier.
reader at this point in the text that Socrates went on to instruct Plato, and Plato (as we saw earlier) later instructed Aristotle. According to Candidus, therefore, the original source of classical philosophical knowledge is not a single “mayster,” but two “mastresse[s]”: Aspasia and Diotima. Suggesting that Aristotle’s knowledge ultimately derives from female philosophers is an ironic masterstroke on the part of Candidus and Elyot, since it places Caninius and his classical master in debt to the very sex that they scorn.

Caninius’ alternate genealogy also has important implications for the Defence’s larger debate over the inherited cultural authority of ancient men. While he earlier drew attention to ancient women who deserved positions of greater authority, Elyot here stresses the figure of the “mastresse”: the woman who instructed classical authorities. In so doing, he raises the possibility of an alternate auctoritas, one that predates—and surpasses—that of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Humanists such as Caninius, who insist that all claims are worthless unless they are “confirmed” by the “consent of al auctours,” are shown to have been putting their faith in the wrong luminaries: it is women such as Diotima and Aspasia who form the true cornerstones of the Western intellectual tradition. Moreover, because it attributes auctoritas to supposedly “subordinate” figures, Elyot’s revised history of philosophy has liberating implications for the modern male writer. Contrary to the strict humanist logic followed by Caninius, modern men may not need ancient masters—indeed, modern men (like ancient women) may in fact be able to master the famous authorities of antiquity. Elyot’s account of Aspasia and Diotima not only raises this possibility; it also enacts it. By rewriting the traditional account of philosophy’s origins, Elyot suggests that he possesses greater knowledge of the past than
the writers who came before him. He asserts, in other words, an *auctoritas* that breaks with that of the “old worthie Authors” of antiquity.

Elyot further shadows his self-defined role as subversive historian and alternate source of authority through another female author found in Vives: the third-century queen Zenobia. Zenobia was the wife of Odenathus, who ruled a group of Roman provinces in Asia Minor centered around Palmyra (modern-day Syria); though nominally loyal to Rome, Odenathus in fact reigned quite independently, owing to Rome’s declining power in the region during this period. After Odenathus’ sudden assassination in 267 CE, Zenobia took control of his territories, and ruled as regent in place of her young sons. In 270, she and her generals began to conquer more land in the Near East, quickly establishing a domain that historians now refer to as the Palmyrene Empire. Although still nominally under the power of Rome, Zenobia (like Odenathus before her) functioned as an independent ruler, and eventually claimed the title of Empress. The Palmyrene Empire lasted until 272—when, after a short war, the Roman Emperor Aurelian deposed Zenobia and reclaimed the Palmyrene territories for Rome.102

In *The Instruction*, Vives praises Zenobia for her “marvaylous chastite,” and claims that she was “lerned both in latyn and greke, and wrote [a] historie” (21). Elyot preserves these qualities when he introduces her as a character in the *Defence*. Indeed, she is presented to the reader as a kind of living *exemplum* of female worth, an “example amonge vs” of “fortitude as of all other vertues” (D7v). Candidus explains that the Emperor Aurelian took Zenobia captive after her army twice defeated his forces in battle.

---

Because of her “nobyltye[,] vertue and courage,” however, Aurelian pardoned her and gave her a villa in Rome (D7r). In the Defence, Zenobia is thus a kind of resident alien—an outsider and onetime enemy of the Roman Empire, now forced to live at its heart. Yet she has not been idle during her Roman captivity. Before her arrival, Candidus tells Caninius that Zenobia, “beinge nowe vacante frome other busynesse, wryteth as they saye of Alexandria and the orient eloquent stories” (D7r-D8v). Zenobia’s writing reflects her status as an intimate outsider, a woman who is in Rome but not of it: from the Empire’s capital, she writes about the foreign lands that resisted its control.

Elyot’s emphasis on Zenobia’s status as an author has important ramifications for his text. Critics have made much of Zenobia’s status as a “captive queen,” drawing parallels between Zenobia’s confined state and that of Catherine of Aragon after 1530, “when Henry ordered that she live apart from him as a virtual prisoner of the state.” I suggest, however, that Zenobia also compellingly allegorizes the condition of the humanist writer. As we have seen in discussions of Ascham, Vives, and Erasmus, the humanist project was sometimes imagined as a form of intellectual bondage to the ancients. Elyot also describes humanist pedagogy in terms that subtly depict its students as captives. In The Boke of the Governor (1531), he specifies that at the age of seven, a young nobleman must “be taken from the company of women” and trusted instead to the care of “an aunciente and worshypfull man.” His parents should carefully choose an instructor who is both gentle and serious, so that their child “may growe to be excellente” “by imitation.” What Elyot advocates here is a kind of embodied practice of imitatio,

---

103 Jordan, Renaissance Feminism, 119.
104 Elyot, Governor, 19r-20v.
105 Ibid, 20v.
in which young boys model themselves after respected older men. And yet, Elyot’s
description of this education suggests that it is also a form of captivity: the young male
student, after all, must be forcibly “taken” from the women who raised him. Elyot
reaffirms this subtext by proceeding to invoke the example of Philip II of Macedon, the
father of Alexander the Great. Elyot alleges that Philip greatly “profited” from his early
experiences as a hostage in Thebes, where he “receyued suche lernynge, … that he
excelled al other kynges, that were before his tyme in Grece.”106 This anecdote helps to
establish Elyot’s view of humanist education as a beneficial form of captivity—one in
which the nobleman’s son gains fluency in Latin and Greek by becoming a kind of
hostage.

More than one scholar has stressed the gendered dimensions of such pedagogy,
emphasizing how humanism took young boys from the “company of women” and
installed them in the all-male world of the schoolroom.107 In the Defence, however, the
male humanist’s captive condition also aligns him with the female figure of Zenobia.
Elyot’s Palmyran queen literalizes the modern author’s metaphorical captivity by
Rome—a subjugation that begins with his education in Latin, and (as we saw in Vives,
Ascham, and Erasmus) continues insofar as humanism assigns the modern writer a
subordinate place in relation to the classical canon. But if Elyot uses Zenobia to
allegorize the constrained condition of the modern humanist, he also uses the captive
queen to shadow forth the advantages that accrue to this position. By highlighting
Zenobia’s continued, indirect resistance to her captors, Elyot suggests that ostensible

106 Ibid, 20v-20r.
subjugation to Rome is actually the ideal position from which to subvert the Empire’s power.

This possibility becomes explicit near the end of the *Defence*, when Zenobia recounts her reign over the Palmyrene Empire. The account she gives both subtly critiques the Roman Empire’s mode of conquest and suggests her own ability to undermine and master her enemies. She explains that when she was queen, Rome “alwaye awayted to fynde oportunitie, to inuade my realme, and to subdue it vnder their Empire” (E4v). Despite the threats from this and other lands, however, she “added moche more to myne Empire, not soo moche by force, as by renoune of iuste and politike gouernaunce” (E5r). Her rule was so widely admired, Zenobia claims, that her country’s invading enemies often chose “rather to leaue theyr hostilitie, and to remayne in our subiection, than to retourne to theyr owne countrey” (E5r). In telling this story, Zenobia emphasizes her ability to resist the Roman Empire—and add to her own—not so much through open conflict (“force”) as through her ability to revise: her good governance transforms the “hostilitie” of enemy men into their willing “subjection.” Her ability to win the support of her enemies also calls into question the status of her captivity. Ostensibly, as a defeated queen and a prisoner of Aurelian, Zenobia has been subjugated to the power of Rome. And yet, because she has proven so adept at converting enemies to her cause, the reader of the *Defence* is left to wonder if she will once again transform “hostilitie” into “subjection”—if this foreign “mastresse” might yet overcome her masters.

Elyot encourages this line of thinking by portraying the Palmyran queen in such a positive light. And given how clearly Zenobia allegorizes the position of the modern
writer, Elyot’s sympathy is not surprising: her potential subversion of her Roman captors figures forth the ability of modern men to undermine their own ancient masters. Indeed, Zenobia’s account of how she added to her empire provides a model for understanding Elyot’s earlier revision of ancient intellectual history. By revising the traditional origins of philosophical knowledge, Elyot demonstrates that men who are hostile to women are actually subject to them. And in so doing, he suggests that the modern author can use his knowledge of the ancient world to undermine its authority. Elyot performs a related maneuver earlier in the text, when Candidus questions Caninius about Aristotle. Are “all the bookes of your mayster Aristotel,” he demands, “of equal authoritie?” (35). When Caninius answers in the affirmative, Candidus points out that in Aristotle’s *Economics* (*Oeconomica*), men and women are said to possess different but mutually-complementary strengths—a stance that conflicts with Aristotle’s claim that women are by nature “vnperfecte.” Once he finishes highlighting this apparent contradiction in Aristotle’s thought, Candidus asks, “Be not these the wordes of your maister?” (36). Though modern scholars agree that the *Economics* was falsely attributed to Aristotle, the text was believed authentic in the sixteenth century, and it plays an important part in Elyot’s dismissal of the Greek philosopher. 108 By emphasizing apparently contradictory arguments in the philosopher’s corpus, Elyot works to break down the ancient man’s authority. In sum, Elyot demonstrates how the modern writer might turn the *auctoritas* of the ancient world against itself.

By the end of the *Defence*, therefore, Elyot suggests that the classical learning instilled in humanist-trained writers does not simply shackle them to the ancient world and its thinkers; it can be used instead to rebel against the authority of these thinkers. In such a scenario, the metaphorical captivity induced by humanism is revealed to be an instrument for freeing the modern writer—a possibility that Elyot explores through the figure of Zenobia. Later in the century, another, less well-known writer named William Painter (1540?–1595) would build on Elyot’s use of the Palmyran queen as a figure for the defiant humanist author. Painter is best remembered today as the compiler and translator of *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566, 1567), a two-volume collection of prose narratives taken from classical and Continental authors, including Livy, Plutarch, Boccaccio, and Marguerite de Navarre.109 *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* observes that Painter’s *Palace* was “widely read, imitated, and plagiarized” in the sixteenth century, and “seems to have left traces in every notable Tudor playwright.”110 One such playwright was Shakespeare, whose *Rape of Lucrece* owes a debt to the *Palace*’s translation of Livy.111 In what follows, however, I am less concerned with tracing Painter’s influence on more-famous early modern authors than on a narrative

---


111 Ibid.
found in the second volume of the *Palace*. In “The lyfe and giftes of the most Famous Queene Zenobia,” Painter translates a letter purportedly written by Zenobia and expands on it significantly, intensifying its anti-Roman rhetoric. In writing as Zenobia, Painter takes a central pedagogical technique of the English humanist schoolroom—that is, *prosopopoeia*—and turns it against the very sense of ancient *auctoritas* that it was designed to reinforce. Ultimately, for Painter, Zenobia becomes not only a site for theorizing how the modern author might resist the influence of the ancients, but also a figure through which that challenge can be articulated.

**The Queen in the Palace: Painter’s prosopopoeia**

Zenobia enjoyed a fairly active literary afterlife in medieval and early modern England, due in large part to her presence in Boccaccio’s *Famous Women*. Elyot, for one, seems to have based his account of the queen on Boccaccio’s narrative. But although he was certainly familiar with Boccaccio, Painter’s main source for his account of Zenobia’s life was the *Historia Augusta*—a collection of biographies of second- and third-century Roman emperors and usurpers likely written during the late fourth century CE. Painter makes no secret of his source, openly citing one of the *Historia’s* purported authors by


113 O’Brien, 64-7.

114 The authorship of the *Historia*, as well as its date of composition, have long been matters of scholarly dispute. Traditionally ascribed to six authors working in the late third and early fourth centuries, classicists now generally agree that the *Historia* was in fact written by “a single person working in or very close to the end of the fourth [century].” For details, see “Historia Augusta,” *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 690-1. It should also be noted that Boccaccio’s account of Zenobia in turn derives from the *Historia*; see O’Brien, 67, n.1.
name as he begins his narrative (95r). The *Historia* provided Painter with both a
general outline of Zenobia’s reign and with several purported details about the queen’s
appearance and behavior—for instance, that her teeth were white as pearls, and that she
only ever slept with her husband in order to become pregnant (98r).

Yet Painter begins to significantly diverge from his classical source when he
recounts how the Emperor Aurelian came to power and led an army into battle against
Zenobia with the intent of reclaiming the Palmyrene Empire. The *Historia* explains that,
“exhausted and worn out by reason of ill-success,” Aurelian sent a letter to the queen,
instructing her that if she surrendered to his forces, her life and the lives of her sons
would be spared. The letter also stipulated that she would have to relinquish her
treasure and dwell along with her children in a place of Aurelian’s choosing. Painter
provides a translation of this supposed letter in his account of Zenobia’s life, but he takes
considerable liberties with the text. His version of Aurelian’s letter is considerably
longer than the *Historia*’s (two hundred and ninety-four words, instead of fifty-seven),
and its terms of surrender are much more generous. In Painter’s version, the Emperor
tells Zenobia that she must disband the Palmyrene Empire, but she may continue to rule
over Palmyra itself. She may also keep her treasure and maintain “a certain number of
men of warre … for the defense of thy kyngdome” (99r). After her death, furthermore,

---

115 William Painter, *The second tome of the Palace of pleasure conteyning store of goodly
histories, tragicall matters, and other morall argument* (London: 1567). All future
citations of Painter will be to this edition.
Library (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1932), 139; 137-138. (All in-text citations will
be to this edition.)
117 *Scriptores* v. III, 247.
118 I say “supposed letter” because most scholars agree that the letters cited in the
*Historia* are not originals but later inventions; see the text’s entry in *The Oxford Classical
Dictionary*, cited above.
she may leave the kingdom to whomever she pleases (99v). Unlike in the *Historia*, however, Painter’s Aurelian requires that Zenobia give him one of her children: “not as prisoner, but as hostage and pledge from thee” (99r). Painter’s letter is also different insofar as his Aurelian demands that the queen “rendre thy selfe under myne obedience,” and “acknowledge Rome to be thy superior” (99v). What Painter’s Aurelian wants, in short, is not Zenobia’s wealth, her soldiers, or her kingdom—he wants her to openly submit to Rome’s mastery.

In Painter’s telling, Aurelian’s letter to Zenobia becomes a version of the deal that humanist pedagogy offered modern writers: submit to the authority of ancient Rome and gain a limited power of your own. For Zenobia, that power is sovereignty over a greatly reduced empire; for modern writers, that power is the eloquence instilled by the classical canon. The allegory is further reinforced by Aurelian’s demand that Zenobia surrender one of her sons to be brought back to Rome as a “hostage.” Invented by Painter, this stipulation recalls Elyot’s unsettling depiction of humanist education as a form of captivity. No less than the Queen of Palmyra, the modern writer must pay a heavy price to Rome in exchange for claiming a small part of that Empire’s *auctoritas*.

But if Painter’s version of Aurelian’s letter suggests the difficult trade-off embedded in humanist pedagogy, his translation of Zenobia’s purported reply strikingly voices the modern writer’s ability to resist classical authority. As we have seen, Painter’s translation of Aurelian’s letter expands on the one found in the *Historia*. Painter takes even greater liberties with the text attributed to Zenobia: the letter found in the *Historia* is only seventy-eight words long, but Painter’s version of the text goes on for more than seven hundred words. At the beginning of his narrative, Painter approvingly informs the
reader that Zenobia “resisted the invincible Romans,” and his version of her letter bears out this claim in great detail (95r). His Zenobia immediately asserts her prerogative, identifying herself to Aurelian as “Lady Regent of all the Orient, and the only dame and maystresse of all the same” (99r). She continues by informing the Emperor, “Thou sayest that if I rendre obedience vnto thee, thou wilt do me great honor: To that I aunswere, that it were a dishonest part of me, and a deede most vnjust, that the Gods hauing created Zenobia to commaund all Asia, she should now begyn to bee slaue and thral vnto the city of Rome” (99r).

This startlingly rebellious proclamation has no parallel in the Historia. It is instead an invention of Painter’s—one that tellingly reflects humanist anxieties over the power of ancient auctoritas. In having Zenobia angrily refuse to be a “slaue and thral” to Rome, Painter articulates a more rebellious version of the rhetoric used by humanist writers such as Petrarch, who (as we saw earlier) insisted, “I do not want a leader who binds me … let me have my eyes with a leader, my judgment and freedom.” While Petrarch advocates for a form of writerly agency that still acknowledges the preeminence of antiquity (he keeps in place, after all, the notion of a classical model or “leader”), Painter’s Zenobia expresses instead a fantasy of breaking completely with Rome and its auctoritas. And much like in Elyot, this possibility becomes associated with the figure of the female “maystresse.”

The two “mastresse[s]” of Elyot’s Defense, Diotima and Aspasia, suggested the possibility of an auctoritas that predates even the most ancient philosophers, and thereby challenges the primacy of these men in the humanist hierarchy. Painter’s depiction of Zenobia as a “maystresse,” however, works differently. Zenobia does not come from a
time before ancient Rome; she is Aurelian’s contemporary and rival, and she openly
defies his authority. As such, she provides the modern writer with a figure for his own
potential dissent. Yet the queen not only represents the possibility of a modern rebellion
against the ancients. In the Palace, she is also a vehicle for articulating this dissent.
Through writing as Zenobia, Painter can refuse—in startlingly bold and unapologetic
terms—to submit to the ancient world’s auctoritas. In another passage from his letter that
has no parallel in the Historia, Painter-as-Zenobia proclaims, “think not that I am greatly
afrayde of the name of Roman Prynce, nor yet the power of thyne huge army. For it bee
in thy hands to gyue battell, it belongeth onely to the gods to gyue either to thee or me the
victory. That I remaine in fielde it is to me greate fame, but thou to fight with a widdowe,
oughtest truelye to bee ashamed” (100v). Here, Painter turns Rome’s reputation for
power against the Empire, insisting that honor accrues not to the winner of the battle, but
to the weaker force: that is, to the “widdowe” Zenobia—and, via homology, to the
humanist writer who dares to defy authoritative ancient models.

Painter thus uses Zenobia’s letter to voice a rebellious reply to the authorities of
antiquity. Turning to the original version of the letter underscores how much Painter
invents under the guise of “translation.” In the Historia, the Queen of Palmyra simply
informs Aurelian that she will not surrender and that reinforcements are coming to her
aid.\textsuperscript{119} The intensely anti-Roman rhetoric found in Painter’s translation—the refusal to be
a “slave and thral” to Aurelian and his Empire—are nowhere to be found. Indeed, Painter
takes so many liberties with Zenobia’s letter that it can hardly be called a translation. It is
instead an example of prosopopoeia, a rhetorical device in which one speaker

\textsuperscript{119} Scriptores v. III, 249.
impersonates the speech of another. *Prosopopoeia* has its roots in classical rhetoric, and was endorsed by both Quintilian and Erasmus.¹²⁰ In his *De conscribendis epistolis* (1522)—a text that exerted a shaping influence on the English grammar school curriculum—Erasmus tells schoolmasters to have their students write letters in the voices of historical and mythological figures from antiquity.¹²¹ Pupils could write, for example, as Agamemnon, “urging his brother Menelaus to forget about Helen”—or, conversely, the boys might write as Helen, “restraining Paris from an illicit love.”¹²² They could write as Nestor attempting to calm Achilles, or (following Ovid’s example in the *Heroïdes*) as Penelope beseeching Ulysses to return to her.¹²³ This work with *prosopopoeia*, Erasmus promises, will do more than help pupils to polish their Latin: the practice will also “unconsciously assimilate ancient tales worth remembering and fix them deep in their memories.”¹²⁴

While Erasmus depicts *prosopopoeia* as an exercise that reinforces a student’s knowledge of antiquity, he also implies that it will strengthen the ancient world’s *auctoritas* for the student. Erasmus reminds the humanist schoolteacher that, if he asks

---


his students to debate moral issues in the voices of various classical figures, the teacher should be certain to furnish them with “several passages where these topics are treated in the classical authors,” because then “the pupils may collect a store of words and maxims or may imitate them with similar expressions.” In this moment, the humanist student shifts from appropriating ancient figures and inventing speeches for them to collecting and imitating the words of classical authors. He moves, in other words, from prosopopoeia to imitatio. Of course, one could argue that prosopopoeia is already a species of imitatio—after all, to write a letter in the voice of Penelope from the Heroïdes is, in some sense, to write as Ovid. And yet, this shift nevertheless seems to restrict the modern author and his range of expression: to push him away from the potential production of new ideas and toward the repetition of inherited ones. (As we have seen, this is the very anxiety that Vives’s Instruction displaces onto ancient women writers such as Theano Metapontina.)

Painter avoids this potential difficulty by choosing to write in the style of an ancient author whose texts had not survived into the sixteenth century. As we have seen, both Vives and Elyot praised Zenobia for her historical writings. The Queen’s reputation as an author ultimately derived from the Historia, which records that she “was so well versed” “[i]n the history of Alexandria and the Orient” that she “composed an epitome.” This work, however, was lost by the time that Painter was translating and writing the texts that compose The Palace of Pleasure. All that remained of Zenobia’s writings was her purported reply to Aurelian in the Historia. As a result of this loss, Zenobia becomes for Painter what Leontium is for Elyot: a classical precedent that

---

125 Ibid, 27.
126 Scriptores v. III, 141.
sanctions the modern author’s writing without also providing a model that he must imitate. Painter’s *prosopopoeia* of Zenobia cannot slide into *imitatio* because there is so little of her writing left to follow. Instead, she becomes an invitingly empty space, a figure associated with revolt against the Roman Empire that Painter employs to articulate his own rebellion against antiquity. In effect, by writing in the voice of Zenobia, Painter cunningly takes the *prosopopoeia* of the humanist schoolroom and uses it against the sense of classical *auctoritas* it was meant to inculcate.

Painter may extensively rewrite Zenobia’s letter to Aurelian under the guise of translation, but he cannot change the historical outcome of their war. The *Historia* records that, after her defeat, Aurelian brought Zenobia back to Rome and triumphantly led her through the streets of the city as a captive. The *Historia* describes her chains in great detail, noting that “her feet were bound with shackles of gold and her hands with golden fetters, and even on her neck she wore a chain of gold.”127 The glittering chains were only one part of her punishment. During the triumph, Zenobia was also reportedly “adorned with gems so huge that she laboured under the weight of her ornaments; for it is said that this woman, courageous though she was, halted very frequently, saying that she could not endure the load of her gems.”128 Painter increases the pathos of this scene by claiming that Zenobia was made to “marche … bare footed, charged with the burden of heavy chaynes, and hir two children by hir side” (101v). If Painter makes Zenobia’s conflict with Aurelian allegorize the modern writer’s struggle to break with classical *auctoritas*, then the queen’s defeat seems to forecast a dismal fate for the humanist author. Beautiful though they are, the chains imposed by Rome are still chains.

127 Ibid.
128 Ibid.
And yet, as we saw earlier, Elyot uses Zenobia’s Roman captivity to suggest that the modern writer’s constrained position in regard to classical authors is actually the ideal position from which to subvert their auctoritas. Painter similarly develops the subversive potential of Zenobia’s confinement by adding a coda not found in his source. The Historia concludes by noting that Aurelian gave the queen an estate, where she “lived … with her children in the manner of a Roman matron”—an anecdote that suggests she became absorbed into the very Empire that she once tried to defy. Painter’s narrative, however, draws to a close by emphasizing the people of Rome’s surprising response to the spectacle of Zenobia’s captivity. The sight of her in chains, Painter claims, “made the Romane Matrons to conceyve great pity [for Zenobia], being wel knowen to al the Romans, that neither in valorous deeds, nor yet in virtue or chastity, any man or woman of hir time did excell hir” (101v). What the viewers of this spectacle see, in other words, is not a public display of the emperor’s power, but of Zenobia’s excellence. As a result, after Aurelian’s triumph concludes, “all the noble Ladies of Rome assembled and repayred to Zenobia, and vsed vnto her great and honorable entertaynement, giuing hir many goodly presents and rewards” (101v). And their hospitality is not short-lived: Painter explains that the former ruler of the Palmyrene Empire spent a decade living “in the company of those noble Matrons … before she dyed, in estimation like a Lucrecia, and in honour like a Cornelia” (101v).

On one hand, this outcome seems—much like the Historia’s version of her fate—to demonstrate Zenobia’s absorption into the Empire she once defied. After all, she becomes a paragon of virtue on par with those famous Roman women, Lucrece and

\[129\] Ibid.
Cornelia. At the same time, however, Painter’s pity-filled matrons also suggest the surprising power of interpretive communities. Aurelian captured the queen and brought her back to Rome, Painter writes, “not to doe hir to death, but to tryumph ouer her” (100r). If Painter has consistently depicted Zenobia as a figure for the modern author, then Aurelian here tries to transform her into a text: one whose public display will establish his mastery and her subjugation. But instead of responding as expected and admiring Aurelian’s power, the Roman matrons pity Zenobia and accept her into their “company.” Indeed, in Painter’s version of her letter to Aurelian, Zenobia herself seems to anticipate how she will become a text whose meanings will proliferate outside of the Emperor’s control. If she is defeated, she warns, “yet it be bruted at Rome, and published in Asia, that the wofull wight Zenobia, was ouerthrone and slayne, in defence of hir Patrimony, and for the conseruation of hir husbande’s honor” (100v, italics mine). She continues by insisting that, “it will be sayd and noysed through the world… that if the Empresse Zenobia be captiue, she was not yet vanquished” (100r). “Published” by Aurelian as evidence of his authority, Zenobia ends up signifying much differently to the watching Roman matrons. As such, these female figures provide a model for how humanist-trained thinkers might challenge the auctoritas of antiquity: not only by appropriating the tools of classical learning, but also by forming a resistant community of readers.

Painter’s own work in “translating” Zenobia’s narrative from the Historia Augusta likewise demonstrates the subversive potential inherent to such resistant modes of reading. For, although it describes Zenobia as brave and beautiful, the Historia frames her reign in the Near East as a shameful sign of the weakness of the Roman emperors
before Aurelian. “[I]n the weakened state of the commonwealth,” we learn, “things came to such a pass that… even women ruled most excellently.” Painter initially seems poised to repeat such disapproving platitudes about the queen and female sovereignty. In his “Preface” to the reader, Painter claims that Zenobia’s life will show noblewomen “in what bounds to conteine their souerainty”; her life, in other words, will serve as a cautionary tale about the limits of female rule (n.p.). And yet, Painter’s actual narrative of Zenobia’s life repeatedly breaks with its classical source, interpreting her rebellion in a highly positive light and adding much information not found in the original. As we have seen, furthermore, these additions enable Painter to voice his own rebellion against Roman rule. “The lyfe and giftes of the most Famous Queene Zenobia” thus not only allegorizes how modern thinkers might interpret classical texts contrary to their intended meaning—it is itself the product of precisely this kind of rebellious reading. Ultimately, Painter proposes that, by reading and writing in the resistant mode of Zenobia, the humanist writer can be at once “captiue” to the auctoritas of ancient writers and “not yet vanquished.”

**Conclusion: Humanism’s “Habits of Alterity”**

When taken together, the works of Vives, Elyot, and Painter all suggest the increasingly pivotal role played by gender as sixteenth-century writers grappled with humanism’s internal contradictions. Because the price for its eloquence was subordination to the classical canon, humanism at once empowered and constrained the modern writer—shackling him, we might say, in chains of gold. Faced with the possibility that his “modern” writing was by definition belated and derivative, Vives

---

130 *Scriptores* v. III, 135.
began to insist that *auctoritas* (or the lack thereof) was the product of a writer’s gender, and not his or her position in time. Such a conceptual shift might seem unsurprising—perhaps even inevitable, given the androcentric nature of the humanist schoolroom. And yet, we have also seen how humanism’s emphasis on the modern male writer’s subordination to classical men tacitly aligned him with the women writers of antiquity. Because of this, we might also say that humanism allowed for, and even encouraged, its male students to identify across the lines of gender—a strategy that writers such as Elyot and Painter employed in their treatments of Zenobia. By sympathetically depicting the captive queen’s rebellion against Rome and its authorities (and, in the case of Painter, by actually writing *as* Zenobia), these writers were able to covertly defy the classical *auctoritas* they had been trained to revere.

In her recent work *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom*, Lynn Enterline draws attention to a paradox at the heart of humanist pedagogy: namely, that it promised to confer powerful masculine identities on its students by persistently requiring them to speak and write in the personae of others. Enterline argues that the actual result of such practices for humanism’s students was not the assumption of “gentlemanly identity and mastery,” but the development of what she calls “habits of alterity.” These habits suggest a “tendency to experience what passes for deep personal feeling... by taking a detour through the passions of others.”¹³¹ I believe that we can productively expand Enterline’s formulation beyond Shakespeare and the realm of affect by recognizing the early modern tendency to identify with ancient women as another humanist-ingrained habit of alterity. English schoolboys learned their Latin in part by imitating the famous works of ancient men such

as Virgil, Ovid, and Cicero. But these boys also learned Latin by attempting to write as ancient women. Contemporary critics are often struck by the seeming incongruity of this arrangement. For example, when discussing the importance of the *Heroides* as a model for student letter-writers, Ian Frederick Moulton remarks, “one marvels at the strangeness of a culture in which the first love letter a person encounters (or writes!) is a poem in a dead language written by a man pretending to be a woman.” Yet the apparently odd practice of *prosopopoeia* had hidden benefits. We have seen how the humanist reliance on *imitatio* sometimes provoked the anxiety that modern thinkers and writers would always be shackled to the ancients. By contrast, *prosopopoeia*’s call to write in the voice of a legendary or historical figure could free the modern writer to invent as much as to repeat. This seems especially true in the context of classical female authors and their conveniently vanished corpus. Humanist-trained writers such as Elyot and Painter found female author-figures such as Zenobia and Leontium deeply useful precisely because these women’s texts had *not* survived into the sixteenth century—and, hence, could not be imitated. Ancient women writers therefore offered modern male authors a unique classical precedent; one that sanctioned their work without also curtailing their potential authority.

By the mid-sixteenth-century, therefore, two gendered responses had emerged out of the problems posed by ancient *auctoritas*. One solution was to leverage gender identity against temporal distance: to insist, along with Vives, that manhood resulted in literary authority, regardless of when the author was writing. The other solution was to embrace a habit of alterity inculcated by the humanist schoolroom and identify with ancient women.

writers. The next two chapters of *Evander’s Mother* will trace how these conflicting impulses existed in productive tension throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—a tension that helped to shape English understandings of authorship in crucial ways.
Chapter 2

Echoes of Sappho:
Petrarchan Authorship and Female Desire

I yearn and I desire.

— Sappho, Fragment 36

In the October Eclogue of Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), the shepherds Cuddie and Piers famously debate the “place” of “pierlesse Poesye,” as well as the “perfecte paterne of a poete.” Among other things, the two men disagree on whether love and desire should inspire poetry. While Piers insists that “lofty love” “[w]ould rayse ones mynd above the starry skie / And cause a caytive corage to aspire,” Cuddie counters that such desire actually destroys poetic production; instead, “vaunted verse a vacant head demaundes.” The shepherds’ debate raises questions about the grounds of poetry and the role of the poet that stretch back to Virgil, and their answers can be traced back to earlier writers, as well. The text’s mysterious glossator E.K. notes that Piers’s position on “lofty love” as poetic catalyst recalls the ideas of Petrarch, whose hugely influential collection of love poetry *Il Canzoniere* (c. 1374) describes his frustrated desire for the beautiful, unattainable Laura. The often-unreliable E.K. is less honest, however, about the source of Cuddie’s contradictory claim that poetic production

---


134 Ibid, 175, Ins. 96, 93-5, 100.

135 Ibid, 182.
depends on “a vacant head,” or a mind free of cares. The glossator credits the sixteenth-century Italian humanist and poet, Baptista Mantuan, with this idea—an attribution that seems believable, given that the October Eclogue is modeled in part after Mantuan’s fifth Eclogue.\textsuperscript{136} But, as more than one scholar has observed, this attribution is a false one; the Latin phrase said to be his, \textit{vacuum curis divina cerebrum Poscit} (divine poetry needs a mind empty from cares), can be found nowhere in Mantuan’s works.\textsuperscript{137} The real source of this position is someone more unexpected—not a Renaissance humanist, but a female poet from ancient Greece: Sappho.

More accurately, this quote derives from the Sappho found in Ovid’s \textit{Heroides}, a collection of fictional letters written by the Roman poet in the voices of various mythical heroines; of these famous women, Sappho is the only historical figure. Though she lived about six hundred years before Ovid (in c. 600 BCE), she was famous in his day—as she is in ours—for her poetry of love and desire. In the second book of his \textit{Tristia}, translated into English by Thomas Churchyard in 1572, the exiled Ovid complains that he has been unfairly punished for the erotic content of his poetry, and lists other authors whose writings are equally amorous—including Sappho. “What hath Dame Sapho Lesbia learned, but maydens fayre to love,” he grumbles, and yet she “still remayneth safe.”\textsuperscript{138} The Sappho who appears in his \textit{Heroides}, however, is a much different figure. This Sappho laments her abandonment by her lover Phaon, and claims that her poetic gift has also left her, for, as she explains, “songs are the labour of minds care-free!” (\textit{vacuae}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, 182; 167.
\textsuperscript{138} Thomas Churchyard, \textit{The thre first books of Ouid De tristibus, translated into Englishe} (London: 1572), 15. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 18978.
Spenserians have puzzled over Cuddie’s concealed Sapphic source, largely because—as E.K. was the first to note—Cuddie serves in the *Calender* as a possible figure for Spenser as author. As one perturbed critic asks, why would Spenser “cause his alter ego… to echo the Ovidian musings of an erotomaniacal poetess offering her sexual services to a man?” To answer this question, we must recall the wider context of Cuddie and Piers’s debate: faced with Piers’s implicit praise of Petrarch as a “perfecte paterne of a poete,” Cuddie invokes Sappho as an alternative.

And yet, on closer examination, Ovid’s Sappho does not seem to be so very different a poet from Petrarch after all. She composes verse because her beloved Phaon has left her, and she wants to give voice to her feelings of loss, misery, and humiliation. In this, she resembles not only Ovid’s other female letter writers, but also the vernacular love poet as first incarnated by Petrarch. Indeed, both the Sappho of the *Heroides* and the Petrarch of the *Canzoniere* demonstrate that songs come from minds that are anything but “care-free.” For although E.K. cites Petrarch during Piers’s discussion of how “lofty love” inspires a poet, the lines he quotes from *Canzone 60* actually concern how the feelings of pain and grief caused by unrequited desire ultimately produce poetry. Petrarch writes that the laurel (the “noble tree” that signifies both his beloved Laura and the laurels of poetic fame) “made my frail wit to flourish in its shade and grow in grief.” In this statement and others like it, Petrarch—no less than Ovid’s Sappho—roots his flourishing verse in lovelorn misery.

---

139 The translation is Stapleton’s (504).
141 Stapleton, 504.
142 The translation is given by Oram, 182, n. 93.4-5.
By drawing attention to the parallels between Ovid’s Sappho and Petrarch’s authorial persona, this chapter challenges much traditional scholarship on Petrarchan poetics. Critics usually point to lines such as the ones quoted by E.K. to demonstrate how Petrarchism, though ostensibly rooted in abjection, ultimately recuperates that misery: in trying and failing to attain Laura, Petrarch instead becomes the laurel-crowned poet. Such poetic triumph appears to stand in sharp contrast with the failure that marks the similarly lamenting heroines of the *Heroides*, whose authorship is usually premised on their imminent suicide—and is, in any case, a fiction devised by a male author. Indeed, late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century readers would have had ample opportunity to compare the male Petrarchan poet and the female Heroidean lamentor, given that, in the 1590s, it became popular to append female-voiced laments to Petrarchan sonnet sequences. I argue, however, that juxtaposing these two “paterne[s] of a poete” reveals both figures to be invested in an abjection that renders authorship precarious and provisional. In other words, the *Heroides*—and the genre of the female lament that emerges from these letters—threatens to expose Petrarchism as a fundamentally unstable mode of poetic production, as likely to destroy a poet as to make one.

But Cuddie’s hint that Ovid’s Sappho might somehow serve as a counterpoint to Petrarch is not wrong. For, if the *Heroides* posits that abjection both enables and endangers the poet, the text also offers Renaissance writers an alternative authorial paradigm in the figure of Sappho. While she does lament the loss of her beloved, the Ovidian Sappho also departs from the misery and pain that undergird both the female lament and Petrarchism. Through her attempts to again seduce Phaon, the ancient female

---

143 For a seminal early example of this reading of Petrarch, see John Freccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics,” *Diacritics* 5 (1975), 34-40.
author suggests an erotic female poetics in which poetry can emerge as part of, and even after, the consummation of desire. This chapter explores how her alternate poetics of female pleasure entered and began to circulate through early modern English literary culture. After describing how the sixteenth-century rediscovery of the historical Sappho made Ovid’s Sappho newly exciting to early moderns, I will trace the latter Sappho’s erotic poetics as it appears in George Turbervile’s 1567 English translation of the *Heroides*, and then show how the poet John Donne provocatively expands on this schema in his poem “Sapho to Philaenis” (c. 1601). Finally, I will explore how John Fletcher’s pastoral tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c. 1608) theorizes a similar poetics of promiscuous desire through a “wanton” female character. Ultimately, I suggest that the figure of the “erotic poetess”—as both a misogynist trope and an echo of Ovid’s Sappho—provided a way for male authors to rethink the abjection at the heart of Petrarchan authorship.

**Ovid, Turbervile, and the Heroidean Lament**

More than one scholar has argued for the historical Sappho’s influence on sixteenth-century love poets, particularly in France, where her extant poetry was first published. In 1566, the Parisian scholar and printer Henri Estienne published all of the fragments of Sappho’s poetry that were then known, including her two most famous, Fragment 1 and Fragment 31. French translations and imitations of Sappho soon followed, as did publication in other anthologies, such as Fulvio Orsini’s compendium of

---

lyrics by nine ancient female poets, *Carmina novem illustrium feminarum* (1568).\textsuperscript{146}

Lawrence Lipking argues that French poets such as Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585) turned to Sappho to escape the ossified conventions of Petrarchism.\textsuperscript{147} French writers discovered, he claims, that a “return to the ancient source, bypassing Ovid, could sanction new symptoms of love and a new poetic technique.”\textsuperscript{148}

But English writers would have had particular trouble bypassing Ovid’s Sappho in favor of the historical woman writer, given that Sappho’s poetry was not published in England until 1652.\textsuperscript{149} Certainly, English readers could have encountered her verse before this in the Latin or French translations published on the Continent.\textsuperscript{150} Yet even these Continental editions of Sappho’s poetry bore the influence of Ovid’s fiction: Estienne’s 1566 volume closes with the letter to Phaon.\textsuperscript{151} As Joan DeJean observes, “nearly all [of Sappho’s] pre-nineteenth-century commentators” treated the invented narrative found in the *Heroides* as “authoritative biography”; very little was known of the historical Sappho, and so Ovid’s letter was used to fill in the gaps.\textsuperscript{152} The Heroidean Sappho, moreover, would have circulated widely in England due to the centrality of the

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Julie Crawford argues that one such reader of Sappho was Philip Sidney, who demonstrates his knowledge of the Greek poet by embedding sapphics into the *Old Arcadia*. See her “Sidney’s Sapphics And The Role Of Interpretive Communities,” *ELH* 69.4 (2002), 979-1007.
\textsuperscript{151} DeJean, 38.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
Heroides to the grammar school curriculum of this period (briefly discussed in Chapter 1). English versions of the text also proved popular: the first complete translation of the work, George Turbervile’s The heroycall epistles of the learned poet Publius Ouidius Naso (1567), went through at least four editions by 1600. Consequently, it would have been difficult for early modern English readers intrigued by Sappho to escape from Ovid’s influence; in short, they would have thought of her as a “great poetresse” who kills herself after her abandonment by her male lover, Phaon.

The other abandoned women of the Heroides fare little better. As Turbervile explains in his preface to the letter of Oenone, she writes “with painefull penne” to lament the betrayal of her husband, Paris (26r). Commenting on the text’s linkage of women and loss, Catherine Bates observes that the letters “insistently define the female condition as privatory: all the complainants are presented as women who have lost—and lost for good—something that, in the form of a suitor, lover, husband, or beloved, they once possessed, and that loss is the definition of their femininity.” To this we might add that loss is the definition of the heroines’ authorship, the precondition for their writing. As such, the text employs what we might call a poetics of abjection, one that becomes consistently associated with women. But even as pain and loss provide the

---

grounds for the female-voiced poetry of the *Heroides*, these same emotions also put the production of this poetry in constant jeopardy. Ovid’s heroines frequently draw attention to how the physical manifestations of their grief literally disfigure their texts. Briseis tells Achilles, “My flushing teares did cause / the blottes and blurres you sée” (12r), while Ariadne informs Theseus, “My trembling fist the letter marres / as I my lynes doe wright” (65r). The passion of these heroines thus both pushes them to write—to compose, in the words of Penelope, “drearie dolefull plaint[s]”—and threatens to mar, efface, or otherwise undo their writing (4v).

In Turbervile’s translation, the self-effacing quality of this poetics comes to characterize the female author more broadly. Again and again, the heroines’ letters conclude with their resolutions to die—in particular, with their intent to kill themselves. Dido’s letter to Aeneas demonstrates the *Heroides*’ association of female authorship and suicide with special vividness. She tells Aeneas that she wishes he could see “Mine ymage whilst I write,” before explaining,

I write, and in my lappe the while 
thy Troian sworde doth lye: 
Downe by my cheekes the teares 
vpon the weapon fall: 
Which now in steade of brine with bloud 
shall be imbrued all. (47r).

Dido conjures a vision of herself composing on the brink of death, her tears not blotting her letter but wetting Aeneas’s sword—the weapon she will use to kill herself. That her tears will be replaced by blood suggests that the central paradox of the *Heroides*’ poetics of abjection extends to the text’s conception of the female lamenter as author. Just as sorrow both facilitates and jeopardizes the heroines’ letters, the heroines’ pain both allows them to become authors and threatens to cause their death. The text’s poetics of
abjection, we might therefore say, leads to a peculiar vision of authorship—one often premised on the female author’s imminent self-destruction.

Throughout his translation, Turbervile’s use of the word “author” highlights the paradoxically self-effacing nature of this form of authorship. In Ovid’s original Latin, Dido tells Aeneas that, though he abandoned her, she does not want him to die. Instead, she hopes that he will live: “Thus shall I see you worse undone than by death. You shall rather be reputed the cause of my doom” (*sic te melius quam funere perdam. / tu potius leti causa ferere mei*). Turbervile translates Ovid’s *causa* (cause, reason, or motive) as “author,” so that his Dido hopes Aeneas will live and be “thought / the Author of my death” (43r, italics mine). Here, Turbervile draws on a pre-modern meaning of the word “author” as “[h]e who gives rise to or causes an action, event, circumstance, state, or condition of things”; in short, the author as an instigator. Turbervile again uses “author” in this sense in the letter of the incestuous Canace to her brother and lover, Machareus. After being ordered by their father to kill herself, Canace wishes that he could see “His daughters death”: “Oh, that the Author sawe / With present eye, the thing he gaue in charge” (66r). Much like Aeneas in Dido’s letter, Canace’s father is an “author” insofar as he pushes her to suicide. And yet, as we have seen, such suffering results in female poetic production: Canace proclaims that her “right hande holdes the pen; the left a sworde” (66r). In the *Heroides*, then, men are the primary causes of female suffering, and therefore of female poetry—an implication stressed by Turbervile’s translation. By making men the “authors” of female grief, Turbervile’s translation

---


suggests that they are also by extension the “authors” of the work’s female-voiced poetry. Thus, though the *Heroides*’ poetics of abjection appears at first glance to confer authorship upon the work’s lamenting heroines, in truth Turbervile’s translation works to credit men with this status.

The self-effacing image of the female author generated by Turbervile’s *Heroides* initially seems to reach its fullest expression in the figure of Sappho. Although the historical Sappho was famous for her poetry of love and desire, Ovid’s letter (also known as *Heroides* 15) makes her a practitioner of the text’s wider poetics of abjection—a position underscored by Turbervile’s translation. In his preface to her letter, Turbervile declares that Sappho “telles hir twi ching griefer [sic] / and pennes hir pinching paine” in the hopes of regaining her lost love Phaon (109v). This neatly summarizes the poetics of abjection at work in the text, a system in which abandonment and grief serve as the catalyst for, and the subject of, female-authored texts. Though she initially claims that “verses” proceed from a “quiet minde” and not from “a mourning minde / whome cruell cares doe pierse,” Sappho’s letter (and the *Heroides* more broadly) demonstrates that precisely the opposite is true: the “mourning minde” is almost relentlessly productive of poetry (109r, 110v). At the same time, however, “mourning” imperils the very poetry it produces, as seen when Sappho claims that (like Briseis), “I write and from my chéekes / the deawie teares distill: / Beholde how many blots they cause / in Sapphos doolefull bill” (113v). The “blots” caused by her tears simultaneously attest to the authenticity of her words and threaten to efface those words.

As her letter progresses, Sappho seems to lose a claim for autonomous authorship in ways that reinforce the text’s recurrent image of female authorship as inherently self-
effacing. Early in her letter, Sappho asks Phaon if he would have known “from whome this writing came,” if he had “not read the Authors name / And Sappho seene” (109r). Her use of “author” to mean composer or writer—and, moreover, to name herself as such a composer—is unprecedented in Turbervile’s translation. As we have seen, elsewhere Turbervile employs “author” to refer to the male agents or causes of female suffering. Yet Sappho’s claiming of such a status becomes complicated in two ways. The first problem is that, as other critics have observed, Sappho’s calling attention to her authorship also allows Ovid to call attention to his authorship; by making Sappho complain that Phaon might not recognize the text’s true author, Ovid slyly reminds his readers of the man “from whome this writing came.” The dynamic highlighted here—in which the text’s poetics of abjection suggests a female authorship that can ultimately be traced back to men—recalls the pattern seen in the text’s other letters. It also encodes in miniature, and on a meta-textual level, an apparent loss of authorship staged by Sappho’s own letter. Such a self-effacement takes place as Sappho describes the effect of Phaon’s abandonment on her writing. She laments,

Now would I were faconde,
but dolour hinders Arte:
And all my witte is me bereft
by long enduring smart.
My wonted vaine in verse
is ouerdrie become:
My lowring Lute laments for wo,
my Harpe with doole is dombe. (116r).

Sappho composes in order to say that she can no longer compose. In so doing, she poses in particularly explicit form the contradiction that undergirds the text’s female poetics of

---

abjection: “Dolour” both makes possible and “hinders Arte.” Her instruments further illustrate this paradox, because they at once “lament” and are “dombe” from grief—a detail that comes from Turbervile, since, in Ovid’s original Latin, Sappho says her instruments are simply “silenced by [her] grief” (pectra dolore iacent muta, dolore lyra).  

Sappho also makes clear how such a poetics works to efface female authorship when she claims soon after that Phaon “doth / both make and marre my skill” (106r). In rooting her poetic “skill” in her lost beloved, Sappho makes him responsible for the creation of her letter and her poetry. Following the logic at work elsewhere in the text, because Phaon is the “author,” or cause, of her sorrows, he becomes by extension the “author” of her verse. The translation later reinforces the importance of Phaon as author-instigator when Sappho explains her poor appearance by saying, “For whome (vnhappie Girle) / should Sappho go so gay? / Whome séeke to please? the Author of / my brauery is away” (112v). Sappho’s loss of status as literary author thus coincides with the loss of Phaon, who was responsible for her appearance and is now responsible for her verse. Sappho’s initial (and unique) use of the word “author” to refer to herself as a composer of literary works therefore ultimately seems to take part in the same phenomenon seen elsewhere in Turbervile’s translation, where the lamenting female author-composer gives way to the male author-instigator.

Yet Sappho’s letter also suggests a poetics outside of the text’s predominant poetics of abjection. She alludes to this second poetics when she reminds Phaon that she won his love not through her beauty, but through her poetic skill. Sappho asserts that,

---

“when thou vewdst my verse, / then Sappho sêemde in sight / A comely wench, thou
swarste that me / alone became to wright” (111v). Here, poetry comes not from abjection,
but from sexual desire—and it is successfully used to spark more desire. Sappho’s verse,
she asserts, allowed her to seduce Phaon:

I sang, I minde it well,
(for Louers fixe in breast
Forepassed toyes) and thou the whilste
to kissing thee addreast.
Those busses likte thée eke,
for euerie point I was
Befancide well: but most when we
to Venus prancks did passe.
Then did my wanton tricks
and loftie mounting, more
With sugred wordes, delight thy minde
(my Phaon) than of yore. (111v)

In this remembered scene of pleasure, Sappho’s poetry shines out as her most effective
“wanton trick,” her songs and “sugred wordes” serving, like her body, to bring delight to
Phaon. Her poetry, as Elizabeth Harvey observes, acts as an aphrodisiac, with lyrical and
corporal pleasures becoming commingled.162 But if her “verse” suggests that poetry can
help lead to consummation, her songs and “sugred wordes” also hint that poetry might
come during the moment of consummation itself. Significantly, such a poetics does not
implicitly efface the female author by rooting her skill in her lost beloved: though her
“verse” pleases Phaon, it emerges from her own desires. Furthermore, Sappho’s erotic
poetics is not predicated on the female poet’s inevitable suicide; where Dido and Canace
hold the sword in one hand and the pen in another, Sappho holds only Phaon. In effect,
this scene provides an account of an alternate paradigm of poetic production, suggesting
not only that poetry might be one of the pleasures of sexual consummation, but also that

162 Harvey, 121.
such a desiring, non-abject poetics would allow for the continued existence of the female author.

In his translation of *Heroides* 15, however, Turbervile attempts to put a stop to this female poetics of desire. After describing the delights she brought Phaon through the charms of her body and her words, Ovid’s Sappho recalls “the deep, deep languor in our wearied bodies” (*plurimus in lasso corpore languor*) that followed lovemaking. But Turbervile makes telling changes to this scene of post-coital lassitude. His Sappho sighs, “And that when both our ioyes / confounded were, I lay / With wearie limmes, and languor lame / and *had no worde to say*” (111v, italics mine). After the success of her seductive poetics, Turbervile’s Sappho recedes into silence. If abjection both enables and endangers the production of poetry in the text’s dominant authorial paradigm, then Turbervile’s translation tries to suggest that desire proves even more untenable as a ground for authorship. Paradoxically, when successful, the erotic poetics of his Sappho satisfies—and thereby dissipates—the desires meant to serve as its engine.

**Writing with the “painless penne”: Petrarchism and the Female Complaint**

With the partial exception of Sappho’s letter, therefore, Ovid’s *Heroides* stresses abjection and loss as the central engines of its female-voiced poetry—a stress that echoes the constant frustrations and misery that undergird Petrarchism. As a poetics, Petrarchism gained wide cultural currency in England in part through the publication of Tottel’s *Miscellany* in 1557, ten years before the appearance of Turbervile’s translation of the *Heroides*. The volume pays explicit tribute to Petrarch, famously hailing him as the “hed

---

and prince of poets all.”¹⁶⁴ But attentive readers of the *Miscellany* would have also found examples of the female lament in its pages, at least two of which were modeled after or allude to letters from the *Heroides*.¹⁶⁵ The sonnet sequences that arose in the 1590s, furthermore, brought Petrarchism and the female complaint together even more deliberately.¹⁶⁶ When Samuel Daniel published his sonnet sequence *Delia* in 1592, he appended a female lament entitled “The Complaint of Rosamond,” in which the murdered mistress of Henry II bewails her fate. Other sonneteers followed suit. Thomas Lodge published *Phillis...with the Tragical Complaint of Elstred* in 1593, while Richard Barnfield’s *Cynthia* (1595) includes the “Legend of Cassandra.”¹⁶⁷ In 1599, Michael Drayton brought together his sonnet sequence *Ideas Mirrour* (first published in 1594) with his imitation of the *Heroides, Englands heroicall epistles* (1597), publishing the combined texts in one volume.¹⁶⁸ And perhaps most famously, the quarto version of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* (1609) concludes with “A Lover’s Complaint”—a poem in which an abandoned young woman tearfully describes her seduction and betrayal.¹⁶⁹

When comparing Petrarchism and the female lament as poetics of abjection, critics have usually identified gender as the element that serves to distinguish between the

---

¹⁶⁵ See “The lady forsaken of her louer, prayeth his returne, or the end of her own life,” in Rollins, 1:173; and Surrey’s “Complaint of the Absence of her Louer Being vpon the Sea.” For more on Surrey’s poem, see *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and “Female Complaint,”* ed. John Kerrigan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 125.
¹⁶⁶ Bates, 178.
two systems of poetic production. In *Motives of Woe*, John Kerrigan makes a distinction between poetry of “unfulfilled desire” that seeks to woo a distant beloved, and poetry of betrayal and abandonment that juxtaposes “past pleasures with a destitute present and unpromising future.”

Men, he notes, historically become associated with the former, while women become associated with the latter, such that “the rhetoric of abandonment seems feminine, while wooing belongs to men.” The male Petrarchan lover-poet, then, writes from an abjection lightened by hope, while the female lamenter composes from a deeper, more abiding misery. Catherine Bates makes this divide explicit when she argues that the “juxtaposition of ‘male’ and ‘female’ complaint has the effect of differentiating between two kinds of lack”: male lack is “conditional and temporary” (“at least theoretically”) because the longed-for Cruel Fair might relent; female abandonment, however, is “irreversible and irrecuperable, not so much conditional as a permanent condition.”

We might further differentiate the two poetics by considering what forms of authorship—if any—their respective losses and sorrows enable. As we have seen, the abject poetics depicted by the *Heroides* paradoxically works to efface the idea of the female author, both by making the heroines’ laments contingent on their suicides, and by making men the ultimate source of their poetry. The poetics of abjection found in the *Heroides*, in other words, link female pain and grief to poetic production, but do not allow for a female poet. Such a failure appears to stand in sharp contrast with Petrarchism. For decades, the critical consensus has been that the male Petrarchan lover

---

170 Kerrigan, 8.
171 Ibid.
172 Bates, 178.
recuperates the abjection he experiences by transmuting it into poetry. As Gordon Braden explains, in this schema of poetic production, “sexual frustration is deeply complicitous with at least a certain kind of poetic success, and the poet’s own literary career—his pursuit of the bays—is in some sense the hidden agenda of his courtship.”\(^\text{173}\) Braden teases out an implication hinted at by John Frecerro’s influential formulation of Petrarchan poetics: Petrarch’s “idolatrous love for Laura, however self-abasing it may seem, has the effect of creating a thoroughly autonomous portrait of the poet laureate.”\(^\text{174}\) Other critics have pushed this reading to argue that Petrarchan abjection is little more than a “fiction” devised by the poet-lover in order to stage his own authorship and poetic mastery.\(^\text{175}\) Petrarchism, in other words, has been seen to succeed at precisely the point at which the female lament fails: it is a poetics of abjection that produces a poet.

In more recent years, however, critics have begun to question the narrative of the Petrarchan lover who successfully transforms his suffering into the achievements of the laurel-crowned poet. If earlier criticism often saw the Petrarchan poet as consolidating a masculine position as author at the expense of the female beloved, more recent work has drawn attention to the ways in which this discourse blurs the boundaries between the male poet and the female beloved, and between positions of power and of helplessness. Speaking of Petrarch’s Laura, Heather Dubrow observes that “[i]n many of the texts of Petrarch, she is erased to the extent and in the ways the male poet is himself.”\(^\text{176}\) Further, she notes that though Petrarchan sonnet mistresses rarely speak, they also “regularly


\(^{\text{174}}\) Frecerro, 38, italics mine.

\(^{\text{175}}\) Villeponteaux, qtd. in Bates, 7.

deprive their poets of a voice, a situation confounded but certainly not resolved by the
paradox that [these poets] manage to write about their inability to write.”¹⁷⁷ Ultimately,
Dubrow contends that Petrarchism “more frequently reenacts the struggles that
compromise male power, whether represented by a single lover or by patriarchy itself,
than it protects that power from threats.”¹⁷⁸ Along similar lines, Lynn Enterline sees the
Petrarchan subject’s masculinity as one that “is always at risk, confronted with an other
that is, by turns, his other and a mirror.”¹⁷⁹ His position as a poet is likewise fraught and
uncertain: if Laura is the ground for Petrarch’s poetry, she also “captures the poet’s
knowledge that his voice will fail, will never recuperate the deferrals of which and
through which he speaks.”¹⁸⁰ Petrarchism, in other words, has come to seem like less of
an inherently masculine, recuperative, and successful poetics than previous generations of
critics have assumed.

If we see the Petrarchan lover’s frustration as not necessarily leading to “a certain
kind of poetic success,” then Petrarchism begins to resemble the poetics of abjection
found in the Heroides. And indeed, the Canzoniere itself hints at such a parallel. In
Canzone 29, Petrarch signals his identification with one of Ovid’s lamenting heroines, an
identification made on the basis of their shared misery and self-alienation. He writes,

My thoughts are now like strangers in my mind
one driven like me once
[…] plunged the loving sword into herself.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁷ Dubrow, 83.
¹⁷⁸ Dubrow, 56.
¹⁷⁹ Lynn Enterline, The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare (Cambridge:
¹⁸⁰ Enterline, 116.
¹⁸¹ Petrarch, The Canzoniere, or, Rerum vulgarium fragmenta, trans. Mark Musa
This allusion, of course, is to Dido—more specifically, it recalls the Dido of the
*Heroides*, who promises that Aeneas’s sword will soon be soaked in her own blood. In
making this allusion, moreover, Petrarch suggests the degree to which his authorship, like
hers, might be premised on self-destruction. The parallels between Petrarchism and the
female poetics of abjection continue to emerge when we examine the self-presentation of
the Petrarchan poets in *Tottel’s Miscellany*. There, much like the female lamenters of the
*Heroides*, the poet-speakers of the volume’s many male-voiced “complaints” stress the
difficulties of adequately expressing their misery—the problems that arise when one
“telles [his] twiching griefer / and pennes [his] pinching paine,” to borrow Turbervile’s
description of Sappho’s letter. One characteristic speaker asserts, “I know and can by
roate the tale that I would tel: / But oft the words come f[o]rth awrie of him that loueth
wel.”182 Not only is writing difficult—it is also potentially deadly. The male lover-poet
depicted in another complaint kills himself because he was, as the poem’s title explains,
forsaken “vpon his ladies in[j]ust mistaking of his writing.”183 In so doing, he goes
beyond any of the female lamenters of the *Heroides*, who threaten suicide but never quite
accomplish it.

Admittedly, not all of the volume’s Petrarchan poetry is so bleak. Bates’s point
that the Petrarchan poet’s despair is, at least in theory, “conditional and temporary,” is
born out in Wyatt’s “The lover sendeth his complaintes and teares to sue for grace,”
where the poet-speaker imagines how his tears and “plaintes” might soften his lover’s
heart, much as water “[w]ithout forcyng or strength” manages to eventually “perse”

182 Rollins, 1:6, lns. 25-6.
“[h]ard stones.”

In this poem, we seem to have a miniature juxtaposition of the Petrarchan male complaint and the Heroidean female complaint: while the tears of Ovid’s heroines threaten to erase their letters, the tears of Wyatt’s poet-speaker promise to wear away at his beloved’s cruelty. Poetic success and failure are therefore gendered along the lines usually laid down by critics, with efficacy becoming associated with the male, and failure with the female. But such a conclusion ignores the way that the pain experienced by the volume’s male lamenters also constantly threatens to compromise their ability to communicate. In Wyatt’s “The lover compareth his hart to the ouercharged gonne,” for example, the male poet-speaker trembles on the verge of implosion, asserting that his “desyre” “encreaseth ay from more to more. / Which to let out, I dare not loke, nor speake: / So inward force my hart doth all to breake.”

Thus, although some of the volume’s Petrarchan poems suggest that the lover’s abjection is lightened by hope and can be recuperated through the assumption of an identity as a poet, this conclusion is by no means the only one proffered by the Miscellany. More often, Petrarchism appears as a poetics constantly threatened by the very abjection that fuels it—an unstable system that renders any authorial identity dependent on it both precarious and provisional.

When juxtaposed with Petrarchism, therefore, the female complaint figures not as Petrarchism’s failed double—as an abject poetics that cannot produce a poet—but rather as a mirror that threatens to reveal Petrarchism as itself a failure, as unable to produce the successful masculine poet it promises. If, in Enterline’s formulation, the Petrarchan mistress is both the other and the mirror of the Petrarchan poet, the Heroidean lament is both the other and the mirror of Petrarchism itself.

184 Rollins, 1:55, Ins. 9-10, 12.
185 Rollins, 1:53, Ins. 9-12.
And yet, even as the poetics of abjection found in the *Heroides* exposes the problems inherent to Petrarchism, Ovid’s text also offers the promise of an alternate system of poetic production in the seductive song of Sappho. As we saw earlier, Sappho’s account of the pleasures she enjoyed with Phaon offers a vision of poetry that leads to and coexists with sexual consummation, running contrary to both Petrarchism and the *Heroides*. And significantly, although Turbervile’s translation depicts this poetics of desire as an inherently flawed one, Ovid’s original text does not. These conflicting conceptions of Sappho’s poetics—as at once reaffirming Petrarchism’s boundaries and as allowing a departure from that mode’s constitutive frustration—make Sappho very useful to writers looking to question the relationship between poetry, sexual desire, and erotic pleasure. For authors seeking a new “paterné of a poet,” she can figure forth success or failure—indeed, in the texts I examine, she often does both, albeit at different moments. In this chapter’s next section, I will discuss how Donne draws on Sappho in order to envision a provisional poetics of female pleasure, one that reshapes traditional love poetry on the level of form.

**Impotent Affections: Donne’s Sapphic Ecphonesis**

Critics and editors of Donne’s poetry have rarely known what to do with his “Sapho to Philaeinis,” a poem in which Donne takes on the persona of Sappho writing to a female beloved. Some editors have even questioned if the poem is by Donne at all. In 1965, Helen Gardner consigned the poem to the Dubia, deeming it “too uncharacteristic of Donne in theme, treatment, and style to be accepted as unquestionably his.”\textsuperscript{186}“I find it difficult,” she confessed, “to imagine him wishing to assume the love-sickness of

Lesbian Sappho.” Most critics now believe “Sapho to Philaenis” to be Donne’s, largely because it was included in various manuscript collections of his works, and printed in the first edition of Donne’s Poems in 1633. The motives for disqualifying it, as Harvey summarizes, appear more moral than textual.

In what follows, I will argue that Donne assumes the voice of Sappho in order to envision an alternate erotic poetics, one that expands on the poetics of desire glimpsed in Heroides 15. Though he begins by depicting her as a poet of abjection (lovesick, as Gardner observes, and aligned with both the Heroidean complaint and Petrarchism), Donne’s Sapho moves beyond this inherited paradigm. Throughout the course of the poem, Sapho appropriates ecphonesis—a signature scheme, as we shall see, of the female complaint and of Petrarchism alike—and makes it the hallmark of a poetics that both springs from and works to generate female pleasure.

Donne’s Sapho initially faces the same dilemma bewailed by Ovid’s Sappho: she claims to have lost her poetic gift as the result of losing her beloved. Though Donne changes the gender of her lost love—it is the female Philaenis whom Sapho lacks, and not Phaon, a point to which I shall return—the poetics of his Sapho also seem to be founded on loss. “Have my teares quench’d my old Poetique fire?” she asks, suggesting that emotional torment might inhibit poetic inspiration, and so halt the production of poetry (ln. 5). Her question resembles the Heroidean Sappho’s claim that “verses” must come from a “quiet minde” and not from “a mourning minde / whome cruell cares

187 Ibid.
188 Harvey, 118. Robin Robins, however, has recently followed Gardner in relegating “Sapho” to the Dubia; see his The Poems of John Donne, V.II (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2008), 469.
189 All in-text citations are taken from the first printed edition of Donne’s Poems (London, 1633), 166-168. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 7045.
doe pierse” (109r, 110v). And yet, much as Ovid’s Sappho belies this claim by producing line after line of poetry detailing her torment, Sapho’s claim that she has lost her poetic gift due to grief is contradicted by the very poetry that she composes.

Donne’s portrait of Sapho as a poet of abjection intensifies as the poem continues. After she questions if her tears have destroyed her poetic gift, she goes on to ask, “Why quench’d they not as well, that [fire] of desire?” (In. 6). It is thus not only sorrow that leads Sapho to compose; her physical yearning for Philaenis also powers her poetry. In this respect, Donne’s Sapho seems to resemble a Petrarchan poet, brimming with frustrated desires—and indeed, Stella Revard comments on Sapho’s resemblance at various points in the poem to “the typical male Elizabethan lover, who complains of neglect by his mistress.”190 Yet Sappho goes on to reject Petrarchan tropes when she attempts to describe the beauty of Philaenis:

… What shall we call thee than?
Thou art not soft, and cleare, and strait, and faire,
As Down, as Stars, Cedars, and Lillies are,
But thy right hand, and cheek, and eye, only
Are like thy other hand, and cheek, and eye. (Ins. 20-24)

The beauty of Philaenis, Sapho insists, cannot be described or understood through reference to the outside world, through simile or metaphor; the only standard for comparison is Philaenis herself. By rendering simile and metaphor obsolete, however, Philaenis also threatens to make the production of poetry impossible—or, at least, the production of poetry according to the paradigm of Petrarchan love. Implicitly, then,

Sapho will have to employ a different kind of poetics.\textsuperscript{191} But as Dubrow and others have observed, refusing Petrarchan language is a trope inherent to Petrarchism itself; the very gesture that would seem to allow one to break out of the Petrarchan mold thus only serves to inscribe the poet more firmly within it.\textsuperscript{192} At this point in the poem, Petrarchism therefore appears as an empty and yet tenacious poetics—incapable of adequately representing Sapho’s beloved, but also incapable of being simply dismissed.

Donne’s Sapho, however, manages to temporarily escape the double bind of Petrarchan constraints by appropriating one of its signature schemes: ecphonesis. George Puttenham highlights the relationship between Petrarchism and ecphonesis in his rhetorical handbook \textit{The Arte of English Poesie} (1589). There, he describes ecphonesis as “the Figure of Exclamation,” or “the Outcry,” and explains that this device “utters our mind by all such words as do show any extreme passion,” including “exclamation or crying out, admiration or wondering, imprecation or cursing, obtestation or taking God and the world to witnes, or any such like as declare an impotent affection.”\textsuperscript{193}

Ecphonesis is therefore a complex trope, encompassing words or phrases that express states of “extreme passion” and “impotent affection.” The scheme’s connections with Petrarchism become apparent when Puttenham goes on to cite Wyatt’s (loose) translation of Petrarch’s \textit{Canzone 206}, “The louer excuseth him of wordes wherwith he was vniustly

\textsuperscript{191} In a complementary reading, William West sees the poem as an attempt by Donne to “establish a space for an alien, non-metaphorical language within the larger, culturally validated, masculine discourse of metaphor” (74); see his “Thinking with the Body: Sappho’s “Sappho to Philaenis,” Donne’s “Sappho to Philaenis” in \textit{Renaissance Papers}, eds. Barbara J. Baines and George Walton Williams (1994), 67-83.
\textsuperscript{192} Dubrow, 6 and \textit{passim}.
In this poem, the speaker swears to his lady that he never said the things that she accuses him of saying, though the exact content of these statements remains unclear. The poem’s opening line, in which the speaker calls on God to witness the truth of his claim, contains the ecphonesis: “Perdie, I said it not, / Nor never thought to do.” (“Perdie”—meaning “by God”—was a mild oath during this period.) But poems found elsewhere in *Tottel’s Miscellany* provide more characteristic instances of ecphonesis in Petrarchism. In “A complaint of the losse of libertie by loue,” for example, the speaker laments his imprisonment in the “trappe” of “cruell loue,” and exclaims, “Oh cruell hap, oh fatall chaunce, / O Fortune why were thou vnkinde.” Ecphonesis—in particular, the anguished “O”—thus gives voice to the perpetually frustrated desires of the Petrarchan lover.

But the female lament also makes frequent use of this scheme, as Puttenham’s other examples make clear. To offer another instance of “the Outcry,” Puttenham cites two lines of text that he claims are by Chaucer, writing about “the Lady Cresseida.” The material he quotes, however, is actually taken from Robert Henryson’s fifteenth-century narrative poem *The Testament of Cresseid*, which expands on Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, but was believed to be Chaucerian in early modern England. Henryson’s work envisions Cresseid’s tragic fate after her lover Diomede leaves her and she contracts leprosy. Much like the women of the *Heroides*, Henryson’s Cresseid laments her abandonment, her sorrow forming the grounds for her outcry. Puttenham quotes the

---

194 Rollins, 2:192.
195 Puttenham, 298.
196 Rollins, 1: 154, Ins. 36-7, italics mine; 1:155, Ins. 16-17, italics mine.
197 Puttenham, 298.
first two lines of her self-reproaching complaint: “O soppe of sorrow soonken into care, / O caytife Cresseid, for now and euermare.”199 Cresseid’s use of ecphonesis articulates her state as “caytife,” or “wretched”—a woman who has lost her beauty and her lovers, and must now make “hir mone” in a “ dark corner of the hous alone.”200

In a similar vein, the Sappho found in Turbervile’s translation of Heroides 15 also employs ecphonesis as part of her poetics of abjection. Lamenting the power of her desire for Phaon, she writes, “Oh, shame and earnest loue / can neuer well agree” (113r, italics mine). Later, she bewails his cruelty, asking how he can be “(oh) more harde / than rocke, and ruthlesse waue” (116v, italics mine). Finally, Sappho wishes that “The gale that hence conuaies / my voice, oh that it might / Reduce thy fléeing Barck againe, / and bring thy shippe in sight” (117v, italics mine). The ecphonesis used by Turbervile’s Sappho, like that used by Henryson’s Cressied, illustrates the “extreme passion” of her lovelorn grief—the same emotion that fuels her poetry.

Ecphonesis, then, articulates the “impotent affections” that characterize and undergird both Petrarchism and the Heroidean lament—the pain, grief, and frustration common to both systems of abject poetic production. Donne’s Sapho, however, uses ecphonesis to express the desire she feels for Philaenis and the pleasure she takes in imagining their reunion. Through the scheme of Sapphic ecphonesis, Donne envisions a female-voiced poetics meant to arouse and seduce, able to simultaneously pleasure both the author and the addressee—and, in so doing, expands on the song of Sappho found in Heroides 15. Donne begins to develop this pleasurable poetics after his Sapho refuses

199 Puttenham, 298, italics mine.
Petrarchism and insists on the incomparable nature of Philaenis’ beauty. Sapho admits, “Such was my Phao awhile, but shall be never, / As thou, wast, art, and, oh, maist be ever” (Ins. 25-6, italics mine). Sapho’s “oh” captures both pleasure and desire. Not only does this instance of ecphonesis express the arousal that Sapho feels on remembering Philaenis’ loveliness, it also articulates Sapho’s wish for Philaenis to remain forever the same, untouched by time and change. Paula Blank, however, reads this outcry and others like it as evidence of Sapho’s futile yearnings: they are, she claims, “interjections [that] mark desire rather than affirmation: Sappho desires rather than affirms that Philaenis may be ‘ever’ the same.”

Sapho’s next use of ecphonesis, however, manages to enact this desire for temporal dilation on the level of form. A few lines after praising Philaenis’ beauty, Sappho wonders if her beloved has turned her attentions to men, asking, “Plaies some soft boy with thee, oh there wants yet / A mutuall feeling which should sweeten it” (31-2, italics mine). The ecphonesis found in this line coincides with a caesura, which Puttenham describes as a pause in a line of verse that brings “delight” to the hearer or reader. But, as Puttenham also makes clear, the use of this pause brings pleasure to the writer as well, for it allows him to rest: as he composes, “our poet… easeth himself with one bait [pause]… which is a comma or caesura in the midway.” Thus, while Sapho’s previous use of ecphonesis signified her wish for Philaenis’ beauty to remain forever unchanged—in effect, for time to slow down or stop—her second use of the scheme enacts her desires on the level of form. Ecphonesis joins with caesura to pause the

\[202\] Puttenham, 164.
\[203\] Ibid.
forward momentum of the line, bringing “delight” and “ease” both to the poet (Sapho) and to the poem’s intended reader (Philaenis). In so doing, Donne’s Sapphic ecphonesis reworks Turbervile’s. While Turbervile’s Sappho uses ecphonesis when asking Phaon to return to her, we already know that her efforts will fail, because Turbervile’s preface establishes her letter to Phaon as, essentially, a suicide note—a text dashed off as Sappho goes to “to leaue / both loue and life withall” (109v). The desire captured in this Sappho’s mid-line ecphonesis—“my voice, oh that it might / Reduce thy fléeing Barck againe, / and bring thy shippe in sight” (117v, italics mine)—is therefore always framed as a hopeless one, a pathetically “impotent affection.” The ecphonesis employed by Donne’s Sapho, by contrast, comes enclosed in no such melancholy certainties. As Janel Mueller recognizes, though she is separated from Philaenis, Donne’s Sapho “looks forward steadily to the fullness of life and (re)union, not, as in Ovid, to a death that alone can vacate the devastation” of betrayal in love.204 By making Sappho’s miserable desire for Phaon a thing of the past, and by not proleptically invoking the outcome of her yearning for Philaenis, Donne allows her desiring “oh’s” to be read differently.

Sapho’s seductive female-centered dilation of time and space through ecphonesis and caesura also finds expression in the rhetoric Sapho employs to woo Philaenis. She follows her words on “mutuall feeling” by stressing how change and transformation overtake the male body:

His chinne, a thorny hairy unevennesse  
Doth threaten, and some daily change possesse.  
Thy body is a naturall Paradise,  
In whose selfe, unmanur’d, all pleasure lies,  
Nor needs perfection; why shouldst thou than  
Admit the tillage of a harsh rough man? (Ins. 33-8)

The unnamed “soft boy” whom Sapho imagines as Philaenis’ new lover becomes associated with “daily change,” his developing adolescent body offering unpleasantly scratchy reminders of time’s relentless progression—and indeed, by the end of the second line, he has become a “harsh rough man.” By contrast, in Sapho’s imagining, Philaenis exists in a realm outside of time and telos. Metaphorized by Sapho as a “naturall Paradise” where “all pleasure lies,” Philaenis’ body does not need to be fertilized, improved, or perfected. Developing this metaphor further, Sapho depicts sexual relationships with men as a violent act of agricultural cultivation—“tillage”—that is both unnecessary and unnatural. If Shakespeare draws on the figurative sense of this word to stress the naturalness of male-female coupling (asking the lovely young male addressee of the Sonnets, “For where is she so fair whose uneared womb / Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?”), Sapho uses this same metaphor to insist that “disdain” is the only logical response to the encroachment of “harsh rough man.”

By making Philaenis a garden already in perpetual bloom, perfected, Sapho places her outside the demands of reproduction and development. The blissful stasis suggested by this rhetoric, moreover, functions as the metaphorical counterpart to the pleasurable pause created by the earlier conjunction of ecphonesis and caesura.

Sapho’s verse becomes even more enticing as she describes the delights that she and Philaenis can share together:

Men leave behinde them that which their sin showes,
And are, as theeves trac’d, which rob when it snows.
But of our dallyance no more signes there are,
Then fishes leave in streames, or Birds in aire.

---

Critics have often read this passage as suggesting the failure of female same-sex desire to properly signify—to leave “signes” that can be read by others—and so to form the grounds of any legible poetry. Barbara Correll, for example, sees this passage as evidence of the poem’s larger implication that “the ‘irksome memory’... of erotic pleasure, of pleasure in the lesbian body, produces tropes that move only toward signifying paralysis, an abortion of meaning.” Cecilia Infante similarly argues that Donne’s poem ultimately “promotes a theory of female erotic desire as unrepresentable.” But to read this passage as denying the legibility of female erotic desire—and, by extension, a version of authorship rooted in such desire—is to ignore how passionately it affirms the sexual pleasures that two women can experience together: “And betweene us all sweetnesse may be had; / All, all that Nature yields, or Art can adde” (Ins. 43-44). Not unlike her earlier claims to have lost her poetic skill due to grief, Sapho’s insistence on the invisibility of sex and pleasure between women is refuted by the very poetry that articulates this idea. Furthermore, the “signes” that she describes are corporeal, not literary: the bodies of the women who “[a]dmit the tillage of harsh rough man” will be marked by their “sin”—through pregnancy, or perhaps by male violence. Women who sleep with other women, however, need fear nothing of the sort. Indeed, Puttenham’s characterization of ecphonesis as giving voice to “impotent affections” appears subversively apt here, for the same “extreme passion” that finds expression in Sapho’s “oh’s” also leads her to

---

celebrate sex between women as marvelously non-reproductive—“impotent” in a different sense of that word. Sapho therefore depicts intimacies between women as inherently invisible in order to paint an even more seductive picture of the “sweetnesse” that she and Philaenis might enjoy together.

Sapho’s erotic poetics reaches its climax in the poem’s next lines, which stage a pleasurable dissolution between Sapho and Philaenis, self and other. She advances her suit to Philaenis by returning to an idea raised earlier in the poem—that Philaenis can only be compared to herself—and inserting herself into this rhetoric of mirror-image perfection:

My two lips, eyes, thighs, differ from thy two, 
But so, as thine from one another doe;
And, oh, no more; the likenesse being such,
Why should they not alike in all parts touch?
Hand to strange hand, lippe to lippe none denies;
Why should they brest to brest, or thighs to thighs? (Ins. 45-50, italics mine)

If Sapho’s previous lines argue for the invisibility of female-female intimacies, this passage insists that the “signes” that should demarcate her from Philaenis are also impossible to trace. By this logic, a “dallyance” between them is not only justified, but partakes in and enhances the perfect symmetry that Sapho earlier makes constitutive of Philaenis. The ecphonesis in this passage—the “oh” Sapho slips in as she contemplates their “likenesse”—registers both her desire to assert this radical similitude, and the pleasure that she takes in such a vision of “mutuall feeling.”

The autoerotic implications of Sapho’s proposition become more pronounced in the lines that follow:

Likenesse begets such strange selfe flatterie, 
That touching my selfe, all seemes done to thee. 
My selfe I embrace, and mine owne hands I kisse,
And amorously thanke my selfe for this.
Me, in my glasse, I call thee… (Ins. 51-55)

In light of her description of “touching [her] selfe” to the thought of Philaenis, Sapho’s ecpheonesis seems even more explicitly identified with female pleasure, her previous “oh’s” now reading as possibly orgasmic. (Tellingly, more than one critic has read the poem as a “masturbatory fantasy” or a “masturbatory [reverie].” 

If so, Sapho’s seductive poetry emerges from the same erotic pleasures that it promises. By hinting that Sapho’s writing is an autoerotic practice, moreover, Donne suggests a form of desiring female authorship that dispenses with the eternal abjection of the Petrarchan lover-poet and the female lamenter; instead of writing with Dido’s (and Petrarch’s) “painefull penne,” Sapho’s “owne hands” simultaneously produce both physical pleasure and verse.

And this pleasure is not confined to her body alone: as we have seen, in Sapho’s authorial paradigm, pleasure becomes a “mutuall feeling” shared between writer and reader.

After reaching this climactic assertion of “likenesse,” however, Sapho begins to swerve back to the grief that earlier powered her poetry. “But alas,” she laments, “When I would kisse, teares dimme mine eyes, and glasse. / O cure this loving madnesse, and restore / Me to mee; shee, my halfe, my all, my more” (Ins. 56-58, italics mine). The delight Sapho took in imagining a “dallyance” with the Philaenis gives way to the tearful sense of lack that initially motivated her poetry. Loss once more enables and endangers poetic production. If the tears of Ovid and Turbervile’s heroines threaten to blot or efface their letters, Sapho’s tears ruin her image of Philaenis, a representation created from

Sapho’s own image. Philaenis becomes, paradoxically, at once “my halfe, my all, my more”—a line that enacts in miniature Sapho’s growing sense of estrangement from Philaenis, for her beloved moves from being a part of her (“my halfe”) to being distinct and distant from her; something that Sapho wishes to possess but cannot. In a parallel development, Sapho’s use of ecphonesis also shifts, becoming evocative of the sorrow displayed by Turbervile’s Sappho and the Petrarchan poets of *Tottel’s Miscellany*; the “impotent affection” now articulated by Sapho’s “O” is “loving madnesse,” not pleasure.

Donne compounds this return to abjection by making further changes on the level of form. Whereas the three earlier instances of Sapphic ecphonesis in the poem came in or near the middle of their respective lines, and so were aligned with the pleasurable pause of the caesura, this final “O” appears at the very beginning of the line, as part of an apostrophe to Philaenis: “O cure this loving madnesse…” Though the entire poem is, arguably, an apostrophe (in that it consists of addressing an absent person as though he or she were physically present), the pairing of ecphonesis and apostrophe at this moment forcibly re-aligns Sapho with the lovesickness of the Petrarchan and Heroidean lamenters. Recall *Tottel’s Miscellany* and “A complaint of the losse of libertie by loue,” where the scorned Petrarchan poet bewails his cruel fate by apostrophizing it: “Oh cruell hap, oh fatall chaunce, / O Fortune why were thou vnkinde.” The simultaneous use of apostrophe and ecphonesis underscores the lover’s helplessness, much as the ecphonesis and self-apostrophe of Henryson’s Cresseid (“O caytife Cresseid, for now and euermare”) testifies to the depth of her self-alienation. Donne’s turn to apostrophe at this moment thus reaffirms the sense that Sapho has returned to her earlier abject poetics. While she previously worked to seduce Philaenis with an ecphonesis that gave voice to the same
pleasures that her verse promised, Sapho now joins ecphonesis with apostrophe to suggest that recovering Philaenis is impossible. In these lines, Sapho’s desire becomes not an invitation, but—like that of the Ovidian heroines and of the Petrarchan sonneteers—a sadly “impotent affection.”

If Donne uses the figure of Sapho and the scheme of ecphonesis to chart a way outside of Petrarchism and the Heroidean complaint, to envision a pleasurable female poetics that expands on the one found in Heroides 15, then the poem’s final lines seem to stage a return to these earlier systems of poetic production. Not only does Sapho’s poetry become fueled by loss and frustrated desire, it also employs tropes that it previously refused. Sapho tells Philaenis,

So may thy cheekes red outweare scarlet dye,  
And their white, whitenesse of the Galaxy,  
So may thy mighty amazing beauty move  
Envy in all women, and in all men, love. (Ins. 59-62)

Where Sapho once rejected simile and metaphor as a way of describing Philaenis’ beauty, she now suggests that her female beloved’s cheeks are redder than “scarlet dye” and whiter than a galaxy of stars, returning to Petrarchan hallmarks she earlier disdained. And her wish that Philaenis’ beauty inspire “Envy in all women, and in all men, love” in effect confines Philaenis’ desirability to men—an odd insistence, given that the rest of the poem testifies passionately to depth and superiority of the “mutuall feeling” that can exist between women.

But the identity of Sapho’s beloved, Philaenis, complicates the poem’s apparent return to conventional systems of poetic production and traditional paradigms of authorship. Though her name means “female friend,” “Philaenis” would have had much
deeper resonances for erudite early modern readers of Donne’s poem.\textsuperscript{209} Don Cameron Allen was the first Donne scholar to look for classical allusions to Philaenis, and found references to at least three female figures with that name. One epigram by the Roman satirist Martial, Allen notes, mocks a Philaenis “who played handball and lifted weights in the dusty palaestra and whose supra-masculine drinking and eating were exceeded by her perverted lust for young girls of whom she devoured eleven at one sitting.”\textsuperscript{210} A sixteenth-century commentary on this epigram, however, mentions a different Philaenis, this one a “skilled heterosexual courtesan who specialized in erotic poetry such as [Donne] was himself writing.”\textsuperscript{211} As Harvey observes, in antiquity, Philaenis was thought to be the author of a manual that detailed various sexual positions, although it is unclear if she ever existed in real life.\textsuperscript{212} The ancient linkage of the name “Philaenis” with erotic authorship provides an important context for its two appearances in the \textit{Greek Anthology}. Two epigrams written in the voice of Philaenis survive there, both of them protesting that she did not compose “those works offensive to ladies,” and that someone else must have written a “wanton treatise” in her name.\textsuperscript{213} The name of Sappho’s addressee, therefore, would have put knowledgeable early modern readers in mind of a female figure closely (if controversially) associated with erotic authorship.

\textsuperscript{210} Don Cameron Allen, “Donne’s ‘Sapho to Philaenis,’” \textit{English Language Notes} 1 (1964), 188-91, 190.
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{212} Harvey, 126. See also the discussion of Philaenis in I.M. Plant’s \textit{Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology} (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 45-7.
The sexual and textual associations around Philaenis would not have been restricted to Latinate readers. Thomas Heywood’s massive history of women, Gynaikeion (1624), published almost ten years before the first print edition of Donne’s Poems, contains two references to a “Philaenis”—both of which depict her as an erotic writer. The first allusion comes when Heywood places Philaenis in a network of lascivious female authors: “Elephantis[,] Philaenis and Astianassa writ booke of the seuerall wayes of Congression, with the pictures of them inserted.”214 After offering the reader this tantalizing bit of information, Heywood promises to “speake further” of them in the section of his work devoted to “Poëtesses.”215 True to his word, in the compendium’s eighth book, Heywood explains that “Philenis was a strumpet of Leucadia,” and “her Verses were as impurely wanton as her life was immodest and vnchast.”216 By making his Sapho write to Philaenis, then, Donne makes her write to another woman of the ancient world known—at least to the educated or well read—for her “impurely wanton” life and verse. In so doing, moreover, Donne leaves open the possibly that those who read his poem might respond in the voice of Philaenis. Indeed, we might even say that, given Philaenis’ reputation in early seventeenth-century England as verse-writing “Strumpet,” he invites such a reply. Thus, although “Sapho to Philaenis” appears to abandon the female-voiced poetics of pleasure it explores as an alternative to Petrarchism and the Heroidean lament, its title ultimately encourages knowledgeable readers to continue imagining the kind of erotic writing that might come from an ancient woman writer—to adopt, in effect, this alternate authorial position.

214 Thomas Heywood, Gynaikeion: or, Nine booke of various history (London: 1624), 343. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 13326.
215 Ibid.
216 Ibid, 395.
In the next section of my chapter, I turn to another early seventeenth-century text that takes up and expands on the concerns displayed by Donne’s poem. Like “Sapho to Philaenis,” John Fletcher’s tragicomedy The Faithful Shepherdess (c. 1608) uses the figure of the “wanton” female poet to articulate a poetics outside of, and at odds with, both Petrarchism and the female lament found in the Heroides. As we have seen, Donne’s poem is primarily concerned with how a female-voiced erotic poetics might unfold on the level of form. But where Donne envisions a poetics premised on (and productive of) female sexual pleasure, Fletcher imagines a system of poetic production powered by indiscriminate and insatiable female desires—and, by extension, a version of erotic authorship that both breaks with and reaffirms Ovidian authorial paradigms.

“If you crave it”: Fletcher’s Wanton Shepherdess

Born in 1579, John Fletcher co-wrote plays with Francis Beaumont and Shakespeare, serving after the latter’s death as the principle dramatist for the King’s Men; he was also familiar with Sappho. We know this because of an allusion made to the ancient female poet in his comedy The Wild-Goose Chase (c.1621). The action of this play centers on Mirabell, a wealthy and dissolute young man who, despite his father’s wish to see him married, has no intention of settling down. After he meets one prospective wife—a formidably intelligent and articulate woman—he delivers a sarcastic vision of their future progeny, imagining that their daughter will be “Sapho, or such a fidling kind of Poetess, / And brought up, invita Minerva, at her needle.”

If the original Sappho was praised throughout the ancient world for her poetic skill, Mirabell’s imagined daughter is much less impressive—“a fidling kind of Poetess,” a phrase that reduces her output to petty trifles. That she will be “brought up, *invita Minerva*, at her needle” reinforces her diminution. The Latin phrase *invita Minerva* is an echo from Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, and suggests doing something against one’s natural inclinations: Puttenham invokes this phrase when he refers to poets who compose “in spite of nature or Minerva.” In Mirabell’s fantasy, however, his poetically inclined daughter will be forced to ignore her talent for verse, and instead focus on the traditionally feminine occupation of needlework. Thus, although Fletcher’s Mirabell references “Sapho” as part of a joke, her invocation leads to a rather dismal vision of stifled female authorship.

But although *The Wild-Goose Chase* is the only Fletcher play that mentions Sappho by name, it is not his only play to imagine the nature and fate of a young “Poetess.” In his first play, the pastoral tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess*, Fletcher creates the character of Cloe, a shepherdess who is desperate to lose her virginity—and eager to woo any shepherd who crosses her path. In one of her most famous lines, Cloe declares, “It is impossible to Ravish mee, / I am soe willing” (3.1.209). Her frankly-stated desires proved shocking to nineteenth and early twentieth century critics: Charles Lamb, while pleased with the play’s delicate lyricism, was appalled by Cloe, whom he called “the wanton shepherdess!” “Nothing short of infatuation could have driven

---

219 Puttenham, 385.
Fletcher” to add “such an ugly deformity as Cloe” to the play, he huffed.221 Lamb was particularly offended by what he termed her “lewdness”: as a female figure of unconstrained and seemingly indiscriminate sexual desire, Cloe was so shocking as to ruin the work. W.W. Greg concurred in 1906, deeming her “utterly preposterous except as a study in [erotic] pathology.”222 Most recent critics, however, have been content to dismiss Cloe and her unbridled yearnings as merely comic: Lee Bliss, echoing the general consensus, claims that she “proves rather a source of laughter than of any real disturbance” in the world of the play.223

I will argue, however, that Cloe’s lines should not be dismissed as comical, or (as sometimes still happens) pathologized as “nymphomaniacal.”224 Her words should instead be recognized as part of the play’s larger meditation on traditional and alternative forms of poetic authorship. As a whole, the play endorses and utilizes a certain strain of Petrarchism that became popular in the seventeenth century: Neoplatonic Petrarchism, in which the lover’s desire for the Cruel Fair becomes rerouted into a desire for virtue. In such a system of poetic production, chaste desires become the grounds for poetry, and the abjection at the heart of conventional Petrarchism is disavowed. Cloe, however, suggests

an alternate and competing poetics, one that draws on the tropes of early modern misogyny—specifically, the idea that women are indiscriminately and insatiably lustful—to theorize a form of female authorship that can ultimately be traced back to the Sappho of *Heroides* 15.

A brief summary of the play’s action will provide the necessary background for understanding Cloe and the promiscuous poetics that she embodies. Fletcher’s work could have been as properly titled *The Faithful Shepherdesses*, for it follows two virtuous female characters: Clorin, a shepherdess and healer who promises to remain faithful to the memory of her dead beloved, and Amoret, who shares a chaste love with the shepherd Perigot. In contrast to these faithful shepherdesses, we have two wanton ones: Amarillis, who is in love with Perigot, and the aforementioned Cloe, who simply wants to have sex. Amarillis sets the play’s central conflict in motion when she magically takes on Amoret’s form and attempts to seduce Perigot. Far from being pleased by this turn of events, Perigot attempts to kill the false Amoret. In the confusion that follows, the true Amoret ends up being badly wounded by her beloved, not once but twice; she is healed first by a River God, and then by Clorin. By the play’s end, however, the chaste lovers are reunited, the wanton shepherdesses are exposed and reformed, and Amarillis’ lustful conspirator—the Sullen Shepherd, who helped her because she promised to sleep with him in return—is banished from the pastoral world of the play. Throughout, the play remains concerned with the relationship between forms of desire and forms of poetic production, and offers two very different ways of resolving the problems of authorship inherent to an abject poetics.
The first solution involves transforming the relationship between the Petrarchan poet and his beloved. Fletcher develops this line of thought through the play’s chaste lovers, Perigot and Amoret. After listening to a lecture by the Priest of Pan that summarizes the play’s official attitude toward sex—“Never more let lustfull heat, / Through your purged conduits beat”—Perigot asks Amoret to meet him that night in the woods by a “vertuous Well” (1.2.23-4, 101). When Amoret demurs, afraid his intent is sexual, he assures her that he only desires their spiritual union: what he calls the “interchange of mutuall chaste imbraces / And ceremonious tying of our soules” (1.2.98-99). The well, he explains, is where such pledges of loyalty usually take place. But this well is not only the site of “mutuall chaste imbraces”—it is also one of poetic production. Perigot avers, “by this / Fresh Fountaine many a blushing maide / Hath crowned the head of her long loved shepheard, / with gaudy flowers, whilst he happy sung / Laies of his love and dear captivitie” (1.2.110-114). The scenario is a recognizably Petrarchan one—the male poet singing of his female beloved—but with a twist. Where the Petrarchan poets of Tottel’s Miscellany languish with frustrated desire, cursing their cruel fate, the poet singing at the well has reconciled himself to his sexless state. If the standard Petrarchan poet produces “complaints” about “the losse of libertie by loue,” Perigot’s poet celebrates his “dear captivitie.”

Gordon Braden describes the shift seen in this moment as characteristic of Neoplatonic philosophy, which, he argues, became the central means of bringing the Petrarchan dilemma to a “happy end” in the seventeenth century.225 By promising that “the lover’s frustrated self-absorption was the beginning of a spiritual ascent,”

225 Braden, 19.
Neoplatonism worked to dissipate the abjection of the Petrarchan lover. Castiglione’s *The Courtier* (translated into English by Thomas Hoby in 1561) clarifies this movement. The lover, we are told, suffers in the absence of the beloved—with “teares, sighes, vexations and tourmentes”—until he recognizes that “the particuler beawtie of one woman” is merely a part of the universal beauty of the soul; his love then becomes “a stayer (as it were) to clime vp to an other farr higher then it.” In such a schema, the lover learns to “enjoy beawtie without passion”—an understanding reflected by Perigot, who claims that such eternally chaste desires provide the grounds for love poetry.

Fletcher signals his support of this Neoplatonic version of Petrarchism not only by making its central proponents, Perigot and Amoret, the romantic heroes of the play, but also by framing his authorship in terms highly reminiscent of Perigot’s description of the “vertuous Well.” This framing takes place in the play’s dedicatory material. There, Fletcher promises the work’s dedicatee, Sir Waltor Aston, that he will “sing againe as who can tell / My next devotion to that holy well” if Aston is pleased with the play. This “holy well,” of course, recalls the “vertuous well” that serves as the locus of Perigot’s Neoplatonic Petrarchan poetics, as well as the Pierian Spring sacred to the Muses from which poets traditionally drew their inspiration. And indeed, before long, the play’s characters explicitly identify the “vertuous well” favored by chaste lovers with the Pierian Spring: Amarillis says that the holy well can only be compared to “that matchlesse spring which Poets know” (2.3.69). In conflating the play’s central site of

\[\text{Ibid.}\]  
\[\text{Baldassarre Castiglione, } The \text{ book of the courtier, }\text{ trans. Thomas Hoby (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 357-8.}\]  
\[\text{Ibid.}\]  
\[\text{Fletcher, 11.}\]
Neoplatonic love with the classical source of poetic inspiration and then signaling his “devotion” to this “holy well,” Fletcher highlights his own participation in Perigot’s poetic economy, where chaste rather than frustrated desires transform one into a poet.

Petrarchism is not the only poetics of abjection that the play reworks according to Neoplatonic philosophy; the female complaint also comes up for revision. The text’s titular faithful shepherdess, Clorin, opens the play by lamenting the loss of her beloved, an unnamed shepherd, and pledging her eternal devotion to his memory. She apostrophizes her lost love, asserting that, “heere will I, in honor of thy love, / Dwell by thy grave, forgetting” “all ensuing heates and fires / Of love; all sports, delights and games, / That Shepheards hold full deare” (1.1.26-7, 7-9). His absence forms the grounds for her complaint, true to the paradigm seen in the Heroides. As with the play’s presentation of Petrarchism, however, there is a twist. Clorin is bereft not because her lover is unfaithful, but because he is dead. Moreover, if the traditional female lamentor is seduced and abandoned by her lover, Clorin remains untouched: as she later explains, her “virgin flower” is “uncropt, pure, chaste, and faire” (1.1.113). Her relationship with her beloved was not sexual, and can never be, given his untimely death. Accordingly, as in the play’s revised version of Petrarchism, chaste desires take the place of frustrated desires: Clorin does not yearn for her beloved’s return, she only wishes to remain lamenting by his “still loved ashes” (1.1.6). Clorin thus gives a distinctly virginal cast to the traditional complaint of the abandoned woman.

The substitution of chaste desires for frustrated ones, furthermore, allows for the production of authorial positions that are much more stable than those seen in the conventional versions of Petrarchism and the female lament. If, as discussed earlier in the
chapter, both modes of poetic production depend on an abjection that at once enables and
endangers them—and hence renders precarious any resulting forms of authorship—
Fletcher’s Neoplatonic emphasis on the enjoyment of “beawtie without passion” makes
these modes no longer prone to self-destruction.

We can see this change in Perigot’s description of the shepherds who plight their
troth at the well, an account that stresses the unchanging nature of the shepherds’
relationships with their beloveds. “By this faire Fount hath many a Shepheard sworne, / And
given away his freedome,” Perigot says, “many a troth / Been plight, which neither
envy nor ould time / Could ever breake” (1.2.106-9). The Neoplatonic lover, in other
words, escapes the constant insecurities and pains endured by the Petrarchan lover—what
The Courtier refers to as the “bitternesse and wretchednes that yong men feele…
continuallye, as ielousies, suspicions, disdeignes, angres, desperations and certein rages
full of madnesse,” rages that lead them to “beate the women whom they loue” and
sometimes to “rid them selues out of their life.” Free of these murderous and
sometimes suicidal rages, the Neoplatonic lover’s poetic output is serenely untroubled: as
we have seen, Perigot’s poet of chaste desires happily sings “Laies of his loue and deare
captivitie” (1.2.114). Likewise, Clorin’s virginal female lament, unlike those found in the
Heroides, is not predicated on her imminent suicide. If, to again quote Catherine Bates,
Clorin’s loss is “irreversible and irrecuperable, not so much conditional as a permanent
condition,” this unending loss offers her a speaking position endowed with a similar
permanence.

230 Castiglione, 357-8.
And yet, even as Fletcher’s play suggests that the “chaste desires” promoted by Neoplatonic philosophy can resolve the problems inherent to both of these abject poetics, *The Faithful Shepherdess* also experiments with constructing a poetics that thrives on very different forms of desire. This system of poetic production emerges most forcefully through the figure of the “wanton shepherdess,” Cloe. We are introduced to her through a soliloquy she delivers in Act 1, Scene 3, where she laments the “cold and dull chastitie” of her fellow shepherds, and asserts that it is “their coldnesse, not my virgin modesty / Makes me compleaine” (1.3.8, 18-19). Her use of the word “complaine” signals that her speech serves as an unusual, somewhat parodic reworking of both Petrarchism and the Heroidean complaint: Cloe complains not because her beloved does not return her affections, or because she has been abandoned, but because she can’t find a man to sleep with. These distinctions are underscored when her soliloquy concludes and the shepherd Thenot enters the scene, bewailing his unrequited love for Clorin: “Heere, let all men knowe, / A wretch that lives to love his mistres so” (1.3.24). In these lines, Thenot highlights the self-publicizing self-abasement of the Petrarchan lover devoted to a single unreachable “mistres.”

In response, Cloe shifts from a complaint that humorously tweaks Petrarchism and the Heroidean lament to a seductive poetics that departs from them both. She attempts to entice Thenot with a catalogue of pastoral pleasures, exclaiming,

> Heere be all new delights, coole streams and wels,  
> Arbors ore growne with wood bines, Caves, and dels,  
> Chuse where thou wilt, whilst I sit by and sing,  
> Or gather rushes, to make many a ring  
> for thy longingers, tell thee tales of love. (1.3.31, 33-5).
Cloe envisions a future in which the role of the lover is synonymous with the role of the storyteller or singer. Of course, Petrarchism and the female complaint also posit a lover-poet, but one who is either endlessly frustrated or permanently abandoned; sexual pleasure in these poetics appears either as an unattainable dream or as a long-lost memory. Cloe’s poetry, by contrast, is powered by the immediate promise of sex, as becomes clearer once Thenot refuses her. After Thenot departs, Cloe—entirely unfazed by his rejection—promptly invents a song designed to bring more potential lovers to her. “Come, Shepheards, come, / Come away without delay,” she urges, before promising “Dainty pleasures that would even / Raise in the coldest age a fire, / And give virgin blood desire”—sentiments that would no doubt alarm the Priest of Pan (1.3.78-80). She states her desire even more plainly in the song’s final lines, which shift into a shorter, quicker meter: “Then if ever, / Now or never, / Come and have it, / Thinke not I / Dare deny, / If you crave it” (1.3.81-86). Cloe’s invitation, then, is a general one, extended to anyone who might be willing.

While Perigot imagines shepherds composing “Laies” that come from their chaste and monogamous relationships with women, and the virginal Clorin laments the loss of her dead beloved, Cloe demonstrates how the sexual desires of women might serve as the grounds for poetic production. These desires, we should also note, are surprisingly indiscriminate—especially when viewed in comparison to those behind Petrarchism and the female complaint, which center obsessively on a single unattainable beloved. But the promiscuous nature of this desire is precisely what makes it so useful as an engine for poetic production, and so stable a ground for authorship. If, in the poetics of abjection, frustrated or disappointed desires become generative of—but also threatening to—poetry,
Cloe’s indiscriminate desire allows for a much less troubled stream of poetic production: in her attempts to seduce one shepherd after another (moving from Thenot to Daphnis to Alexis), she creates ever more songs and stories. As a poet of wanton desires, moreover, she eludes the pull toward self-effacement or destruction that plagues the abject poet, and imperils his or her ability to continue producing poetry. (Tellingly, Dido’s sword is nowhere to be found in Cloe’s fantasies.)

Cloe’s poetics not only resolves the problem of rejection, of failed desire, but also that of *consummated* desire. As we saw with Turbervile’s Sappho, any desiring poetics that attains the object of its desire risks losing its reason to exist. Neoplatonic Petrarchism deals with this difficulty by making the union with the beloved a purely spiritual affair, a consummation realized only by “chaste imbraces.” Cloe, however, suggests that the insatiable nature of female desire—its ability to be endlessly renewed—would allow for a consummation that does not spell the end of poetic production. While still trying to seduce Thenot, Cloe tells him a myth that depicts female desire as never-ending:

[... ] the pale *Phoebe* hunting in a grove,  
First saw the boy *Endimion*, from whose eyes,  
She tooke eternall fire, that never dies,  
[... ] she convaid him softly in a sleepe,  
His temples bound with poppy to the steep  
Head of old Latmus, where she stoopes each night,  
Gilding the mountaine with her brothers light  
To kisse her sweetest. (1.3.36-43)

Cloe’s retelling of the myth of Phoebe and Endymion—popular in this period, especially in the form of epyllia—stresses the ongoing nature of the goddess’ desires, how she “stoopes each night” “[t]o kisse her sweetest.”\(^{231}\) Moreover, because tropes of fire, heat, and light are used consistently throughout the play to signify lust (as in the Priest of Pan’s

\(^{231}\) See, for example, Michael Drayton’s *Phoebe and Endimion* (London: 1595).
warning to avoid “lustfull heat”), Cloe’s mention of Phoebe’s “eternall fire” gives the
goddess’s ostensibly chaste kisses a suggestively erotic undertone. In Cloe’s telling of
events, the normally virginal Phoebe enjoys her beloved in an endless cycle of pleasure.

Cloe again invokes female desire as an insatiable force in another story she tells
as part of a seduction attempt. When the shepherd Daphnis enters the scene after Cloe
sings her inviting song, she exclaims,

How the sight
of those smooth rising cheeks renue the story
Of young Adonis, when in pride and glory
He lay infolded twixt the beating armes
Of willing Venus. (1.3.111-2)

The story of Venus and Adonis recalls that of Phoebe and Endymion: both feature a
goddess who falls in love with a beautiful mortal boy. The stories diverge, however, in
that Adonis is killed while hunting; unlike Endymion, Adonis cannot remain always the
goddess’s unchanging beloved. But Cloe’s telling of events stops at the moment of sexual
consummation, eliding the death of Adonis and keeping him forever “infolded twixt the
beating armes / Of willing Venus.” Because of this, her version of the myth has much in
common with Spenser’s account of the Garden of Adonis in Book III of the Faerie
Queene—a work that, as many scholars have noted, serves as an important source for
Fletcher’s play.232 In Book III, the narrator tells us that some believe that Adonis did not
die, but remains hidden by Venus in a garden,“[l]apped in flowres and pretious
spycery.”233 Venus preserves him, furthermore, for her pleasure: “But she her selfe, when

232 See Philip J. Finkelpearl, “John Fletcher as Spenserian Playwright: The Faithful
Shepherdess and The Island Princess,” SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 27
233 Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. A.C. Hamilton (New York: Routledge,
2006), III.vi.46.
ever that she will, / Possesseth him, and of his sweetnesse takes her fill.”

Cloe therefore tells not one but two stories of goddesses who capture young men and keep them for use in an endless cycle of self-gratification—a cycle she signals her willingness to join by positioning Daphnis as the new Adonis and herself as the new Venus.

In these stories, female desire “never dies”; although consummated, it does not conclude. Such a conception of desire helps to explain the workings of poetic production in Cloe’s earlier fantasy of her future with Thenot. She describes how she will “sing” and “tell tales of love” as they enjoy the delights of the pastoral landscape. One of these pleasures—never stated, though implicit throughout—is that of sex. (The terms of Thenot’s refusal make the erotic subtext of her proposition explicit: he disdains what he calls her “wanton heat and ease” [1.3.43].) For Cloe, poetry therefore emerges as part of, and even after, the consummation of desire—an emergence made possible because of the female poet’s insatiable yearnings. In this paradigm, the achievement of desire simply leads to more desire, and thus to more poetry. Powered by an “eternall fire,” Cloe’s poetics are self-renewing rather than self-destroying.

The character of Cloe thus proposes an authorial paradigm rooted not in abjection, but in sexual desires that are at once insatiable and indiscriminate. They are also female desires, which is part of the reason that Lamb objected to Cloe so strenuously: that women could possess such vociferous sexual urges was, he insisted, unthinkable. But few early modern moralists shared his attitude. Indeed, as numerous scholars have discussed, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers spent much time and ink considering women’s propensity for lust—a trope that winds it way through the period’s religious, medical, and

---

234 Ibid, vi.46.8-9.
imaginative literature. The highly popular female conduct book examined in the previous chapter, Vives’s *The Instruction of a Christen Woman*, repeatedly warns its readers against licentiousness, and urges fasting as a way to “brydell” the body, to “presse hit downe, and quenche the heate of youthe”; women “ought to remembre,” Vives writes, “that our fyrste mother for meate was caste out of paradise.” As this allusion suggests, the Biblical Eve (“our fyrste mother”) provided an oft-cited precedent for understanding women in general as innately lustful, possessed of appetites that they could not control. This deeply-entrenched religious discourse was echoed by emerging scientific theories: discussing early modern medical writing about women, historians Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford observe that because it was believed that “women were constructed for breeding,” they were consequently understood to be “insatiable for sex.” Perhaps most pertinently, female sexual voracity was also a widespread literary trope. The titular goddess of Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* (1593) serves as one memorable example. The epyllion’s narrator repeatedly stresses the goddess’ inexhaustible rapacity—how, unless interrupted by Adonis, she would never stop her attentions. “Even so she kiss’d his brow, his cheek, his chin,” we are told, “And where she ends, she doth anew begin.” Venus’ desire carries within it the promise—or the threat—of endless renewal, of a hunger that can never be sated.

Contemporary critics have pointed out the misogyny underlying such conceptions of female desire, and rightly so. And yet, in *The Faithful Shepherdess*, Cloe’s

---

237 Burrow, 178, Ins. 59-60.
promiscuous poetics serves as an important part of the text’s attempts to move beyond Petrarchism and the female complaint. As we have seen, the problem with these abject poetics is that the very thing that enables them also constantly threatens them; as such, they can only produce precarious authorial positions. If one solution to this dilemma is to Neoplatonize their frustrated desire—to render it chaste and put it in service of virtue—then another is to go in the opposite direction and imagine a relentless and endless desire, one that can be consummated and yet never fulfilled. Cloe embodies Fletcher’s attempts to envision a desire that is indiscriminate, insatiable, and poetically productive—indeed, a desire that is poetically productive because it is indiscriminate and insatiable. The early modern preoccupation with rapacious female sexuality, moreover, makes it logical that he would choose a female character to embody this experiment.

Cloe is not, however, the only figure in the play who embodies the idea of uncontrollable lust. The character of the Sullen Shepherd serves as her male parallel in the arena of appetite, repeatedly giving voice to a frighteningly voracious desire. Before he meets with Amarillis to help her change her shape, Sullen proclaims in soliloquy that he does not love her, he only desires her, as he does every woman: “all to me in sight / Are equall; be they faire, or blacke, or browne, / Virgin, or carelesse wanton, I can crowne / My appetitie with any” (2.3.10-13). And yet, Sullen differs from Cloe in one key respect: he is not a poet. Where Cloe produces songs and stories designed to work as aphrodisiacs, and imagines a world where sexual pleasure and poetic production coincide, Sullen simply states his indiscriminate desire in the bluntest of terms: “Now lust is up, alike all women be” (3.1.135). The play’s “wanton shepherdess” voices an entire
system of poetic production grounded in indiscriminate and insatiable desires, but the Sullen Shepherd does not participate. Why, we should ask, is this so?

The answer, I believe, lies with Sappho. Cloe’s poetics is thinkable, in part, because Sappho—and, more specifically, the Sappho of Heroides 15—exists as a precedent linking female desire and poetic production. This is not to say that Fletcher deliberately patterns Cloe after Sappho, but that his attempt to reimagine the relationship between sexual desire and poetic authorship can be traced back to ideas surrounding her. To put it another way, the female author makes sense as a vehicle for a poetics of indiscriminate and insatiable desire not only because early modern misogyny associated women with just such forms of lust, but because Sappho existed in the early modern imagination as (to quote DeJean) the “original poet of female desire.” And as DeJean further explains, this view emerges from Ovid’s Sappho and her double position as “the archetypal woman in love and the archetypal woman writer.”

Not all early modern thinkers were comfortable with the ways in which the figure of Sappho brought together the desiring woman with the famous poet. A tradition arose in antiquity that claimed there were in fact two Sapphos—one a poet, the other a prostitute—and this belief carried over into the early modern period. For evidence of this tradition, we can turn to Aelian’s Varia Historia, written in the third century CE and translated into English in 1576 by Abraham Fleming. Aelian asserts that Plato “numbreth Sapho the Versifyer… among such as were wise, lerned and skilful. I heare also, that there was another Sapho in Lesbus: which was a stronge whore, and an arrant

238 DeJean, 6.
239 Ibid, 23.
240 Lipking, 71.
As this quote makes clear, the tradition of the two Sapphos works to separate the female “Versifyer” from the “arrant strumpet”—to make them mutually exclusive identities. Fletcher, however, makes the wanton desires of his female “Versifyer” the source of her poetry. In so doing, he theorizes a solution to the problems of authorship entailed by Petrarchism and the Heroidean lament, and that he elsewhere attempts to resolve through Neoplatonic philosophy.

As The Faithful Shepherdess continues, however, the conflicts between the play’s investments in Neoplatonic love and its use of “wanton” female sexuality become more pronounced. After propositioning Thenot and Daphnis, Cloe finally finds an equally lusty shepherd, Alexis, who agrees to meet her in the woods that night. They meet as promised, but before they can sleep together, the Sullen Shepherd appears, demands that Alexis surrender Cloe to him, and wounds Alexis in the fight that ensures. Any more violence is prevented by the arrival of the Satyr, who serves Clorin, and whose menacing appearance scares Cloe and Sullen into running away. After the Satyr takes Alexis to Clorin to be healed of his lust, Cloe returns to the stage and voices her longings even more explicitly than before. Although the sudden appearance of the Satyr made her run, she says,

```
Yet my desire keepes still above my feare,
I would faine meete some Sheapheard knew I where,
For from one cause of feare, I am most free,
It is Impossible to Ravish mee,
I am soe willing… (3.1.209-212)
```

In her insistence that she cannot be raped, Cloe evinces an extreme erotic desire, the same unbridled sexual willingness that lies at the core of her poetics. Yet such a view of female sexuality, though shown to be poetically productive for Cloe, ultimately proves untenable.

---

in the world of the play—not only because it threatens the play’s ideological investments in chastity and Neoplatonism, but also because it threatens dramatic action. In a play that generates audience suspense and interest by threatening the chastity of its faithful shepherdesses, Cloe’s stated inability to be ravished both crystallizes her promiscuous poetics—articulating her desires in the most uncompromising of terms—and leaves her without a story. Shortly after Cloe utters this speech, she leaves the stage in order to look for Daphnis, and does not reappear again until almost the end of the play. It is as though Fletcher can imagine the poetry that might emerge from an “erotic poetess,” but not a plot. (Or, perhaps, he is unable to imagine a plot for her that does not end in sex.) In a sense, then, the extreme sexual willingness that generates Cloe’s poetry eventually threatens to stop Fletcher’s; although her desires allow Fletcher to experiment—briefly and provocatively—with revising inherited models of authorship, they also push against Fletcher’s ability to remain a dramatist in a Neoplatonic Petrarchan mode.

Cloe’s return to the stage near the end of the play thematizes the threat she poses to Neoplatonic ideals both within and without the play. At this point, the Satyr brings Amoret (wounded for a second time by the beguiled Perigot) to Clorin to be healed. Cloe’s almost-lover Alexis has already been almost healed by the faithful shepherdess, his improving health a reflection of his improving sexual purity. Yet soon after Amoret is brought in, Clorin’s healing medicines stop working, alerting her that “some uncleanessee nye doth lurke”; a search of the area reveals Cloe and Daphnis hidden together in a hollow tree (5.2.47). Further, once exposed, Cloe’s mere presence weakens the powers of the play’s Neoplatonic ideal, and even threatens to undo Clorin’s work in healing Alexis of his lust—“his wound againe is burst” as Cloe is brought before him (5.2.105). Cloe
poses a similar threat to the play’s ideology: her female poetics of consummated yet endlessly renewed desires work against the play’s emphasis on Neoplatonic love, and Fletcher’s own use of Neoplatonized Petrarchism in creating beautiful, chaste female figures like Clorin and Amoret to move the audience to virtue. Much as Lamb feared, Fletcher’s wanton shepherdess threatens to eclipse his faithful shepherdess. The play works to foreclose on this possibility by once more removing her from the stage. When we see Cloe again, she has been reformed—the only fire she professes now is the “chast flame” of Neoplatonic virtue (5.5.18).

But the story of Fletcher’s promiscuous poetics does not end with Cloe. This system of poetic production is one that Fletcher kept thinking about in his later collaborations with Beaumont. In their work *The Maid’s Tragedy* (c. 1610-1611), the bawdy female character of Dula appears onstage in order to sing a song remarkably similar to those voiced by Cloe. At the request of a bride preparing for her marriage bed, Dula sings,

I would never have the power  
To love one above an hour,  
But my heart would prompt mine eie  
On some other man to fly,  
Venus fix mine eies fast,  
Or if not, give me all that I shall see at last.\(^{242}\)

Although editors typically assign authorship of this scene (and, by implication, of this song) to Beaumont, Dula’s irreverent celebration of female inconstancy seems to deliberately echo the open invitations of Fletcher’s wanton shepherdess. What she

suggests is that, even after Cloe’s reformation, Fletcher continued to imagine the kinds of verse that might come from a female poet possessed of insatiable desires.²⁴³

**Conclusion: Playing with Ovid**

In his *Canzoniere*, Petrarch famously takes the story of Apollo and Daphne as told in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and turns it into an allegory for his own authorship: just as Apollo chases Daphne and captures only the bay laurel that she becomes, Petrarch pursues his beloved Laura, but instead gains the *lauro*—the laurel that symbolizes poetic achievement and fame. As the editors of a recent compendium tracing Petrarch’s influence on English literary culture observe, this pun (capturing, as it does, how Petrarchism makes the unattainable female beloved the source of male poetic identity and renown) serves as “the master trope of the vernacular poetry that revolutionizes the European love lyric and seeds all the national literatures of the Renaissance.”²⁴⁴ The works that I have examined in this chapter, however, suggest that another Ovidian figure—the Sappho of the *Heroides*—allowed early seventeenth-century writers access to a very different set of relationships between gender, desire, and poetic production than those forged by Petrarch. Donne took on Sappho’s voice in order to envision poetry that arises from, and helps to produce, female pleasure. And slightly later in the century,

²⁴³ Cyrus Hoy assigns authorship of this scene to Beaumont in his article “The Shares Of Fletcher and His Collaborators In The Beaumont And Fletcher Canon (III),” *Studies In Bibliography* 11 (1958), 94. That said, such attempts to neatly divide authorship between the two playwrights have been criticized, and remain speculative. See Jeffrey Masten’s *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Assigning authorship to Dula’s song is additionally complicated by the fact that there are two manuscripts of the play, Q1 and Q2, and Dula’s song appears only in Q2. See T.W. Craik’s introduction to the play: *The Maid’s Tragedy*, ed. T.W. Craik (Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 1988), esp. 34.

Fletcher proposed that a female figure first incarnated by Sappho—the erotic poetess—might resolve, through her promiscuous poetics, the problems of authorship that inhere in Petrarchism.

In essence, Sappho became useful to these authors because she incarnated not one but two “paterne[s] of a poet”: one whose abjection confirmed the traditional Heroidean and Petrarchan paradigms, and another whose desiring voice reached beyond these inherited models. Because of this inherent doubleness, Sappho proved to be a highly flexible conceptual vehicle for early modern writers looking to renegotiate the relationship between erotic desire and poetic authorship. We have seen how this inherent doublessness emerged in part from her conflicting portrayals in the *Heroides*. But it is important to remember, as well, that Ovid’s versions of Sappho became authoritative to later readers and writers because so little of her actual writing survived beyond antiquity, leaving her open to ongoing appropriations and re-imaginings. Speaking of the fragmentary nature of her poetic corpus, and of how little is definitively known of her, Margaret Reynolds shrewdly observes that “‘Sappho’ is not a name, much less a person. It is, rather, a space. A space for filling in gaps, joining up the dots, making something out of nothing.”245 Ultimately, for writers in early modern England, Sappho opened up a very specific space—one in which they could imagine forms of desiring authorship that diverged from Petrarch’s model of love and loss, and yet were still rooted in Ovid.

Chapter 3

Author’s Pen, Sibyl’s Voice:
Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Vates

“Sibylla out of her furious and enraged mouth… uttering foorth and resounding words without mirth, and provoking no laughter… hath continued with her voice a thousand yeeres, by the meanes of Apollo, speaking by her.”


Critics of *Othello* (c. 1603) have been obsessed with Desdemona’s handkerchief since at least 1693, when Thomas Rymer published his infamously bad-tempered response to Shakespeare’s play. Commenting on the intense importance that Othello places on what seems to be “so remote a trifle,” Rymer sardonically exclaims, “So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call’d the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*?”  

(He would have understood the uproar, he confesses, “[had] it been Desdemona’s Garter.”) But beginning in the late twentieth century, critics—with an ironic nod to Rymer’s invective—began to deem the handkerchief a major “symbolic nexus” in the play, one that metonymically evokes Desdemona, her sexuality, and her marriage bed. Complicating matters, of course, is

The chapter’s epigraph is taken from Plutarch, *The philosophie, commonlie called, the morals vvritten by the learned philosopher Plutarch of Chaeronea*, trans. Philemon Holland (London: Arnold Hatfield, 1603), 1188. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 20063.

245 Thomas Rymer, *A short view of tragedy it’s original, excellency and corruption: with some reflections on Shakespear and other practitioners for the stage* (London: Richard Baldwin, 1693), 135. EEBO STC Wing R2429.

247 Ibid, 140.

the fact that Othello offers two conflicting accounts of the handkerchief’s origins. In his first narrative, Othello claims that an Egyptian “charmer” gave the handkerchief to his mother so that she could “subdue my father / Entirely to her love” (3.4.56, 58-9); in the second, Othello tells Gratiano that the handkerchief was “an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2.214-215). But although critics have noted the discrepancies between these two stories, few have paid sustained attention to the figure that Othello initially claims is the creator of the fabric. As he tells Desdemona,

… there’s magic in the web of it:  
A sibyl, that had number’d in the world  
The sun to course two hundred compasses,  
In her prophetic fury sew’d the work[.] (3.4.68-71, italics mine).

Who is this “sibyl” behind one of theater’s most famous props? In his recent Oxford Shakespeare edition of the play, Michael Neill glosses “sibyl” as meaning simply “prophetess.” Similarly, E.A.J. Honigmann’s notes to the Arden edition explain that the word suggests a “prophetess, as in ancient Greece and Rome.” Neill and Honigmann are right to note that “sibyl” was sometimes just a generic term for a female prophet: in his early seventh-century work Etymologiae, Isidore of Seville clarifies that “just as every man who prophesies is called either a seer (vates) or a prophet (propheta), so every woman who prophesies is called a Sibyl, because it is the name of a function,

---

250 Neill, 317, n. 69.
not a proper noun.”

Isidore goes on to explain, however, that the “most learned authors” identify ten famous sibyls from the ancient world. After giving their names and brief biographical details, Isidore closes by observing, “[s]ongs by all of them are published in which they are attested to have written many things most clearly even for the pagans about God and Christ.”

Closer to Shakespeare’s own day, Thomas Elyot’s 1559 dictionary entry on “Sibylla” echoed Isidore’s: after listing the ten sibyls, Elyot adds, “every one of these (as Lactantius saythe) wrate of the incarnation of Chryste.”

The sibyls, in other words, were more than just prophetesses—they were also thought to be ancient women writers.

In Chapter 1 of Evander’s Mother, we examined how male humanists used the rebellious women writers Leontium and Zenobia to allegorize their attempts to break with the auctoritas of classical men; in Chapter 2, we explored how the Ovidian figure of Sappho enabled Donne and Fletcher to revise the role of the vernacular love poet. In this chapter, we will trace how Shakespeare’s representations of sibylline figures in his poetry and plays respond to—and reshape—the classical conception of the author as divinely inspired poet-prophet, or vates. Isidore of Seville may have suggested a gendered divide between the male vates and the female sibyl, but the writings of Virgil and Ovid closely link the two figures, and Shakespeare repeatedly draws on this classical heritage as he refashions the vatic role. In particular, he focuses on the long-standing paradox that

---

253 Ibid.
254 Ibid.
crediting the poet with divine inspiration at once exalts the poet’s work and denigrates the poet to the status of an empty vessel used by a superior force.

Scholars of early modern authorship have not often considered Shakespeare in relation to the vates. It was Spenser (and later Milton), they argue, who was most invested in adopting the vatic role, particularly as it appeared in Virgil. Yet examining works such as Titus Andronicus, The Rape of Lucrece, Troilus and Cressida reveals that Shakespeare was indeed interested in thinking about the Virgilian figure of the vates, and that he ultimately treated this role quite differently than did Spenser. Although critics often depict the vatic role as inherently empowering to the poet, Shakespeare and Spenser both suggest that it is a deeply vulnerable position—largely because the Aeneid associates the vates with violated women such as Cassandra and the Sibyl of Cumae. But where the “newe Poet” attempts to recuperate the vatic role by burying its connections to the sibyls, Shakespeare foregrounds these links. Through female characters such as Lavinia, Lucrece, and Cassandra, Shakespeare emphasizes that the divinely inspired poet serves as an instrument victimized by greater powers. At the same time, however, he uses these sibylline figures to imagine a theory of authorship that collapses the boundaries between controlling agent and passive instrument—and, in the process, eschews recognizable authorial “personhood.” In so doing, the poet-playwright draws not only on Virgil, but

---

also on the growing doubts around the sibyls’ status as authors in the early seventeenth century. Ultimately, for Shakespeare, the sibyls model not only a form of authorship in which the poet is forcibly ravished by outside forces, but also one in which the author-as-individual vanishes completely.

**Mastered by Apollo:**
*Divine Possession and the Sibyl in Plato and Virgil*

Before exploring how Spenser and Shakespeare used sibylline figures to interact with the role of the *vates*, we need to understand the classical heritage behind the idea of the divinely inspired poet. One of the most influential ancient thinkers on this subject was Plato. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates identify four kinds of beneficial, divine madness; for our purposes, the most important are the poetic and the prophetic. Poetic madness, Socrates explains, “takes hold of a delicate, virgin soul and stirs into it a frenzy for composing lyric and other kinds of poetry.” Socrates’ language (“takes hold,” “stirs into,” “frenzy”) hints that the onset of this madness entails a certain loss of agency for the poet, who must be taken over by an outside force before he can compose. Plato further undermines the agency of the poet when he has Socrates assert that any person who “approaches the doors of poetic composition without the Muses’ madness, in the conviction that skill alone will make him a competent poet, is cheated of his goal.”

Poetry, then, is no art—it is instead (as Socrates states in the *Ion*) a “divine force [that] moves you.” In this, poetry is like prophecy, which is caused by an analogous form of

---

258 Ibid.
divine madness. Plato develops the poet-prophet parallel in the *Ion*, where Socrates explains that both poets and prophets serve as conduits or vessels for the divine:

...god takes away [poets’] senses and uses them as servants, as he does divine prophets and seers, so that we who hear may realize that it is not these persons, whose reason has left them, who are the speakers of such valuable words, but god who speaks and expresses himself to us through them.\(^{260}\)

The inspiration of Plato’s poet may come from above, but his position is not so much exalted as powerless—the god’s possession strips him of both individual agency and independent voice.

Plato’s Socrates further illustrates the violence behind divine possession by means of a surprising analogue. The epic and lyric poet alike, he states, “produce all their beautiful poems” in a “state of possession”; in just the same way, “women draw honey and milk from the rivers when under Bacchic possession, but not when they are in their right mind.”\(^{261}\) The male poet-prophet, in other words, resembles the female devotees of Bacchus, the god of wine and ecstasy—a comparison with unsettling implications, given that these female followers, the maenads, were known for their violent, orgiastic behavior.\(^{262}\) Consequently, Plato’s allusion to the maenads imbues the poet-prophet’s “state of possession” with threatening undertones, particularly concerning the poet’s inevitable loss of reason and self-control.

Plato also associates the prophet (and hence the poet) with divinely inspired female figures in the *Phaedrus*—in this case, with “the Sibyl,” as well as with the oracles

\(^{260}\) Ibid, 5.
\(^{261}\) Ibid.
\(^{262}\) As Jane O. Newman observes, “even in its early Greek form,” the worship of Dionysus “was identified with the immorality, licentiousness, and frenzy of its female devotees” (319). See her “And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness”: Philomela, Female Violence, and Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45.3 (1994), 304-326.
of Delphi and Dodona. They have, he explains, “done Greece a lot of good […] in their madness, but little or nothing when they are in their right minds.” Socrates may allude to these women in order to illustrate the benefits conferred on mankind by the “divine gift” of prophetic madness, but, when taken with his reference to the maenads in the Ion, the effect is to stress the effeminization of the poet-prophet. Such a subtext is not surprising, given the ancient world’s recurring equation of masculinity with self-control, and—conversely—of femininity or effeminacy with the loss of this control. For Plato, the poet’s loss of agency and self-control when a “god takes away [his] senses and uses [him as a servant]” subtly aligns him with women in general—and with possessed female figures such as the maenads, the oracles, and the Sibyl in particular.

The links that Plato forges between the male poet-prophet and the female Sibyl are cemented in Virgil’s Aeneid. The Roman poet’s epic includes a number of characters identified as vates, ranging from the friendly prophet Helenus to the “ill-boding seer” Celaeno the Harpy. None, however, are more prominent than the Sibyl of Cumae. We first learn of the Sibyl in Book III, when Helenus instructs Aeneas to travel to the Temple of Apollo at Cumae, where he will find “an inspired prophetess” (insanam vatem) “who deep in a rocky cave sings the Fates and entrusts to leaves signs and symbols.” Because these written prophecies are easily scattered by the winds, however, Helenus

---

263 Phaedrus, 25-6.
264 Phaedrus, 25.
265 Todd W. Reeser, Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 27.
267 Aen. 3.443-44.
urges Aeneas to ask the Sibyl to speak her predictions aloud.\textsuperscript{268} This request appears to be a simple one, but it results in a scene of intense supernatural violence in Book VI. There, after Aeneas makes his request to the “most holy prophetess” (sanctissima vates), the god Apollo overtakes and possesses the Sibyl, who struggles to resist his forcible entrance into her body:

…the prophetess (vates), not yet brooking the sway of Phoebus, storms wildly in the cavern, if so she may shake the mighty god from her breast; so much more he tires her raving mouth, tames her wild heart, and moulds her by constraint.\textsuperscript{269}

As many classicists have noted, Virgil here depicts divine possession or inspiration as a kind of rape, in which the masculine god masters and violates the vates.\textsuperscript{270} Virgil’s description of the Sibyl as “bacchatur vates” even intimates that the prophetess resembles the frenzied madwomen possessed by Bacchus, for the verb bacchor suggests ranting and raving wildly, in the style of the maenads.\textsuperscript{271} Significantly, this scene also builds on the disempowering nature of the poet-prophet’s role. If Plato claims that the poet must suffer divine madness in order to compose, the Sibyl must be violently overwhelmed by Apollo, enduring a divine coercion made all the more unsettling by its sexual undertones. In his most extended depiction of the vatic role, therefore, Virgil works to align the vates with the figure of the violated woman.

\textsuperscript{268} Aen. 3.456-7.
\textsuperscript{269} “most holy prophetess,” Aen. 6.65; “the prophetess…” Aen. 6.77-81.
One might be tempted to dismiss these disturbing links as anomalous, but to do so would be to ignore how deliberately Virgil repeats this linkage elsewhere in the epic, in the character of the “prophet Cassandra” (*vates Cassandra*). When telling Dido about the fall of Troy in Book II, Aeneas stresses how Cassandra’s warnings to the Trojans were ignored: “[she] opened her lips for the coming doom—lips at a god’s command never believed by the Trojans.” Here, Aeneas obliquely alludes to the story behind Cassandra’s prophetic powers. According to legend, Cassandra’s gift of prophecy came from the god Apollo, who—after she rejected his sexual advances—placed a curse on her, ensuring that she would never be believed. Cassandra’s status as *vates* thus originates with Apollo’s desire for her. This backstory is most famously staged in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, where the inspired Cassandra cries out as Apollo forcibly possesses her: “Oh! Oh! The pain! The terrible agony of true prophecy is coming over me again, wringing me around and deranging me in the <fierce storm> of its onset.” As Helen Lovatt observes, the god’s painful possession of the prophetess serves as a substitute for the sexual possession that he was denied. In effect, Cassandra’s “gift” of prophecy depends—much like the Sibyl’s—on a kind of divine rape.

Although the *Aeneid* does not explicitly detail the vatic Cassandra’s history with Apollo, it does allude to the story of her literal rape after the fall of Troy. In the opening of Book I, Juno rages over her inability to crush the Trojans, which she compares to the

---

273 *Aen.* 2.246-7.
superior efficacy of Minerva, who destroyed a Greek fleet because of “one single man’s guilt.” This man was Ajax Oileus, a Greek warrior who raped Cassandra after dragging her away from a statue of Minerva. In Book II, Aeneas vividly remembers watching Cassandra being taken from the shrine by the invading Greeks: she was “dragged with streaming hair from the temple and shrine of Minerva, vainly uplifting to heaven her blazing eyes—her eyes, for bonds confined her tender hands!” By emphasizing the vatic Cassandra’s rape at the hands of Ajax, the *Aeneid* reinforces its portrait of the *vates* as the victim of forces beyond his or her control.

Because it builds on Plato and associates divine inspiration with rape, Virgil’s depiction of the Sibyl (and Cassandra) poses a significant dilemma for those poets after him who would claim the vatic role. As Don Fowler asks, “if the Sibyl’s inspiration is like the poet’s, and inspiration is figured as sexual assault, where does that leave the creative artist?” Virgil further complicates matters by claiming the title of *vates* for himself only once in the epic—directly after Aeneas’ journey into the Underworld with the Sibyl. There, in the opening of Book VII, Virgil invokes the aid of the Muse Erato, imploring, “You, goddess, remind the prophet-poet (*vatem*). I shall tell of horrid wars.” Appearing so soon after Apollo’s violent possession of the Sibyl, Virgil’s use of *vates* subtly links him with his violated female prophet.

---

277 *Aen.* 1.41.
278 *Aen.* 3.403-6.
279 Fowler, 149.
281 On the Sibyl as a double for Virgil, see Alison Sharrock, “An A-musing Tale: Gender, Genre, and Ovid’s Battles with Inspiration in the *Metamorphoses*,” in *Cultivating the Muse*, esp. 211-12.
The *Aeneid* thus offers its readers a vexed paradigm for vatic authorship—one that suggests that the poet-prophet is not empowered by divine possession but in fact violently deprived of agency, self-control, and eloquence. And the gendered subtext of the *vates* only compounds this problem. In our earlier discussion of Plato, we saw how the ancient world equated masculinity with self-control, and effeminacy or femininity with a loss of this control. By extension, therefore, the vatic role—which depends on becoming a vessel or an instrument to be used by the god—threatens to compromise the male poet-prophet’s male identity. As Fowler notes, in much Latin literature, inspired male poets “lose that control of self which is essential to ancient masculinity,” and hence they take on the “female subject position, penetrated and overborne.”\(^\text{282}\)

Early moderns inherited the ancient world’s equation of masculinity with reason and self-control; consequently, the idea of divinely inspired poetry could be a deeply troubling one.\(^\text{283}\) Nowhere is this concern more clear than in William Scott’s 1599 treatise *The Model of Poesy*. Addressing those who believe poetry is divinely inspired, Scott demands, “is this instinct, fury, influence, or what else you list to call it, is this… divine seed infused and conceived in the mind of man in despite of nature and reason, as you would say by rape?”\(^\text{284}\) Scott highlights with unusual bluntness one of the most threatening implications of the vatic role: that the *vates* is, in some figurative but still disquieting way, the victim of sexual violence. Scott raises this idea in order to discredit

\(^{282}\) Fowler, 159.

\(^{283}\) See Mark Breitenberg, who discusses “the high premium placed on reason and self-control as the most critical constituents of Renaissance masculinity” in his book *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 63.

the divine origins of poetry, but in Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), the
glossator E.K. attempts the more difficult maneuver of recuperating the vatic role—of
transforming the *vates* from an effeminized victim of divine rape to a potent ravisher of
men’s minds. As we will see, key to this effort is separating the vatic role from the figure
of the Sibyl.

**Taming Her Wild Heart:**
the Ravishment of the Sibyl and the Birth of the “new Poete”

E.K.’s revision of the vatic role begins with his account of that role’s origins in antiquity.
In an endnote to Spenser’s “October” eclogue, E.K. describes how, at festivals held in the
ancient world,

> some learned man being more hable then the rest, for speciall gyftes of wytte and
> Musicke, would take vpon him to sing fine verses to the people, in prayse [eyther]
> of vertue or of victory or of immortality or such like. At whose wonderful gyft al
> men being astonied and as it were rauished, with delight, thinking (as it was
> indeede) that he was inspired from aboue, called him *vatem* … (177)

As we have seen, the *Aeneid* often associates the role of the *vates* with female characters,
such as the Sibyl of Cumae and Cassandra. (It is associated, as well, with “Evanders
mother,” the prophet Carmentis.285) Yet in E.K.’s telling of events, the *vates* is a role that
emerges from a world populated entirely by ancient *men*: it is first embodied by a
“learned man” whose poetic gifts impress “al men.” His account of how “Poetes or
makers” came into being is similarly androcentric. E.K. explains that certain “men” (and
here it is unclear whether he is referring to the original vatic poets or to their audiences)
“fram[ed] their verses to lighter musick,” including love and pleasure, “and so were
called Poetes or makers” (177-8). For E.K., then, both the vatic poet and the poetic maker
are roles that emerge from a thoroughly masculine past.

E.K.’s account of the *vates* is notable not only for its exclusively male cast; its emphasis on the role of “ravishment” is equally significant. For the glossator, the *vates* is known as such because of the overwhelming “delight” he brings to his “ravished” audience. The word “ravishment” was a complex one in early modern England. As E.K.’s usage suggests, the term could connote “rapture,” “ecstasy,” or “delight.” But these positive connotations emerged from a darker etymology: the word derives from the Latin *raptus*, meaning “violently seized or carried away.” As Amy Greenstadt explains, in early modern England, “ravishment described an experience in which a person was so carried away by sensual pleasure that he temporarily lost the ability to exert conscious control.” Women and literary texts alike were often said to “ravish” their viewers or readers—an ironic attribution, given that, throughout this period, “ravishment” was sometimes synonymous with another word derived from *raptus*: rape. As Greenstadt says elsewhere, “[b]oth aesthetic beauty and male sexual violence were … conceived as forces that invaded the body of another individual through superseding or contradicting his or her will.” Katherine Eggert has explored how these opposing understandings of “ravishment” manifest in *The Faerie Queene*, arguing that, on one hand, the romance-epic figures poetry as “a tool for single-minded exposure, penetration, and comprehension of a feminized scene”; on the other, however, it sometimes “hints at poetry as a vehicle for rapture, a suffusion of delight that suspends the quest and admits a

286 “ravishment, n. 2a” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014.


288 *Ibid*.


290 Amy Greenstadt, “‘Rapt from himself’: Rape and the Poetics of Corporeality in Sidney’s *Old Arcadia*,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 312.
multiplicity of … pleasures.” Yet if *The Faerie Queene* exploits the varied early modern valences of “ravishment,” E.K.’s attempts to explain the power of the vatic poet through a language of ravishment in the *Calender* lead to a serious questioning of that power.

Initially, the glossator’s emphasis on the *vates*’ ravishing verse seems to invert the troubling subtext that accrues to the role in the *Aeneid*. If, as we have seen, Virgil’s epic identifies the *vates* with violated female characters such as Cassandra and the Sibyl, implicitly proposing that attaining this role requires a traumatic loss of personal agency and individual voice, E.K. conversely insists that the *vates* ravishes his listeners, leaving them “astonied”—that is, “stunned, stupefied, deprived of sensation.” E.K.’s poet thus becomes not the victimized instrument of the gods, but a figure who himself possesses a kind of godlike power; in other words, he is more Apollo than Cassandra. Indeed, in an essay that considers the *Calender* alongside Virgil’s *Georgics*, Jane Tylus argues that Virgil and Spenser alike are both wary of asserting a divinely inspired poetic role precisely because such a role is too powerful, too autonomous: “the self-authenticating *furor* of poetic inspiration,” she says, “places the poet among the gods”—and outside of the very earthly patronage networks that both poets are trying to cultivate.

---

Yet the Calender’s unease with the vatic role in fact owes less to the idea of its “transgressive” power than to fears over its intense and inherent vulnerabilities.\textsuperscript{294} These fears overshadow even E.K.’s most positive depictions of poetry’s divine origins. In his preface to the “October” eclogue, E.K. informs the reader that poetry is not an art, but “a diuine gift and heauenly instinct” (170); he nuances this claim, however, by adding that poetry is “not to bee gotten by laboure and learning, but adorned with both” (170). Like so many other early modern inheritors of Plato’s version of divine possession, E.K. wants to have it both ways: he wants the exalted origins of a divine poetry, but he also wants to leave the poet some of the agency—even if only as adornment—that such origins would deny him.

In order to make possible this tricky compromise, E.K. draws on ideas found in one of Plato’s most influential early modern interpreters, Marsilio Ficino. Working to synthesize Platonic texts with Christian doctrine, Ficino re-conceptualized the experience of divine inspiration itself.\textsuperscript{295} As we saw earlier, in the Phaedrus and the Ion, Plato suggests that divine possession robs the poet of agency and self-control. In his commentary on the Ion, however, Ficino hints at a gentler view of divine possession. Expounding on Plato’s point that poets describe all of the arts and sciences knowledgeably (even ones they have no experience in), Ficino concludes, “[s]o it is not

\textsuperscript{294} The word is Tylus’s; \textit{ibid.}

by human art but by a divine infusion (infusione) that poets produce poetry.\textsuperscript{296} The word that Ficino uses to describe the experience of inspiration, infusione—from infundō, “to pour in”—is an important one.\textsuperscript{297} For, although he follows Plato in attributing poetry to the “frenzy of the Muses” (furore Musarum), Ficino’s use of infusione implies that divine inspiration might be a process in which the poet is not stripped of agency or self-control but is instead filled with some kind of divine energy or power.\textsuperscript{298}

E.K. draws out these implications in his preface to the “October” eclogue when he writes that poetry is “poured into the witte by a certaine [enthusiasmos], and celestiall inspiration” (170). Just as in Ficino’s commentary on the Ion, divine inspiration is an infusion—a form of liquid that flows gently into the poet, leaving his agency uncompromised. The appeal of this model of inspiration is clear: it allows E.K. to credit Spenser’s verse with divine origins without also making it the product of divine coercion. But the glossator’s mild portrait of divine inspiration soon gives way to less celebratory visions of where poetry comes from and what price it may exact from the poet. As Cuddie debates with Piers in “October” about the place of the poet in a post-classical world, the shepherd who may shadow Spenser articulates a vision of poetic inspiration very different from E.K.’s. It, too, hinges on an act of “pour[ing],” though what Cuddie envisions is not divine energy but literal wine. “Bacchus fruite is frend to Phoebus wise,”

\textsuperscript{298} C.f. Allen’s comments in The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino, where he observes that, when God possesses Ficino’s poet, it is not an act of violence imposed on an individual by an outside force (as in Plato), but a recovery of a “divine, excessive, ecstatic [self], purely and wholly formed in the image of God” (61).
Cuddie claims, “[a]nd when with Wine the braine begins to sweate, / The nombers flowe as fast as spring doth ryse” (lines 106-8). Aspiring poets must therefore “[l]et powre in lauish cups” (line 105). Cuddie’s tribute to wine culminates in a vision of ecstatic poetic production:

Thou kenst not _Percie_ howe the ryme should rage.
O if my temples were distaind with wine,
And girt in girlands of wild Yuie twine,
How I could reare the Muse on stately stage,
And teache her tread aloft in buskin fine,
With queint _Bellona_ in her equipage. (lines 109-114)

Critics disagree on how to understand Cuddie’s praise of wine’s inspiring powers and on how this praise might relate to Spenser’s own theories on the subject. Disillusioned by the many difficulties and few rewards he has found in poetry, Cuddie may be indulging in some bitter humor; he may also provide Spenser with an opportunity to satirize pleasure-seeking court poets.²⁹⁹

Most interesting for our purposes, however, is that although they would seem to contradict his Ficinian understanding of poetry as a “celestiall” infusion, E.K. does not object to Cuddie’s statements. Instead, he finds Cuddie the embodiment of his vatic ideal. Commenting on the shepherd’s outburst, the glossator observes that the Cuddie “seemeth here to be rauished with a Poeticall furie” because his “numbers rise so ful, & [his] verse growtheth so big” (182). Once again, E.K. turns to a discourse of ravishment in order to conceptualize the vatic poet; yet now the terms have become inverted. While E.K.’s earlier footnote identified the _vates_ as the ancient poet who left his listeners “as it were

rauished, with delight,” here Cuddie is himself ravished—a key distinction. And as such, the inspired Cuddie becomes associated with an effeminizing loss of self-control. For although he envisions how an infusion of wine would allow him to “reare the Muse on stately stage, / And teache her tread aloft in buskin fine” (dreaming, in other words, of controlling an art gendered as female), Cuddie also imagines being crowned “in girlands of wild Yuie.” In a footnote, E.K. informs the reader that “the Maenades” wore such adornments, before identifying these figures as “Bacchus franticke priestes” (182). As usual, however, the glossator cannot be fully trusted. A quick look in Elyot’s dictionary Bibliotheca Eliotæ (1542) would have confirmed for sixteenth-century readers that the maenads were not male “priestes” but “women whiche dyd alwaye folowe Bacchus, runnyng aboute with theyr [hair] scattered lyke madde women.” What we ultimately see in Cuddie, then, is not Ficino’s gently infused Platonic poet, but Virgil’s bacchatur vates: the poet-prophet who raves and rages like the maenads.

E.K.’s early claims for the ravishing power of the vates (and the gentle nature of divine inspiration) are thus belied by the Calender’s later suggestions that—exactly as the Aeneid illustrates—the divinely inspired poet is in fact ravished and effeminized by an outside force. With this progression in mind, we can return to E.K.’s introductory “Epistle” to the Calender, and observe how consistently it works to project the disempowering implications of the vatic role onto Spenser’s rivals. E.K.’s attack begins when he mocks contemporary poets for their over-reliance on alliteration and rhyme, referring to them as “the rakehellye rout of our ragged rymers”—condemning them, that

is, with their favorite stylistic affectation (17). But the critique truly gains momentum when he contends that these poets “without learning boste, without judgement jangle, without reason rage and fome, as if some instinct of Poeticall spirite has newly ravished them above the meaneness of commen capacitie” (17). E.K.’s choice of words anticipates both how he will praise Cuddie for being “rauished with a Poeticall furie,” as well as his later portrayal of poetry as an “vnnatural rage passing the reache of comen reason” (183)—and yet, E.K. seeks only to denigrate and dismiss the “rymers.” The difference between the admirable vates and the absurd “rymers” seems to lie, at least in part, in the latter’s pretension: they act “as if” they experience divine inspiration, when in fact their studied methods (alliteration and rhyme) reveal them to be akin to the poetic “makers” that E.K. describes elsewhere.

But E.K. is not satisfied with making such a fine distinction between the “ragged rymers” and Spenser. The glossator needs something more concrete to wedge between the two. And so E.K. turns to the female figures that have shadowed the divinely inspired poet since antiquity, alleging that the “newly ravished” “rymers,“...being in the middest of all their bravery, soddenly either for wont of matter, or of ryme, or having forgotten theyr former conceipt, they seeme to be so pained and traveiled in theyr remembrance, as it were a woman in childebirthe or as that same Pythia, when the traunce came upon her.

Os rabidum fera corda domans etc. (17)

What E.K. attempts at this moment in the text is an audacious rewriting of the gendered subtext behind the ancient figure of the vates. The Latin line cited here comes from Virgil’s description of how the god Apollo “tires [the Sibyl’s] raving mouth and tames her wild heart”; as we have seen, this scene from the Aeneid introduces significant instability into the notion of vatic authorship, suggesting that the poet’s experience of
divine inspiration is akin to sexual violation. But E.K. takes Apollo’s forcible coercion of the raving Sibyl and makes it instead characterize the *rymers*—the false vatic poets, that is, instead of the true one. And in case the resulting feminization of Spenser’s rivals is not clear enough to the reader, E.K. also equates the “*rymers*” with a woman giving birth as well as with the “Pythia”—the title for the possessed priestess of the Delphic oracle. Both examples reaffirm that in E.K.’s telling of events the “*rymers*” take on a role usually associated with the *vates*: that of the shrieking, powerless vessel. Whatever agency E.K. has accorded these poets in his scornful discussion of their use of alliteration and rhyme—their “hunt[ing] of the letter”—now proves useless (17).

In conspicuous contrast to the illusory agency of the ravished “*rymers,*” E.K. identifies Immeritô as a poet whose verses are the product of masculine labor. Shortly before evoking the Sibyl, the glossator alleges that “what in most English wryters useth to be loose, and as it were ungyrt, in this Authour is well grounded, finely framed, and strongly trussed up together” (17). Although such a statement conflicts with E.K.’s later insistence that poetry is “no art,” it also allows him to credit Spenser with a considerable degree of agency, making the poet not a “woman in childebirthe” but a skilled craftsman. If the “*rymers*” are characterized by their effeminizing loss of self-control, then E.K. insists that Spenser is a poet of exquisite and manly discipline—one whose verses manage to be at once “a diuine gift” and yet are also “adorned” with “laboure and learning” (170).

Thus, for all of his insistence that the “new Poete” closely follows Virgil, in practice E.K. proves very selective about what aspects of the famous Roman poet’s career he allows to shadow Immeritô; the Sibyl serves not as Spenser’s double, but as a
means to discredit his rivals. And E.K.’s refusal to identify Spenser with the vatic Sibyl appears even more deliberate when we remember that this refusal resists the precedent not only of Virgil, but also of Ovid. In Book XIV of his *Metamorphoses*, the poet cunningly rewrites Virgil’s Sibyl, transforming her into a figure for his own literary immortality. Ovid’s Sibyl tells Aeneas the story of how she (much like Cassandra) was once wooed by Apollo. We learn that she asked the god for as many years of life as there were grains in a pile of sand, but forgot to ask for eternal youth; as a result, she was condemned to live for a thousand years, growing ever older and uglier. Yet the Sibyl evinces a certain undeniable pride in her fate, insisting that, although her body will eventually shrink down to nothing, “still by my voice shall I be known, for the fates will leave me my voice.”302 In important ways, the future that Ovid’s Sibyl envisions for herself is the opposite of the experience suffered by Virgil’s. If the Sibyl of the *Aeneid* is mastered by Apollo and reduced to a “raving mouth” (*os rabidum*) or “raving lips” (*rabida ora*), her voice splintering into shrieks, the Sibyl of the *Metamorphoses* imagines that her body will disappear, leaving only her deathless voice—which, significantly, remains under her own control. In so doing, she provides Ovid with a striking image for his own predicted literary immortality. At the end of his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid insists that though his body will die, his fame never will: “I shall be borne immortal far beyond the lofty stars and I shall have an undying name.”303 Imagining his future as a voice without a body, Ovid aligns himself as author with his eternal Sibyl.304

**Publishing the Sibyls**

---

304 As Lovatt notes, the Sibyl of Cumae “forms a feminine counterpart to Ovid’s own imagined literary immortality”; see *The Epic Gaze*, 129-130, footnote 23.
In defiance of the precedent established by both Virgil and Ovid, then, E.K. refuses to align the “new Poete” with the Sibyl of Cumae. Instead, much like “Evanders mother” (whom we examined in this dissertation’s Introduction), she becomes an ancient female anti-poet who produces inarticulate noise, thereby highlighting Spenser’s own successful use of “brave and glorious words” (15). And E.K.’s treatment of the Sibyl is all the more conspicuous given the fact that, in late sixteenth-century England, she and her fellow sibyls were not only believed to be prophets; they were also published authors.

The Sibyl of Cumae’s authorial reputation emerged in part from Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, which announces that a new Golden Age prophesized by the Sibyl of Cumae is about to begin.\(^{305}\) This new age, the Eclogue continues, will be ushered in by the birth of a miraculous baby boy. Most classicists now believe that Virgil penned this Eclogue to celebrate the marriage of Mark Antony to Octavian’s sister, Octavia, and to predict the birth of an heir.\(^{306}\) During the early modern period, however, the text was routinely interpreted as a prediction about the coming of Christ, and as evidence that the Sibyl of Cumae was a divinely inspired proto-Christian prophet.\(^{307}\) This line of interpretation had a very old and prestigious pedigree. In his *The City of God*, no less an authority than Augustine had included an acrostic poem about Judgment Day that he attributed to “the Sibyl of Erythrae or, as some prefer, of Cumae.”\(^{308}\) Augustine’s approving citation of the Cumaean Sibyl helped to establish her authority for many generations of Christian

\(^{305}\) *Ecl*. IV.4-5.  
readers of Virgil—not only of his *Eclogues*, but also of the *Aeneid*. In John Harington’s gloss on his 1604 translation of Book VI, for example, he notes that “*Sibylla was a generall name of certayn cunning women or prophetesses*”; while there were ten sibyls in total, there was “one of speciall fame whose wrytings wear kept in Roome, and she prophesyed of Chryst as in the 18. booke of Snt Augustin yt appeers in *Civitae*. Later in his commentary, Harington explains that this sibyl “of speciall fame” is “Sybilla Erethrea or Cumana” and repeats that the eminent Augustine himself cites her “verses.”

In his commentary, Harington makes the common Renaissance mistake of conflating two distinct groups of texts associated with the sibyls. The “wrytings” once “kept in Roome” are the *libri sibyllini*, a collection of prophetic texts that—according to Roman historians such as Pliny the Elder, Livy, and Tacitus—were kept at the Temple of Jupiter on Rome’s Capitolino Hill and consulted during times of civic crisis. (When, in *Henry VI, Part One* (1592), Shakespeare has a character mention “the nine sibyls of old Rome,” it is likely he is remembering this detail—even as he misremembers the traditional number of sibyls.) These sibylline *libri* seem to have been lost by the late fourth or early fifth century CE.

---

310 Ibid, 65.
313 Malay, *Shakespeare’s Sibyls*, 18.
The same was not true, however, of the “verses” quoted by Augustine. The acrostic poem that the Church Father cites in *The City of God* is actually an excerpt from the *Sibyline Oracles*, a group of ancient prophetic texts recovered during the Renaissance and initially believed by some to be written by one or more of the sibyls. Although elements of their provenance are still debated, J.J. Collins, a leading expert on the *Oracles*, argues that various Jewish and Christian authors composed these prophetic texts over a period of time ranging from the mid-second century BCE to the seventh century CE.\(^{314}\) Lost to the Christian West during the Middle Ages, a manuscript copy of the *Oracles* was recovered by the Augsburg scholar Xystus Betuleius in 1540. He published a Greek edition of the *Oracles* in 1545, and another scholar, Sebastian Castellio, translated them into Latin in the following year.\(^{315}\) And although no full English translation of the *Oracles* was published during Spenser’s lifetime, excerpts were published in Shelteco à Geveren’s popular apocalyptic text *Of the Ende of this Worlde*.

---


\(^{315}\) Almost a decade later, in 1555, Castellio published a revised version of the Greek text along with the Latin translation of 1546. My account of the rediscovery of the *Oracles* is drawn from Buitenwerf, 6-9.
(first printed in 1577, it went through five more editions by 1600), and in John Napier’s *A plaine discouery of the whole Reuelation of Saint Iohn* (1593).³¹⁶

Late sixteenth-century interest in the *Sibylline Oracles* was propelled in part by a more general excitement over prophetic texts: writing in 1599, Edward Topsell observed that “[m]any of the learned sort are much affected with the prophesies of the *Sibilles*,” whereas “simple and vulgar people” revere “*Merlins prophesie.*”³¹⁷ As noted above, however, the Sibyl of Cumae’s early modern authorial reputation emerged not only from the newly circulating *Oracles* but also from Virgil himself. In Abraham Fleming’s 1575 English edition of the *Eclogues*, for example, the poet announces that, “Loe, nowe the later age is come, which Sibills verse foretold.”³¹⁸ Much like Spenser’s *Calender*, Fleming’s translations are accompanied by a gloss, and the notes to this line explain that while the Roman historian Varro listed ten sibyls in total, “the sibil which we have in hande is called Cumea [sic], she prophecied of the foure ages of the worlde...”³¹⁹ Sixteenth-century readers of Fleming’s translation would therefore be left with an understanding of the Sibyl as a famous female author of prophetic verse: verse that they could examine for themselves in the newly circulating *Sibylline Oracles*.

³¹⁶ Sheltco à Geveren, *Of the ende of this world, and second comming of Christ, a comfortable and necessary discourse, for these miserable and daungerous dayes* (London: 1577), 37. STC (2nd ed.) 11803a.7. (A comparison of the editions on EEBO reveals that excerpts from the *Oracles* continued to be printed in the five subsequent editions of 1578, 1580, 1582, 1583, and 1589.) John Napier, *A plaine discouery of the whole Reuelation of Saint Iohn set downe in two treatises*... (London: 1593), n.p. STC (2nd ed.) 18354.

³¹⁷ Edward Topsell, *Times lamentation: or An exposition on the prophet Ioel, in sundry sermons or meditations* (London: 1599), 63. Bull also comments on Topsell; see his “Spenser, Seneca, and the Sibyl,” 421.


³¹⁹ Ibid, 10-11. (Note, however, that the 1575 edition skips page 11, incorrectly numbering it “12” instead.)
The Sibyl of Cumae’s reputation as a divinely inspired ancient woman writer—indeed, as what we might call a recently published *vates*—renders her appearance in the *Calender*’s “Epistle” all the more intriguing. On one hand, when E.K. mentions the possessed, raving Sibyl of the *Aeneid*, he is working to discredit Spenser’s vernacular rivals and their vatic pretensions; as Kevin Pask observes, this “demystifying use of Virgil transforms the poetic ‘bravery’ of the ‘ragged rymers’ into the feminized position of ravishment and childbirth.” At the same time, however, E.K. is also looking to distinguish Immeritô from another rival—not the “modern” male poets of 1579, but the ancient woman writer believed to have predicted the coming of Christ: the Sibyl of Cumae herself. By stressing Virgil’s depiction of the Sibyl’s “raving mouth” and “raving lips,” and then associating this near-unintelligible speech with the “rymers,” E.K. is able to eliminate two of Spenser’s literary rivals at once.

**Shakespeare’s Ravished Orpheus**

Thus far, I have argued that the classical heritage behind the vatic role associates it not with power and control, but with an effeminizing loss of agency, and that Spenser’s *Shepheardes Calender* works to counter these associations by suppressing the *vates*’ traditional links to the sibyls—and, in particular, to Virgil’s Sibyl of Cumae. The next section of this chapter, however, will explore how insistently Shakespeare emphasizes the vulnerabilities of the vatic role by excavating the very sibylline subtext that E.K. alternately seeks to hide and displace.

Shakespeare’s interest in vatic vulnerabilities is evident from his unusual handling of the legendary poet, Orpheus. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* helped to establish Orpheus’s

---

320 Kevin Pask, *Emergence*, 104.
reputation as a *vates*, referring to him as the “poet-prophet of Thrace” (*Threicius vates*) and “Apollo’s prophet” (*vatis Apollinii*). Spenser’s “October” eclogue evokes the ravishing power of Orphic song in detail. Piers praises Cuddie’s poetry by asserting that the “pleasaunce of [his] vaine” allows the poet to “pricke … forth” the “lawlesse youth” and “entice” their “wills” as he pleases. In this, Piers explains, Cuddie is like Orpheus, whose music tamed “the hellish hound” and guardian of the Underworld, Cerebus, so that the poet could recover his beloved Eurydice. Shakespeare was certainly aware of the legendary powers of Orpheus’s song. In his early comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1589), a character alludes to how the Orphic lute could “soften steel and stones, / Make tigers tame and huge leviathans / Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.” And yet, in his early narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), Shakespeare associates Orpheus with Lucrece as she struggles to stop Tarquin from assaulting her. Because Lucrece’s words briefly “delay” the “unhallowed haste” of Tarquin, she is compared to Orpheus, whose music made the “moody Pluto” “wink” (lns. 552-3).

Odd though it is that Shakespeare associates the legendary *vates* with a sexually vulnerable woman, it happens again in *Titus Andronicus*, a tragedy likely composed at around the same time as *Lucrece*. Like the “October” eclogue, *Titus* invokes Orpheus’s

---

321 *Metamorphoses*, XI.2, 8.
325 The play’s date of composition is uncertain, but in his *Arden* edition of the play, Jonathan Bate theorizes that it was written in “late 1593,” not long after *Lucrece* (78).
famous taming of Cerberus. But if Piers uses the allusion to praise Cuddie’s ravishing poetic gifts, Shakespeare utilizes the vatic poet to describe the violently ravished and maimed Lavinia. After discovering his niece in the woods with her tongue cut out and her hands removed, Marcus exclaims,

O, had [your attacker] seen those lily hands
Tremble, like aspen-leaves, upon a lute,
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touch’d them for his life!
Or, had he heard the heavenly harmony
Which that sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropp’d his knife, and fell asleep
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet’s feet. (2.3.44-51)

In Marcus’s telling of events, Lavinia’s song was once equal to that of Orpheus (“the Thracian poet”). Once again, therefore, Shakespeare links the figure most celebrated for his “heavenly” poetry to a sexually vulnerable female character—indeed, to one who has already been raped.

How can we account for Shakespeare’s peculiar linkage of the supernaturally powerful male vates with the sexually violated woman? The answer becomes clear later in Titus, when—in the midst of a set of very explicitly Ovidian allusions—Virgil appears. Lavinia runs on stage at the beginning of Act 4, Scene 1, chasing after her nephew Lucius and his copy of the Metamorphoses. She uses Ovid’s story of Philomel to reveal her rape, then identifies her attackers by writing their names out in the sand with a staff held between her stumps and in her mouth. When Titus sees this writing, he swears revenge on Tamora’s family. He insists that he

will go get a leaf of brass,
And with a gad of steel will write these words,

And lay it by: the angry northern wind
Will blow these sands, like Sibyl’s leaves, abroad,
And where’s your lesson, then? (4.1.104-5)

Titus’ allusion to Virgil helps to clarify Marcus’ earlier description of Lavinia as a kind of ravished Orpheus, as well as the narrator’s association of Lucrece with the Thracian poet. These depictions ultimately look back to the Aeneid and the Sibyl of Cumae, the classical figure that grounds the vatic role in violation and coercion. In these scenes, Shakespeare literalizes the discourse of ravishment that Spenser’s Calender builds around the divinely inspired poet, taking the earlier text’s apprehensions over the vulnerabilities of the vates and realizing them through the Orphic figures of raped and ravaged women.

If Lavinia and Lucrece are two early Shakespearean demonstrations of the costs of Virgil’s vatic authorial paradigm, however, they are not the last. To find the playwright’s most detailed critique of the vates and the violent loss of agency and self that it entails, we will have to turn to Troilus and Cressida (c. 1601)—and to the very sibylline figure of Cassandra, the raving and disorderly female prophet of Troy.

**“Enter Cassandra raving”**

*Troilus and Cressida* is the only Shakespeare play in which Cassandra appears on stage, but it is not the only one of his plays in which her presence can be felt. We began this chapter by examining Desdemona’s handkerchief, allegedly made by a “sibyl” in a “prophetic fury.” As numerous critics have observed, this phrasing echoes the concluding canto of Ludovico Ariosto’s epic *Orlando Furioso* (1532). In Canto 46 of that work,

---

the warrior Ruggiero receives an elaborately embroidered silk tent as a wedding gift. This “gorgeous pavilion,” the narrator explains, “was embroidered almost two thousand years” before the wedding celebration by a woman that worked in “a prophetic furor” (furor profetico).\(^{327}\) This woman is Cassandra, the seer who foresaw the fall of Troy. Wittingly or unwittingly, then, when he has Othello describe his handkerchief, Shakespeare transforms Ariosto’s Cassandra into a sibyl.

If the figure behind Othello’s sibyl is Cassandra, then—in an elegant form of intellectual symmetry—the figure behind Troilus’s Cassandra is the Sibyl of Cumae. There are two versions of Cassandra’s entrance into the play, and both versions suggest the influence of Virgil. In the 1609 Quarto edition, the stage directions state “Enter Cassandra raving”; this raving, of course, recalls the Sibyl’s “raving mouth” (os rabidum) and “raving lips” (rabida ora). The 1623 Folio edition, meanwhile, specifies that Cassandra enters the scene “with her haire about her eares.”\(^{328}\) On the Renaissance stage, a female character’s disheveled hair often indicates that she is in the throes of madness—or that she has just been raped.\(^{329}\) These visual associations link Cassandra once more to the Sibyl of Cumae, who becomes abruptly disheveled when assaulted by Apollo: “suddenly not countenance nor colour was the same, nor stayed her tresses braided” (non vultus, non color unus, non comptae mansere comae).\(^{330}\) As a raving, disheveled female

\(^{327}\) Ariosto qtd. in Tylus, 239.

\(^{328}\) Roger Apfelbaum discusses this discrepancy and its dramatic potential in his *Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida: Textual Problems and Performance Solutions* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 80-92.


prophet associated with both madness and sexual assault, the Cassandra of Troilus is Virgil’s Sibyl brought to the stage.

Unlike Virgil’s Sibyl, however, Shakespeare’s Cassandra struggles to convince her listeners of the truth of her prophecies. When she first appears on stage, she urges her fellow Trojans to return Helen to the Greeks before Troy is destroyed. “Our firebrand brother, Paris, burns us all,” she warns (2.2.109).³³¹ Hector supports Cassandra’s claims, asking the war-hungry Troilus, “do not these high strains / Of divination in our sister work / Some touches of remorse?” (2.2.113-115). As these lines reveal, Hector recognizes Cassandra as a divinely inspired prophet—and his mention of her “high strains” hints, too, that she occupies a poet’s role, for the word “strains” could connote “a passage of song or poetry.”³³² (As an example, the OED offers the speaker of Milton’s Il Penseroso, who hopes to eventually “attain / To somthing like Prophetic strain.”³³³) For Hector, Cassandra is a vates, and she deserves to be heard.

At first, Cassandra’s sibylline associations might seem to reinforce her trustworthiness to early modern English audiences. After all, although her possession by Apollo forces her to rave like a maenad, Virgil’s Sibyl of Cumae is still a “most holy prophetess” (sanctissima vates). And as mentioned in the introduction, in addition to the newly circulating collection of prophecies called the Sibylline Oracles, the sibyls were believed to be responsible for the lost books of prophecy consulted by the ancient Romans in times of crisis, the libri sibyllini. The ancient praises of sibylline prophecy led sixteenth-century humanist scholars such as Pedro Mejía to assert that in antiquity the

³³¹ Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida, ed. Kenneth Palmer (London: Methuen, 1982). All in-text citations will be to this edition.
³³³ Ibid.
sibyls’ “bookes” were “credited” by all, “but especially [by] the Romaines, whiche in
[all] their affaires, or necessities whatsoeuer, had their due recourse to the Prophecies of
these Sibylles, conferring, and consultyng of all thynges, by them written.”

And yet, at the same time that Shakespeare was composing Troilus, the sibyls’
status as divinely sanctioned female authors was coming under increased scrutiny.
Ironically, this questioning occurred because the writings so long credited to them—the
_Sibylline Oracles_—came into print for the first time. Earlier, we saw that Xystus
Betuleleius published his first edition of the _Oracles_ in 1540; he appears to have done so in
part because some scholars speculated that the _Oracles_ were not true prophecies but early
Christian forgeries written to provide further, “pagan” evidence for the life and divinity
of Christ. In 1599, the Protestant scholar Johannes Opsopoeus published his own edition
of the _Oracles_ in which he supported the forgery argument, insisting that the prophecies
attributed to the sibyls about the life of Jesus were too clear and precise to be
predictions—instead, Opsopoeus suggested, they were history disguised as prophecy.

Late sixteenth-century English texts that quoted the _Oracles_ often alluded to the
debate over the texts’ authenticity. When John Napier decided to include excerpts from
Castellio’s edition of the _Oracles_ in his _A plaine discouery of the whole Reuelation of
Saint Iohn_ (1593), he put them in an appendix, describing the prophecies as documents
“whose authorities neither being so authentik, that hitherto vve could cite any of them in

---

334 Pedro Mexia, *The foreste or Collection of histories no lesse profitable, then pleasant
and necessarie*, trans. Thomas Fortescue (London: 1571), 63. (It should be noted,
however, that Mexia here confuses the _Oracles_ with the _libri sibyllini_, suggesting that the
texts consulted by the Romans were the same ones that foretold the coming of Christ.)
335 This paragraph’s account is drawn primarily from two sources: Buitenwerf, 6-12
(cited above); and Anthony Grafton, _Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship
in an Age of Science, 1450-1800_ (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University
matters of scriptures, [but] neither so prophane that altogether we could omit them.”

In 1599, the religious writer Edward Topsell was more strident in his objections, denouncing “the prophesies of the Sibilles” as among the current “false and foolish prophesies, which being but the dreames of many brainsicke persons, haue bewitched the hearts of men that heard them, and seduced the liues of some that receiued them.”

Topsell’s denunciation of the Oracles proved prescient. In the early seventeenth century, England’s James I asked the celebrated French scholar and Protestant theologian Isaac Causabon to write a response to a recent defense of the Catholic Church composed by an Italian cardinal. The cardinal had discussed the Oracles as part of his defense—and, in return, Causabon attacked their credibility, concluding that they were not ancient Greek texts but later Christian forgeries. Causabon’s work was published in 1614, and his views soon gained wide acceptance. Sir Walter Raleigh confessed in 1615 that he once “thought reuerendly” of the “Sibylline praedictions,” “following the common beleefe and good authoritie”—but now, because of Causabon, he knew them to be “no better than counterfeited pieces” composed with “vndiscreet zeale” by early Christians. Not everyone was convinced—scattered defenses of the sibyls and their prophecies were published into the early eighteenth century—but after Causabon, the tide had definitively turned. By 1621, Robert Burton was referring dismissively in his Anatomy of

---

336 Napier, n.p.
337 Edward Topsell, Times lamentation: or An exposition on the prophet Ioel, in sundry sermons or meditations (London: 1599), 62-3. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 24131.
338 Malay, 142-6.
340 See, for example, John Twysden’s A disquisition touching the sibylls and the sibylline writings (London: 1662), EEBO Wing T3546.
Melancholy to “all such Sibylline prophesies, if there were euer any such, which with Causabon and others I iustly except at.”

Shakespeare thus chose to shade his Cassandra with sibylline associations at the same time that the Sibylline Oracles were becoming increasingly discredited, and—by extension—the sibyls were losing their status as authoritative ancient female authors. Although Causabon’s response to Baronio had not yet been published when Shakespeare was writing Troilus, as Napier and Topsell’s comments suggest, serious doubts had been raised by 1601. The dissolving early modern reputation of the sibyls helps to shed light on Troilus’ dismissal of Cassandra’s prophecies. He insists that she is simply “mad”—the producer of what he calls (in an echo of Topsell’s language) “brain-sick raptures” (2.2.122). His word choice is telling. Like “ravishment,” in early modern England, “rapture” connoted states of intense pleasure and mental transport, as well as darker possibilities—including abduction (especially of a woman), and rape. This is so because both words ultimately derive from the same Latin root: raptus. Thus, by referring to her “raptures,” Troilus seems to embed his sister in the same Virgilian nexus of eroticized violence that Shakespeare explored through the Orphic figures of Lavinia and Lucrece. Moreover, in the context of the play, the word “rapture” also has strong links to unbridled female speech. When confessing her love for Troilus, for example, Cressida says, “Sweet, bid me hold my tongue; / For in this rapture I shall surely speak /

---

342 “rapture, n.1 a, c, and n.2 a-b.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
343 The noun “rapture” ultimately derives from the adjective “rapt,” which comes from raptus; see the headnote to “rapt, adj.” OED Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
The thing I shall repent” (3.2.122-4). Here, “rapture” is a state of heightened emotion that threatens to make a woman speak uncontrollably—to “blabb,” as Cressida puts it (3.2.117). In speaking of Cassandra’s “brain-sick raptures,” therefore, Troilus implies that her predictions come not from true divine inspiration (as her associations with the Cumaean Sibyl might initially suggest), but from something akin to the “vndiscreet zeale” that Raleigh attributed to the true authors of the Oracles. Similarly, when Troilus later ridicules his sister for being a “foolish, dreaming, superstitious girl” (5.3.78), his language recalls that of Topsell when he condemns the “false and foolish prophesies” of the sibyls as untrustworthy “dreames.” Like the Sibylline Oracles, then, Cassandra’s “high strains / Of divination” come to be dismissed as the products of an over-emotional and unstable mind.

Of course, Cassandra’s prophecies were never believed; Aeschylus’ Agamemnon established her archetypal role as the seer whose prophecies are doomed to be ignored. But by later extending the role of the vates to one of the play’s most highly ranked male characters, Shakespeare reinforces the implication that speaking from this position fails to bring the poet-prophet any form of “good authoritie.” In Act 5, Scene 3, as Hector prepares to go to battle with Achilles, his wife Andromache and Cassandra both appear and beg him not to go; Andromache, we learn, has “dreamt / Of bloody turbulence” (5.3.11). Eventually Cassandra brings in their father, King Priam, telling him to “hold [Hector] fast,” for if Hector goes to battle, Troy will fall (5.3.59). And Priam (surprisingly, given that he said not a word of support for Cassandra during her earlier appearance in the play) complies:

   Come, Hector, come. Go back.
   Thy wife hath dreamt, thy mother hath had visions,
Cassandra doth foresee, and I myself
Am like a prophet suddenly enrapt
To tell thee that this day is ominous. (5.3.62-66).

In these lines, Priam himself becomes a prophet, and in ways that closely resemble Cassandra’s appearance in Act 2, Scene 2. If Troilus claimed that his sister was lost in “brainsick raptures,” then Priam describes himself as being “suddenly enrapt”—that is, “‘carried away’ by prophetic ecstasy.”\textsuperscript{344} For much like “ravishment” and “rapture,” “enrapt” derives from \textit{raptus}, and—as such—associates the vatic Priam with the violence of divine inspiration: as E.K. would say, the leader of Troy has been “newly ravished… above the meaneness of commen capacitie.”\textsuperscript{345} And yet, much like his daughter before him, Priam is ignored. Although he is both Hector’s father and his king, Priam is powerless to stop Hector from going to fight Achilles—and, subsequently, from being killed in an ambush by the Greeks. That this is so suggests that the degree to which assuming the role of the \textit{vates} divests one of political power and influence in the world of the play.

\textbf{Strange Fellows: Disappearing Authors and Non-Human Agents}

Much like Lavinia and Lucrece, the sibylline Cassandra functions as a way for Shakespeare to meditate on divine inspiration as an experience of \textit{raptus}—a concept that, whether translated into English as “ravishment” or “rapture,” frames divine inspiration as a sudden violation that strips the \textit{vates} of control over body and voice. \textit{Troilus}, furthermore, links Priam’s acquisition of a vatic role to his loss of control over his family—a failure that (although this is not staged) leads to the destruction of his city. Such a reading would seem to position Shakespeare as a playwright who amplifies what

\textsuperscript{344} “enrapt, adj.” \textit{OED Online}. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
\textsuperscript{345} Spenser, “Epistle,” 17.
we might call a “Spenserian” anxiety over the vulnerable position of the divinely inspired poet-prophet; where E.K. works to distance the vatic role from the sibyls and other prophetic women, Shakespeare persistently reaffirms this classical heritage. And yet, to depict Shakespeare in this way is to tell only part of the story of his relationship to the vates. For, in the same works that register his opposition to the vatic paradigm, Shakespeare also articulates a theory of authorship that recuperates the violence behind divine inspiration—a theory that makes the vates’ loss of self into a poetically productive state that does not necessarily entail a loss of agency.

_Troilus and Cressida_ begins to signal the terms of this revised vision of vatic authorship its Prologue. Famously, the Prologue comes on stage “in armour” in order to inform the audience that events will begin _in media res_; he is “armed,” he explains, “not in confidence / Of author’s pen or actor’s voice, but suited / In like conditions of our argument” (Prologue, 23-25).\textsuperscript{346} Shakespeare was far from the only early modern playwright to invoke the familiar identification of the author with the pen: Jonson’s Preface to the 1605 edition of _Sejanus_, for instance, informs the reader that this version of the play is not the same as the one performed on stage, “wherein a second pen had good share.”\textsuperscript{347} But if Jonson’s Preface relates the author and the pen via metonymy—making the instrument of writing (the pen) stand in for the agent (the author)—_Troilus_ flirts with authorial imagery and metaphors that collapse the boundaries between the agent of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[346] Much has been made of the evocative phrase “author’s pen or actor’s voice.” Drawing on these terms, Robert Weimann has described the early modern stage as a space of “bifold authority” in which “author’s pen” and “actor’s voice” were often at odds—a tension that, he argues, Shakespeare’s theater often exploits toward productive ends. See his _Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare’s Theater_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
\item[347] The OED’s entry for “pen” uses this moment as an example of the word’s metonymic functions; see “pen, n.3(b).” _OED Online_. Oxford University Press, September 2014.
\end{footnotes}
writing and the instrument. This pattern is prefigured in Troilus’ early and intense praise of Cressida to Pandarus in Act 1, Scene 1 of the play. There, he exclaims,

...O, that her hand,
In whose comparison all whites are ink
Writing their own reproach... (1.1.52-54).

Ostensibly, this moment is an absurd bit of hyperbole on the part of Troilus: the lovesick Trojan insists that Cressida’s hand is so perfectly white that it makes the hands of all other women look unattractively dark. But while this metaphor aims at praising beauty, it does so in the language of authorship; the white hands of other women become black ink, “writing their own reproach.” What Troilus envisions—however playfully and figuratively—is non-human agents (“whites”) writing about themselves. But if the “whites” appear as non-human agents of writing, they are also figured as ink, one of the key instruments of writing. As such, although it does not directly attempt to describe authors or authorship, Troilus’ praise conjures odd visions of non-human agents somehow writing about—and with—theirselfs.

Troilus’ blazon of Cressida’s hand enacts on a purely figurative level the play’s recurrent conflation of the category of “agent” with the category of “instrument.” The next pertinent example comes later in Troilus, when Ulysses tries to bait Achilles into returning to the battlefield. Ulysses tells the Greek warrior that he is reading a “strange fellow” who argues that an individual’s qualities are only known as such when shared with others (3.3.96). An individual, Ulysses explains, “[c]annot make boast to have that which he hath, / Nor feels not what he owes, but by reflection; / As when his virtues, shining upon others, / Heat them, and they retort that heat again / To the first givers” (3.3.99-103). As Elizabeth Freund explains, Ulysses’ speech invokes a “perennial
philosophical and literary critical *topos*”—the troubling truth that, because “we cannot step outside our own minds,” knowledge of ourselves depends on what others reflect back to us. But as Ulysses continues describing the “author’s drift,” more than simple self-knowledge seems to be at stake. Indeed, personal qualities seem to exist only insofar as they are first routed through others and then back to the self (3.3.114). Ulysses explains that a man “behold[s]” his own qualities “*formed in th’ applause / Where they’re extended*—who, like an arch, reverb’rate / The voice again” (3.3. 120-123, italics mine). A man’s personal qualities are now not merely reflected by others; they are also (in some mysterious way) formed or constituted by the watching others. Under these terms, a man does not merely know himself through his echo; he *is* his own echo—the voice that “reverb’rate[s]” back to him.

Ulysses’ argument problematizes what exactly a self might be by conflating the speaking subject and his voice—that is, the agent and the instrument. It is the same pattern that we saw with Troilus’ blazon, only now it has become more explicitly about individuals and their actions. The shadowy presence of the “strange fellow” behind Ulysses’ book, moreover, helps to focus this pattern of breakdown on the concept of authorship. Ulysses paraphrases the “fellow” behind his book, but—importantly—never identifies him. Scholars have long debated the source of Ulysses’ ideas, but their searches for the author’s identity are beside the point. Troilus’ refusal to name the author even as it paraphrases his “drift” is the best possible embodiment of his theories. Divested of the independent “self” that a name might convey and known only by his ideas, the author becomes, in effect, his own echo.

---

348 Freund, 28-9.
349 Bevington reviews the candidates in his Longer Note on this passage in the *Arden*, 365.
Troilus and Cressida was not Shakespeare’s first work to experiment with a theory of authorship that conflates the agent and the instrument. We can locate an earlier version of this vision of authorship in Lucrece. Shortly before he rapes her, Tarquin threatens Lucrece by telling her that unless she submits to his advances, he will kill her and then frame her for adultery (lms. 514-518). Then, he says, “[t]hy kinsmen [will] hang their heads at this disdain; / Thy issue [will be] blurred with nameless bastardry; / And thou, the author of their obloquy, / Shalt have thy trespass cited up in rhymes, / And sung by children in succeeding times” (lms. 521-225, italics mine). Though he uses the word “author” in the sense discussed in Chapter 2 (that is, to mean “instigator” or “cause”), what Tarquin proposes is a nightmare vision of textual publication and posthumous fame. He suggests that his lies about Lucrece’s “trespass” will circulate endlessly, becoming “cited up in rhymes” and sung publicly. Her story and her name, in other words, will become the matter for cheap print, for broadsides and ballads. These threats may explain why, when Lucrece begins to lament her violation, she employs strategies of articulation that confound the distinctions usually made between author and instrument, as well as those between author-instigator and effect. If Tarquin threatens to make Lucrece the infamous “author” of wildly proliferating texts, Lucrece’s own laments conspicuously efface the author, in both senses of that term.

We first see these strategies at work in the text when Lucrece invokes Ovid’s Philomel. As she laments her rape, Lucrece calls on Philomel to “[m]ake thy sad grove in my disheveled hair,” so that they can together “sing’st of ravishment” (ln. 1128). Lucrece frames her apostrophe to Philomel as part of an attempt to locate “co-partners in [her] pain” (ln. 789), and it is tempting read Lucrece as successfully (if temporarily)
constructing a female “fellowship of suffering” that relieves at least some of her sorrow. But although she initially suggests that she and Philomel will accompany one another in a kind of duet, Lucrece soon raises a stranger vision of authorship:

And whiles against a thorn thou bear’st thy part,
To keep thy sharp woes waking, wretched I
To imitate thee well, against my heart
Will fix a sharp knife to affright mine eye,
Who if it wink shall thereon fall and die.
These means, as frets upon an instrument,
Shall tune our heart-strings to true languishment. (Ins. 1135-1141, italics mine).

Lucrece here alludes to the traditional belief that the nightingale kept itself awake and singing by pricking its breast on a thorn. For the same reasons, Lucrece insists, she will keep a knife pressed to her own “heart.” Such a scenario would make Lucrece at once an “instrument” (her voice responds to the pain caused by the knife), and an author-instigator (she holds the knife). The violated Roman matron fantasizes, in effect, about becoming an instrument somehow capable of playing itself—the sonic counterpart of Troilus’ inky “whites” that “[write] their own reproach” (1.1.54).

Lucrece’s attempts to collapse the difference between author and instrument only intensify as the poem continues. In her search “for means to mourn some newer way” (ln. 1365), she gravitates to a painting of the siege and fall of Troy. Here she discovers an image of the “despairing Hecuba,” and begins to mourn anew (ln. 1447):

On this sad shadow Lucrece spends her eyes
And shapes her sorrow to the beldam’s woes,
Who nothing wants to answer her but cries,
And bitter words to ban her cruel foes.
The painter was no god to lend her those;
And therefore Lucrece swears he did her wrong,

Warren Chernaik reads Lucrece’s apostrophe in this way; see his The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 51.
To give her so much grief, and not a tongue.

‘Poor instrument,’ quoth she, ‘without a sound,
I’ll tune thy woes with my lamenting tongue...’ (1457-1463, italics mine).

Lucrece’s response to the image of Hecuba is a complex one. On the one hand, Lucrece attempts to give voice to the sorrows of the Trojan queen—to give Hecuba her “lamenting tongue.” As such, we might say that Lucrece makes herself into an instrument that can express the other woman’s “woes.” At the same time, however, Lucrece discovers Hecuba as part of her own search for “means to mourn some newer way” (ln. 1365). And the Trojan queen provides these “means,” becoming (as Lucrece herself acknowledges) an “instrument” through which Lucrece can route her own lamentsations. What Lucrece desires to effect in this scene is a kind of mutual ventriloquism—an exchange of voices in which both women serve at once as author-instigators and instruments, articulating a grief that is and is not their own.

Therefore, although Lucrece links herself with classical precedents of female sorrow, her efforts seem less motivated by a desire for female community than for a form of authorship that erases the usually distinct categories of author and instrument. The image of the self-playing instrument that Lucrece invokes in her apostrophe to Philomel returns as the narrator describes her lamentations before the painting of Troy:

Here feelingly she weeps Troy’s painted woes;
For sorrow, like a heavy ringing bell,
Once set on ringing with his own weight goes;
Then little strength rings out the doleful knell.
So Lucrece, set a-work, sad tales doth tell
To pencilled pensiveness, and coloured sorrow;
She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow. (Ins. 1492-98)

The narrator uses the image of the bell to explain the production of Lucrece’s “sad tales” (ln. 1496). Importantly, although it is an instrument that initially requires human action to
be sounded, “the heavy ringing bell” soon tolls out without need of a human hand: “his own weight” is all that the bell requires to keep ringing (ln. 1492-3). Lucrece’s lamentations work in an analogous way. Much like the bell, Lucrece’s “words” initially respond to the actions of an outside force (Tarquin), but eventually her sorrow itself produces them (although her role as author-instigator is complicated, as we have seen, by her tendency to understand her complaints as part of a process of mutual ventriloquism). The narrator’s bell analogy suggests that, by turning to the painting of Troy and Hecuba, Lucrece succeeds in her goal of becoming a self-playing instrument.

In sum, Lucrece employs a metaphorics of authorship that we earlier glimpsed in *Troilus and Cressida*: one that conflates the agent and the instrument of writing, such that poetic production is no longer clearly the product of a human actor. In making these claims, moreover, this chapter responds to Patrick Cheney’s arguments for Shakespeare’s “self-concealing” authorship. For Cheney, Shakespeare—acting “in response to the laureate self-presentation of Spenser”—develops a form of authorship in which the poet-playwright seems to vanish, but in truth remains half-hidden “behind the veil of his fictions”; the task of the critic then becomes to follow Shakespeare “through tracks he himself leaves—in his diction, images, myths, and so forth.”

This chapter, however, argues that in the plays and poems discussed, Shakespeare experiments a theory of authorship premised not on self-concealment, but on self-erasure. Doing so results in a number of paradoxical images: the author becomes an echo of his own voice, an instrument that plays itself, a hand that writes of its own accord. According to these

---

terms, the author becomes a kind of nonhuman agent—an object or a thing imbued with an uncanny agency.\(^{352}\)

Perhaps the most striking incarnation of this idea appears in Shakespeare’s Lavinia. As we have seen, Lavinia brings the sibylline subtext behind the vatic role to the surface of *Titus Andronicus*. But we should also note that Lavinia’s method of writing—and indeed, Lavinia herself—serves as a literal embodiment of the theory of authorship that Shakespeare later explores in *Lucrece* and *Troilus*. After her rape, Titus’ daughter has no hands to write with; instead, she names her rapists by taking a staff “into her mouth” and “guid[ing] it with her stumps” (4.1. s.d.). If Lavinia becomes an author at this moment, it is only because she also becomes her own pen, literally bringing together the roles of the agent and of the instrument. And yet, even more than in its later manifestations in *Lucrece* and *Troilus*, this version of authorship also proves highly disturbing. Perhaps this is so because, by the time Shakespeare writes *Troilus*, he suggests that an authorial model that conflates the categories of agent and instrument ultimately transforms the author into an echo of his own voice—that is, into a bloodless and disembodied paradox. In *Titus*, however, the conclusions are darker. When Lavinia’s brother Lucius laments her appearance after her rape and dismemberment, he cries out, “this object kills me!” (3.1.65). Although he means “object” in the sense of “something presented to the eyes,” his choice of word also suggests Lavinia’s dehumanization at the

\(^{352}\) My thinking on this point owes a debt to recent attempts to theorize the place of the object in early modern studies. For an important early collection of essays in this field, see *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Guilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
hands of her rapists—her reduction to the role of a “thing.” But it is precisely through becoming an “object,” the play suggests, that Lavinia also becomes an author.

Othello’s sibyl, again

By tracing Shakespeare’s interest in sibyls and sibylline figures in his plays and poetry, I have tried to suggest that these figures helped him to articulate his opposition to the role of vates, as well as to envision a theory of authorship in which Plato’s paradigm for divine inspiration is no longer tenable. On one hand, the sibyls were suited for such a project because of their conflicting classical heritage: as a ranting, raving victim of divine rape, Virgil’s Sibyl of Cumae represented the costs of vatic authorship in disconcerting detail. On the other hand, the sibyls’ own reputations as authors—more specifically, their dissolving reputations—provided Shakespeare with a useful parallel to his anti-vatic theory of authorship, in which the roles of agent and instrument are so confused and conflated that there is no easily discernible author-figure, no “self” that writes or composes. In order to better understand this last point, we must return to Desdemona’s handkerchief. As we noted earlier, Othello provides two accounts of this unusual object. He initially claims that a “sibyl” made the cloth in a “prophetic fury”—a phrase that associates the textile with the texts of the Sibylline Oracles, also thought to have been divinely inspired. And yet, when Othello tells Gratiano about the handkerchief at the end of the play, he makes no mention of any sibyl. Instead, he tells the other man that the cloth was “an antique token / My father gave my mother” (5.2.214-215). The handkerchief, in other words, enacts in miniature the trajectory of the Oracles from the mid-sixteenth to the early seventeenth century: initially believed to be the product of a

“prophetic fury,” but ultimately revealed to be an “antique token” of uncertain origin.

And once the sibyl disappears, the handkerchief starts to resemble Lucrece’s instrument that plays itself: it is, finally, an object imbued with an uncanny agency, responsible for much of the play’s tragic action (too much, if Thomas Rymer is to be believed).354 Desdemona’s sibylline handkerchief is thus not a metonym for Shakespeare as author as much as a symbol of Shakespeare’s persistent interest in making the author vanish.

For centuries, critics have been fascinated with the idea of Shakespeare’s disappearing authorship. For John Keats, Shakespeare embodied the notion that “poetical Character” “is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing,” and that the true poet possesses “no identity.”355 Andrew Bennett has argued that Romantics such as Keats, Coleridge, and Hazlitt invented this conception of Shakespeare as transcendent, protean genius in response to the lack of available biographical information about his life.356 I hope to have shown, however, that the theory of a Shakespearean authorship that somehow abjures the self emerges before the Romantics, in Shakespeare’s own works, as a response to the threat of divine inspiration; indeed, in some sense, it is a recuperation of the loss of self that is inherent to the position of the vates. If E.K. tries to rework the role

354 Jonathan Gil Harris has discussed the ways in which the handkerchief is “an object that behaves like a subject,” and how this agency has unsettled critics (Untimely Matter, 176); instead of reading away this odd agency, Harris seeks to understand it through Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (180-1). I argue, however, that the handkerchief fits into a wider Shakespearean pattern of associating authorship with a kind of agentive objecthood.
of the *vates* for Spenser so that it leaves the “New Poete” firmly in change of his poetic voice, then Shakespeare suggests a very different alternative. Instead of defending the author’s agency by insisting on his possession of a powerful, autonomous self, Shakespeare works to conflate the role of the author with that of his instrument. In so doing, moreover, the poet-playwright disentangles “agency” from “selfhood.” His recurrent images of the author as a nonhuman agent—as an instrument that plays itself, or as a pen that tells its own story—keeps the poetic productivity of the *vates* without that role’s attendant vulnerabilities. Preemptively discarding the too-easily violated self, Shakespeare’s sibylline theory of authorship looks instead to uncanny objects as models for poetic production.

If this is so, then one of Shakespeare’s final dealings with the prophetic women of antiquity takes on a particularly ironic cast. In 1632, a young John Milton contributed “An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, W. Shakespeare” to the Second Folio; it is a poem that imagines the *reader* of Shakespeare transforming into an object. Milton asserts that Shakespeare’s body does not need an elaborate tomb, for “[t]hou in our wonder and astonishment / Hath built thy selfe a lasting Monument” (ln. 8).³⁵⁷ Shakespeare’s awe-struck readers, in other words, become the most enduring testaments to his poetic greatness—and, as the poem continues and the conceit develops, the sepulchers for his “hallow’d Reliques” (ln. 3). After one reads Shakespeare’s “Delphic Lines,” Milton muses, “[t]hen thou our fancy of her selfe bereaving, / Doth make us Marble with too much conceiving” (lns. 12, 13-14). For Milton, Shakespeare’s verse

---

takes the readers’ “fancy” away from itself—or, more to the point, from “her selfe.”

Because although Shakespeare’s poetry is “Delphic,” Milton’s Shakespeare is nothing like the divinely inspired Delphic oracle, violently ravished by her god. Instead, Shakespeare ravishes his effeminized reader in a manner reminiscent of Cuddie’s Orphic song, which (according to Piers) “bereau[s]” its listeners of their “sense.”358 Yet Milton’s praise is not finished. He also insists that Shakespeare does Spenser one better, for Shakespeare’s poetry transforms his readers into a “Marble” “Tombe” where he rests “Sepulcher’d in… pompe” (Ins. 14, 16, 15). Milton here annexes E.K.’s hybrid model of the powerful, masculine vates-poeta for Shakespeare, characterizing his work as at once divinely inspired (“Delphic”) and ravishing. We can imagine the appeal of such a model for a poet who would later aspire “[t]o somthing like Prophetic strain.” And yet, in so doing, Milton credits Shakespeare—the “Deare Sonne of Memory [and] great Heire of Fame” (ln. 5)—with precisely the kind of distinctive and enduring “selfe” that the poet-playwright’s sibylline theory of authorship worked to abandon.

358 Spenser, “October,” 172, ln. 27.
Chapter 4

Pamphilia’s Past:
Wroth, Literary History, and the Fate of Women’s Writing

“Pamphilia wrote some thirty Books of History, which all her age esteem’d.”


In Canto 37 of the hugely influential romance *Orlando Furioso* (1532), Ariosto’s narrator issues a call to arms—or, rather, a call to the pen. Addressing his female readers directly, he informs them that “deceitful” and “envious” men have long worked to obscure accomplished women from the historical record; though remarkable ladies existed in the past, “[t]heir virtues are lost to fame… out of a thousand names barely one is mentioned.” But now, Ariosto insists, modern women can—and must—write themselves into history. As an illustration of this possibility, the narrator invokes the celebrated Italian noblewoman and poet, Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547). Colonna, he claims, “has not only made herself immortal with a style, a sweetness I have never heard bettered; but she can draw from the grave and immortalize whomsoever she speaks or writes about.” Yet she is far from the only modern woman writer deserving of praise. “[M]any of you,” he notes, “have left, and are leaving, your needles and fabrics to visit

---

360 Ibid, 37.23.
362 *Orlando Furioso*, 37.16.
the Muses… and you are so transformed on your return that we [men] have more need of your labours than you of ours.” In Ariosto’s reckoning, modern women writers are both the authors and the subjects of a new kind of history—one that will entrench their names into the literary record for all time.

This chapter examines how one well-known early modern woman writer—Mary Wroth—responded to Ariosto’s provocation, arguing that her romance The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania (1621) offers a much less triumphalist vision of women’s literary history than the one provided by the Italian author. Over the past few decades, as scholars have recovered Wroth’s impressive extant corpus, she has been celebrated as the first English woman to publish a prose romance and the first to publish a sonnet sequence. Her Urania, meanwhile, has shifted from obscurity to occupying a central place in the canon of early modern literature—aided in no small part by Josephine Roberts’ path-breaking 1995 edition of the romance. But Wroth’s phoenix-like literary resurgence after centuries of neglect by critics and readers alike is surprisingly at odds with the Urania’s own ambivalent meditations on the relationship between women writers and literary history. I argue that Wroth’s romance persistently depicts women’s writing as vulnerable to destruction and erasure—an impression emphasized through the classical heritage of her avatar, Pamphilia. The princess’s name evokes that of “Pamphila,” a first-century Roman woman historian whose texts survived into the early modern period in only a few short fragments. Like her classical counterpart, Pamphilia is a woman writer whose texts do not seemed poised for long-lasting fame: at various points in the romance, she destroys her poetry, refuses to sign it, or leaves it completely unwritten.

Wroth’s revision of Pamphila into Pamphilia suggests her difference from the humanist-educated male authors whose works we have examined thus far. Previous chapters of *Evander’s Mother* have traced how early modern men creatively appropriated the female authors of antiquity as a way of reshaping inherited authorial roles. By contrast, this final chapter demonstrates how Wroth draws on an ancient woman writer to expose the long history of textual loss that made such appropriations possible.

Wroth was far from the first author of romance to emphasize how easily women—and, in particular, women writers—could be lost from the historical record. Her uncle’s *New Arcadia* features key scenes where women’s writing vanishes (or nearly vanishes), effaced by natural elements and the passing of time. Equally important, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* both contain moments where their respective narrators decry male historians who have erased accomplished women from history. But while these authors attribute the loss of female-authored texts to the passage of time or the malice of men, Wroth focuses on two more counter-intuitive threats to the woman writer’s place in literary history. The first, as our initial reference to Pamphilia indicates, is the woman writer herself; the second is her female rivals. For, despite its reputation as a work that depicts supportive female friendships, the *Urania* also devotes considerable narrative energy to depicting jealousy and competition between women—particularly for the love of Amphilanthus. Two of Pamphilia’s principal competitors in this contest, Antissia and Musalina, are also poets, and the *Urania* suggests that they seek to erase Pamphilia not only from the heart of Amphilanthus, but also from literary history.
In emphasizing the destructive potential of female jealousy, furthermore, Wroth may be invoking a second ancient woman writer: Sappho. Scholars have observed that Wroth identifies the passionate Antissia with Ovid’s lovelorn version of Sappho, but Antissia also recalls seventeenth-century anecdotes about Sappho’s competitiveness toward other women. Indeed, given that her aunt Mary Sidney Herbert was said to equal—and surpass—Sappho in late sixteenth-century texts, Wroth would have had good reason to associate the ancient Greek poet with same-sex literary rivalry. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Wroth’s frequently dark assessment of the relationship of women to literary history emerges in part from her understanding of the female authors of antiquity. What Wroth finds in Pamphila and Sappho is not an enduring female literary inheritance, but a daunting history of textual fragmentation and loss; not a welcoming community, but a tense nexus of female competition.

*  

The first song of Wroth’s sonnet sequence *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*—published with the *Urania* in 1621, but likely written before the romance—provides a useful point of entry into Wroth’s often-ambivalent explorations of the relationship between gender and literary history.\(^{364}\) In this poem, a shepherdess laments her betrayal by her “truest love,” and seeks to immortalize her grief in writing (ln. 9).\(^{365}\) She insists both that her death is “neere,” and that she will spend many nights uttering lyric complaints: “nightly I will lye, / Wayling inconstancy / Since all true love is dead” (Ins.

---

\(^{365}\) This and all future in-text citations to the first song refer to *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, ed. Josephine A. Roberts (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 88-89.
22, 38-40). On one hand, the shepherdess’s complaint seems to constitute a female-voiced version of the Petrarchan paradox discussed in Chapter 2, in which losing the beloved allows the lover to gain an identity as a poet. At the same time, however, the shepherdess’s authorial position is undercut by her writing’s uncertain future. As she laments, the shepherdess envisions recording her loss in a number of potential mediums. First she suggests that her clothing might memorialize her suffering, becoming “imbroder’d all” “with Gyrlands round / Some scater’d, others bound / Some ti’de, some like to fall” (Ins. 29-30). As Margaret Simon observes, the mention of “Gyrlands” evokes collections of poetry (often referred to as “garlands” in early modern England), along with the laurel crowns of Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse.* But if the shepherdess’s embroidered clothes recall—or even function as—poetic texts, they are texts that seem poised to elude her control: “Some scater’d, others bound / Some ti’d, some like to fall.” Much like the easily scattered leaves of Virgil’s Sibyl, the shepherdess’s embroidery seems troublingly transient.

For this reason, perhaps, the shepherdess turns away from textiles, invoking instead a medium familiar to readers of the *Urania.* “The barck my booke shall bee,” she announces, “Wher dayly I will wright, / This tale of haples mee” (Ins. 33-35). Much like Pamphilia (whose writing we will examine later), the shepherdess seeks to publicize her misfortunes by carving them into a tree; as Vin Nardizzi and Miriam Jacobson note, Wroth’s female poets tend to “comprehend bark as though it were a *codex,* a word that

---

signifies ‘book’ for us, but which, in Latin, originally named the trunk of a tree.” Bark seems like it might be a more enduring medium than clothing; certainly it is a more capacious one, as seen by the shepherdess’s vow to write on it “dayly.” And yet, much as she did before, the shepherdess turns away from this medium to contemplate another. She composes a four-line epitaph for herself, proclaiming that, “thes lines I will leave / If some such lover come / Who may them right conseave, / and place them on my tombe” (Ins. 41-44, italics mine). Here it seems as though the shepherdess has finally found a lasting medium to preserve “[t]his tale of haples mee”—her tomb, presumably a monument made of stone, where her poetry can be either affixed or inscribed. But the ultimate fate of her epitaph is left uncertain, because its survival depends on being discovered and reproduced by a reader who will correctly interpret (“right conseave”) its meaning.

As a whole, Wroth’s first song identifies two central difficulties faced by the woman writer who wishes to bequeath her writing to posterity: the problem of finding an appropriately enduring medium, and the problem of reaching readers who will continue to preserve her verse. In a compelling recent essay, Simon argues that while the first song’s conclusion may signal the potential ephemerality of the shepherdess’s writing, the poem also demonstrates Wroth’s engagement with the long tradition of epitaphic verse, and hence makes “muted but stalwart claims for its relevance and endurance.”

Simon, 49. She is responding to Heather Dubrow’s more pessimistic reading of the song’s fate in The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 139-141. For more on the first
reading usefully complicates what might otherwise seem to be a rather dark meditation on the uncertain survival of women’s writing. But Wroth’s poem also responds to another literary subgenre, one with less promising implications for women writers—that of the female complaint.

As we saw in Chapter 2, this popular early modern subgenre emerged from the precedent set by Ovid’s *Heroides*, and featured the laments of seduced and abandoned women. Despite its use of the female voice, however, the female complaint is a conspicuously *male*-authored tradition; Shakespeare, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, and Thomas Lodge all produced notable early modern examples. Wroth therefore embeds her narrative of a woman writer who seeks to find an enduring medium for her writing within a poetic subgenre not known for preserving female voices—or, more precisely, within a subgenre known for preserving only male *fantasies* of the female voice. In so doing, Wroth may be making a subversive point, demonstrating how she can skillfully re-appropriate a form founded on gendered appropriation. And yet, it seems equally possible that she is again calling into question the relationship of women to literary history. Are readers able to “right conseave” women’s writing when their expectations have been shaped by a male-dominated literary tradition and its male fantasies of the female voice? Can a woman write herself into literary history if her remembrance by posterity depends upon the reinscription of her words by others?

**Absent auctoritas: Pamphila in Early Modern England**

Wroth’s heroine and central avatar in both the sonnet sequence and her romance is the princess—and later queen—Pamphilia. Often glossed as meaning “all-loving,”

---

song, see also Ilona Bell, “‘A Too Curious Secrecie’: Wroth's Pastoral Song And ‘Urania,’” *Sidney Journal* 1 (2013), 23-50.
Pamphilia’s name has a suggestive classical heritage that opens up more questions about the relationship between women writers and literary history.\(^{369}\) Josephine Roberts was the first to note that Pamphilia’s name deliberately evokes that of Pamphila, a female historian who wrote during the first century CE.\(^{370}\) As with most female authors of Greco-Roman antiquity, little is known for certain about her.\(^{371}\) The ninth-century Byzantine scholar Photios records in his Bibliotheca that Pamphila was born in Egypt, lived during the reign of Nero, and wrote an eight volume Miscellany of Historical Works.\(^{372}\) The tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia the Suda, however, records that she was the author of thirty-three historical commentaries, as well as “many other books.”\(^{373}\) Whatever the actual number of volumes written by Pamphila, none of them have survived to the present day. All that remains of her work is a small collection of citations and paraphrases—ten, in total—made by later authors. Eight of these paraphrases appear in Diogenes Laertius’s Lives of Eminent Philosophers (c. third century CE), and two in Aulus Gellius’s Attic Nights (c. second century CE).\(^{374}\) Wroth may have learned about Pamphila through these classical texts, given that the Sidney family library in Penshurst possessed copies of both works.\(^{375}\) Wroth may also have learned about Pamphila through

\(^{369}\) Roberts, Poems, 42.

\(^{370}\) Ibid.

\(^{371}\) Pamphila’s entry in I.M. Plant’s anthology provides a useful overview of the few facts we do know, as well as an English translation of her extant fragments. See I.M. Plant, Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: An Anthology (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 127-129.


\(^{374}\) I.M. Plant, 127.

\(^{375}\) The Library of the Sidneys of Penshurst Palace, circa 1665, eds. Germaine Warkentin, Joseph L. Black, and William R. Bowen (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 172, 143. Our knowledge of the Penshurst library’s holdings comes from a
the handful of early modern texts that mention her, which include William Baldwin and Thomas Palfreyman’s extremely popular adaptation of Laertius, *A Treatise of Morall Philosophy* (first published in 1547), as well as the writings of the English Hebraist Hugh Broughton (1549-1612).^{376}

Because the classical authors who cite Pamphila often allude to her no longer extant works, Wroth was likely to have associated the ancient woman writer with textual loss. While discussing the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus, for example, Laertius observes, “Theophrastus was a man of remarkable intelligence and industry and, as Pamphila says in the thirty-second book of her *Memorabilia*, he taught Menander the comic poet.”^{377} Similarly, while discussing the life of Plato, Laertius mentions a story about the philosopher that Pamphila relates “in the twenty-fifth book of her *Memorabilia*.”^{378} To an early modern reader, citations like these would have suggested

catalogue made in the early 1650s, after Wroth had written the First and Second Parts of her *Urania*. As the catalogue’s editors observe, however, the bulk of the collection was amassed by Wroth’s father and brother (3); it thus seems likely she would have had access to its copies of Aulus Gellius and Diogenes Laertius. We are also uncertain if Wroth knew Latin—although, if she did not, the Penshurst library had a French translation of Laertius’s *Lives* published in c. 1601. For more on Wroth’s possible knowledge of Latin, see Margaret Hannay, *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* (New York: Ashgate, 2010), 72.

^{376} In addition to the 1604 work *An advertisement of corruption* (cited below), Broughton alludes to Pamphila in *An apologie in briefe assertions defending that our Lord died in the time properly foretold to Daniel* (London: William Kearney, 1592), sig. F2r. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 3845; and in *A require of agreement to the groundes of divinitie studie wherein great scholers falling, & being caught of Iewes disgrace the Gospel: & trap them to destruction* (Middelburg[h], 1611), sig. N2v. EEBO STC (2nd. ed.) 3882. None of these works are listed in the 1665 catalogue of the library at Penshurst, but several of Broughton’s other writings are in the collection. See *Library*, 94.

^{377} Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Volume I, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), V. 2. (See Chapter 1 of *Evander’s Mother* for the early modern afterlife of Theophrastus’s alleged feud with the female philosopher Leontium.)

^{378} Ibid, III. 23.
two details: first, that Pamphila was a respected ancient historian; and second, that none of her many works had survived beyond antiquity. As Wroth’s contemporary Samuel Torshell wrote in 1645, “Pamphilia [sic] wrote many books of Historie, which when they were extant were much esteemed.”

Like many of the ancient women writers discussed in previous chapters, her textual legacy is one of absent auctoritas—a position nicely captured by the Treatise of Morall Philosophy, which renders the anecdote about Theophrastus thusly: he was “a manne of exceeding wisedome, and of singuler study, [and] Scholemaster (as saythe Pamphila) of Menander the wryter of Comedies.”

Now tucked away in the parentheses, Pamphila remains visible to Renaissance readers, but all mention of her books has vanished—a second kind of textual loss. The only early modern English source to offer any biographical information on her at all was Broughton. In a letter addressed to King James I and published in 1604, Broughton briefly mentions Pamphila, describing her as “a learned Romane woman, [who] wrote of Olympiades”; he also notes that her work is “honore[d]” in Photios’s Bibliotheca. Once again, Pamphila functions as a kind of absent authority, worthy of citation but also obscure enough to require a gloss.

---

379 See his work The womans glorie (London: 1645), 31. EEBO Wing T1941. (Note as well that he refers to Pamphila as “Pamphilia”; this alternate spelling—quite suggestive for readers of the Urania—is also present in various editions of Baldwin’s Treatise.)

380 William Baldwin and Thomas Palfreyman, A Treatise of moral philosophy containing the sayinges of the wise (London: Richard Tottill, 1564), n.p. (The only page number given is “Fol.40.”; the heading of the section is “The life of Tirtanus otherwise called Theophrastus. Capit. xxiii.”) EEBO STC (2nd ed) 1258.

381 It is worth noting that the Treatise cites Pamphila as it does much more famous male authorities such as Augustine and Herodotus—that is, by using the formula “as saythe.” For early modern readers, this pattern would have bolstered the impression that Pamphila was an ancient historian whose auctoritas was equal to that of her male counterparts.

382 Hugh Broughton, An advertisement of corruption in our handling of religion To the Kings Majestie (Middelburg: Richard Schilders, 1604), sig. C4v. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 3843.
Thus, despite Roberts’s optimistic claim that Pamphila was “one of the most famous women writers of antiquity,” the ancient female author was in truth a more shadowy figure in early seventeenth-century England—a historian nearly lost from history. Recognizing that Pamphilia’s namesake was associated with textual loss and fragmentation can help bring into focus a recurrent theme in Wroth’s romance: the destruction and suppression of female-authored texts. Early in Book I of the *Urania*, the narrator identifies Pamphilia as “generally the most silent and discreetly retir’d of any Princesse” (61), and scholars of Wroth have written at length about Pamphilia’s obsession with privacy and secrecy, especially where her writing is concerned. These traits appear with particular force during the famous episode where Pamphilia first composes poetry in the *Urania*. Upset over her love for Amphilanthus—and very jealous over his earlier praise of Antissia—Pamphilia writes a poem by candlelight that (much like the shepherdess’s poem) bewails her emotional suffering. But while the shepherdess hopes that her poem will be found, read, and preserved by a later reader, Pamphilia obviates that very possibility. After reading over her verses and complaining that they reveal her shameful “idlenesses,” the princess takes “the new-writ lines, and as soone almost as shee had given them life, shee likewise gave them buriall” (63). As more than

---

one scholar has noted, it is unclear what, exactly, the narrator means by “buriall”: does Pamphilia lock up her verses in her nearby “little Cabinet… wherein she had many papers” (60)? Does she blot them out, or tear them up? Or does she perhaps burn them in the candle flame?\footnote{Mary Ellen Lamb, Vin Nardizzi, and Miriam Jacobson have considered these possibilities; see Lamb, \textit{Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 190-191; Nardizzi and Jacobson, 183.}

Regardless of whether she destroys or merely conceals her poetry, Pamphilia’s efforts at this moment seem to align with what Jeffrey Masten has influentially identified as Wroth’s “privatizing poetics.” Both her romance and her sonnet sequence, he argues, demonstrate an intense commitment to privacy and withdrawal—a refusal to be circulated among men that creates the conditions necessary for a self-controlled female subjectivity. For Masten, Pamphilia’s secretive poetic practices reflect Wroth’s own vexed place as a female author in early modern England: “Wroth, as a woman-writer, must resist publication as a form of male trafficking, yet that resistance can only register if it is made public.”\footnote{Jeffrey Masten, “‘Shall I Turne Blabb?’: Circulation, Gender, and Subjectivity in Mary Wroth’s Sonnets,” in \textit{Reading Mary Wroth}, 67-87, 83.} Subsequent scholars have challenged this reading in recent years, stressing that we must be wary of too neatly conflating Wroth with her fictional avatar, and that her writings are more invested in literary fame than they may initially seem.\footnote{Daniel Juan Gil, for example, contends that Wroth’s poetic authorship suggests “a desire to become the object of public reading and consumption; far from seeking to escape the position of the spoken-for and spoken-of token of other desires, Wroth seeks to constitute herself as the poetic, literary and public currency from which the eyes of a contemporary readership cannot turn away” (76); see his article “The Currency of the Beloved and the Authority of Lady Mary Wroth,” \textit{Modern Language Studies} 29.2 (1999): 73–92.}

Julie Crawford has emphasized that Wroth’s romance was published as a folio, “the
biggest and most expensive print format,” while Margaret Hannay points out that the Urania’s elaborately engraved title page quite deliberately advertises Wroth’s prestigious literary heritage, identifying her as the niece “to the ever famous, and renowned Sr. Phillips [sic] Sidney,” as well as to “most exele[n]t Lady Mary Countesse of Pembroke late deceased” (civ). In addition, the historical evidence for Wroth as an author invested in secrecy and withdrawal has come under renewed scrutiny. On December 15, 1621, Wroth sent a letter to James I’s favorite the Duke of Buckingham, protesting that she did not intend to publish the Urania and offering to withdraw it from sale. This letter is often used to demonstrate the risks faced by early modern women writers who published their work—particularly given the vitriolic response poem produced by one offended reader of the romance, Lord Edward Denny. But, as Rosalind Smith has shown, Wroth actually wrote to Buckingham two months before Denny wrote his attack; her letter therefore seems to have been not a shamefaced attempt at retraction, but a canny “insurance policy” designed to protect against any potential criticism.

Important though the scholarship of Smith and others has been in making us rethink Wroth’s relationship to textual suppression, it leaves certain questions unanswered: why does Wroth name her heroine after an ancient female historian whose works had almost entirely disappeared by the early seventeenth century? And why does the Urania repeatedly depict women writers who destroy their own work? The suggestion that Pamphilia burns her verse, examined above, is confirmed in Book II of the romance,

390 Hannay, Mary Wroth, 233.
during the much-discussed scene where Pamphilia allows Amphilanthus access to both her private chamber and her poetry. At his request, Pamphilia “tooke a deske, wherein her papers lay, and kissing them, delivered all shee had saved from the fire” (320). To be sure, this moment establishes that she preserves at least some of her poetry—but it also forcibly reminds us that she has destroyed other examples. And though we may not explicitly see Pamphilia burn any verse over the course of the romance, we do witness her rival, Antissia, doing just that. Shortly after Pamphilia shares her verse with Amphilanthus, Antissia—her “heart now fill’d with envy” over Pamphilia—secretly composes a poem that expresses her own tormented desire for Amphilanthus (327). But, as with Pamphilia’s buried poetry, it does not survive for long. The narrator informs us that, after Antissia rereads what she has written, she “leap’d from her stoole, ranne to the fire, [and] threw in the paper” (327). Critics often see Antissia as a foil for Pamphilia—a royal female poet whose lovelorn verse contrasts unfavorably with Pamphilia’s purportedly more orderly and discreet poetry—but on the issue of textual destruction, at least, they seem to exist on a continuum rather than a binary.392

**Ephemeral Mediums, Enduring Mediums**

The significance of such scenes in the *Urania* becomes more complicated when we recognize that, in depicting the destruction of female-authored texts, Wroth glances back at a trope found in the *New Arcadia*. Sidney may mock the historian for his “old mouse-eaten records” in *The Defence of Poesy*, but in his romance, the texts most

---

392 Roberts was influential in creating this scholarly commonplace: see her “Introduction” to the *Urania*, xxxiv-xxxv.
vulnerable to the ravages of time are female-authored poems.\footnote{See \textit{The Defence of Poesy} in \textit{Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works}, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 220.} In Book II, for instance, Philoclea goes to find a “goodly white marble stone” on which she wrote a poem recording her vow to remain forever chaste (147).\footnote{Philip Sidney, \textit{The New Arcadia}, ed. Victor Skretkowicz (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). All in-text citations will be to this edition.} Once she arrives at the stone, however, the princess finds that “neither the light was enough to read the words, and the ink was already foresworn and in many places blotted” (147). She intended to add to the vow, but that is no longer possible; instead, the princess mentally composes “certain verses which, if she had had present commodity, she would have adjoined as a retractation to the other” (148). Philoclea’s never-written poetic addendum depicts the destruction of her verse as a fitting image of female inconstancy: because she no longer wishes to honor her earlier vow, Philoclea considers her words to have been “full weak” (ln. 15). Both stanzas of her new poem end by stressing “how ill agree in one, / A woman’s hand with constant marble stone” (Ins. 13-14, 19-20).

The \textit{Urania}, of course, is in many ways dedicated to refuting this notion of female fickleness, as Pamphilia—and many other female characters in the romance—remain forever faithful to their often-inconstant male beloveds. But though she refuses Philoclea’s ironic juxtaposition of the faithless “woman’s hand” with the unyielding white marble, Wroth does not often allow her constant women to find enduring mediums for their verse. A scene from Book I of the \textit{Urania} reinforces this fact. After describing her tearful parting from Antissia, the narrator recounts how Pamphilia’s “passionate breast… brought these Verses to her mind” (146)—echoing Philoclea’s moment of mental composition, in which “there came into her head certain verses.” But though
composed in a similar way, the verses take very different positions on the issues of female constancy. If Philoclea’s poem claims that her vanishing verse illustrates her shamefully mutable mind, Pamphilia’s depicts her heart as a “Diamond cleare”—one “ingraven” with “a love more pure / Then spotlesse white, and deepe still to endure, / Wrought in tears of never resisting paine, / Carv’d with the sharpest point of curs’d disdaine” (146). And in case any readers miss the very marked inversion of Philoclea’s imagery (the “full weak” made diamond-hard, the blotted made “spotlesse white”), Wroth has Pamphilia continue by asserting, “Raine oft doth wash away a slender marke, / Teares make mine firmer…” (146). Philoclea’s resolutions may crumble, her writing effaced by the elements or the passing of time, but Pamphilia’s vows will never falter. Logically, then, it seems as though Pamphilia’s poem should be granted a material permanence that matches the steadfast nature of its content. Yet this is precisely what does not happen—for as we have seen, although they imagine a love permanently engraved in Pamphilia’s heart, these verses exist only in the princess’s mind, where she has “imprinted them” (146).

This is not the only moment when Wroth engages in a dialogue with her uncle about the nature and endurance of women’s writing. Earlier, we examined the scene where Pamphilia composes lovelorn verse and then gives it a somewhat mysterious “buriall” (63). Wroth here responds to a scene from Book II of the New Arcadia, where the male hero Pyrocles composes a love lament while disguised as the Amazon Zelmane. The narrator often uses female pronouns when describing Zelmane’s actions, and this scene is no exception: “she took a willow stick,” the narrator tells us, “and wrote in a
sandy bank these few verses” (229).³⁹⁵ No less than the sandy writing of Shakespeare’s Lavinia (and recalling, as well, the scattered “Gyrlands” of Wroth’s shepherdess), Zelmane’s verses are ephemeral artifacts—poetry destined for erasure. Indeed, the Amazon decides to destroy her poem almost immediately after writing it. But before she can “give the new-born letters both death and burial,” Philoclea interrupts her (229). As the shared vocabulary of textual life, death, and burial suggest, Wroth likely had this scene in mind when writing about Pamphilia’s poetry. And yet, much as we saw in the previous example, Wroth does not respond to Sidney as we might expect. She does replace Sidney’s cross-dressed male poet with a woman writer—a shift that perhaps represents her own re-appropriation of the genre of the female lament, so often practiced by men, and so visibly employed by her uncle. At the same time, however, Wroth does not undo his emphasis on the vulnerable nature of women’s writing; instead, she intensifies it. If Sidney’s Zelmane episode depicts the not-quite loss of poetry written by someone who is not quite a woman, then Wroth rewrites the scene so that the poetry in question is both unquestionably female-authored and undeniably suppressed.

Thus far, we have focused on instances of Pamphilia entrusting her verses to ephemeral mediums—or to no material medium at all, “imprint[ing] them” instead within her mind. But the princess sometimes employs more lasting mediums. Perhaps the most famous example of female authorship in the Urania comes in Book I, when Pamphilia takes a knife and “finishe[s] a Sonnet, which at other times shee had begunne to ingrave in the barke of one of those fayre and straight Ashes” (92). In this scene, Wroth returns to a medium that she earlier considered in the first song of her sonnet sequence. As Leah

Knight notes, writing on trees is a long-running trope, particularly in romance; by making Pamphilia engrave her sorrows into tree bark, Wroth self-consciously affiliates her heroine with a longer literary tradition. Pamphilia’s tree poem, moreover, is acutely invested in preserving her story, in making it legible to future readers. “Keepe in thy skin this testament of me,” she writes in the first stanza, before ending the poem with a similar bid for immortality: “out-live me,” she instructs the tree, “and testifie my woes” (92-3). Her language recalls that of the shepherdess, who vows to “dayly… wright, / This tale of haples mee” in tree bark; it recalls, as well, the poem that Pamphilia composes and keeps in her mind, the one that depicts her heart as a “Diamond” “ingraven” with the story of her love. Pamphilia’s tree poem makes good on the imagery that remains metaphorical in the latter poem: it is literally “ingrave[d]” into a hard and unyielding surface, permanently imprinted into bark for later readers to find. Equally important, Wroth explicitly affirms the tree’s enduring nature as a poetic medium both by specifying that Pamphilia is actually completing a poem that she began earlier, and by having the princess return again to the same tree in Book II and add another stanza (191).

Pamphilia’s tree-poetry therefore seems to represent a medium for female-authored poetry that can and will endure into the future. After all, unlike the shepherdess, Pamphilia does not make her writing’s survival contingent on being discovered and correctly interpreted by a later reader—she creates her own monument, a permanent text designed to outlive her. As Maureen Quilligan observes, “The notion of the long-lived tree… records in Wroth’s poem not only the speaker’s love-death, but it also implicitly

affirms the immortality of the verse.” Quilligan continues by comparing Pamphilia’s tree-writing to that of Sidney’s Pamela (a clear source of inspiration for Wroth), and notes, “Pamela does not expect to be remembered as a poet. Pamphilia at least considers the possibility.”

Juxtaposing this scene with another instance of women’s writing in the *New Arcadia*, however, calls into question its effectiveness as a bid for posthumous remembrance. In Book II of Sidney’s romance, as Plangus laments his love for the captive queen Erona, he exclaims, “Can I forget from how much mourning plainfulness / With diamond in window-glass she graved, / ‘Erona, die, and end this ugly painfulness’?” (203). As a woman writer who engraves in glass, Erona breaks with the pattern of ephemeral verse produced by Philoclea and Zelmane. Significantly, however, Sidney’s image of a woman writing with a diamond on “window-glass” is not one he invented: it comes from John Foxe’s very popular and important work of Protestant history, *Acts and Monuments* (1563). While describing the then-Princess Elizabeth’s imprisonment at Woodstock Palace in the mid-sixteenth century, Foxe relates that she carved “these verses … with her diamond in a glass window: Much suspected by me, / Nothing proved can be. Quod Elizabeth prisoner.” In Sidney’s hands, the Princess Elizabeth’s refusal to confirm (or deny) charges that she had conspired against her half-sister Mary Tudor

---

398 Ibid.
399 *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, eds. Leah Marcus Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 46 n.1. This anecdote was later repeated nearly verbatim in the 1587 edition of *Holinshed’s Chronicles*. 
becomes Erona’s melancholy wish for death.\textsuperscript{400} And yet, at the same time, Sidney’s revision of this story preserves a vital aspect of the anecdote—the very thing, in fact, that Wroth suppresses: the female author’s name. Plangus remembers Erona’s writing in part because it inscribed her own name into glass; similarly, Elizabeth I’s poem is known as hers because she made sure to identify it as the work of “Elizabeth prisoner.” By contrast, Pamphilia’s tree-poetry is quite conspicuously unsigned. She may ask the tree to “Keepe in thy skin this testament of me,” but the “me” remains unidentified.

Pamphilia’s attempts to keep her passionate verse completely anonymous, however, are thwarted by her rival Antissia. After Pamphilia completes her tree-poem, she finds Antissia rustling around in the bushes nearby, sick with jealousy and trying to “over-heare [Pamphilia’s] secret complaints” (93). Once found out, Antissia proceeds to interrogate her supposed friend, asking first if she is in love with someone, then if she is in love with Amphilanthus. When Pamphilia denies having feelings for the prince, Antissia leverages her verse against her: “‘You cannot thus dissemble,’ replied Antissia, ‘your owne hand in yonder faire Ash will witness against you” (94). Pamphilia continues to deny her emotions (insisting that “many Poets write aswell by imitation, as by sence of passion”) but her rival has nonetheless identified her as the author of a supposedly anonymous poem (94). We might therefore understand this scene as suggesting that the princess’s writing will successfully endure into the future, recognized by others in spite of its missing authorial signature. But it is important to remember that Antissia is not a general reader: she is (as Sarah Rodgers recognizes) a “coterie reader” with personal

\textsuperscript{400} For more on the historical circumstances around this poem, see Ilona Bell, \textit{Elizabeth I: The Voice of a Monarch} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 51-59.
knowledge of Pamphilia. And while this personal knowledge of the princess enables Antissia to recognize Pamphilia’s “hand,” there is little indication that a less well-connected reader would be able to do the same—or that a future reader would be able to attribute this poem to the princess. Indeed, it is doubtful that anyone from outside Pamphilia’s coterie would be able to gain access to the poem in the first place, given that it has been inscribed in a grove adjoining the royal family’s gardens (90). Thus, while the princess has a reputation for being “excellent in Poetry” (as her friend Meriana puts it), her fame seems unlikely to travel beyond a relatively small group of intimates—particularly given her reluctance to share or even publicly acknowledge her work (460).

A scene from Book III of the Urania suggests, furthermore, that coterie readers will not always publicize the identities of writers who have chosen anonymity. While Perissus walks through the woods with Limena, the Queen of Naples, and others, they come across a grove with “names ingraven upon the trees (490). The narrator informs us that these readers “understood” the carved names “not perfectly, because when they had decipher’d some of them, they then found they were names fained and so knew them not. But Perissus remembred one of the Ciphers, yet because it was Pamphilias hee would not knowe it” (490). Much like Antissia, then, Perissus recognizes certain tree-carvings as the work of Pamphilia—but, unlike Antissia, he refuses to explicitly attribute them to her. Even more interesting is how difficult the ciphers are to understand: although Pamphilia’s friend Limena and her aunt the Queen of Naples are both present at the grove, the narrator gives no hint that either one of them recognizes Pamphilia’s handiwork. As such, the Urania suggests not only that Pamphilia’s reputation as a poet is limited to her

---

coterie; it also demonstrates that not all members of this coterie are willing—or even able—to puncture her veil of anonymity.

**Eaten to the Heart: Romance’s Envious Male Historians**

The *Urania’s* portrayal of Pamphilia’s disappearing, unsigned, and (sometimes) unwritten verse suggests that, even as Wroth wrote with an interest in literary fame, she was also contemplating potential impediments to such renown: namely, mediums that prove too ephemeral and coteries of readers that prove too small. And as we have seen through Wroth’s dialogue with Sidney, Pamphilia’s status as a woman writer is also an issue here. Wroth was not the first writer of romance to articulate doubts about whether literary posterity would remember female authors. We began this chapter by looking at how Ariosto urges his female readers to immortalize themselves through their pens. This call builds on an earlier canto in the romance, where the narrator looks back on antiquity and sees a world populated by women “whose splendid, glorious deeds irradiated the whole earth.”

In addition to celebrating women warriors of the past, the narrator singles out two famous female authors for special praise. “Sappho and Corinna shine,” he writes, “on account of their learning, with a radiance that the night will never darken.” But not all women writers remain visible to posterity. Ariosto’s narrator continues by complaining that many women did marvelous deeds in antiquity, but “the world has long remained unaware of their achievements” due to the ignorance—or “Envy”—of male historians. He makes the same point more stridently in Canto 37, insisting, “Male writers are so eaten to the heart with malice and envy that they often pass in silence over

---

402 *Orlando Furioso*, 20.1.
403 Ibid.
404 *Orlando Furioso*, 20.2.
the good they might have mentioned, while promulgating all the evil they know.”

Consequently, the “glory” of women, though not entirely eclipsed, has been severely dimmed; some evidence of their great deeds survives, “but not the full tally—not by a long streak!” This account suggests that the history of women writers (like the history of women more broadly) is one punctuated by loss and forcible erasure: while authors such as Sappho and Corinna continue to be remembered, many others have been forgotten, their fame extinguished by jealous male historians.

In *The Faerie Queene* (1590), another importance influence on Wroth’s *Urania*, Spenser follows Ariosto in critiquing the male-dominated historical record—but with telling omissions. Early in Book III, Spenser’s narrator criticizes male historians for occluding the “braue gests and prowesse martiall” of female warriors, complaining, “[s]carse doe [historians] spare to one or two or three, / Rowme in their writtes” (III.ii.1). Even the accounts of historical women warriors that do exist, he continues, are calculated to downplay their achievements: “the same writing small / Does all t'heir deedes deface, and dims their glories all” (ibid). By contrast, the narrator depicts himself as recovering a suppressed history of female valor (III.ii.2). And yet, while Spenser’s narrator appears to criticize how the male-authored historical record effaces female accomplishments, he in fact participates in a similar process of suppression. For, though he follows Ariosto by imitating the earlier author’s praise of forgotten women warriors, he quite conspicuously leaves out any mention of ancient women writers. In so doing, the

---

405 Ibid, 37.2.
406 Ibid, 37.4.
Spenserian narrator reenacts the same gender-based historical suppression that he ostensibly decries.

Turning to Sir John Harington’s English translation of Ariosto’s epic—published in 1591, only one year after the first half of The Faerie Queene—underscores this point. In his notes on Canto 20, Harington expands on Ariosto’s praise of Sappho and Corinna, observing that “for learning diuers women haue greatly excelled[,] as Eriana [Erinna], Aspasia, Cleobulyna, Theana [Theano], Leontion [Leontium], Manto, Nicostrata, Carmenta, the Sibils, [and] Sulpicia.”

Harington’s catalog of ancient women writers renders all the more striking the refusal of The Faerie Queene to name any of them. Ignoring his source’s praise of famous literary women, Spenser conjures a vision of antiquity in which women wield swords, but not pens.

The Faerie Queene’s omissions in this area matter because, as we saw in the introduction, Ariosto’s claim that envious male historians have erased accomplished women from history leads the narrator to urge modern women writers to rectify these gaps. “[E]very age,” he writes, “has produced many a woman meriting a legend, but the envy of writers has deprived you of posthumous renown. This will no longer be true now that you see to assuring your own immortality.”

Spenser’s narrator, by contrast, is after something much different. By reproducing Ariosto’s complaint against biased male historians while removing the concomitant suggestion that modern women take up the

409 One might object that Spenser is writing about an ancient woman warrior, not a woman writer, and thus his omissions are understandable. But his source, Ariosto, is also writing about a woman warrior (Bradamant); Spenser’s omissions therefore break very deliberately with his model.
410 Orlando Furioso, 37.23.
pen, Spenser’s narrator tacitly appropriates the task of writing a female-centered history for himself. We can see this shift play out in the opening cantos of Book III of *The Faerie Queene*. In Canto II, directly after complaining about how male historians have ignored the deeds of warlike women, the narrator begins to contemplate the difficulty of adequately praising Elizabeth I. He claims that he “would endyte” her praise, but his writing is unworthy—his “rymes” are “too rude and rugged” (III.ii.3). Compounding this problem is the fact that the Queen seems more than capable of advertising her own glory: as the narrator admits, “[t]hy selfe thy prayses tell, and make them knowen farre” (III.ii.3). Elizabeth, in other words, seems to be already following Ariosto’s advice, mythologizing herself in a way that threatens to render the narrator’s efforts superfluous.

Spenser’s narrator overcomes this dilemma in the next canto. Elizabeth may be able to “tell” her own “prayses,” but the narrator promises to do something even more impressive: he will represent his sovereign’s glory by tracing her illustrious family tree. Fittingly, then, at the opening of Canto III, he calls on Clio to “recount from hence / My glorious Soueraines goodly auncestrye, / Till that by dew degrees and long protense, / Thou hast lastly brought vnto her Excellence” (III.iii.4). As the muse of history, Clio is the obvious muse for the poet to invoke; after all, she “ennoble[s] with immortall name / The warlike Worthies, from antiquitye, / In [her] great volume of Eternitye” (III.iii.3). And yet, after this invocation, Clio quickly disappears from the canto. In her place, Spenser’s narrator substitutes the male figure of Merlin. It is Merlin who shows Britomart the genealogical line produced from her union with Arthegall, and it is Merlin who reveals the “streight course of hevenly destiny” that leads up to Elizabeth herself (III.iii.24, 49). As a male character that appropriates a historical function previously
associated with a female figure, Merlin seems to re-enact on the level of plot a phenomenon that occurs on a more meta-textual level in Book III—that is, the narrator’s appropriation of Elizabeth’s ability to shape her own legend.

**Women Beware Women: Pamphilia’s Rivals**

Two of Wroth’s major precedents in the realm of romance thus critique—and, in the case of Spenser, subtly reenact—the premise that the extant historical record is both male-dominated and biased against female accomplishments. Given this background, it would not be surprising to find that Wroth, too, blames men for not preserving women writers or their texts. As we have seen, however, women’s writing in the *Urania* tends to be suppressed, destroyed, or rendered anonymous not so much by men, but—ironically—by the very women who write it. It is true that, at one key moment in the romance, female-authored poetry faces a certain degree of neglect from an important male reader. Earlier, we discussed how Pamphilia shares her verse with Amphilanthus in Book II, bestowing on him “all shee had saved from the fire” (320). After perusing her poetry, Amphilanthus praises it as “the best he had seene made by woman” (320). On one hand, this is a scene of great emotional intimacy, as the sharing of her verse prompts Pamphilia to finally admit her feelings for Amphilanthus. At the same time, however, it is also a scene of failed textual transmission, for the princess’s beloved ultimately proves more interested in a miniature portrait of Pamphilia that he finds in her chamber (321). He asks her if he can keep the portable portrait, and—though it was made for her sister—Pamphilia agrees (321). What Amphilanthus takes from his intimate encounter with Pamphilia is thus not her writings, but her miniature; not her words, but her image.⁴¹¹

---

⁴¹¹ Cf. Rodgers: “Both the picture and the poetry represent Pamphilia’s “selfe,” but
While we might read this episode as indicting a kind of benign male neglect of women’s writing, the *Urania* focuses with much greater intensity on the threat that women writers pose to other women writers. If Ariosto and Spenser both suggest that male jealousy has occluded women from history, Wroth emphasizes instead the corrosive dangers of *female* jealousy. In order to understand this logic, we will have to examine the romance’s preoccupation with rivalry and competition between women. It has become a commonplace in Wroth studies to argue that her writings are characterized by highly supportive relationships between women. Naomi Miller, for example, finds that Wroth emphasizes “mutuality rather than hierarchy” in her portrayals of female friendship.\(^{412}\) Along similar lines, Barbara Lewalski claims that Wroth’s pastoral tragicomedy *Love’s Victory* “repudiates the patriarchal ethos of Jacobean society to develop an ideal community centered on women.”\(^{413}\) Yet while certain female characters do enjoy warm friendships with one another in the *Urania*—Pamphilia and Urania, for instance, or Pamphilia and her fellow poet Orilena—other pairings are considerably less cordial. The haughty princess Nereana, for example, cannot hide her dislike of Pamphilia when she meets her for the first time, beholding the other princess “earnestly, and one might see curiously, and like a rival, therefore spitefully” (194). When Nereana accuses her of being a romantic rival for the love of Steriamus, Pamphilia blushes—“both with modesty, and anger”—and denies the charge (194). Nereana in turn is “ nettled” by Pamphilia’s words, “yet could she not in her judgement finde fault openly with them, but rather

---

Amphilanthus, having effectively deciphered Pamphilia’s poetry, chooses the picture rather than Pamphilia’s literary endeavors” (481).  
suffered them with double force to bite, inwardly working upon her pride-fild heart” (194). Like Ariosto, Wroth figures jealousy as a bitter internal force, metaphorically eating away at its sufferer from within.

This tense, angry, awkward exchange recalls Pamphilia’s similarly charged encounters with Antissia. Because despite her protestations to the contrary in Book I, Pamphilia is not only deeply in love with Amphilanthus—she is also intensely jealous of Antissia. As Quilligan observes, we first see her compose poetry as a direct result of this envy: the verses that Pamphilia suddenly buries were written after Amphilanthus praised Antissia’s beauty (61).414 (Pamphilia, predictably, did not agree, leading the prince to answer that he “had never seen so much Womanish disposition in her, as to have so much prettie envie in her” [61-2]). In a recent monograph, Nandini Das argues that the Urania’s representations of jealousy and competition serve as narrative tropes through which the romance articulates nuanced notions of female subjectivity and agency.415 But as Pamphilia’s buried verse suggests, female envy is also crucial to the work’s representations of female authorship. If Pamphilia first composes verse in the romance because she is jealous of Antissia, Antissia first composes verse because she is jealous of

---

414 Quilligan, “The Constant Subject,” 315. Quilligan continues by arguing that Wroth’s jealous women poets mirror “the competitive nature of the Petrarchan enterprise” (319); I build on this important argument by showing how such competition between women writers in the Urania leaves the survival of their texts—and hence their claim on literary posterity—uncertain.

Pamphilia. In Book I, convinced that she has seen Pamphilia and Amphilanthus secretly meeting in a garden, Antissia goes to the “same Ashe” where Pamphilia wrote her unsigned poem, and—“perplexed with love, jealousie, and losse”—composes a sonnet of her own (114). And this is not an isolated incident. We have seen how, in Book II, Antissia burns one of her poems; this verse too emerged out of her rivalry with Pamphilia (she wrote it with a “heart…fill’d with envy” [326]). Even when the two princesses are not openly competing, the narrator sets them—and their poetry—against one another. During the scene where Pamphilia mentally composes verses that remain “imprinted” within her mind, Antissia sings a song that the narrator glosses as “unfashionably framed,” and as the probable product of the princess’s “unframd and unfashioned thoughts” (147). The two princesses are thus locked into a rivalry as poetically productive as it is emotionally torturous.

Yet if the rivalry between Pamphilia and Antissia results in female-authored verse, it also seems to endanger Pamphilia’s singular status as the royal female poet who pines for Amphilanthus. Certainly, Pamphilia understands herself to be possessed of a unique depth of feeling: moments before inscribing her sonnet into the ash tree, she informs the ground she reclines upon that it is “being honor’d with the weight of the loyallest, but most afflicted Princess that ever this Kingdome knew” (92). Try as she might, however, Pamphilia cannot escape the presence of Antissia, that other “affectionate afflicted Princesse” who regularly pours her feelings about Amphilanthus into verse (114). The narrator frequently seems at pains to distinguish one from the other—to insist, for example, that Antissia is the lesser poet, whose verse is “unfashionably framed.” But the fact that she even needs to make these distinctions for
the reader suggests how closely Antissia shadows Pamphilia, how deeply she threatens the distinctiveness of the other princess. In Book I, when Antissia composes a sonnet at the same tree where Pamphilia wrote hers, the narrator finds her exact motives unclear: “shee was invited, either by her owne passion, or the imitation of that excellent Lady, to put some of her thoughts in some kind of measure” (114, italics mine). Despite the narrator’s professed confusion, Antissia’s actions follow a definite logic. By returning to the site of Pamphilia’s lovelorn poetry about Amphilanthus and composing melancholy verse of her own, Antissia aims to replace Pamphilia—to literally write her out of their love triangle. Nardizzi and Jacobson suggest that Antissia may even inscribe her poetry over Pamphilia’s, and hence efface her writing. While this possibility seems unlikely given the fact that Pamphilia later returns to the tree and adds to her sonnet (something she could not do if it were effaced), the notion fits thematically with Antissia’s consistent presentation as an agent of destruction and disorder—what the narrator at one point refers to as “a mere Chaos, where unfram’d, and unorder’d troubles had tumbled themselves together without light of Judgement, to come out of them” (191, 115). No less than the invasive and biting emotion of jealousy itself, Antissia seems possessed of corrosive properties, able to erode the boundaries that should keep her separate from her rival.

Disgracing Sappho

Because Antissia threatens to erase Pamphilia’s distinctiveness, to replace her as a lover and a poet, she also implicitly threatens Pamphilia’s grasp on literary posterity. Wroth enriches this subtext by giving Antissia a classical precedent of her own. Pamphilia may evoke the historian Pamphila, but the other princess recalls a much more

416 Nardizzi and Jacobson, 186.
famous ancient woman writer: Sappho. Once again, Roberts was the first to notice these links, arguing that Wroth’s portrait of Antissia recalls the similarly lovesick and disorderly Sappho of Ovid’s *Heroides*.\(^{417}\) But Antissia also recalls another version of Sappho beginning to circulate in the early modern period: Sappho the literary rival. Male admirers of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century women writers often compared them favorably to the ancient Greek poet, particularly if these modern women were learned in classical languages. As Jane Stevenson notes, “Any Latinate woman, however miniscule her oeuvre, tended to be hailed by well-intentioned men in her immediate social circle as a sister or rival to Sappho.”\(^{418}\) In mid- to late-sixteenth-century England, this trope took shape around the famously learned Queen Elizabeth I. Jan van der Noot was among the first to praise the Queen in this way, writing in 1569 that, “your grace is so instructed in the diuine Arte of Poetrie, that you may woorthily be called the seconde Sappho.”\(^{419}\) Ironically, Elizabeth was far from the only English woman writer of the time to be honored as the “seconde Sappho.” In the late sixteenth century, another frequent candidate for this title was Wroth’s own aunt, Mary Sidney Herbert (1561-1621). Francis Meres and Thomas Nashe both made the comparison—with the latter author bringing out the trope’s darker edges.\(^{420}\) In the preface to the 1591 edition of *Astrophil and Stella*, Nashe exclaims over Herbert’s poetic abilities, insisting that, “in thee, the Lesbian

---

\(^{417}\) As Roberts notes, Antissia’s name may derive in part from the town of “Antissa” on Sappho’s home island of Lesbos; see her “Introduction,” xxxiv.


\(^{419}\) Jan van der Noot, *A theatre wherein be represented as wel the miseries & calamities that follow the voluptuous worldlings as also the greate ioyes and plesures which the faithfull do enioy…* (London: 1569), A.v. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 18602.

\(^{420}\) Francis Meres, *Palladis tamia Wits treasury being the second part of Wits common wealth* (London: 1598), 285v. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 17834.
Sappho with her lirick Harpe is disgraced.” Here, the competitive energies embedded in the “seconde Sappho” trope surface: according to Nashe, Herbert does not simply equal Sappho—she surpasses the ancient poet, humiliating her in the process.

Simply by reading tributes to her famous aunt, then, Wroth could have formed an image of Sappho as an ancient rival to modern women writers. She could also have seen how such praise tacitly divides literary competition along gendered lines, with men and women in separate groups. (Amphilanthus, for one, certainly seems to follow this logic: recall that when he reads Pamphilia’s verses, he deems them “the best he had seene made by woman” [320, italics mine].) But Sappho’s own poetry could have also given Wroth reason to associate her with literary rivalry between women. In the *Moralia* (translated into English in 1603 by Philemon Holland), Plutarch relates that Sappho once wrote insulting verse addressed “to a certaine rich and wealthie dame in her time.” Holland translates the poem thusly:

> All dead thou shalt one day entombed be,
> There sha[l]l remaine of thee no memorie,
> For that no part of roses came to thee
> That flower upon the mountaine Pierie. 

In this fragment, Sappho taunts another woman for her lack of learning and poetic skill—a lack, the poet insists, that will consign her to oblivion. By contrast, Sappho herself will become immortal because of her gift for lyric, her share of the Pierian roses. It is a

---

423 Ibid.
fragment that even in Wroth’s day must have seemed self-evidently true: after all, Sappho’s name had survived, while her female enemy’s had been completely forgotten, precisely as the fragment predicated. Earlier, we saw how Pamphilia’s name associates her with textual loss, opening up questions about whether women writers can ever truly immortalize themselves through their pens as Ariosto imagined. By contrast, the classical precedent behind Antissia suggests that a woman can in fact enshrine herself into literary history—but it may only be one woman, and her enduring fame may come at the expense of alliances with other women.

Antissia’s associations with Sappho begin to fade by Book III of the romance, when she marries Dolorindus and stops pursuing Amphilanthus (397). But the Urania’s investment in romantic and poetic rivalry between women does not disappear in the later books of the romance; to the contrary, it becomes even more pronounced. No sooner is Antissia safely married off then a new rival appears for Amphilanthus’s love: Musalina, a noblewoman known for her “spirit, wit, [and] rare discourse” (397). (In this she resembles Lucenia, yet another prominent rival for Amphilanthus’s love, known for her “exquisite wit and rare spirit” [161].) Even worse for Pamphilia, Musalina was one of Amphilanthus’s “first Loves in his youthfull travailes,” and she promptly accomplishes something that Antissia never could: she makes him forget Pamphilia (397). His desire-induced amnesia is particularly egregious given that, when Musalina enters the romance, Pamphilia and many of her friends are trapped in an enchanted theater; once Amphilanthus is reunited with Musalina, however, the search for Pamphilia and her friends is “quite forgot” for “some time” (397). Equally important, Musalina is also a poet—one whose methods of composition closely resemble Pamphilia’s. In Book III, the
narrator explains that once she separates from Amphilanthus, Musalina composes “sad rimes” and makes “the poore trees [feel] the cruelty which she said was inflicted on her” (498). Much like Antissia, then, Musalina serves as a double for Pamphilia, a female rival who threatens to replace the “afflicted princess” not only on the level of narrative, but also in terms of literary posterity.

The multi-layered threat posed by Musalina reaches its most vivid expression during Book IV, when Amphilanthus goes missing. After finding the emperor’s armor abandoned in a forest, Pamphilia and Polarchos create a monument to him by hanging this bloody armor up on “great stones” (583). Pamphilia then “vnder-writ[es] some lines” on this monument, “both making them, and ingrauing them” (583, italics mine). The language of poetic inscription and engraving recalls Pamphilia’s tree-writing and its claims for permanence and endurance; it recalls as well “goodly white marble stone” written on by Philoclea in the New Arcadia (147). But if Philoclea’s writing becomes “blotted” by exposure to the natural elements, Pamphilia’s faces another threat. After she and Polarchos finish creating their monument for Amphilanthus, it suddenly becomes an entry into the “Hell of Deceit”—a supernatural space where Pamphilia is taunted by the prospect of her own erasure. While peering inside it, Pamphilia sees a vision of her rivals Musalina and Lucenia: “Lucenia holding a sword, which Musalina tooke in her hand, and before them Amphilanthus was standing, with his heart ript open, and Pamphilia written in it, Musalina ready with the point of the sword to conclude all, by razing that name out” (583). In this scene, Wroth intensifies Sidney’s depictions of vanishing women’s writing to a nightmare extreme, making Pamphilia into a text about to be effaced from the heart of Amphilanthus. And, as we have seen, the princess has good reason to worry—
Pamphilia has already been forgotten in favor of Musalina once before. But while Wroth uses this image of near-erasure to dramatize Pamphilia’s fears of losing her beloved, it is also resonates with the *Urania*’s concerns about female literary history. Significantly, what Pamphilia’s rivals attempt to destroy is her *name*—the very signature that she has, in the past, refused to attach to her writing. As such, the Hell of Deceit is much more than a vision of being forgotten by a lover: it is also a premonition of authorial erasure, a fever dream of being obliterated by a rival female poet.

Pamphilia is not the only character to suffer in the Hell of Deceit. At the end of Book IV, after Amphilanthus recovers from Musalina’s spell, we learn that he saw a supernatural vision quite different from Pamphilia’s when he first encountered the enchantment. What he saw was “Pamphilia dead, lying within an arch, her breast open and in it his name made, in little flames burning like pretty lamps which made the letters, as if set round with diamonds, and so cleare it was, as hee distinctly saw the letters ingraved at the bottom in Characters of bloud” (655). While Pamphilia was taunted with the prospect of her own erasure, Amphilanthus occupies a much more stable place in his beloved’s heart: note the recurrence of the diamond imagery from Book I, as well as the language of engraving. On one hand, the permanence of Amphilanthus’s name represents Pamphilia’s constant love for him in spite of his fickleness; on the other, his deeply inscribed name has important literary-historical connotations, as well. If throughout the *Urania* Pamphilia seems leery of both committing her verse to paper and claiming it as her own, Amphilanthus’s attitude toward claiming and circulating his poetry is much more relaxed. In particular, he often gives Pamphilia’s rivals access to his poetry, which they then routinely preserve. After he composes “most excellent Verses” in Book III, for
example, he sends them off to Musalina and Lucenia, who (the narrator tells us) already possess “most he had written” (497). Antissia also collects his verse with an almost maniacal energy: “Oft would shee read the papers she had gaind from him in his owne hand, and of his making, though not all to her, yet being in that time she did not feare, she tooke them so, and so was satisfied” (328). Because she indiscriminately hoards Amphilanthus’s writings (even those not addressed to her), Antissia comes to serve as a kind of deluded archivist. “Read them she did even many millions of times,” the narrator informs us, “then lay them up againe, and (as her greatest priz’d and only blessing left) kept them still neere” (328).

Antissia may create a partly stolen archive of her beloved’s writings, but Musalina outdoes her in amorous literary obsession. A rival who threatens to erase Pamphilia’s name, Musalina not only writes her own “sad rime” on trees—she also apparently inscribes “others” written by Amphilanthus into the bark, as well (498). By reproducing Amphilanthus’s poetry on new surfaces, Musalina seems to work toward ensuring that verse’s ongoing survival. Her actions recall the advice given by Juan Luis Vives in the *The Instruction of a Christen Woman* (1529): as we saw in Chapter 1, the humanist educator recommended that women practice writing by transcribing lines from Scripture or classical philosophy, “which by often writyng she mayne fasten better in her memory.”

Certainly, Musalina does not reproduce the somber writings that Vives had in mind, but she and her fellow rivals do preserve Amphilanthus’s texts in a way that echoes Vives’s gendered division of literary labor, in which men write and women remember and repeat their words. Given the tendency of his lovers to hoard up and

---

preserve his writings, Amphilanthus’s writings seem much better poised to survive into posterity than do those of Pamphilia. As such, it is not surprising that, in the Hell of Deceit, the emperor’s name is not threatened with erasure, but “ingraved” in a way that lets it be “perfectly” and “distinctly” seen (655).

If, as I have been arguing, the Urania suggests that Amphilanthus’s textual afterlife is far more secure than Pamphilia’s, then its closing scene continues to undermine the princess’s claims on literary history. Once Amphilanthus is reunited with Pamphilia, he returns to the Hell of Deceit, reclaims his sword and armor, and “destroy[s] the monument,” “resolving nothing should remaine as witnesses of his former fickleness, or the property of that place” (661). Critics often rightly note that this scene revises Guyon’s destruction of Acrasia’s Bower of Bliss in The Faerie Queene, but—because the monument was inscribed with Pamphilia’s verses—it also reworks the end of the first song of Pamphilia to Amphilanthus. As we have seen, that poem’s lamenting shepherdess creates an epitaph that she hopes will be found by a later reader, who will “right conseave” the verse and inscribe it on (or attach it to) her tomb. The shepherdess’s epitaph thus faces an uncertain fate, but it remains preserved within the song itself, to be discovered by future readers. By contrast, Pamphilia’s verses are already inscribed into stone, already positioned for immortality by their author. Yet they are destroyed before the reader of the Urania can access them. After first mentioning the composition of this poetry, the narrator promises to return to them (“Pamphilia both making them, and ingraving them, as shal be told hereafter” [583, italics mine]), but this promised event never occurs. Wroth thus replaces the shepherdess’s tenuous claims on literary posterity with the certain loss of Pamphilia’s verse—a loss so complete that, in the end, even the
reader of the romance is not given the chance to “right conseave” the woman writer’s meaning.

* 

Throughout this chapter, we have explored a peculiar phenomenon in the First Part of the *Urania*: the highly uncertain fate of its female-authored verse. Sometimes this poetry is threatened with loss because it remains unsigned, or is never written down; at other times, it is actually destroyed by the women who write it. We have also seen how, in depicting the neglect and destruction of female-authored verse, Wroth is intensifying a trope from her uncle’s *New Arcadia*. Yet, unlike Ariosto and Spenser—who indicted the male-dominated historical record for occluding the achievements of women writers—she focuses instead on the danger posed by female rivals: women who threaten to replace her avatar Pamphilia both as a lover and a poet. In so doing, Wroth may reflect the growing seventeenth-century tendency to group women writers together on the basis of their gender—but also to pit them against one another from within the confines of this separate sphere, as the trope of the “second Sappho” suggests.

Moreover, by assigning ancient literary precedents to Pamphilia and Antissia, Wroth comments on the kinds of classical heritage available to women writers when they attempt to affiliate along the lines of gender. Critics of Wroth often claim that she benefited from empowering models of female authorship: Hannay, for example, stresses that Wroth “found her literary mentor… in her aunt. Thus when later she began to write, she saw herself not merely as a woman, but as a *Sidney* woman with a clear sense of poetic authority in her lineage.”

425 Similarly, Naomi Miller has stressed the shaping

---

effects of what she calls Wroth’s “significant matrilineal heritage.” But the two major classical female presences in the romance—Pamphila and Sappho—indicate a more ambivalent attitude toward female predecessors, at least when they emerge from antiquity. In naming her heroine after a woman historian whose texts had been almost completely lost by the early modern period, Wroth suggests that the scenes of textual destruction in her romance are not isolated incidents, but in fact part of a larger pattern of loss—a longer history of gender-based suppression. And by aligning Pamphilia’s chief rival Antissia with the competitive incarnation of Sappho, Wroth suggests that women no less than men have been participants in this process of textual destruction. Female jealousy, she implies, has played its own part in consigning women writers to oblivion.

Yet there is another puzzle worth pausing over here, and it is the fact that, in the very act of describing the loss and suppression of women’s writing, Wroth preserves it for future generations of readers. Pamphilia may burn her verse, leave it unsigned, or refuse to write it down—but Wroth’s narrator transcribes it into the pages of the *Urania* all the same. (Antissia’s verse, too, is preserved in this way.) The same cannot be said of Amphilanthus’s writings. As we have seen, the romance emphasizes how his work is carefully preserved by his admirers, and sometimes even reproduced by them. Within the world of the romance, then, Amphilanthus’s work seems destined to be remembered—more so, certainly, than that of Pamphilia or Antissia. At the same time, however, the narrator often refuses to share the emperor’s verse with the reader. For instance, when Amphilanthus composes poetry for the first time in Book I, the narrator describes his writing thusly: “he put the rest of his thought into excellent verse, making such exelling

---

426 Miller, *Changing*, 79.
ones, as none could any more imitate or match them, then equall his valour” (136). Yet the reader is never allowed access to this superlative poetry. A similar moment of poetic occlusion occurs in Book III, where, after hearing a shepherd boy sing, Amphilanthus “was pleased to make most excellent Verses, and then return’d to Court” (497). Once again, despite their excellence, Amphilanthus’s poetry is kept from the eyes of the reader.

Thus, while the *Urania* seems to set the preservation of Amphilanthus’s male-authored verse against the ephemerality of Pamphilia’s poems, this pattern is contradicted by the romance’s persistent preservation of the princess’s verse. Her words are the ones that survive, not his—and they survive not in spite, but *because* of, the scenes that detail their loss and suppression. The paradoxical notion that destruction might somehow lead to survival is one that Wroth gestures toward more than once in her fiction, particularly in poems composed by female characters. In Book II, for example, Queen Melasinda is forced to burn a letter from her beloved Ollorandus to keep it safe from prying eyes; she then stores its ashes “in a daintie Cabinet” and composes a poem about the burning of the letter (272). Initially, Melasinda asks the fire to “turne / Crosse to your selfe and never burne / These Reliques of a blessed hand” (273). Yet by the poem’s end, she suggests that the fire might actually immortalize the letter it works to destroy, much as “Famous bodys still in flames, / Did anciently preserve their names” (273). The paradoxical idea that destruction is a form of preservation reaches its most vivid expression in the poetry of Antissia. Earlier, we saw that she wrote—and then burned—a passionate poem while her heart was “fill’d with envy” over Pamphilia (326-327). What we did not examine, however, is how this female-authored poem anticipates its own fate. Toward its conclusion, its speaker insists, “since I cannot please your first desire / I’le blow, and
nourish scorners fire / As Salimanders in the fire doe live: / so shall those flames my
being give” (327). Unlike the phoenix—the mythical creature used by poets to symbolize
Mary Sidney Hebert’s authorial emergence after her brother Philip’s death—the
salamander is not a triumphant symbol of rebirth. This animal suggests instead a
quieter, more counterintuitive emblem of survival; it does not transcend or escape the
dangerous flames, it lives within and because of them. Ultimately, then, perhaps it is
Pamphilia’s supposedly inferior rival who best articulates the paradoxical fate that the
_Urania_ envisions for women writers and their texts.

---

427 Margaret Hannay, _Philip’s Phoenix: Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke_ (New York
and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 81-82.


Epilogue

Ancient Sisters, Modern Rivals

“Nicostrata, or Carmenta, the Mother of Evander, an ancient King of Italy, even before the arrival of Aeneas into that Country. She is feign’d, for it will be look’t upon rather as a fiction then real Story, to have been the first Inventor of Verse…”

—Edward Phillips, *Theatrum Poetarum* (1675)

Early in Anthony Munday’s prose romance *Zelauto* (1580), the eponymous hero tells a friend about his recent journey to London, where he was granted an audience with England’s “vertuous Mayden Queene.”⁴²⁸ When pressed to describe the character of this “péerelesse Paragon,” Zelauto emphasizes her astounding learning: “It is in vaine of the Grecians to vaunt of their Sappho, Corinna, Eriune [Erinna], Praxilla, Telesilla, Cleobulina, nor yet the Pithegoreans brag of theyr Diotima, and Aspasia, for theyr lyues, this is she that excelleth them all.”⁴²⁹ We saw in the previous chapter how mid- to late-sixteenth-century writers often praised Elizabeth’s poetry by comparing her to Sappho; here Munday expands on the trope, alleging that the queen surpasses a whole host of learned women of antiquity.⁴³⁰ In recent years, critics have stressed the isolating nature of such competitive rhetoric on Renaissance women writers. Jane Stevenson observes that many early modern men preferred to see learned women “as unique—a Sappho, a Tenth

---

⁴²⁸ Anthony Munday, *Zelauto, the fountaine of fame* (London: 1580), 32. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 18283.
⁴²⁹ Ibid, 33.
⁴³⁰ In so doing, Munday was in fact drawing on rhetoric that first emerged among fifteenth-century Italian humanists as they wrote in praise of learned women such as Isotta Nogarola and Cassandra Fedele. See Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), esp. 18-35; see also Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), esp. 33-57.
Muse, a phoenix—and often use[d] this rhetoric of uniqueness to situate them outside the sodality of poets in general.” Further, as Sylvia Brown notes, the conventional address of a learned woman as the “second Sappho” implies “that there can only be, at most, one Sappho at a time”—that, in effect, such women are freakish anomalies. Munday’s praise of the Virgin Queen’s literary abilities would seem to reaffirm these observations. After all, by making Elizabeth I into the preeminent woman writer of her time (indeed, of all time), he separates her from predecessors and peers alike.

And yet, however isolating the comparison of modern women writers to ancient ones could be (perhaps intentionally), in the years after Elizabeth’s death, this trope helped to lay the groundwork for the creation of English literary histories centered on women. Even before the queen died in 1603, English writers were beginning to admit that she was not the nation’s only admirable female author. In his *Palladis Tamia* (1598), for instance, Francis Meres praises the “learned Mary, the honorable Countesse of Pembrook” alongside Elizabeth, noting that the former woman is “a most delicate Poet” who bears comparison to Sappho. Similarly, in the notes to his translation of *Orlando Furioso*, John Harington made sure to exalt Elizabeth for her learning, ranking her above a host of ancient women; elsewhere in the translation, however, Harington also

---

commends the four daughters of Sir Anthony Cooke for their skill in poetry.\footnote{Ludovico Ariosto, trans. John Harington, \textit{Orlando furioso in English heroical verse} (London: 1607), 314. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 746.} And seven years later, Thomas Lodge would hail one of these sisters, Lady Elizabeth Russell, as “our English Sappho.”\footnote{Elizabeth Cooke Hoby Russell, \textit{The Writings of an English Sappho}, ed. Patricia Phillipy, trans. Jaime Goodrich (Toronto: Iter, Inc., 2011), 1.}

As these examples suggest, by the end of the sixteenth century, it was becoming increasingly difficult to claim that only one English woman merited praise for her writings; the nation had not one Sappho, but several. And after Elizabeth’s death, vernacular authors began to write female-centered literary histories that started in antiquity and concluded with these English women. The most influential of these histories appears in a text we first examined in Chapter 2: Thomas Heywood’s \textit{Gynaikeion: or, Nine books of various history} (1624). In this sprawling work, Heywood draws on myths, anecdotes, jests, ancient histories, and contemporary events to describe the nature and history of womankind. Most importantly for us, he devotes his eighth book to learned women, and focuses with special interest on female authors of the past and present.\footnote{One of Heywood’s major sources of information on ancient women writers was a list of sixty-five “Mulieres Doctae” compiled by the humanist scholar Joannes Ravisius Textor; this list appears both in the anthology of writings about women that Textor edited, \textit{De Memorabilibus et Claris Mulieribus} (1521), and his later encyclopedic work \textit{Officina} (1552).}

After providing accounts of mythical and historical women writers such as Carmentis, Sappho, Corinna, and Telesilla, Heywood jumps to sixteenth-century England by announcing, “Before many, or most of those, I may justly and without flattery preferre the famous Queene Elizabeth.”\footnote{Thomas Heywood, \textit{Gynaikeion: or, Nine books of various history} (London: 1624), 398. EEBO STC (2nd ed.) 13326.} Yet Heywood does not conclude here. He
continues by adding, “[o]thers there haue beene likewise of our owne Nation, of whose
elegancie in these kinds the World hath taken notice, and pittie it were their memories
should not be redeemed from obliuion.” He then offers accounts of eight more English
women writers (including Mary Wroth, whom he refers to as “the ingenious Ladie, the
late composer of our extant Vrania”). Despite her pride of place in Gynaikeion,
therefore, Elizabeth is ultimately shown to be only one of several important female
authors of the modern age.

Heywood’s emphasis on assembling a catalog of female authors from “our owne
Nation” demonstrates one increasingly important theme in the emerging literary histories
centered on women: an incipient nationalism. But before we discuss this element of the
histories, we should note how seventeenth-century works like Heywood’s make much
different use of ancient women writers than do many texts from the previous century. The
first chapter of Evander’s Mother revealed how the humanist training of sixteenth-
century male writers subordinated them to the auctoritas of ancient men—and thereby
aligned them with ancient women. While certain male writers (Vives, Spenser) resisted
this implicit linkage, others—including Elyot, Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Donne—
exploited it as a way of refashioning inherited authorial roles. Chapter 4, by contrast,
demonstrated how Wroth used the ancient authors Pamphila and Sappho to draw
attention to the repeated loss of female-authored texts—to the very bibliographic
absences, in other words, that enabled ancient women to become a Renaissance “canon
without a corpus” in the first place. Wroth’s treatment of ancient women writers
corresponds to a wider shift in how these female figures were understood in the

438 Ibid.
439 Ibid.
seventeenth century. Instead of functioning as intellectual tools for humanist-trained men attempting to establish their own literary auctoritas, the female authors of antiquity became part of a separate history of women’s writing.

For more evidence of this shift, we can examine Heywood’s treatment of an ancient female author first discussed in Chapter 1: Leontium. He identifies her as “a Grecian Damosel, whom Gallius calls a strumpet,” and adds that, “she was so well seen in Philosophicall contemplations, that she feared not to write a worthie book against the much worthie Theophrastus.” The allegation that Leontium was unchaste—which Vives uses to discredit her as a lascivious, babbling “concubyne,” and which Elyot does not discuss at all—does not appear to perturb Heywood: her book against Theophrastus is still described as a “worthie” one. Tellingly, moreover, Heywood does not identify with or against Leontium; he simply recounts her story in Book Eight’s account “[o]f Women excellent in Philosophie, and other Learning.” For Heywood, the philosopher-prostitute does not provide a usefully “empty” classical precedent (as she does for Elyot), nor does she serve as a figure to be displaced onto one’s enemies (as she does for Vives); Leontium is instead part of a specifically female literary history. The same can be said of Zenobia, another central figure from Chapter 1. While Elyot and Painter used her to allegorize (and redeem) the “captive” status of the humanist-trained male writer, for Heywood, Zenobia is simply another entry in a narrative that eventually leads up to modern English women (albeit a particularly illustrious one, given her status as both a warrior queen and a historian).  

---

440 Heywood, 378.
441 Ibid, 377.
442 Ibid, 379.
How can we understand this transformation in thought? How did ancient women writers shift from intellectual tools employed by sixteenth-century men to the predecessors of “modern” female authors? Several factors were at work. First, an increasing number of works by English women circulated in manuscript or appeared in print during the seventeenth century. The celebration of Elizabeth I for her erudition created a precedent for male authors looking to court potential female patrons, and—by the end of the sixteenth century—these men found that socially elite women writers such as Mary Sidney Herbert and Lady Elizabeth Russell could be praised in similar ways. And the following generation brought more aristocratic women known for their writings. By the time Heywood was compiling his *Gynaikeion* in the early 1620s, he had a small but substantial canon of English women to name as the heirs to ancient Greece and Rome. Fifty years later, Edward Phillips built on this list in his *Theatrum Poetarum* (1675). A literary history that divides authors according to gender, nationality, and historical period, the *Theatrum* contains a section devoted to “Women Among the Moderns Eminent for Poetry” that names fourteen women writers from England—five more than Heywood.\(^{443}\) And while Phillips had the advantage of using *Gynaikeion* as a source for this list, he also benefited from the mid-seventeenth-century increase in printed women writers.\(^{444}\) As Patricia Crawford has demonstrated, the Civil Wars and Interregnum periods saw a marked increase in published women’s writing: from 1646 to

\(^{443}\) Edward Phillips, *Theatrum poetarum, or, A compleat collection of the poets especially the most eminent, of all ages, the antients distinguish’t from the moderns in their several alphabets* (London: 1675), 253-262. EEBO Wing P2075.

\(^{444}\) Phillips was certainly familiar with Heywood’s work: he wrote a prefatory epistle to the 1657 edition of *Gynaikeion*, which was published under the name *The generall history of women* (London: 1657), sig. A3. EEBO Wing H1784. Much of the *Theatrum Poetarum*’s information about ancient and modern women writers comes from Heywood.
1650 alone, sixty-nine new publications by women appeared.\textsuperscript{445} (By contrast, only eight new female-authored works were printed from 1616 to 1620.)\textsuperscript{446} This proliferation of women writers enabled Phillips to follow his detailed account of “Women Among the Ancients Eminent for Poetry” with a robust list of English “Moderns”—including Elizabeth Carey, Katherine Philips, Margaret Cavendish, and Aphra Behn.\textsuperscript{447}

The seventeenth-century rise in female authors therefore contributed to the writing of histories that could account for the existence of these literary women. But more than history was at stake in these accounts; national pride was also at issue. Discussing early modern Italian attitudes toward women writers and scholars, Virginia Cox observes that “by the late fifteenth century, the ‘learned lady’ was a familiar and sanctioned enough figure to have been co-opted as a kind of ‘national treasure,’ routinely boasted of by compatriots as an honor to her city and her kin.”\textsuperscript{448} Two hundred years later, English authors were eager to boast about their own learned ladies—and thereby cement their nation’s importance on the international literary scene.

This gender-mediated rivalry is on full display in the \textit{Theatrum}.\textsuperscript{449} As we have seen, Phillips’s work features a list of “Women Among the Moderns Eminent for Poetry.” Despite their shared status as “moderns,” however, Phillips is careful to specify the homelands of these twenty-five female authors. England possesses the majority of

\begin{flushright}
\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{446} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{447} Phillips, 253-262.
\textsuperscript{448} Cox, 8.
\textsuperscript{449} We can see the early stirrings of this rivalry in Harington’s notes on \textit{Orlando Furioso}, published in 1591. There, he comments on Ariosto’s praise of Vittoria Colonna by asserting that, whereas Ariosto can “maketh so great bost onely of our learned woman in Italie,” he can name (besides Elizabeth I) “three or foure [learned women] in England out of one family”: the Cooke sisters (314).
\end{flushright}
named women writers (fourteen), with its closest rival being Italy (six); the other nations—including Scotland, France, Germany, and the Netherlands—possess only one each. By highlighting substantially more women writers from England than from anywhere else, Phillips subtly challenges the literary prominence of other nations—something he does more openly in his account of Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* (he claims) has been "judg’d little inferior, if not equal to[,] the chief of the ancient Greeks and Latins or Modern Italians." What the *Theatrum Poetarum* suggests, in other words, is that the emergence of female-centered literary histories in England had as much to do with asserting the nation’s cultural prestige as it did with a desire to enshrine women writers into the historical record.

Phillips’s championing of Spenser reflects an increasingly self-confident English literary culture—one that believes itself capable of rivaling writers both ancient and modern, Greco-Roman and Continental. In Chapter 1 we saw how, according to humanist thinking, the “modernity” of the sixteenth-century vernacular writer left him at a distinct disadvantage with respect to his predecessors, as he was far removed from the prestige and *auctoritas* of the ancient world. By contrast, works like the *Theatrum* insist that English writers in the vernacular now possibly equal their renowned classical predecessors. Phillips describes Ben Jonson, for instance, as comparable to "the chief of the Ancient Grec and Latin Comedians as [well as] the prime of Modern Italians"—

---

451 Phillips, 35. This disparity in numbers is especially noteworthy considering that Phillips leaves out a number of Continent women writers that he earlier praised in his preface to *The generall history of vwomen*, including Laura Cereta, Modesta Pozza, and the learned Christina, Queen of Sweden (sig. A4).
terms that recall his praise of Spenser.\textsuperscript{452} According to Phillips, both men deserve to be ranked among the greatest writers of any age or nation. Similarly, he describes Shakespeare as “the Glory of the English Stage,” and insists that his writings demonstrate “a certain wild and native Elegance”: a phrase that, in its ascription of eloquence to the vernacular, might have seemed oxymoronic a century prior, but no longer.\textsuperscript{453} It was this kind of triumphalist literary-historical thinking—working in tandem with the increase in English women writers—that helped to sever the always-unstable homology between modern men and ancient women. Once modern literary \textit{auctoritas} became a well-recognized possibility in early modern England, male authors no longer needed ancient women writers to test the possibilities of vernacular authorship. England’s “canon without a corpus” was therefore free to be absorbed into emerging literary-historical accounts of women writers.

But there is one more relevant factor at work in this intellectual shift—one that we can glimpse by turning back to Evander’s mother. In the Introduction, we saw how Carmentis was believed to be a preeminent ancient poet not in spite, but \textit{because} of, her missing texts; writers such as Richard Allott interpreted their absence as proof that they had been destroyed out of envy. Yet Phillips offers a much different account of Carmentis in the \textit{Theatrum}, ranking her as one of the “Women Among the Ancients Eminent for Poetry” only to discount her immediately. After identifying her as “the Mother of Evander, an ancient King of Italy,” he adds, “[s]he is feign’d, for it will be look’t upon rather as a fiction then real Story, to have been the first Inventor of Verse.”\textsuperscript{454}

\textsuperscript{452} Phillips, \textit{Theatrum}, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{453} Ibid, 194.
\textsuperscript{454} Ibid, 245.
Even though Phillips attributes more to Carmentis than did Boccaccio—making her the inventor of all “Verse,” and not merely the Latin alphabet—these claims for the literary prowess of Evander’s mother quickly vanish into the territory of insubstantial, shadowy “fiction,” along with Carmentis herself.

This disappearing act was possible in part because of certain changes in historical thought. While it is important not to overstate the uniformity and speed of these changes, scholars tend to agree that the seventeenth century saw the development of more empirical models of history—models that stressed the importance of documentary evidence, eyewitness accounts, and causal explanations of events. And as part of this epistemic shift, “history” increasingly came to be distinguished from the “fictions” of myth and legend. Hence Phillips is careful to define Carmentis as “fiction [rather] then real Story”—in other words, she is not a historical woman writer, but a mythical one. Evander’s mother was not the only female author-figure of antiquity to lose her literary reputation in the seventeenth century. As we saw in Chapter 3, the sibyls also began to lose the auctoritas that had long been ascribed to them once the Sibylline Oracles started to be seen as forgeries. (Phillips observes that the sibyls’ authorship of the Oracles “may easily be question’d” and has “been the dispute and inquiry of many.”) Underlying this

---


456 Shapiro, 40-42. For a dissenting view, see Blair Worden, “Historians and Poets,” in The Uses of History, 69-90.

457 Phillips, Theatrum, 249-250.
skepticism was a different attitude toward textual loss than we have seen until now—one that understands absence not as the space for invention, but as a lack of proper evidence, a hole in the historical record.

A dedicatory poem by Abraham Cowley that prefaces the 1667 edition of Katherine Philips’s verse provides a startling illustration of this emerging mindset. There, he praises Philips first by saying that she surpasses Sappho and other ancient women writers, and then—more surprisingly—by calling the very existence of these classical rivals into question. “Of Female Poets who had names of old,” Cowley writes, “Nothing is shewn, but onely told / And all we hear of them, perhaps may be / Male Flattery onely, and Male Poetry.” In four short lines, Cowley uses the (at best) highly fragmentary state of much ancient women’s writing to assert that perhaps these women writers never existed at all; perhaps they were nothing more than fictions dreamed up by ancient men. On one level, these lines provide a fitting gloss not on classical men, but on Cowley’s predecessors—the sixteenth-century male writers who reimagined the lives and writings of ancient women to serve their own ends. But Cowley’s words also highlight the fact that ancient women writers began to serve as precedents for modern female authors at the precise time when their historical authenticity was being increasingly questioned. Thus, if the female authors of antiquity eventually became part of a history belonging to seventeenth-century English women writers, it was a history ironically made more dubious and marginal by that act of inclusion.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


———. *Orlando furioso in English heroical verse, by Iohn Haringto[n]*. London: 1591.


Broughton, Hugh. *An advertisement of corruption in our handling of religion To the Kings Majestie*. Middelburg: Richard Schilders, 1604.

———. *An apologie in briefe assertions defending that our Lord died in the time properly foretold to Daniel*. London: William Kearney, 1592.

———. *A require of agreement to the groundes of divinitie studie wherin great scholers falling, & being caught of Iewes disgrace the Gospel: & trap them to destruction*. Middelburg[n], 1611.


———. *Poems, by J.D. VVith elegies on the authors death.* London: 1633.


Geveren, Sheltco à. *Of the ende of this world, and second comming of Christ, a comfortable and necessary discourse, for these miserable and daungerous dayes.* London: 1577.


Meres, Francis. *Palladis tamia Wits treasury being the second part of Wits common wealth.* London: 1598.


Phillips, Edward. *Theatrum poetarum, or, A compleat collection of the poets especially the most eminent, of all ages, the antients distinguish’t from the moderns in their several alphabets*. London: 1675.


Rymer, Thomas. *A short view of tragedy it’s original, excellency and corruption: with some reflections on Shakespear and other practitioners for the stage.* London: Richard Baldwin, 1693.


——. *Syr P.S. His Astrophel and Stella Wherein the excellence of sweete poesie is concluded.* London: 1591.


——. *The Faerie Queene.* Eds. A. C. Hamilton, Hiroshi Yamashita, and Toshiyuki


Textor, Joannes Ravisius. De Memorabilibus et Claris Mulieribus (1521).

———. Officina (1552).

Topsell, Edward. Times lamentation: or An exposition on the prophet Ioel, in sundry sermons or meditations. London: 1599.


Van der Noot, Jan. A theatre wherein be represented as wel the miseries & calamities that follow the voluptuous worldlings as also the greate ioyes and plesures which the faithfull do enioy... London: 1569.


**Secondary Sources**


Benson, Pamela. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*. University Park, PA: The


———. “Sidney’s Sapphics And The Role Of Interpretive Communities,” *ELH* 69.4 (2002), 979-1007.


*Cultivating the Muse: Struggles for Power and Inspiration in Classical Literature*. Eds.


Regier, Alexander. *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism.* Cambridge:


