

The Status of Reading in Early Modern English Literature

by

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## Introduction

When William Rowley dedicated his and Thomas Middleton's 1617 play *A Faire Quarrell* to Robert Grey, a groom of King James's bedchamber, he described Grey as "nobly disposed, vertuous, and faithfull-brested," and asked him, in this capacity, to "iudge" the work.<sup>1</sup> Rowley's language of nobility and good judgment incorporates the apparently untitled Grey into the rhetorical space usually occupied by the lords, earls, countesses, and the like who were frequently sought as literary patrons in this period.<sup>2</sup> The language suggests that while Grey may not have a noble title, he has the inner qualities that define nobility, qualities that make him worthy of being addressed as a privileged reader. Moreover, in constructing Grey as a privileged reader, Rowley implies that the inner qualities that constitute nobility are perhaps more important than the titles that signify it. The way in which this dedication entwines the language of virtue-based nobility with the idea of privileged reading and strong judgment is indicative of changing expectations about the relationship between social and literary culture in early modern England.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *A Faire Quarrell* (London: [George Eld] for I[ohn] [Trundle], 1617), A2, A2v.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Grey does not have an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Margot Heinemann points out that actors such as Thomas Heywood often "became a groom of the chamber to the Queen" and in that function participated in court processions ("Rebel Lords, Popular Playwrights, and Political Culture: Notes on the Jacobean Patronage of the Earl of Southampton," in *Patronage, Politics, and Literary Traditions in England, 1558-1658*, ed. Cedric C. Brown [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991]: 135-58, 144). It is possible, then, that Grey was a current or former actor and thus known personally to Rowley; in that case, he probably would not have possessed significant money or status. While his position as groom of the bedchamber, which implies great intimacy with the monarch, would have carried a certain kind of high status, I am primarily interested in the discursive space created by Rowley's address to an apparently untitled person.

Pre-modern European culture was one in which distinctions between ranks—even small distinctions—were marked visibly, aurally, and behaviorally: in choices of color, design, and fabric for clothing; in linguistic modes of address; and in physical motions indicating respect or authority.<sup>3</sup> One's identity was deeply tied to one's social status: as scholars have shown, early moderns seem to have understood people not so much through notions of what we would call individual personhood as through an understanding of someone's social position as it related to the positions of others.<sup>4</sup> The literary patronage model, by which a writer earned the social and financial support of a wealthy, titled person for producing work that was deemed worthy of such support, had long implied that social rank and intellectual discernment went hand in hand: just as rank was usually an inborn status, so was the ability to read well.<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation tracks changes to ideas about the relationship between reading and various kinds of status that coincided with a number of economic and social changes toward the end of the sixteenth century—changes that altered the way “status” was understood. In this

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Margreta de Grazia, “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 44:3 (Autumn 1993): 255-83; and Peter Stallybrass, “Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text,” in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992): 593-612.

<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have analyzed in depth the varied and complex relationships between writers and patrons that belie the simplicity of what I am arguing. See, for example, Robert C. Evans, *Ben Jonson and the Poetics of Patronage* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1989); Michael Brennan, *Literary Patronage in the English Renaissance: The Pembroke Family* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (University of California Press, 1983). In my study, however, I am less interested in what the patronage system was actually like than what it signified more broadly. David M. Bergeron, in *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570-1640* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), argues that “Wayne Chandler articulates an informed view: ‘the actual exchange of art and patronage is not the crucial element in our consideration of that system. The crucial element is that better artists and patrons *believed* in the exchange of art and patronage, regardless of whether such exchange occurred with the frequency or generosity that artists would have preferred” (9, qting Wayne A. Chandler, *Commendatory Verse and Authorship in the English Renaissance* [Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2003], 166). Bergeron himself argues that even in situations such as the printing of dramatic works, where “we cannot define the operation of patronage precisely,” authors continued to “search for status and support from patrons” as a rhetorical move if not a practical one (Bergeron, *Textual Patronage*, 7; 13).



period, new forms of economic capital, such as those practiced by theaters, printing houses, and joint-stock companies, were becoming more prevalent, calling into question traditional understandings of how wealth and social rank were attained—and who could attain them.<sup>6</sup> Alongside these changes, increasing educational opportunities ensured that more young men from lower social ranks could interact as near-peers with their social superiors and prove their intellectual abilities to those who could offer them employment.<sup>7</sup> Implicated in almost all of these changes was print publication: while printing houses themselves were making use of new economic opportunities related to market forces,<sup>8</sup> the material they were producing promised a key shift in the number and kind of people who had access to books.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed analysis of these larger trends, see Linda Woodbridge's Introduction to *Money and the Age of Shakespeare: Essays in New Economic Criticism*, ed. Linda Woodbridge (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003): 1-18; Michael Neill, "Servant Obedience and Master Sins: Shakespeare and the Bonds of Service," in his book *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 13-48; Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Lawrence Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500-1700," *Past and Present* 33:1 (1966): 16-55; Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen and Company Ltd., 1965); and Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Michelle O'Callaghan, *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Mark H. Curtis, "The Alienated Intellectuals of Early Stuart England," *Past & Present* 23 (Nov. 1962): 25-43.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the economics of print, see Peter W. M. Blayney, "The Publication of Playbooks," in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 383-422.

<sup>9</sup> This study does not assume that the technology of print was, on its own, capable of causing the social changes in which it is implicated, as Elizabeth Eisenstein argues in *The Printing press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and Walter Ong suggests in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) (New York: Routledge, 2002). As Arthur Marotti and Michael D. Bristol write, in *Print, Manuscript, and Performance: The Changing Relations of the Media in Early Modern England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), "What the arguments of technological determinism occlude is the role of *social intentions*, implemented through plans, projects, and lucid reflection in the development of any technological infrastructure . . . people 'invent' things because they are looking for a solution to some kind of practical problem" (2). And as Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier argue, in *A History of Reading in the West* (1995), trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), "the invention and spread of printing alone" were not "responsible for bringing about a fundamental revolution in reading," since other changes, including the shape of books

The growth of print raised questions about what would happen if texts that had previously circulated only within certain rarefied communities—communities defined by education level, church affiliation, social status, or the like—found their way into the hands of readers who had generally never had access to those texts. Often, it raised fears, at least among people in positions of authority, that broader access would result in social disruption. For example, in 1543, when King Henry VIII allowed the Bible to be printed in English, he passed a statute that strictly outlined who was allowed to read it, alone or aloud to others. Every “noble man and gentleman being a householder” had almost free range to read the Bible and cause it to be read to members of his household; however, women of the same status could only read it to themselves, and people of lower ranks were further restricted by rank, gender, occupation, and household situation.<sup>10</sup> The statute is silent about literacy itself, suggesting that it was feasible at this time for apprentices, servingmen, laborers, and lower-status women to achieve the mechanical requirements of reading that comprised parsing words on a page.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the statute envisions

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and methods of reading, had begun long before (22-24). Important studies that have examined the intertwined relationship between print and the society in which it developed include Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers: 1475-1557* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> “An Act for thadvancement of true Religion and for thabbolisshment of the contrarie,” in *Statutes of the Realm*, Vol. 3 (London: Eyre, 1810), 894-97 (896). The restrictions were as follows: lower-ranking male householders, such as merchants, could also only read the Bible to themselves; “woomen artificers prentyses journeymen serving men of the degrees of yeomen or undre, husbandmen and laborers maie reade to themselves and to none other,” and nobody below them can read it at all (896). In “Protestant Reformations and Reading,” in Cavallo and Chartier, *History of Reading in the West*: 213-237, Gilmont asks of this statute, “Could there be a clearer expression of the political and social stakes involved in reading the Bible?” (221). But while the statute of course has important implications for English religious culture, it has no less important implications for English reading culture.

<sup>11</sup> Literacy rates are notoriously difficult to calculate. David Cressy’s argument, in *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), that “[m]ore than two-thirds of the men and nine-tenths of the women were so illiterate at the time of the civil war that they could not even write their own names,” simplifies the situation because it amalgamates reading literacy with writing literacy (2). In *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Heidi Brayman Hackel provides an overview of more recent scholarship on literacy (56-58) and claims that “[a]ncedotal evidence

“reading” as a process of incorporating ideas into one’s worldview in a way that could shape one’s relationship with other people and with social and political institutions.<sup>12</sup> Reading, in the statute’s assessment, is a social act.

The way reading is entwined with social status in this statute has broader implications for English society. The statute links the idea of reading poorly with lower social status, arguing that “a great multitude of his saide subjectes, most specialle of the lower sorte have so abused” their prior access to the English Bible, “that they have thereby growen and increased in divers naughtie and erronious opynions, and by occasion therof fallen into greate dyvision and discencion amonges themselves, to the greate unquietnes of the Realme and other his Majesties Domynions.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, withholding the Bible from the “lower sorte” prevents them from reading inappropriately and developing “erronious opynions.” But of course, to claim that the “lower sorte” are poor readers is also a means of retaining power among those of the highest social ranks. For those whom the statute frames as poor readers, men and women in various positions of subordination, are the very people who have the most at stake in challenging the social order. Henry’s statute, then, envisions social disruption if ideas are allowed to extend freely to people who do not have a vested interest in maintaining the social order—and attempts to forestall that

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reveals the expectation that spelling and inexpensive books were within reach of members of all social classes” (65).

<sup>12</sup> In *Reading Material*, Brayman Hackel explores the statute along very similar lines as I do, arguing that it shows that “who one was and how one read were considered one and the same: identity, that is, determined interpretation” (83). However, Brayman Hackel analyzes the statute in the context of how “authors and authorities resisted a growing readership, and efforts were made to physically control the circulation of printed books” (82), while I am more interested in how the statute conceives of the potential for social change (and social disruption) through reading.

<sup>13</sup> “An Act,” 896.

disruption by claiming that such people are poor readers and should not be trusted with the responsibility of reading.<sup>14</sup>

While the Bible was a more politically and socially charged publication than most, Henry's fears about the social implications of print were echoed again and again throughout the sixteenth century by a variety of people, in reference to different genres and printed formats. A significant amount of scholarship over the last fifty years has analyzed these expressions of fear, suggesting that there was a widespread cultural anxiety about the socially disruptive effects of print publication.<sup>15</sup> However, by focusing so readily on anxiety, this scholarship has ignored evidence that many people found new opportunities in the promise of widespread circulation. Indeed, a number of writers and printers in this period strategically used their platforms to explore the benefits of the social changes promised by print publication, and they did so through constructing reading as a socially meaningful act.<sup>16</sup> If Henry VIII could claim, for his own political reasons, that high social status and good reading capacity were linked, these writers could claim, for their own reasons, that reading well was an indication that someone deserved a higher social or cultural status.

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<sup>14</sup> We do not know whether or to what extent the statute was actually enforced; however, it shows how an authority figure in early modern England perceived the broad social implications of reading and print publication.

<sup>15</sup> In this argument I push against an overwhelming trend in early modern literary scholarship to emphasize writers' anxieties and fears about print publication. The trend originated with J. W. Saunders' enormously influential work, "The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Bases of Tudor Poetry," *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 139-64. While it is true that a large number of early modern writers expressed anxiety about their work being circulated to a "great Variety of readers" (Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material*, 11), many of them also relied on print for their livelihood in one way or another. While I do not want to deny that there was cultural anxiety about print, my study seeks to uncover a discourse about the potential benefits of print that has often been overlooked.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Snook, whose book *Women, Reading, and the Cultural Politics of Early Modern England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005) analyzes representations of reading in literature by women, makes a similar claim: Snook argues that the writers she analyzes "insist that reading is socially important . . . Writing about reading provides women with a language with which to fashion a writing voice" (24).

## *The “True Nobility” of Reading*

There was a long tradition in western culture of examining the qualities of social rank—especially nobility. This tradition found its origins in ancient Greece, and it steadily developed over time, flourishing in ancient Rome and eventually finding its way into the humanist tradition, where it was generally referred to as “vera nobilitas;” I will refer to it throughout the dissertation as “true nobility.”<sup>17</sup> Michael McCanles articulates a series of propositions that comprise the true nobility argument:

- (1) Aristocrats possess true nobility.
- (2) Aristocrats ought to possess true nobility.
- (3) Those who possess true nobility ought to be aristocrats.
- (4) Those who possess true nobility are aristocrats.<sup>18</sup>

In the pre-modern imagination, then, people who held noble titles were assumed to have a corresponding “inner” nobility—to be more virtuous, moral, and ethical than their untitled counterparts.<sup>19</sup> These propositions carried internal tensions that philosophers struggled with for centuries: for titles could be inherited, but the inheritance of virtue was, of course, more complicated. Ellery Schalk, writing about the concept of nobility in early modern France, shows how, while there was a cultural expectation that nobles deserved their status through virtuous

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<sup>17</sup> Michael McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 47. McCanles cites Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1978) for much of this history, including the phrase “vera nobilitas.”

<sup>18</sup> McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations*, 50.

<sup>19</sup> According to Ellery Schalk, who studies early modern French culture in *From Valor to Pedigree: Ideas of Nobility in France in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Princeton University Press, 1986), qualities usually associated with nobility in sixteenth-century France “included courage and prowess in battle as well as personal qualities such as uprightness, selflessness when defending the weak and poor, loyalty to one’s monarch or one’s military leader or superior, honesty, and adherence to the morals of the time. To contemporaries, and above all to nobles, nobility was the profession of virtue or of the virtuous” (21).

behavior, there was also a general understanding that titles were inherited and some nobles did not act worthy of their status.<sup>20</sup>

The notion of true nobility was therefore increasingly complicated in the Renaissance as philosophers and individual social actors sought to apply the concept to their lived experiences. McCanles argues that the humanist tradition, with its emphasis on education and on advising state leaders, exhibited its tensions most provocatively. Humanists, according to McCanles, “treated noble persons” they addressed in their works “as if they already possessed the humanist virtue which they could not possibly possess until obliging humanists taught it them. And since this impossibility is itself part of humanist doctrine, it follows that Renaissance humanists supported established aristocracies in the process of implicitly calling them into question.”<sup>21</sup>

John Huntington has argued that some treatises were more socially “radical” than others; however, they all, to a certain extent, exhibited a precarious balance between endorsing and challenging the aristocratic order.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree*, xiv.

<sup>21</sup> McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Huntington, *Ambition, Rank, and Poetry in 1590s England* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 74. Huntington, whose study focuses on the work of George Chapman, pursues an in-depth study of one treatise in particular, *Nennio*, to whose English translation Chapman contributed a prefatory poem. Huntington argues that while *Nennio* invites itself to be read “in the tradition of *The Courtier* and the various treatises on nobility, the issue here is not how to succeed as a courtier. *Nennio* disregards the practical issues and poses bluntly and at length the radical and socially basic question in any aristocracy, what is nobility? The book allows that the conventional inherited nobility, that is, the class that the courtier aspires to and serves, may not deserve that title” (69). In reading *Nennio* through the lens of conduct books rather than the “true nobility” tradition, Huntington argues for a more radical reading of this text than it might deserve. However, he also claims that this text allowed Chapman and others to “identify an intellectual hierarchy, a ‘true nobility,’ that poses an alternative to, and therefore always entails a criticism of, the actual social structure, dominated by a ‘false nobility’ of ‘blood’” works along very similar lines as this study (67). With this claim, Huntington works along very similar lines as my study; however, we arrive at our conclusions through different means: Huntington sees poets such as Chapman manipulating the true nobility tradition to present a very strong critique of nobility derived from blood, whereas I see an increasing cultural investment within England in reading as a measure of true nobility. My study thus sees a trajectory whereas Huntington’s study sees a break.

The themes of true nobility explored in humanist treatises were also part of a long literary tradition. In England, for example, Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale" tells the story of a knight who betrays the ethical components of his title when he rapes a young maiden. As part of his punishment he is given a series of difficult tasks, and eventually must marry a "foul, and oold, and poore" woman (1063).<sup>23</sup> On their wedding night, the knight bemoans the women's poverty (among other things), to which she argues that nobility—here "gentillesse"—is not related to wealth:

Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,  
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay  
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;  
Taak hym for the grettest gentil man. (1113-1116)

Rather than wealth, "vertuous" behavior—both privately and in the open—is the true marker of "gentillesse." Moreover, such virtue cannot be passed down from generation to generation in the same way that lands, wealth, and titles can be:

. . . men may wel often fynde  
A lordes sone do shame and vileynye;  
And he that wole han pris of his gentrye,  
For he was boren of a gentil hous  
And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous,  
And nel hymselfen do no gentil dedis  
Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,  
He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl,

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<sup>23</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," In Larry D. Benson and F. N. Robinson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 116-122, ll. 857-1264. All subsequent quotations from "The Wife of Bath's Tale" are from this edition.

For vileyns synful dedes make a cherl. (1150-58)

Here the old woman asserts that even a “lordes sone” is not guaranteed to have the “gentilesse” that his father might have had, and can just as easily become a “cherl” as anyone of lower rank. Actions alone, not birth, determine someone’s “gentilesse,” which ultimately “cometh fro God allone” (1162). The woman goes on to remind the knight of Tullius Hostilius, one of the kings of Rome, who “out of poverte roos to heigh noblesse” (1167). According to the old woman, because action determines everything, it is just as possible for a poor person to achieve “gentilesse” as for a rich one.

Henry Medwall’s late-fifteenth-century play *Fulgens and Lucrece*, which was a translation of an Italian treatise on nobility, presents similar ideas.<sup>24</sup> Medwall’s play tells the story of Lucrece, a maiden of “beaute and clere understanding,” “full of honest and verteous counsell / Of here owne mynd,” who chooses between two suitors by determining which one is most noble (269; 274-75).<sup>25</sup> She ultimately passes over the one who snobbishly proclaims hereditary nobility, choosing instead the one from a less prestigious family who demonstrates his nobility through deeds. Like the old woman in the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” Lucrece claims that virtue, not blood, is the most important factor in determining true nobility: she says, “for vertue excellent I will honoure a man / Rather than for hys blode” (2260-61). Her suitor Gaius, the man she eventually chooses, further asserts that blood has nothing to do with virtue: he claims that his rival’s “auncetours”

were noble withouten faile,

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<sup>24</sup> According to McCanles, the source text was Buonaccorso da Montemagno’s *Controversy about Nobility* (1428), “which John Tiptoft translated in 1460 and Caxton printed in 1481” (58-59).

<sup>25</sup> Henry Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucrece*, in *English Verse Drama Full-Text Database* (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1994, Web) from Alan H. Nelson, ed., *The Plays of Henry Medwall* (Cambridge: Totowa, Rowman & Littlefield, 1980), 2272-75. All subsequent quotations from *Fulgens and Lucrece* are from this edition.



And dyde grete honoure to all the contrey.

But what can theyr sayde noblenes advayle

To hym that takyth a contrary way? (2128; 2130-33)

Here he asserts that his rival's ancestors were truly noble because their deeds served the country; their nobility, however, does not carry through to their descendent unless he does similar good deeds. Although Gaius' opinion of his rival is perhaps not entirely objective, Lucrece ultimately agrees. Moreover, she clarifies that nobility can be found in anyone, no matter their rank:

a man of excellent vertuouse condicions,

Allthough he be of a pore stoke bore,

Yet I wyll honour and commende hym more

Than one that is descendide of ryght noble kyn (2272-75)

Lucrece thus argues that action and behavior are truer indicators of nobility than title alone, and that poverty is no obstacle to true nobility.

But how could an untitled person demonstrate true nobility effectively? What kinds of actions and behavior truly signaled inner virtue? Traditionally, the clearest way to achieve nobility through action was through deeds of bravery and might on the battlefield.<sup>26</sup> For example, Macbeth, in Shakespeare's play, earns a higher title after conducting himself admirably in war.<sup>27</sup> In *Henry V*, on the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, the king promises his soldiers that

he to-day that sheds his blood with me

Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Ellery Schalk, *From Valor to Pedigree*, 21.

<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 1 for a fuller analysis of *Macbeth* in this context.

This day shall gentle his condition. (4.3.61-63)<sup>28</sup>

In Henry's imagining, even the most "vile"—the most low-ranking of his common soldiers—can become gentle—can earn the status of "gentleman," a status far above that of common laborers—through honest fighting, bravery, and injury on the battlefield. Henry's word choice here suggests that the gentling of his soldiers through brave action comes from their own inner worth, and not from his bestowal: they won't be "made gentle" by him after the fact: the day itself, which contains their virtuous actions, will "gentle" them.

Since fighting on the battlefield was generally barred to women, there was a different tradition through which women were able to prove their inner worth. This tradition had its basis in the story of the patient Griselda, a peasant woman who marries a rich man and endures almost unspeakable physical and emotional torment at his hands for many years before he acknowledges that she is worthy of her new title and position. The Griselda story had a long life in the European cultural imagination: one of the stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, it was retold by Petrarch and Chaucer, among others, and made its appearance on the London stage when Thomas Dekker's play, *The Pleasant Comoedie of Patient Grissill*, was performed by the Lord Admiral's Men in about 1600.<sup>29</sup> The Griselda story implies that patience and extreme humility are marks of inner worth that enable a woman to raise her social status effectively.

By the late sixteenth century, however, notions of true nobility were increasingly framed not through physical stamina but through *reading*. That is, the act of reading—reading well,

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<sup>28</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 4.3.61-63.

<sup>29</sup> Jones and Stallybrass cite 1600 as the probable year of the play's performance (228) in their chapter on the cultural history of Griselda (220-244) in *Renaissance Clothing*.

reading with good judgment—became something that “gentled” people.<sup>30</sup> This process was generally thought to work through mimetic action. Frank Whigham, for example, has claimed that courtesy books, which were printed and sold in increasing numbers in the late sixteenth century, codified the behavior of the elite classes in a way that enabled non-elite people to read about it and adopt it.<sup>31</sup> Richard Halpern, analyzing Tudor humanist education, argues that “[m]imetic assimilation was fundamental to all of humanist pedagogy . . . Social roles, cultural *decora*, and literary style were all assimilable through imaginary identification and internalization.”<sup>32</sup> Edmund Spenser’s epic poem *The Faerie Queene* promotes the idea of mimetic action, telling tales of chivalry and knightly bravery in order to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.”<sup>33</sup> But other authors questioned the efficacy of this approach. Francis Beaumont’s play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, for example, parodies it, showing, through the misadventures of the Grocer, his Wife, and their apprentice Rafe, that obsessively reading and imitating tales of chivalry are not, on their own, “gentling” acts. Writers

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<sup>30</sup> In her chapter “Framing ‘Gentle Readers’ in Preliminaries and Margins,” in *Reading Material* (69-136), Brayman Hackel analyzes a large number of print prefaces that frame the reader as “gentle.” She argues, “The appellations ‘gentle’ and ‘courteous’ carry clear class associations; with their double play on docility and nobility, these epithets reveal the cultural association of polite, skilled reading with membership in the ruling class” (116). She argues that these appellations were not entirely benign: “While the title of ‘gentle’ or ‘courteous reader’ may flatter, it also disregards the actual experience of a reader because it puts forward the epithet before the reader has a chance to respond, a preemption that, I would argue, is precisely its point. For the title is, above all, prescriptive not descriptive: the business of the preface is to shape each unknown reader into a receptive, pleasant reader” (117). Brayman Hackel argues that the texts tend to imagine gentle readers as reading “in a docile, friendly, uncritical manner,” while “a more aggressive or resistant reading called into question all of these terms” (117). Thus, Hackel links the notion of the gentle reader with a desire on the part of “authors and publishers” to “control the readership of their books” in the absence, because of the openness of the print marketplace, of any other forms of control over circulation and reception (116; 122). However, I argue that the idea of reading as gentling was more culturally pervasive than Brayman Hackel’s study acknowledges. My study has identified more than just prefaces that assert this idea; moreover, I argue that the aspirational benefits of this idea were far-reaching.

<sup>31</sup> Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege*.

<sup>32</sup> Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Spenser, “Letter to Raleigh,” in *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Pearson Longman, 2001): 714-18, l. 8.

like Beaumont implied that for reading to be a gentling act, what matters is not only *what* you read, but *how* you read. In the pages that follow, I explore the “how” of reading: I analyze how writers and printers depicted the process(es) through which reading could be gentling, and the broader cultural implications of this idea. For not only did writers suggest that reading could allow someone to raise his or her social rank, but they also used ideas associated with the true nobility tradition to suggest that social rank in the traditional sense was not the only kind of status that mattered; there was also a broader “cultural” status to which lower-ranking but intelligent people could claim access.

### *Constructing the Status of Reading*

This dissertation argues that in an age when writers were negotiating multiple avenues for publication, they invented the concept of the common print reader, who was distinct from the particularized patron, familiar coterie, or professional association. The idea of the common reader, and the reading public to which he or she belonged, allowed writers to challenge traditional expectations about social hierarchy by suggesting that there was, or could be, an alternate cultural hierarchy whereby a new kind of high status could be earned through intelligent literary engagement. This new kind of status meant different things for different writers: for some it meant attaining an aristocratic title through proving one’s intelligence and wit within a high-ranking community; for others it meant constructing cultural capital based on popularity; and still for others it meant asserting the unique value of cultural contributions made by people whose gender or social position were considered subordinate.

In part, this study traces a trend toward what Pierre Bourdieu calls “the aristocracy of culture.”<sup>34</sup> The “aristocracy of culture” was built on a complex positioning of literary producers within and against aristocratic culture:

The fact remains that the ‘pedant’s’ situation is never entirely comfortable.

Against the ‘populace’ and with the mondain aristocracy—who have every reason also to accept it, since they have an interest in birthrights—he is inclined to accept the ideology of innate tastes, since it is the only absolute guarantee of his election; but against the mondain he is forced to assert the value of his acquirements, and, indeed, the value of the work of acquisition, the ‘slow effort to improve the mind’, as Kant put it, which is a blemish in the eyes of the mondain, but in his own eyes his supreme merit.<sup>35</sup>

Here Bourdieu articulates the difficult position of people whose education and abilities mark them as distinguished, but who do not have the social status usually associated with such distinction. These people, Bourdieu argues, adopt the terminology of their social superiors in order to align themselves with them, while also constructing new notions of value to assert their own cultural importance.

A number of recent scholarly studies, largely influenced by Bourdieu’s theories, have explored how English writers and thinkers toward the end of the sixteenth century were beginning to articulate new vocabularies of status, especially in relation to literature and to displays of learning and wit. For example, in his study of wit in early modern comedy, Adam Zucker claims that “[a] different sort of status formation is at work . . . an increasingly prevalent logic of social power which uses differences in taste, in aptitude, and in cultural fluency to

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<sup>34</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 11.

<sup>35</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 74.

supplement, to compete with, and at times to disguise entirely the developing economic and political relations of early modern England.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, John Huntington asserts that this period of “economic transition” offered early modern poets “an opportunity to realign the system of cultural power, to propose that artistry, wit, and learning are important qualities in themselves, apart from the rank of the person displaying them.”<sup>37</sup> My study is indebted to the work of these scholars for their nuanced articulation of the cultural stakes of early modern poetic ambition—and for the growing importance of the literary as a site for cultural contestation.<sup>38</sup> But where they focus on the space of writing, analyzing the rise of the author as a category of social and cultural value, this dissertation explores the imaginative space of reading.<sup>39</sup> Through inventing a reading public made of common readers, writers could most effectively push against aristocratic cultural dominance.

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<sup>36</sup> Adam Zucker, *The Places of Wit in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> John Huntington, *Ambition, Rank*, 8.

<sup>38</sup> These studies have pushed against some of the assumptions of new historicism, arguing that the works they analyze are not so much implicated in large-scale political resistance, by which “politics . . . is conducted *through* literature,” but rather in smaller-scale efforts to investigate “the politics *of* literature as a form” (Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Theory in Social Context* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 8.). Matz further argues that to study “the ongoing construction of poetry as a particular form of discursive practice . . . requires a shift in emphasis from the relationship between literature and more local political struggles to a consideration of the place of literature within longer-term changes in elite Tudor society and culture” (8). Matz argues that the literary works under consideration in his book “do not just give us a window into [a] transitional culture . . . they are part of it. Changes in notions of aristocratic conduct help to determine the definition of and regard for poetry within sixteenth-century aristocratic culture. And this regard was inevitably ambivalent, given that what properly constituted such conduct was itself under debate” (3).

<sup>39</sup> Most scholars who explore the role of print within the literary system have focused on the rise of the author as a category of cultural and social value. In addition to the scholars I have noted above, see, for example, Geoffrey Turnovsky, *The Literary Market: Authorship and Modernity in the Old Regime* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Joseph Loewenstein, *The Author's Due: Printing and the Prehistory of Copyright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Douglas Brooks, *From Playhouse to Printing House: Drama and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Douglas Bruster, “The Structural Transformation of Print in Late Elizabethan England,” in Marotti and Bristol, *Print, Manuscript & Performance*: 49-89; and Richard Helgersen, *Self-Crowned Laureates*.

In the following chapters, I analyze textual constructions of readers and reading.<sup>40</sup> The fictional and imagined readers I analyze are not, as Heidi Brayman Hackel warns against, the “phantom idealized readers of recent critical theory.”<sup>41</sup> While my study is informed by the reader-response theories of such theorists as Stanley Fish and Walter Iser, my imagined readers are not their imagined readers.<sup>42</sup> Rather, they are the imagined readers called into being by the texts themselves, through paratexts and other framing devices, as well as fictional characters and ideas explored within the texts. In his large-scale study of the social and political implications of vernacular literature in India, Sheldon Pollock writes, “It is often assumed that textualized representations (conceptual spaces, for example) are somehow less real than material practices (circulatory spaces, for example), less consequential in actuality, and so less worthy of historiographical scrutiny and analysis;” however, “[t]o contrast such representations with ‘history’ is to ignore something crucial about the actual historicity of representation itself.”<sup>43</sup> My

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<sup>40</sup> In its exploration of reading, this project is indebted to the important materialist scholarship on readers and reading that has emerged in recent decades. See, for example, Heidi Brayman Hackel and Catherine Kelly, eds. *Reading Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Marta Straznicky, *The Book of the Play: Playwrights, Stationers, and Readers in Early Modern England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006); Carla Mazzio and Bradin Cormack, *Book Use, Book Theory: 1500-1700* (Joseph Regenstein Library, The University, 2005); William Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Sasha Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare’s Poems in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jennifer Andersen, et. al., eds., *Books and Readers in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Kevin Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Cavallo and Chartier, *A History of Reading in the West*; Eugene R. Kintgen, *Reading in Tudor England* (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996); Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, “‘Studied for action’: how Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy,” *Past and Present* 129 (1990): 30-78; and Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-century Miller* (1976), trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). However, while this project is informed by such studies, it is ultimately not a materialist study.

<sup>41</sup> Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

<sup>43</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 7.

study is invested in the idea that the readers constructed and represented by texts are as culturally important as the actual readers of materialist scholarship.

Chapter 1 of this study explores the relationship between the concept of reading well and avenues for social mobility in the late sixteenth century. I first analyze early modern metaphors about reading to show that being a good reader implied the possession of internal qualities, such as intelligence, humility, and wit, that were associated with high social rank. Then, through case studies of dramatic characters who strive for social advancement through reading, I show that social mobility was not in itself considered problematic in this period, but that raising one's status was considered impossible for people who lacked the ability to read well—and all the internal qualities associated with doing so. Chapter 2 moves away from social rank to explore a different kind of status, a cultural status more related to Bourdieu's aristocracy of culture. This chapter analyzes how Shakespeare's plays and sonnets invoke a multitude of readers as a way of asserting the cultural status of poetry as distinct from the social status of aristocratic networks. Chapter 3 asserts that Aemilia Lanyer's long poem *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* constructs and then rejects the idea of a small network of aristocratic reader-patrons. Using its avowed dedicatees as rhetorical tools for a larger poetic project, Lanyer's volume proposes an alternate cultural hierarchy by which women and middling status writers can provide important and unique cultural contributions unavailable to their aristocratic counterparts. Chapter 4 places the ideas from the earlier chapters in conversation with each other: examining Ben Jonson's *The New Inn* and the poetry that circulated in the wake of its failure, I show how Jonson and his peers construct an alternate cultural hierarchy similar to Lanyer's, while also claiming that people can raise their social rank by reading well. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 also pay particular attention to the print manifestations of the works under consideration, examining how the authors, or the



publishers in charge of printing their work, framed the work for print readers. Together, these chapters analyze a variety of popular genres to show how early modern writers and printers constructed the idea of a reading public made of common readers. The interests and buying power of this reading public could shape literary popularity over and against the interests of the patron or limited social network. In this way I push against Bourdieu's argument that an elite taste culture developed in opposition to a common, popular culture.<sup>44</sup> Rather, I argue that writers and printers often invoked a kind of popular culture in opposition to the elite, rarefied world of aristocratic court circles.<sup>45</sup>

Scholars analyzing the broader social and economic impact of print publication assume that an "anonymous" market of common readers was already a cultural force in this period.<sup>46</sup> However, in a culture so heavily tied to the importance of social hierarchy, the idea of a common reading public was not a given, and indeed, was constructed imaginatively before it could be understood to exist.<sup>47</sup> According to Michael Warner, a public "is a space of discourse organized

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, his discussion of modern art in *Distinction*, 30-32.

<sup>45</sup> See particularly Chapter 2.

<sup>46</sup> Matz writes that "during this period economic capital begins more fully to emerge as wealth partially separated out from traditional social hierarchy and personal relationships. The emergence of a more autonomous identity for the artist may likewise be traced to an incipient shift in the artist's support from personal patronage to the more anonymous market, as well as to a developing separation of art from the church and the sacred" (*Defending Literature*, 6). In *Textual Patronage*, Bergeron provides an overview of scholarship on this (11-12), and argues that "dramatists, who sought publication, recognized the growing market of readers, a situation that they and printers sought to exploit" (14).

<sup>47</sup> Bergeron briefly articulates this idea, writing that "playwrights did become increasingly concerned about readers, a reading public that they imagined" (*Textual Patronage*, 14). However, he does so primarily to explore the difference between readers and audience members: "In addressing patrons or readers, dramatists could imagine whatever they wanted to imagine, in contrast to the scruffy, sometimes unkind theatrical reality, which might have been harsh" (14). In *Textual Patronage*, Bergeron analyzes the prefatory material in printed plays in order to explore how the language of patronage interacted with the new market potential of readers for early modern drama; he argues that the prefaces show that there was not a linear development from patronage economy to market economy; moreover, he argues that "the search for aristocratic patrons and the seeking of readers, as attested in prefatory texts, underlines the authorial quest, that the textual economies of textual patronage merge into and help clarify authorship" (18). It is in my investment in readership over and above authorship, as well as my investment in multiple genres, that I diverge most explicitly from Bergeron.

by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*.”<sup>48</sup> For Warner, publics are real in their cultural power, although they are “virtual” in that they are called into being by textual address and readerly “attention.”<sup>49</sup> My study is guided by Warner’s work, emphasizing how the idea of the common reading public was called into being by these texts. The existence of this public was thus tied to the needs and ideas of the writers and printers who called it into being, and who used it strategically to explore ideas about their own cultural importance and the growing importance of people outside the ranks of the aristocracy as cultural taste-makers. Throughout this study, I thus identify important strands of thought through which writers and printers established ideas about the cultural value of literary engagement, showing why it was important for an untitled reader like Robert Grey to be considered “noble.” The varied ways this study explores the social dynamics of reading and readership show that the act of reading has implications not only for a person’s understanding of his or her place in the social world, but for the very structures that define that world.

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002), 67, emphasis in original.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 88.

## Chapter 1

### Reading Up: Social Mobility and Ambition in *Doctor Faustus*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Macbeth*

Reading is an act that comprises a strange blend of inner and outer experience. Words enter the mind through the eyes or the ears, and there they mingle with prior knowledge and ideas—and have the potential to influence the mind’s decisions and the body’s actions. Perhaps to make sense of the bodily complexities of the reading process, many early modern metaphors that describe reading use words related to eating and digestion. Michel de Montaigne, for example, writes that books are bodily nourishment, “the best provision I have found for this human journey.”<sup>1</sup> In his witty parody of a conduct book, Thomas Dekker writes to his reader, “It is by heart that I would haue you to con my lessons, and therefore be sure to haue most deuouring stomaches.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars analyzing these metaphors have generally done so through the framework of humoral theory, exploring how the body’s emotional and spiritual health can be shaped by reading.<sup>3</sup> My study turns outward instead, examining not the body’s internal health but its external relationships. The metaphors of digestion so prominent in this period, alongside

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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. and ed. Donald Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 628.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Dekker, *The Gvls Horne-booke*. (London: [Nicholas Okes] for R. S[ergier?], 1609), 3.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Douglas Trevor, “Self-love, Spirituality, and the Senses in *Twelfth Night*,” in *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England*, ed. Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 64-82; Michael Schoenfeldt, “Reading Bodies,” in *Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 215-43; and Adrian Johns, “The Physiology of Reading,” in *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 380-443.

others I have found that relate to travel, can, I argue, help us understand how and why reading was thought to shape a person's social identity—and, in some cases, actual social rank.

This chapter begins with an analysis of early modern metaphors that describe reading. Guided by recent work in historical phenomenology, I explore these metaphors in order to grasp how early modern people thought about reading—and the relationship between reading and the reading body.<sup>4</sup> These metaphors can show us why reading capacity could be a productive way to achieve social mobility. In the right person, reading could have powers of physical and social transportation; however, failing to read with the proper discernment could not only hinder such movement, but could sink someone lower or imply a descent into the monstrous. These metaphors show an increasing emphasis on the high stakes of reading well.

The sections that follow explore the implications of this analysis by tracing the stories of several characters from early modern drama. The characters I examine find themselves in a position to advance socially through opportunities posed by reading and interpretation. But most—especially Doctor Faustus, Malvolio, and Macbeth—ultimately fail to do so. In analyzing the ways they strive and fail while others succeed, I explore how social advancement through reading and textual interpretation was thought to work in this period—and what kinds of limitations were attached to it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Recent scholarly approaches to historical phenomenology have pursued similar methods in order to historicize how early modern people experienced things—or thought that they experienced them. See, for example, Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Bruce R. Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and Kevin Curran and James Kearney, "Introduction," Special issue of *Criticism*, 54: 3 (Summer 2012): 353-64.

<sup>5</sup> I have chosen dramatic characters because drama was such a popular medium in early modern England, both reflecting and shaping early modern English culture. For more on this, see Jean Howard, *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598-1642* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Howard argues for London's dramatists' ability to "creat[e] a stage whose popularity testified to the playwright's attentiveness to the urban anxieties and pleasures they so persistently solicited and addressed" 3-4. See also Steven Mullaney, "What's Hamlet to Habermas? Spatial Literacy, Theatrical Publication and the Publics of the Early Modern Public Stage," in *Making Space Public in Early Modern*

The texts these characters read include prophecies, letters, and sacred and secular print books. By encompassing this variety I do not mean to argue that reading process is unconnected to the material experience of reading—that, for example, reading a personal letter is the same as reading a print book of poetry.<sup>6</sup> Rather, I suggest that early modern dramatists were invested in exploring the process of reading, and that their explorations extend over multiple types of texts.<sup>7</sup> I argue that the characters under consideration here point to a culture in which social advancement through reading well was thought to be possible. The ability to read well—to interpret, to discern—was thought to reflect particular inner qualities, in a manner similar to that of noble titles. Reading well, as I argued in the Introduction, was increasingly thought of as a way for someone to prove his or her true nobility. However, failing to read with the proper discernment, or letting desire for external benefits cloud one’s reading capacity, could be a marker that someone was not capable or deserving of social advancement. These texts therefore offer and then moderate ideas about social mobility through reading, revealing a society attempting to make sense of increased avenues for social mobility through traditional frameworks of hierarchical identification.

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*Europe: Performance, Geography, Privacy*, ed. Angela Vanhaelen and Joseph P. Ward (New York: Routledge, 2013): 17-40. Mullaney makes a case for the cultural importance of live theater as a space where different kinds of publics could interact with ideas. While other chapters in this dissertation analyze the investments of particular authors, this chapter seeks to get at a broader spectrum by analyzing similar themes across several works by different authors.

<sup>6</sup> For a broader discussion of why these assumptions are problematic, see D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Roger Chartier, “Reading Matter and ‘Popular’ Reading: From the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century,” in Cavallo, Guglielmo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (1995), trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999): 269-83, 275.

<sup>7</sup> However, I limit my study in this chapter to written and spoken words and verbal interactions rather than, say, faces and handkerchiefs. In the *Macbeth* section my discussion extends briefly into visions and visitations as a way of exploring the extent of Macbeth’s interpretive challenges.

### *The Transportative Dynamics of Reading*

In early modern English descriptions of reading, metaphors of digestion often mingle in complicated ways with metaphors of travel and exploration—metaphors that emphasize the body’s external movement, not simply the body’s internal composition. For example, John Donne writes in a letter, “I am no great voyager in other men’s works, no swallower nor devourer of volumes,” an assertion that simultaneously shrinks and expands the reader, describing both internal and external movement.<sup>8</sup> In another letter, Donne asserts, “I dare write my opinions of that book in whose bowels you left me,” shifting the role of digestion to the book rather than the reader, and shrinking the reader to a size small enough to fit inside the book.<sup>9</sup> In yet another, Donne eschews digestion altogether, claiming, “I can thus far make myself believe that I am where your Lordship is – in Spain – that in my poor library, where indeed I am, I can turn mine eye towards no shelf in any profession . . . but that I meet more authors of that nation than of any other.”<sup>10</sup> In claiming that encountering the books of a particular nation can take him imaginatively to that nation, Donne suggests that books have vast powers of transportation. When he writes in an epistolary letter, “Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle souls, / For thus friends absent speak,” he attributes to reading the power to draw together people’s inner and outer selves across great distances.<sup>11</sup> Donne’s linking of inner and outer experience suggests that while reading may be an internal experience, it affects the way a body perceives its relationship with the world around it. If reading is digestive, it is also transportative within the social and physical realm.

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<sup>8</sup> John Donne, *Selected Letters*, ed. P. M. Oliver (Manchester, UK: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2002), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Donne, *Selected Letters*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Donne, *Selected Letters*, 98.

<sup>11</sup> John Donne, “To Mr Henry Wotton,” in *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, ed. Robin Robbins (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 2010), ll. 1-2.

In the work of John Taylor, a Thames ferryman who was also a prolific poet, the transportation metaphor becomes literalized. Taylor regularly used the vocabulary of river navigation to discuss the reading and writing of poetry. In “*The Scvller, Rowing from TIBER to THAMES with his Boate laden with a hotch-potch, or Gallimawfry of Sonnets, Satyres, and Epigrams*,” Taylor imagines his volume as a journey, both literal and metaphorical: as Taylor the man ferries his readers across the Thames, Taylor the poet imaginatively ferries his readers to the Tiber, whose papist connotations provide the context for the volume’s verses satirizing Catholic priests. The relationship between literal and metaphorical is sharpened with one of the epigrams in the volume, which begins: “I That haue rowed from Tyber vnto Thames, / Not with a Sculler, but with Scull and Braines,” suggesting that brains and intelligence are responsible for carrying Taylor and his reader through space.<sup>12</sup>

Reading at its best, then, can transport someone long distances. But, with his emphasis on “Braines,” Taylor suggests that a certain kind of skill is necessary in order to experience the transportative power of reading. For example, Taylor articulates some of the stakes of poor reading in the last poem in *The Scvller*, which reads:

You that the Sculler right doth vnderstand,  
Hees very glad you’r safely come to land.  
But if that any snarling manlike Monster:  
His honest meaning wrongfully misconster:  
To such in all despight, he sends this word,  
From Booke and Boat heele hurle them ouer boord.

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<sup>12</sup> John Taylor, *The Scvller: Rowing from Tiber to Thames with his boate laden with a hotch-potch, or gallimawfry of sonnets, satyres, and epigrams* (London: E[dward] A[lld]e [for Nathaniel Butter], 1612), 1 Epigram 29, sig. D.

This poem equates the completion of the journey not simply with reading, but with reading *well*: the person who “doth vnderstand” the Sculler “right” has “safely come to land,” his body having moved through time and space as a result of engaging with the volume. This construction suggests that reading can provide new experiences that might change a person’s physical position—but only if that person is receptive to being changed. Someone who fails to read well, however, who “wrongfully misconst[rues]” the Sculler’s “honest meaning,” should be sent “ouer boord” from “Booke and Boat.” Taylor thus claims that the person who fails to acquire new knowledge or understanding through reading cannot be transported by it. Instead, such a person should sink under the weight of his own inadequacy.

Moreover, such a poor reader is in danger of losing his human qualities: Taylor describes him as a “snarling manlike Monster.” Taylor’s wording suggests that reading poorly is somehow a dehumanizing act. Indeed, poor readers were often figured as monstrous in early modern literature.<sup>13</sup> For example, the surgeon John Banister claims that poor readers possess “the tongue of the horsleeche, the eye of the cockatrice, the talents of the tyger,” thus imaginatively constructing their bodies as an amalgamation of monstrous parts.<sup>14</sup> In his *Fairie Queene*, Edmund Spenser also explores the associations between poor reading and the monstrous through the allegorical figure of Error. When Error encounters the Red Cross Knight, she vomits a repulsive mixture of undigested matter, including reading material:

Therewith she spewd out of her filthie maw

A floud of poyson horrible and blacke,

Full of great lumps of flesh and gobbets raw,

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<sup>13</sup> Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material*, 78, 123; Brayman Hackel explores monstrous readers primarily to analyze the perceived effect of poor reading not on readers but on texts and their authors.

<sup>14</sup> John Bannister, *The Workes of that Famous Chyrurgian* (London: Thomas Harper, 1633), qtd in Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material*, 123.



Which stunk so vildly, that it forst him slacke,  
His grasping hold, and from her turne him backe:  
Her vomit full of bookes and papers was,  
With loathly frogs and toades, which eyes did lacke,  
And creeping sought way in the weedy grow:

Her filthie parbreake all the place defiled has.<sup>15</sup>

Spenser's inclusion of "bookes and papers" among Error's vomit links poor reading with poor digestion and the monstrous. Error is a figure composed of the repulsive things she has swallowed but imperfectly digested—either because she will not or cannot digest them properly. Error reflects the kinds of readers, like those Dekker recalls in *The Gull's Hornbook*, who "deuour" books whole without using powers of discernment that might allow them to distinguish useful advice from absurdities.<sup>16</sup> For Error, vomiting these books is almost a defense mechanism, used to repel attackers or, possibly, to spread errors to others. In his extended metaphor comparing Error's vomit to the flooding of the Nile, Spenser writes, "Such vgly monstrous shapes elswher may no man reed," tying this monstrous vision with reading (1.1.21.9). In framing reading through terms of ontological difference, Spenser shows how reading can not only shape the body's internal qualities, but its external features. This has implications for the social world as well, since a physical change can shape how other people and beings experience the body.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Shakespeare explicitly ties poor reading capacity with ontological difference. Sir Nathaniel describes the ignorant Dull as someone who

hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book.

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<sup>15</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London: Pearson Longman, 2001), 1.1.20.1-9.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Dekker, *The Gvls Horne-book*, 3.

He hath not eat paper, as it were, he hath not drunk ink. His intellect is not replenished, he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts (4.2.21-23)<sup>17</sup>

In his assessment of Dull, Nathaniel claims that books contain a kind of nutrition that feeds the intellect—the intellect that, in Renaissance philosophy, was considered the defining distinction between humans and animals.<sup>18</sup> Dull’s reading capacity (or lack thereof) can be mapped onto the hierarchy of beings: not having eaten books, Dull is “only an animal.” The implicit suggestion here is that if Dull were to start eating books, he might be able to change his state to that of a human. Here whatever interior, humoral benefits reading can provide are also mapped onto external relationships. “Eating” books can shape the physiology of the mind and the body, which in turn can shape the body’s place within an ontological hierarchy.

The complex metaphors of digestion, transportation, and the monstrous in these texts make physical a difference in skill and capacity that is by nature not physically marked. The need to make the invisible visible, to understand the idea of reading well through more easily understood physical markers, suggests that early modern culture attached social importance to reading. Like the differences in cut and fabric of clothing that signaled status, different kinds of reading capacity carried with them social and cultural markers. In the sections that follow, I examine early modern dramatic texts that link reading capacity with the potential for social advancement, exploring how reading well and reading poorly could make and unmake a character’s social identity.

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<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et. al. (New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997). All subsequent quotations from Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets are from this edition.

<sup>18</sup> On the role of the intellect in the human-animal divide, see for example, Katherine Park, “The Organic Soul,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 464-84; and Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

### *Faustus and Gluttonous Reading*

Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus* depicts the rapid rise and eventual fall of a low-born man who entangles himself with books. Although scholars tend to analyze the play's investment in books through the framework of early modern religious controversies, I would like to suggest that it can reveal much about the relationship between reading and social status in this period as well.<sup>19</sup> The play's introductory Chorus begins the story with Faustus' early years, relating that he was "born, of parents base of stock," and later moved to Wittenberg, where

So soon he profits in divinity,  
The fruitful plot of scholarism graced,  
That shortly he was graced with doctor's name,  
Excelling all whose sweet delight disputes  
In heavenly matters of theology (15-19)<sup>20</sup>

In choosing to begin with an explicit articulation of Faustus' low birth, Marlowe incorporates his character into a world where it is possible to achieve social advancement through education. This was increasingly possible in England at this time; Marlowe himself, the son of a shoemaker, had received merit-based scholarships to attend King's School, Canterbury, and later Cambridge.<sup>21</sup>

But while Faustus has proven himself to be a capable and even brilliant reader, full of discernment and good judgment, he possesses another quality—ambition—that eventually gets the better of him. The Chorus relates how Faustus begins to desire more:

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<sup>19</sup> For an overview of the relevant themes explored by such scholarship, see David Bevington, "Introduction," in *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*, ed. David Bevington, et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002): 245-49.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, in David Bevington, et. al., eds, *English Renaissance Drama*. All subsequent quotations from *Doctor Faustus* are from this edition.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Nicholl, 'Marlowe, Christopher (bap. 1564, d. 1593)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed, Jan 2008.

Till, swoll'n with cunning of a self-conceit,  
His waxen wings did mount above his reach,  
And, melting, heavens conspired his overthrow.  
For, falling to a devilish exercise,  
And glutted more with learning's golden gifts,  
He surfeits upon cursèd necromancy (20-25)

Not content with the position he has earned through his studies, Faustus strives for a status far beyond it through the study of magic and “necromancy.” Faustus’ ambition, like that of Dedalus striving for human flight, is marked as unreasonable, extending far beyond the reach of appropriate human achievement. The Chorus uses words of excess to describe Faustus—“swoll’n,” “glutted,” “surfeits”—that all connote an overconsumption of food. Faustus may have digested some reading material well, but his unquenchable desire for more has turned him into a glutton; he cannot possibly digest the rest appropriately.

Therefore, although Faustus began his career with the kind of intelligence that goes hand-in-hand with reading well, his skill becomes perverted through his unbridled use of magic. Early in the play, Valdes tells Faustus, “these books, thy wit, and our experience / Shall make all nations to canonize us” (1.1.121-22). Valdes’ pairing of books and wit suggests, like other early modern descriptions of reading, that it is not through books alone, but through intelligent engagement with those books, that he and Faustus will achieve their success. Yet while paying lip-service to this understanding of the internal qualities that go into reading, Valdes primarily emphasizes the external benefits: his use of the word “canonize” implies that the two will achieve a kind of sainthood through their actions. But whereas saints perform good actions and are then canonized in recognition, Valdes’ construction suggests an emphasis on the end result

rather than the process, a concern with outer display and rewards rather than with cultivating inner virtue.

Throughout the play, Marlowe explores this tension between inner virtue and outer display, often through the use of books. While Faustus' initial rise to prominence occurred through an intellectual engagement with books of theology, his later rise occurs through an instrumental use of books that denies their capacity for cultivating inner virtue. When contemplating the pursuit of magic, for example, Faustus says:

Oh, what a world of profit and delight,  
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence  
Is promised to the studious artisan!  
All things that move between the quiet poles  
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings  
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,  
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;  
But his dominion that exceeds in this  
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man.  
A sound magician is a mighty god. (1.1.55-64)

The first three lines of this passage show a conflicting understanding of what learning can do for the “studious artisan.” The use of “profit and delight” in the first line implies an internal benefit: reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesy*, it suggests that the artisan can learn moral lessons through the delights of study.<sup>22</sup> But the second line suggests a more self-serving approach: study can confer external benefits such as power and respect. As the passage

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<sup>22</sup> Sidney had argued that the “end” of “poesy” is “to teach and delight” (Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander [New York: Penguin Books, 2004], 10).

progresses, it becomes clear that Faustus is more attracted to these external benefits than the internal ones. He strives to exceed the worldly power of emperors and kings—whose rule only extends to their own domains—and attain the powers of a god, controlling not only the earthly but also the supernatural. Later in the scene, Faustus claims that he wants to “be as cunning as Agrippa was, / Whose shadows made all Europe honor him” (1.1.119-120). Faustus’ ultimate ambition is for power over others, not the cultivation of inner virtue.

Throughout the play, Faustus consistently seeks earthly, external pleasures over divine, internal ones. His deal with Mephistopheles is profoundly earthly: he willingly gives up the possibility for an eternity in heaven in exchange for twenty-four years of worldly glory:

Had I as many souls as there be stars,  
I’d give them all for Mephistopheles.  
By him I’ll be great emperor of the world  
And make a bridge through the moving air  
To pass the ocean with a band of men;  
I’ll join the hills that bind the Afric shore  
And make that land continent to Spain,  
And both contributory to my crown. (1.3.104-111)

Here Faustus’ gluttony finds expression through the infinity of the stars. If he had an infinite number of souls, he would be able to transport himself socially and physically across the wide world. But while Faustus desires the infinite, he also lacks understanding of it. His desires are limited to the earthly world; his mind cannot comprehend the infinite of heaven or hell. Later, even when Faustus most doubts himself and most craves repentance, his earthly ambition or his fears of bodily harm always get in the way. For example, toward the end of the play, Faustus

immediately retracts his repentance when Mephistopheles threatens to “in piecemeal tear thy flesh” (5.1.68). After apologizing, Faustus asks Mephistopheles to conjure Helen of Troy, in order “To glut the longing of my heart’s desire” (5.1.82). Faustus’ gluttonous desire thus impedes his capacity for comprehending his own sins and thinking about the afterlife.

As this perversion of Faustus’ abilities proceeds, books themselves lose their capacity for intellectual engagement and become instead instruments of awe. At one point Mephistopheles instructs Faustus:

Hold, take this book. Peruse it thoroughly.  
The iterating of these lines brings gold;  
The framing of this circle on the ground  
Brings whirlwinds, tempests, thunder, and lightning.  
Pronounce this thrice devoutly to thyself,  
And men in armor shall appear to thee,  
Ready to execute what thou desir’st. (2.1.160-66)

Here the book’s words themselves contain performative powers: when spoken, the words become actions. Mephistopheles’ vision of magical reading elevates the book and reduces the importance of the person reading. Jay Zysk has argued that in these moments “Marlowe displaces on to the secular magic book the affective ritual properties of liturgical books that could not otherwise be staged.”<sup>23</sup> In his analysis, the performative power of these books takes on deep religious significance. However, the emphasis on the supernatural power of books also has implications for the hierarchical relationships in the play. Marlowe explores these implications in the scenes with Robin and Wagner. Because Wagner can perform impressive magical feats, he

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<sup>23</sup> Jay Zysk, “The Last Temptation of Faustus: Contested Rites and Eucharistic Representation in Doctor Faustus,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*. 43:2 (Spring 2013): 335-367, 338.

ends up commanding the service of people who would otherwise scoff at serving him. Their service is inspired not by loyalty or respect, but rather by the threat of harm from his magical powers. He orders Robin to “bind yourself presently unto me for seven years, or I’ll turn all the lice about thee into familiars, and they shall tear thee in pieces” (1.4.24-26). And later, “Villain, call me Master Wagner, and let thy left eye be diametrically fixed upon my right heel, with *quasi vestigias nostras insistere*” (1.4.71-73). These comic scenes contain a sharp edge, suggesting that Wagner takes part in a perversion of the social order. Flouting early modern expectations about being a good master, Wagner never attains the personal virtues necessary to command true respect and loyalty from inferiors; the people who follow him do so out of fear and out of a mistaken belief that he is as powerful as the magic he knows how to conjure.<sup>24</sup>

An investment in the power of material books returns toward the end of the play, when Faustus faces his impending descent to hell. He declares sorrowfully, “oh, would I had never seen Wittenberg, never read book!” (5.2.19-20). Here Faustus claims that books are to blame for his damnation: if he had never seen a book, he never would have yearned for the heights that magic promised. While this may have been true for Faustus himself, it has important implications for the idea of social mobility through reading. In suggesting that access to books was what led him astray—rather than, for example, personal failings—Faustus employs an argument sympathetic to attempts on the part of religious and secular leaders—and authors themselves—to keep books out of the hands of people who might misinterpret them.<sup>25</sup> If there is

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<sup>24</sup> Compare this enforced service with Kent’s willing service to the impoverished and weakened King Lear, to whom Kent still feels enormous loyalty and duty, and with Launcelot Gobbo’s service to Bassanio, whose Christian virtues apparently make up for his poverty. In contrast to these tales of honorable service, *The Tempest* presents a perversion of social hierarchy when Caliban, entranced with the delights of alcohol, offers service to Stephano. The somewhat magical properties of alcohol here stand in for the status and abilities that Stephano lacks.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Henry VIII’s 1543 statute forbidding lower-status people from accessing the English Bible; I discuss this, and other fears about broad circulation, in the Introduction.



a socially inflected warning in the play, it could be that people “base of stock” should not have access to reading material at all, since they do not possess the capacity for intellectual and personal regulation that those of higher status might possess.

But while the play might suggest such an interpretation, I propose that it ultimately offers a more complicated understanding of the relationship between reading and social hierarchy. For the way it explores Faustus’ mistakes suggests that what was to blame was not access to books, but a personal refusal to cultivate discernment. Paul Budra argues that the play presents a dichotomy between the knowledge contained within books and the material possession of books: “Faustus has not grasped the difference between the possession of books and knowledge, between technique and the transformation of faith.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, throughout the play, Mephistopheles and the other devils “distract[] Faustus from true knowledge with the gift of books,” leading him to believe that “with the right book, wisdom and experience are unnecessary.”<sup>27</sup> Budra contrasts Faustus’ ideas about books with those of the Old Man who comes at the end of the play to urge Faustus to repent. The Old Man attempts to convey to Faustus that “faith is not dependent upon the object. Faith cannot be manufactured through technique; it can only be realized in the reader as the interior—not physical—self is transformed by the sacred text.”<sup>28</sup> The contrast between Faustus and the Old Man that Budra highlights suggests that Faustus errs where another person, more open to the transportative power of reading, might not.

Despite his early successes, then, Faustus proves to be a remarkably poor reader. Once he finds himself at the mercy of his own ambitions for greatness, he, who had once been a scholar of divinity, becomes unable to read well enough to conceive of God’s mercy. Although the Good Angel regularly tells him that he can still repent, he never does, and he consistently prefers

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Budra, “*Doctor Faustus: Death of a Bibliophile*,” *Connotations* 1.1 (1991): 1-11, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Budra, “*Doctor Faustus*,” 4; 6.

<sup>28</sup> Budra, “*Doctor Faustus*,” 8.

worldly glory and ease, which he can understand, to the unknown fate that awaits him should he reject the devil. His negation of inner experience can be seen most vividly in the scene when he asks Mephistopheles about hell. When Mephistopheles tells him, “Why this is hell, nor am I out of it,” Faustus responds, “What, is great Mephistopheles so passionate / For being deprived of the joys of heaven?” (1.3.78, 85-86). Failing to perceive that hell can be an internal experience, just as real and painful as anything he could encounter in the outside world, Faustus assumes it merely implies the absence of heaven. Faustus’ fate is deeply tied to personal failures to read. These failings come not from an *inability* to read well, but from personal ambition that clouds Faustus’ judgment and impinges on his reading capacity. The play’s last Chorus warns wise people only to “wonder” at things rather than seeking to “practice more than heavenly power permits” (Epilogue 6, 8). If a person seeks learning through a gluttonous desire for personal advancement and earthly glory, he may, the play suggests, face the fate of Faustus.

#### *Malvolio, Maria, and Digestive Capacity*

While Marlowe’s play depicts a character who deliberately ignores his wit and intelligence to pursue earthly glory, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* depicts a character who lacks wit and intelligence almost entirely. Toward the middle of *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio, a steward in the household of the high-ranking Olivia, reads a letter purportedly from Olivia. At one point, the letter reads, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ’em” (2.5.126-27). This framing expresses the tension between inborn and earned status in this period, arguing that birth is only one of three ways to achieve a high status. Malvolio takes the letter at its word and pursues a course of action whose goal is some combination of achieving

greatness and having greatness thrust upon him—through marriage with Olivia. At the end of the play, Malvolio's social ambition is soundly punished.

In early modern England, marrying someone from a different social status was considered problematic: not only were family connections and wealth at stake, but people who married above their station were believed to lack the inner qualities that warranted such social advancement.<sup>29</sup> *Twelfth Night*, however, is a play deeply concerned with the question of social mobility—through the very kind of cross-class marriage that Malvolio is punished for imagining. Maria, Olivia's chambermaid, marries Sir Toby Belch, Olivia's cousin. And Olivia herself, though courted by the illustrious Duke Orsino, falls in love with Orsino's page, Cesario, and at the end of the play thinks she has married him. These two marriages face none of the ridicule that Malvolio's ambitions inspire, yet Maria and the purported Cesario are of a similar social status to Malvolio: given early modern expectations about household service, these characters would have been understood to come from gentle (landowning) families, in positions of service to social superiors, but of a higher rank than scullery maids, cooks, stableboys, and the like.<sup>30</sup> Malvolio, as steward, is responsible for the daily functioning of Olivia's household and possesses a high degree of power and authority.<sup>31</sup> And yet, of the three characters who have the potential to improve their social status through real or perceived cross-class marriage, he is the

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<sup>29</sup> Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 70-72.

<sup>30</sup> Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household: 1250-1600* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 43, 129. Stewards, David Schalkwyk writes, "could be drawn from a variety of social ranks: from yeoman, through the lesser gentry, to, in some cases, the upper gentry" (*Shakespeare, Love, and Service* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008], 124n14). However, while a steward would likely have come from a similar background as other servants of gentle status, he would have held a higher position of authority within the household (Mertes, *Noble Household*, 17). See also Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Mertes, *Noble Household*, 17. For more on the liminal position of the steward, see Barbara Correll, "Malvolio at Malfi: Managing Desire in Shakespeare and Webster," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58 (2007): 65-92.

only one who fails. I argue that the play's harsh treatment of Malvolio is less connected to the supposed impropriety of a cross-class marriage—an impropriety that the play generally rejects—than to the problems of interpretation and judgment that Malvolio consistently demonstrates. Like Faustus, Malvolio demonstrates excessive ambition tied to poor reading practices.

The only contemporary account we have of *Twelfth Night* was written by John Manningham, a lawyer-in-training who attended a performance in 1601. Of the Malvolio subplot he writes,

A good practise in it to make the Steward beleieve his Lady widdowe was in love with him, by counterfeyting a letter as from his Lady in generall termes, telling him what shee liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his appaile, &c., and then when he came to practise making him beleue they tooke him to be mad.<sup>32</sup>

Conceiving of Malvolio's humiliation as a "good practise," Manningham implies that Malvolio's punishment was somehow deserved. Barbara Correll has read Manningham's emphasis on Malvolio's story as evidence of a cultural anxiety about cross-class marriage.<sup>33</sup> But Manningham seems far less interested in the potential impropriety of a steward wanting to marry his mistress than in Malvolio's capacity to be tricked. The "good practise" here is not shaming a socially ambitious servant, but convincing him that his mistress loves him by "counterfeyting a letter." Manningham's framing of Malvolio's punishment is also compelling, since it comes not as the just deserts for his social aspirations, but as another form of trickery: once they had deceived him through the counterfeit letter, they also "ma[de] him believe they took him to be mad."

Manningham's account of Malvolio, then, emphasizes powers of discernment and

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<sup>32</sup> John Manningham, *Diary of John Manningham*. Ed. John Bruce. Project Gutenberg Ebook (12 Dec. 2012), Feb. 1601.

<sup>33</sup> Barbara Correll, "Malvolio at Malfi," 73-74.

interpretation—powers Malvolio critically lacks. It is a failure to interpret and discern, and a susceptibility to trickery, that show Malvolio lacking the inner virtues that could justify social advancement.

Throughout the play, Malvolio consistently demonstrates a lack of interpretive skill. For example, when Malvolio chides the clown Feste for being too presumptuous with Olivia, Olivia corrects him, saying that Feste was allowed to be inappropriate because that is his job as her fool. She adds,

O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distempered appetite. To be generous, guiltless, and of free disposition, is to take those things for bird-bolts that you deem cannon-bullets. (1.5.77-80)

Olivia's use of the term "distempered appetite" suggests a humoural imbalance that interferes with Malvolio's ability to digest what he sees. Measuring other people's actions, behavior, and words based on what they mean for him, rather than within a broader context of social relationships, he is liable to consider things very important that other people might brush aside. Later, Olivia takes advantage of Malvolio's failures of discernment when she entrusts him to carry her ring to Cesario, claiming that Cesario had left his with her. Malvolio, failing to perceive the flirtatious trickery in Olivia's action, proves the ideal messenger.

While Malvolio's failings of discernment prove useful for Olivia, they limit Malvolio's ability to interact successfully with other characters. For example, when he attempts to curb Sir Toby and Sir Andrew's riotous carousing—an action he takes at Olivia's express command—he chooses an approach that misses the complexities of rank and social position involved. His rhetorical question, "Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?" lacks the nuance that might be needed when chastising people who are his social superiors. Sir Toby counters with,

“Art any more than a steward?” a cutting remark that emphasizes the difficulties of Malvolio’s position—difficulties made worse by Malvolio’s high-handed approach (2.3.82-83).<sup>34</sup> While Malvolio is not in the wrong when it comes to the substance of what he says in this scene, his poorly chosen words are simply not shrewd enough for the needs of the situation.

After Malvolio leaves, Maria criticizes him in words that address what she perceives as Malvolio’s character flaws: he is

the best persuaded of himself, so crammed, as he thinks, with excellencies, that it is his grounds of faith that all that look on him love him; and on that vice in him will my revenge find notable cause to work. (2.3.131-36)<sup>35</sup>

Here Maria suggests that Malvolio’s preconceived notions about himself prevent him from picking up on signals that might exist to contradict them. When Maria constructs her complicated revenge on Malvolio, she crafts it specifically to play on his weaknesses: his preconceived ideas about his own potential for greatness and his inability to discern absurdity from useful advice.

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<sup>34</sup> Of this moment, Correll writes, “Malvolio’s shaming discourse is pointedly aggressive: it figuratively lowers Toby to the position of tinker and cozier. Challenging him to respect social hierarchy, however—“Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you?” (ll. 82–83)—earns Malvolio a quick lesson in hierarchy when Toby’s retort succinctly redraws the line of class difference . . . The stakes could not be much higher for both characters” (“Malvolio at Malfi,” 77). Correll thus grants Malvolio a self-awareness about his rivalry with Sir Toby that I do not espouse: I argue that Malvolio’s misunderstanding of how specific social interactions are supposed to happen is the basis for his failed attempt at cross-class marriage.

<sup>35</sup> Many scholars, of course, read in this moment, and in the later gulling of Malvolio, a “derisive” parody of puritans and puritan reading practices (Trevor, “Self-love,” 70). However, some recent studies of Malvolio suggest that there is more to his story. Douglas Trevor, for example, cites a number of historians and literary scholars who have argued that “targeting puritans for derisive attack was a more complicated business in the early 1600s than many literary scholars have assumed,” since “the distinctions between conformists and nonconformists in late Elizabethan England were hardly always crystal clear” (“Self-love” 70; 64). I argue that if we shift away from the religious paradigm, we can examine Malvolio’s interpretive practices, and Maria’s understanding of them, in light of their implications for early modern understandings of the relationship between reading and social status.

The audience becomes privy to Malvolio's preconceived ideas when he enters the stage alone in a later scene, musing on his desire for social advancement. He says, "'Tis but fortune, all is fortune," suggesting that the differences between himself and those of higher rank stem from the vagaries of fortune and therefore do not reflect substantive differences in inner quality or character (2.5.20). Then he indicates that he already has his sights on Olivia: remembering moments in which she hinted that she might be attracted to him, he says, "I have heard herself come thus near, that should she fancy it should be one of my complexion" (2.5.21-22). Then he declares, "To be Count Malvolio!" (2.5.30). He cites examples that suggest that his social ambitions are not unheard of, saying: "There is example for't; the Lady of the Strachey married the yeoman of the wardrobe" (2.5.34-35). His words suggest that he has long been fantasizing about marrying Olivia. He then imagines what life would be like if he became a count: "Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state . . . Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown . . ." (2.5.39-40; 42-43). His emphasis on his "branched velvet gown," his day-bed, and the officers at his command, show him desiring the trappings of wealth and status. He then embarks on a long fantasy about how he will send "Seven" of his men to fetch Toby, who, after "curts[ying]" to Malvolio, will listen patiently to Malvolio's stern command: "'Cousin Toby, my fortunes having cast me on your niece give me this prerogative of speech . . . You must amend your drunkenness. . .'" (2.5.52, 55, 62-63; 65). This long imagined exchange suggests that a major part of Malvolio's fantasy centers on how he will experience the life of a high-ranking householder and maintain power over his subordinates—including Sir Toby, the man who had recently scoffed at him for being no more than a steward.

When Malvolio finds Maria's forged letter shortly after this soliloquy, it plays exactly into his preconceived ideas and hopes about Olivia. He readily accepts that it is written in Olivia's hand, and that it is addressed to him. The letter is addressed in the following way:

'I may command where I adore;  
But silence, like a Lucrece knife,  
With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore:  
M.O.A.I. doth sway my life.' (2.5.94-97)

And Malvolio immediately tries his hand at interpreting it:

Why, she may command me. I serve her, she is my lady. Why, this is evident to any formal capacity. There is no obstruction in this. And the end—what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me. Softly—'M.O.A.I.' . . . 'M.' Malvolio—'M'—why, that begins my name. . . . 'M.O.A.I.' This simulation is not as the former; and yet to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name. (2.5.104-108, 112, 122-24)

Malvolio's speech here shows a man eager to bend the reading material to suit his purposes. He talks of "*mak[ing]* [it] resemble something in me," of "*crush[ing]* [it] a little," and he reads his name into the address simply because his name possesses the same letters as those indicated—but not even in the same order. Of course, we know that the letter has been written for the sole purpose of duping him, but I argue that Maria writes it this way because she knows what Malvolio's interpretive process is like.

The rest of the letter reinforces Malvolio's understanding of fortune by claiming, as I noted above, that high status is a product of the stars, and of fate, thus feeding into Malvolio's



previously held beliefs about the randomness at the heart of distinctions in rank. The letter ends by urging Malvolio to “cast thy humble slough, and appear fresh”—to adopt the clothing, behavior, and conversation topics common to people of a higher status—before he has actually achieved that status, in order to “inure thyself to what thou art like to be” (2.5.129-30, 129). After reading the letter, Malvolio is quick to adopt its commands verbatim. Believing fully in the letter because it accords so completely with his own preconceived ideas, he fails to notice Olivia’s shocked responses to his behavior<sup>36</sup> and still believes the letter is genuine until Olivia scans it herself and recognizes Maria’s hand. Malvolio’s mistakes are thus twofold: he reads in the letter what he wants to read, and he follows its advice without putting that advice into a broader context. Malvolio’s problem, then, is not so much that he wants to marry his mistress, but that he has the capacity to be tricked into thinking that she wants to marry him, and that following the letter’s questionable terms to the word will bring this marriage about.

In contrast to Malvolio, Maria and Cesario demonstrate sophisticated interpretive capacities. Cesario, of course, is a character layered with gender and status complexity, since the audience knows that “he” is actually the high-ranking Viola in disguise. Yet for the purposes of this analysis, I would like to think about how Olivia responds to this character, whom she believes is the page of her wealthy, high-ranking suitor. There is a degree of impertinence in Cesario’s words and behavior that seem to shock and attract Olivia simultaneously. Olivia calls Cesario “saucy,” claims he begins his conversation “rudely,” and asserts that his desire to see her face is “out of [his] text”—outside the bounds of what a page might be expected to ask for when courting a woman on his master’s behalf (1.5.174, 187, 204). But Cesario’s level of impertinence is different from Malvolio’s because he brings sophisticated interpretive skills to it. In his first exchange with Olivia, Cesario cleverly manipulates the language of the Petrarchan poetic

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<sup>36</sup> Olivia says, “Why, this is very midsummer madness” (3.4.52).

tradition. Cesario's engagement with Petrarchan poetics shows not only a fluency with literary traditions that are usually marked as aristocratic, but also the discernment needed to question them and the wit to play with them flirtatiously. His capacity for discernment is highly sophisticated: he can read the "text" of Petrarchan poetry, incorporate it into the larger context of the rules of courtship, examine it, and challenge it.<sup>37</sup> Olivia is therefore intrigued rather than offended at his boldness. Olivia's admiration for Cesario, which she expresses in a blazon that incorporates him into the world of high-status courtship, comes from physical attraction to his "face" and limbs," but also from attraction to his "tongue," "actions and spirit," qualities that are wrapped up in his interpretive abilities (1.5.262). And when she marries the person she thinks is Cesario at the end of the play, Olivia believes the marriage is a union of equals, since Cesario has demonstrated such a high degree of inner worth: it is a "marriage of true minds," if not of titles.

Maria's story has a similar trajectory to Cesario's: like Cesario, she demonstrates wit, cleverness, and a strong interpretive capacity. (Unlike Cesario, of course, Maria is who she claims to be.) At the end of the play, Maria marries Olivia's cousin Sir Toby Belch, who is not as wealthy or high-ranking as Olivia, but nevertheless outranks Maria. Throughout the play, Sir Toby refers to Maria in a variety of ways that suggest that their relationship is based on a complicated interplay between power and rank. Within the space of a single scene, for example, he refers to Maria as a "beagle, true-bred," and as "Penthesilea," the Amazonian queen of myth, who fought nobly in the Trojan War (2.4.158, 156). Maria is at once a loyal and virtuous subordinate (the beagle), and a powerful, independent leader (the queen). And indeed, she proves to be both, since she cleverly takes on a leadership role in the gulling of Malvolio—but does it out of loyalty to Sir Toby. Later in the play, Sir Toby refers to Maria in economic terms. He calls

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<sup>37</sup> Correll writes, "Olivia rejects Orsino's suit for its hackneyed Petrarchism" (78). But I would suggest that before she rejects it, Viola/Cesario interprets and presents in a way that invites Olivia's rejection.

her his “metal of India,” implying that he sees her as a piece of exotic wealth to be possessed, at which others might marvel (2.5.11-12). But later he expresses a more everyday understanding of Maria’s economic value: after watching Malvolio take the letter’s bait, he says:

SIR TOBY: I could marry this wench for this device.

SIR ANDREW: So could I, too.

SIR TOBY: And ask no other dowry with her but such another jest.

*Enter Maria*

SIR ANDREW: Nor I neither.

FABIAN: Here comes my noble gull-catcher. (2.5.158-62)

Here, Sir Toby suggests not only that he is personally impressed with Maria’s abilities—impressed enough to want to marry her—but that her abilities can be considered a form of social and economic currency clearly legible within the English social system. While he constructs her intelligence and wit as comparable stand-ins for the status and wealth that she lacks, Fabian calls her a “noble gull-catcher,” suggesting that her wit has ennobled her. When Sir Toby marries Maria, as when Olivia marries the person she thinks is Cesario, he marries someone whose personal merits make up for deficiencies in social status and wealth.

The ways that reading and wit become entwined with the possibility of cross-class marriage in *Twelfth Night* have implications for our understanding of the status of reading in early modern England. When examined in relation to the stories of Maria and the purported Cesario, the play’s treatment of Malvolio can be seen not so much as evidence of cultural anxiety about cross-class marriage, but as evidence for a growing cultural investment in reading and intelligence. However, the play also suggests an uncertainty about what to do with this new investment. Sir Toby’s inability to incorporate Maria into a single interpretive framework

reflects a culture grappling with how to measure different kinds of value—social, economic, interpersonal, interpretive. That Maria’s abilities are framed as exotic and almost un-measurable, but are then enfolded into the more clearly defined structure of early modern marriage alliances, suggests that this culture was trying to make sense of new ideas about social mobility through clearly understood, traditional frameworks of rank, status, and family alliance.

### *Macbeth and Monstrous Interpretation*

In the Introduction, I explored how “true nobility” was understood in the premodern period, and noted that by Shakespeare’s time, martial prowess was giving way to reading ability as a marker of true nobility. An examination of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* can help us track the implications of this shift. Scholars have tended to analyze *Macbeth* in relation to key political events of the early years of King James’ reign, such as the Gunpowder Plot, as well as new, controversial social practices, such as James’ policy of essentially selling titles of honor rather than bestowing them in recognition of service and loyalty.<sup>38</sup> I would like to suggest that while *Macbeth* stages the collapse of feudal notions of service and loyalty, it also investigates how reading and textual interpretation might take part in the new social order created in their place.

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is the ideal medieval soldier, tied to the “true nobility” tradition whereby deeds of courage, loyalty, and might on the battlefield make manifest a person’s inner worth. After the battle that opens the play, the Sergeant describes Macbeth’s deeds in language steeped in this tradition:

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Maurice Hunt, “Duncan, Macbeth, and the Thane of Cawdor,” in *Studies in the Humanities* 28.1-2 (2001): 1+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 22 Apr. 2015; Olga Valbuena, “To ‘venture in the rebels’ fight’: History and Equivocation in *Macbeth*,” *Renaissance Papers* 1994, ed. Barbara J. Baines and George Walton Williams (Raleigh, NC: The Southeastern Renaissance Conference, 1995): 105-122; Steven Mullaney, “Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England,” *ELH* 47 (1980): 32-47. On James and titles of honor, see Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 65; 81. I discuss titles of honor in more depth in Chapter 4.

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name!—

Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel

Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like valour's minion

Carved out his passage (1.2.16-20)

The Sergeant's description emphasizes Macbeth's dedication, strength, and fearlessness—qualities that speak to his great worth as a soldier and a subject. In response to the Sergeant's report, King Duncan responds, "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!" and bestows a new noble title, Thane of Cawdor, on Macbeth (1.2.24). Maurice Hunt has argued that Duncan's bestowal of this particular, mid-range title may not be as generous as it sounds, given the characters' other motivations, and that it may reflect a general trend throughout the Shakespeare canon by which there is "a disturbing disjunction between [inherited or conferred titles] and their bearer's intrinsic worth."<sup>39</sup> However, this argument simplifies the complex ways Shakespeare works through ideas about titles and inner worth in his plays, and does not fully take into account Duncan's understanding of Macbeth's accomplishments. In declaring that "What he [Cawdor] hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won," Duncan implies that although, as king, he has the earthly responsibility for bestowing a higher title on a worthy subject, the new title is a reflection of Macbeth's proven inner worth rather than a reward or payment for service (1.2.67). Duncan's comment reflects an idealized system of honor, by which a title makes manifest a person's already-existing inner worth. That Macbeth eventually loses his inner worth does not mean he never possessed it—and is, I suggest, a reflection of other changes that take place within the dramatic space of the play.

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<sup>39</sup> Hunt, "Duncan, Macbeth," np.

By the time Macbeth learns of his new title, he has already heard the witches' prophecy. The prophecy promises him great things:

FIRST WITCH: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.

SECOND WITCH: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.

THIRD WITCH: All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! (1.3.46-48)

However, it is also a text of inconclusive origin.<sup>40</sup> Because Macbeth does not know who authored the text, he cannot determine what it really means; he waffles between thinking it is a simple prophecy and worrying that it is the inspiration of the devil:

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success  
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature? (1.3.130-36)

Macbeth has suddenly encountered a new world where valor in war is not the only way to secure social advancement—but the interpretive qualities demanded of him are beyond him. Unsure what to do, he writes to his wife, who also struggles to interpret the prophecy. Together, they eventually decide to take action to make the text's statements come true. This involves murdering the king—as well as others who might prevent Macbeth from securing the throne. Macbeth, who had fought valiantly for his king so recently, demonstrating the kind of inner

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<sup>40</sup> I have written about issues of authorship in this moment elsewhere; see Cordelia Zukerman, "Equivocations: Reading the Shakespeare/Middleton *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Survey* 66 (2014): 24-37.

worth celebrated in the “true nobility” tradition, suddenly finds himself poised to commit regicide.<sup>41</sup>

The Macbeths, I argue, come to this decision not because they are inherently poor readers—the text they have decided to interpret is perhaps deliberately obscure—but because they allow their reading process to be guided by ambition rather than the genuine desire to understand. When Lady Macbeth receives her husband’s letter, she muses:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be  
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature.  
It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,  
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,  
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou’ldst have, great Glamis,  
That which cries ‘Thus thou must do,’ if thou have it,  
And that which rather thou dost fear to do  
Than wishest should be undone. (1.5.13-23)

Lady Macbeth sees in the prophecy a call to take action: she believes that her husband cannot become king simply by letting the future take its own course. And she claims that while her husband would not be uncomfortable with “wrongly win[ning]” something, nor would he “wish[] . . . undone” something by which he profited, he lacks the drive to take any action that involves a moral compromise. She therefore sets about to give him that drive by inciting him to

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<sup>41</sup> Judith Weil, in *Service and Dependency in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), argues that Macbeth “perverts the language of service” once he decides to murder Duncan; his actions are thus mirrored in his language (140).

the “illness” that attends ambition. In reading the prophecy through the lens of ambition and encouraging her husband to do so as well, Lady Macbeth closes off other interpretive possibilities. When she tells her husband that

Thy letters have transported me beyond

This ignorant present, and I feel now

The future in the instant (1.5.54-56)

she adopts the early modern framework of reading as transportative; however, Shakespeare suggests that this feeling of transport is guided primarily by her ambitious desires. Moreover, Macbeth, who had been initially so aware of the contingencies of interpretation, now lets ambition cloud his capacity. Rather than holding multiple interpretations in play at once, as he did in the earlier scene (“if ill . . . If good”), he comes to believe that there is only one interpretation—that if the prophecy is to come true, he must kill Duncan himself.

As he pursues this course of action, Macbeth develops difficulties with interpreting the world around him. He sees visions, such as the dagger and Banquo’s ghost. He also trusts too completely the words of the witches’ apparitions, failing to conceive of a circumstance in which “Great Birnum Wood” should move “to high Dunsinane Hill,” or in which there should exist a man “none of woman born” (4.1.96, 109). Of course, the play suggests that these apparitions are the work of supernatural beings, deliberately designed, on the one hand to throw off Macbeth’s confidence, and on the other to build it up too high; however, it is significant that a play so invested in tracing “Vaulting ambition” should also contain so many difficulties with interpretation (1.7.27). *Macbeth* suggests that the more ambition clouds someone’s mind, the less capable he is of interpreting textual, verbal, and visual inputs.



And the more monstrous he becomes. When the play begins, the Sergeant describes Macbeth and his comrade as “eagles” and “lion[s]” on the battlefield; these similes emphasize their nobility, valor, and leadership (1.2.35). Coppélia Kahn has argued that the early “account of Macbeth’s valor suggests that he passes through a sort of initiation rite, to emerge fully validated as a man, warrior, and loyal subject,” while later in the play, Lady Macbeth strategically breaks down his sense of manhood in order to push him toward her interpretation of the prophecy.<sup>42</sup> Macbeth is indeed drawn to his wife’s insistence that his actions will make him “so much more the man” (1.7.51). However, the image Lady Macbeth ultimately conjures turns him into a monstrous being:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men  
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,  
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,  
Your hand, your tongue; look like the innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under’t (1.5.60-64)

Here Lady Macbeth urges her husband to become a serpent in order to cloud Duncan’s interpretive capacity. Claiming that men’s faces can be read like books, she also claims that monstrous deception can prevent successful interpretation.

As the play progresses, other characters begin to notice Macbeth’s monstrous qualities; no longer is he a lion or an eagle in their eyes. Toward the end of the play, Malcolm refers to a time “When I shall tread upon the tyrant’s head,” recalling the biblical assertion that Eve’s

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<sup>42</sup> Coppélia Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 174.

progeny will bruise the serpent's head (4.3.46).<sup>43</sup> His metaphor aligns Macbeth with the serpent and, by extension, the devil. Angus declares late in the play that

Those he [Macbeth] commands move only in command,  
Nothing in love. Now does he feel his title  
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe  
Upon a dwarfish thief. (5.2.19-22)<sup>44</sup>

This simile of dwarfishness suggests that Macbeth's tyranny has physically shrunk him from a man to a creature of limited capacity; he does not possess the stature of a king, nor does he command the loyalty of his followers. And as Macduff faces Macbeth in single combat at the end of the play, he declares that "We'll have thee as our rarer monsters are, / Painted upon a pole" (5.10.25-26). While Macbeth's transformation to a monster most obviously reflects his moral failings, these are tied in complex ways to his struggles with interpretation. In telling the tale of a man whose interpretive choices, clouded by ambition, lead to monstrous destruction rather than beneficial transportation, Shakespeare, like Marlowe before him, suggests not that social advancement through reading is impossible, but that it is impossible in the context of ambitious desire.

In this chapter I have attempted to show that acquiring or proving intellectual capacity and discernment was tied to changing notions of social prominence. Scholarly studies on changing economic circumstances in early modern England have argued that a new emphasis on

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<sup>43</sup> Genesis 3:15.

<sup>44</sup> Zaixin Zhang has argued, in "Shakespeare's Macbeth," *The Explicator* 47:2 (Winter 1989): 11-13, that in this moment, "the garment imagery is related to the discrepancy between Macbeth's moral sense and his ambition, in which case, the smaller body in clothes symbolizes Macbeth's moral inadequacy, while the larger garment represents the wearer's ambition too great to be fulfilled" (11).

monetary reward steadily replaced older notions of loyalty and service.<sup>45</sup> The plays I have analyzed all depict the collapse of these older, idealized notions of service. But while doing that, they also explore the growing cultural importance of reading capacity. These plays all suggest that as older forms of demonstrating inner worth fall by the wayside, new forms can take their place. As the *Macbeth* example suggests, these new forms of inner worth lie open to different kinds of people than those who prospered under older social norms. But as most of the examples suggest, they only lie open to those whose interpretive capacity is not clouded by ambition. In Ruth Kelso's extensive survey of sixteenth-century treatises on gentlemen, she claims that "No fault of the century was more often attacked than [a] discontent with things as they were, and the word *ambition* had the connotation of a vice."<sup>46</sup> Thus, the notion that reading well and exerting intelligence could allow someone to advance socially was still guided by traditional notions of the importance of humility and "disinterestedness."<sup>47</sup> Yet though they are expressed in traditional ways, these new ideas are no less far-reaching. For they present opportunities for people who are not in positions of high status to attain it through different means. In the chapters that follow, I examine the authorial positioning and literary expressions of early modern writers and printers who sought to do just that.

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<sup>45</sup> See, example, Michael Neill, "Servant Obedience and Master Sins: Shakespeare and the Bonds of Service," in his book *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 13-48; Neill writes, "Of course household relations continued to be governed to some degree by the traditional notion of servants as inferior members of the master's family, dependent more upon his bounty than upon the mechanical regulation of 'bare wages'; yet by the early 1620s William Gouge appeared to take it for granted that service was to be treated as a marketable commodity when, in a significant turn of phrase, he reminded master that 'wages is due for labor, as money for wares'" (33, qting William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Dvties Eight Treatises* (1622), 685). See also Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Kelso, *The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century, With A Bibliographical List of Treatises on the Gentleman and Related Subjects Published in Europe to 1625* (Urbana: Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 14: 1-2, 1929), 32.

<sup>47</sup> Kelso, *Doctrine*, 42.

## Chapter 2

### A Multitude of Eyes, Tongues, and Mouths: Reading Sonnets in Shakespeare's Drama and Poetry

When William Shakespeare printed his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* in 1593, he or his publisher placed on the title page a phrase borrowed from Ovid: “vilis miretur vulgus: mihi flauus Apollo Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua” (“Let vile people admire vile things; may fair-haired Apollo serve me goblets filled with Castalian water”).<sup>1</sup> This statement pits the skill of Apollo, god of poetry, against the tastes of the “vulgus,” or common crowd. Statements such as this were common in early modern print works of the era; they often imply scorn at the “multitude” of readers that might encounter the author’s works, against whom are positioned a more select, “well learned” readership that is invited to engage with the text.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have read this tradition as part of an effort to distinguish “an aristocratic sensibility from that of the vulgar and popular.”<sup>3</sup> When linked to anxieties about print, this language suggests fears about literary work being made available to a “great Variety of readers.”<sup>4</sup> Some scholars, such as John

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in Greenblatt et. al, eds, *Norton Shakespeare*. The Norton editors cite Ovid’s *Amores* 1.15.35-36 for this quotation and provide the English translation.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Brenz, *A verye fruitful exposiciou vpon the syxte chapter of Saynte Iohn* (London: Ihon Daie and Wylliam Seres, 1550), n.p.

<sup>3</sup> John Huntington, *Ambition Rank, and Poetry in 1590s England* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 129, citing Gary Schmigdal, *Shakespeare and the Courtly Aesthetic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). Roger Chartier has argued that in Spain, at least, “*vulgo* was a term that disparaged readers (or spectators) who lacked aesthetic judgement or literary competence” (“Reading Matter and ‘Popular’ Reading: From the Renaissance to the Seventeenth Century,” in Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds. *A History of Reading in the West* (1995), trans. Lydia G. Cochrane [Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999]: 269-83, 279).

<sup>4</sup> Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender, and Literacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11. See also Alexandra Halasz, *The Marketplace of*

Huntington, also identify a different strain of this impetus—a strain that links writers like George Chapman to a “learned coterie” over and against aristocratic culture.<sup>5</sup> For whatever reason, writerly aversions to the multitude have received significant attention in recent scholarship. However, this tradition is only one part of the story: far less scholarly attention has been paid to analyzing the texts and writers for whom the “multitude” served an important role, both practically and imaginatively.

Shakespeare, I argue, is one such example, for although his two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* (1594), are fully incorporated into the tradition of disdaining the multitude—whether for status or intellectual purposes—his other works are not. This change can partially be explained through material conditions: there is no concrete evidence that Shakespeare ever sought print for any work after *Lucrece*, and seems to have been content with the patronage relationships and financial success he developed as a shareholder of his theater company;<sup>6</sup> when his works were printed, it was most likely without his permission or to benefit the entire theater company rather than himself personally.<sup>7</sup> Yet the change can also be analyzed

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*Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997); Kevin Dunn, *Pretexts of Authority: The Rhetoric of Authorship in the Renaissance Preface* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); and Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Huntington, *Ambition, Rank*, 129.

<sup>6</sup> On the patronage relationships of early modern playhouses, see Paul Whitfield White and Suzanne R. Westfall, *Shakespeare and Theatrical Patronage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). David Scott Kastan sees Shakespeare’s apparent “lack of interest” in printing his plays as “tacit acknowledgment of the performative aspect of drama,” in *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15. However, Shakespeare was a savvy businessman and it is unlikely that financial considerations would not have entered into the picture.

<sup>7</sup> Recent scholarship has suggested that the playing and printing industries relied on each other to generate profit. Tiffany Stern, for example, argues that print was essential for advertising new plays to potential playgoers, and there were likely personal connections between players and printers that facilitated the printing of plays, in “‘On Each Wall and Corner Poast’: Playbills, Title-pages, and Advertising in Early Modern London.” *English Literary Renaissance* 36.1 (Winter 2006): 57-89, 64. Lukas Erne has argued that the printing of playbooks coincided with the revival of a play on the stage, in *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare and the Book Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jonathan Olson, *Paradise Revised: The*

in the context of readership. *Venus and Adonis* rapidly became a bestselling work, going through six editions in six years, and ten during Shakespeare's lifetime.<sup>8</sup> As Lukas Erne has argued, the "massive" success of *Venus and Adonis* propelled Shakespeare into fame and popularity, to such an extent that not only was he soon being compared with Ovid, but his name was frequently appropriated by ambitious publishers and printers to market books not by him.<sup>9</sup> If it did nothing else, the approbation of the multitude bolstered Shakespeare's reputation.<sup>10</sup> As one of the truly popular writers of his generation, Shakespeare was therefore positioned to think about readership differently from peers for whom exclusivity was a sign of high status.

Recent studies of Shakespeare's literary ambitions and relationship with the book trade have argued that Shakespeare possessed strong literary ambitions and, working alongside his theater company, may have used print strategically to further them.<sup>11</sup> In this chapter I move beyond the question of materiality of publication to engage with the broader cultural implications

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*Formal and Material Revision of Paradise Lost* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 2009), 23-28; Peter Blayney, "The Publication of Playbooks," in *A New History of English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 383-422; H. S. Bennett, *English Books & Readers, 1603-1640. Being a Study in the History of the Book Trade in the Reigns of James I and Charles I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 216; and A. F. Johnson, "Title-Pages: Their Forms and Development" (1928), in *Selected Essays on Books and Printing*. Ed. Percy H. Muir (Amsterdam: Van Gendt, 1970): 288-97.

<sup>8</sup> Erne, *Book Trade*, 33; Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Introduction," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine-Duncan Jones (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Erne, *Book Trade*, 30; on the comparison to Ovid, see Francis Meres, [*Palladis Tamia*,] *The Second Part of Wits Common-wealth* (London: P. Short for Cuthbert Burbie, 1598), 282; and Erne, *Book Trade*, 23; Erne investigates the phenomenon of Shakespearean pseudoepigraphy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, in which printers/publishers would claim a work was by Shakespeare in order to garner more sales. Erne argues that this is distinct from the way other playwrights were treated: in the same period, "no other identifiable playwright had a single playbook misattributed to him. The pattern of misattributed playbooks is an eloquent testimony to the remarkable place 'Shakespeare' occupied in the London book trade in the final years of the Elizabethan and in the Jacobean period" (81).

<sup>10</sup> As Peter Blayney has discussed, authors received a flat fee for their material; a popular play would earn Shakespeare and his fellow shareholders direct profits from ticket sales and a chance to perform at high-ranking households, but a bestselling book would earn more money for his publisher than for him ("Publication of Playbooks," 391).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Erne, *Book Trade*; Patrick Cheney, *Shakespeare's Literary Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Erne, *Literary Dramatist*.

of Shakespeare's unique understanding of literary popularity. In many of his plays, as well as his sonnets, Shakespeare theorizes reading in significant and complex ways. Throughout these works, he develops an understanding of readership that, far from disdaining the multitude, actually depends on it. Analyzing the way Shakespeare depicts fictional, imagined, and real readers can reveal important ways that Shakespeare and his publishers were thinking through what it meant to appeal to a "multitude" rather than a "select few."

Shakespeare's engagement with the sonnet form provides the most useful account of how he theorizes reading. In the 1590s, when Shakespeare was beginning to reach popularity, the sonnet form was arguably the most important poetic form in England.<sup>12</sup> The way Shakespeare engages with sonnet culture and the writing of sonnets shows him thinking through the stakes of popularity and literary accomplishment, as well as the stakes of reading. Through his depiction of the writing, circulation, and reading of sonnets, Shakespeare makes a case for the importance of broad circulation and constructs a particular kind of reader, a "common" reader whose anonymity and non-aristocratic social status exist in tension with the "known" or the "aristocratic" reader. Moreover, when Shakespeare's sonnets were printed, his publishers also adopted these ideas in ways that can help us understand the importance of the "common" reader for the literary system at large. In constructing this reader, Shakespeare and his publishers reject the importance of a "select" readership, even claiming that seeking out "select" status is detrimental to the reader and the work being read. They explore instead how the "multitude" can benefit not only themselves as readers, but the very poets and writers who claim to disdain them.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Christopher Warley, *Sonnet Sequences and Social Distinction in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Arthur Marotti, "'Love is Not Love': Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order," *ELH* 49.2 (Summer 1982): 396-428. For the poetic importance of the sonnet form, see, for example, Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 174.

### *The Status of the Sonnet in the 1590s*

Sonnets had not been a particularly important feature of the English cultural landscape until about 1591, when the posthumous printing of Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* ignited a popular fascination with the form. Sidney was not the first to write sonnets in English: in the 1530s, Sir Thomas Wyatt had translated and adapted many of Petrarch's Italian *Rime Sparse*, and Wyatt and his fellow courtier, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, developed the structures and rhyme schemes that later became standard for the English sonnet. They also preserved Petrarch's investment in the dual nature of sonnets, which were simultaneously personal communications to or about a particular addressee or situation and literary works capable of bringing fame to their author. They thus implied particular readers familiar with the circumstances of the poem's production, and also a larger number of readers perhaps unfamiliar with those circumstances. For example, Petrarch writes in sonnet 61 of the *Rime Sparse*:

Benedette le voci tante ch' io  
chiamando il nome de mia donna ò sparte,  
e i sospiri et le lagrime e 'l desio;

et benedette sian tutte le carte  
ov' io fama l'acquisto . . .

Blessed be the many words I have scattered calling the name of  
my lady, and the sighs and the tears and the desire;

and blessed be all the pages where I gain fame for her . . .<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Durling, trans. and ed., *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 61.9-13.



Here Petrarch negotiates different expectations about readership, invoking the very personal experience of love through relating his “sighs and the tears and the desire” while simultaneously expecting that his writing has “gain[ed] fame for her.” Petrarch is highly aware of his sonnets as literary creations that can and should be read by many people outside the sphere of his immediate experience—even though they document intensely personal feelings.

Despite Wyatt and Surrey’s accomplishments and the popularity of Petrarch’s poetry in Continental Europe, the sonnet had never reached the level of importance in England that it held in other countries. One reason for this was the low cultural status of English lyric poetry in general. Scholars such as Steven May have argued that a “stigma of verse” existed in this period that rejected poetry, and especially English vernacular poetry, as a valuable means of literary expression.<sup>14</sup> Ramie Targoff argues that the low status of English love poetry was tied to the English rejection of Neoplatonism, the philosophical tradition that inspired the Italians “to take love poetry seriously, to treat it as part of an important intellectual development.”<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have highlighted social concerns that made poetic ambition gauche: the ideal courtier, according to Baldesar Castiglione’s highly influential *Book of the Courtier*, cultivated “sprezzatura,” a witty nonchalance, “so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it.”<sup>16</sup> This nonchalance meant that a courtier could not be perceived to work hard to come up with the witty poems with which

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<sup>14</sup> Steven W. May, “Tudor Aristocrats and the Mythical ‘Stigma of Print,’” *Renaissance Papers* 1980: 11-18, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ramie Targoff, *Posthumous Love: Eros and the Afterlife in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 47.

<sup>16</sup> Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), 1.26.43. *The Book of the Courtier* was first printed in Italy in 1528 and was widely circulated throughout Europe. Sir Thomas Hoby’s English translation was first printed in 1561. Scholars argue that Castiglione’s influence on Elizabethan English culture, specifically, “can hardly be exaggerated” (Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of The Courtier* [Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996], 55, qting John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* [New York: Macmillan & Co LTD, 1954], 19).

he was expected to entertain others. The self-conscious use of the word “toy” to describe one’s poetic creation persisted throughout the sixteenth century, despite the efforts of such poetic theorists as Sidney, William Webbe, George Puttenham, and Francis Meres, all of whom sought to claim for English poetry a cultural status it had never held before.<sup>17</sup>

Nobody knows exactly why the sonnet played such an important role in changing how the English viewed their own poetry.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have argued that much of the change came from the cultural status of Sidney himself as the nation’s most famous courtier poet.<sup>19</sup> When *Astrophil and Stella* was printed, it was presented to readers as a window into Sidney’s courtly world; in editions in 1591 (by Thomas Newman) and 1597 (by Matthew Lownes), its title read, “Syr P.S. his Astrophel and Stella . . . To the end of which are added, sundry other rare sonnets of diuers noble men and gentlemen.”<sup>20</sup> This presentation, emphasizing the high social status of the

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<sup>17</sup> On the use of the word “toy,” see, for example, Targoff, *Posthumous Love*, 48; and Marotti, ““Love is Not Love,”” 398. See also William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie Together, with the Authors Judgment, Touching the Reformation of our English Verse* (London: Iohn Charlewood for Robert Walley, 1586); Meres, *Palladis Tamia*; George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesy. Contriuied into three Bookes: The first of Poets and Poesie, the second of Proportion, the third of Ornament* (London: Richard Field, 1589); and Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, in *Sidney’s ‘The Defence of Poesy’ and Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Arthur Marotti warns against making unwise generalizations, writing that “the analysis of the sonnet fashion in late Elizabethan England in a sociopolitical context points to challenging critical problems—of explaining the culture-specific encoding of literature, the nature of literary change, and the arrangement of a society’s hierarchy of genres” (““Love is Not Love,”” 421).

<sup>19</sup> For example, Steven May writes, “The accessibility of Sidney’s works, coupled with his position as model courtier and national hero, gave maximum impetus to a new and positive recognition of poetry as a worthwhile art form” (*The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: The Poems and Their Contexts* [University of Missouri Press, 1991], 101). Similarly, Arthur Marotti argues that “Sidney endowed the sonnet form and the sonnet sequence with a special prestige. The genre’s rhetorical strategies were usually those of the politely deferential suitor, by definition the social inferior of the putative addressee. But Sidney’s use of the form in a substantial body of lyrics, especially in the context of his rhetorically forceful assertions of independence and autonomy, established the sonnet sequence in late Elizabethan England as a socially respectable enterprise” (““Love is Not Love,”” 407-408).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Newman, pub. *Sir P. S. His Astrophel and Stella. Wherein the excellence of sweete poesie is concluded. To the end of which are added, sundry other rare sonnets of diuers noble men and gentlemen* (London: 1591); Matthew, Lownes, pub. *Sir P. S. His Astrophel and Stella. Wherein the excellence of sweete poesie is concluded. To the end of which are added, sundry other rare sonnets of diuers noble men and gentlemen* (London: 1597).

volume's contributors, was similar to the 1557 volume of Wyatt and Surrey's poems, printed by Richard Tottel, who entitled the volume *Songes and Sonettes, Written By the Ryght Honorable Lord Henry Howard, late Earle of Surrey, and others*.<sup>21</sup> Tottel's title emphasized the authorship of the Earl of Surrey over anyone else, yet the Earl's poems accounted for less than a quarter of the total poems in the volume; indeed, the volume had over twice as many poems by Wyatt as it did by Surrey. According to William J. Kennedy, the kinds of people most likely to buy Tottel's book were members of "the rural gentry and urban middle classes," for whom this volume in its print form would have represented an alluring "peek into courtly life."<sup>22</sup> Tottel's volume was an influential model for Sidney's later volume, and the growing popularity of sonnets toward the end of the sixteenth century may thus reflect a desire on the part of readers—a desire reinforced by publishers—to gain vicarious access to an elite world.

Arthur Marotti suggests, moreover, that a confluence of social, political, and literary investments made sonnets a culturally significant form that people such as Sidney wanted to write. He and Stephen Greenblatt argue that sonnet culture became a way for Queen Elizabeth to negotiate her position as an unmarried queen: engaging in what Greenblatt terms "Petrarchan politics," she fashioned herself as a beautiful but inaccessible object of desire and used that persona to manipulate and control her courtiers, who employed similar language to articulate their own political ambition.<sup>23</sup> Writing sonnets was thus not only about participating in the courtly love tradition: it was also a way for ambitious young men to explore patronage relationships, articulate social aspirations, and express frustration at failed social or political

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Tottel, ed. and print, *Songes and Sonettes, Written By the Ryght Honorable Lord Henry Howard, late Earle of Surrey, and others* (London: 1557 and 1574).

<sup>22</sup> William J. Kennedy, "Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Petrarchism," in *Early Modern English Poetry: A Critical Companion*, ed. Patrick Cheney, Andrew Hadfield, and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 70-78, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 165-66.

opportunities.<sup>24</sup> In these assessments, sonnets were a broadly important feature of the social landscape of England's elite. Christopher Warley, however, argues that their importance extended beyond elite spaces, and that, in fact, sonnets "provided writers with a unique form to describe, and to invent, new social positions before there existed an explicit vocabulary to define them."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, he adds, "Rather than a homogeneous poetic tradition, sonnet sequences mediate between a wide range of cultural events," including military action in Ireland, religious thought, and economic systems, among others.<sup>26</sup> For whatever reason, over twenty sonnet cycles followed *Astrophil and Stella* into print in rapid succession, and more followed.<sup>27</sup> Sonnets became widely popular.

Many contemporary writers considered this popularity worthy of scorn or ridicule. For example, Thomas Nash writes of someone who "will be an *Inamorato Poeta*, & sonnet a whole quire of paper in praise of Lady *Swinsnout*, his yeolow fac'd Mistres."<sup>28</sup> Using "sonnet" as a verb, Nash suggests that most sonnets are neither original nor interesting; everybody writes

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Wall, *Imprint*; Steven W. May, *The Elizabethan Courtier Poets: The Poems and Their Contexts* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1991); and Marotti, "Love is Not Love."

<sup>25</sup> Warley, *Sonnet Sequences*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Warley, *Sonnet Sequences*, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Marcy L. North, "The Sonnets and Book History," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt (Blackwell, 2007): 204-21. North includes devotional sequences in her calculation (204). The cycles, based on North's list (n. 1, pp. 219-20) and my own searches of online databases, include Spenser's translation of poems by Joachim du Bellay in *Complaints* (1591), Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592), Henry Constable's *Diana* (1592), Barnabe Barnes's *Parthenophil and Parthenope* (1593) and *A Divine Centurie of Spirituall Sonnets* (1595), Giles Fletcher's *Licia* (1593), Thomas Lodge's *Phillis* (1593), Gabriel Harvey's *Gorgon* (1593), the anonymous *The Tears of Fancie, Or, Loue Disdained* (1593), Michael Drayton's *Idea's Mirrour* (1594), Nicholas Breton's *Greenes Funeralls* (1594), William Percy's *Sonnets to the Fairest Coelia* (1594), the anonymous *Zepheria* (1594), Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), E. C.'s *Emaricdulfe* (1595), Richard Barnfield's *Cynthia with Certaine Sonnets* (1595), Bartholomew Griffin's *Fidessa* (1596), Richard Linche's *Diella* (1596), and William Smith's *Chloris* (1596), Henry Lok, "Sundrie Sonnets" and "Affectionate Sonets" in *Ecclesiastes* (1597), Robert Perry, *Sinetes* (1597), and Thomas Rogers, *Celestial Elegies* (1598). According to Thomas Roche, forty-four sonnet sequences were published in London between 1560 and 1634 (*Petrarch and the English Sonnet Sequences* [New York: AMS Press, 1989], 518-22). See also Kennedy, "Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Petrarchism."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Nash, *Pierce Penilesse his supplication to the diuell* (London: Abell Ieffes, for Iohn Busbie, 1592), B2.

them, and they are often addressed to a less-than-ideal mistress. The idea of having an excess of words to “sonnet” recurs in other works of this period. For example, in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, when Don Armado privately acknowledges his love for Jaquenetta, he immediately links this emotion with sonnet-writing, saying, “Assist me, some extemporal god of rhyme, for I am sure I shall turn sonnet” (1.2.162-3). After he acknowledges his transformation, he experiences an excess of verbal output, saying, “I am for whole volumes, in folio” (1.2.163-64). In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Proteus urges the Duke to “Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears / Moist it again” (3.2.74-75). This notion of excessive verbiage suggests an inability to edit oneself, to distill emotional experience into a perfectly constructed sonnet. Sonnets are important for *what* they signify (love), rather than *how* they signify. In John Marston’s play *The Parasitaster*, Don Zuccone complains, “But that we must court, sonnet, flatter, bribe, kneele, sue to so feeble and imperfect, in constant, idle, vaine, hollow, bubble, as woman is.”<sup>29</sup> Here Marston depicts sonneting as one of the many formulaic requirements of courtship. As a verb, “sonnet” implies an action rather than a creation; it is about declaring intent rather than producing a unique work of poetic accomplishment that might, like Petrarch’s verse, be read long into the future.

In several of his plays from the 1590s, especially *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and *As You Like It*, Shakespeare explores and pokes fun at English sonnet culture. An initial reading of Shakespeare’s use of sonnets in these plays might suggest that he accords with such writers as Nash and Marston; Katherine Duncan-Jones has argued that Shakespeare’s plays are uniformly “scornful” of sonnet culture, associating it “with feeble-mindedness.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> John Marston, *Parasitaster* (London: T[homas] P[urfoot] for VV. C[otton], 1606), Act 4, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Duncan-Jones, “Introduction,” 44-45. Duncan-Jones makes sense of Shakespeare’s apparent inconsistency between disdaining sonnets in his plays and writing “one of the longest sonnet sequences of the period” by arguing that his own sonnets represent a “radical difference” from all their “Elizabethan

However, this assessment does not do justice to Shakespeare's complex approach to sonnets. I argue that Shakespeare's theorization of sonnet-reading in his plays, and later in his own sonnets, posits a very different idea about the value of popularity than what might be expected. Rather than privileging particular readers of high social status, Shakespeare's work suggests that it is in a kind of broad popularity—ranging across space and time—that sonnets can become documents of high cultural status.

### *Reading Sonnets in Shakespeare's Plays*

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *As You Like It*, Shakespeare explores the communal affiliations of sonnets, showing how reading sonnets in different contexts not only shapes their meaning, but shapes their identity as literary works. Shakespeare suggests that sonnets convey primarily social meaning when read by people who share communal affiliation; only when other kinds of readers access them are they able to transcend this social meaning to participate in literary culture more broadly. In *Much Ado*, for example, when Benedick realizes he loves Beatrice, he fashions himself a sonneteer even though writing poetry does not come easily to him:

Leander the good swimmer, Troilus the first employer of panders, and a whole  
book full of these quondam carpet-mongers whose names yet run smoothly in the  
even road of a blank verse, why they were never so truly turned over and over as  
my poor self in love. Marry, I cannot show it in rhyme. I have tried. (5.2.26-31)

While Benedick believes that his love is greater than that of many famous lovers, he finds it hard to express himself in poetry. Yet he still tries his hand at it because “sonneting” is an important

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and Continental predecessors” and “have none of the tediously predictable quality of the love sonnets mocked in the plays” (44-45). This claim depends on an outdated notion of Shakespearean exceptionalism.

part of the courtship ritual within the community of the play. At the end of the play it turns out that Beatrice has written one as well, and when the two attempt to deny their love for each other, their sonnets are produced as evidence of their love:

LEONATO: Come, cousin, I am sure you love the gentleman.

CLAUDIO: And I'll be sworn upon't that he loves her,

For here's a paper written in his hand,

A halting sonnet of his own pure brain,

Fashioned to Beatrice.

HERO:                      And here's another,

Writ in my cousin's hand, stol'n from her pocket,

Containing her affection unto Benedick.

BENEDICK: A miracle! Here's our own hands against our hearts. (5.4.84-91)

These sonnets signal to the community within the play—including Beatrice and Benedick themselves—that they actually love each other. Patrick Cheney argues that in this scene Shakespeare seeks to validate “the art of the sonnet as an important cultural institution for individual identity and social relationships.”<sup>31</sup> But Cheney fails to notice that whether or not the sonnets convey that love in beautiful or “halting” language does not seem to matter—which suggests that Shakespeare depicts sonnets here not as aesthetic projects but as signifiers of love. Indeed, the audience never gets to hear either sonnet, suggesting that all that matters is the fact of the sonnets’ existence. Maurice Hunt argues that Benedick’s sonnet is “inscribed public proof of his love rather than . . . an adequate conveyor of that love.”<sup>32</sup> Hunt, however, is more concerned

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<sup>31</sup> Patrick Cheney, “Halting Sonnets: Poetry and Theater in *Much Ado about Nothing*,” in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Michael Schoenfeldt, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007): 363-82, 378.

<sup>32</sup> Maurice Hunt, “The Reclamation of Language in *Much Ado about Nothing*,” in *Studies in Philology* 97:2 (Spring 2000): 165-191, 189.

with the inadequacy of love poetry to convey true feelings; I want to suggest that Shakespeare is not as concerned with love poetry in general, but with love poetry within particular communities. He is not merely making fun of sonnets; he is making fun of the way certain communities co-opt them as communicative objects.

Shakespeare explores this idea most thoroughly in *Love's Labour's Lost*, which is full of circulating sonnets within a particular community, and he shows how sonnets are used to build and develop social relationships. The play begins when the King of Navarre asks his three good friends, all of them lords, to sign an oath to pursue a three-year period of serious academic inquiry, temperance, and chastity. Two of the lords agree, but the third, Biron,<sup>33</sup> objects, citing their youth and the possibility that they might fall in love and thus break their oaths. Biron frames his objection in the form of a sonnet. As soon as Biron finishes, the King judges his friend's sonnet, saying, "How well he's read, to reason against reading!" (1.1.94). This analysis displays witty wordplay of its own: it has alliteration, repetition, and internal rhymes. The King's expression of judgment thus matches Biron's wit and cleverness while calling attention to the fact that in order to produce his sonnet Biron needed to have extensive learning; thus the King pushes for his academic agenda while also asserting his (literary) dominance over Biron. The other two lords take up the King's mantle: Dumaine wittily imitates the King's syntax while essentially saying the same thing: "Proceeded well, to stop all good proceeding," and Longueville chimes in with a more figurative but similarly phrased statement: "He weeds the corn and still lets grow the weeding" (1.1.95, 96). Both Dumaine and Longueville's expressions of judgment ally themselves with the King, using repetition and internal rhymes in the same way, and similarly exposing as hypocritical Biron's disavowal of academic study. Biron then adds his

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<sup>33</sup> Here I grudgingly follow the spelling choice of *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et. al. The traditional spelling is Berowne.





his companions' decisions while emphasizing his right to membership in their community, while his companions use them to reinforce their choices and label Biron as an outlier. Thus, writing poetry and expressing literary judgment within a group of like-minded people becomes a means of negotiating social bonds and defining the terms of a community.

Toward the middle of the play, when the men fall in love with the ladies visiting the royal court, they make sense of their love and express it through poetry addressed to their beloved. But all the poems in *Love's Labour's Lost* miscarry before reaching their intended addressee.<sup>34</sup> Their movement among unexpected readers mirrors the experience of making work available to a "multitude" who might not understand a poem as well as a select few. Through this movement, Shakespeare interrogates what it means—for the poem, for the poet, for the reader—when a poem is exposed to different kinds of reading and interpretation. In one scene toward the middle of the play, for example, each man enters the stage alone and reads a sonnet he has just composed. The sonnet confesses his love and broken oath and is, unbeknownst to him, overheard by at least one of his friends. When they, rather than the beloved, hear the poem, they think of it entirely in terms of their own community: it becomes primarily about the broken oath. For example, when the King confronts Longueville and Dumaine, he says, "I heard your guilty rhymes, observed your fashion, / Saw sighs reek from you, noted well your passion. / 'Ay me!' says one, 'O Jove!' the other cries. / One, her hairs were gold; crystal the other's eyes. / [*To LONGUEVILLE*] You would for paradise break faith and troth / [*To DUMAINE*] And Jove for your love would infringe an oath" (4.3.135-140). In calling these rhymes "guilty," and using the words "break" and "infringe," he emphasizes the importance of the oath within their community

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<sup>34</sup> Moreover, their arrival to the intended addressee happens offstage; the poems are briefly discussed by their intended recipients in Act 5, scene 2.

of friends. This love poem becomes not simply a declaration of love to a beloved; it also a declaration of betrayed friendship.

Shakespeare also investigates what happens when the poems circulate beyond friends to people of different social ranks and occupations. In one scene, Biron pays the clown Costard to deliver his love poem to Rosaline. But Costard cannot read, and he accidentally mixes up Biron's letter with another one he was entrusted to carry, which is intended for Jaquenetta. When Costard delivers Biron's letter to Jaquenetta, she, also unable to read, asks the clergyman Nathaniel to read it to her; Nathaniel is accompanied by the humanist scholar Holofernes and the constable Dull. Therefore, while Biron's intended reader for this letter was Rosaline—a single addressee who shares his social status—the readership Biron's poem actually finds includes five people of a range of social and intellectual backgrounds, none of whom share Biron's social status.

Biron's sonnet is marked formally and linguistically as the literary production of highly educated, high-status people, employing elevated diction, with references to classical mythology and an assertion that the beloved is "Celestial" (4.2.110). If it had not gone astray, Rosaline would have incorporated it into her understanding of the way Petrarchan poetry could be used within high-status courtship rituals. When it is read to this group, however, it is received in some unanticipated ways. For example, the first person to respond is Holofernes, who reads from his position as a humanist scholar and applies literary analysis to the poem by comparing it with the work of Ovid:

Here are only numbers ratified, but for the elegancy, facility, and golden cadence of poesy—*caret*. Ovidius Naso was the man; and why indeed 'Naso' but for smelling out the odoriferous flowers of fancy, the jerks of invention? *Imitari* is nothing. So doth the hound his master, the ape his keeper, the tired horse his rider.

(4.2.113-18)

Holofernes' expressions of judgment somewhat mirror what Dumaine said about Biron's earlier output: while the "numbers" are "ratified"—the meter is formally correct—the substance of the poem lacks the spark that makes for great poetry. The words "elegancy, facility, and golden cadence" imply something beyond formal competence: creativity and "invention," against which he pits "imitation." Holofernes reads this poem as if Biron has ambition to be a great poet; in this context, the poem has failed.<sup>35</sup> In incorporating the poem into his own worldview, Holofernes shows how contingent textual reception is on the specific social position of the reader.

Jaquenetta, in contrast, inscribes herself into the role of the poem's beloved addressee:

HOLOFERNES: But, *domicella*—virgin—was this directed to you?

JAQUENETTA: Ay, sir[, from one Monsieur Biron]. (4.2.127-29)<sup>36</sup>

The circulation of this poem has thus allowed Jaquenetta to read a literary product of elite culture and imagine herself to be the love object it addresses; she reads herself into the community of courtiers her social status otherwise prohibits her from joining. Jaquenetta's moment of imagined social advancement does not last long, however: the mistake is swiftly discovered and corrected. Moreover, when this moment is performed on stage, it invites laughter as the audience is confronted with the contrast between the poem's elevated language and the country girl's crude bearing—a contrast that suggests that Jaquenetta could never make the social leap that reading

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<sup>35</sup> While it is perhaps unwise to attempt an aesthetic judgment of these poems, scholars generally acknowledge that they are at least marked as bad. See, for example, Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Introduction," 44; and Maurice Hunt, "Thomas Nashe, *The Vnfortunate Traveller*, and *Love's Labour's Lost*," *SEL* 54:2 (Spring 2014): 297-314, 301.

<sup>36</sup> The original line in the 1598 quarto reads, "sir from one mounsier *Berowne*"; the Norton edition cuts that phrase, calling it an "error," because Jaquenetta "can't know that Biron . . . actually composed it" (Greenblatt et. al, *Norton Shakespeare*, 767n9). The Arden Shakespeare keeps it as I have above with the name spelled "Berowne"; see H. R. Woudhuysen, ed., *Love's Labour's Lost*, by William Shakespeare (China: Arden Shakespeare, 1998), 4.2.29. The salient point here is that Jaquenetta believes herself to be the addressee; if the line is kept as it existed in the quarto, it suggests that she realizes one of the high-ranking men at court wrote it and still believes that she could be the poem's love object.

enables her to imagine.

In this moment, Shakespeare shows how unexpected reading practices can take part in constructing the identity and substance of a poem—as well as the identity of the reader. The very notion that Jaquenetta could read herself into the poem suggests that the identificatory possibilities of reading can be empowering—if only for a short time. And Holofernes' expression of judgment suggests that here is a great difference between poetry that functions on interpersonal levels and poetry that achieves literary greatness; moreover, this moment implies that something other than social rank is at play in understanding the cultural value of poetry.

In contrast to *Much Ado* and *Love's Labour's*, which primarily investigate the use of sonnets in constructing interpersonal relationships, *As You Like It* depicts sonnets that are deliberately published to unknown readers. Orlando, exiled from the world of the court, wanders the Forest of Arden, writing love poems about Rosalind and publishing them by hanging them on trees or carving them into tree bark. Like his namesake Orlando Furioso, he represents a Petrarchan lover addressing an inaccessible beloved; he seeks literary fame to ensure that his love, and his beloved, will become renowned among strangers.<sup>37</sup> At one point he says,

Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love;  
And thou thrice-crowned queen of night, survey  
With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,  
Thy huntress' name that my full life doth sway.  
O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,  
And in their barks my thoughts I'll character  
That every eye which in this forest looks

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<sup>37</sup> Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso* (1516), trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford University Press, 1974). Since he believes Rosalind is far away at the Duke's court, he has little expectation that she will actually read his poems, much less return his feelings.

Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere.

Run, run, Orlando; carve on every tree

The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she. (3.2.1-10)

These lines read as the second two quatrains and last couplet of a sonnet; in this apparently spontaneous sonnet, Orlando expresses a desire that his poems will be read by many people. Through such widespread reading, the virtues of his beloved will become famous. Later, it becomes apparent that Orlando also has ambitions beyond being a love poet: one of his poems reads,

Why should this a desert be?

For it is unpeopled? no.

Tongues I'll hang on every tree,

That shall civil sayings show.

Some, how brief the life of man

Runs his erring pilgrimage,

That the stretching of a span

Buckles in his sum of age.

Some of violated vows

'Twixt the souls of friend and friend.

But upon the fairest boughs,

Or at every sentence end,

Will I "Rosalinda" write

Teaching all that read to know

The quintessence of every sprite

Heaven would in little show. (3.2.113-28)

The beginning of the poem is not about Rosalind at all, showing that Orlando's poetry has ambitions beyond signifying his emotions to or about a beloved. He imagines himself a poet in the Petrarchan tradition, a commentator on human experience and emotion whose poetry is not simply love poetry but also a great literary achievement.

Despite these ambitions, Orlando does not succeed in becoming the great poet he imagines himself to be. One of his central problems, Shakespeare suggests, is that he does not have an expansive understanding of readership. There is a strong irony to publishing poems in a fairly "unpeopled" setting: since the trees cannot move at all, the only circulation that can take place is that of people through the forest—which the "unpeopled" nature of the forest already calls into doubt. Orlando's claim that "these trees shall be my books" thus presents a static view of books as solid and unmoving. People come to them rather than the other way around, which severely limits their scope. This image stands in marked contrast to Duke Senior's earlier incorporation of books into the natural world: for the Duke, there are "books in the running brooks," an image that suggests constant movement and interaction (2.1.16). Orlando's static understanding of books limits the interpretive possibilities of his poems. Although Orlando wants many people to read his poems, he only wants them to be read *his* way, as he expresses in an exchange with Jaques:

JAQUES: I pray you mar no more trees with writing love-songs in their barks.

ORLANDO: I pray you mar no more of my verses with reading them ill-favoredly. (3.2.237-40)

Here Orlando suggests that "ill-favored" reading has the potential to "mar" his verses, to do them some kind of active harm. That Orlando imagines only favorable readers is a strong sign that his

poems might not stand up to varied kinds of reading. Orlando's static understanding of poetry, and his closed-mindedness about readers, are significant setbacks in his pursuit of literary fame.

And Orlando's fear of unexpected readers proves justified, since all unexpected readers who encounter his poetry think it is quite bad. Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone, finding the verses, make fun of them mercilessly:

ROSALIND: [reading] "From the east to western Ind

No jewel is like Rosalind.

Her worth being mounted on the wind

Through all the world bears Rosalind.

All the pictures fairest lined

Are but black to Rosalind.

Let no face be kept in mind

But the fair of Rosalind."

TOUCHSTONE: I'll rhyme you so eight years together, dinners, and suppers, and sleeping-hours excepted. It is the right butter-woman's rank to market.

ROSALIND: Out, fool.

TOUCHSTONE: For a taste:

If a hart do lack a hind,

Let him seek out Rosalind.

If the cat will after kind,

So, be sure, will Rosalind.

Wintered garments must be lined,

So must slender Rosalind.



.....  
This is the very false gallop of verses. Why do you infect yourself with them?

ROSALIND: Peace, you dull fool, I found them on a tree.

TOUCHSTONE: Truly the tree yields bad fruit. (3.2.77-105)

In this scene, the poetry through which Orlando seeks fame is shown to be formulaic, repetitive, and deeply uninteresting. Not only does Touchstone disparage it, but he quickly comes up with a parody that uses the same meter and rhyme scheme, showing how replicable, and therefore unremarkable, the poems are. Once Celia enters reading another poem, Rosalind, who had initially seemed annoyed by Touchstone's mockery, also takes part in judging the verses' literary quality:

ROSALIND: O most gentle Jupiter! What tedious homily of love have you wearied your parishioners withal, and never cried "Have patience, good people."

.....  
CELIA: Didst thou hear these verses?

ROSALIND: O yes, I heard them all, and more, too, for some of them had in them more feet than the verses would bear.

CELIA: That's no matter; the feet might bear the verses.

ROSALIND: Ay, but the feet were lame, and could not bear themselves without verse, and therefore stood lamely in the verse. (3.2.143-45; 151-57)

In this exchange, Rosalind and Celia assert that the poems' handling of its subject matter is dull, and its execution, such as its use of meter, is poor. These poems are wanting in every way.

Despite her poor assessment of the poems' literary quality, Rosalind thrills at the idea that she might be the beloved "Rosalind" they address. When she learns that Celia knows who wrote them, she is desperate to discover the writer's identity:

ROSALIND: Nay, I prithee now with most petitionary vehemence, tell me who it is. . . . One inch of delay more is a South Sea of discovery. I prithee tell me who is it quickly, and speak apace. I would thou couldst stammer, that thou mightst pour this concealed man out of thy mouth as wine comes out of a narrow-mouthed bottle—either too much at once, or none at all. I prithee, take the cork out of thy mouth, that I may drink thy tidings. (3.2.174-75; 180-85)

Her excitement seems out of place given the low estimation in which she holds the poems. In this exchange, it becomes apparent that she can separate the emotion from the execution. When Celia finally tells her that the writer is her beloved Orlando, her opinion of his poetry does not in any way alter her opinion of his person:

ROSALIND: Looks he as freshly as he did the day he wrestled?

CELIA: . . . I found him under a tree, like a dropped acorn—

ROSALIND: It may well be called Jove's tree when it drops forth such fruit.

CELIA: Give me audience, good madam.

ROSALIND: Proceed.

CELIA: There lay he, stretched along like a wounded knight—

ROSALIND: Though it be pity to see such sight, it well becomes the ground.

(3.2.209-221)

Rosalind is so full of praise for Orlando that she interrupts Celia's story multiple times in order to express it. Her reference to Jove here stands in marked contrast to her earlier reference to

Jupiter; she has no apparent trouble condemning the poem while praising the poet. Indeed, when she eventually comes upon Orlando in the forest, she makes no reference to the quality of his poetry. Instead, she questions only the sincerity of his love:

ROSALIND: . . . There is a man haunts the forest that abuses our young plants with carving Rosalind on their barks; hangs odes upon hawthorns and elegies on brambles; all, forsooth, deifying the name of Rosalind. If I could meet that fancy-monger, I would give him some good counsel, for he seems to have the quotidian of love upon him.

ORLANDO: I am he that is so love-shaked. I pray you, tell me your remedy.

ROSALIND: There is none of my uncle's marks upon you. He taught me how to know a man in love, in which cage of rushes I am sure you are not prisoner.

(3.2.326-36)

Rosalind mentions all the types of verses that have been published around the forest, as if to suggest that the sheer number and variation of poems signifies a lover. Perhaps like Don Armado, Proteus, or Don Zuccone, Orlando has an excess of words to get out of himself. Several lines later, Rosalind asks, "But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?" (357). Their entire exchange centers on whether or not he wrote the poems, and whether his poems signify the emotions he truly feels. Throughout this long scene, Rosalind's shifting responses to the poetry and the poet show how the context in which a poem is read shapes its meaning. When the poems are read by people who know their addressee, what matters are the emotions they signify; when read by strangers who have no personal knowledge of the poem's writer or addressee, their literary quality becomes far more important. Shakespeare thus suggests not only that skill is key for ensuring poetic immortality, but also that broad circulation to a diverse readership is the

means through which that skill can be tested and proven. Wishing to deny your work to a “multitude” of readers is a sign, perhaps, that your work is not very good.

### *The Readers of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*

Although it is a commonplace that Shakespeare’s sonnets explore the idea of poetic immortality, few scholars have analyzed the specific technology of preservation that they espouse.<sup>38</sup> This kind of exploration is thwarted by the absence of any material records that Shakespeare either circulated his sonnets extensively in manuscript or intended them to be printed.<sup>39</sup> We do know that at least some manuscript poems made their way to people only peripherally connected to Shakespeare: the printer William Jaggard acquired two of Shakespeare’s sonnets around 1598 or 1599, and Sir Francis Meres mentioned them in a book printed in 1598, writing that “the sweete wittie soule of *Ouid* liues in mellifluous & honytongued *Shakespeare*, witnes his *Venus* and *Adonis*, his *Lucrece*, his sugred Sonnets among his priuate

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<sup>38</sup> One important exception is Aaron Kunin, “Shakespeare’s Preservation Fantasy,” *PMLA* 124.1 (2009): 92-106. I engage with Kunin’s work below.

<sup>39</sup> There are no extant manuscript versions of the sonnets dating before about 1619-25 (Gary Taylor, “Some Manuscripts of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 68 [1985]: 210-46, 220). On the “relative paucity” of records of manuscript circulation, see Arthur Marotti, “Shakespeare’s Sonnets and the Manuscript Circulation of Texts in Early Modern England,” in Schoenfeldt, *A Companion*: 185-203, 186. However, Marcy L. North argues, based on book historical analysis of the sonnets, that the poems present some evidence for “the vestiges of a manuscript origin” (North, “The Sonnets and Book History,” 219). Gary Taylor, using different analytical methods, argues that sonnets 8, 106, and 128 may have originated in manuscript; he makes a case for a manuscript origin for sonnet 2; and argues that “the testimony of the extant manuscripts and *The Passionate Pilgrim* strongly encourages the conclusion that the sonnets circulated in manuscript individually, not as a sequence” (225; 243-44; 225). Scholars are still deeply divided on whether or not Shakespeare was involved in Thorpe’s printing of his sonnets. Katherine Duncan-Jones makes a strong case for Shakespeare’s active involvement based on Thorpe’s relationship with Jonson and the timing of the print edition (“Was the 1609 Shakespeare Sonnets Really Unauthorized?,” *The Review of English Studies*, 34:134 [May 1983]: 151-171); for an overview of the salient issues related to the sonnets’ printing, see Colin Burrow, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91-98.

friends, &c.”<sup>40</sup> What is noteworthy here is that while Meres claims that Shakespeare’s sonnets were circulated “among his priuate friends,” such seemingly limited circulation had apparently no effect on Meres’ ability to access them and write about them in a printed work, and use them as evidence that Shakespeare was a great poet whose cultural contributions were as great as Ovid’s. I would like to suggest that the medium in which Shakespeare may or may not have published his poems can be isolated from the way they explore readership—and that, ultimately, the medium in which Shakespeare demonstrated the most consistent investment was the bodies of his readers. Shakespeare’s own sonnets are full of images of readerly agency as a means of achieving poetic immortality.<sup>41</sup>

Shakespeare’s sonnets demonstrate an investment in readers in a number of ways.<sup>42</sup> First, they are aware of the process of identification that happens when readers encounter poetry. For example, in sonnet 106, Shakespeare describes the way poems accrue new meanings for readers over time. The sonnet begins with a description of reading: “When in the chronicle of wasted time / I see descriptions of the fairest wights, / And beauty making beautiful old rhyme” (1-3).

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<sup>40</sup> Meres, *Palladis Tamia*, 282. Hugh McIntosh, citing Taylor and Marotti, writes that “*The Passionate Pilgrim* poems offer the only textual evidence of the circulation Meres mentioned in 1598” (“The Social Masochism of Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *SEL* 50:1 [Winter 2010]: 109-125, 111). McIntosh offers a compelling reading of the sonnets from *The Passionate Pilgrim* within the context of supposed manuscript circulation.

<sup>41</sup> Here I differ with Katherine Duncan-Jones, who argues that “While an attempt to immortalize through verse is frequently envisaged or affirmed by Shakespeare’s speaker, it is also subtly but powerfully undercut” (Katherine Duncan-Jones, “Playing Fields or Killing Fields: Shakespeare’s Poems and Sonnets,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 54:2 [Summer 2003]: 127-141, 144). Christine Hutchins argues that “Shakespeare’s theme is often that the poems and their lovers are as easily erased and forgotten as humankind is easily razed and replaced in the end times or earlier, depending on when the writer ceases revising, readers stop turning Shakespeare’s pages, or the book goes out of print” (Christine Hutchins, “English Anti-Petrarchism: Imbalance and Excess in ‘the Englishe straine’ of the Sonnet,” *Studies in Philology* 109:5 [Fall 2012]: 553-580, 578). But I argue that Shakespeare is deeply invested in new generations of readers always being available to incorporate the poems into themselves in different ways.

<sup>42</sup> In my analysis of the sonnets, I do not necessarily assume that they tell a coherent narrative; rather, my analysis proceeds thematically. For critics who have challenged conventional scholarly assumptions about narrative structure, see Heather Dubrow, “‘Incertainties now Crown Themselves Assur’d’: The Politics of Plotting Shakespeare’s Sonnets,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47:3 (Autumn 1996): 291-305.

After setting the scene of reading old romances, using the Old English word “wight,” as Spenser did in his *Faerie Queene*, to create a deliberately archaic tone, the speaker then explains his thought process:

I see their antique pen would have expressed,  
Even such a beauty as you master now.  
So all their praises are but prophecies  
Of this our time, all you prefiguring (7-10)

Although the poem continues with an exploration of the inadequacy of language to express true beauty, these lines show the reader anachronistically reading his own beloved into the poetry of old. Like Jaquenetta in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, the speaker reads his own experience into the poem. This sonnet suggests that literary work lasts by being read in new ways in each generation.

The sonnets further suggest that for a poem to survive for a long time, it must be reproduced. Themes of sexual reproduction abound in the procreation sonnets; although these primarily urge the addressee to marry and reproduce, much of their language bears metaphorical links with literary reproduction, uniting the notion of “reproduction” with the notion of “replication.” Many of these sonnets suggest that people have a duty to replicate themselves if they are beautiful, since they hold inherent value. For example, in sonnet 3, Shakespeare writes, “Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another” (1-2). The indirect command “should” implies a cultural urgency: the face owes it to itself and the world to replicate itself. The 1609 quarto (Q)’s choice of “an other” as two separate words, rather than “another,” emphasizes that the replica is a separate entity: while it is a perfect copy of the original, it has the ability to circulate to places beyond the power of the original.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> William Shakespeare, *Shake-speares Sonnets. Never Before Imprinted* (London: G. Eld for Thomas Thorpe, 1609).

This phrasing recurs in sonnet 10, when the speaker urges, “Make thee another [Q: an other] self for love of me” (13).<sup>44</sup> As in sonnet 3, this “other self” is imagined to be an exact replica of the original.

In addition to arguing for reproduction, the speaker uses metaphors of waste to criticize the choice not to reproduce. For example, the addressee who fails to reproduce “Feed’st thy light’s flame with self-substantial fuel” and “Within thine own bud buriest thy content” (1.6, 11). These images suggest closed circles that have no outward direction, no social interactions. In sonnet 4, Shakespeare writes, “Thy unused beauty must be tombed with thee, / Which used, lives th’executor to be,” suggesting that this closed, self-contained circle will perish unless it engages with the outside world (13-14). The notion of “use” implies generative growth; although the term often had negative connotations associated with usury in the early modern period, Shakespeare emphasizes the positive potential of it here; he develops that idea further in sonnet 6:

That use is not forbidden usury  
Which happies those that pay the willing loan:  
That’s for thyself to breed another [Q: an other] thee,  
Or ten times happier, be it ten for one;  
Ten times thyself were happier than thou art,  
If ten of thine ten times refigured thee,  
Then what could death doe if thou shouldst depart,  
Leaving thee living in posterity? (5-12)

Rather than being about the problematic process of usury, this “use” is about replication, and Shakespeare suggests the more the better: the more copies that exist in the world, the longer they

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<sup>44</sup> Shakespeare, *Shake-speares Sonnets*.

will live. In sonnet 16, Shakespeare writes, “To give away yourself keeps yourself still,” arguing that this kind of reproduction and circulation is not only beneficial but self-sustaining (13).

The sonnets’ thematization of sexual reproduction and literary circulation are brought together in sonnet 11 in which Shakespeare uses the metaphor of printing to urge his beloved to reproduce: “She [Nature] carved thee for her seal, and meant thereby / Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die” (13-14). This metaphor does far more than suggest a desire for print as the medium of replication and immortality.<sup>45</sup> By linking print reproduction with human reproduction, Shakespeare imagines literary work as living, in the same way that a human child is the living reproduction of the parents. This notion of poetry as organic and alive recurs throughout the volume and is central, I argue, to Shakespeare’s understanding of the afterlife of a poem.

After developing the importance of reproduction and circulation, Shakespeare ties them to immortality. In sonnet 100, for example, he writes,

Rise, resty muse, my love’s sweet face survey  
If time have any wrinkle graven there.  
If any, be a satire to decay  
And make time’s spoils dispised everywhere.  
  
Give my love fame faster then time wastes life;  
So, thou prevene’st his scythe and crooked knife. (9-14)

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<sup>45</sup> The assumption that print was linked with immortality is a central tenet held by many scholars who analyze Shakespeare’s literary investments; see, for example, Erne, *Book Trade*; Cheney, *Literary Authorship*; and Erne, *Literary Dramatist*. This tenet does not fully take into account how new and conditional print was as a medium; on the cultural construction of print as a medium of fixity, see Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).



Here the speaker urges his Muse to use a literary genre, satire, to combat the effects of Time.<sup>46</sup>

The Muse can do this through spreading this satire among as many people as possible, “everywhere [Q: euery where]” before Time’s effects are able to occur. In this poem, poetry can prevent the effects of time by getting to readers before time has had a chance to work its powers, “faster then time wastes life.” Shakespeare thus entwines rapid, widespread circulation with immortality.

Although Shakespeare mentions print in sonnet 11, the majority of his poems are vague about the medium in which they exist. For example, sonnet 17 imagines the speaker’s poetry existing in “papers” that are “yellowed” with age, an image that complements the poem’s initial invocation of the “age to come” in which people encounter the poems: both exist at some unspecified time far in the future (9, 7). While the image of loose papers suggests manuscript verse, Shakespeare also suggests that the poems will not merely exist passively on paper to be judged, and in this case, “scorned” by future readers: the poems will also live, in a way comparable to a human descendant of the beloved: “But were some child of yours alive that time, / You should live twice: in it, and in my rime” (10, 13-14). This notion of poetry suggests something more organic, more mutable, than mere physical existence on yellowed pages: the person of the reader.

Throughout the sonnets, while Shakespeare sometimes refers to the physical poem on paper, he demonstrates a far greater investment in the incorporation of poems into the bodies of their readers. For example, sonnet 63 ends with the following lines:

For such a time do I now fortify  
Against confounding age’s cruel knife,

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<sup>46</sup> Q presents the word capitalized and italicized, as *Satire*, thus emphasizing it as a distinct unit; it also capitalizes the Muse and Time (Shakespeare, *Shake-speares Sonnets*).

That he shall never cut from memory  
My sweet love's beauty, though my lover's life.  
His beauty shall in these black lines be seen,  
And they shall live, and he in them still green. (9-14)

Here the speaker writes of “these black lines” as the medium in which his beloved’s “beauty shall . . . be seen,” suggesting a physical dimension to the poem, presumably either print or manuscript, or both. But the key factor here is not the physical existence of the poem, but the idea that it will be read. This poem emphasizes the “memory” of future generations. Also, by asserting that the black lines will “live,” Shakespeare suggests not that the poems will passively exist, but—as the word “green” implies—that they will continue to grow and change as living things. Similarly, in sonnet 18, Shakespeare emphasizes the physiology of reading: “So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (13-14). Here, again, “this” is the poem embodied by readers, living through them as they live. In these sonnets, readers emerge as the single most important factor in a poet’s pursuit of poetic greatness.

Some scholars see a sense of frailty in the poems’ investment in readers. Daniel Juan Gil, for example, argues that the “reference to actual biological readers (equipped with lungs and eyes) introduces a certain vulnerability” to the poems.<sup>47</sup> This notion of vulnerability of individual human bodies, however, does not take into account Shakespeare’s investment in the existence of many bodies in the aggregate. Aaron Kunin, analyzing the technologies of preservation offered by the poems, argues that the “phrase ‘this gives life to thee’ cannot pretend to offer absolute eternity, because as a technology of preservation it operates in time—the brief moment of enunciating the poem, or the even briefer moment of saying ‘this’—and depends on the

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<sup>47</sup> Daniel Juan Gil, *Before Intimacy: Asocial Sexuality in Early Modern England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 132.

continued existence of people and eyes to perform the life-giving work of breathing and seeing.”<sup>48</sup> But I would like to suggest that Kunin presents a more static understanding of poetry than Shakespeare does, and that while Shakespeare does depend on the continued existence of people, he does so in a way that acknowledges mutability.

Shakespeare’s notion of poems as lived experiences contrasts productively with a more traditional understanding of poetry as static. In several sonnets, Shakespeare deliberately reshapes the classical tradition according to his own understanding of how poetry exists and functions. Two of these sonnets play off an ode by Horace that imagines his work into immortality through the image of a monument. Horace writes,

monumentum aere perennius  
regalique situ pyramidum altius,  
quod non imber edax, non Aquilo impotens  
possit diruere aut innumerabilis  
annorum series et fuga temporum.

I have built a monument more lasting than bronze, and set higher than royal  
pyramids, which neither devouring winter nor the violent North wind is able to  
erode, nor the numberless series of years and the flight of times.<sup>49</sup>

This imagery suggests static solidity: Horace’s poetic monument is made of a physical substance that exists in time and in a geographic position, imagined in relation to structures with large physical dimensions. It has height and weight. Of course, Horace uses this imagery to suggest that his poems are *more* long-lasting than the monuments of old, but all of his imagery is

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<sup>48</sup> Kunin, “Preservation Fantasy,” 99.

<sup>49</sup> Horace, *Epodes and Odes: A New Annotated Latin Edition*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 3.30.1-5; translation mine.

constructed in relation to the physical world. It suggests that poetry lasts forever by existing solidly, by not moving or changing.

Shakespeare's versions of Horace's ode articulate a very different understanding of poetry: in each, it is not the medium of the poem, but rather the experience of the reader that matters most for achieving immortality. Sonnet 55 reads:

Not marble nor the gilded monuments  
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,  
But you shall shine more bright in these contents  
Then unswept stone besmeared with sluttish time.  
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,  
And broils root out the work of masonry,  
Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire shall burn  
The living record of your memory.  
'Gainst death and all obliuious enmity  
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room  
Even in the eyes of all posterity  
That wear this world out to the ending doom.  
  
So, till the judgement that yourself arise,  
You live in this, and dwell in lovers' eyes.

Here, like Horace, the speaker compares his poem favorably with the solid structures that exist in time and space. However, rather than arguing that his work will be stronger and better than these structures, he suggests that those seemingly permanent things are subject to the buffets of time *because* of their very physicality. The beloved will live on not in a physical structure, but in the

“living record of your memory”: in the *people* who read the poem. By ending the poem with the idea that the beloved will “live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes,” Shakespeare refers to the identificatory process of reading. The beloved does not passively exist in a poem; he is actively encountered by readers who then incorporate him into their own experiences of love. In this way, the beloved and the poem never stay the same; they are always changing in relation to new readers and readerly experiences.<sup>50</sup>

Sonnet 81, another take on Horace’s ode, presents a similar rejection of the notion of physical presence, emphasizing in new ways the presence of readers. Shakespeare writes:

Or I shall live your epitaph to make,  
Or you survive when I in earth am rotten.  
From hence your memory death cannot take,  
Although in me each part will be forgotten.  
Your name from hence immortal life shall have,  
Though I, once gone, to all the world must die.  
The earth can yield me but a common grave  
When you entombed in men’s eyes shall lie.  
Your monument shall be my gentle verse,  
Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read,  
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse  
When all the breathers of this world are dead.

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<sup>50</sup> Here I disagree with Katherine Duncan-Jones, who reads the sonnets in the context of the plague that resurfaced in 1609, arguing that “an attempt to immortalize through verse is frequently envisaged or affirmed by Shakespeare’s speaker,” but is ultimately “subtly but powerfully undercut. [T]he beautiful love object does not live in the poet’s ‘eternal lines’ (18.12), he dies in them. He has been embalmed like a corpse or speared like a butterfly. The freshness of his beauty will never be preserved in language, for it is essentially mobile. Such love poetry does not conquer death but reaffirms it” (Duncan-Jones, “Playing Fields,” 141). I argue that this static notion of poetry is exactly what Shakespeare rejects in the sonnets.

You still shall live—such virtue hath my pen—

Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men.

As with sonnet 55, this poem's speaker rejects the Horatian assertion that poetry is akin to (but better than) a monument, claiming instead that poetry will replace physical monuments as a means of immortalization. Poems gain immortality not through being solid and immovable, but through their capacity to move and change as future people interact with them. This sonnet is even more explicit than sonnet 55 about the agency of readers in crafting an embodied monument: the beloved will be "entombed in men's eyes" as the poems about him are immortalized in readers' "eyes," "tongues," "breath," and "mouths." The speaker creates a sense of endless time not through static solidity but through organic movement; poetry achieves immortality through the active agency of future readers, who mouth the words, read them silently and aloud, repeat them to their friends, and pass them down to their children.

The notion of poetry's mutability is enhanced by the fact that the sonnets never provide the readers with the names of the beloved(s). Catullus had his Lesbia, Petrarch his Laura, and Shakespeare's contemporaries had Stella, Delia, Diella, Coelia, Chloris, Licia, Cynthia, and others; even Shakespeare's Orlando has his Rosalind. Shakespeare never names the sonnets' addressees. Many scholars have read biographical information into this choice, assuming that the refusal to name reflects a hidden "scandal" that would emerge if the "real" identities were discovered—a scandal related to the poems' homoeroticism, their treatment of class and race, or their sexual explicitness, among others.<sup>51</sup> But one effect of the refusal to name a beloved—or, in many cases, even the gender of the beloved—is that readers have more leeway to map their own

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<sup>51</sup> For an overview of these theories, see Robert Matz, "The Scandals of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *ELH* 77, 2010: 477-508; Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," *Shakespeare Survey* 46, 1993: 35-49; and Margreta de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

experiences and emotions onto the poems.<sup>52</sup> As when Jaquenetta imaginatively reads herself into Biron's sonnet, Shakespeare's readers are invited to read not a narrative of somebody else's love but a series of poems they could take part in imaginatively, or incorporate into their own constructed narrative.<sup>53</sup> In what they say and what they refuse to say, the sonnets invite significant readerly agency.

### *Shakespeare's Readers in Print*

While Shakespeare's sonnets thematize readerly agency, their print manifestations demonstrate a practical investment in it. Some of Shakespeare's sonnets were printed in a poetry volume in 1598/99, and all of his sonnets (that we know about) were printed in their own volume in 1609.<sup>54</sup> Both of these print productions demonstrate two aspects of readerly agency: the printers' in the way they understand and frame the text, and the print readers', since they are invited to engage with the work in particular ways. Both of these volumes show that printers

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<sup>52</sup> While my project is far more concerned with imagined readers than actual readers, historically readers have used this leeway in compelling ways, often shaping a culture's understanding of the sonnets in the process. For analysis of anonymous early modern readers assuming a particular gender for an addressee, see Matz, "Scandals," 489. For analysis of the editorial decisions of John Benson and Edmund Malone based on their own constructed narratives, see Katherine Duncan-Jones, "Introduction," 40-44; and de Grazia, *Shakespeare Verbatim*. For analysis of tendencies among scholars to "script their own narratives" for the sonnets, see Heather Dubrow, "Incertainties now Crown," 305. For an overview of some of the ways early modern readers interacted with Shakespeare's texts, see Jean-Christophe Mayer, "Rewriting Shakespeare: Shakespeare's Early Modern Readers at Work," *Études Épistémè* 21, 2012; and for an argument about how some early modern texts encouraged active reading, see Stephen B. Dobranski, *Readers and Authorship in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>53</sup> Most scholars who have analyzed Shakespeare's refusal to name the young man have generally thought about it in different terms. For example, Robert Matz argues that scholarly narratives about the sonnets have obscured the more interesting things they do with gender relations (Matz "Scandals"). Aaron Kunin contrasts Spenser's explicit naming of a beloved in *Amoretti* 75, which shares many similarities with Shakespeare's sonnets 18 and 55, to argue that while Spenser's beloved maps onto a specific time and place, with particular historical connotations and the ability to speak back to the writer, Shakespeare's unnamed young man becomes "a site of [implicit] resistance to the preservation fantasy" (Kunin, "Preservation Fantasy," 99). For Kunin, refusing to name indicates an experimental approach to poetry, whereby other things besides names can stand in for fame and immortality.

<sup>54</sup> Erne argues for a possible lost first edition of *The Passionate Pilgrim* in "late 1598 or 1599" (Erne, *Book Trade*, 84).

were invested in the mutability of literary texts and the importance of readerly agency as a way of making literary work culturally significant through broad popularity.

As Peter M. W. Blayney and others have eloquently discussed, early modern publishers had to be savvy businessmen in order to succeed in a competitive, clogged, and precarious field. Printing and publishing held high risk as professional fields because a significant amount of money had to be expended up front for any given printed text: the publisher had to pay the author or acquirer for the work itself, the Stationers for the license to print it, and the compositors and typesetters to compile it at the printing house. Once the publisher had invested his money, the book would eventually be put up for sale—where there was no guarantee that his investment would lead to any profit. If a book was unpopular or unappealing, it would not sell. The real profit from printing usually lay in second and later editions of a work, since the publisher had already paid the necessary acquiring and licensing fees and could keep a larger percentage of the sales as direct profit.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, and crucially, a second or later edition implied that the book was already popular and would sell well. Blayney argues that early modern publishers had to walk a fine line between being willing to print almost anything they could get their hands on, on the off-chance it would prove profitable, and being risk-averse, eager to invest in something that had a better chance of earning a profit. Thus the ideal text was one whose initial costs would not be overwhelming and whose popularity could be counted on.

In 1598/99 William Jaggard printed a volume of poetry that seems to have been designed as one such book. Entitled *The Passionate Pilgrim*, it was supposedly written by W. Shakespeare. The poems in the volume primarily concern themes of love, and they include two sonnets written by Shakespeare, and another three sonnets that had appeared in *Love's Labour's Lost*; those are the only poems in the volume (a little more than one-fifth of the twenty-four total

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<sup>55</sup> Blayney, "Publication of Playbooks," 391.



poems) that are Shakespeare's. The rest are by a number of other poets including Richard Barnfield, Bertholomew Griffin, Thomas Heywood, and Christopher Marlowe.<sup>56</sup> We do not know whether Jaggard had Shakespeare's permission to use his poems and his name, but there is a general scholarly consensus that he did not.<sup>57</sup> We do not know how Jaggard came by the poems, and it is not entirely clear that he knew the poems were not all by the same person. Some scholars think he acquired a miscellany and simply printed its contents; it is also possible that he found the poems himself from a range of sources and used his own editorial logic to put them together in a volume; and still another possibility is that he acquired the two Shakespeare sonnets, which were apparently well known in some circles and possibly in demand, and then found other poems to fill out the volume.<sup>58</sup>

By that point, as Erne has shown, "Shakespeare's name had such publicity value that it was repeatedly used to promote play texts not written by him."<sup>59</sup> A business-minded printer/publisher such as Jaggard could count on the idea that a volume of poetry by

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<sup>56</sup> Lois Potter, "Involuntary and Voluntary Poetic Collaboration: *The Passionate Pilgrim* and *Love's Martyr*," in *Shakespeare and his Collaborators over the Centuries*, ed. Pavel Drábek, Klára Kolinaká and Matthew Nicholls (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 10; Erne, *Book Trade*, 85. This was the first appearance in print of the two sonnets of Shakespeare's, and also the first appearance of Marlowe's poem "Come Live With Me and Be My Love," among others (Potter 9).

<sup>57</sup> In the afterword of his treatise *An Apology for Actors* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1612), Heywood wrote of his anger in having his poems printed "vnder the name of another, which may put the world in opinion I might steale them from him" (np). The fault lay with the printer: Heywood writes, "the Author I know much offended with M. *Jaggard* (that altogether vnknowne to him) presumed to make so bold with his name" (np). Scholars have long tied that reference to Shakespeare and the 1612 third edition of *The Passionate Pilgrim*. See, for example, Erne, *Book Trade*; Arthur Marotti, "Shakespeare's Sonnets as Literary Property," in *Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Elizabeth D. Harvey and Katharine Eisaman Maus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 143-73; and James Shapiro, *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Erne, *Book Trade*, 86-88; Potter, "Involuntary," 12; James Bednarz, "Canonizing Shakespeare: *The Passionate Pilgrim*, *England's Helicon*, and the Question of Authenticity," *Shakespeare Survey* 60 (2007): 252-267, 257; Colin Burrow, "Introduction," 58; Joseph Quincy Adams, "Introduction," in *The Passionate Pilgrim: By William Shakespeare* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), xi-xiv.

<sup>59</sup> Erne, *Book Trade*, 81.

“Shakespeare” would probably sell well.<sup>60</sup> And not only did Jaggard make strategic use of Shakespeare’s name: he also sold the volume at the Sign of the Greyhound at St. Paul’s Churchyard, the same bookseller’s shop where a new edition of *Venus and Adonis* was being sold that same year. Joseph Quincy Adams suggests that the choice of bookshop—a departure from Jaggard’s usual choice—strategically capitalized on the established popularity of *Venus and Adonis*, since the volume would be perfectly placed to attract the greatest number of interested buyers.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Jaggard reinforced and perpetuated an already-existing market for books about Venus and Adonis.

The story of *The Passionate Pilgrim* suggests a number of compelling ideas. First, it suggests that publishers and printers, as some of the earliest readers of a literary work before it reached the broader public, were highly influential in determining how that work would be represented to future readers. They thus played a key role in guiding and developing popular taste for literary work, taking interests that were already there and using their own shrewdness to expand the market for them. Jaggard, as a reader of Shakespeare, shaped the way other readers would encounter Shakespeare’s—and “Shakespeare’s”—works.<sup>62</sup> Lois Potter argues that the volume is not just linked at the surface level to Shakespeare and *Venus and Adonis*: she claims that the sonnets about Venus and Adonis in the volume demonstrate in-depth engagement with Shakespeare’s work.<sup>63</sup> Potter argues that this reveals a (one-sided) collaborative impulse between Shakespeare and whoever put together the volume.

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<sup>60</sup> Jaggard’s investment seems to have paid off: while there are no extant copies of the first edition labeled as such, *The Passionate Pilgrim* was printed as a “Third edition” in 1612, thus suggesting that the volume sold well and earned Jaggard a decent profit.

<sup>61</sup> Adams, “Introduction,” xv. This seems to be an early version of Amazon’s “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought...”

<sup>62</sup> On Jaggard’s “curiously divided legacy” in the creation of the Shakespeare canon, see Bednarz, “Canonizing Shakespeare,” 266.

<sup>63</sup> Potter, “Involuntary,” 11.

However, I would like to suggest that *The Passionate Pilgrim* calls attention to the collaborative impulse of readers as well. The volume presents the sonnets from *Love's Labour's Lost* as Shakespeare's, not as his characters'; in the fictional world of the play, the three poems were written by Biron, Longueville, and Dumaine in order to express their love for their mistresses. In the play, as I have discussed above, the poems demonstrated the social uses of poetry as they circulated to people other than the addressees. Jaggard's printing of them can therefore be seen as just another level of circulation, farther from the center of production. As poems written by "W. Shakespeare" rather than characters in a play, they accrue new kinds of meaning, rather like when Jaquenetta reads Biron's sonnet as addressed to her, or when Holofernes attempts to incorporate it into the classical tradition. There is no longer necessarily a predetermined story attached to the poems: the readers of *The Passionate Pilgrim* are invited to read them alongside the other poems in the volume and construct new narratives from them.<sup>64</sup>

The different kind of readerly engagement invited by this volume suggests that literary popularity could be linked to the actual and imagined agency of readers—readers who come from an array of social backgrounds. In constructing a volume to appeal to such an array of readers, Jaggard essentially constructed those readers.

The printing of Shakespeare's sonnets in 1609 reveals a somewhat parallel narrative.<sup>65</sup> Whether or not the publisher Thomas Thorpe had permission to print Shakespeare's sonnets,<sup>66</sup> his title page resembles Jaggard's in its emphasis on Shakespeare as an important cultural figure:

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<sup>64</sup> Potter, in "Involuntary," touches on this when she discusses the implications of a reader voicing the poems as Venus and Adonis or as the courtiers in *Love's Labour's Lost*, in whose voices the "theme of forswearing, which dominates" *The Passionate Pilgrim*, would have resonated for readers familiar with the play (12). Potter, however, does not examine the implications of voicing the poems through different interpretive lenses.

<sup>65</sup> One major difference, however, is that *Shakespeare's Sonnets Neuer before Imprinted* was not successful, never reaching a new edition during Thorpe's career; however, in "The Sonnets and Book

# SHAKE-SPEARES

## SONNETS.

Neuer before Imprinted.

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AT LONDON

By *G. Eld* for *T. T.* and are  
to be solde by *William Apley*.  
1609.

This title page emphasizes Shakespeare's name with large type at the top, suggesting that "Shake-speare" is the key piece of information a potential book-buyer would want in order to decide whether to purchase the volume. The phrasing, "Shake-speares Sonnets. Neuer before Imprinted," moreover, suggests that Shakespeare's sonnets are in demand—that there is a cultural urgency to printing them. It implies that they have been circulating or known about for some time, and they are only now being made available to an eagerly expectant public.

While the title page constructs Shakespeare's work as broadly culturally valuable, the dedication makes a claim about the kind of reading public the work speaks to. The dedication is not addressed to a member of the nobility; instead, it reads more like a personal note:

TO.THE.ONLIE.BEGETTER.OF.  
THESE.INSVING.SONNETS.  
M<sup>r</sup>. W. H. ALL.HAPPINESSE.  
AND.THAT.ETERNITIE.  
PROMISED.  
BY  
OVR.EVER.LIVING.POET.  
WISHETH.  
THE.WELL-WISHING.  
ADVENTVRER.IN.  
SETTING.  
FORTH.

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History," Marcy L. North argues that this was not unusual for many print sonnet sequences: "thirteen of the 1590s sequences were never reprinted" (209).

<sup>66</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones has argued persuasively that Thorpe had connections with Ben Jonson and that 1608/09, a plague year, would have been a good time for Shakespeare to seek print—as he had in 1593 and 1594, when he sought print for his two narrative poems ("Unauthorized"). Colin Burrow argues that if Shakespeare had a role in the printing, he most likely was not in London during the final stages—including when the dedication was written ("Introduction").

By refusing to name any of the players involved in writing and printing the sonnets—we have “W. H.,” “Our ever living poet,” and “T. T.” (though “T. T.” is presumably Thomas Thorpe)—the dedication creates a feeling of exclusivity, promising the reader some hidden subtext that lies just beyond his grasp. Colin Burrow argues that this may have been a marketing scheme on Thorpe’s part: “[O]ne way in this period of selling books was to suggest seductively that there might be private allusions to unknown individuals hidden within them. . . . Printed poems could be presented in such a way as to make their readers feel that they were both inside and outside a charmed circle of knowledge.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the use of the title “M<sup>r</sup>.” adds another valence to this sense of exclusivity by implying that the inner circle is not necessarily socially elite.

Very few scholars have given enough weight to the fact that the mysterious “W. H.” of the dedication was not—or the printer does not want to reveal him as—an aristocrat. In this period, the written initials “M<sup>r</sup>.” were most likely to be an abbreviation of the word “Master.”<sup>69</sup> The original sense of the word “master” appears to be “A skilled workman or craftsman . . . a workman qualified by training and experience to teach apprentices (chiefly in appositive compounds, as master carpenter, etc.).”<sup>70</sup> By the late sixteenth century the term could apply not only to middling people but to those who had achieved wealth and/or the gentle status either by birth or trade; however, there is no historical example of the word being applied to a man who

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<sup>67</sup> Katherine Duncan-Jones finds evidence in some of Thorpe’s other work for this unconventional typesetting. In Act V of Jonson’s *Sejanus His Fall*, “the Senate’s proclamation, though in English, is printed after the manner of a Roman inscription, capitalized, and with a stop after each word” (“Unauthorized,” 157). Geoffrey Caveney reminds us that the format is reminiscent of a “Roman funerary monument,” in “Mr. W. H.: Stationer William Holme (d. 1607),” *Notes and Queries* 62:1 (2015): 120–24, 123.

<sup>68</sup> Burrow, “Introduction,” 103.

<sup>69</sup> The term “mister” was apparently a later development derived from changing pronunciation of the abbreviation “M<sup>r</sup>.” (*OED*).

<sup>70</sup> “master, n. 1 and adj.,” 14. *OED Online*. March 2015. Oxford University Press.

had a higher status than that of a gentleman.<sup>71</sup> There were proper modes of address for every rank in English society, and if someone had a higher status than a simple gentleman, he would be addressed accordingly.<sup>72</sup> In addressing its object as “M<sup>r</sup>,” this dedication builds a sense of exclusivity not through the invocation of a high-status culture, but through the invocation of a knowledgeable literary culture whose members come from a more socially diverse pool of people. Moreover, by invoking “M<sup>r</sup>. W. H.” as the “begetter” of the sonnets, it also privileges a different kind of text-making than authorship alone, one in which taking action to procure a text for publication is a creative act. Through its title and its dedication, *Shake-Speares Sonnets* speaks to a very different kind of readership—and argues for a different social role for that readership—than texts that persist in disdaining the multitude.

In their exploration of readership, Shakespeare and his publishers articulate ideas about the value of literature that anticipate what Jürgen Habermas argues emerged only in the eighteenth century, alongside the bourgeois public sphere: that literature should be judged for its aesthetic qualities rather than its “social function.”<sup>73</sup> But their exploration not only makes a case for the value of literature; it also articulates the cultural value of many socially diverse readers, over and against that of a single, privileged reader. As I hope to have shown, the ways in which Shakespeare’s sonnets explore readership, and the ways in which their print versions invoke readership, speak to an emergent idea of a “common reader” whose reading experience shapes

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<sup>71</sup> A possible exception would be the younger son of an aristocratic family.

<sup>72</sup> Burrow, for example, rejecting a long scholarly tradition that includes E. K. Chambers and Katherine Duncan-Jones, analyzes early modern modes of address to argue that since Thorpe had addressed William Herbert, earl of Pembroke, as “your Lordship” and “Your Honour,” in previous dedications, “it seems very unlikely that he would have stripped Pembroke of his title” in the dedication to the *Sonnets* (100-101). Very recently, in “‘Mr. W. H.’,” Geoffrey Caveney has argued that the initials refer to William Holme, a publisher and associate of Thorpe’s, who died in 1607.

<sup>73</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), 39.

both the text itself and the cultural value of the text—and whose cultural role is ultimately elevated over and above the role of the single noble patron.

### Chapter 3

#### Of Fine Sugar and Laboring Bees: Aemilia Lanyer's Textual Staging of Genre, Gender, and Status

Like Shakespeare, Aemilia Lanyer explores in her work both the cultural status of poetry and the idea of achieving status through poetry. But while Shakespeare invoked a multitude of readers to claim a high cultural status for his work, Lanyer strategically invokes specific high-ranking readers, manipulating the patronage tradition to assert the cultural value of poets like herself. Lanyer is an important figure through which to explore the social implications of writing and reading poetry, since she was a woman of middling status who lived at the periphery of aristocratic circles.<sup>1</sup> Occupying for many years a liminal status in and around the royal court as the daughter of a court musician and, later, mistress of the lord chamberlain Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon, she was eventually separated from the aristocratic ranks through her marriage.<sup>2</sup> Lanyer's long devotional poem, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, contains a number of verse and prose dedications to important aristocratic women who were part of the social and literary circle connected to Queen Anne.<sup>3</sup> In addressing these women as potential patrons, Lanyer repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> In *Lanyer: A Renaissance Woman Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Susanne Woods writes that "court musicians were members of the minor gentry, with respectable incomes by the standards of the day," and there is a record of Lanyer's father exchanging gifts with Queen Elizabeth in 1565 (8).

<sup>2</sup> Woods, *Lanyer*, 16-19.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars analyzing *Salve Deus* have tended to read it through the lens of Lanyer's biography, searching within its extensive dedicatory material for clues to Lanyer's personal desires and the extent of her historical relationships with the noblewomen she addresses as potential patrons. See, for example, Pamela Joseph Benson, "To Play the Man: Aemilia Lanyer and the Acquisition of Patronage," in *Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550-1700: Volume 3: Anne Lock, Isabella Whitney and Aemilia*



claims that she seeks their good readership and strong judgment—both of which seem inextricably linked with their high social status. Yet Lanyer’s poetic volume as a whole subverts generic expectations, ultimately implying that the aristocratic readers she invokes serve more as rhetorical tools for her poetic project than as actual patrons whose high status lends the poem cultural value. Lanyer’s volume plays with the status of her imagined readers to craft a new kind of cultural status uniquely suited to people who function outside the aristocratic realm.

The key feature of Lanyer’s poetics is a kind of thematic meandering that she connects with the idea of nature. Lanyer’s volume invites a recursive reading process, which allows the text to make important claims about the cultural value of women and middling-status people. Working thematically through the volume’s different sections, I show how they build off each other, circle back to each other, and, in doing so, challenge traditional expectations about hierarchical relationships.

### *The Volume’s Invitation to Recursive Reading*

When *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* was printed, in 1611, its title page announced it as a series of devotional poems written by a respectable London matron:

SALVE DEUS

REX JUDAEORUM

*Containing,*

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Lanyer, ed. Micheline White (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009): 401-422; Leeds Barroll, “Looking for Patrons,” in *Aemilia Lanyer: Gender, Genre, and the Canon*, ed. Marshall Grossman (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1998): 29-48. In her Introduction to *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), Susanne Woods writes of the historical record, “There is no evidence that . . . any of the dedications produced any patronage for the Lanyers” (xxvii). However, in analyzing the volume from this perspective, scholars lose sight of the fact that this is a work of literary creation. Lanyer’s background positioned her well to think through the stakes of achieving status through poetry, her volume presents a carefully crafted poetic persona that transcends the material conditions of Lanyer’s historical position.

1. The Passion of Christ.
2. Eves Apologie in defence of Women.
3. The Teares of the Daughters of Jerusalem.
4. The Salutation and Sorrow of the Virgine Marie.

With divers other things not unfit to be read.

Written by Mistris *Aemilia Lanyer*, Wife to Captaine

*Alfonso Lanyer* Servant to the Kings Majestie.<sup>4</sup>

The volume seems straightforward, presenting four discrete devotional poems, three of which concern biblical women. Its affiliation with women is emphasized not only through the poems' subject matter but through the identity of the author, whose marital standing and social position are clearly indicated. In its framing of work and author, the title page incorporates the volume into a long tradition of devotional verse written by and for women.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the pages that follow, the volume disrupts the expectations about genre and subject matter that the title page established. First, the volume contains a long series of dedications to women from a range of social ranks, starting with the queen and moving down the social ladder to "all virtuous Ladies in generall" (48).<sup>6</sup> These dedications mark the volume as one designed to seek patronage: middling-status writers often tried to maximize opportunities by

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<sup>4</sup> Aemilia Lanyer, *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer: Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, ed. Susanne Woods (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 1. All subsequent quotations from *Salve Deus* are taken from this volume.

<sup>5</sup> On the tradition of women writing devotional verse, see, for example, Barbara Lewalski, "Seizing Discourses and Reinventing Genres," in Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer*: 49-59, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Not all dedicatory poems would have appeared in every version of the volume: as was common in this period, presentation copies would have been tailored to suit the particular patron to whom they were given. For a complete list of the dedications present in extant volumes, see Woods, "Textual Introduction," in *The Poems of Aemilia Lanyer*, xlvii-li. However, all the dedications were of course printed and may have appeared in less noteworthy versions of the volume; moreover, the extant volumes almost always contain a number of the dedications, not just a single one.

dedicating their work to “several important personages at once.”<sup>7</sup> In presenting itself as a socially ambitious work, the volume defies its modest framing.<sup>8</sup> Second, the long narrative poem that lends the volume its title, “Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum,” is not organized into the four discrete sections promised by the title page.<sup>9</sup> Rather, it tells one long digressive narrative, whose subjects and themes—far more than four—are marked, not with section breaks and titles, but with small printed marginal notes. These subjects and themes transition fluidly from one to the next and sometimes back again; in their fluidity, they defy easy classification. Finally, the volume ends with a non-devotional poem entitled “The Description of Cooke-ham,” which describes the country seat of one of the aristocratic women addressed in the dedication section.

While the volume’s basic structure—dedications followed by a long poem followed by a short additional poem—was not unusual in this period, what is compelling about the volume is that none of its three sections—the dedications, the “Salve Deus,” and “The Description of

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Brennan, *Literary Patronage in the English Renaissance: The Pembroke Family* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 4. Scholars generally agree, as Su Fang Ng articulates, in “Amelia Lanyer and the Politics of Praise,” *ELH* 67:2 (Summer 2000): 433-51, that Lanyer published *Salve Deus* “to solicit patronage” (434). Doing so would be in line with most scholarly work on the way people of Lanyer’s social status used literature strategically within the patronage system (Brennan, *Literary Patronage*, 11-13). As scholars such as Ng and Lisa Schnell, in “‘So Great a Difference Is There in Degree’: Aemilia Lanyer and the Aims of Feminist Criticism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 57:1 (March 1996): 23-35, point out, seeking patronage would not prevent someone like Lanyer from pushing against the constraints of this deeply flawed system (Ng, “Politics of Praise,” 434; Schnell 26-27).

<sup>8</sup> The language of social ambition and the language of praise to a patron were mutually dependent, though often in tension with each other as well. Brennan writes, “Time and time again, we find in the works of talented and ambitious men of letters, lavish panegyrics uneasily rubbing shoulders with satiric condemnations of the court patronage system” (Brennan, *Literary Patronage*, 17). That Lanyer was a *woman* fashioning herself as a professional writer was also highly ambitious, since women were not usually professional writers. However, Marcy L. North argues that women writers and translators were more visible in the early print market than we might think, in “Women, the Material Book, and Early Printing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Women’s Writing*, ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 68-84.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use “Salve Deus” to refer to the long poem of that title and *Salve Deus* to refer to the volume as a whole.

Cooke-ham”—is entirely what it promises to be.<sup>10</sup> The dedications are poems in their own right, with a similar meter and rhyme scheme as the “Salve Deus” poem, and contain textual features, such as marginal notations, and biblical references that link them thematically with “Salve Deus.” They are at once separable dedications and extensions of the religious poem that they precede. Similarly, one of Lanyer’s dedicatees, the Countess of Cumberland, is featured in all three sections of the volume: after being the subject of a dedicatory address, she is addressed and mentioned at several points throughout “Salve Deus,” her presence signaled both within the text itself and in marginal notes; she is also a central addressee and subject in “The Description of Cooke-ham.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, “Cooke-ham” shares thematic connections with the dedications and the “Salve Deus” poem. In all these ways and more, the volume blurs the lines it has established between dedication and poem, addressee and poetic subject, religious and secular; it thus defies, even as it invites, straightforward classification, refusing to exist within a recognizable generic or literary category. According to Hans Robert Jauss, “literary genres have . . . social function,” and that “the work of art is understood as a sign and carrier of meaning for a social reality, and the aesthetic is defined as a principle of mediation and a mode of organization for extra-aesthetic

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<sup>10</sup> Brennan writes, “Henry Lok addressed sixty individuals in as many commendatory sonnets at the end of his collection of divine poetry, *Ecclesiastes* (1597). Geoffrey Whitney’s *A Choice of Emblems* (1586) contained over ninety different dedicatory addresses” (Brennan, *Literary Patronage*, 4). Su Fang Ng reminds us that Spenser included seventeen dedicatory poems in the 1596 edition of *The Faerie Queene* and that some writers addressed up to sixty or ninety dedicatees (“Politics of Praise,” 435). It was also not unusual to append an unrelated poem at the end of an otherwise thematically coherent volume: for example, the 1609 edition of *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* included the narrative poem “A Lover’s Complaint” at the end.

<sup>11</sup> Often in “Salve Deus” the Countess’s presence is signaled by two paratextual elements: marginal notes and a paragraph symbol (¶). The paragraph symbol was often used in early drama to designate a change in speaker; in the King James Bible, first printed in the same year as Lanyer’s poem, the paragraph symbol also designates a shift in narration; see *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, introd. and notes Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

meanings.”<sup>12</sup> While Jauss was writing about genres in the large scale, his argument has implications for Lanyer’s work. Scholars exploring the social dimensions of genre have argued that it is a “historically specific elements of social practice,”<sup>13</sup> and that it is even “an aspect of social action.”<sup>14</sup> Playing with or subverting generic categories can be a way to play with or subvert social conventions more broadly. I argue that, like Shakespeare’s play with sonnet contexts, Lanyer’s subversion of generic categories reflects and even shapes the way her project seeks to rethink social categories.<sup>15</sup>

Working along lines similar to those developed in this chapter, Barbara Lewalski has argued that Lanyer’s volume challenges generic expectations on multiple levels. Within each section is a remarkable amount of generic play: Lanyer’s dedicatory poems differ from each other in style, and the “Salve Deus” incorporates “a prose polemic in defense of women, [and] a meditative poem on Christ’s Passion which contains an apologia, laments, and several encomia.”<sup>16</sup> Lewalski argues that Lanyer refocuses these genres toward women in a socially audacious way, such as presenting “Christ and Christ’s passion as subject to female gaze and

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<sup>12</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 107.

<sup>13</sup> William F. Hanks, “Discourse Genres in a Theory of Practice,” *American Ethnologist*, 14:4 (Nov. 1987): 668-692, 668.

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn R. Miller, “Genre as Social Action,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151-167, 153.

<sup>15</sup> Other scholars have noticed a similar move through the way Lanyer explores religious themes. For example, Kari Boyd McBride, in “Sacred Celebration: The Patronage Poems,” in Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer*: 60-82, writes, “I wish to suggest here that the patronage poem functioned to construct a transgressive female authority for Lanyer only because she fundamentally altered the context in which patron-client relationships were supposed to have functioned, substituting a religious sphere for the courtly one,” and that Lanyer combines “traditional social and generic forms with a radical theology to claim authority and poetic identity” (60-61). Michael Schoenfeldt explores the way Lanyer and John Donne use language that disrupts cultural expectations about sexuality and gender in order to express religious devotion, in “The gender of religious devotion: Amelia Lanyer and John Donne,” in *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England*, ed. Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 209-233. Schoenfeldt writes, “Together, Donne and Lanyer reveal some of the most profound truths, and some of the deepest contradictions, implicit in the collusion between religious injunction and social organization that constitutes the western tradition” (229).

<sup>16</sup> Lewalski, “Seizing,” 49.

interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> In this way, Lanyer’s version of the Passion takes a “safe” genre for women writers—devotional work—and puts it into “unsafe” terms; in doing so, it presents “a formidable challenge to Jacobean patriarchal ideology.”<sup>18</sup> While Lewalski’s study has done much to suggest a compelling connection between Lanyer’s use of genre and her desire for social change, I see Lanyer’s work as accomplishing far more than challenging traditional ideologies: rather, she utilizes her marginalized position as a woman of middling status to construct an ideology of merit.<sup>19</sup>

Recent scholarship on Lanyer has pushed back against an initial scholarly trend that saw in Lanyer’s work only the invocation of a “community of women.”<sup>20</sup> As these scholars show, the *Salve Deus* volume regularly expresses a deep ambivalence about the unifying power of gender, especially when status is concerned. For example, Lisa Schnell and Ann Baynes Coiro argue that considering Lanyer’s work primarily through the lens of feminism flattens some of the cultural

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<sup>17</sup> Lewalski, “Seizing,” 51.

<sup>18</sup> Lewalski, “Seizing,” 51, 57.

<sup>19</sup> John Huntington has argued that “Lanyer presents herself . . . not only as a celebrator of courtly piety but as a humble yet important instance of ‘woman’s wit.’ That is, . . . she comes before us, without title or fortune, asking to be recognized as a poet” (*Ambition, Rank*, 148). Huntington provides a cursory analysis of Lanyer’s poem, focusing on the moments in which she questions the origins of nobility and “articulate[s] a complaint about the injustice and inequality of the system” (152). As I noted in the Introduction, Huntington is far more concerned with authorial positioning than I am; in this chapter I identify not only Lanyer’s positioning of herself in relation to her aristocratic dedicatees, but also her construction of a different kind of poetics that enables her and other lower status writers to produce culturally valuable literary work.

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Lewalski was the first to argue for Lanyer’s construction of a community of good women, writing, “Lanyer’s volume as a whole is conceived as a Book of Good Women, fusing religious devotion with an argument proclaiming the superiority of women to men in moral and spiritual matters and so denying any grounds for their subordination” (“Re-writing” 102). Sharon Cadman Seelig, in “‘To all vertuous Ladies in generall’: Aemilia Lanyer’s Community of Strong Women,” in *Literary Circles and Cultural Communities in Renaissance England*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000): 44-58, revises this notion to claim for the existence of “a community of strong women, a constellation of heroic virtue” (48). Similarly, in “Fast ti’d unto them in a golden Chaine’: Typology, Apocalypse, and Woman’s Genealogy in Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 133-79, Marie H. Loughlin argues that *Salve Deus* constructs “a typological and apocalyptic genealogy of women” that had implications for the spiritual realm as well as the struggles of Margaret Clifford to ensure a female inheritance for her daughter Anne (175).

work it does, especially its nuanced examination of class.<sup>21</sup> Su Fang Ng follows suit, arguing that “By overemphasizing Lanyer’s feminism, we lose sight of important class tensions within the poem.”<sup>22</sup> Audrey E. Tinkham, whose work runs along similar lines as mine, asserts that Lanyer engages with the classical humanist understanding of civic virtue to urge for women’s greater participation in the public sphere.<sup>23</sup> I claim, rather, that Lanyer believes that women and lower-status people can offer something uniquely different to English culture than their aristocratic counterparts. Lanyer crafts a poetics that offers the potential for women and people of lower social status—those who traditionally receive less education, and live and work in marginalized positions—to assert the unique value of intrinsic merit.

Lanyer’s poetics is based on a complex figuring of nature. Toward the end of the first dedication in the volume, addressed to Queen Anne, Lanyer writes of her poetic project in the following way:

And pardon me (faire Queene) though I presume,  
To doe that which so many better can;  
Not that I learning to my selfe assume,  
Or that I would compare with any man:  
  
But as they are Scholers, and by Art do write,  
  
So Nature yeelds my Soule a sad delight. (145-50)

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<sup>21</sup> Schnell, ““So Great a Diffrence,”” 23-27; Ann Baynes Coiro “Writing in Service: Sexual Politics and Class position in the Poetry of Aemilia Lanyer and Ben Jonson,” in White, *Ashgate Critical*: 333-352. Coiro writes, “In many significant ways, Lanyer and Jonson have more in common with each other than does Lanyer with other important women writers of her generation. Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke and Lady Mary Sidney Wroth, for example, defined themselves not only as women, but also and very centrally as members of a powerful aristocratic family” (335).

<sup>22</sup> Ng, “Politics of Praise,” 434.

<sup>23</sup> Audrey E., Tinkham, ““Owning’ in Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (‘Hail God King of the Jews’),” *Studies in Philology* 106:1 (Winter 2009): 52-75, 53.

These lines claim that while the author is not as learned as many male scholars, her work has a value of its own that exists on a separate plane: while male scholars and writers of the “better” sort use art to craft their writing, this author uses nature. Lanyer’s concept of “Nature” belies an easy association with instinct or lack of learning. For the volume as a whole demonstrates extensive learning and deep engagement with classical, biblical, and rhetorical tropes. Susanne Woods claims from internal evidence that Lanyer most likely studied Latin and Greek, as well as Ciceronian rhetoric, among other subjects, and that “the ease and ubiquity of Lanyer’s references to classical figures and stories strongly suggest she encountered them in their original languages.”<sup>24</sup> I contend that Lanyer’s emphasis on nature was not an excuse for poor learning, made as an apology for participation in literary culture, but rather a carefully crafted poetic agenda, designed to enable her to develop a literary voice without seeming to strive inappropriately beyond her social position.

According to Aristotelian philosophy, nature is the impulse that guides living things and beings. Aristotle argued that things “constituted by nature” had “a principle of motion and standing, some according to place, some according to growth and diminution, and some according to alteration.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, “Aristotle identifies nature as an ‘innate impulse of change’ that not only sets things in motion but governs the course of those motions and brings them to rest.”<sup>26</sup> Things governed by nature always exist or act toward a specific purpose: Aristotle writes, “As a thing acts, therefore, so is it naturally apt [to act]; and as it is naturally apt [to act], so each thing acts, unless something impedes it. But it acts for the sake of something, so

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<sup>24</sup> Woods, “Lanyer,” 9-13, 13.

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Physics, Or Natural Hearing*, trans. and ed. Glen Coughlin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2005), 2.1.192b14-16.

<sup>26</sup> Joe Sachs, *Aristotle’s Physics: A Guided Study* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1995), 56.



it is also naturally apt to act for the sake of something.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, “if the swallow makes its nest and the spider its web by nature and for the sake of something, and plants their leaves for the sake of the fruit and the roots go not up but down for the sake of food, it is apparent that this sort of cause is in things which come to be and are by nature.”<sup>28</sup> Nature is what guides and enables a thing to perpetuate itself; not only does its motion exist directly for the good of that thing, but that thing cannot do otherwise than what nature guides it to do: a plant’s roots, for example, will not grow upward if they are supposed to grow downward.

In aligning herself with nature, Lanyer claims that poetry is her calling: just as it is in the swallow’s nature to make a nest, it is in Lanyer’s nature to write a poem. Poetry, she suggests, is how she perpetuates herself, and she cannot do otherwise than write it. Several scholars, most notably Susanne Woods and John Rogers, have analyzed Lanyer’s vocational understanding of poetry, arguing that she derives her authority primarily from a divine source as well as from, and through, her religious subject matter.<sup>29</sup> Lanyer thus builds on Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie*, which had claimed that poetry could be an “unelected vocation.”<sup>30</sup> But while Sidney’s text sought to improve the status of poetry in the cultural imagination, Lanyer’s text seeks to improve her status as a non-elite poet. For her vocational understanding of poetry guards her against accusations of impropriety, since nature compels her to write and God inspires her.

Lanyer’s position also builds on and reshapes the art vs. nature debate that occupied Renaissance philosophers as well as literary writers. A. J. Close has articulated the ways in

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<sup>27</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.8.199a9-12.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.8.199a26-30.

<sup>29</sup> Susanne Woods, “Vocation and Authority: Born to Write,” in Grossman, *Aemilia Lanyer*, 83-98; and John Rogers, “The Passion of a Female Literary Tradition: Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 63:4 (2000): 435-46. Rogers argues that Lanyer, and not Milton, should be understood as the first English poet to “ascribe [her] vocation to [her] fate at birth” (435).

<sup>30</sup> Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, in Sidney’s ‘*The Defence of Poesy*’ and *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 4.

which, from classical antiquity to Renaissance thought, nature was generally believed to be the source of art: “human art generally is dependent on and ancillary to nature: dependent because it imitates the functions, processes, and appearance of the natural world, takes its laws and principles from nature, and makes use of its material; ancillary because it often cooperates with natural processes in helping them to attain full or normal development, and more generally because it fills in the deficiencies of man’s natural state and environment.”<sup>31</sup> Nature, then, was perceived as a kind of raw material from which art was constructed. While art depended on nature, it also perfected nature. In Lanyer’s imagining, however, her poetry is not the kind of art that more learned, high-status people practice; rather, it is a natural poetry, connected to natural processes, and devoid of artifice.

The formal implications of Lanyer’s natural poetics are that it is less rigid than the kind of poetry pursued by those of great learning or high status. Rather than abiding by strict distinctions between genre and subject matter, Lanyer invites readers to place different sections of the volume in conversation with each other, rereading earlier parts with knowledge gained from later parts, and following thematic threads from section to section. This circuitous reading process is initiated in the volume’s very title. The phrase that forms the title of the poem and volume, “Hail God, King of the Jews,” was spoken in the Bible not by Christian believers but by Pontius Pilate and the soldiers who had custody over Jesus on the eve of his crucifixion; it was also placed on his cross.<sup>32</sup> John Rogers points to how “strange” the title of Lanyer’s volume and poem is, since it “invites the reader’s identification of the poet not with Christ or his champions

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<sup>31</sup> A. J. Close, “Commonplace Theories of Art and Nature in Classical Antiquity and in the Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 30:4 (Oct-Dec 1969): 467-86, 469.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 15:2-26.

but with his crucifiers.”<sup>33</sup> I contend that this title encourages active reading, since it reminds the reader that not everything should be read at face value. At the very end of the volume, in the address “To the doubtfull Reader,” the author provides a justification for the title: it

was delivered unto me in sleepe many yeares before I had any intent to write in this maner, and was quite out of my memory, untill I had written the Passion of Christ, when immediately it came into my remembrance . . . and thinking it a significant token, that I was appointed to performe this Worke, I gave the very same words I received in sleepe as the fittest Title I could devise for this Booke.

(139)

This explanation invites the reader to reconsider, and thus reread, the title, as well as other aspects of the work, such as the conversation between Pontius Pilate and his wife. Framing the volume as part of the poet’s spiritual calling, the address endows the poet with divine authority, encouraging readers to go back and read the work as part of a larger spiritual experience.

The entire volume thus lends itself to circling back, and each section accrues meaning as the reader places it in conversation with the others. In the sections that follow, I explore what happens when we read Lanyer’s volume this way; I work thematically through each section, allowing it to build on the others as I do. Reading Lanyer’s work this way allows us to explore the full stakes of her poetics of nature as a means of shaping expectations about how cultural status can be earned through the writing and reading of poetry.

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<sup>33</sup> Rogers, “The Passion,” 445. Rogers argues that this explanation of the title fits into what he sees as Lanyer’s “typological reading of literary history” (445).

*Natural Sovereignty: Social Status and the Poetics of Nature*

Lanyer most fully articulates her poetics of nature in the dedicatory poem addressed to Mary Sidney, Countess Dowager of Pembroke, where she explores how her poetry is different from, but not inferior to, the poetry of her social superiors. By 1611, the Countess of Pembroke was famous not only for her extensive patronage of English poets and writers, but for her own literary work. She had completed the psalm translation that her brother Philip had begun, and she was also instrumental in bringing his *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* into print. The Countess was a successful female literary figure—whose success was due, in great part, to her well-established social position. In Lanyer's dedicatory poem to the Countess, titled "The Authors Dreame," Lanyer brings social status to the fore, suggesting that there are poetic processes far more suited to lower-status people than to high-ranking people such as the Countess.

In this poem, Lanyer describes a dream-like experience in which she observed with "the eie of Reason" a "Lady whom *Minerva* chose, / To live with her in height of all respect" (6, 3-4). This lady is placed in "Honors chaire," and receives goddesses and nymphs who come to pay their respects and entertain her (8, 29-80). She is eventually revealed as the Countess of Pembroke. Soon the Countess, accompanied by her attendants, goes to a

sacred Spring where Art and Nature striv'd  
Which should remaine as Sov'raigne of the place;  
Whose antient quarrell being new reviv'd,  
Added fresh Beauty, gave farre greater Grace. (81-84)

Nymphs, goddesses, and the Countess of Pembroke all serve as judges over the contest. However, they quickly realize that neither Art nor Nature is superior: their "ravisht senses made them quickly know, / T'would be offensive either to displace" (87-89). The judges

therefore will'd they should for ever dwell,  
In perfit unity by this matchlesse Spring:  
Since 'twas impossible either should excell,  
Or her faire fellow in subjection bring.

But here in equall sov'raintie to live,  
Equall in state, equall in dignitie (89-94)

In depicting this contest and its results, Lanyer emphasizes equality above all. While Art and Nature are clearly different, and accomplish their ends through different means, they share a capacity to “ravish” the “sences” to equal degree. Their equal sovereignty does not mean that they are the same thing; it just means that neither is better than the other.

Lanyer then proceeds to use a metaphor of sugar and honey to concretize the difference between art and nature—and the difference between her own poetic approach and that of the Countess. Lanyer writes that she will now “repaire” to the Countess,

Presenting her the fruits of idle houres;  
Thogh many Books she writes that are more rare,  
Yet there is hony in the meanest flowres:

Which is both wholesome, and delights the taste:  
Though sugar be more finer, higher priz'd,  
Yet is the painefull Bee no whit disgrac'd,  
Nor her faire wax, or hony more despiz'd.

And though that learned damsell and the rest,  
Have in a higher style her Trophie fram'd;  
Yet these unlearned lines beeing my best,  
Of her great wisdom can no whit be blam'd. (193-204)

In aligning herself with the bee, Lanyer recalls the ode in which Horace claims, “Ego apīs Matinae / more modoque / grata carpentis thyma per laborem / plurimum circa nemus uvidique / Tiburis ripas operosa parvus / carmina fingo” (I, in the method and manner of the Matine bee, plucking pleasing thyme with utmost labor around the groves and banks of the watery Tibur, little me fashions painstaking songs).<sup>34</sup> Horace’s claim here is as apparently humble as his bee, appearing as it does at the end of a poem that honors the great lyric poet Pindar, whom, Horace writes, no one can rival or seek to rival. But although Horace claims that he is merely a bee to Pindar’s “swan” (“cycnum”), and reinforces his diminishment by describing himself as “parvus” (little), the poem as a whole seeks to elevate lyric poetry to the status of epic—a change that would also enhance Horace’s status.<sup>35</sup> Lanyer’s recalling of Horace’s bee positions her simultaneously as humble and ambitious—humble because of the small stature and “painfull” labor of the bee, and ambitious because of the link she creates between her own work and a long literary tradition of lyric poetry.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to its broader literary implications, Lanyer’s bee metaphor also has social implications. The metaphor compares Lanyer’s work to honey and the Countess’s to sugar. While insisting on their fundamental equality—both are sweet and delicious—she also

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<sup>34</sup> Horace, *Epodes and Odes: A New Annotated Latin Edition*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), Odes 4.2.27-32; translation mine.

<sup>35</sup> Horace, *Epodes and Odes*, Odes 4.2.25. At another point in the poem Horace imagines Pindar writing poems of praise for Caesar.

<sup>36</sup> For more on the bee metaphor as it relates to poetry, see Judith Dundas, *The Spider and the Bee: The Artistry of Spenser’s Faerie Queene* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

articulates important differences between them—differences that relate to their status connotations. In the early modern period, honey and sugar both connoted sweetness and were often called upon to serve the same medicinal function in medical texts. For example, a 1601 text calls for a dish “hauing beene confected in honie or sugar;”<sup>37</sup> a 1609 travel narrative refers to “water and Sugar, or hony;”<sup>38</sup> a 1609 medical text calls for “water and hony or sugar boiled together;”<sup>39</sup> and a 1612 travel narrative mentions a dish “seasoned with vinegar, leekes, honey, or sugar.”<sup>40</sup> However, while honey and sugar were considered equally sweet, they had very different status connotations. Sugar, which was man-made, refined, and imported into England from various exotic locales, was more expensive; honey, the result of a natural process involving home-grown bees, was more widely available to a broader sector of English society.<sup>41</sup> Sidney Wilfred Mintz writes that in this period sugar was generally associated with high-status circles: the “rich and powerful . . . derived an intense pleasure from their access to sugar – the purchase, display, consumption, and waste of sucrose in various forms – which involved social validation, affiliation and distinction.”<sup>42</sup> During the period in which Lanyer wrote, sugar was becoming

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<sup>37</sup> Pierre La Primaudaye, *The Third Volume of the French Academie* (London: Printed at Eliot’s Court Press, by George Bishop, 1601).

<sup>38</sup> William Biddulph, *The trauels of certaine Englishmen into Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythinia, Thracia, and to the Blacke Sea* (London: Thomas Haveland for William Aspley, 1609).

<sup>39</sup> Petrus Pomarius, *Enchiridion Medicum* (London: Henry Ballard for George Potter, 1609).

<sup>40</sup> Benevenuto, *The Passenger* (London: Thomas Snodham for John Stepneth, 1612).

<sup>41</sup> In *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), Sidney Wilfred Mintz writes, “Honey, of course, is an animal product, at least in the sense that its raw material is gathered from flowering plants by bees. ‘Sugar,’ particularly sucrose, is a vegetable product extracted by human ingenuity and technical achievement. And whereas honey was known to human beings at all levels of technical achievement the world over from a very early point in the historical record, sugar (sucrose) made from the sugar cane is a late product that spread slowly during the first millennium or so of its existence, and became widespread only during the past five hundred years” (16). On the elite connotations of sugar, he writes that by “the late seventeenth century,” sugar “became a desired good—consumed frequently by the wealthy, and soon to be afforded by many who would forgo important quantities of other foods in order to have it” (77).

<sup>42</sup> Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 154, quoted in Kim Hall, “Culinary Spaces, Colonial Spaces: The Gendering of Sugar in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture*:

more available, while retaining, in Kim Hall's estimation, its high-status connotations: Hall writes that "it was not until the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that sugar use began to spread beyond the wealthiest classes, presumably by those wanting to emulate a social elite."<sup>43</sup> Lanyer's poem uses the sugar metaphor to map social status onto literary production: just as the aristocracy is more likely to buy and consume sugar, so, Lanyer suggests, the "higher style" of the Countess's own poetry is more appropriate to her aristocratic literary milieu. In framing the Countess's poetry this way, Lanyer simultaneously honors and pushes against the Countess's literary standing. For while she praises the rarity of the Countess's verse, she also suggests that it is refined, imported, and not widely available.

In comparison, the author's work, like honey, is "less rare" than the Countess's sugar, an assertion that aligns honey with humility and grace. In this period, honey was often linked to the hard work it took the bees to produce it. Early modern texts refer to the "labouring hony be," and, like Lanyer, the "painfull Bee."<sup>44</sup> In suggesting a connection between her poetry and honey, Lanyer emphasizes her vocational relationship with poetry: just as the bee cannot do otherwise than produce honey, Lanyer cannot do otherwise than write her poems—no matter how much she struggles in the process. By suggesting that her poetry is not a leisure good, but rather a strenuous process necessary to her survival, Lanyer argues for the cultural importance of lower-status poets like herself. These are the homegrown poets, the ones who write from a deep urgency and who are far more capable of literary innovation, since they draw from their inner nature to produce their work.

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*Emerging Subjects*, ed. Valerie Traub et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 168-190, 187, n.15.

<sup>43</sup> Hall, "Culinary Spaces," 172.

<sup>44</sup> Henoch Clapham, *A Chronological Discourse Touching, 1 The Church. 2 Christ. 3 Anti-Christ. 4 Gog & Magog* (London: William White, 1609); William Barksted, *Mirrha the Mother of Adonis: Or, Lustes Prodegies* (London: E. A[lde] for Iohn Bache, 1607); and William Whately, *A Godlie Treatise, Intituled the View and Down-fall of Pride* (London: Thomas Creed for Iohn Deane and Iohn Bailly, 1602).



Lanyer's investment in the cultural importance of lower status people is developed throughout the *Salve Deus* volume, which engages in a sustained critique of the social system that assumes that people who have more worldly advantages are superior to those who do not. Lanyer regularly reminds her addressees, and by extension her readers, that God is ultimately responsible for whatever advantages they may have in status, wealth, or ability. For example, in the dedication to Katherine, the Countess of Suffolk, Lanyer writes

the times doe change,  
So are we subject to that fatall starre,  
.....  
Since what we have, we cannot count it ours:

For health, wealth, honour, sicknesse, death and all,  
Is in Gods powre, which makes us rise and fall (4; 10-12).

Lanyer suggests that social status is only one of many ways in a person can receive benefits from God. This enables Lanyer to assert the importance of her poetic project: for none else but God, she writes, "hath given me powre to write, / A subject fit for you to looke upon" (13-14). Thus Lanyer's poetic project exists on the same plane of importance as Suffolk's social status.

In her dedication to Anne, Countess of Dorset, Lanyer produces her most explicit and thoroughly developed discussion of social status, insisting that status alone has little intrinsic meaning or importance. First she claims that because "worldly treasure" and "worldly honours" are bestowed by human social institutions rather than God, they cannot help someone reach heaven:

Greatnesse is no sure frame to build upon,  
No worldly treasure can assure that place;

God makes both even, the Cottage with the Throne,  
All worldly honours there are counted base; (17-20)

By extension, Lanyer suggests that God values only the inner qualities that guide a virtuous life. Although worldly honors do not have spiritual significance, Lanyer suggests that they *could*—if only they were aligned with inner virtue:

Titles of honour which the world bestowes,  
To none but to the virtuous doth belong;  
As beauteous bowres where true worth should repose,  
And where his dwellings should be built most strong: (25-28)

Here Lanyer distinguishes between what is bestowed by the outside world and what rightly belongs to someone through divine grace. Her use of the word “should” twice in two lines suggests that the material considerations of the outside world often overwhelm the more inner qualities of divine grace. Lanyer continues with a pointed discussion of how noble titles have come to be dissociated from the inner virtues that they once signified:

What difference was there when the world began,  
Was it not Virtue that distinguisht all?  
All sprang but from one woman and one man,  
Then how doth Gentry come to rise and fall?  
Or who is he that very rightly can  
Distinguish of his birth, or tell at all,  
In what meane state his Ancestors have bin,  
Before some one of worth did honour win?

Whose successors, although they beare his name,  
Possessing not the riches of his minde,  
How doe we know they spring out of the same  
True stocke of honour, beeing not of that kind?

.....

If he that much enjoyes, doth little good,

We may suppose he comes not of that blood. (33-44; 47-48)

Here Lanyer asserts that “when the world began,” titles and virtue were linked with each other: a person’s nature determined everything. But over time, virtue and titles fell out of alignment, since people no longer had to demonstrate virtue to earn titles but could instead inherit them from their virtuous ancestors. Recalling the “true nobility” tradition, Lanyer suggests that if people inherit titles—the human-designed way of honoring virtue—they might not actually deserve them in the same way their ancestors did.<sup>45</sup> She therefore suggests that the people who now hold noble titles don’t necessarily deserve them, and therefore that titles are becoming increasingly devoid of meaning.

The relationship between titles of honor and inner virtue is given new significance in “Salve Deus,” where Lanyer repeatedly emphasizes the spiritual value of Christ’s poverty. For example, she writes:

Loe here thy great Humility was found,  
Beeing King of Heaven, and Monarch of the Earth,  
Yet well content to have thy Glory drownd,  
By beeing counted of so meane a berth;

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<sup>45</sup> See the Introduction for a more sustained discussion of the “true nobility” tradition in early modern English culture.

Grace, Love, and Mercy did so much abound,  
Thou entertaindst the Crosse, even to the death:  
And nam'dst thy selfe, the sonne of Man to be,  
To purge our pride by thy Humilitie. (473-80)

Here Lanyer juxtaposes Christ's status as "King of Heaven, and Monarch of the Earth" with his "meane . . . berth." Framing the stanza with the word "Humility" in the first and last lines, Lanyer emphasizes that Christ's greatness comes from his very willingness to adopt the humblest position in order to bring spiritual health to humanity. The example of Christ shows that worldly titles are far less important than inner grace bestowed by God.

Later in the poem, when she addresses the Countess of Cumberland, she enfolds the Countess into her earlier discussion of Christ:

Oft times hath he made triall of your love.  
And in your Faith hath tooke no small delight,  
By Crosses and Afflictions he doth prove,  
Yet still your heart remaineth firme and right; (1337-40)

Emphasizing the Cumberland's spiritual strength in the face of worldly affliction, Lanyer marks her as one whose nature proves her worthy of high honors. A little later, she continues:

Thou beeing thus rich, no riches do'st respect,  
Nor do'st thou care for any outward shewe;  
The proud that doe faire Virtues rules neglect,  
Desiring place, thou sittest them belowe:  
All wealth and honour thou do'st quite reject,  
If thou perceiv'st that once it prooves a foe

To virtue, learning, and the powres divine, (1385-91)

By juxtaposing two different meanings of the word “rich” within the same line, Lanyer urges her readers to shift their understanding of wealth from the worldly to the spiritual realm. She disparages “outward showe” and “wealth and honour,” highlighting instead the immense value of “virtue, learning, and the powres divine.” She also makes explicit the notion that people who “Desir[e] place” should be sat “belowe,” since their active striving in the realm of worldly power and riches suggests their neglect of inner virtue.

In “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer moves her discussion of outer show and inner virtue out of their allegorical and biblical contexts and into the context of contemporary England. She writes:

Unconstant Fortune, thou art most too blame,  
Who casts us downe into so lowe a frame:  
Where our great friends we cannot dayly see,  
So great a diffrence is there in degree.  
Many are placed in those Orbes of state,  
Parters in honour, so ordain’d by Fate;  
Neerer in show, yet farther off in love,  
In which, the lowest alwayes are above. (103-110)

Here, as in her earlier dedications, she suggests that the vagaries of fortune, rather than an actual difference in worth, is responsible for differentiating lower-status from higher-status people. No individual, of any rank, should be blamed for lowness, and thus title is not an adequate signifier of inner worth or lack thereof. Moreover, Lanyer suggests that there are areas, such as “love,” in which low-status people are superior to high-status people. Thus Lanyer not only argues for

recognizing the areas in which low-status people have more capacity than high-status people, but argues that the areas in which low-status people exceed high-status people are more important overall.

The volume thus ends on a note of defiance against the social structures that hold “the lowest” down. This note of defiance urges the reader to go back and reread the other sections of the volume. Moments where Lanyer seems to emphasize equality in difference, as with the equal sweetness of sugar and honey, now encourage a more radical reading. Her bee metaphor draws on the long literary tradition that linked bees with social equality. In his fourth Georgic, Virgil writes at length about the social structure of the beehive, likening it to the organization of citizens in an ideal society: “si parva licet componere magnis, / Cecropias innatus apes amor urget habendi munere quamque suo” (“If little things can be compared to great, innate desire to work for the common wealth inspires the bees, and each of them has his role”).<sup>46</sup> This smoothly functioning society can teach humans about how to structure their own societies, Virgil suggests: “solae communis natos, consortia tecta / urbis habent, magnisque agitant sub legibus aevum” (“They are the only ones who share their children in common parentage, the only ones to share in common the houses where they dwell; they live together under the rule of law”).<sup>47</sup> Lanyer’s bee metaphor, read in conversation with her statement about the superiority of lower-status people’s virtues, works not only to construct a new poetics but to define the basis of a new kind of social structure. In arguing for the value of her own poetic voice, Lanyer shows how writing—and reading—poetry outside of aristocratic circles has inherent dignity and, like the efforts of Virgil’s bees, can contribute to the common good.

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<sup>46</sup> Virgil, *The Georgics of Virgil: Bilingual Edition*, trans. David Ferry (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 154-55.

<sup>47</sup> Virgil and Ferry, *Georgics*, 152-53.

*Natural Origins: Women and the Poetics of Nature*

While much of Lanyer's volume concerns social status, it also encompasses gender—which is a kind of status within a patriarchal social structure. Lanyer suggests that just as people of lower status may have more access to virtue than their social superiors, women have a unique capacity for divine grace. This grace enables women to write poetry, use rhetoric, become learned, and spread the gospel. Throughout the volume, Lanyer focuses on the figures of Christ and Eve in order to assert women's religious and cultural value and argue for the importance of a greater presence of women in public life. She does this not by suggesting that women can participate in public life in the same way that men do, but by claiming that women provide a unique perspective, derived from natural grace, that can aid public discourse—as long as the agents of that discourse take it seriously.<sup>48</sup>

In her dedicatory address to “the Vertuous Reader,” Lanyer reminds her readers that Christ, the only being who could determine the circumstances of his own entry into the world, chose, “from the time of his conception, till the houre of his death, to be begotten of a woman, borne of a woman, nourished of a woman, obedient to a woman . . .” (ll. 42-44). Citing these lines, Su Fang Ng argues persuasively that, “Reversing Biblical tradition that has the woman created from the man's rib-bone, Lanyer makes woman the origin of man and, more importantly, the genesis of his salvation.”<sup>49</sup> And I suggest that in doing so, Lanyer de-emphasizes God's artistry in creating Eve from Adam's rib, giving prominence instead to the natural process of childbirth—and, alongside that, to the natural empathy that exists between Christ and women.

For Christ demonstrated an affinity for women not only during his early years; Lanyer

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<sup>48</sup> Rogers argues that “while we might be tempted to think that Lanyer is criticizing the patriarchal social conditions that nullify the efficacy of female speech, the poem itself seems largely to question the assumption that female speech—indeed, any original speech—might succeed in effecting positive change” (“The Passion,” 440-41). However, I see Lanyer's work as being ultimately more hopeful.

<sup>49</sup> Ng, “Politics of Praise, 439.

emphasizes that as an adult “he healed woman, pardoned women, comforted women: yea, even when he was in his greatest agonie and bloodie sweat, going to be crucified, and also in the last houre of his death, tooke care to dispose of a woman: after his resurrection, appeared first to a woman, sent a woman to declare his most glorious resurrection to the rest of his Disciples” (45-50). Thus he gave women the role of disciple as well as visionary.

Later in “Salve Deus,” Lanyer demonstrates the importance of women’s spirit when she depicts Pontius Pilate’s wife pleading with her husband to save Christ’s life. Acknowledging Christ as “her Saviour,” Pilate’s wife urges her husband to “Condemne not him that must thy Saviour be” (752, 757). Because she has already converted to Christianity, Pilate’s wife has moral and spiritual superiority over her husband, who, for all his intelligence and knowledge, fails to see in Christ what his wife sees. In Pilate’s wife, Lanyer shows how women’s attunement to spiritual grace might be far more effective in matters of religion than more traditionally masculine forms of knowledge: Pilate’s wife implores her husband to “Doe not the thing that goes against thy heart,” suggesting that if he listened to his heart, he would understand things that he is otherwise unable to perceive (756).

Women’s access to grace, Lanyer suggests, allows them to perceive inner virtue in ways men cannot. Despite the pleading of his wife, and although he is “a man of knowledge, powre, and might,” Pilate sentences Christ to die (931). In Lanyer’s estimation, Pilate is a “faultie Judge” who “condemnes the Innocent” (938). Later Lanyer depicts another moment where men fail to recognize Christ’s innocence: “They that had seene this pitifull Procession, . . . Might thinke he [Christ] answered for some great transgression, . . . He plainly shewed that his own profession / Was virtue, patience, grace, love, piety” (953, 955, 957-78). Although his face “plainely shewed” his virtues, the men either cannot or simply refuse to read it that way. As



Christ comes to die, he only interacts with the women, whose “cries inforced mercie, grace, and love / From him, whom greatest Princes could not moove / To speake one word” (975-77). In dramatizing such deep empathy between women and Christ at such a crucial moment, Lanyer argues that the ways women are different from men make them more capable of receiving God’s word and communicating it to others. As with her investigation of social status, Lanyer shows how women’s differences from the more socially empowered men enable them to contribute to human society in vitally important ways, filling a need that cannot be otherwise addressed.

In “The Description of Cooke-ham,” Lanyer shows how women’s capacity for grace can influence the contemporary world of early modern England. She presents the Countess of Cumberland and her daughter, in their natural home of Cooke-ham, as the site of continuity between the biblical, classical, and contemporary worlds. Lanyer depicts the land surrounding Cooke-ham as a classical and then Edenic paradise: Philomela, Phoenix, and Phebus surround the Countess and her daughter, suggesting a communion with the classical world. Then Lanyer links the Countess with Christ and other biblical figures:

In these sweet woods how often did you walke,  
With Christ and his Apostles there to talke;  
Placing his holy Writ in some faire tree,  
To meditate what you therein did see:  
With *Moyeses* you did mount his holy Hill,  
To know his pleasure, and performe his Will.  
With lovely *David* you did often sing,  
His holy Hymnes to Heavens Eternall King. (81-88)

In these lines, Lanyer suggests that the Countess's virtues are aligned with those of originary male biblical figures. Because she is uniquely capable of communing with them, she has a cultural superiority over those who have less capacity for grace. Moreover, the Countess shows her capacity for discipleship and learning through her deep engagement with the "holy Writ" and the Bible's "Hymnes." Within the context of perfect communion with classical and biblical precedent, the Countess and her daughter take part in shaping England's future:

And that sweet Lady sprung from *Cliffords* race,  
Of noble *Bedfords* blood, faire steame of Grace;  
To honourable *Dorset* now espows'd,  
In whose faire breast true virtue then was hous'd (93-96)

These lines, in which Anne Dorset becomes the line of continuity between Clifford, Bedford, and Dorset, reflect back to the beginning of the volume: as in the dedication to Queen Anne, Lanyer emphasizes the importance of women in crafting a line of male descent. And in the context of the perfect world she has created at Cooke-ham, she also suggests that women provide something unique that men do not. These moments recall Lanyer's discussion of her own poetic project, earlier in "Salve Deus," in which she writes,

But my deare Muse, now whither wouldst thou flie,  
Above the pitch of thy appointed straine?  
With *Icarus* thou seekest now to trie,  
Not waxen wings, but thy poore barren Braine,  
.....  
But yet the Weaker thou doest seeme to be  
In Sexe, or Sence, the more his Glory shines,

That doth infuze such powerfull Grace in thee,

To shew thy Love in these few humble Lines; (273-76; 289-92)

Here she connects Christ's affinity for women with her own poetic project. For even though it seems that she is reaching, like Icarus and the over-ambitious Doctor Faustus, beyond her "appointed straine," she is not: Christ's affinity for people like her, who seem "Weaker" in "Sexe, or Sence," not only justifies, but demands that she pursue this work. Her phrasing here suggests that as a woman she experiences the world in a way that makes her particularly attuned to receiving Christ's grace and telling his story. Claiming poetic inspiration from Christ's grace, she argues that her poetic endeavors are necessary and important.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, reading her poetry can be a way for women to develop an understanding of their own cultural value as separate from, but by no means inferior to, the value long understood to be held by men.

### *The Status of Lanyer's Poetic Project*

As her readers are invited to explore the stakes of her poetics of nature, the stakes of Lanyer's own poetic project unfold. Lanyer frames her project most explicitly through exploring her relationship with the Countess of Cumberland.<sup>51</sup> The Countess of Cumberland is the only figure to be mentioned by name in each section of the volume; she functions as a through-line, her role expanding over the course of the volume from patron/dedicatee to poetic addressee to something akin to a character. Lanyer uses this changing role to emphasize her volume's disruption of generic categories, and to point out how poetry can be used to effect social change.

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<sup>50</sup> Theresa Tinkle has explored similar themes of the idea of natural authority in *Gender and Power in Medieval Exegesis* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> There is no evidence that the historical Lanyer had any relationship with the Countess of Cumberland, although she certainly moved in the circles that could have enabled such access. If this story is entirely fictional, it adds a compelling twist to Lanyer's construction of the relationship between herself and her social superiors: it suggests that she wants to build her own poetic persona in conversation with, and in contrast to, the social position of the Countess.

In the dedication to the Countess, Lanyer develops a relationship between her worldly position and her poetic project: she writes,

Right Honourable and Excellent Lady, I may say with Saint *Peter*, *Silver nor gold have I none, but such as I have, that give I you:* for having neither rich pearles of India, nor fine gold of Arabia, nor diamonds of inestimable value; neither those rich treasures, Arramaticall Gums, incense, and sweet odours, which were presented by those Kingly Philosophers to the babe Jesus I present unto you even our Lord Jesus himselfe, whose infinit value is not to be comprehended within the weake imagination or wit of man: and as Saint *Peter* gave health to the body, so I deliver you the health of the soule; which is this most pretious pearle of all perfection, this rich diamond of devotion, this perfect gold growing in the veines of that excellent earth of the most blessed Paradice, wherein our second *Adam* had his restlesse habitation. (34, ll. 1-14)

In these lines, she acknowledges that her own worldly position is disadvantageous compared to that of others; however, she turns the conversation around to assert that what she does have is more meaningful. Rather than worldly wealth, she has the wealth of the soul. While there are many angles from which to examine this statement, I see it as mapping onto Lanyer's discussion of nature: whereas others have man-made riches, or riches that human society has determined to be riches, her own riches come from spiritual strength, from within. Here, this investigation also has bearing on the economics of poetry: poetry can do something important for the world, and in doing so, can have great value, even if that value cannot be counted as easily as worldly wealth. Putting poetry into economic terms allows Lanyer to argue that her poetic project is important. She elaborates on this idea toward the end of the dedication, when she writes,

Therefore good Madame, . . . I deliver the inestimable treasure of all elected  
soules, to bee perused at convenient times; as also, the mirrour of your most  
worthy minde, which may remaine in the world many yeares longer than your  
Honour, or my selfe can live, to be a light unto those that come after (35, ll. 27-  
33)

In writing “I deliver the inestimable treasure of all elected souls,” Lanyer merges her poem with Christ himself, as she did earlier, when she stated that her poem “present[s]” to the Countess “even our Lord Jesus himselfe.” What is being delivered to the Countess is simultaneously the poem and the subject of the poem. And a few lines later, when she expresses the wish that her poem will last for a long time, “to be a light unto those that come after,” she again implicitly links her poem with Christ. By associating her poem with Christ, Lanyer shows how her poetic project can help her readers grow spiritually. In imagining that her poem will last far longer than herself or her dedicatee, Lanyer claims that it does important cultural work from which others—unknown to her—will benefit long after she is dead.

In “Salve Deus” Lanyer also relies on Christ’s supremacy to establish the value of her own poetic agenda. After explicitly articulating that the poem is directed toward the Countess, Lanyer writes,

And pardon (Madame) though I do not write  
Those praisefull lines of that delightful place,  
As you commaunded me in that faire night,  
When shining *Phoebe* gave so great a grace,  
Presenting *Paradice* to your sweet sight (17-21)

In these lines, Lanyer sets a scene in which the Countess asks her to write a poem praising the “*Paradice*” before them. Using specific language to depict “*that faire night*,” under the moonlight (“shining *Phoebe*”) Lanyer gives a glimpse of what such a poem would look like, inviting her readers to imagine such a conversation taking place in such a setting. However, she ultimately refuses to write that poem of praise. The rejected command hangs in the air as the scene fades from the Countess’s earthly “*Paradice*” to the spiritual paradise offered by Christ. In the lines that follow, Lanyer uses a series of dependent clauses to construct a transition so fluid that it is unclear at what point the scene shifts from “*that faire night*” with the Countess to a more interior discussion of Christ. About a hundred lines later, Lanyer comes back to the Countess, apologizing for that shift:

Pardon (good Madame) though I have digrest  
From what I doe intend to write of thee,  
To set his glorie forth whom thou lov’st best,  
Whose wondrous works no mortall eie can see; (145-48)

This apology, however, seems more pro forma than sincere, for it implies that writing about Christ is in fact more important than writing whatever the Countess had wanted her to write. A being far higher than the Countess inspired Lanyer’s poetic creation.

Only when she has finished writing “*Salve Deus*” does Lanyer turn to the poem that, it seems, the Countess had originally “commaunded” her to write. But even when she does, it is fully on her own terms: the poem begins,

Farewell (sweet *Cooke-ham*) where I first obtain’d  
Grace from that Grace where perfit Grace remain’d;  
And where the Muses gave their full consent,

I should have powre the virtuous to content: (1-4)

Although the poem starts with a farewell to the place that is the subject of the poem, Lanyer quickly turns the focus to herself as poet: it is the place where “*I first obtain’d*,” and the place where the Muses gave authority to Lanyer’s voice. In effect, Lanyer does not merely write about Cooke-ham for the Countess’s sake; she writes about it for the sake of her own poetic endeavors.

Throughout the poem, Lanyer constructs a deep sympathy between the Countess and Cooke-ham’s house and lands, a sympathy that, at its surface, honors the Countess’s good stewardship:

Oh how (me thought) against you thither came,  
Each part did seeme some new delight to frame!  
The House receiv’d all ornaments to grace it,  
And would indure no foulness to deface it.  
The Walkes put on their summer Liveries,  
And all things else did hold like similies:  
The Trees with leaves, with fruits, with flowers clad,  
Embrac’d each other, seeming to be glad,  
Turning themselves to beauteous Canopies,  
To shade the bright Sunne from your brighter eies:  
The cristall Streames with silver spangles graced,  
While by the glorious Sunne they were embraced:  
The little Birds in chirping notes did sing,  
To entertaine both You and that sweet Spring. (17-30)

Here both the house and the natural world surrounding Cooke-ham direct themselves to the Countess's wellbeing, in a trope that adheres to standard forms of flattery within the patronage tradition. The pull of the Countess's power is strong enough to alter the natural order of things: rather than moving toward their own self-perpetuation, in the Aristotelian understanding of nature, the trees, the streams, and the birds all move toward serving the Countess's pleasure, orienting to the Countess as to the sun. And when the Countess leaves Cooke-ham, the natural world sympathetically adopts the Countess's sorrow, sorrowing itself at her departure:

The trees that were so glorious in our view,  
Forsooke both flowres and fruit, when once they knew  
Of your depart, their very leaves did wither,  
Changing their colours as they grewe together.  
.....  
The floures that on the banks and walkes did grow,  
Crept in the ground, the Grasse did weepe for woe.  
The Windes and Waters seem'd to chide together,  
Because you went away they know not whither;  
And those sweet Brookes that ranne so faire and cleare,  
With griefe and trouble wrinckled did appeare.  
Those pretty Birds that wonted were to sing,  
Now neither sing, nor chirp, nor use their wing; (133-36; 179-86)

In depicting this idealized empathy between a lady and her manor, Lanyer's poem initially seems to celebrate the Countess's aristocratic virtues.



Yet the poem also resists this surface reading. For by framing the poem as a farewell to Cooke-ham, Lanyer hints at the unsustainability of the ideal relationship between land and landowner. Scholars have maintained that this unsustainability works to destabilize the social structures that the Countess represents. Lisa Schnell, for example, claims that “Cooke-ham” “is replete with reminders of the oppressive social structures that facilitate [the Countess’s] virtue” (31).<sup>52</sup> However, I contend that this unsustainability also works to emphasize Lanyer’s own poetic craft. The poem ends with the following lines:

This last farewell to *Cooke-ham* here I give,  
When I am dead thy name in this may live,  
Wherein I have perform’d her noble hest,  
Whose virtues lodge in my unworthy breast,  
And ever shall, so long as life remains,  
Tying my heart to her by those rich chaines. (205-210)

In suggesting that Cookham itself will “live” in her poem, Lanyer gives to her poetry the power of creating a world. This ending invites the reader to reexamine the earlier parts of the poem. Now, in addition to celebrating the empathetic relationship between the Countess and her estate, the poem reveals an investment in Lanyer’s poetic craft in constructing this world. In the earlier lines, when Lanyer writes that “The Walkes put on their summer Liveries, / And all things else did hold like similies,” her use of the word “similie” reminds the reader that her descriptions are figurative constructions: for example, Lanyer the poet *makes* the walks put on liveries because she is writing a poem praising the Countess. Similarly, toward the end of the poem, when Lanyer writes of the natural world withering in response to the Countess’s departure, her images evoke

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<sup>52</sup> Much of this scholarship focuses less on the relationship between land and landowner than on patron and client: Ng, for example, argues that Lanyer “tellingly uses an idealized version of the patron-client relationship in order to critique her present circumstances” (“Politics of Praise,” 444).

the changing of the seasons: in addition to the flowers dying and the birds moving away, the trees' leaves are "Changing their colours." These lines suggest that Lanyer the poet is choosing to link the natural decay of autumn to the Countess's departure for greater rhetorical effect. In harnessing natural processes for her own rhetorical purposes, Lanyer gives herself power to create a world through poetry.

The end of the poem says far more about the power of poetry than the power of the Countess's aristocratic relationship with her land: only through poetry will Cooke-ham live on, and only through poetry will the Countess's virtues be known. At the beginning of the poem, Lanyer instructs the Countess, "Vouchsafe to thinke upon those pleasures past, / As fleeting worldly Joyes that could not last" (13-14). And at the end, she asserts, like Shakespeare does in his sonnets, "When I am dead thy name in this may live": read together, these lines point to the fleeting quality of material things, and the staying power of poetry.<sup>53</sup> In calling attention to the constructedness of the entire poem, "The Description of Cooke-ham" becomes not simply about Cooke-ham and the Countess, but about the cultural value of Lanyer's poetic project, and poetry in general.

In these moments, we can see how the meandering nature of this poetry volume, and the way it disrupts traditional subjects and forms, participates in the crafting of a "natural" poetics. Lanyer not only refuses to conform to generic expectations established by her social superiors; she argues that her own poetics offers something new and different that people need to hear.

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<sup>53</sup> Lisa Schnell writes, "Sounding uncannily like her most celebrated contemporary, who concludes the work that represents his own retrospective with the lines 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee,' Lanyer reminds the countess that in the end Cooke-ham is *only* the poem" ("So Great a Diffrence" 34). Schnell is primarily concerned with how Lanyer demonstrates ambivalence, and even resistance, to the patronage structures that circumscribed her poetic endeavors. I differ with Schnell in the way I see Lanyer working to construct a poetics by which others of similar standing can participate in literary culture. After all, Shakespeare is not the only one—by far—to have written such lines, nor do such lines only resonate in the context of patronage: the construction goes back to the classical tradition.

Through this poetics, Lanyer crafts a means by which lower status people and women can participate in English culture by reshaping it.<sup>54</sup> Instead of having to speak the language of those traditionally in power, they can assert the validity of their own kind of language. And in doing so, they can empower readers through ideas and themes to which people in traditional positions of power would not otherwise have access.

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<sup>54</sup> At least two subsequent writers of such backgrounds invoked a natural poetics very similar to Lanyer's: the Thames ferryman and poet-aspirant John Taylor adopts it in his 1614 work *The Nipping and Snipping of Abuses*, when he writes: "But wherefore doe I take a Schollers part, / That haue no grounds or Axioms of Art: / That am in Poesie an artlesse creature, / That haue no learning but the booke of Nature" (*The Nipping and Snipping of Abuses* [London: Ed. Griffin for Nathaniel Butter, 1614], np.). In 1656, Margaret Cavendish wrote of the form and style of her *Nature's Pictures Drawn*, that "my will was forced by my Naturall Inclinations;" moreover, she apologizes that "though my work is of Comickall, Romancicall, Historicall and Morall discourses, yet I could not place them so exactly into severall Books, or parts as I would, but am forced to mix them one amongst another," a generic mixing reminiscent of Lanyer's ("To the Reader," in *Nature's Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the life Written by the Thrice Noble, Illustrious and Excellent Princess, the Lady Marchioness of Newcastle* [London: for J. Martin and J. Allestrye, 1656], np.).

## Chapter 4

### Not Clothes but Brains: Display, Status, and Reading in Ben Jonson's *The New Inn*

When Ben Jonson's play *The New Inn* premiered at Blackfriars in 1629, it was an immediate failure, and its anticipated court performance never took place.<sup>1</sup> When, two years later, Jonson arranged for the play to be printed, he provocatively called attention to this failure through the title page and other paratextual material.<sup>2</sup> This material became part of the play's legacy: reproduced verbatim in future printings of *The New Inn*, it ensured that the play would be handed down to posterity attached to the history of its failure—which suggests that there was something important in the failure itself that Jonson wanted to emphasize.<sup>3</sup> The title page reads:

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<sup>1</sup> The Cambridge editors dismiss as “unsubstantiated” William Gifford's nineteenth-century claim that *The New Inn* was “not heard to its conclusion” at its first performance (David Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, ed., *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 6 [Cambridge U. Press, 2012], 169; William Gifford, ed., *The Works of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 5 [London: Bickers and Son, Henry Sotheran and Co., 1875], 298). The evidence for an intended court performance seems to come mostly from the separate epilogue to the play, which is titled, “Another Epilogue there was made for the play in the poet's defence, but the play lived not in opinion to have it spoken,” and addresses “the King and Queen and court” (Ben Jonson, *The New Inn*, ed. Julie Sanders, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 167-313, 309, l. 4). Whether a court performance was canceled after the play's failure, or whether the option simply “never materialised,” as Martin Butler characterizes it, is unclear (Martin Butler, ed., *The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson*, Vol. 2 [Cambridge U. Press, 1989], 300; Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 167).

<sup>2</sup> The Cambridge editors write, “Evidence from collations suggests that Jonson was involved in the proofreading” of the publication (Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 168). There is no evidence that Jonson did not write the paratextual material himself.

<sup>3</sup> According to David M. Bergeron, dedicatory epistles to a printed play were not usually changed over time, “no matter how many subsequent editions the play might have,” and no matter whether a writer's circumstances changed or a dedicatee died (David M. Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570-1640* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006], 6-7). *The New Inn* proved no exception to this practice, as Jonson must have anticipated. For example, when a new edition of Jonson's works, including *The New Inn*, was printed in 1692, the octavo's paratextual material was preserved verbatim (Ben Jonson, *The*

THE  
 NEVV INNE.  
 OR,  
 The light Heart.  
 A COMOEDY.  
 As it was neuer acted, but most  
 negligently play'd, by some,  
 the Kings Seruants.  
 And more squeamishly beheld, and censur-  
 ed by others, the Kings Subiects.  
 1629.  
 Now, at last, set at liberty to the Readers, his Ma<sup>ties</sup>  
 Seruants, and Subiects, to be iudg'd.  
 1631.  
 By the Author, B. Ionson.  
 Hor. . . . *me lectori credere malle*:  
*Quam spectatoris fastidia ferre superbi*<sup>4</sup>

This contentious phrasing proclaims the superiority of readers to spectators, asserting that while the original spectators (aided by the poor work of the players) failed to judge Jonson's play fairly, its print readers are fully equipped to do so. The Latin epigram, borrowed from Horace, lends classical weight to the assertion.<sup>5</sup> This was not the first time Jonson articulated the notion that reading a play was intellectually superior to attending live theater, and certainly not the first time he defiantly sought print for a play that had failed on the stage; scholars therefore tend to read this title page in the context of Jonson's anti-theatrical sentiments and his mounting personal frustrations as he succumbed to financial troubles and ill health toward the end of his

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*Works of Ben Jonson* [London: Thomas Hodgkin, for H. Herringman, E. Brewster, T. Bassett, R. Chiswell, M. Wotton, G. Conyers, 1692], Early English Books Online).

<sup>4</sup> Ben Jonson, *The New Inn* (London: Thomas Harper, for Thomas Alchorne, 1631. Early English Books Online.) Title page.

<sup>5</sup> "I would rather trust myself to a reader than bear the squeamishness of a proud spectator" (translation mine). The text is somewhat altered from the original Horace, Epistles, 2.1.214-25, which reads, "Verum age et his, qui se lectori credere malunt, / Quam spectatoris fastidia ferre superbi" ("And truly pay attention to these ones, who prefer to trust to a reader than to bear the squeamishness of a proud spectator," translation mine) (Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 177). The word "fastidium," used to describe the spectators, can be translated as "squeamishness," "distaste," "disgust," "aversion," "disdain," "pride" ("Fastidium," *Collins Latin Dictionary* [New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996], 140).

life.<sup>6</sup> In their reckoning, calling attention to the play's failure was a consequence of hurt pride. However, reading the play's front matter in this context obscures the positive ways Jonson frames reading itself, and the broader implications of this framing.

In claiming that *The New Inn* is “set at liberty . . . to be iudg'd” by its readers, the title page asserts strong faith in its readers' capacity for judgment. Judgment, the ability to distinguish substance from illusion and appropriately assess that substance's moral and ethical value, was a lifelong preoccupation of Jonson's. In order to exert good judgment, Jonson argued at one point, a person must use “election and a mean,” or in other words, discrimination and judiciousness, forms of discernment that require the exercise of intelligence and understanding.<sup>7</sup> Jonson was invested in the labor that this kind of judgment required; for example, in an epigram dedicated to Benjamin Rudyerd, he writes,

Writing thyself, or judging others' writ,

I know not which thou'st most, candour or wit;

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<sup>6</sup> Jonson printed *Catiline His Conspiracy* and *Sejanus His Fall* despite poor audience reception; in the 1605 printing of *Sejanus*, he refers to his work as a “Poëme” and defends his choices to disregard certain narrative expectations about tragedies such as the unity of time and the chorus, and his choice to use Latin quotations (Ben Jonson, *Sejanus his fall* [London: G. Elld, for Thomas Thorpe, 1605], Early English Books Online). Similarly, in the 1611 printing of *Catiline*, he refers to the play as “a legitimate Poëm. I must call it so, against all noise of opinion” (Ben Jonson, *Catiline his conspiracy* [London: [William Stansby?] for Walter Burre, 1611], Early English Books Online), “Dedication to Pembroke.” His first “Ode to Himself” urges himself to “Make not thyself a page / To that strumpet the stage, / But sing high and aloof” (Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 310-313, ll. 33-35). Moreover, in including his plays in his collected *Workes* of 1616, which often includes marginal comments alongside the text, he suggested that plays were, in some part at least, designed to be read. On Jonson's late-career and financial difficulties, see Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford U. Press, 2011), 382-383; 399-401; Bergeron, *Textual Patronage*, 137; and Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 168-69. On Jonson's anti-theatricalism, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (U. of California Press, 1981), 132-54; Joseph Loewenstein, *Ben Jonson and Possessive Authorship* (Cambridge U. Press, 2002), 194; Bergeron, *Textual Patronage*, 136-37; and Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 413-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ben Jonson, “To the Reader,” in *The Alchemist*. Peter Holland and William Sherman, eds., in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 3, 543-710, 558, l. 25. Throughout this essay, quotations of Jonson's work are taken from Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, 7 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012).

But both thou'st so, as who affects the state

Of the best writer and judge should emulate.<sup>8</sup>

By giving the phrase “judging others’ writ” a weightier iambic rhythm than the swift trochee that begins “Writing thyself,” Jonson forces his reader to pause over the word “judging,” emphasizing its importance. In the next two lines, Jonson claims that judging requires just as much skill as writing: both require candor and wit, and both earn his equal respect. In another poem, “An Epistle to Master John Selden,” Jonson expresses what an honor it is to be asked for his judgment:

Your book, my Selden, I have read, and much

Was trusted that you thought my judgement such

To ask it<sup>9</sup>

Here he asserts that submitting one’s work to the judgment of a reader is an indication of deep respect, because doing so implies that the reader has the intelligence and skill necessary to judge that work well. The title page of *The New Inn* articulates such respect toward all of its readers, apparently without exception. And it does so not because of *who* those readers might be—since they come from the exact same social pool as the faulty spectators and players, the King’s “Seruants, and Subiects”—but rather because of *how* they approach the text. The title page suggests that there is something about reading itself, rather than other forms of cultural engagement, that works hand-in-hand with the cultivation of the inner merit necessary for good judgment.

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Jonson, “To the Same,” in *Epigrams*, ed. Colin Burrow, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 5, 101-198, ll. 1-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Jonson, “Epistle to Master John Selden,” in *The Underwood*, ed. Colin Burrow, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 7, 71-295, 114, ll. 5-7.

*The New Inn*'s title page did not make these claims in isolation; rather, the claims were connected to a broader debate that took place among Jonson and his literary peers in the years following the play's initial failure. This chapter analyzes *The New Inn* as well as the flurry of poetic writing and circulation that occurred in response to its failure. In doing so, it traces mid-seventeenth-century English concerns about the relationship between inner merit and outer display. The debate about *The New Inn*, I argue, articulated broader concerns about a culture in which there was a growing polarity between display and substance, such that traditional markers of cultural authority were increasingly revealed as empty signifiers. In emphasizing the importance of reading well, Jonson and his peers articulated a concrete way that people could resist this trend of empty display and thereby challenge existing structures of authority.

#### *The New Inn and True Nobility*

Jonson's upbringing had primed him to value inner merit more highly than outer signifiers. As the step-son of a brick-layer, Jonson was by no means guaranteed a gentleman's education, and it was only through a scholarship that he attended the Westminster School, which received support from Queen Elizabeth "to attract talented children from poorer families."<sup>10</sup> According to Ian Donaldson, the Westminster School was remarkably egalitarian for the age: under the direction of William Camden, who believed that "families were to be valued for their accomplishments, not for their antiquity," the school "set the sons of squires, lawyers, clergy, tradespeople, artisans, and aristocrats on a relatively equal social footing, its gradations depending less upon birth and wealth than upon intellectual merit."<sup>11</sup> This setting, combined with

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<sup>10</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 71.



Jonson's own social position and expansive intellect, seem to have cultivated in Jonson a lifelong investment in the idea that intelligence and ability were as culturally valuable as social status.

This investment in ability was implicated in Jonson's understanding of the relationship between substance and display. In one of his poems that addresses this issue, the "Epistle, Answering to One That Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben," Jonson writes that he seeks as friends only those who pursue a path of centered virtue:

... if I have any friendships sent  
Such as are square, well-tagged, and permanent,  
Not built with canvas, paper, and false lights,  
As are the glorious scenes at the great sights;  
And that there be no fevery heats nor colds,  
Oily expansions, or shrunk dirty folds,  
But all so clear, and led by reason's flame,  
As but to stumble in her sight were shame;  
These I will honour, love, embrace, and serve<sup>12</sup>

The extended metaphor criticizes people who claim to be what they are not, just as the cheap materials of stage scenery deliberately fool the eye by posing as finery. While this metaphor refers specifically to court masques, it also articulates the dangers of illusion more generally: in equating false people with stage scenery, Jonson suggests that illusion designed to awe is as morally problematic as illusion meant to deceive, since both command the viewer's attention while concealing the true substance beneath—or the absence of such substance.<sup>13</sup> This metaphor

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<sup>12</sup> Ben Jonson, "Epistle Answering to One That Asked to be Sealed of the Tribe of Ben," in Burrow, ed., *The Underwood*, 188-191, ll. 63-71.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong argue that Jonson's quarrel with Jones centered on their very different understanding of what masques should do: for Jonson, they should be "the mirrors of man's life,"

suggests why Jonson was uncomfortable with visual display: it necessarily occluded deeper moral or intellectual values.

*The New Inn* itself presented pointed satire about the relationship between social status and inner worth that laid the groundwork for the debate that would follow its failure. Blackfriars Theater, where *The New Inn* was performed, was known at the time as a site of social performing, a feature that Jonson had called attention to in previous work. For example, in *The Devil is an Ass*, the character Fitzdotterel says:

Today, I go to the Blackfriars Playhouse,  
Sit i'the view, salute all my acquaintance,  
Rise up between the acts, let fall my cloak,  
Publish a handsome man, and a rich suit—  
As that's a special end, why we go thither,  
All that pretend to stand for't o'the stage.  
The ladies ask, who's that? For they do come  
To see us, love, as we do to see them.<sup>14</sup>

In this passage, Fitzdotterel suggests that the theater is not so much a space of literary or dramatic endeavor as it is a space of social performing and social striving, where he and other audience members seek to present themselves as elegant, stylish, and affluent, gaining the attention of fellow audience members by sitting in highly visible seats and moving around the theater between the acts. Similarly, in a satirical 1609 work *The Gvls Horne-booke*, Thomas Dekker describes his theater-going gull as a “fetherd *Estridge*,” wearing “new Satten,” who

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whereas for Jones, they were “nothing else but pictures with light and motion;” “Jonson’s ethical assertion is set against Jones’s aesthetic vision” in a way that the two artists never reconciled (*Inigo Jones: The Theatre of the Stuart Court, Vol. 1* [Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1973], 2).

<sup>14</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Devil Is an Ass*, ed. Anthony Parr, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition, Vol. 4*, 479-609, 1.6.31-38.

deliberately chooses to sit on the stage—not to be closest to the play’s action, but to benefit from the stage lights, which would illuminate his clothing for all to see.<sup>15</sup>

As Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass have discussed, the clothing trade in London was growing rapidly during this period, bringing about changes in the way people thought about what clothing meant and who could wear it.<sup>16</sup> Sumptuary laws had long regulated the wearing of fabrics such as satin, silk, velvet, taffeta, and damask; cloth made with gold, silver, or tinsel; certain kinds of fur; and colors such as crimson, scarlet, and blue.<sup>17</sup> Most of these types of clothing were reserved for noblemen of various ranks; Ann Jennalie Cook cites a moment in Thomas Middleton’s play *Your Five Gallants* in which a character uses the word “satin” as synecdoche for “gentleman.”<sup>18</sup> However, the increasing wealth of the merchant classes through the growth of commercial trade was making it easier for non-titled people to buy and wear expensive clothes; moreover, members of the aristocracy did not always have the ready money to wear such clothes.<sup>19</sup> Early in James’ reign, the sumptuary laws were allowed to lapse,

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Dekker, *The Gvls Horne-booke* (London: [Nicholas Okes] for R. S[ergier?], 1609), Early English Books Online.

<sup>16</sup> The clothing trade grew at a rapid rate in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass write, “Between 1530 and 1609, 11,201 people were apprenticed to eleven major companies (including the main victualling companies) in the City of London. During the same period, 19,913 people (nearly *twice* as many) apprenticed with four of the major cloth and clothing companies (the Clothworkers, the Drapers, the Haberdashers, and the Merchant Taylors). . . . Between 1550 and 1609, the number of apprentices in the five major victualling companies increased by 132 percent; in the Merchant Taylors, the number increased by 496 percent” (17, citing Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 3).

<sup>17</sup> A proclamation by Elizabeth in 1559 gave detailed information not only about what fabrics could be worn by different ranks but how those fabrics could be used: for example, people under the rank of knight were forbidden “velvet, otherwise than in jackets, doublets, etc.” (*Tudor Royal Proclamations: Volume II, The Later Tudors [1553-1587]*, Ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, c. s. v. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 138).

<sup>18</sup> Ann Jennalie Cook, *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London, 1576-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Cook, *Privileged Playgoers*, 42; Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 28-29. Interestingly, Elizabeth’s 1559 proclamation generally makes exceptions for wealthy people of whatever status; thus, the proclamation forbids, for example, “velvet in gowns, coats, or outermost garments; furs of leopards;

“establishing,” as Cook puts it, “the victory of new money over ancient custom.”<sup>20</sup> The role of the theaters in the changing customs surrounding clothing was not minor: Jones and Stallybrass argue that the London theater companies helped shape the growing clothing trade in this period and “functioned as engines of fashion.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, addressing these issues from a slightly different angle, Paul Yachnin argues that “commodification of social prestige was a key element in the development of the drama” in the London theaters.<sup>22</sup> Not only did the theaters expend large amounts of money on costumes and employ many people to mend, alter, and take care of them; their buying and selling of second-hand clothes, and their efforts to display the latest fashions on stage, also fed into the audience’s cultural investment in the clothes they wore to the theater.<sup>23</sup> Clothing became an important visual signifier of a person’s worth, status, and social proficiency.

The indoor theaters such as Blackfriars, where *The New Inn* was first performed, lent themselves particularly well to socializing and display.<sup>24</sup> They were smaller than the public

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embroidery; pricking or printing with gold, silver, or silk; except barons’ sons, knights, or men that may dispend £200 by year” (*Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 137). Even in Elizabeth’s time, it seems, “new money” held some social sway.

<sup>20</sup> Cook, *Privileged Playgoers*, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 177; 187.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare’s England: A Collaborative Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 41.

<sup>23</sup> Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 187.

<sup>24</sup> Many scholars, including Tiffany Stern, who has written eloquently about the subject, argue that the indoor (private) theaters facilitated a different culture than the outdoor (public) theaters; see, for example, Tiffany Stern, “Taking Part: Actors and Audience on the Stage at Blackfriars,” in *Inside Shakespeare: Essays on the Blackfriars Stage*, ed. Paul Menzer (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna U. Press, 2006): 41-51. Cook points out that the architecture of the private theaters was designed to have “close and immediate affinities with the great halls of royalty and the nobility, where exclusive aristocratic audiences watched special performances” (*Privileged Playgoers*, 180-81). However, Cook also suggests that there was not as much difference between the public and private theaters as we might think: both types of theaters required ready money and leisure time, and the comparatively lower prices of the public theaters (starting at half the initial cost of the cheapest private theater ticket) did not necessarily imply “a low clientele,” since well-born people did not always have much ready money to spend on expensive seats (*Privileged Playgoers*, 182). Moreover, people who kept records of going to the theater tended not to specify which theater, or which type of theater, they went to (*Privileged Playgoers*, 142). In *The Gvls Horne-booke*, Dekker implies that the social function of both types of theaters is the same, since he makes no distinction between the opportunities for display within a “publique or priuate Play-house” (28). Because my

theaters, seating an estimated 500 people rather than 3,000, and were often U-shaped, so that audience members ended up facing each other from their seats. Moreover, the heat and pervasive artificial light ensured that people could take off their outer garments and that more people than those on the stage could be seen and admired in the candlelight. There were therefore many opportunities to be seen by others, even if a spectator chose not to take an expensive seat on the stage. In addition, the frequent need to trim the candlewicks created pauses in the action during which audience members were free to devote their attention fully to each other.<sup>25</sup> As Tiffany Stern argues, with such a cultural emphasis on display and socializing, the “theater collectively created a theatrical event of which the play was an element.”<sup>26</sup> This theatrical event was less about the language and plot of the drama onstage than the visual resonances of clothing, the subtleties of seating arrangements, and the layers of meaning attached to flirtatious gestures and conversations among acquaintances. The emphasis on visibility at the theaters existed in tension with Jonson’s investment in inner merit. And the plot of *The New Inn* addressed this tension head-on by exploring the relationship between substance and display through the question of how true nobility is expressed.<sup>27</sup>

Michael McCanles, who has written at length about the true nobility tradition, argues that Jonson was one of the few writers of his generation to enjoy “a prominence and welcome in

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analysis ultimately attempts to uncover cultural expectations about Blackfriars, a private indoor theater, in the years after the King’s Men took it over from the boys’ companies in 1608, I focus on what scholars have written about that space in particular, while being aware that many of the statements about display could just as easily apply to the public theaters or to the earlier indoor boys’ company theaters.

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of the architecture, seating, prices, and customs within indoor theaters, see Cook, *Privileged Playgoers*, 175-195; John Orrell, “The Theaters,” in *A New History of English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 93-112, 100; Irwin Smith, *Shakespeare’s Blackfriars Playhouse: Its History and Design* (New York: New York University Press, 1964): 290-310; Stern “Taking Part”; Keith Sturges, *Jacobean Private Theatre* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 11-55; and Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1-27, 195-215.

<sup>26</sup> Stern, “Taking Part,” 48.

<sup>27</sup> See the Introduction for a thorough discussion of the “true nobility” tradition.

aristocratic and royal circles that need to be remembered in judging both Jonson's praise of the virtues of true nobility and his attacks on their absence."<sup>28</sup> Jonson, he claims, held a "conviction that the aristocratic establishment of England should in fact be left wholly in place, but transformed: a system of outer signs whose meanings have been radically altered from within."<sup>29</sup> McCanles provides an in-depth examination of Jonson's lyric poetry, which was often written to and about aristocratic patrons. In this poetry, he argues, Jonson "attempt[ed] to lay out rhetorically to aristocratic gaze a program of education in humanist virtue as if such a program only supported the aristocratic status of its patrons and did not implicitly subvert it."<sup>30</sup> McCanles sees in Jonson's poetry a "need to guard both poems and himself from . . . subversion. Consciousness of the history and dialectics of the vera nobilitas argument would seem to have been for Jonson a continual burden."<sup>31</sup> McCanles' study does not examine Jonson's plays in any depth, and I would like to suggest that *The New Inn* is an important site in which Jonson could work through some of these issues, edging toward more subversive ideas as he did so. For although *The New Inn* is reverential toward many elements of aristocratic culture, its investment in merit presents a subtle but powerful challenge to this culture, and to the hierarchy on which it rests.

*The New Inn* examines the social and cultural implications of the true nobility argument, asking what happens when people who have noble titles do not exhibit the corresponding inner qualities, and when people who do not have those titles exhibit it. The play's Argument sets the

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<sup>28</sup> Michael McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations: The Humanist Poet and the Praise of True Nobility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 235, n.17 to p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations*, 55.

<sup>30</sup> McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations*, 58.

<sup>31</sup> McCanles, *Jonsonian Discriminations*, 74.

scene by discussing true nobility.<sup>32</sup> It begins, “The Lord Frampul, a noble gentleman, well educated, and bred a scholar, in Oxford, was married young to a virtuous gentlewoman, Syllly’s daughter of the south, whose worth, though he truly enjoyed, he never could rightly value.”<sup>33</sup> From a consideration of titles alone, the marriage between a lord and a gentlewoman is unequal: he is much higher on the social scale than she is. However, Jonson suggests that this “virtuous gentlewoman” has intrinsic worth—true nobility—that puts her on equal footing with the lord. Indeed, in some ways she is *more* deserving of her new title than the lord: he deserts her soon after their second child is born, unwilling to carry the responsibility that comes with his title and lands and unable to recognize his wife’s deserving nature. The Argument relates that she, bereft, left home with her youngest child in search of her errant husband. The action of the play itself begins many years later at the Light Heart, the inn where Lord Frampul serves as host, having disguised himself as Goodstock, a man of middling status. Unbeknownst to each other, Frampul and his wife live under the same roof: she has disguised herself as a nurse and charwoman. At the end of the play, Frampul and his wife will be reunited and restored to their titles and fortune; the play’s plot suggests that Frampul had to go through the process of temporarily losing his noble title in order to attain the inner qualities that make him worthy of it.

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<sup>32</sup> The Argument may have been distributed at Blackfriars before the performance, as well as appearing in the octavo: examining extant documents as well as moments when characters are given Arguments during a play-within-a-play, Tiffany Stern shows that Arguments “were designed to be disseminated before production and read *during* it, ‘making’, as Jonson put it in one of his masques, ‘the spectators understanders’” (*Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* [Cambridge University Press, 2009], 66). While Arguments were most common for masques and court performances, they also occasionally appeared in public and private theaters (65, 70-72). Although we will never know whether *The New Inn*’s Argument was distributed to the Blackfriars spectators before the play began, it is certainly possible that it was. In any case, Jonson seems to have intended his reading audience to learn of the backstory and plot before reading the play: the Dedication to the Reader ends with the following language: “Fare thee well, and fall to. Read. / BEN JONSON. / But, first / *The Argument*” (Jonson, *The New Inn*, ed. Julie Sanders, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 167-313, 180). Thus, not only does the Argument appear before the text of the play, but the reader is directly ordered to read it “first,” before moving on to the play itself.

<sup>33</sup> Jonson, *The New Inn*, ed. Julie Sanders, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 6, 167-313. “Argument,” 181. All subsequent quotations from *The New Inn* are from this edition.

Themes of true worth as opposed to undeserved social striving permeate the play's action and dialogue. For example, early in the play, the inn's guest Lovel engages in a discussion with his host, during which Frampul/Goodstock displays his learning:

LOVEL: You're tart, mine host, and talk above your seasoning,

O'er what you seem . . .

How long have you (if your dull guest may ask it)

Drove this quick trade of keeping the Light Heart,

Your mansion, palace here, or hostelry?

HOST: Troth, I was born to somewhat, sir, above it.

LOVEL: I easily suspect that. Mine host, your name?

HOST: They call me Goodstock.

LOVEL: Sir, and you confess it,

Both i' your language, treaty, and your bearing.

HOST: Yet all, sir, are not sons o' the white hen,

Nor can we, as the songster says, come all

To be wrapped soft and warm in Fortune's smock

When she is pleased to trick of trump mankind;

Some may be coats, as in the cards, but then

Some must be knaves, some varlets, bawds, and ostlers,

As aces, deuces, cards o' ten, to face it

Out i' the game which all the world is.

LOVEL: But

It being i' your freewill (as 'twas), to choose,



What parts you would sustain, methinks a man  
Of your sagacity and clear nostril should  
Have made another choice than of a place  
So sordid as the keeping of an inn . . . (1.3.89-112)

In this exchange, Lovel has recognized something in his host that marks him as superior to ordinary innkeepers. When the host hints that he might be superior in title (“I was born to somewhat, sir, above it”), Lovel seems to understand his answer in the context of true nobility: he praises his host’s “language, treaty, and . . . bearing,” which mark him as coming from good stock—a phrase that could imply titled advantages but could also imply general inner worth. Moreover, when the host articulates a deterministic understanding of Fortune, Lovel counters by arguing that it is in the host’s “freewill . . . to choose, / What parts you would sustain.” Lovel seems to believe that possessing true nobility can allow a person to improve on the lot Fortune has bestowed on him by pursuing worthy professions. In other words, true nobility might allow someone to raise himself up on the social scale. Lovel gently suggests that his host has not lived up to the promise of his inherited gifts—has not sought to unite his inner nobility with its outer manifestation.

As the play’s action proceeds, other characters round out its examination of true nobility. For example, Lord Beaufort meets and marries Laetitia, a lovely young noblewoman staying at the Inn. When, at the end of the play, she is revealed as the lowly daughter of the Nurse, Beaufort initially refuses to honor the marriage contract, inspiring the Nurse to chastise him: “Is poverty a vice? . . . You may object / Our beggary to us as an accident, / But never deeper, no inherent baseness” (5.5.56, 60-62). Here the Nurse blames the vagaries of fortune for her lowly social position, emphasizing to Beaufort that, but for an accident of fate, he might be lowly as

well. She suggests that inner virtues or vices cannot be inferred simply by looking at the outer trappings of social position: the two exist on different planes. In the end, the Nurse's argument is not thoroughly tested because she and Laetitia are both revealed to be Lord Frampul's long-lost family: high-ranking people with (apparently) corresponding inner virtue.

Jonson does not, however, stop there: in the character of the chambermaid, Prudence, he explores the subversive implications of the Nurse's statement about the accidents of fate.

Prudence, or Pru, has arrived at the inn accompanying her mistress, Lady Frampul (Lord Frampul's other daughter, who has temporarily inherited his wealth and title). Lady Frampul initiates the revelry at the inn, and creates a Court of Love, naming Pru queen and judge of the court. To outfit Pru in accordance with this new title, she lends Pru one of her own dresses. Pru worries that dressing above her station has "translated" her "'bove all the bound / Of fitness or decorum" (2.1.53-54). However, Lady Frampul dismisses her concerns, and Pru wears the dress and serves as "queen" for most of the play, demonstrating great intelligence and wit as she does. Indeed, Pru performs her role with such skill and grace that she attracts the attention of a young lord staying at the inn, who then proposes marriage to her. By the end of the play, Pru's inner nobility has been united with the external nobility of a title.<sup>34</sup>

The final major example of class cross-dressing in the play is highly transgressive, and provides a counter-example to both Laetitia and Pru. This is the tailor's wife, Pinnacia, who puts on a wealthy client's dress as part of her husband's sexual fantasy. When her deceitful action is revealed, the other inhabitants of the inn order her to be stripped naked; moreover, Pru, the chambermaid-queen, orders: "To rags and cinders, burn th' idolatrous vestures" (4.3.94). The

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<sup>34</sup> In order to enhance the play's investigation of nobility, Jonson takes pains to make Pru's *vera nobilitas* as unexpected as possible. Although she is her mistress' only companion at the inn, Jonson makes her a chambermaid, not a lady's maid; at one point she worries that Lady Frampul has "not a woman but myself, a chambermaid" to accompany her to the inn (2.1.50, 53-54).

term “idolatrous” suggests that the tailor’s wife ascribes undeserved and possibly dangerous power to the clothing, worshiping the sign rather than the substance of nobility. Pru’s comment suggests that clothing, like religious artifacts, should reflect an inner state, not be thought to constitute it. Pinnacia’s example is the flip-side of Pru’s: she reveals what happens when someone dresses beyond her station for the purpose of *seeming* noble, rather than the purpose of reflecting true nobility.

As Anne Barton has elegantly articulated, by dressing up in inappropriate clothes, Pru reveals her “inherent excellence,” but when Pinnacia does it she “demonstrates nothing but her own, unalterable vulgarity.”<sup>35</sup> No amount of dressing up will turn Pinnacia into the noblewoman she pretends to be, while Pru, who declares at one point that she would “rather die . . . Than owe my wit to clothes,” is aware that fine clothing can at best only reflect the excellence beneath. 5.2.24-26. *The New Inn* ultimately disparages undeserving strivers while celebrating the elevation in title—or, in Lord Frampul and Laetitia’s cases, the re-attainment of title—for those who have proved themselves worthy of it. The complementary stories of Lord Frampul, Laetitia, Pru, and Pinnacia argue that nobility is an earned status; while it is generally inborn, it must be cultivated by the regular exercise of intelligence, learning, and wit.

*The New Inn*’s emphasis on inner nobility seems to have violated dramatic decorum and social expectations simultaneously. At least one contemporary of Jonson’s, Owen Felltham, criticized Jonson’s treatment of the chambermaid: he complained of the “unlikely plot” and claimed that Jonson’s “Jests”

do displease

As deep as *Pericles*,

Where yet there is not laid

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<sup>35</sup> Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 271.

Before a Chamber-maid

Discourse so weigh'd, as might have serv'd of old

For Schools, when they of Love and Valour told.<sup>36</sup>

In Felltham's opinion, even the roundly detested *Pericles*, which Jonson himself described as "mouldy," did not contain something so indecorous as a highly intelligent, humanist-educated chambermaid.<sup>37</sup> Jonson's own second epilogue to *The New Inn*, written in anticipation of a court performance, discusses the chambermaid in somewhat defensive terms. Devoting ten of its sixteen lines to the question of Pru, the epilogue suggests that Jonson sought to mitigate criticism about her.<sup>38</sup>

Over the years, many possible explanations for the play's failure have been posited. Scholars and theater critics alike cite the play's slow opening, complicated backstory, dull minor characters, lack of dramatic action, and confusing last scene as major factors that make the play potentially alienating to spectators.<sup>39</sup> The play, in the estimation of many, was simply not very good. Others argue that Jonson assumed a higher intellectual capacity than his spectators possessed, thus addressing it to the wrong audience.<sup>40</sup> Yet another contributing factor, I argue, was the concept of true nobility, which played into the audience's anxieties about social

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<sup>36</sup> Owen Felltham, "An Answer to the Ode of Come leave the loathed Stage, &c.," in *Ben Jonson, Vol. XI*, ed. C. H. Herford Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Clarendon Press, 1952), 339-40, ll. 22, 25-30.

<sup>37</sup> Ben Jonson, "Ode to Himself," in *The New Inn*, 310-313, l. 21.

<sup>38</sup> Ben Jonson, "Another Epilogue," in *The New Inn*, p. 309.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, 279; Northrop Frye *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York, 1965), 15-16; and reviews of the 1987 Royal Shakespeare Company production: Michael Ratcliffe, "The gut of the gilded city," in *Observer* (London, 15 Nov. 1987), 22; and John Peter, "The measure of modernity" in *The Sunday Times* (London, 15 Nov. 1987), Issue 8519, 57.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Rebecca Yearling argues that the play asks too much of its audience: in it, Jonson "plays tricks on his spectators, working to disorientate them, to undermine neat moral distinctions, to provide multiple perspectives on the action without ever making it clear by what standards the play and its characters 'should' be assessed: by those of fiction or those of 'reality'; by absolute moral standards or with a sense of tolerance towards human weakness and folly" (Rebecca Yearling, "Ben Jonson's Late Plays and the Difficulty of Judgment," in *Ben Jonson Journal* [Vol. 14, Nov. 2007], 202).

hierarchy at a cultural moment when beliefs about the natural order of society were being strongly challenged.

*The New Inn*'s premiere in 1629 occurred only a few months after the assassination of George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, and scholars tend to link several of its themes with contemporary concerns about Buckingham and the politics of the Stuart court. Buckingham had begun his career as a commoner, exceedingly handsome but "too poor to cut a figure," and in 1614 was given £100 for clothing by a wealthy businessman who apparently saw his potential; in a remarkably short time he had become a duke whose wealth was vast and who held enormous influence over King James and, later, King Charles.<sup>41</sup> Buckingham's swift rise and broad influence made him a highly divisive figure; one verse written after his death declares that he "did mate"

The Nobles, Gentles, Commons of our state;  
Struck Peace and Warr at pleasure, hurld downe all  
That to his Idoll Greatnes would not fall  
With groveling adoration: Sacred Rent  
Of Brittaine, Saxon, Norman Princes spent  
Hee on his Panders, Minions, Pimpes, and Whores,  
Whilst their great Royal Offspring wanted dores  
To shutt out Hunger . . .<sup>42</sup>

This verse pits Buckingham's profligate approach to his newly acquired wealth and influence against England's ancient history and customs; in the poet's vision, Buckingham's rise posed a

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed. Britain 1603-1714* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 96-97.

<sup>42</sup> "Immortal Man of Glorie." By Anonymous. From BL MS SLoane 836, fols. 191v-192r. Bellany cites this poem in "Rayling Rymes" 305-306, as does Norbrook in his discussion of "illusion" (224).

direct threat to the honor, power, and wealth of long-established titled families. Later in the verse, the author suggests that Buckingham's self-promoting propaganda, which included commissioning ceiling paintings of his own apotheosis, allowed him to awe people by magnificent illusions:

Antwerpian Rubens best skill made him soare,  
Ravisht by heavenly powers, unto the skie  
Opening, and ready him to deifie  
In a bright blissfull Pallace, Fayrie Ile,  
Naught but illusion were we . . .<sup>43</sup>

According to David Norbrook, Buckingham's enemies frequently associated him with "illusion," not only because of the duke's taste for "spectacular masques" but because his "political career seemed to be governed by opportunism and pliability, rather than any deep-rooted principles."<sup>44</sup>

Buckingham came to signify some of the major cultural changes that were taking place in England in the early seventeenth century; while most of these trends began before his rise and continued after his death, his highly visible and influential adoption of them made them more culturally prominent. For example, he participated in, and helped shape, the culture of display in London, to which the growing clothing trade was also contributing.<sup>45</sup> The same is true of what Lawrence Stone terms the "inflation of honours," the Stuart practice of granting unprecedented numbers of knighthoods and other titles to wealthy, untitled families in exchange for the

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<sup>43</sup> "Immortal Man of Glorie." By Anonymous, 26-29.

<sup>44</sup> David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 224, 223. Norbrook discusses how Buckingham sympathized with the pro-Spanish faction at court; however, after the failed trip to Spain, he "formed a loose alliance with Puritan leaders, but worked against Puritan interests in other ways" (223). He "seemed to his enemies to be a political weathercock whose views could not be trusted" (223).

<sup>45</sup> Mark Kishlansky writes that Buckingham "entertained lavishly," and his "contribution to the conspicuous expenditure of the age was by no means negligible" (97, 98).

donation of large sums of money.<sup>46</sup> When James first became king in 1603, he dubbed “no fewer than 906 knights” in “the first four months of the reign;” but “[b]y December 1604 England could boast of 1,161 new knights, which means the order had suddenly been increased almost three-fold.”<sup>47</sup> From 1537 to Elizabeth’s death in 1603, a total of 1,252 knighthoods had been granted, at an average of about nineteen a year; between 1603 and 1641, 3,281 knighthoods were granted, an average of about 86 a year.<sup>48</sup> Buckingham often acted as middleman in these transactions, using his influence with James and Charles to acquire titles for social aspirants and accepting money from them in exchange.<sup>49</sup> According to Stone, these transactions contributed to the cultural devaluation of noble titles, and families who had long held them sought higher titles in order to distinguish themselves from the newly and, many thought, undeservedly, elevated.<sup>50</sup> While this situations might have posed a problem for the nobility alone, it ultimately had broader stakes, since it affected the way people thought about the monarch’s authority over his subjects: Stone claims that during this period, “respect for the Crown as the fount of honour was weakened, and the hierarchical structure of society was undermined.”<sup>51</sup>

Buckingham’s death was a watershed moment, not only politically but also socially and culturally. Stone cites it as a turning point in the “inflation of honours”: while Charles granted about eighty-five baronetcies in the two years before Buckingham’s death, he granted only four in the eleven years afterward.<sup>52</sup> Scholars see *The New Inn* as engaging directly with

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<sup>46</sup> Stone, Lawrence. *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 65; 81. The Stuart monarchs granted titles of honor at a much higher rate than previous monarchs.

<sup>47</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 74.

<sup>48</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 71-72; 82.

<sup>49</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 94; Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, 223; Kishlansky, *A Monarchy*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 82.

<sup>51</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Stone, *Crisis*, 94-95. During the crisis of 1641, Charles granted about 128 baronetcies; Stone suggests that “The purpose of this change was probably partly to buy support against the opposition in Parliament”

contemporary concerns about Buckingham's legacy: for example, Martin Butler writes, "If this fable may be understood as promoting an image of an aristocracy re-educated in its moral and social responsibilities and revived by the recovery of old blood and the promotion of new merit, it is difficult not to think of Buckingham's removal as being both the occasion and the necessary precondition for its invention."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Peter Womack writes that the play "addresses a social moment at which the question of 'aristocratic values' is a directly political one."<sup>54</sup>

Scholars like Womack essentially suggest that the play mourns a time when inner and outer nobility were united.<sup>55</sup> They tend to disagree, however, on how that mourning manifests itself: Sheila M. Walsh, for example, suggests that Jonson comments on a changing economic order by deliberately setting the revelry at a commercial inn rather than a great house.<sup>56</sup> Anne Barton argues that the play presents "an indictment of Stuart society" by exhibiting nostalgia for

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(95). It took a massive political crisis for Charles to return to the policies he had decisively turned away from after Buckingham's death.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Butler, "Late Jonson," in *The Politics of Tragicomedy: Shakespeare and After*, ed. Gordon McMullan and Jonathan Hope (New York: Routledge, 1992): 162-88, 172-73. David Norbrook argues that Jonson himself had a "somewhat strained" relationship with Buckingham: he satirized Buckingham's family in *The Gypsies Metamorphosed* and his "taste for riotous and farcical masques" in the antimasque of *The Masque of Augurs*; moreover, he disapproved of Buckingham's influence in Charles' proposed match with the Spanish infanta (*Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* [Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984], 224-25).

<sup>54</sup> Peter Womack, "The Sign of the Light Heart: Jonson's 'The New Inn', 1629 and 1987," in *New Theatre Quarterly* (Vol. V, May 1989), 168.

<sup>55</sup> I have already discussed Womack's interpretation above. Barton argues that Jonson demonstrates nostalgia for a specifically Elizabethan age. Sheila M. Walsh argues that the play "mirrors the devaluation of chivalry in ways that both reach into and extend beyond the play's textual borders" (Sheila M. Walsh, "'But yet the lady, th'heir, enjoys the land': Heraldry, Inheritance and Nat(ion)al Households in Jonson's *The New Inn*," in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, Vol. 11, ed. John Pitcher, (Madison, WI: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1999): 226-263, 227). While her study focuses primarily on the relationship between the English and the Irish aristocracy, she discusses the relationship between nobility and the performance of nobility, writing, "Indeed, Lovel's harangue of Host Goodstock [1.3.40-46] is couched in terms which both figure and blur the distinction between the performance of nobility and the textual proof required to secure it" (243).

<sup>56</sup> She explores the tension present in the play between the "commercial setting of the inn" and the "social practice of heraldic visitations and public texts of chivalry through which 'old' English 'houses' were interrogated and established" (Walsh, "'But yet the lady,'" 227).



Elizabeth's time, during which the court was a "fountainhead of virtuous education whose currents circulate through every aristocratic household."<sup>57</sup> However, as Ian Donaldson suggests, Barton's claim seems somewhat overblown given that Jonson was not particularly favored at Elizabeth's court, nor "at ease with the political climate of Elizabeth's reign."<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the play's nostalgia is quite idealized, as in this early scene when Lovel offers to make someone his page and Frampul/Goodstock, the inn's host, responds by calling it a "desperate course of life" (1.3.39):

LOVEL: Call you that desperate, which by a line

Of institution from our ancestors

Hath been derived down to us, and received

In a succession, for the noblest way

Of breeding up our youth in letters, arms,

Fair mein, discourses, civil exercise,

and all the blazon of a gentleman?

Where can he learn to vault, to ride, to fence,

To move his body gracefuller, to speak

His language purer, or to tune his mind

Or manners more to the harmony of nature

Than in these nurseries of nobility?

HOST: Ay, that was when the nursery's self was noble,

And only virtue made it, not the market,

That titles were not vented at the drum

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<sup>57</sup> Barton, Ben Jonson, *Dramatist*, 261.

<sup>58</sup> Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson*, 416.

Or common outcry; goodness gave the greatness,

And greatness worship. Every house became

An academy of honour . . . (1.3.40-57)<sup>59</sup>

While the Frampul/Goodstock complains about a state of affairs that could easily be mapped onto current sociopolitical issues—actions are governed by the market and people can buy honors—the way he and Lovel discuss what nobility once was is fairly general and could harken back to a long-distant mythical age just as much as Elizabeth’s time.<sup>60</sup> Butler provides a more convincing assessment of this idealism, arguing that Jonson’s criticism of the Caroline Court in *The New Inn* is the criticism of a loyal insider, not an alienated outsider: the play demonstrates a deep investment in the court culture of the day, seeking to engage with and reform it rather than simply condemn it.<sup>61</sup> In other words, Jonson mourns an idealistic past in order to guide people in the present to more ethical actions. Peter Womack argues that *The New Inn* essentially presents a kind of “social protestantism,” pushing its audience “to interiorize the marks of nobility and so make them independent of their lost social matrix.”<sup>62</sup> Jonson, Womack asserts, “rescues traditional hierarchy from its own material contradictions by re-situating it at the level of subjectivity.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Barton and Womack both point to this passage in their discussions of idealized nobility (Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, 261; Womack, “The Sign,” 166).

<sup>60</sup> This is especially compelling given that the Stuarts were not the first monarchs whose policies altered cultural expectations about the nobility. Lee Patterson argues that in late fourteenth century, Richard II managed to consolidate his own power by making the nobility more dependent on his favor. He accomplished this by granting titles that came with annuities rather than land and encouraging the development of a courtier culture with emphasis on the literary arts rather than fighting (16-17). His policies had a likely influence on Chaucer’s tales, many of which, like the “Wife of Bath’s Tale,” explore the meaning of nobility. While Jonson may not have been aware of this history, it seems short-sighted to argue that an ideal court culture existed as recently as Elizabeth’s reign.

<sup>61</sup> Butler, *Late Jonson*, 175.

<sup>62</sup> Womack, “The Sign of the Light Heart,” 168.

<sup>63</sup> Womack, “The Sign of the Light Heart,” 168.

However, these scholars tend to elide Frampul and Laetitia's re-attainment of their titles with Pru's assumption of hers; although Barton comes close, none of them fully engages with the radical implications of Pru's elevation.<sup>64</sup> I argue that the play does far more than comment on Buckingham for an aristocratic audience who needed to be reeducated in traditional virtues associated with nobility; rather, through the character of Pru, it also suggests that non-aristocrats might be able to raise themselves through possession of those same virtues. This notion presented an unusually stark challenge to a social order already undermined by other social and political factors.

While there was cultural precedent in literature and humanist political theory for emphasizing the value of true nobility, most humanist thinkers fell short of challenging the social order, and literature engaging with true nobility was usually set in a mythical past or involved revelations that minimized threats to the social order. For example, Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," which I examine in the Introduction, is set in "th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour," when "Al was this land fulfild of fayerye."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece* is set in distant ancient Rome; moreover, Lucrece chooses between two suitors who have a similar standing in their community despite the difference in blood. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* is set in the mythical past of King Arthur, who frequently encounters fairies, demons, and other magical and mythical creatures. And in *Henry V*, one of the few examples set in historical England rather

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<sup>64</sup> Barton devotes several pages to a discussion of Pru's elevation and how unprecedented it is in the literary tradition. She writes, "The concept of an innate aristocracy, unrelated to birth or breeding, available to serving wenches as well as to countesses, still needed defending in 1740 when Richardson wrote *Pamela*. Feltham is unlikely to have been the only contemporary who found Jonson's handling of Pru little short of scandalous" (283). However, she does not explore the cultural implications of this "scandalous" choice, instead focusing entirely on the dramatic implications.

<sup>65</sup> Chaucer, "Wife of Bath's Tale," 857, 859.

than a distant place or mythical time, the king's promises never come to fruition.<sup>66</sup> These examples suggest that it is far easier to discuss true nobility in the abstract than imagine what a society governed by it would look like. Indeed, Frank Whigham argues that early moderns tended to think of hierarchical differences as differences in kind, as boxes you fell into rather than a spectrum you could traverse: while a small degree of mobility might be possible from one related rank to another, it was nearly impossible—or *thought of* as nearly impossible—to make large leaps.<sup>67</sup> Far more common in early modern literature are characters that mirror Laetitia's story: young women who are believed lowly but virtuous until they are eventually revealed to have noble blood.<sup>68</sup> Contrary to Henry V's bold assertion, then, someone born of "vile" status could never fully become "gentle."<sup>69</sup>

Early modern practices of revelry played on these hierarchical differences: on certain specified days low-ranking people such as apprentices could dress above their station for a strictly limited amount of time, as part of a celebration that had clear temporal boundaries. In *The New Inn*, Pru's assumption of her borrowed status after the revelry has ended deeply undermines the notion of proper hierarchy. The end of *The New Inn* therefore poses a challenging question: if you see a finely dressed person, how can you tell whether you're encountering a Laetitia, a Pru, or a Pinnacia? According to the action of the play, you simply cannot tell from visual display

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<sup>66</sup> After the battle's casualties have been assessed, Henry dismisses all non-aristocratic casualties as being of "None else of name" (4.8.99). Far from bestowing titles on the non-aristocratic men who shed their blood with him, Henry does not even dignify them with names.

<sup>67</sup> Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1984), 70.

<sup>68</sup> Barton points out that stories of young women such as Spenser's Pastorella and Shakespeare's Perdita and Marina, all women who fit this mold, are far more common in the period than stories of young women such as Pru (*Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, 283).

<sup>69</sup> As I note in the Introduction, Henry claims, "he to-day that sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile, / This day shall gentle his condition," (William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et. al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 4.3.61-63).

alone. The play therefore suggests that expensive clothing can be an empty signifier and implies that the people so intent on displaying their status at the theater or in life could be just as undeserving of that status—and as ignorant of its true cultural meaning—as Pinnacia. This suggestion has implications that reach far beyond the walls of the theater, for if you cannot trust traditional cues, how do you know whether someone is worthy to be a cultural leader?

### *The Nobility of Literature*

In the wake of *The New Inn*'s failure, Jonson wrote a poem, titled "An Ode to Himself," which expanded on *The New Inn*'s social satire. The poem switches the conversation from nobility to literary judgment: it argues that in the same way an emphasis on the outer trappings of nobility obscures what true nobility should be, an emphasis on display within the theater obscures what good literary judgment should be. By elaborating on *The New Inn*'s original satire, the poem invites its readers to question broader hierarchical structures. In doing so, it suggests that reading can be a socially empowering act.

At the beginning of the poem, Jonson exhorts himself to "Come, leave the loathèd stage, / And the more loathsome age, / Where pride and impudence, in faction knit, / Usurpe the chair of wit."<sup>70</sup> The words "pride" and "impudence" relate to a person's perception of where he or she belongs in the broader social sphere; here they imply presumption and insolence.<sup>71</sup> According to Jonson, the age is full of people who reach above their appropriate station out of a mistaken sense that they deserve to do so. Yet despite the social connotations of Jonson's terms, the "chair" usurped in this poem is not social, but literary: it belongs to "wit," a term that Jonson was

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<sup>70</sup> Ben Jonson, "Ode to Himself," in *The New Inn*, 310-313, ll. 1-4. All subsequent quotations from the poem are from this edition.

<sup>71</sup> According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "pride" can mean an "inordinately high opinion of oneself," and "impudence" suggests presumption and insolence ("Pride;" "Impudence," *OED* Online).

particularly invested in as regards the production of good literary work and the exercise of proper literary judgment. By using social terminology to discuss literary ability, Jonson suggests that there is a literary hierarchy similar to the social hierarchy, and that it can be undermined in much the same way as its counterpart: by inopportune strivers who do not deserve the honors it conveys.

In the next few stanzas, Jonson defines what these literary strivers lack, using extended metaphors about food to literalize the notion of literary taste.<sup>72</sup> He writes:

Say, that thou pour'st them wheat,  
And they will acornes eat:  
'Twere simple fury, still, thy selfe to waste  
On such as haue no taste!  
To offer them a surfet of pure bread,  
Whose appetites are dead!  
No, give them graines their fill,  
Huskes, draffe to drink, and swill.  
If they loue lees, and leaue the lusty wine,  
Enuy them not their palate's, with the swine. (11-20)

In this stanza, Jonson compares his spectators to farm animals, specifically pigs. They prefer the basest of foods, choosing acorns over wheat, unrefined grains over “pure bread,” and dregs over “lusty wine.” Their poor taste preferences show that they represent the bottom of a hierarchy of species.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, they seem born into their status and unable to better themselves even when exposed to high quality foods.

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<sup>72</sup> Jonson of course was not the first person to do this; the tradition extended back several hundred years.

<sup>73</sup> In this way, they are reminiscent of the monstrous readers I explore in Chapter 1.

In the next stanza, Jonson maintains the species hierarchy while also reintroducing the social hierarchy he had established at the beginning of the poem. He writes:

No doubt some mouldy tale,  
Like *Pericles*; and stale  
As the Shrieues crusts, and nasty as his fish-  
scraps, out euey dish,  
Throwne forth, and rak't into the common tub,  
May keepe vp the *Play-club*:  
There, sweepings doe as well  
As the best order'd meale.  
For, who the relish of these ghests will fit,  
Needs set them, but, the almes-basket of wit. (21-30)

Here the words “mouldy,” “stale,” and “nasty,” used to describe “crusts,” “scraps,” and “sweepings” thrown into a “common tub” once again show the spectators at the bottom of the species hierarchy. The phrase “almes-basket of wit,” however, draws the metaphor out of the farmyard and back into the realm of social relationships: the audience members, like low-quality people, are content to take charity from other people’s vast stores of wit. In these stanzas, Jonson refers to two different hierarchies—the social hierarchy and the species hierarchy—to establish the notion of a literary hierarchy. Like the others, the literary hierarchy rests on inborn qualities: by their nature, people prefer high or low fare. Moreover, the literary hierarchy has clearly defined parameters such that one can recognize someone’s status fairly easily: just as the clothing one wears and the food one eats signifies social status, the literary fare one consumes signifies literary status.

After establishing this literary hierarchy, Jonson puts it in conversation with the social hierarchy, asserting that the very people who stand lowest on the literary hierarchy—indeed, those who actively prefer the lower fare offerings—are those who care most about the social hierarchy. He refers to the *New Inn*'s spectators as “Braue *plush*, and *velvet-men*” (41), letting their rich clothing represent their wealth and status—or their social climbing. Jonson's assertion that his richly-clad spectators lack wit and judgment suggests that cultivating one's social position can inhibit the development of good reading skills.

Jonson ends the poem by referring to a hierarchy of genres. He urges himself to “Leaue things so prostitute, / And take the *Alcaick* Lute; / Or thine owne *Horace*, or *Anacreons* Lyre; / Warne thee, by *Pindares* fire” (42-44). The word “prostitute” suggests that Jonson sees theater work as morally degraded and ignoble. Instead he should pursue the more ennobling lyric poetry, whose elevated poetic status will allow him to garner the praise he deserves, putting his detractors to shame (48). But he ends the poem with a reference to the highest genre of all: poems of praise to the monarch. He describes this kind of poetry in the following way: “But, when they heare thee sing / The glories of thy *King*, / His zeale to *God*, and his iust awe o're men; / They may, blood shaken, then, / Feel such a flesh-quake to possesse their powers” (51-55). Jonson describes his audience as having a visceral response to his songs of praise: they will not be able to avoid being awed. After hearing his work, they will “cry . . . No Harpe ere hit the starres / In tuning forth the acts of his sweet raigne” (56-58). Poetry of praise, Jonson suggests, will allow his “Harpe,” his instrument of praise, perhaps his poetry, to reach the heavens. He ends the poem with the assertion that his poetry will be of such a high quality that no one will be able—or will even want—to argue about its merit. Jonson therefore uses the hierarchy of genres to present himself at the top of the literary hierarchy: he is capable of writing the best poems in



the best genre. This ode carefully constructs a cultural order built on literary ability, suggesting that people like Jonson—born without land or a title but with vast stores of taste, wit, and good judgment—should become the cultural leaders. In this way Jonson aligns himself with Pru, whose inner nobility shines out despite her low status. Poetry for Jonson becomes a kind of nobility, allying him with the monarch, who represents the highest kind of inner and outer nobility united.

Jonson circulated the “Ode to Himself” in manuscript among his peers, and it quickly achieved notoriety. Many of Jonson’s peers responded with literary work of their own: three people translated it into Latin, and at least seven people wrote poetic replies.<sup>74</sup> Robert C. Evans writes, “If documented reader response indicates a work’s impact, then this poem might seem one of the most significant Jonson ever wrote.”<sup>75</sup> Evans, whose study is the only one to date to investigate this poetic debate in depth, examines it primarily for the evidence it provides about “the role of literary circles in Jonson’s era.”<sup>76</sup> He analyzes the micropolitical jockeying of Jonson’s friends and rivals, as well as that of Jonson himself, whose age and declining health threatened to dethrone him from his position of “‘leader’ of a circle.”<sup>77</sup> My analysis of the poem and its responses moves away from thinking about how they construct Jonson’s relationship to his literary circle; instead, I look at them for evidence of how they respond to Jonson’s ideas as ideas. These poems, I argue, demonstrate a changing culture, in which ideas about the role and

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<sup>74</sup> Robert C. Evans, “‘This Art Will Live:’ Social and Literary Responses to Ben Jonson’s *New Inn*,” in *Literary Circles and Cultural Communities in Renaissance England*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: U. of Missouri Press, 2000), 76.

<sup>75</sup> Evans, “‘This Art Will Live,’” 80. Evans writes that the “Ode to Himself” was “apparently, his only work ever translated three times, by three different authors, into Latin” (76). The translators were John Earle, William Strode, and Thomas Randolph.

<sup>76</sup> Evans, “‘This Art Will Live,’” 75.

<sup>77</sup> Evans, “‘This Art Will Live,’” 76.

identity of cultural leaders are far more fluid than they had once been, and in which the literary realm is increasingly understood to wield social power.

Of the seven poetic replies to Jonson's poem, five present sympathetic opinions of Jonson while two are highly critical of him, his poem, and *The New Inn*. All the poems are clearly in conversation with Jonson's ode and with each other, both thematically and poetically. They elaborate on the relationship between display and substance, and the way judgment, intelligence, and wit can and should be expressed. Moreover, three of them mimic the ode's meter and rhyme scheme, and most of them use the same vocabulary or syntax as the ode. These poems reveal the way that pressing cultural concerns could be worked out through the writing and circulating of poetry. And as a whole, they suggest that Jonson's ideas about the relationship between true nobility and literature were culturally meaningful and worthy of extended debate.

The poetic responses sympathetic to Jonson present the spectators as Jonson does: unquestionably low on the literary hierarchy, akin to animals, worthy only of the scraps of wit.<sup>78</sup> For example, Thomas Randolph, who begins his poem with "Ben doe not leave the stage / Cause 'tis a loathsome age," refers to the spectators as "Bacon-braines," who choose "mast"—food typically thrown to pigs—over the "wheat" that Jonson offers them.<sup>79</sup> The poet known as I. C. asserts a similar difference in kind, referring to the spectators as "foule mouthes" who "had rather drink / Out of the common sink" than choose the work Jonson produces from the "Muses spring."<sup>80</sup> On a more general note, Thomas Carew calls the age "sotted," and full of "swolne Pride," adding, "It can nor iudge, nor write."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> All quotations from the poetic responses are taken from C. H. Herford Percy and Evelyn Simpson, *Ben Jonson*, 333-346.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Randolph, "An answer to Mr. Ben Iohnson's Ode to perswade him not to leave the stage," 1-2; 13; 12; 14.

<sup>80</sup> I. C., "Ode. To Ben Jonson Upon his Ode to himself," 31-32.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Carew, "To Ben Johnson vppon occasion of his Ode to Himself." 1-4.

Like Jonson, these poets also claim that although the spectators have distinctly poor intellectual capacity, they wear expensive clothing and have—or strive to have—high social status. I. C. explicitly combines the two states of the spectators, writing:

And let those silken men  
(That know not how, or when  
To spend their money, or their time) maintaine  
With their consum'd no-braine,  
Their barbarous feeding on such grosse base stuffe  
As onely serves to puffe-  
Up the weak empty mind,  
Like bubbles, full with wind,  
And strive t'ingage the scene with their damn'd oaths,  
As they doe with the priviledge of their cloaths.<sup>82</sup>

In I. C.'s view, the spectators are all display and no substance; moreover, their display of “cloaths” “ingage[s] the scene”—perhaps meaning that it grabs people's attention for the wrong reasons, taking away from the other action occurring in the space. Thomas Randolph also contrasts the spectators' display and substance, writing: “And let those things in plush, / Till they be taught to blush, / Like what they will . . . I know thy worth, and that thy lofty straines / Write not to clothes but Braines.”<sup>83</sup> R. Goodwin calls the spectators “imbroydered-glittering-Siluer Coates” and “*Gilt-men*,”<sup>84</sup> and like Randolph and I. C., he also explicitly pits their social status against their literary status, calling the spectators “a Multitude / of Silken fooles; who cannot

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<sup>82</sup> I. C., “Ode,” 41-50.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Randolph, “An answer,” 31-33, 35-36.

<sup>84</sup> R. Goodwin, “Vindiciae Jonsonianae,” 80; 85.

vnderstand / (for they were borne not to have wit, but Land).”<sup>85</sup> By framing the two types of attributes—land and wit—as mutually exclusive, Goodwin suggests that the people born into the landowning ranks have less wit than people from other, perhaps lower-status, backgrounds.

Even the poems that criticize Jonson adopt the same juxtapositions between display and substance. For example, an anonymous “Censure” of Jonson uses similar terms to assert that the spectators could indeed judge accurately: “for *Velvett, Scarlett, Plush*, doe tell you true, / t’was not their Cloathes, but they, did blush for you.”<sup>86</sup> This writer turns the tables back on Jonson by suggesting that “Weakness and Impudence possest the stage,” injuring “the strength of Witt.”<sup>87</sup> Later the same poet claims, “Pride and presumption hath dethronde thy witt.”<sup>88</sup> In suggesting that it is *Jonson*, and not his spectators, who has striven to reach above his station, this writer imagines the same kind of inopportune literary striving that Jonson imagines in his ode—with the roles simply reversed. Similarly, Owen Felltham argues that people in “Plush” actually *do* have a good sense of judgment and knowledge.<sup>89</sup> These two poems show just how influential Jonson’s ode was: although they strongly criticize Jonson himself, they do so on Jonson’s terms, adhering to the themes of literary striving and, in Felltham’s case, the exact meter established by Jonson’s initial ode. The way that these poems systematically liken literary ability to the social hierarchy, and then undermine the very culture of display on which that social hierarchy rests, suggests that their writers were marking a crucial shift in thinking about cultural authority in their era. Although none of them, not even Jonson—tied as he was to aristocratic social structures—overtly supports a culture based on individual merit, they pave the way by using their culture’s vocabulary of dominance to subvert the dominant social order.

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<sup>85</sup> R. Goodwin, “Vindiciae Jonsonianae,” 6-8.

<sup>86</sup> Anon., “The Cuntrys Censure on Ben Johnsons New Inn,” 17-18.

<sup>87</sup> Anon., “The Cuntrys Censure,” 20-21.

<sup>88</sup> Anon., “The Cuntrys Censure,” 39.

<sup>89</sup> Owen Felltham, “An Answer,” 31-33.

### *Constructing the Reader as Patron*

When Jonson arranged for *The New Inn* to be printed, he included the “Ode to Himself” at the end of the octavo, and used the print format to expand further on the debate he had sparked. The print text imagines a new cultural hierarchy built on a kind of true nobility, and this true nobility, as I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, is explicitly tied to reading.

In previous work, Jonson had often sought to distinguish between different kinds of readers: for example, in *Catiline His Conspiracy*, he distinguished between “the Reader in Ordinary” and “the Reader Extraordinary,” and in *The Alchemist* he distinguished between the “understander,” who is literally “more” than a reader, and the “pretender,” who seems to have come by the play second-hand, without having legitimate access to it.<sup>90</sup> These investigations of fit and unfit readers suggest a difference in kind, whereby “pretenders” cannot become “understanders.” Stanley Fish has argued that Jonson’s work speaks to a community of fit readers, whose tastes align with his to such an extent that they are always-already “the same” as him, existing in a kind of self-perpetuating circle in which Jonson and his readers continue to inform and benefit each other without letting in outsiders.<sup>91</sup> The front matter of *The New Inn* provides a twist on this notion by emphasizing the means through which readers can *become* fit readers:

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<sup>90</sup> Jonson, *Catiline His Conspiracy*, ed. Stina Ewbank, in Bevington, Butler, and Donaldson, *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 4, 3-185, “To the Reader in Ordinary” and “To the Reader Extraordinary,” 26; Jonson, *The Alchemist*, Cambridge, Vol. 3, 558, “To the Reader,” ll. 1-2.

<sup>91</sup> Stanley Fish, “Authors-Readers: Jonson’s Community of the Same.” *Representations* (No. 7, Summer 1984), 47.

## THE DEDICATION, TO THE READER.

If thou be such, I make thee my patron and dedicate the piece to thee.<sup>92</sup> if not so much, would I had been at the charge of thy better literature. Howsoever, if thou canst but spell and join my sense, there is more hope of thee than of a hundred fastidious impertinents who were there present the first day, yet never made piece of their prospect the right way. ‘What did they come for, then?’ thou wilt ask me. I will as punctually answer: ‘To see and to be seen. To make a general muster of themselves in their clothes of credit, and possess the stage against the play. To dislike all, but mark nothing. And, by their confidence of rising between the acts in oblique lines, make *affidavit* to the whole house of their not understanding one scene.’ Armed, with this prejudice, as the stage-furniture, or arras-cloths, they were there, as spectators, away. For the faces in the hangings and they beheld alike. So I wish they may doe ever. And do trust myself and my book rather to thy rustic candour than all the pomp of their pride, and solemn ignorance to boot. Fare thee well, and fall to. Read.<sup>93</sup>

The beginning of this dedication seems to set up a dichotomy of readers similar to those established in *Catiline* and *The Alchemist*: the first set is identified by their nature as true readers—“If thou be such”—while the second is somehow less than that—“if not so much.” However, Jonson then elides this distinction. Rather than establishing a difference between “Ordinary” and “Extraordinary” readers, or between “more” than readers and “pretenders,”

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<sup>92</sup> The 1631 octavo reads, “I make thee my Patron, and dedicate the Piece to thee,” emphasizing the word “Patron” through its capitalization and the offsetting of the comma (*The New Inn*, Early English Books Online).

<sup>93</sup> Ben Jonson, “The Dedication, to the Reader,” in *The New Inn*, 179-180. The 1631 octavo has no punctuation after the word “Read,” which invites the reader to read continuously from the dedication to the rest of the text (*The New Inn*, Early English Books Online).

Jonson presents a simple distinction between people who read and people who don't.<sup>94</sup> Thus the only requirements for deserving this dedication are that the reader can "spell," which implies reading "letter by letter," and that he can "join my sense," perhaps implying the ability to understand Jonson's work on its own terms.<sup>95</sup> Instead of pitting a fit reader against an unfit one, this dedication pits the "rustic candour" of all readers against the "pomp," "pride," and "solemn ignorance" of the original spectators, who, like Fitzdotterel and Dekker's gull, cared most about their own social standing than the cultural value of the play they were watching.

Of course, this assessment of his readers has ironic undertones, and there is a sense in which the emphasis on the reader's lowly "rustic candour" can be read more as a scathing critique of the spectators than as a sincere articulation of Jonson's hopes for his print readers. However, when read in the context of the rest of the *New Inn* debate, this dedication presents some intriguing ideas about how Jonson understood the shifting nature of England's cultural hierarchy. For in a remarkable twist on notions of social authority, the reader imagined by the *New Inn*'s dedication is worthy not only to judge Jonson's work but to become his *patron* simply through the act of reading. David M. Bergeron argues that this idea remains in the realm of abstraction, or what he terms "a convenient fiction": although it does acknowledge the market power of print readers, addressing a reader as a patron does not make that reader suddenly capable of being socially and financially influential.<sup>96</sup>

But Jonson's dedication does more than simply acknowledge the market potential of readers—or create a fiction of readerly patronage to combat the professional despair and frustration he felt at this time. Rather, this dedication makes a point about the way cultural

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<sup>94</sup> Even those who do not read are given the benefit of the doubt: if only Jonson could have "been at the charge of thy better literature," they might have become the readers Jonson addresses (Jonson, "The Dedication, to the Reader," in *The New Inn*, 179-180, l. 2).

<sup>95</sup> "Spell," *OED* Online.

<sup>96</sup> Bergeron, *Textual Patronage*, 136-37.

authority *should* work: the people who should have the most cultural influence, Jonson suggests, are those who possess the inner qualities that make that influence beneficial. In making the reader his patron, Jonson makes a strong political and social statement: he imagines an alternate cultural hierarchy whereby virtuous action can lead to a well-deserved elevation in status. Here, Jonson imagines a world in which a reader can *develop* good taste through reading well, and through that process can *earn* the high status implied by the word “patron.” In uniting reading well with being a patron, Jonson brings true nobility firmly into play in contemporary English life, suggesting that membership in the new cultural elite will come from hard work and achievement, not from social rank or wealth. If *The New Inn* itself suggests that chambermaids can deserve to become ladies, the paratextual apparatus of its printed form suggests that untitled readers can deserve to become patrons.



## Conclusion

### The Status of Reading in the Civil War and Beyond

In Book 5 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, just after God has appointed the Son as leader of the angels, to whom "shall bow / All knees in Heav'n, and shall confess him Lord," Satan decides to launch a rebellion (5.606-8).<sup>1</sup> After gathering together the group of angels under his command, he endeavors to sway them to his cause through the use of "ambiguous words . . . to sound / Or taint integrity" (5.703-704).<sup>2</sup> He thus beguiles his followers into thinking that his course of action is warranted. Milton relates how the angels

all obeyed

The wonted signal, and superior voice

Of their great potentate; for great indeed

His name, and high was his degree in Heav'n;

Hie count'nance, as the morning star that guides

The starry flock, allured them, and with lies

Drew after him the third part of Heav'n's host (704-710)

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<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: The Modern Library, 2007). All subsequent quotations from Milton's poetry are from this edition.

<sup>2</sup> This entire story is voiced through Raphael, who is relating it to Adam in Paradise.

Trained to respect authority, the angels, who still think their commander is the Archangel Lucifer rather than the fallen Satan, let themselves submit to Satan's false rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Doing so, they earn themselves eternal damnation.

Written in the aftermath of the English Civil War, *Paradise Lost* explores the very high stakes of reckless ambition united with deeply flawed powers of discernment. Scholars have often read Satan against the backdrop of the civil war, exploring the ways in which he simultaneously recalls the republican values of the parliamentarians and the worst of a corrupted monarchy.<sup>4</sup> In the above passage, Milton suggests that interpretive skill and good judgment have broad political and moral implications: excessive awe toward authority figures, of whatever variety, at the expense of one's own powers of discernment, earns you nothing but ill.

In this dissertation I have explored the social implications of reading in early modern England, arguing that writers and printers developed varied notions of status to claim an alternate hierarchy of intellectual merit that existed in tension with the social hierarchy. John Huntington, whose work traces a similar trajectory, argues that during the reign of James I, "the possibilities available at the end of Elizabeth's reign seem to close down; the court tends to monopolize social reward, and compared with the earlier decade there are few options for the ambitious intellectual outside that source of cultural capital."<sup>5</sup> He further claims that "[i]t isn't until the nineteenth century with the further decline of aristocratic privilege and the development of an independent market for symbolic goods that artists can afford to express openly their sense of their own

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<sup>3</sup> Several lines before, Milton writes of Lucifer's transformation: "Satan, so call him now, his former name / Is heard no more in Heav'n" (658-59).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Neil Forsyth, "Satan," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost*, ed. Louis Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 17-28; and Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> John Huntington, *Ambition, Rank, and Poetry in 1590s England* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2001), 147.

dignity.”<sup>6</sup> He thus sees a break between a particular cultural moment in the 1590s and later developments in ideas about taste that happened about two hundred years later. However, if, instead of considering only writers, we also think about readers, we see a productive continuity between the earlier period and subsequent historical developments. The works I have analyzed in this dissertation suggest that the alternate hierarchies explored by writers and printers from the 1590s to the 1630s concerned not only ideas about social status, but also cultural status more broadly. These works, I argue, challenged traditional hierarchical structures on two fronts: while writers explored what it meant for particular readers to advance socially through reading and discernment, they simultaneously suggested that a common reading public should be considered just as culturally valuable—or perhaps *more* culturally valuable—than smaller, more socially elite communities of readers. This idea in particular had wide-ranging implications, for it played a significant role in shaping how arguments about power and kingship were conducted in the years following the period under consideration here.

In the years leading up to and encompassing the civil war, furious debates about the role of government and the monarchy were waged on the pages of print pamphlets. Christopher Hill has argued that this was “a period of glorious flux and intellectual excitement . . . Literally anything seemed possible; not only were the values of the old hierarchical society called in question but also the new values.”<sup>7</sup> The market was “flooded with printed matter” as a vast array of people, with different ideological, religious, and political ideas expressed themselves to a reading public.<sup>8</sup> Reading thus became a way for citizens to actively participate in, and shape, the fate of their country. Perhaps the most telling example is the 1649 printing of *Eikon Basilike*,

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<sup>6</sup> Huntington, *Ambition, Rank*, 153.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (1972) (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 14-15. Hill is specifically discussing the years between about 1645 and 1653 (14).

<sup>8</sup> Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 17.

supposedly written by the recently executed King Charles, justifying the monarchy. That a king would seek the good opinion of anonymous print readers to defend his title and his very life suggests the vast cultural importance of the idea of a common reading public.

Intellectuals like Milton not only took part in these debates, but also thought about their deeper significance. For it was not only important to appeal to a reading public: it was also important to continue to think about the way this reading public could use their powers of discernment to make important choices about the governance of their country. Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, written in response to *Eikon Basilike*, defends the king's execution in terms explicitly aimed at those "who through custom, simplicity, or want of better teaching have not more seriously considered kings than in the gaudy name of majesty."<sup>9</sup> And his *Areopagitica*, he argues for the freedom of the press by claiming that when it comes to reading material, "leaving the choice to each man's discretion" is an important component of civil Christian society, since "our faith and knowledge thrives by exercise."<sup>10</sup> In trusting all readers to develop habits of discernment through regular reading, and in aiming his political tracts at such readers, Milton makes a case for a large, diverse reading public that had the power and intellectual resources to determine its own future.

Moreover, even though so many larger political issues were at stake, we can see the rhetorical positioning of the earlier era infusing ideas in the civil war decades. At some point, probably in 1642, when there was a possibility that royalist troops would invade London,<sup>11</sup> John Milton wrote a poem with the idea of posting it on his door in case of invasion:

Captain or colonel, or knight in arms,

Whose change on these defenseless doors may seize,

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<sup>9</sup> Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, eds, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 1059.

<sup>10</sup> Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, eds, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 937; 952.

<sup>11</sup> Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, eds, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 144-45.

If deed of honor did thee ever please,  
Guard them, and him within protect from harms;  
He can requite thee, for he knows the charms  
That call fame on such gentle acts as these,  
And he can spread thy name o'er lands and seas,  
Whatever clime the sun's bright circle warms.  
Lift not thy spear against the muses' bower:  
The great Emathian conqueror bid spare  
The house of Pindarus, when temple and tower  
Went to the ground: and the repeated air  
Of sad Electra's poet had the power  
To save th' Athenian walls from ruin bare.<sup>12</sup>

Here Milton imagines a soldier reading this poem and, swayed by its beauty, refusing to harm the inhabitants of the house. Milton frames the soldier's reading experience as gentling: reading this poem, he claims, will inspire the soldier to behave honorably. Milton thus constructs his imagined reader in order to make a broader claim about the cultural value of poetry. When walls are crumbling everywhere, he suggests, reading poetry can be instrumental in reshaping human society anew.

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<sup>12</sup> Sonnet 8, in Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, eds, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, 144-45.

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