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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Plangent Petrarchan lovers berated by love, belaboured by sorrow, yet somehow begging for more; mournful elegists unable to part with the object they have lost, obsessively fingering their wounds; lachrymose cross-dressers who not only play the woman's part but ventriloquize the voice of feminine suffering, abandonment, and complaint: Renaissance lyric is populated by such figures who appear by choice to defy the period's model of a phallic, masterly masculinity – these adopted positions of impotence, failure, and gendered discontent seeming wilfully to pervert what might otherwise have been seen (indeed, might thereby be defined) as the patriarchal norm. A 'turning aside from truth or right' is how the *OED* defines perversion, its illustrative quotation from Sir Francis Bacon suggesting a monstrous overturning of the habitual order of things: 'women to govern men . . . slaves freemen . . . being total violations and perversions of the laws of nature and nations'. Apparently doing all in their power to relinquish masculine agency, to submit to emotional states of loss they neither hope nor wish to overcome, to enslave themselves to their mistresses, if not to become enslaved themselves, these figures pointedly deviate from an axiomatically empowered, active, forceful masculinity, and suggest that, as Kaja Silverman writes (commenting on the same dictionary definition and illustrative quotation), perversion 'turns aside not only from hierarchy and genital sexuality, but from the paternal signifier, the ultimate "truth" or "right"'.[1] The perverse masculinities that are the subject of this book are seen therefore as deviating, in the first instance, from a phallic rather than from a strictly ethical standard, the apparent willingness with which these figures embrace castration and abrogate the powers and privileges that might otherwise have been deemed their due being what gives rise, in turn, to any sense of moral outrage or critical scandal. Given the populous nature of the field, this book might have selected any number of Renaissance lyric texts by way of illustration, but the poems that form the focus of the five chapters to follow have each been chosen on the grounds of their extremity – of the extremity, that is, to which they take their disruption if not dismantling of the phallic norm. Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, is read as an exercise in masochism where Astrophil not only takes pleasure in his physical pain but also courts intellectual torture rather as, in the *Apology for Poetry*, he compromises the mastery of the speaking voice and so undermines its claims to theoretical consistency, moral seriousness, or masculinist Protestant militarism. Ralegh's great poem of abject atonement, *The Ocean to Cynthia*, is read as a document in melancholia in which the inability to mourn a maternal object of desire is seen radically to compromise the formation of a masculine gender identity, the failure to 'consolidate' that identity classically manifesting itself in the speaker's tortured and broken syntax, and in articulations where the text speaks of its own unfinishability. Zelmane's blazon of Philoclea in the *New Arcadia*, 'What tongue can her perfections tell?', is read as an experiment in castration where, in defiance of the critical orthodoxy on the subject, the male poet does not shore up the integrity of his own body by 'scattering' that of his female beloved into multiple parts, but is, rather, scattered into numerous body parts himself and, as a cross-dressed Amazon, is thoroughly gender-ambiguated to boot: a situation that does much to query the phallic subject in both its sexual identity and its capacity to produce 'aureate' courtly verse. Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint* – the only part of the Shakespeare canon that, until very recently, critics have not wanted to know – is read as a parody of male homosocial desire in which instead, as usual, of men writing poems about beautiful women and circulating them among themselves, it is now women's poems about a beautiful man that end up in other women's hands, the male subject being virtually erased from the scene and reduced to a mere mediatory relay in the circulation of 'lesbian' desire: a situation that has predictably disruptive consequences for the construction and maintenance of a heteronormative male gender identity. And Donne's *Sapho to Philaenis* – for some critics an unacceptable affront to the cherished image of a 'manly' Donne – is read as the most thorough deconstruction of the masculine subject yet, consolidating the 'lesbian' trend already traced in the poems by Sidney and Shakespeare, in order to propose a radical alternative to the traditional poetry of praise: for here the typical scene of mutual admiration and desire is transposed onto a mirror relation between two subjects who, although equal and ideal, are demonstrably not phallic, not 'whole'. This list is not intended to be exhaustive or comprehensive – there are other poems (by Wyatt, Surrey, Gascoigne, or Marlowe, for example) that might as easily have been included and that were, in an original projection, once to have formed a part of this book – but it is hoped that, in selecting a

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sonnet sequence, an elegy, a blazon, a complaint, and an epistle, the texts chosen as the objects of focus here will, at least as far as the lyric tradition is concerned, be generically varied enough to prove illustrative if not representative. The aims of this book, then, are to draw out the perverseness of male subjectivity such as it is represented in English Renaissance lyric, to show the lengths to which that perverseness might be seen to go, and, above all, to do justice to the scenes of radical alterity which I believe these poems promote – scenes that have not, or not very widely, been dealt with elsewhere or before. Indeed, if anything, the scenes of perversity which these poems parade have been met, more often than not, with various forms of disavowal. The topic of masochism has barely been broached as relevant to *Astrophil and Stella*, for example, while 'What tongue can her perfections tell?', if singled out for attention at all, is generally regarded as conventional rather than perverse. As for the poems by Ralegh, Shakespeare, and Donne, the denial of their perversity takes a somewhat different form, registering not so much in a critical silence on the subject as in a distinct critical discomfort and unease. Each of these poems has seriously rattled its readers, evidence for this unsettling of scholarly certitudes being found in ongoing debates about how (in all three cases) these odd, anomalous texts should be generically classified, or about whether (in the case of two of them) they can be deemed authorial at all. I emphasize the point because it is no small part of the argument of this book that the perversity it seeks to locate and to explore has largely been blocked – rendered invisible and inaccessible – by certain critical methodologies and ways of reading that, whether consciously or otherwise, have done their best to deny it and push it out of sight, out of mind. Much of the discussion in the chapters to come is devoted to exactly what such readings are seeking to avoid, and why.

One such methodology, for example (which might be considered first if only because it has for so long dominated the field of literary study) is that which organizes its reading of texts on the basis of what Jonathan Dollimore, following Foucault, has called 'the complex, often violent, sometimes murderous dialectic between dominant and subordinate cultures, groups, and identities'.[2] In *Sexual Dissidence*, Dollimore's aim is to theorize a form of perversion or degree of radicalism that is extreme enough to shatter the belief systems of the dominant patriarchal ideology, and to that end he contrasts two positions each of which is exemplified, as it happens, by a notoriously perverse (although not, admittedly, early modern) male. The first position – which the critic variously calls 'radical humanism' or 'humanist transgression' – involves contesting the dominant order but on

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and in its own terms. The paradigm here is the figure of André Gide who defended his vilified homosexuality on the grounds that it was a truer, more authentic, more essential expression of his being than his society's normative heterosexuality: a position that resists the dominant ideology by calling upon its own terms of reference (here, an essential self to which one might be 'true'), using that society's own deep beliefs in order to correct its shallow societal norms. While it might appear to reinforce the very ideology to which it is opposed, this position is not rubbished by Dollimore who, on the contrary, scrupulously defends it as an important and necessary stage in the struggle against a patriarchal hegemony. Nevertheless, the second position – which he variously calls 'sexual dissidence', the 'perverse dynamic', or 'transgressive re-inscription' – is argued to go incomparably further in its assault on social conventions for it does not employ (and so reinforce) society's terms of reference but opts, rather, to dismantle them altogether. The paradigm here is the figure of Oscar Wilde who, instead of validating an alternative authenticity *à la Gide*, deconstructed – in his dedicated cult of insincerity, superficiality, and style – the notion of authenticity itself. In a quest to find the most radical form of sexual 'dissidence' available, Dollimore's argument traces a trajectory from the first position – good but limited, its moment now passed, its adherents having 'lost their faith' (p. 81) – toward the second: a perverse dynamic that, as a form of protest, goes altogether further in its concerted attack on otherwise unchallenged systems of belief and habits of thought. For all the excitement about the radical possibilities that such 'perversion' seems to offer, however, the promised revolution never comes, and the reason for this is that the critic never escapes from the dialectic between dominant and subordinate which is where his argument began. For all its 'deconstructive potential' (p. 121), that is, the second position does not deconstruct that dialectic but remains firmly embedded within it: 'the terms of a binary interrelate, interdepend', Dollimore writes, 'but to differing degrees: in one kind of interdependence the one term presupposes the other for its meaning [this would be Gide]; in another more radical kind of interdependence the absolutely other is somehow integral to the selfsame [this would be Wilde]' (p. 229). The two positions carefully distinguished at the start of the book – and structuring the movement of its polemic from one to the other – thus end up merging rather seamlessly into one another, for the difference is not one of kind but, as the critic seems here forced to admit, only of degree: Wilde is only a little further along the same line than Gide but is basically 'perverse' in the same way. The argument is obliged to resort to the language of comparatives – 'more radical' (p. 229), 'perversion in this fiercer sense' (p. 125) – in

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order to assert the greater radicality of the second position as it comes to look increasingly like the, strictly limited, challenge of the first. Since the dominant/subordinate binary is not taken apart but is still kept in play, the negativity of the second position – however 'fierce' – proves in the end to be no less contained by what it would subvert, and the situation stubbornly continues to be seen in terms of an entrenched 'struggle' between mutually defining, mutually antagonistic parties.

The problem here is a refusal to contemplate what might be considered to be the most 'perverse' position of all – namely, a truly disempowered position, one that is *not* to be conceptualized in terms of opposition, contest, resistance, conflict, or, in a word, power. Instead, the 'pervert' – of either variety – tends nostalgically to be cast as a rebel or hero, locked in inexorably dialectical combat with a system that has to be kept in place so as to allow him to fight another day. Indeed, as in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (a model to which Dollimore maintains allegiance throughout), it is unthinkable that there might be positions that are 'in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat', for such passivity is invariably theorized in terms of resistance: resistances are everywhere, there is a 'plurality' of them, 'points, knots, or focuses of resistance' that are spread over time and space, 'mobile and transitory points of resistance' that contest the social order every way you turn.[3] Subordinate and dominant positions are thus dialectically bound together in what Foucault calls a perpetual 'game' (p. 45) of pleasure and power. Within this framework, subordination can only be conceived of as *in*subordination, described in terms of 'power asserting itself' (p. 45), or experienced as the rebellious pleasures of travesty, evasion, or resistance. There can be no position of slavery as such because, as in the Hegelian dialectic on which Foucault here draws, the slave has – in his work, in his self-recognition, and in his recognition by others who are his equals – always 'dialectically overcome' his slavery and so achieved the condition of the 'complete, absolutely free man, definitively and completely satisfied by what he is'.[4] Critical methodologies that are based on premises such as these thus prove strangely incapable of theorizing what might be thought the 'perverse' position *par excellence* – the masochistic position, that is, in which enslavement is positively cultivated, defeat sought out, and a state of dissatisfaction indefinitely prolonged. Where power is deemed to be 'everywhere', there can be no place for those perverse masculinities that would, by contrast, renege on their phallic inheritance: for those figures, that is, who, all things being equal, would 'prefer not to'; who would do all they could to 'say "no" to power'; and who would, had they the choice, opt to give the 'fierce order of virility' a miss.[5]

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Such critical methodologies have, nevertheless, dominated the field of early modern studies for some time, and have given rise to a series of what I shall call 'recuperative narratives' in which perverse positions of failure or defeat are routinely turned around and re-interpreted as elements within a larger articulation of power. A number of historians, for example, have judged sixteenth-century masculinity to be 'in crisis' and have shown the pseudo-monolith of 'patriarchal society' to reveal lived experiences of manhood that were, in fact, fragile, disorderly, and inherently anxious. But, while this constituent anxiety reveals, for one critic, the 'fissures and contradictions of patriarchal systems', it at the same time 'paradoxically enables and drives patriarchy's reproduction and continuation of itself', so that a 'negative effect that leads us to patriarchy's own internal discord' also proves 'an instrument (once properly contained, appropriated, or returned) of its perpetuation'.[6] For another historian, sixteenth-century masculinity actually drew its 'psychic strength' from the disorderly behaviour that codes of social discipline were supposedly designed to check, with the result that 'what seems at first to be uncivilized "wildness" was in fact carefully structured by the rules of civic society'.[7] For others, if the sixteenth-century shift from an older feudal economy to an increasingly capitalist regime brought in its wake a crisis in the contemporary definition of masculinity, then this was more than compensated for by the opportunities that humanist education provided for a new kind of masculine agency and instrumentality, for now a man might fight and win acclaim more effectively with his finely honed words than with a rusty sword: 'appearing in print before other men's eyes, became the new place in which men displayed the cerebral equivalent of chivalric prowess, in virtuoso deployments of their skill in probable argument'.[8] Historians of the Renaissance lyric would recuperate the less than masterly versions of masculinity to be found there in a similar way, so that, of the 'hapless, powerless, pitiable male lover' of Petrarchan tradition, for example, one critic could flatly declare that 'there was no such thing', for the image of the 'lordly, domineering woman' to whom that figure was generally devoted, turns out to be none other than the 'roundabout, inverted picture of the dominant upper-class male in his presence as *paterfamilias* and as master in society and politics' – the lady can only have been fashioned 'after his own image'.[9] For another critic, the Petrarchan lover's habitual pose of inadequacy is equally deceptive: 'helplessness is a relative concept' when 'to fall apart in a masterfully crafted sonnet – or, better yet, a perfect sestina – is, in a sense, not to fall apart at all'; instead, the Petrarchan poet garners greater fame through his 'exercise of an overpowering stylistic mastery'.[10] For another similarly minded

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reader, the 'vulnerable, subject status of the male lover' within the typical Petrarchan sequence is 'countered by the mastery of the poet'; while for a third, 'the abject position of the lover within the Petrarchan fiction is itself a fiction, since as the author the lover is actually controlling the sequence'.[11] For some, the lyrics of Petrarch and of Petrarchanism would detail a 'run of masculine bad luck so insistent that it becomes almost a joke', were it not for the fact that the poet's own literary productivity redeems the situation by inducing in him a 'heady sense of power', for the one 'thing the Petrarchan poet has, in compensation for his anguish, is poems'.[12] In readings such as this, lyric poetry is seen not as a simple outpouring of emotion but as an artful presentation, carefully contrived with an eye to audience and effect. The portrayal of a self as in pieces or overpowered is not the subjective reflection of the poet's state of mind but the product of cool authorial judgement. That judgement – the ability to fashion characters and to manipulate events at will – remains paramount no matter how violently the persona blusters, stammers, or writhes this way and that in his folly and desperation. Indeed, the greater the distance between the image of anguished selfhood, on the one hand, and the mind that portrays it, on the other, the greater the comparative composure of the latter: the more miserable the poetic 'I', the greater the artistry in presenting its tragic 'tale of me'. This rhetorical turn – the weaker, the stronger – tropes weakness back into strength again, so that the lover's very failures come to testify to the poet's success, the result being a kind of formal restitution in which the poet recoups, in his technical assurance and rhetorical skill, anything the lover might have lost in his chaotic self-presentation. The more extreme the lover's emotional indiscipline, the more impressive his achievement in containing all that turmoil – those 'passions . . . without measure', as Samuel Daniel called them – within literary forms like the sonnet whose verbal economy and metrical discipline made it the supreme example of formal control, a perfect 'Orbe of order and forme'.[13] Poet and persona are clearly distinguished – the lover might be slave to his mistress but the poet is master of his text – and by means of this tried and tested formula the typically enfeebled lover of Renaissance lyric tradition finds himself rehabilitated and definitively re-empowered. What began as a tale of enslavement is thus guaranteed to end up as a record of triumph, the courtly lover's story of abject failure as the laureate poet's crowning success. Indeed, one might be forgiven for forgetting that, despite its depiction of the eternally weeping lover, Renaissance lyric had anything to do with abject masculinity at all, for in these readings failure is effectively annulled, subsumed beneath the poet's achievement in bringing off that failure well, loss or enfeeblement

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is inoculated in advance, foreclosed by the enabling strategies of the poet's speech. If the lover is not in control of his lady, then the poet is in control of his words, and in terms of future fame (and the critical accolade awarded him for doing so) the one more than compensates for the other.

Wedded to a dialectic in which passivity cannot be theorized except in terms of power, recuperative narratives such as these thus leave little scope for a reading that would seek, by contrast, to explore any alternative or 'perverse' vision of masculinity. They perform one important service, nevertheless, and that is to indicate, in a very clear way, the obstacle that stands in the way of such a reading, and to that extent they could be seen to show in which direction the present study might proceed. For these narratives depend heavily upon the notion of the sovereign writing subject who is in complete command of his words. The final destination of their argument is the masterly writer who surmounts emotional collapse and contains it within the lyric's well-wrought form, and, since it is the critic's job to applaud such technical assurance, the writing subject remains paramount, his virtuosity extolled. In one particularly influential article, for example, Louis Montrose argues that Spenser – the obeisant 'Elizabethan subject' – turns the tables on his royal mistress by making her, in the April Eclogue and in *The Faerie Queene*, the 'subject' of his text: the poet, we are told, effectively 'masters his mistress by inscribing her within his text'.[14] This move, however, betrays a suspicious identification on the critic's part, for he, after all, is a writing subject too. Any argument that praises the 'controlling power of the writing subject over the representation he has made' (p. 320) runs the risk of allowing the critic to bathe in reflected glory since to take this line is to shore up the idea of a stable, unitary ego that is the masterful creator and not the hapless creature of his words. The critic's tribute to the poet's 'mastery', in other words, could be seen to be underwritten by an investment of his own, and his own literary 'mastery' – his command of the field, his confident survey of the subject in hand – to be complicit in the model of literary mastery he sets out to reveal. In another essay, Montrose takes care to avoid or at least to minimize such identifications by claiming that the new historicist's 'project of historical situation' necessarily relativizes the critic's own position, since the latter is a subject in history no less than the poet about whom he or she writes, and yet such caveats are not, within the new historicist corpus as a whole always or everywhere apparent.[15] And, where they are not, there is a danger that the dialectical argument will grant the critic a narrative in which his or her own status as a writing subject – as a professional who has something useful to 'say' – will come to rest upon the story of poetic mastery he or she tells. More seriously, if these

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recuperative narratives can surreptitiously serve to bolster the critic's own bid to authority, on the one hand, and where professional pressures continue to demand a competent, authoritative writing subject, on the other, then it is difficult to see why this particular reading of Renaissance lyric should not remain thoroughly entrenched. The most dangerous outcome, at the far end, would be a kind of short-circuit in which the confidence of the critic's own interpretation would come to depend upon his or her own interpretation of poetic confidence – a nexus of bad faith. Critical distance would thus give way to critical self-investment, at the expense, I would hazard, of a whole swathe of Renaissance literary texts. In the event that those texts should depict anything approaching a 'perverse' subjectivity – a subjectivity that is less than masterly – then their radical alterity (not to mention the possibility of theorizing the same) stands in danger of being buried beneath the self-interest of critics who take upon themselves the task of writing confidently and knowingly about them.

The project of theorizing not only perverse subjectivities but specifically perverse *masculinities*, moreover, becomes more difficult still in those cases where the 'masterly' writing subject has explicitly been masculinized, and here two well-known readings of Wyatt might serve as an instructive example. In *The Light in Troy*, for example, Thomas Greene favourably compares the robustness of Wyatt's poetry with the effete productions of Petrarch who, in spite of glimpsing in Roman poetry – and in the towering achievements of Virgil, above all – a world-view, a sense of self, and a mode of writing which the critic characterizes as 'hard' and 'firm', unaccountably lapsed back, in the *Canzoniere*, to an Augustinian subjectivity of sin, taint, and self-division, relinquishing at a stroke an idiom variously valorized as 'august', 'spacious', 'imperial', 'secure' and 'entire', for one contrastingly demoted as 'unstable', 'narcissistic', 'sterile', and 'repetitious'.[16] Wyatt, however, is shown to redeem Petrarch's failings by escaping from the claustrophobic indulgences of the self-obsessed Italian and by relating, for the first time in modern poetry, to something outside himself. Where Petrarch goes round in circles, getting nowhere, Wyatt is seen to stage crises – generally crises of faith – which are definitive, unrepeatable, and irreversible: a process that Greene christens 'linearization' (p. 250). Wyatt's 'single, linear progression into lucidity' (p. 251) is taken as a major advance. Where Petrarch had dramatized self-collapse, Wyatt takes a long hard look at the collapse of certainties and relationships in the rapidly changing world around him, a look that culminates in the three epistolary satires, which state more openly or directly what his lyrics had tended only to imply. Wyatt's cultivation of a plain style in these poems is key to his concerned

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moral vision, and entails what Greene presents as a worthy rejection of Petrarchan ornament and decoration: such 'imagistic asceticism, is essential to Wyatt's language because it strips the word of its aesthetic pretentiousness and leaves it as a naked gauge of integrity' (p. 256). Wyatt turns to proverb lore in order to stabilize values in his increasingly unstable world, the use of such maxims and sayings being said to supply his poems with a certain 'stiffening' (p. 258), although what really stabilizes his poetry, in Greene's view, is irony: classical irony, that is, which establishes a 'hierarchy of moral voices' and, in setting one authority over another, 'stabilizes the play of inauthenticities by distinguishing perspectives' (p. 259). With all this talk of linearity, nakedness, stiffening, and stability, it is evident that, consciously or otherwise, Greene is aligning himself with a long-standing critical tradition that has repeatedly praised Wyatt for his 'manliness', seeing him as the perfect picture of what Surrey called 'manhood's shape', and admiring the 'deep manly sorrow' of his lyrics, or the 'manly reflections' of his satires.[17] What is equally evident, however, is the critic's own identification with such an exemplary figure. The speaking voice in Wyatt's satires, for example, is said to belong to 'a civilized critic capable of friendship, anger, discrimination, and wisdom, a well-travelled man *in situ*, located in a social, historical, geographical context, synthesizing in his firm moral style the native tradition with the ancient, confident of his unblinking estimates, registering depravity, hypocrisy, and suffering without hysteria, strong in his independence . . . which is a token of dignity and poise' (p. 262). It is difficult to avoid the feeling that this portrait of the poet is shading into a portrait of the critic here, or that the manly satirist whom the critic holds up for praise and whose qualities he manifestly values (so fastidiously removed from anything resembling 'hysteria') in fact morphs imperceptibly into an image of the patrician critic who is praising him as such.

A second example of such critical identification is to be found in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, a reading of Renaissance literature that announces itself from the outset to be 'resolutely dialectical': 'for all his impulse to negate, Wyatt cannot fashion himself in opposition to power and the conventions power deploys', the critic writes, 'on the contrary, those conventions are precisely what constitute Wyatt's self-fashioning'.[18] The argument proceeds to a discussion of the *Penitential Psalms*, a text in which – by presenting himself as the remorseful and guilt-ridden David – Wyatt identifies with one of western culture's most prototypically abject males. By means of a recuperative narrative, however, Greenblatt contrives to bring what was once low back to dizzy heights: