

## *Introduction: consummate play*

I began this study with a dual interest in sexuality (and sexual difference) and in the aesthetic, and with a belief that these two were interconnected. My project was sparked by a resistance to claims, seemingly ubiquitous in the heyday of New Historicism, that any foregrounding of aesthetic concerns was necessarily both essentializing in outlook and complicitous with a conservative status quo.<sup>1</sup> While such assertions were clearly responding to the conservative bias evident in much (though not all) earlier formalist analysis (and while the focus in the past two decades on the historical embeddedness of texts has been both salutary and illuminating), they struck me as essentializing in their own right, as inadvertently reproducing and reinforcing patriarchal modes of thought – and, quite simply, as wrong. The counterexample that immediately suggested itself was the case of Christopher Marlowe, whose writings became a touchstone for this work. For Marlowe, undirected aestheticism, insofar as it can be imagined (and his writings repeatedly acknowledge that it can never be fully so), offers a means of thinking outside the constructions of his culture, of questioning their seemingly fixed, immutable truths.<sup>2</sup>

The extreme aesthetic of Marlowe's texts is inseparable from (is, from one perspective, identical to) their unorthodox sexuality. What is subversive about art here is its potential for radical non-instrumentality – for what I will term “pointless play” – a potential that is duplicated in the non-reproductive, unconsummated sexuality towards which these texts repeatedly gesture.<sup>3</sup> Marlowe, as we shall see, makes these connections explicit. And similar, though not identical, connections are suggested in the later plays about women by John Webster, Thomas Middleton, John Ford, and Margaret Cavendish that I examine here; these often attempt (with varying degrees of success) to imagine a non-phallic sexuality, whose very existence, in the terms of Webster's *Duchess*

of *Malffi*, is bound up with and dependent upon “sportive action,” rather than “action indeed.”<sup>4</sup>

Central to this study is my deep and abiding investment in what Joel Fineman has called the “literariness” of the literary,<sup>5</sup> which I am perhaps in danger here of hiding behind a polemic point (which is necessarily a version of the same old point). But I also believe that, for those of us interested in problems of gender and sexuality, it is crucially important not simply to recover the stories of marginalized groups (although that is important), but to consider the extent to which the forms of these stories work in concert with the ideology that marginalizes them. Thus, while I have taken into account as much as possible the historical specificity of my texts, I have foregrounded formal and textual rather than “historical” questions as these terms are currently understood. Indeed, one of the implications of my work is that narrative “history” necessarily partakes of the same culturally created connections to patriarchal, heteroerotic masculinity as all narratives, and needs to be radically reconceived if it is really to represent other positions.<sup>6</sup>

Recent examinations of the New Historicist distrust of formalist analysis have linked it to anxieties about women and others characterized by “fluid sexualities.” Heather Dubrow comments:

Surely it is relevant that the formal as it is generally conceived has characteristics often gendered female and associated with a female subject position, though it is at once intriguing to speculate and impossible to determine to what extent formalism is demonized because it is feminized as opposed to vice versa . . . Our professional dismissal of formalism coincided chronologically with the increasing presence and power of women in the profession. This was no accident . . . because deflected resentment of highly visible female colleagues arguably intensified the rejection of the putatively feminized formal mode. Is it not possible as well that formalism’s associations with the fluid sexualities of Bloomsbury and of other writers associated with art for art’s sake further encouraged the rejection of it in some quarters? Real men don’t eat villanelles.<sup>7</sup>

Dubrow’s analysis is very acute. But the relations she notes are even less fortuitous and less locally limited than her account implies. In the early modern period, one can see somewhat similar anxieties surfacing in the complaints of the antitheatricalist pamphleteers. The most frequently cited is a passage from Phillip Stubbes’s *Anatomie of Abuses*, which connects the theater to sodomy:

These goodly pageants being done, every mate sorts to his mate, every one brings another homeward of their way verie freendly, and in their secret conclaves (covertly), they play *the Sodomits*, or worse.<sup>8</sup>

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But the continuation of this passage is also worth considering. Stubbes declares:

And these be the fruits of Playes and Enterludes for the most part. And wheras you say there are good Examples to be learned in them, Trulie so there are: if you will learne falshood; if you will learn cosenage; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the Hipocrit, to cogge, lye, and falsife; if you will learn to jest, laugh, and fleer, to grin, to nodd, and mow; if you will learn to playe the vice, to swear, teare, and blaspheme both Heaven and Earth: If you will learn to become a bawde, uncleane, and to devertinat Mayds, to deflour honest Wyves: . . . If you will learn to rebel against Princes . . . If you will lerne to deride, scoffe, mock, & flowt, to flatter and smooth: If you will learn to play the whore-maister, the glutton, Drunkard, or incestuous person . . .<sup>9</sup>

And Anthony Munday describes an audience in similarly sexualized terms:

For while they saie nought, but gladlie looke on, they al by sight and assent be actors . . . So that in that representation of whoredome, al the people in mind plaie the whores. And such as happilie came chaste unto showes, returne adulterers from plaies. For they plaie the harlots, not then onlie when they go awaie, but also when they come.<sup>10</sup>

As various readers have noted, these passages are marked by the insistent repetition of the word “play” (and the action it denotes), which crosses linguistic and theatrical boundaries and erases distinctions between truth and fiction.<sup>11</sup> This erasure is, moreover, repeated in all the vices – sexual and otherwise – that “play” encourages: they all have in common a perceived inauthenticity, an intrinsic “fictionality,” if you will, that distances them from a “reality” imagined as natural, moral, and true. Jonathan Goldberg, who has characterized Stubbes’s view of sodomy in similar terms (“a debauched playing that knows no limit”) comments: “Worse than playing the sodomite would be to be a sodomite . . . a being without being . . . This ‘worse’ is worst not least because it also dissolves the boundary between being and playing.”<sup>12</sup> I would suggest, though, that Stubbes’s locution already implies this dissolution: to “plaie the *Sodomit*” – like “to play the Hipocrit,” “to playe the vice,” “to play the whore-maister,” to “plaie the whores [and] . . . harlots” (or, in a relevant phrase from *Edward II*, to “play the sophister”<sup>13</sup>) – is to inhabit a condition of permanent unreality, in which one is always, in effect, playing a player, in a dizzying, Escher-like regress of unstable fictions and masks.

In the antitheatricalists' anxious fantasies, theatrical performances enact a particularly strong version of the subversive power of the aesthetic, as it has been described by Murray Krieger:

Unlike authoritarian discourse, the aesthetic takes back the "reality" it offers us in the very act of offering it to us. It thus provides the cues for us to view other discourse critically, to reduce the ideological claims to the *merely* illusionary, since there is in other discourse no self-awareness of their textual limitations, of their duplicity – their closures, their exclusions, their repressions... The sociopolitical function of literature in its aesthetic dimension, then, is to *destabilize* the dominant culture's attempt to impose *its* institutions by claiming a "natural" authority for them.<sup>14</sup>

And the power to call what we normally perceive as reality into question, to see it, in Kaja Silverman's terms, as merely the "dominant fiction,"<sup>15</sup> is something that imaginative creations share with the culturally defined and despised sodomitical and feminine, both of which possess the capacity to interrogate the phallic point upon which that dominant fiction rests.

But the "play" I invoke in the title of this introduction has another, conflicting meaning as well. The linear, teleological structure we have come to associate with narrative is much more evident (or at least more expected) in Renaissance drama than in narrative poetry or prose, as any reader of Spenser can readily attest. Early modern critics like Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson repeatedly insist on the importance of obeying the dramatic unities, while allowing much more leeway to narrative romances, which were understood to be "thing[s] recounted with space of time, not represented in one moment."<sup>16</sup> Renaissance dramatists do, of course, regularly subvert and defy these dicta: Sidney criticizes even *Gorboduc*, the only play he seems to admire at all, for being "faulty both in the place and time, the two necessary companions of all corporal actions,"<sup>17</sup> and among later playwrights, the principal example of one who usually adheres strictly to the rules is Jonson himself.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, as we shall see, many plays of the period demonstrate both a clear consciousness of the expectations of unity and an acute awareness of the implications of failing to fulfill them.

In recent years, postmodern criticism has connected the "logical," linear form of narrative with heterosexual consummation and reproduction. Judith Roof, for example, declares: "Our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends on a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic within a reproductive aegis."<sup>19</sup>

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Although her analysis focuses on twentieth-century fiction and media, Roof is bringing to the surface here some of the most central and enduring assumptions in Western culture.<sup>20</sup> In his seminal analysis of sexual aberrations, Freud associates “perversion” with excessive “lingering,” a refusal to attain proper consummation and closure:

Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.<sup>21</sup>

And his developmental account of sexuality also ensures, as Leo Bersani points out, that “the perversions of adults become intelligible as the sickness of *uncompleted narratives*.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite differences in earlier constructions of sexuality – which are extremely important, and to which I will give careful consideration – similar equations are perceptible in the Renaissance. Conventional “unified” dramatic structure is regularly associated with orthodox male sexuality and disrupted by deviations from that norm. Once again, Marlowe makes this linkage explicit, connecting linear narrative – which is productive of meaning – with sexual reproduction and setting it against lyric stasis and unconsummated “frolicking.”<sup>23</sup> From a very different perspective, Margaret Cavendish also identifies reproductive sexuality with dramatic closure and presents both in an ambivalent light. Webster, on the other hand, highlights the implicit masculinity of conventional tragic structure and disrupts it, in a manner that might be surprising to some – though not to readers of Irigaray – with a sexuality that is founded in feminine reproduction. And, like Marlowe’s texts, all of the exemplars I have chosen enact a tension between the two opposed connotations of “play” – between unified, teleological dramatic structure on the one hand and static lyric or improvisational performance on the other – a tension that is characteristic of early modern texts in general and that, as Marshall Grossman has cogently demonstrated, both responds and contributes to changing ideas about time, history, and sexuality in the period.<sup>24</sup>

My primary focus in the following pages is on tragedy, conventionally considered the highest and most masculine of dramatic forms in the Renaissance.<sup>25</sup> But I have also included analyses of relevant lyrics and poetic narratives, to provide a broader view as well as a clearer perspective on what is peculiar to the drama of the period. And my examination of Cavendish further necessitates a movement away from tragedy into other

dramatic genres. The criticisms of narrative that underlie my argument necessarily pose a problem in the structuring of my own story. I have tried to give them their due by avoiding an overly constricting master narrative, while I also attempt to avoid the imitative fallacy (and to respect institutional strictures) by charting clear connections among the texts I examine – and between them and other contemporary texts – and by considering how they respond to the constraints of their time.

The first section of the book examines several of Marlowe's plays and poems in detail, focusing particularly on the construction of sodomy in these texts, and more generally, on their attempts to disrupt and denaturalize societal structures of masculinity and meaning. As I have suggested, Marlowe is an important reference point for this study, both because he makes the associations I am examining particularly clear, and because he radically challenges received structures and ideas – much more so than Shakespeare, the usual focus for studies of early modern drama.

The first chapter begins with an analysis of Marlowe's famous lyric, "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and explores what happens when the lyric and the assumptions behind it are enacted in drama; I seek here, among other things, to rectify the anti-lyric bias (expressive of an anti-aesthetic bias) that is evident in much recent criticism.<sup>26</sup> I then examine the ways in which the tension between lyric and drama works, in *Tamburlaine*, Part One, to suspend consummation of all kinds. The following chapter discusses the connection between that suspension and sodomy in *Edward II* and considers the force of the play's conclusion, in which both are fixed and defined, shut up and closed down. The final chapter of this section then returns to Marlowe's nondramatic poetry and looks at the somewhat different, more optimistic perspective achieved in his (significantly unfinished) poem, *Hero and Leander*.

The second section of the study deals primarily with seventeenth-century drama, examining various attempts in the plays of the period to represent female sexuality and desire. Although the conflation of sexuality and gender that occasionally occurs here may disturb some readers, I would argue that it is inevitable when examining Renaissance texts, in which even the most conventional female desire is potentially subversive.<sup>27</sup> I introduce this part of the book with a brief chapter that forms, as its title indicates, a "Shakespearean interlude." As I have made clear, I did not wish to follow other critics in making Shakespeare the center of my work;<sup>28</sup> neither, however, did I wish simply to ignore him, looking only at "non-Shakespearean drama" (which is defined precisely by his exclusion). Many later plays concerning women seem haunted by his

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creations – especially by the image of romantic love and death in *Romeo and Juliet* – and attempt repeatedly to rethink and revise them. I therefore look briefly at *Romeo and Juliet* and its Shakespearean progeny in order to consider the relation of those plays to their successors, which often position themselves as less orthodox.

I then examine *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Although the numerous revenges in this play revolve around the question of female chastity, both its form and concerns are clearly marked as “male”: images of swelling and detumescence pervade the text and define its movement, which turns on the self-defeating paradoxes involved in the masculine desire for purity. While the anonymous playwright (now usually assumed to be Thomas Middleton) criticizes his male characters for displacing their desires and anxieties onto women, he constructs similar displacements himself, and he seems to revel in his own self-canceling creations.

John Webster, by contrast, takes the problems involved in constructing a female subjectivity much more seriously. In Chapter 5, I briefly examine Webster's analysis of gender and power relations in *The White Devil*, focusing on his presentation of gender as performance. I then turn to *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, the playwright questions to what extent it is possible not merely to parody, denaturalize, and decenter the structures of patriarchal power, but to imagine himself out of them. *The Duchess of Malfi* is particularly interesting to consider after Marlowe's plays, because Webster's challenge to the erotics of patriarchy and the structure of tragedy – to the fantasy of a self-defining, self-defeating moment of phallic orgasm and death – is conceived precisely in terms of reproductive sexuality: the Duchess's pregnancy is the central fact of the play. Throughout this chapter, I explore problems of enclosure (and closure) in seventeenth-century drama and look at the frequent, paradoxical presentation of enclosure as violation and rape.

My investigation of these problems – and of the contradictions apparent in Webster's construction of the feminine – leads me to (re)turn to Middleton. I consider his later plays, especially *The Changeling*, in the context of contemporary epithalamia, which often imply a queasy equation between virginity and whoredom, fear and desire, marriage and rape – an equation that is frequently figured by a popular literary device, the “bed-trick.” *The Changeling* emphasizes this equation as it both explores erotic compulsion and enacts that compulsion structurally. While anatomizing its society's myths and fantasies about female sexuality, the play simultaneously participates in and derives considerable erotic power from them, presenting us with an inexorable chain of events



that we, like its characters, “[can]not choose but follow.”<sup>29</sup> By comparing *The Changeling* with both similarly themed lyric and an episode in a narrative romance, I explore further the difference among these genres, and I demonstrate the importance dramatic form plays in constructing the illusion of inevitability.

The following chapter glances backward over the early modern tragic canon, as it reconsiders the relation between John Ford’s “belated” play *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* and its predecessors. I argue that Ford’s play inhabits a masculinized tragic space that it simultaneously criticizes from within, unsettling the categories of masculinity and tragedy as it does so. *’Tis Pity* turns *The Duchess of Malfi*’s criticism of *Romeo and Juliet* – of a patriarchal erotics of “unity” in consummation and death – back upon itself, placing Ferdinand’s fantasy once more at center-stage and once more subsuming the feminized space of pregnancy within the patriarchal sphere. Incest is presented here as enabling the fiction of paternal parthenogenesis, silencing anxieties about fatherhood by effectively eliding the troublesome woman. Thus, while Giovanni’s actions effectively destroy his father, they also prove him to be – as he claims – an excellent student and a true son. And Ford situates himself in a similar, contradictory relation to his own literary forefathers; he simultaneously revivifies conventional structures and ideas and presents them critically, as outdated fictions – as, in the words of his play, “old men’s tales.”<sup>30</sup>

Examining so many images of female desire leads me to consider, in my final chapter, how one woman writer approached the questions these images raise. The plays of Margaret Cavendish provide us with a particularly good vantage for contemplating the problems explored throughout this book; for even though they are predominantly comedies (a genre thought to be more suitable to the dramatist’s gender), they repeatedly engage and challenge the ideas and forms deployed by their tragic predecessors. More than any other playwright here (with the possible exception of Marlowe), Cavendish makes the tensions between the two opposed meanings of “play” explicit and their implications for constructions of gender and desire clear. She sees cohesive dramatic structure not only as expressive of reproductive sexuality but as reproducing a patrilineal tradition that both champions conventional “logical” structure and is constituted by it. This chapter examines both her prefaces and plays and considers her revisions of earlier dramatists (especially Ford), which repeatedly suggest the possibility, never fully realized in her work, of letting go of the “old men’s tales” of the past and creating something new – something that she images as the tales of young virgins.



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Throughout the book, I attempt to keep my eye both on specific early modern constructions of desire and on the larger, persistent patterns of Western European culture of which they are part. And I consider to what extent – and how – disruptive desires can effectively challenge, change, or undermine the structures in which they are embedded. This is perforce a formal as well as a historical problem; as I have suggested, it is a problem that ultimately necessitates revisiting and rethinking our conception of “history.” In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Luce Irigaray suggests that “in order to make it possible to think through, and live [sexual] difference, we must reconsider the whole problematic of space and time.” She further asserts that doing so adequately would result in “the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a *new poetics*.”<sup>31</sup> Several of the texts in this study, especially those by Marlowe, Webster, and Cavendish, clearly attempt, with varying degrees of optimism and success, to participate in such a creation. Others accede more fully to the dominant fiction that masquerades as reality. But by making the underpinnings of that fiction more visible (and by showing its connections to texts we commonly conceive of as “fictional”), they all help us to understand more fully the forms and fantasies we still inhabit, to consider anew the implications of our involvement in them, and to contemplate the possibility of constructing alternative fictions – and alternative “realities.”

PART I

*“Come . . . and play”: Christopher  
Marlowe, beside the point*