Introduction

Provisional pleasures

While browsing through a card shop just before Valentine's Day a few
years ago, I noticed a valentine with a photograph of a pre-Raphaelite
painting on its cover. In the painting, a medieval woman with a cloud of
golden hair bent fervently to kiss the hand of a knight who had clearly
just slain the dragon now lying behind them. Half of a red lance
protruded from the dragon's side, while the other splintered half
remained in the knight's now-quiet hand. Because something about the
card seemed out of kilter, I took it down to look inside. No surprises
there: ''You're My Knight In Shining Armour. Happy Valentine's Day.''
The problem was that in the painting, the knight was gazing quietly over
his lady's shoulder, as though at some invisible complication or heavi-
ness. Only when I looked at the back of the card did I learn that the 1898
painting by Mary F. Raphael (fl. 1889–1915) was titled *Britomart and
Amoret*. I felt as though someone were teasing me – or perhaps (since I
did not know the sex, sexual orientation, politics, or education of the
card-maker who had paired Raphael's painting with that tag to form a
valentine) it was my private pleasure rather than one I shared with
someone else. To a card-maker who had not read *The Faerie Queene*'s
third book, with its bold heroine disguised as a knight in armor, the
name ''Britomart'' would not necessarily look feminine, would it? Given
that the card shop's valentine display clearly assumed heterosexuality
and that the card's message did not announce itself as anything other
than timeworn, I imagined an unsuspecting female customer buying the
card for her guy. She would thus be sending an erotic message far more
complex than she had intended – or than he would be likely to receive.
This was a delightful game, yet I did not even know whose it was. Which
two figures did this armored dalliance engage? Britomart and Amoret?
(In the poem, after all, Amoret does not know at first that her rescuer is a
woman.) Spenser and Britomart? An employee of the Marcel Schurman
card company and myself? Myself and another purchaser? Mary

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Raphael-the-pre-Raphaelite and her post-Raphaelite viewers? Or suppose I decided to send the valentine to a male friend whose familiarity with Spenser would allow him to enjoy the gendered layering? The card neither depicted a flirtation nor clearly enacted one; Raphael's maiden was solemnly grateful rather than blushing, the message inside was not coy, and even the red lance was hardly subtle. Yet although a valentine depicting, say, Titian's *Urbino Venus* – with her face half-turned, her smile half-formed, and her hand half-covering her pubis – might have had a more immediately erotic effect on its viewers, such a valentine could not have been any more intriguingly indirect or provisional in its sexual teasing than this one was.

Raphael's painting depicts a scene not to be found in *The Faerie Queene*; Spenser's Britomart saves Amoret from various perils but never from a dragon. Despite, and partly because of, its mismatch between illustration and written text (whether by ''text'' we mean the message in the card or the sixteenth-century epic from which Raphael took her title), this twentieth-century valentine with its surplus of messages can serve as an appropriate analogy for the complicated genderings in Spenser's poetry. Although all good flirtations involve a great deal of uncertainty about what is or is not going on, Spenser's narrative technique often resembles or incorporates flirtation while adding more layers of ambiguous intent than we normally recognize in a flirtation between two people. This book will use Spenser's poetry to define a flirtatious sixteenth-century literary mode that scholars have often glanced at without fully recognizing, which can best be described as a *conditional erotics*. Whereas all flirtation is conditional in the sense that the people involved cannot be sure of each other's wishes, the type of flirtation that this book addresses threads its way through wider uncertainties: because the participants may be narrative voices, readers, or even figures of speech as well as characters, the very existence of their erotic exchanges often seems a trick of lighting, an elusive shadow in our peripheral vision.[1] Many times neither the reader nor the participants know for sure who is dallying with whom or how they are gendered by the text. Yet I will argue that this dalliance is a source of great textual strength.

I want to raise questions about gender that are at once less antipathetic towards male authors and more cognizant of the unresolvable strangeness of sixteenth-century ideas about human sexuality than some recent feminist criticism has been. Briefly, the central questions of the book are these: to what sorts of feminine influence other than, or in addition to, that of the Virgin Prince does Spenser's *Faerie Queene* acknowledge or reveal a debt? In what sense can we say that this specifically Spenserian indebtedness to forms of behavior and thought that early modern

English culture labels "feminine" grows out of or participates in a wider set of sixteenth-century English attitudes toward eroticism? How do these sixteenth-century attitudes then shape the ways that people view English women who begin to publish imaginative literature in significant numbers for the first time in the seventeenth century? In answering these questions about Spenser, I make no pretense of compendiousness; for better or worse, my habit is always to work outward from small, luminous moments in a text toward the suggestion of larger possibilities. Similarly, my final two chapters will address the questions I have raised about the seventeenth century by working outward from two texts that cannot in themselves prove trends but that can show us richly what is possible. These chapters examine two seventeenth-century refigurations of Spenser's topos, first in a comic drama by Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley and then in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," which differs from mid-sixteenth-century Petrarchan lyrics in ways that strongly suggest both the intervening influence of Spenser's conditional erotics and the pressure put upon that mode by the entrance of female writers into the marketplace.

The notion of a conditional eroticism informs the whole of my study; *Conditional Erotics* was intended to be the book's main title until practical marketing considerations stepped in. Because two-thirds of the book will be devoted to defining my key term by example and discussion, any attempt to define conditional erotics in this introduction by summarizing those examples will necessarily seem oblique or elliptical. There are, however, some general characteristics of Spenserian textual eroticism that will become more intelligible once we have set the stage by looking at the origins and contexts of this mode.

Elizabethan courting

The confederation of literary techniques that I am calling conditional eroticism has its roots in the tradition of Petrarchan love poetry, becoming especially important for Sidney's sonnets in the sixteenth century. Two of these sonnets will generate a great deal of the centrifugal force for Chapter 2. The strongest examples of the phenomenon, however, are in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, *Amoretti*, and *Epithalamion*, so Chapters 1 through 4 will chiefly discuss passages from the romance epic rather than short lyric poems. Spenser complicates, politically intensifies, and narrativizes a type of dalliance that Sidney, Greville, and others had already made possible in more lyrical and less complicated fashions.

A note about the term "post-Petrarchan": I use this term somewhat differently from Roland Greene, who begins his study of the western

lyric sequence by postulating, ''As soon as a European poet of the 1500's
lifts pen to write as a Petrarchan, he or she inevitably becomes a post-
Petrarchan, reinventing the idea of a broadly scaled, self-oriented poetry
for present circumstances'' (*Post-Petrarchism*, 3). True as this must be in
some senses (and Greene makes good use of it), in most argumentative
contexts it is counterproductive to define Petrarchism as including only
that which is indistinguishable from Petrarch. All genres vary a great
deal internally; otherwise, we would have to define each genre as only an
original example and its most slavish, least interesting followers. For my
purposes, Petrarchism includes Petrarch's *Rime sparse* and all the lyric
sequences afterwards that imitate the *Rime sparse* to any significant
degree.

Yet we need not insist upon a sharp distinction between Petrarchism
and post-Petrarchism, either. With the latter term, I do not primarily
designate what Heather Dubrow calls a ''counterdiscourse'' (*Echoes of
Desire*, 8), nor an antagonism toward an earlier genre – though Spenser
certainly had that at times. Rather, I am interested in a conversation
between a non-lyric genre (the epic) and a lyric one (the Petrarchan
sonnet sequence). Indeed, I am far less concerned with the move from the
Rime sparse to English poetry than with how Petrarchism as defined in
English sonnets begins to influence other English works. Rather than
considering Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* as anti-Petrarchan or post-
Petrarchan, then, I take Sidney to be the author who most familiarly
defines the genre for England. (His anti-Petrarchan declarations are
almost always humorously ironized by his imitations of Petrarch's own
self-criticism.) I think of *post*-Petrarchism as a body of literature, not
usually in sonnet form, which recognizes the prior fact of Petrarchan
lyricism and quotes it purposely out of context.

I should be more specific about my relationship to Dubrow's work,
since she must have been writing her *Echoes of Desire: English Petrar-
chism and its Counterdiscourses* at about the same time I was working on
the Spenser portions of this book, and since our theories complement
each other. The category of responses to earlier Petrarchism that
Dubrow addresses differs from the category engaged by this present
study. Dubrow's ''counterdiscourses'' are by and large the conservatizing
responses: those which attempt to counter the frustration and the
gendered slippages characteristic of Petrarchism by fashioning a powerful
male speaker who ''achieves the consummation of which his counterpart
in Petrarchism can, quite literally, only dream'' (*Echoes*, 252). Dubrow
and I agree that Petrarchism is complexly gendered, often making room
for feminine agency even in sonnet sequences with male speakers, but
whereas Dubrow looks at subsequent efforts to tame this complexity, I

look at subsequent efforts to heighten it, to search out its dangers – though in the context of a playfulness that can overtly deny the existence of risk.

In importing a quintessentially lyrical mode into his epic, Spenser might seem at first simply to take his cue from Sidney's use of ostentatiously and sometimes humorously Petrarchan sigla in his *Arcadia*, as when sighing lovers affix poems to trees (a topos later gleefully employed by Shakespeare in *As You Like It* and Marvell in ''The Garden''). Yet even more than Sidney, I would argue, Spenser recognizes that at the heart of Petrarchism is not a set of tropes, gestures, and images (though he is quite capable of using these) but a method of enriching the representation of relationships among desiring human beings and among the conflicting desires of each individual. Explicitly neoplatonist in his *Fowre Hymnes* and in the *Faerie Queene*'s Garden of Adonis (*FQ* III.vi), Spenser is nonetheless famously anti-Petrarchan in his critical portrayal of Busyrane's sadistic use of sonnet devices to torture Amoret, who literally carries her pierced heart before her in a basin, the wound in her breast giving her agony (*FQ* III.xii). It is to a great extent this very discomfort with the tradition, combined with fascination, that produces Spenser's conditional erotics. Although others among his contemporaries certainly ironize the sonnet tradition while using it, only Spenser is at once so invested, so disturbed at his own investment, and so determined to probe the wound of that disturbance. Before addressing conditionality more specifically in relation to Spenser's texts, then, we should briefly consider gender and conditionality in the Petrarchan tradition proper.

As Arthur Marotti, Louis Montrose, and others have pointed out, Petrarchism became increasingly important in court politics after Elizabeth Tudor ascended the throne; in one sort of court discourse, the ideal sovereign became the ideal beloved, and political ambition spoke the language of neoplatonic desire for both the enlightenment and the erotic fulfillment that only a beautiful woman could supply. The fantasy of marrying purely for love came to represent the equally improbable fantasy of being promoted purely for merit.[2] On the one hand, this sociopolitical system sometimes advanced Elizabeth's interests in frequently allowing her to offer her followers the conditional and ambiguous rewards of grace and love in place of, say, monopolies or hard cash, and it further allowed her to avoid ceding power to a husband who would only interfere in the marriage between the Virgin Queen and her country.[3] Scholars such as Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Goldberg, Daniel Javitch, and Frank Whigham have usefully explored the ways that the queen's authority was veiled, ventriloquized, and disseminated,

often through amorous fictions and rhetorics that made it seem as
though courtiers and subjects called all of the shots.[4] Analogously,
though in a deconstructive vein, Elizabeth Bellamy has argued that the
very language Spenser uses to describe his queen only names her
elusiveness. When he metaphorizes her as a mirror, she becomes "her
own self-reflecting but ever-vanishing source, defying representation
from the outside" ("Vocative," 10). The fact that Spenser never received
a court position and was therefore technically not a courtier only
emphasizes the degree to which his unsuccessful bid for such a position,
in naming England's first national epic after Queen Elizabeth, demon-
strates the success of her political appropriation of Petrarch.

On the other hand, some of these same critics have also been interested
in the ways that Elizabethan writers used their *subjected* positions within
Petrarchan discourse as a means of asserting their own *subjectivity*.
Montrose writes that "the Petrarchan lover worships a deity of his own
making and under his own control," and Robert Mueller argues that
although "the ambition of the courtier keeps producing and reproducing
the absolute status of the arbitrary power," this means (in Hegelian
fashion) that the monarch depends upon the courtier.[5] Indeed, according
to Mueller, Spenser's Gloriana (the "Faerie Queene" herself) "is the
creation solely of Arthur's quest for her. Arthur's infinite desire is
equated with Elizabeth's endless stream of courtiers" ("Infinite Desire,"
757). Although Elizabeth differed from Gloriana in having a living
presence, Montrose argues persuasively that Elizabeth Tudor had only
partial authority in the production of "Queen Elizabeth"; this authority
was shared by many people with competing interests, including writers
like Spenser: "This is not to deny that there exists an authority 'beyond
the poem,' but it is to *un*fix that authority, to put into question its
absolute claims upon the subjects who produce the forms in which it
authorizes itself" ("Elizabethan Subject," 317, 331).

More recently, Richard Rambuss has cross-pollinated the theory that
Elizabeth uses Petrarchism to frustrate her courtiers' access to her power
with the theory that her subjects use Petrarchism to claim at least a
conditional, textual power. Starting with the etymological connection
between "secrecy" and "secretary," Rambuss argues that Spenser's
career as a secretary in the civil service is not as incidental as has been
thought to Spenser's fashioning himself into England's first professional
poet:

Rather than seeking to "name" Elizabeth, or to lift the "couert vele" that always
obscures her, the poem's investment, I suggest, lies precisely in maintaining that
veil, in keeping her (as its) secret. And rather than occasioning the vocational
crisis Bellamy describes, Spenser's secreting of Elizabeth serves as the poetic

substantiation of his vocation as a poet who is also a secretary – who is, to recall Angel Day's formulation, "a keeper or conseruer of the secret unto him committed." (*Spenser's Secret Career*, 76; Day, *The English Secretary*, Pt. 2, 102–103).

Rambuss emphasizes the politic and professional nature of Spenser's proof that he can keep secrets, but I find Rambuss's conjecture striking in its hint of a much more intimate flirtation between poet and queen than the courtship-contests figured by Montrose *et al.* Here, Spenser styles himself as someone who shares his mistress's beauties only with her – if she will coöperate. Nevertheless, Rambuss shares with the critics who privilege Elizabeth's control over her poet and those who privilege Spenser's control over his queen the baseline assumption that Elizabeth is always at the center of Spenserian erotics.

Most Spenserian scholars interested in issues of sexuality and gender have focused their researches upon Elizabeth, and understandably so, given that Spenser's epic turns to the queen for its inspiration, title, subject matter, and reward. In view of Spenser's lifelong angling for a position at court, it would seem doubly logical to center my own study of textual flirtation upon the queen. Nor do I disagree with the historicist arguments summarized above. Yet the mythology of the Virgin Queen, which encouraged Elizabeth Tudor's courtiers to flirt with her, fully explains neither Spenser's responses to the pressures of femininity nor his explorations of the interactions between gender and narrative. Certainly *The Faerie Queene* is heavily invested in Elizabeth, but it also acknowledges, and is curious about, less glorious forms of feminine power and inscrutability. If it is true, as the last several decades of Renaissance scholarship have indicated, that Elizabeth shrewdly predicated her political control upon her difference from other women, validating her rule by claiming the "heart and stomach of a king" while paternally preventing her Maids of Honor from making even basic decisions about the directions of their own lives, then we should consider the possibility that feminine influences upon, and voices within, Spenser's epic may sometimes look very different from Elizabeth's idiosyncratic brand of feminine influence.[6] It follows that the poem's exchanges with other forms of femininity may differ importantly from its erotic exchanges with the "haughtie courage" of the queen (*FQ* IV.pr.5).

Jonathan Goldberg has taken issue with the current tendency to believe Queen Elizabeth unique in her gendering simply because she spoke of herself in both feminine and masculine metaphors, remained adamantly unmarried, and was powerful: "To treat her as 'anomalous' is to assume that biological sex and gender are unproblematically sutured in 'ordinary' cases and that heterosexuality assigns men and women to

stabilized and opposing positions. That is the work that marriage as an institution is supposed to do . . .'' (*Sodometries*, 41). Reminding his readers that within femininity there are many possible configurations, Goldberg speculates that ''Elizabeth's 'anomaly' might well have been a potentially shareable position'' (*Sodometries*, 61). This reminder is well placed, and in fact my interest lies precisely in problematic sutures of gender. Yet to the extent that we might define such sutures in Spenser's work only in terms of Elizabeth as Queen, we would paradoxically treat her as an anomaly despite our best intentions. Gender identity aside, she was, of course, anomalous among women in many ways, and we cannot isolate her gendering from the other facts of her life. Even more importantly, both her supporters and her detractors *believed* her gendering anomalous, fearing and gaining strength from her Minervan powers, her inviolate body. Although I cannot hope – and would not wish – to speak about conditional erotics in *The Faerie Queene* without taking Elizabeth into account, neither do I believe it necessary or desirable to refer all settlements to her. Because other critics have already attended so productively to the queen, I have the luxury of bringing Spenser's wooing of her into my present study chiefly to the extent that this wooing helps us get at Spenser's constructions of femininity, rather than the other way around; and I will spend most of my time with forms of femininity in Spenser's work that either avoid or are denied the limelight demanded by Elizabeth. Among other things, I will argue that the intricate genderings Spenser coaxed from the Petrarchan tradition often are important in ways that do not particularly distinguish court life from all other.[7]

Petrarchan selves

Some of these other forms of femininity are peculiarly allied to the poet's inner self.[8] Natalie Davis and Stephen Greenblatt have argued that in sixteenth-century Europe, the self was not formed by psychological individuation. People did not have a sense of a private, essential self at the core of being; rather, titles to selfhood were secured by community and family, and although one could certainly have secrets, the psyche was not a private or self-defining place but a microcosm of the contests, negotiations, and intrigues that went on in the social world. According to Greenblatt, Spenser envisions the psyche, like one's position in the social world, as ''extremely vulnerable to fraud'' (*Learning to Curse*, 144; see also Davis, ''Boundaries''). One contention underlying this book is that when Petrarchan poets search for ways of representing this potentially unfaithful inner self, they begin by calling it ''lady.'' Wendy Wall's

observations about the oddly public version of intimacy generated by
sixteenth-century sonnet coteries are apposite here:

> Because the coterie charted a pathway that identified class boundaries, it
> reinforced a peculiarly socially defined sense of privacy. The social enclosure and
> exclusivity generated by the circulation of manuscript texts could be discussed
> thematically as "the personal." Social privacy, when threatened by technological
> innovation, became articulated in Renaissance English culture as erotic intimacy.
> (*Imprint*, 188)

"The personal" is sibling to the self, and when written sonnets house the
personal, selfhood becomes not only a textual matter but a peculiarly
flirtatious one. Sonneteers such as Sidney and Greville often bring
femininity inside the head of a male persona in the form of a woman's
image that also serves as a resident feminine *imagination* when it inspires
new poetic images. Yet this in-house femininity is more complicated and
potentially more troublesome than a muse. In "Early Modern Women
and 'the muses ffemall,'" Frances Teague has intriguingly explored the
early modern fear that women authors could receive inspiration from the
female muses only by having "tribade" sex with them, but even in this
scenario, the muses were not envisioned as having complicated psyches.
Whereas a muse may either inspire or withhold inspiration, the feminine
figure that resides in a male poet's head sometimes has intricate agendas
of her own. Her serious dalliance with her host can metaphorically turn
his body inside out or render it subject to its own fantastical projections.
The Petrarchans complement the European explorers' outward voyages
by traveling inward, and, like the explorers, the poets encounter stran-
gers. One could say cynically that because what the Petrarchans find
inside of themselves seems to them an uncivil mess, they look around for
someone to blame it on and fix naturally upon stony-hearted women, but
the phenomenon is richer than this, especially in Spenser's epic versions
of selfhood. I suggest that in the sixteenth century, the interiority that
would later develop into the modern private self was first conceived by
male authors as a female *figure* who resided, as the female sexual organs
resided in Aristotelian and Galenic medical theory, somewhere inside of
and yet prior to the man's own formation.[9] Such a figure was certainly
capable of unfaithfulness.

In a recent article titled "Making Defect Perfection: Shakespeare and
the One-Sex Model," Janet Adelman argues convincingly that the one-
sex biological model from ancient Greece, which has captivated literary
critics in the past dozen years, is almost completely absent from English
vernacular medical manuals of the sixteenth and early seventeenth
centuries. This is an especially notable absence in the most popular
manuals, except in the few cases where medical writers bring up the one-

sex model in order to refute it. Yet the fact that refutation was deemed
necessary is, as Adelman acknowledges, evidence that it had some degree
of popular hold (though not the hegemony so often currently accorded
it). One need only read pamphlets from the controversy over women to
see that a jumble of ideas from Galen, Aristotle, and the church fathers
were often cited as proof in arguments written by the learned and the less
learned. A favorite piece of supporting evidence for all sorts of arguments
was the Aristotelian conception of woman's unstable intellect, morals,
and body; she wandered.[10] According to Ian Maclean's *Renaissance
Notion of Woman*, although no one characteristic of women in the
Aristotelian model (which included a great deal of information about
femaleness and femininity beyond the biological) had been widely jet-
tisoned by the end of the sixteenth century, the unquestioning assump-
tion that Aristotle's picture was coherent had certainly waned, with every
individual characteristic becoming subject to debate (pp. 82–83). At the
same time, I would point out, the very fact that the nature of woman was
more genuinely disputed than it had been for millennia seemed in a sense
to emphasize that women were indeed erratic, making them the perfect
representation of a man's inner turmoil and self-evasion. And the fact
that Elizabethans' obsessions with secrecy and spying extended to a
paranoia about what women thought or talked about when men weren't
around meant that the male poet's relationship with his feminine inner
self, who was largely hidden even from himself, involved complexities of
voyeurism, desire, wooing, and teasing.

Responding to critics such as Ann Rosalind Jones and Gary Waller,
who have written about female poets' struggles to join a masculine
tradition, Gordon Braden has objected that Petrarchism seems to have
been far more hospitable to expressions of women's desires than other
literary genres and modes available in the sixteenth and seventeenth
centuries. ''Critical insistence on the maleness of Petrarchism is prema-
ture subtlety that blurs the texture of the tradition's historical placement
and obscures what is unusual and noteworthy about its place in the grid
of gender relations'' (Braden, ''Gaspara Stampa,'' 118; see Jones, *Cur-
rency of Eros*, and Waller, ''Struggling''). Braden's article offers a useful
revision of widespread interpretations of Petrarchism, mostly in view of
the work of the Italian sonneteer and courtesan Gaspara Stampa. For
my purposes here, however, it is important to consider his claim that
even the body of Petrarchan poems written by men should not be
described as overwhelmingly masculine: ''Gendering Petrarchism as
male, of course, second-guesses the usual Renaissance complaint. The
standard joke about the Petrarchan lover is his effeminacy'' (*ibid*., 117).
There is some confusion of terminology between Braden's usage and