

“I Am No Woman, I”: Gender, Sexuality, and Power in Elizabethan Erotic Verse

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Introduction: England’s “Female Prince”

Elizabeth Tudor’s accession to the English throne in 1558 significantly challenged and disrupted contemporary assumptions about gender roles. Elizabeth I was an anointed monarch, but she was also a woman in a world of men. Early modern England was a patriarchal society in which the monarch’s control over the kingdom was often compared to a father’s power over his household (Shuger, 1997), and virtually all the powerful figures at Elizabeth’s court were male, including the members of her Privy Council. The expectation was that the highest political position of all, that of England’s sovereign, should also be held by a man, and in contemporary writings on the institution of monarchy the ruler’s body is always imagined to be male. During Elizabeth I’s reign, however, tension was generated by the gap between rhetoric and reality; while the ideal royal body might be gendered male in political discourse, Elizabeth’s own physical body was undeniably female.

Elizabeth I’s political androgyny – she was known at home and abroad as a “female Prince”, and Parliamentary statute declared her a “king” for political purposes (Jordan, 1990) – raised serious questions about the relationship between gender and power, questions which were discussed at length by early modern lawyers and political theorists (Axton, 1977). However, such issues also had an influence on Elizabethan literature. Elizabeth I often exploited her physical femininity as a political tool: for instance, she justified her decision not to marry by casting herself as the unobtainable lady familiar to Elizabethans from the Petrarchan sonnet tradition,¹ and encouraged her courtiers to compete for political favour by courting

¹ Francesco Petrarch was a fourteenth-century Italian scholar and poet who wrote a series of sonnets (*Il Conzoniere*) addressed to an idealised, sexually unavailable mistress. His poems became popular in early modern England, and inspired court poets such as Thomas Wyatt and Sir Philip Sidney.

her in the language of love. The ideological implications of this eroticised politics can be discerned in the verse of courtier-poets such as George Gascoigne; since courtly love poetry reversed standard gender roles, with the man becoming his beloved's "servant", it could reflect contemporary anxieties about a female monarch's authority over the male elite (Henderson, 1995). During this period, the very act of praising a beloved woman was attacked as "feminine" and emasculating; with sexual and political subservience imaginatively conflated in contemporary discourse, the loss of "masculine" dominance resulted in a slippage of gender identity in which the subservient male was re-imagined as stereotypically female (Henderson, 1995). This perceived relationship between gender and power, and power's capacity to imaginatively re-fashion gender identities, was also relevant to Elizabeth's own politically androgynous state.

Courtly verse was dedicated to the queen, and therefore at least ostensibly aimed to flatter Elizabeth. However, another poetic genre of the period also responded to questions of gender identity, political interaction, and power: the erotic verse of the 1590s. Like the courtly lyrics of the period, these poems depict episodes of sexual dominance and surrender, exploring the relationship between power and gender identity within an erotic context in order to express the political experience of their male readership, bound in subservience to a dominant female ruler. Written at a time when many young male courtiers were becoming dissatisfied with life under a cautious, aging queen (Haigh, 1984), these erotic verses differed from courtly poetry in addressing an aristocratic male readership, rather than Elizabeth I. For instance, Nashe's *Choice of Valentines* is dedicated to "Lord S[trange]", and addresses "gentlemen" readers (314), while Marlowe's posthumously published poem *Hero and Leander* includes a dedicatory epistle to Sir Thomas Walsingham. The circulation of erotic verse within a homosocial literary network in which only male readers were expected to participate has encouraged scholars to identify homoerotic tensions in these poems, and beautiful adolescent boys certainly feature frequently. However, this poetic focus on the adolescent male also has a politicised ideological significance in that, like the literary network within which such verses circulated, it facilitates the exclusion of the female and feminine power from an exclusive masculine sphere.

Many young aristocratic men were particularly frustrated by Elizabeth's reluctance to engage in military enterprises, and I will begin this article by analysing how the relationship between conquest and masculinity is explored in the erotic epyllion *Hero and Leander*. Next, I will consider the connection Elizabethan erotic verse posits

between masculine identity and sexual dominance, and investigate what happens when male lovers experience sexual failure, as in *All Ovid's Elegies* and Nashe's *Choice of Valentines*. Sexual submission is again important in Shakespeare's sonnet 133, and in the epigram "In Francum", in which a breakdown in sexual power structures threatens to disrupt the stability of gender identity itself. Finally, in the conclusion, I will discuss how anxieties about power, sexuality, and gender ultimately lead in these poems to the exclusion of the threateningly powerful female from the masculine sphere, foreshadowing James I's future ideological assault on Elizabeth I's cult of the female ruler.

Soldiers and Sexual Conquest

In Christopher Marlowe's poem *Hero and Leander* (first published 1598), gender categories are questioned and challenged from the start. The opening description of Leander hints at a feminine element to his appearance, characterised by "dangling tresses that were never shorne" (I.55) and "orient cheekes and lippes" (I.73), while the narrator reports that "some swore he was a maid in mans attire, / For in his lookes were all that men desire" (I.83-84). This potential hint of same-sex desire is reinforced in a later passage, when Leander encounters the sea-god Neptune. The "lustie god" (II.167), "imagining, that *Ganimed*...had left the heavens" (II.157-58), seizes Leander and "imbrast him, cald him love, / And swore he never should returne to Jove" (II.167-68). Even when Leander's human identity becomes apparent (II.169), Neptune's erotic assault upon his body continues:

He clapt his plumpe cheekes, with his tresses playd,
And smiling wantonly, his love bewrayd.
He watcht his armes, and as they opend wide,
At every stroke, betwixt them would he slide,
And steale a kisse, and then run out and daunce.

(II.181-85)

The language of this passage is explicit and sensual: Neptune's "love" for Leander is not Platonic, but overtly sexual. Yet the anticipated climax of the episode never arrives; as, when in Sestos, Leander bemused those who "knew he was a man" (I.87) by his reluctance to participate in "amorous play" (I.88), so now he rejects Neptune's "talke of love" (II.191) with comic naivety: "You are deceav'd, I am no woman, I" (II.192).

For Leander, the encounter with Neptune threatens his masculinity just as the Thracian soldier's earlier advances at Sestos had done: the latter's feelings of desire suggested to some that Leander was a "maid" (I.83), while Leander believes that submission to Neptune's desires must entail a feminised identity which he rejects. Significantly, however, it is not homosexual desire *per se* which threatens male identity: Leander's suitor in Sestos is introduced as a "barbarous...soldier, moov'd with nought" (I.81), while Neptune is described as "kingly" and "lustie" (II.166-67), terms that suggest a military and masculine potency. Indeed, Leander's first physical encounter with Hero erodes his masculinity as ably as either of his homoerotic experiences, when he reverses the Sestian image of "a maid in mans attire" (I.83) by dressing up in Hero's feminine accessories (II.105-10); his "amorous habit" (II.104) may recall the myth of Hercules and Omphale, a classical trope of effeminised masculinity.

What is at stake in these encounters is not necessarily heterosexual or homosexual desire, but rather sexual authority: the implication is that gender is a constructed category, linked to the performance of surrender or conquest. Leander's encounters with the Thracian soldier and Neptune are threatening not because they are homoerotic, but because he would be the subordinate partner; the act of submission would apparently entail the erosion of his masculinity and the elision of his own identity into that of the "maid" or "woman". In the same way, Leander's first encounter with Hero also places him in a subordinate position, since the power to give or withhold her favours lies with Hero (II.25). While she chooses not to deny Leander, he is unable to take advantage of her decision: the reader is informed that he "as a brother with his sister toyed, / Supposing nothing else was to be done" (II.52-53). Leander's sexual omissions implicitly undermine his masculinity by allowing the power within the relationship to remain with Hero, as symbolised by her continued possession of the "diademe", "this inestimable gemme" (II.77-78).

Subsequently, however, Leander is able to repair this omission, reaffirming his sexual dominance and thus his masculinity. Rejecting the threatened assault on his gender identity by informing Neptune that "I am no woman" (II.192), Leander proceeds to overpower Hero in a scene that plays with the Petrarchan conceits typical of Elizabethan court poetry; indeed, Patrick Cheney has even suggested that there is a potential analogy between Hero and England's queen (Cheney, 1997, p.246-47). Leander's initial pursuit of Hero is likened to a hunt, as he casts "his hands...upon her like a snare" (II.259); Hero responds "like chaste *Diana*" (II.261), a goddess of the hunt whose image featured in Elizabeth's royal iconography. Next, military

metaphor is introduced: Hero's "every lim did as a soldier stout / Defend the fort, and keep the foe-man out" (II.271-72), but this defence soon falters, and the victorious Leander "puls or shakes" (II.300) the "fruit" of Hero's chastity. In conquering Hero sexually, his manliness is confirmed, and the narrator subsequently compares him to Mars (II.305), god of war. Marlowe's Leander reaffirms his masculinity in a scene of martial conquest, yet he does so during a period when Elizabeth I's reluctance to wage war had become deeply frustrating for the young men at her court, who believed that their queen's reluctance was depriving them of the chance to win military honour and martial glory.

Impotence and Identity

In *Hero and Leander*, the threat of gender confusion is averted by Leander's sexual conquest of Hero. However, there are moments in Elizabethan erotic verse when conquest is denied and the model of male sexual dominance breaks down, as in Marlowe's vernacular translation of Ovid's *Amores* (first published 1599). Here, the speaker self-consciously adopts a supplicant's role, describing himself as Love's "captive" (I.2.8, 19); in turn, such submissive behaviour weakens the speaker in his subsequent sexual encounters. Though he recounts many erotic "conquests", these successes are undercut by the form in which they are presented: "When in this workes first verse I trod aloft, / Love slackt my Muse, and made my numbers soft" (I.1.21-22). Marlowe's usage of "slack" and "soft" hints at a sexual dimension which becomes explicit in Book III, when the flaccidity of the speaker's penis becomes the subject of an elegy written in "soft" and "spent" verse (III.1.69, 15). The speaker's sexual impotence, as his penis "hung down...and suncke" (III.6.14), leads to a concomitant failure of identity: noting that "I prove neither youth nor man" (III.6.20), the speaker concludes that "neither was I man, nor lived then" (III.6.60). This crisis of masculine identity culminates when the speaker likens his "dead" and "drouping" penis to "a Rose puld yesterday" (III.6.66); the rose motif more commonly symbolises *female* genitalia. Eliding male and female sexual organs, the speaker deconstructs the conventional boundaries of gender identity, and relates sexual failure to gender confusion.

A similar narrative of impotence runs through Thomas Nashe's *Choice of Valentines* (date unknown), which again uses Ovid's hemlock motif to portray penile dysfunction. The lover who narrates the poem, while cataloguing the delights of his mistress' body in pseudo-Petrarchan style, becomes over-excited and ejaculates prematurely: "It makes the fruites of love eftsoone be rype, / And

pleasure pluckt too tymelie from the stemme” (118-19). This “plucking” from the “stem” may perhaps recall the effeminised rose-penis of elegy III.6, while Nashe’s debt is evident in the next few lines:

Hir arme’s are spread, and I am all unarm’d.
Lyke one with Ovids cursed hemlock charm’d,
So are my limm’s unwealdie for the fight,
That spend their strength in thought of hir delight.

(123-26)

Employing the same martial imagery as Marlowe and Ovid, Nashe characterises his speaker’s sexual failure as a military defeat, and one that threatens to disrupt the conventional topos of the conquering male lover. “What shall I doe to shewe my self a man?” (127), laments the speaker, perpetuating the Ovidian model in which sexual failure threatens to deconstruct gender identity.

Nashe’s speaker subsequently persuades his penis to rise “from his swoune” (142) and carry out a pseudo-military assault on his mistress’ body, reminiscent of Leander’s conquest of Hero: “Then he flue on hir as he were wood, / And on hir breeche did thack and foyne a-good” (143-44). However, success is short-lived, and the speaker’s “faint-hearted instrument of lust” (235) again proves incapable of satisfying his mistress; instead, the male penis is replaced by a sterile and mechanical copy. Yet the threat represented by “eunuke dilldo, senceless, counterfet” (263), is ultimately neutralised by the poetic narrative. Firstly, the dildo is represented by the masculine pronoun and described as a “page” (253) or “youth” (269): the power to satisfy the woman sexually is still gendered male in Nashe’s poem, albeit in counterfeit form. Secondly, the virility of the dildo is challenged by the response of the male narrator, who ends by reporting his own personal triumph: “She lyeth breathlesse... The waves doe swell, the tydes climbe or’e the banks, / Judge gentlemen if I deserve not thanks” (312-14). Reasserting the speaker’s capacity to satisfy his mistress, these lines also resituate the poem’s events within a wider context through the external address to the “gentlemen” readers. The speaker’s mistress may gain autonomous sexual power, but she achieves this only through a sterile reproduction of masculine potency. Moreover, her apparent independence is nothing of the sort, since within the narrative structure of Nashe’s poem the supposed self-sufficiency of the woman occurs only to allow the male reader a voyeuristic glimpse of her sexually aroused body. In devaluing the woman’s attempt to assert sexual authority Nashe’s poem, like Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, potentially reacts to Elizabeth I’s own pose of political androgyny, which associated her own power over her

male subjects with a chaste, sterile mimicry of masculine prowess: both Virgin Queen, and female Prince.

Love's Captive: Surrender and Submission

Despite Nashe's containment tactics, the male reader of *The Choice of Valentines* is still problematically implicated in a ritual of surrender: the reader obtains an erotic thrill from witnessing impotence and through the (ultimately deferred) threat of male subservience. In the same way, William Shakespeare explores male experiences of sexual submission in the *Sonnets* (first published 1609), for instance using the trope of imprisonment in sonnet 133 as he begs his mistress to "prison my heart in thy steel bosom's ward" (9). The pronoun references are ambiguous, but the dominant sexual partner is apparently the female mistress, who has enslaved both the speaker and his "sweet'st friend" (133.4): the speaker proposes instead that his mistress should imprison him alone, for "I being pent in thee, / Perforce am thine, and all that is in me" (133.13-14). His words suggests submission, surrender to imprisonment, and yet there are also hints of sexual enjoyment; the image of the speaker becoming encased in the mistress' body, and pouring out "all that is in me" into her implies a sexualised occupation of her body. While the idea of the lover's imprisonment is a conceit typical of courtly verse, which also occurs in sonnets 57 and 58, here it is complicated by the underlying confusion about the gender/identity of the dominant party, and by the erotic enjoyment this imprisonment enables.

A more explicit relationship between surrender and sexual pleasure can be discerned in *All Ovid's Elegies*. Here, the speaker's presentation of himself as Love's "captive" carries suggestive implications, endorsed by Marlowe's translation: "Loe I confesse, I am thy captive I, / And hold my conquered hands for thee to tie" (I.2.19-20). Indeed, the speaker's "new made wound" (I.2.29), presumably inflicted by Love's arrow, may even hint at the sexualised penetration of his "captive" body by Cupid's phallic "shaft" (I.1.26). The physical interaction between Love and the speaker involves sexualised tropes of dominance and subservience elsewhere explored through the speaker's relationship with his mistresses. At times, the speaker's erotic enjoyment seems integrally linked to the act of surrender: "Doubtfull is warre and love: the vanquisht rise" (30), he remarks in elegy I.9. In this elegy, in which the lover's endeavours are likened to military conquest, the potential pun which aligns defeat and sexual arousal ("the vanquisht rise") is provocative. However, it is in the verses by Sir John Davies which were printed alongside Marlowe's

Elegies that this model of sexual arousal through surrender is made explicit.

In Davies's epigram, "In Francum", the speaker meditates on a mixture of punishment and pleasure not unlike that enjoyed by Marlowe's Ovidian speaker – a structure of pleasure that would later be termed sadomasochism (Moulton, 1998):

When Francus comes to solace with his whoore
He sends for rods and strips himselfe stark naked:
For his lust sleepes, and will not rise before,
By whipping of the wench it be awaked.

(33.1-4)

As Ian Moulton (1998) has noted, the dynamics of sexual power in the poem are uncertain, given the ambiguity about whether Francus is beating the whore, or being beaten *by* the whore. This confusion is intensified in the last two lines of the poem, when the speaker remarks that, "I envie him not, but wish I had the powre, / To make my selfe his wench but one halfe houre" (33.5-6). Since the narrator is presumably male, this comment introduces a homoerotic subtext into the epigram, while simultaneously suggesting that, regardless of whether Francus is the beater or the beaten, the sexual dynamics of this relationship may ultimately require one male partner to play a subservient role. Indeed, the erotic experience of defeat is possibly even essential, since the reader is told that Francus's lust "sleepes, and will not rise" until the "whipping of the wench" begins: the play of domination and surrender is not merely a source of pleasure, but a sexual imperative. By offering the possibility that a male lover may *only* be aroused when dominated physically by his sexual partner, Davies's epigram complicates the alignment of masculinity with sexual and military ascendancy posited in poems such as *Hero and Leander*.

Manly Women and Womanly Men

As the sexual inversions depicted in the erotic poetry of the 1590s erode the equation of masculinity with sexual potency and control, gender categories begin to break down. In *Hero and Leander*, the male protagonist Leander believes that his masculinity is threatened by Neptune's advances, whereas Hero is imbued with a martial aura, her clothes stained "with the blood of wretched Lovers slaine" (l.16); at least until Leander reaffirms his sexual dominance by "conquering" Hero. Similarly, in Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Elegies*, the use of

pronouns introduces some uncertainty about the gender of the person whom the speaker is addressing: for example, in Book I, elegy 3 was variously printed with a “he” or a “her” identified as the successful captor of the speaker’s heart (Bowers, 1981, p.318). Likewise, the pronoun references are consistently obscure in Nashe’s *Choice of Valentines*; indeed, this is a feature of Nashe’s writing throughout his career (Crewe, 1982). In *The Choice of Valentines*, the initial confusion is consolidated in the description of Mistress “Francis” and her “mannely thigh” (104): the name “Francis” is androgynous, while the adjective “mannely” raises questions about this mistress’ gender. In a “somewhat carelessly written” seventeenth-century manuscript version (McKerrow, 1958, p.397), the confusion is exacerbated by the masculine pronoun given to the mistress’ “fountaine”, that “hath *his* mouth beset with rugged briars” (McKerrow, 1958, p.408); the image of the ejaculating “fountaine” is, in any case, suggestively phallic. The same gender ambiguity informs Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, to the extent that it is not always clear whether the speaker is addressing a male or female lover: Stanley Wells (2002, p.89) notes that, when these sonnets were reprinted in 1640, pronouns in some of them were altered from male to female. Overall, it seems that the mutability of gender was a common motif in the erotic verse of the 1590s, and one which was regularly linked to questions of authority and power.

Conclusion

Although such gender confusion is often interpreted by critics in terms of homosexual desire, the power dimension is at least as relevant within the Elizabethan context. Consistently, within these poems, the acquisition of sexual power and authority involves the construction of a gendered identity. When the male subjects of these verses dominate sexually, they are described as “kingly” and “lustie”, but when this sexual power is lost, either through voluntary submission to the other partner or through the involuntary experience of impotence, their sexual identity is feminised: the subjugated male lover is described as “soft”, metaphorically acquires female genitalia, or dresses in women’s clothes. Conversely, when the female lovers in these verses gain sexual control gender identities blur again, with the dominant female described as androgynous or even openly “mannely”. The perceived connection between power and gender rehearsed here may well reflect the politics of Elizabeth I’s court, where Elizabeth appropriated the imagery of the androgynous, manly female in order to secure her political authority, while encouraging her courtiers to “court” her in an eroticised ritual which was perceived as potentially emasculating and effeminising (Henderson, 1995).

For the courtier-poet, the ritualised performance of submission to a female mistress was a recognised rhetorical strategy designed to gain Elizabeth I's favour; such verse was generally dedicated to the queen. However, the erotic poems of the 1590s, addressed to young male aristocrats, construct an alternative model in which sexual submission leads to a loss of masculinity, but can also become a source of erotic pleasure. Such voyeuristic enjoyment of the act of submission is enabled through the same strategy that was used to market these texts: the exclusion of the female. These verses were apparently written for an exclusively male readership, and a comparable policy operates within the poems themselves, in which the female presence is ultimately elided and the "feminine" role of subservience instead displaced onto a sexual partner who is anatomically male. Thus in *Hero and Leander*, the most erotically charged episode is the encounter between Leander and Neptune; the observing or observed male beloved is an important presence in Shakespeare's sonnets of surrender; and the scene of Francus's domination is transferred by the narrator's final couplet into a male-male sphere. When the physical female body does appear in these poems, it is commonly to enable the reassertion of male sexual dominance, as when Leander conquers Hero's body to gain a martial masculine identity, or when the impotent Ovidian narrator recalls his former sexual conquests in an attempt to reconstruct himself as a potent male (III.6.23-26). The sexually dominant female retains a shadowy existence, threatening to reassert her power, just as within the real political sphere occupied by the dedicatees of these poems the queen's physical femininity could never be completely ignored. Yet, within these erotic verses, the female presence is effectively subsumed by the beautiful and sexually submissive male body, enabling these poems to imaginatively construct an exclusively masculine sphere of dominance and subversion.

In the same way that eroticised lyric verse fulfilled a political purpose at Elizabeth's court, allowing its authors to seek royal favour, the exclusion of the female from contemporary erotic poetry may also have distinct political implications. During the 1590s, expectations that the Scottish king James VI would shortly succeed Elizabeth were growing. James's own courtly rituals perhaps worked to exclude the female presence by recasting the subservient male in "feminine" terms: for instance, he publicly fondled his favourite Buckingham, and called him his wife (Traub, 1992, p.106). After his succession to the English throne, the exclusion of the female became an ideological goal, and writers such as William Shakespeare sought to imaginatively deconstruct the dual-gender discourse of Elizabeth I, for example by satirising the politically dominant and androgynous female in *Macbeth* (Frost, 2009). It seems that the erotic poems of the

1590s may have represented an early stage in this return to a male monarchy; as they subsume motifs common in Elizabethan court poetry into a sexualised dialogue of dominance and submission which ultimately moves to exclude the female body, they effectively displace “femininity” unto the subservient male and thus challenge the female-centric imperatives of the Elizabethan courtly lyric.

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