ABSTRACT

TEXT, SEX, AND PERVERSION
ON THE EARLY MODERN STAGE

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This thesis attempts a synthesis of bibliographic criticism and queer theory by examining representations of texts as eroticized objects in early modern drama. Through analyses of plays by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Middleton, and Beaumont & Fletcher, the thesis demonstrates how the stage collapses sex into writing, reading, and bookmaking. Early modern drama breaks down the distinction between the “real” and the “metaphoric” by interlocking its discourses about sex and texts. By locating textual objects in a matrix of eroticized acts of writing and reading, the stage reveals an early modern tendency to organize sex, desire, and pleasure around objects and acts rather than identities.
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Texts, Sex, and Perversion on the Early Modern Stage

In “Explicit Ink,” Elizabeth Pittenger postulates that a “text, in representing scenes of writing, figures the very dynamics that produce it as an object” (224). By looking at depictions of writing in medieval anti-sodomy tracts, she demonstrates that pre-modern polemicists reproduce the very vice they are attempting to stamp out. Imagining that the errors and interventions of scribes “perverted” the integrity of the texts they copied, medieval orthographers connected writing with a variety of transgressive sex acts. According to Pittenger, writing “lends itself as a metaphor for vice and sodomy” because of this scribal tendency toward “distortion, error, lapses, and general corruption” (230). Not only is the act of writing “artificial, man-made, and therefore perverse,” it is also a “material and physical production” that involves the body (231). As an embodied activity, making texts is always dangerously close to making sex.

Pittenger’s approach to medieval orthographers provides a useful framework for the study of early modern drama. The early English stage also registers a suspicion about the perversity of writing as an artificial and embodied technique. Furthermore, representations of printing in early modern drama suggest that the mechanical reproduction of texts, rather than eradicating the scribal tendency toward textual and sexual deviance, actually proliferates perversion. The stage blends old scribal and new mechanical practices of textual production together in a way that collapses the distinction between them. Writing tends toward variation, print toward fixity, but the drama elides these differences by representing their inherent perversity as embodied acts.

An analysis of representations of writing and of printing – of the embodied acts of making texts – in early modern plays reveals the dynamics of their production and points to a conception of texts as eroticized objects. Whereas Pittenger observes a metaphoric connection between writing and sex/ text and body, the early English stage conflates them in ways that cannot be adequately described as metaphoric because it is impossible to determine which is the tenor and which the vehicle. The relation of writing to sex and texts to bodies collapses the distinction between “real” and “metaphoric.” To appropriate a concept from formalist criticism, early modern drama seems to possess a “mechanism of sensibility which could devour” sex and text simultaneously instead of separating them into discrete and decorous categories (Eliot 247).
Similarly, the stage was neither discreet nor refined (by modern standards) when representing sex and desire. Because of its volatility about pleasure and perversion, early modern drama provides us with a snapshot of time when non-heteronormative sex practices existed side by side with heteronormative ones without either being privileged over the other. The early English stage registers a variety of alternative desires and pleasures that while not unthinkable are marginalized and cast as deviant within the modern regime of sexuality. While early modern plays gesture toward marriage as “the only socially approved arena for sexual expression” (Maus 2177), they also offer daringly speculative formulations of sex, desire, and pleasure. There is much early modern evidence that points toward or prefigures the rise of heteronormative sexuality – such as in the narrative structure of church court depositions and the improbable marriages that conclude most stage comedies. However, the dictates of ecclesiastical law and comedic convention do not tell the whole story. Early modern ways of organizing sex and desire are much more complex. In fact, early modern drama registers configurations of desire and sex that undermine the notion that the rise of heteronormative sexuality was inevitable or even desirable.

I shall try to account for the stage’s identification of textual production with perversion without fallaciously mapping modern conceptions of texts and sex onto early modern plays. To avoid making what Jonathan Goldberg would identify as an “unthinking categorization of the perverse” (106), I shall try to explain just what “perversity” is in early modern England and how it relates to the distinction between licit and illicit acts. As Michel Foucault observed, “prohibitions bearing on sex were essentially of a juridical nature” in pre-modern Europe (History of Sexuality 38). Licit sex was something that happened in marriage; all other acts and desires were cast as illicit without discrimination. The church courts responsible for enforcing moral legislation made little distinction between the various manifestations of illicit sex – rape, buggery, and bestiality were folded together with the more mundane but nevertheless “illicit” acts such as adultery, whoring, and mutual masturbation. This is not to say that the English were entirely permissive of lechery or sexual deviance. Lawrence Stone argues that the English were “both sexually very lax and also highly inquisitorial, with a great readiness to denounce each other’s transgressions” (324). For instance, church court records suggest that a 17th century inhabitant of Essex would have “had more than a one-in-four chance of being accused of fornication, adultery, buggery, incest, bestiality, or bigamy” at some point during his or her adult
life (324). However, the categories of licit and illicit belong to legal and moral discourses, and the early English stage frequently fashions its own discourses about sex and desire in opposition to them. On the one hand, early modern drama criticizes contemporary sex laws and the discourses that underpin them as residual vestiges of long-forgotten attitudes toward sex; on the other, it celebrates the pleasure and danger that goes along with transgressing them. The illicit and even the merely unfamiliar are attractive because by their very nature they are perverse, both “contrary to an accepted standard or practice” and “contrary to what is morally right or good” (OED Online). I use the term perversity, then, not to describe a psychological predisposition toward sexual transgression (although the stage certainly registers that as well) but to refer to acts and desires that are intensely pleasurable and irresistibly attractive because they are illicit or unfamiliar. Perversity applies not to identities but to acts.

To bring early modern texts into line with heteronormative sexuality and post-enlightenment attitudes toward literacy has always required orthographic intervention. That is, modern critics and editors have tried to correct textual and sexual perversion in the plays by ignoring, suppressing, and even writing over representations of certain kinds of textual production and desire. Instead of implanting modern ideas about sex and writing into the plays, I want to demonstrate how the texts themselves organize their discourses about desire and textual production as well as how they actively try to resist the orthographic, or corrective, impulse. Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure is an ideal point of departure because it foregrounds the conflict between licit and illicit desire, between the joy of perversion and the anachronistic severity of legal discourses about sex. Furthermore, the play frequently identifies sexual deviance and textual production in terms of each other. Rather than showing how my methodological approach applies to the play, I hope instead to demonstrate how it actually derives from it. For not only does Measure for Measure deal with the uneasy legal status of perversity, it has proven curiously resistant to attempts by modern critics to impose anachronistic literary and moral standards on it.

The dark tone of Measure for Measure is uncharacteristic for a comedy, as is its complicated treatment of issues of sex and morality. Modern critics have tried to make sense out of the supposed formal and moral irregularities of the play by labeling it (along with All’s Well That Ends Well and Troilus and Cressida) a “problem play.” By “problematizing” Measure for
Measure, they ahistorically imposed modern medical and moral discourses onto it. Although Frederick Boas first used the term to describe plays that posed a moral problem, chief among his diagnostic criteria for “problem plays” is the fact that they “introduce us into highly artificial societies, whose civilization is ripe unto rottenness” and that the characters trapped in these pathologically corrupt societies reveal symptoms of “abnormal conditions of brain and of emotion” (345). Later critics such as W.W. Lawrence expanded Boas’ concern with moral abnormalities to perceived textual abnormalities, especially the plays’ mingling of elements from comedy and tragedy. The “problem” of a play like Measure for Measure is perversion, both textual (because it does not conform to modern concepts of thematic unity or genre) and sexual (because of its “rotten” and “abnormal” morality). Labeling it a “problem play” is therefore an act of textual and sexual orthography, or a correction according to standardized rules. Lawrence acknowledges the orthographic nature of his approach to the “problem plays” by offering his analysis as “a corrective” for the “many incongruities which appear disturbing upon more careful study” (37). In order for the “problem” to be solved, the play must be made to conform to modern literary tastes and sexual mores, and as a result it is subjected to what Foucault would identify as “a multiple implantation of ‘perversions’” (History of Sexuality 37). Like Duke Vincentio does for his Viennese subjects, Boas and Lawrence force Measure for Measure to declare and repent of its manifold sexualities. The incontinence of Claudio, the sadism of Angelo, and the frigidity of Isabella are brought into the modern regime of sexuality where they are systematized, analyzed, and pathologized. Yet, the perversion and “abnormality” remain emphatically there, and attempts by critics to “correct” the play so that it fits neatly into modern categories of sexuality fail precisely because they overlook the actual “problem” that animates it. That is, by mapping foreign conceptions of sex onto the play and by writing over the play’s own discourses about desire, Boas and Lawrence reproduce the very error that undoes Angelo. Their attempts at sexual and textual orthography, like Angelo’s fierce revival of Vienna’s sex laws, force the characters and the play into conformity with concepts of sexual morality that within the play itself are cast as outdated.

1 The OED Online’s definition suggests that the term applies almost exclusively to “correct or proper spelling; spelling according to accepted usage or convention,” but I will use “orthography” to describe a corrective impulse toward writing in general. For the Greek term ὀρθογραφία implies not only “correct” writing but also “upright,” “righteous,” or “straight” writing. See Lidell and Scott.
Measure for Measure registers a deep anxiety about how effectively desire and sex can be channeled into legitimate social alliances (marriage between men and women, friendship and patronage between men). It criticizes the severity of contemporary sex laws while celebrating the pleasure and danger that goes along with transgressing them. Claudio acknowledges as much while expressing shock that Angelo plans to subject him to

all the enrolled penalties
Which have, like unscour'd armour, hung by the wall
So long that nineteen zodiacs have gone round
And none of them been worn. (1.2.164-7)

Angelo’s arbitrary application of long-unenforced sex laws is catastrophic. First, the citizens of Vienna are already playing fast and loose with the distinction between licit and illicit sex. Claudio’s offense is that he slept with Julietta after establishing a “true contract” (1.2.142), or making a consensual agreement of marriage, but prior to obtaining an official “denunciation” (145), or the reading of the banns. In order for sex to be licit, it must be preceded by a ritualized performance, a citation of language encoded elsewhere in legal and religious discourse, otherwise the text of their “contract” is void. Claudio establishes a link between desire, sex, and literacy that is reinforced in the way other characters repeatedly describe him as “sentenced” (2.2.55). As the Provost explains to the disguised Duke, Julietta and Claudio each bear the physical marks of their sin – “she is with child / And he that got it, sentenced” (2.3.12-3). The term “sentence” is more than just a synonym for punishment; it implies that his crime has left a textual record, a “sentence,” inscribed on his body parallel to Julietta’s pregnancy.

Measure for Measure typifies early modern drama’s blending of unfamiliar formulations of sex with unfamiliar formulations of texts. In order to account for this collapsing of textual production and perversion, I propose that analyses of sex and of literacy (including the writing, publishing, and reading of texts) that have run parallel to each other should be synthesized because they are related. Although apparently foreign sets of concerns, they converge on this point – texts are eroticized objects in early modern drama. Not only are texts and bodies consistently imagined in terms of each other on stage, early modern drama situates texts as material objects within a matrix of erotically charged activities. Writing practices are never
wholly differentiated from erotic practices, especially transgressive sex, or perversity. Or, to borrow a phrase from Pittenger, writing and perversion “at various times and in various ways stand for each other” in early modern drama (224). The stage also recognizes the printing and publishing of books as sex acts. The mechanical processes of textual reproduction are interchangeable with those of sexual reproduction. Finally, early modern reading practices involved the body to considerably greater degree than modern reading. Since reading demands the action of the voice, the breath, and the arms, the stage consistently registers it as an embodied and erotic act.

Let us first consider how writing and sex are used to signify each other on the early modern stage by looking at *The Maid’s Tragedy*, a play that grapples with questions about the boundaries between licit and illicit sex as well as the difficulties of navigating the “complex economy of honor and shame which regulated early modern social existence” (McCluskie 104). In *The Maid’s Tragedy*, Beaumont and Fletcher consistently imagine sexual perversion as a kind of writing that leaves a record of shame upon the body. A single transgressive act inscribes itself on many different bodies and brands them with a lasting legacy of disgrace. When Evadne refuses to consummate her marriage to Amintor, he threatens her with a ravishment that is articulated as an act of writing: “Ile dragge thee to my bed, and make thy tongue / Undoe this wicked Oath, or on thy flesh / Ile print a thousand wounds to let out life” (2.1.307-9). Amintor’s licit desire for his wife boils over into aggressive rapine, and if Evadne refuses he will reduce her body to a text, a record of his intractable desire. Rape makes the woman’s body as abject as a sheet of paper upon which the ravisher can “print a thousand wounds.” Evadne refuses to sleep with her husband because their marriage is sham. She and the King have arranged her marriage to Amintor to hide their own sordid affair. Although she finds her husband loathsome, Evadne nevertheless recognizes their marriage as a means of writing over her own perversity – Amintor will “beare the name / Of husband to [her], / that [her] sin may be / more honourable” (2.1.353-5). Beaumont and Fletcher expose the supposedly licit category of sex within marriage as a hollow, legalistic construct. In the case of Amintor and Evadne, the only licit channel for desire and sex is itself a morally bankrupt perversion. Though furious, Amintor is unable to avenge himself lest he “fixe the name / of feareful cuckold” upon his own head for everyone to read (3.2.252). In *The Maid’s Tragedy*, perversity manifests itself as writing on the body.
Melantius repeatedly suggests that his sister’s sinful lust is now physically inscribed on her body. When Amintor first tells him of Evadne’s condition, Melantius becomes enraged that his friend would dare to “strike the brand / Of whore upon [his] sister” (3.2.151). Like Amintor before him, he threatens Evadne with sexual violence conceived of as writing:

        When I have kild thee, as I have
        Vow’d to doe, if thou confesse not, naked as thou hast left
        Thine honour, will I leave thee,
        That on thy branded flesh the world may reade
        Thy blacke shame and my justice.  (4.1.117-121)

He will not be moved by pity for his sister, nor will he heed her cries for help. Instead, he promises to write upon her “naked” body the record of her “black shame” and his “justice.” By making her body into a text, he can punish her perversity while apparently satisfying his own, for Melantius complains that he too has the shame of his sister’s perversity written on him when he insists that the King’s lust has “brand[ed]” him and imprinted the “base staine of whore” upon his sister (5.2.48, 50).

While *The Maid’s Tragedy* emphasizes the body’s textuality, Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* offers an example of a text that is identified as a sexualized object. Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Maria decide to play a prank on the humorless Malvolio as revenge for his earlier abuse of them. Maria hatches a plan to “drop in his way some obscure epistles of love” (2.4.138) that will convince him that Lady Olivia, whom he serves as a steward, is in love with him. In his delighted reaction, Malvolio conceives of the letter as a sexually embodied object:

        MALVOLIO  [taking up the letter] By my life, this is my lady's
                hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus
                makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her
                hand.
        SIR ANDREW Her c's, her u's and her t's: why that?
        MALVOLIO  [Reads] 'To the unknown beloved, this, and my good
                wishes.' Her very phrases! By your leave,
wax – soft! and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal – ’tis my lady. (2.5.73-85)

Malvolio first identifies the text through metonymy that suggests the sexualized conditions of its production – it is not Olivia’s letter but rather her “hand,” signifying her handwriting as well as the erotic potential of the hand itself. The individual letters of which the text is composed are then identified with Olivia’s genitals. In laying open her words, she has also laid open her vagina to him. The wax that seals the letter is imprinted with an image of Lucrece, whose austere chastity tempted Sextus Tarquinius to rape her. Malvolio fetishizes the soft, impressionable wax of the seal as if it were Olivia’s hymen. The text is an eroticized object that arouses Malvolio because of its interchangeability with the body of his beloved. Though normally puritanical and reserved, Malvolio is excited to orgasmic volubility by the physical presence of the letter. His response to the letter collapses the distinction between metaphoric and actual sexual transgression. The physicality of the text literally arouses him, a fact he suggests by describing Olivia’s handwriting as being capable of causing erections, or making “great P's,” a pun usually understood as a reference to urination.

The examples from The Maid’s Tragedy and Twelfth Night show how writing and sex collapse into each other in early modern drama. The early English stage, then, continues to register the sexual valences of writing that Pittenger describes as animating medieval discourses about perversity. The advent of the printing press did not stamp out this tendency to connect the production of texts with eroticism. Instead, the imaginative fusion of textual and sexual production spread to discourses about printed texts in early modern drama. Printing becomes a sex act on the early English stage, and printed texts are every bit as sexualized as their handwritten counterparts. For instance, in The Merry Wives of Windsor, Falstaff attempts to seduce two married women, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, by sending them identical love-letters. Mistress Page’s comparison of the identical letters associates both writing and printing with Falstaff’s sexual perversion:

Letter for letter, but that the name of Page and Ford differs! To thy great comfort in this mystery of ill opinions, here’s the twin brother of thy
letter. But let thine inherit first, for I protest mine never shall. I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names--sure, more,--and these are of the second edition: he will print them, out of doubt; for he cares not what he puts into the press, when he would put us two. (2.1.62-70)

Mistress Page’s description of the love-letters registers texts as eroticized objects and writing as a kind of perversion. Her letter is more than a mere copy, it is the “twin-brother” of the one sent to Mistress Ford. Although she specifically identifies the texts as embodied and gendered, she is vague about what they stand to “inherit” from their father. Mistress Page’s ironic deference to Mistress Ford’s letter (“let thine inherit first”) coupled with her own insistence that hers “never shall” receive Falstaff’s dubious inheritance suggests that the letters also stand for their vaginas. First, the letters were Falstaff’s twins, but now they are the genitals of their unwilling mothers. Mistress Page further develops the letter as vagina metaphor by suggesting that Falstaff has many more copies “writ with blank space for / different names.” Not only are the letters themselves vaginas, the “blank space” for future addressees seems to be a punning allusion to the vagina as well.

What does it mean when she imagines that Falstaff has a “thousand of these letters”? Are they thousands of identical boys or thousands of different vaginas? Are they still boys if they have a “blank space” for him to set “different names” in? Falstaff had to handwrite the letters under discussion, but considering his pathological desire for the company of women, he should probably just “print them.” The unchanging fixity of print does not eradicate writing’s similarity to perversion but amplifies it through mass production. The physical process of producing printed materials is evocative of sex. Falstaff can simply “print” out more of his children/vaginas; after all, “he cares not what he puts into the press, / when he would put us two.” Printing evokes both birth (since Falstaff will be bearing his children) and solitary ejaculation (since he will be doing it alone). Mistress Page’s puns on the term “press” are equally ambiguous. The “press” at first seems to refer to the vagina – something else for Falstaff to penetrate. Even the act of filling in the “blank space” by writing a name has an erotic valence. Mistress Page finishes by implying that Falstaff wants to put both of them to “the press” by
mounting and, thus, crushing them under his corpulent body. The reaction to Falstaff’s letter reveals how writing, printing, and sex collapse into each other on the early modern stage.

In *The Nice Valour*, Thomas Middleton explores the connection between writing, printing, and perversity. In one of the play’s subplots, a character named Lepet, “an author and a gentleman about the court” according to the *dramatis personae*, publishes a treatise on the pleasures of being physically beaten. The pleasure he takes in suffering abuse causes the other characters to mark him off as sexually perverse, and his sexual eccentricity is articulated in terms of racial difference. According to one courtier, Lepet’s “buttock's all black lead, / He's half a negro backward; he was past a Spaniard / In eighty-eight, and more Egyptian-like” (4.1.219-221). Since his rear is receptive to blows (and, by extension, penetration), it is imagined as racially different – “black lead,” “half a negro,” and “Egyptian-like.” The allusion to “eighty-eight,” the year of the Armada, suggests that his sexual perversity is an invasive, destabilizing force. Because Lepet’s body is a corrupted text, the writings that he produces are also corrupt and mangled. Since “black lead” is a colloquial term for graphite, the text of his body is equated with his own textual corpus. Lepet is accused of writing out of his ass. The fact that his name is French for “the fart” is only underlines the identification of his perversity with his profession as a writer.

Printing is also a metaphor for Lepet’s perversion. Obsessed with the technical details of the publication of his book, he is determined that each of the different types of blows a man might receive be printed in fonts appropriate to their severity. While examining the proof sheets prior to publication, he entrusts his servant with orders for the printer:

LEPET Bid him put all the thumps in pica Roman, And with great T's, you vermin, as thumps should be.

CLOWN Then in what letter will you have your kicks?

LEPET All in Italica, your backward blows All in Italica, you hermaphrodite! (4.1.239-241)

Lepet and the Clown both recognize the erotic potential of textual objects. While “pica Roman” refers to a common typeface, the Clown hears instead “piked Romans” (4.1.315). His mishearing
puns on the possibility that the Romans might be enormously well-endowed (with pike sized penises) or power bottoms (gifted at being penetrated by big pricks). The fact that Lepet considers “pica Roman” the appropriate font for “thumps” suggests that he too is conscious of the erotic potential of typeface. Similarly, his insistence on the “great T” at the beginning of the word mimics the power and size of a thump, while the shape of the uppercase “T” itself evokes a long penis dangling between testicles. By setting his “kicks” in “Italica,” Lepet plays on the association of Italians with the vice of buggery, or blows to the backside (hence “backward blows”). Despite his own enthusiasm for sexual submission, Lepet accuses the Clown of being a “hermaphrodite” because of his slow “wit” (l.242). Lepet’s sexual perversity, then, makes him “half a negro” but not necessarily half a woman. Although he prefers his kicks “from behind” (5.2.27), Lepet does not consider this effeminizing. Rather, he thinks of himself as postulating a new way of organizing masculinity that inverts the customs of his day. Interestingly, the words “virtue” and “virtuous,” both derived from the Latin word for “manly,” appear 23 times in the play; and yet, Lepet and his collaborator the Clown are the only two major characters never to speak it.

Lepet’s book, provocatively entitled *The Uprising of the Kick and the Downfall of the Duello*, features a table illustrating the various “postures” associated with receiving blows. The term “postures” also alludes to the informal English name of Pietro Aretino’s *I Modi*, a collection of sexually explicit engravings accompanied by equally lurid sonnets. Middleton fashions Lepet as a pornographer by collapsing his publishing project together with Aretino’s. Even though Lepet insists that it is “the book [that] sells the table” (5.3.8), the other characters suspect that the erotic woodcuts are the main reason that *The Uprising of the Kick* goes through “two impressions” (5.3.5) before the play even ends. Lepet’s efforts as an author and his involvement in the process of publication of his book are at all times interchangeable with perverse acts, and the success of his book seems to testify to the public’s widespread interest in transgressive sexuality. *The Nice Valour* not only explores the connection between writing, printing, and perversion, it celebrates it.

Finally, in order to understand how texts are eroticized on the early English stage, we must recognize that early modern reading practices involved the body to a much greater extent than the modern regime of silent reading. As Roger Chartier observes, “reading is not uniquely
an abstract operation of the intellect: it brings the body into play; it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself or with others. This is why special attention should be paid to ways of reading that have disappeared in our contemporary world” (8). Chief among these is the practice of reading aloud. Sounding the words on the page aloud was still common practice in the early modern era even while reading alone. According to Chartier, “in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the reading style implicit in a text, literary or not, was still often an oralization of the text, and the ‘reader’ was an implicit auditor of a read discourse” (9). Although modern reading involves only the eyes and (peripherally) the hands, pre-modern reading practices involved the body to a much greater degree – the voice, the breath, gestures. When on stage, the content of written texts, such as letters, is revealed when they are read aloud. Silent reading even would be accompanied by an actor signaling with his body that he is reading – opening a book, looking down at it, scanning left to right, paging through it. Since reading on stage demands an amplified performance of the physicality of reading, it is not surprising that early modern plays consistently recognize the act reading as full of erotic potential.

In Hamlet, for instance, when Polonius and Claudius use Ophelia as bait to determine whether lovesickness is the source of his madness, she is instructed to “read on [a] book, / that show of such an exercise may colour / [her] loneliness” (3.1.43-45). Though we tend to think of Ophelia’s book as an ornament or accessory, Polonius specifies that reading is sexually alluring. By physically performing the “exercise” of reading, Ophelia imbue her solitude with a seductive “colour.” Perhaps the fact that she engages in a sexually charged activity like reading at the behest of her father and the king is what inspires Hamlet to order her to go to a “nunnery,” or a brothel. Interestingly, in the First Quarto of Hamlet (Q1) both Ofelia (as she is named in that text) and the prince are reading books at the beginning of this scene. Before Hamlet’s entrance in Q1, the King observes him “poring upon a book” as he approaches. Q1 doubles the physicality of reading and, as a result, the erotic tension between the two.

Literacy and sex are not peripheral concerns on the early modern stage; in fact, many plays seem to be organized around eroticized acts of reading and writing. Eroticized textual objects appear frequently on the stage, where they incite the character and audience alike to arousal and sexual transgression. This is certainly true of the most bibliophilic of early modern plays, Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, which I will take as the subject of my first chapter. The play
turns upon a series of eroticized encounters with texts. Books have strong physical presence in
the play and feature prominently as stage props, while the characters make incessant allusions to
texts that do not appear onstage but that have previously brought them pleasure. By examining
representations of books and reading in Doctor Faustus, I will demonstrate that the play’s
discourses about printed texts are interlocked with its discussion of transgressive sexual desire.
While my first chapter emphasizes the erotic nature of printed texts and the act of reading, my
second chapter focuses on acts of eroticized writing in Beaumont and Fletcher’s Philaster. My
reading of Philaster shows that the play consistently represents sex as an act of literary
collaboration and bodies as eroticized textual objects.

The processes of writing, printing, and reading texts are eroticized on the early English
stage, and texts themselves, whether handwritten or set from type, are consistently represented as
sexualized objects. The intertwining of dramatic discourses about texts and sex collapses
distinctions between old and new conceptions of literacy (those related to scribal and print
cultures), between familiar and unfamiliar organizations of sexuality (heteronormative and non-
heteronormative, the licit and the perverse), and even between reality and representation. Further,
the eroticization of early modern texts is of more than antiquarian interest because it can act as a
pivot for synthesizing two complementary modes of criticism – textual criticism/history of the
book and queer theory/history of sexuality. Because early modern dramatic discourses about sex
and literacy are constructed in opposition to contemporary legal discourses (which dictate what
kind of sex is proper) and orthographic conventions (which dictate what kind of writing is
proper), they have proven surprisingly resistant to efforts by modern critics to bring them into
line with ahistorical notions of sexual morality and textual integrity. To borrow an observation
from textual criticism, the stubborn refusal of dramatic representations of sex and writing to
“yield to modern norms bears witness to the specific history of the texts they make up, a history
so specific that it cannot comply with modern notions of correctness and intelligibility” (De
Grazia and Stallybrass 3). Therefore, the study of early modern drama demands a critical
approach that takes into account a historicized awareness of sexuality and textuality.
“Swoll’n with Cunning:” Figurations of Texts and Perversion in *Doctor Faustus*

Literacy is crucial to the plot of *Doctor Faustus*, and as Sarah Wall-Randell has observed, the play relentlessly draws our attention to this fact with its “general thickness of literary reference; with its setting in a scholarly milieu; with books themselves, as material objects” (263). When we see Faustus for the first time he is in his study brooding over books; his illiterate servants eagerly snatch them from his library; he summons demons with books, and then begs the very same demons for more books. According to Stephen Orgel, in *Doctor Faustus* “universal power is construed as power over the supernatural, the celestial, the natural, but epitomized in the written word – the power is literacy” (“Tobacco and Boys” 571).

*Doctor Faustus*’ equation of books and power consistently points us away from modern skepticism and enlightened notions of literacy. Indeed, the play suggests that print technology is intimately intertwined with transgression and the diabolical. The characters’ interactions with printed texts always border on the sinister, and bookmaking is virtually interchangeable with conjuring. Nowhere is this overlap more apparent than when the Horse-courser confuses the Doctor for a “Master Fustian” (A 4.1.109). His pun reveals the early modern tendency to confuse legends of Johann Faust with the life of Johann Fust (or Faustus), “an early practitioner of that sinister art known as printing” (Bevington and Rasmussen 4). In the early modern popular imagination, Faustus then is not only an enthusiast of print; he is also conflated with one of the fathers of the technology. The Fust/Faustus connection reflects “early modern writers’ and readers’ trepidation about the potential and danger of print technology, even as it records their rapt fascination with the book as a powerful object,” according to Wall-Randell (260). If printed books and power are connected, how does this connection affect our understanding of early modern discourses about gender, the body and sexuality when they too are figured in the language of bibliography?

The play’s discourses about literacy follow a pre-modern tradition in which writing and perversion “at various times and in various ways stand for each other” (Pittenger 224). *Doctor Faustus* deploys sexually-charged language – especially puns and bawdy wordplay – in order to articulate a vision of reading and writing as inherently erotic enterprises. The play registers
literacy as perversion, and perversion as an act of reading or writing. Furthermore, books are eroticized objects whose very material existence has the power to arouse the characters in the play. The components of the book are similarly embodied — even words and letters register as having a sexualized, material existence.

The action of Doctor Faustus, from the conjuring of Mephistopheles to Faustus’ final damnation, flows out of the Doctor’s desire for books as material objects. Faustus is as interested in the corporeality of books as he is in the scientific or literary knowledge printed in them. His curious attraction to printed texts extends to components of books not usually recognized as sites of meaning. Faustus is enamored of the physical presence of printed pages down to the “lines, circles, signs, letters and characters” (A 1.1.53) that make up texts. What we often dismiss as marginal, paratextual, or even sub-literary features of the book — down to the “lines” and “circles” that constitute letters — are crucial to the Doctor’s conception of a text. His wish to command “all things that move between the quiet poles” (A 1.1.58) is nothing compared to his desire for the books. In Doctor Faustus, a book’s material existence is imagined in terms of its embodiment — books become bodies, and bodies books.

The fact that Robin and the Doctor are equally fascinated with a book’s “lines, circles, signs, letters and characters” suggests that words (perhaps the smallest unit of meaning in a text) are more than neutral, descriptive signs pointing toward things and ideas outside of the text. They are instead mysteriously, even magically embodied. In Doctor Faustus, the art of conjuring depends upon arranging words in unusual ways. In order to summon demons, Faustus encloses himself in a circle containing:

Jehovah’s name,
Forward and backward anagrammatized,
The breviated names of holy saints,
Figures of every adjunct to the heavens,
And characters of signs and erring stars. (A 1.3.7-12)

The text explicitly links the use of anagrams and “breviated names” with the bodies they represent. Playing with the arrangement of letters and words allows Faustus to upset the celestial

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2 All references to Doctor Faustus are from David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen’s edition of the play that includes separate versions of the A- and B-texts, referred to as (A) and (B) in the parenthetical citations.
order. By tampering with words, he tampers with the things they name. *Doctor Faustus’* conception of words is distinctly medieval; Faustus himself seems to adhere to the pre-modern notion that connects words with “extralinguistic criteria” which not only describes but embodies “the essence of the referent” (Jacquart and Thomasset 10). According to this view, words have a material existence that allows them to be manipulated for sinister purposes. Rearranging or “anagrammatizing” the names of things directly affects the physical realities they represent.

Furthermore, the act of writing involves making a text either with or on the body. Literacy is a kind of power that is inscribed on the body and expressed from it. While words are embodied, the body itself bears words. Faustus must use his own blood to draw up “a deed of gift” (A 2.1.60) contracting his soul to Lucifer. In a sense, the Doctor must make the text out of his own flesh, and once this is accomplished, he finds that his flesh has, in turn, been written upon – his arm has been inscribed with the phrase “*Homo, fuge!*” At the end of the play, he once again writes in his own blood to “confirm / [the] vow [he] made to Lucifer” (A 5.1.72-3). In medieval texts, as Elizabeth Pittenger has observed, “the soul as a written sheet, a page, is a pervasive analogy” (226). *Doctor Faustus* alters this formula slightly; the body, rather than the soul, is figured throughout the play as a page. The distinction is important because it celebrates rather than condemns the perversity inherent in texts and bodies, as well as their tendency toward corruption and aberration. The play articulates a pre-modern ideology of writing that identifies it “as a technique [that] is artificial, man-made, and therefore perverse: as a material and physical production, it is tied to the body, therefore doubly perverse” (Pittenger 251), but its fascination with the body as text and the text as body suggests that perversion is infinitely desirable. In *Doctor Faustus*, the printed word produces and is produced by perversity. As material objects books have the erotic potential to awake, arouse, and even satisfy perverse desire.

As a result of the connection between textuality and corporeality, discourses about books in the play are indistinguishable from discourses about sex. As embodied sites of desire, printed texts have the power to attract and arouse those who possess them. They are eroticized objects whose alluring materiality appeals even to those who cannot read. The very shapes that make up the printed word appeal as much to doctors of theology as they do to illiterate servants, who, though unable to make sense out of words, are capable of responding viscerally, even sexually to books. Furthermore, representations of literacy in *Doctor Faustus* consistently register reading as
an act that necessarily involves the body. Because reading demands the action of the eyes, hands, breath, and voice, it is an act imbued with eroticism. However, the early modern stage does not recognize the similarities between reading and sex as merely metaphoric, and in Doctor Faustus, there is no distinction between them. Not only are books bodies in the play, but reading is sex. For instance, the unlettered Robin expresses a sexually charged desire for books as material objects, even though his inability to read prohibits him from understanding the literal meaning of words on a page.

In Doctor Faustus, representations of writing, reading, and textual objects are articulated in terms of perversion, but the critical and editorial tradition has tended to obscure or ignore this fact. Even Stephen Orgel has argued that there is nothing in Doctor Faustus that “the most moral of Elizabethan audiences cannot laugh at with a clear conscience” (“Tobacco and Boys” 572). However, the historical record suggests that sexual licentiousness and perversion may have been more the rule than the exception in Elizabethan England, and the “most moral of Elizabethan audiences” therefore would have been sexually lecherous if not downright predatory by modern standards. In what follows, I will try to show that early modern discourses about literacy and books are consistently figured in terms of acts that in modernity are often categorized as non-normative sexual acts but that the early English stage recognizes as normal and even desirable alternatives to the narrow category of the licit. By investigating how discourses about texts and sex are interchangeable, I hope to determine to what extent plays like Doctor Faustus help us to rethink and more clearly map the boundaries of desire and sex in early modern England.

The introductory remarks about Faustus in the prologue foreground the play’s preoccupation with perversion. The Chorus implicitly links the Doctor’s social mobility with a kind of “unnatural generation” associated with illicit forms of financial gain. The course of Faustus’ life, his rise from obscurity to renown as a scholar, is articulated in economic terms:

Now is he born, his parents base of stock….
So soon he profits in divinity,
The fruitful plot of scholarism graced,
That shortly he was graced with doctor’s name (A 0.11, 15-17)

The Chorus emphasizes the social and economic aspects of Faustus’ ascent. He is able to turn his “base” parentage into a “profit.” Social promotion follows swiftly upon the heels of his financial
success, leaving him doubly “graced.” In other words, we see in the prologue evidence for Jonathan Dollimore’s argument that Faustus is “constituted by the very limiting structure which he transgresses” (110). The Chorus defines Faustus in terms of his precarious relationship to wealth – his humble origins place him squarely on the margins of a society whose conventions and mores he will soon dangerously violate. Indeed, the account of his rise in wealth and social prestige indicates that he has already transgressed social norms. By transforming himself from something “base” into something noble, or “graced,” Faustus has committed an act that resembles counterfeiting. The Chorus’ accusations about the Doctor’s illicit methods of procuring wealth and prestige are couched in discourses about perversity, specifically sodomy, which is consistently “conjoined with – or figured as – counterfeiting” in early modern texts (Fisher 8). The prologue goes on to connect the erotic potential of books and literacy with these “improper forms of economy” (Fisher 8).

Faustus’ acquisition of “profit” and grace is ultimately dependent upon his abilities as a scholar. After all, the Doctor has been able to accrue wealth and prestige because he “[excels] all whose sweet delight disputes / In heavenly matters of theology” (A 0.19). Literacy is remunerative to the point of being usurious, and the “sweet delight” that Faustus takes in theological disputations makes the connection between sex and text explicit before the action of the play begins. The sexual valences of the phrase “sweet delight” indicate the possibility that Faustus takes erotic pleasure in learning and academic debate. The phrase appears frequently in erotic contexts throughout the second half of the 16th century. To cite only one example, in Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece, the wavering Tarquin resolves to carry through with the sexual assault of Lucrece because it is nighttime, and darkness will cover “the shame that follows sweet delight” (357). The deceptively benign sound of the phrase is undermined by the perversity and horror of Tarquin’s desire. Like Shakespeare, the Chorus associates “sweet delight” with an unusual and destructive desire – in this case the Doctor’s sexually-charged eagerness for books and learning. Faustus’ delight in “heavenly matters of theology” is superlative, dangerously excelling that of any of his peers. Much like his ascent from humble

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3 While Frederick Boas’ has argued that “Marlowe had in mind the Cambridge official ‘grace’ permitting a candidate to proceed to his degree” (qtd. in Bevington and Rasmussen 107), the entry for the term in the OED indicates that it was used more generally by early English playwrights to mean “to confer honour or dignity upon; to honour with a title or dignity.” The OED cites the final lines of the Jew of Malta (“Grace him as he deserves, / And let him not be entertain’d the worse / Because he favours me”) as evidence of Marlowe’s use of the term in this context.
origins, his desire is threateningly inordinate – transgressive of the social order. According to the Chorus, success that depends upon transgressive desire leads inevitably to destruction. The Doctor grows arrogant to the point that, “swoll’n with cunning of a self-conceit, / His waxen wings did mount above his reach, / And melting heavens conspired his overthrow” (A 0.20-22).

Excessive indulgence in “sweet delight” causes Faustus to grow “swoll’n,” and the ambiguity of the term suggests the Doctor’s desire for books is both sexual and gender-bending. As in a gestalt image, Faustus’ desire creates a swelling that could apply equally to a man or a woman. Like an academic Tarquin, Faustus finds his cock “swoll’n” from an unnatural and destructive perversity. Since “self-conceit” refers “one’s own opinion of oneself” (OED Online), the Chorus seems to accuse Faustus of allowing his vanity to spill over into onanism and to hint at the masturbatory nature of his academic successes. By suggesting that the Doctor is guilty of producing of pleasure out of nothing, the Chorus continues to develop his accusations of usury against Faustus. While masturbation per se did not necessarily register as destructive or dangerous in early modern England, the Chorus implies that there is something excessive, something inordinate about the Doctor’s desire.4

At the same time, the Chorus’ claim that Faustus is “swoll’n with cunning of a self-conceit” suggests that the Doctor’s inordinate desire for learning has resulted in a gender reversal. The power of literacy arouses a desire that makes him both erect and pregnant. In this scenario, the autoerotic implications are again reinforced by the use of the term “self-conceit.” It seems apparent that the Chorus is here punning on the idea that Faustus has “conceived” a child. While the OED cites only a single early modern use of “conceit” as meaning “conception of offspring,” it too appears in a punning context, and the metaphor of the mind as mother of destructive ambition is revisited later in the play by Mephistopheles, who claims that Faustus’ “brain / Begets a world of idle fantasies / To overreach the devil” (B 5.2.13-15). The term “cunning” puns openly with “cony,” the cunt, a site of fantasy for masturbation and a site of conception in pregnancy. The “swoll’n,” or erect, penis is now a “swoll’n” vagina. The Doctor’s unnatural procreation mimics the structure of his illegitimate social rise, recalling again the

4 Self-pleasure does not yet seem to incite the paranoia and moral outrage that becomes associated with it toward the end the 18th century; rather, it was sometimes recommended as part of a healthy sex life. According to Stone, it appears to have been standard medical doctrine that “for good health the human body needs occasional evacuation of superfluous fluids” (319).
practices of usury and counterfeiting, which were “conflated in early modern Europe as illegitimate means of generating money: counterfeiting by making false coins, usury by making money breed” (Fisher 11). *Doctor Faustus’* discourses about literacy and scholarly disputation are already wrapped up in discourses about sexuality and illegal monetary practices, which are, according to Fisher, “always already sexualized” (11). The prologue’s representations of book culture are part of a matrix of discourses that equate sex and power.

The Chorus reproduces the pre-modern “idea of an inverse similarity of the genital organs of men and women” (Jacquart and Thomasset 17) by suggesting that the Doctor’s androgyny is both metaphorical (his excessive desire makes him feminine) and corporeal (his male genitalia are in serious danger of inverting and thus switching his biological gender). Faustus’ desire is dangerous not to his soul but to his body because the male sexual organs are interchangeable with and always at risk of metamorphosing into a vagina and uterus. Faustus is like one of the medieval diagrams that “could be used to show the male organs or the uterus” (Jacquart and Thomasset 18) – a reminder that in pre-modern anatomy discourse, male and female genitalia were seen as analogous, if not interchangeable. To gloss the Chorus’ words as a simple conflation of “Daedalus, as the ‘cunning’ maker of wings, with Icarus, who mounted above his reach” (Bevington and Rasmussen 108) ignores the obvious sexual valences of the speech. For instance, the term “mount” means both “to ascend” and “to climb on to (a partner or mate) for the purpose of sexual intercourse” (*OED Online*), and the Chorus employs both meanings of the word in order to implicate the Doctor’s sexual perversions in his Icarian downfall. The use of the term “mount” also accentuates the Doctor’s solipsistic vanity – he is interested only in “mounting” himself and nourishing his perversion with auto-eroticism. The prologue establishes clearly one of the central preoccupations of the play: how reading shapes and is shaped by perversity.

The sexual and gender-bending possibilities of books are developed more thoroughly in Faustus’ first monologue, where he baldly confesses to an erotic attachment to the printed word:

Haven commenced, be a divine in show,  
Yet level at the end of every art,  
And live and die in Aristotle’s works.  
Sweet *Analytics*, ‘tis thou hast ravished me! (A 1.1.3-6)
Faustus’ resolution to “level at the end of every art” seems to communicate his commitment to academic research, but he also uses openly sexual language to articulate his ideals of scholarship. Nevertheless, the editorial tradition has masked the sexual valences of his speech, disguising the Doctor’s erotic figuration of books with mundane or common sense commentary. For example, Bevington and Rasmussen gloss “level” as “aim” and offer two possible meanings of “end:” “(a) purpose (b) utmost limit” (109). The usefulness of their notes in this case is limited, and the glosses disguise the Doctor’s sexual peculiarities. Faustus uses the term “level” here more specifically to refer to a more aggressive type of “aiming.” It would better connect Faustus’ words to these concerns about text and sex if “level” were glossed according to the OED entry: “to aim (a missile weapon); to ‘lay’ (a gun); also rarely, to bring (a spear) to the proper level for striking.” Although Faustus never specifies what object he plans to “level,” the term is linked closely with words like “weapon,” “gun,” and “spear” that are suggestive of the penis. Acknowledging the pun on the term “end” allows us to flesh out Bevington and Rasmussen glosses further to include a third possibility, “(c) arse.” If we go back and substitute for the variables of the Doctor’s resolution, we find that he is figuring his ideals of scholarship in terms of buggery: “aim your cock at the arse of every art.”

Moments after unabashedly declaring himself the buggerer of books, Faustus inverts this image and fashions himself as the passive sexual partner to Aristotle’s works: “Sweet Analytics, ‘tis thou hast ravished me” (A 1.1.6). Not only does he address a book as he might a lover, he suggests that books in general have the power to overcome him sexually and, further, that he is capable of deriving great pleasure from something like rape. Interestingly, Faustus identifies the Analytics as the ravager, rather than Aristotle. He emphasizes the erotic potentialities of the book over those of the author. The physical texts and its reader have switched positions; now the book is the buggerer, Faustus the buggered.

The inverse figurations of buggery are separated by a line that reaffirms the erotic potentiality of literacy and books in Faustus’ speech. The Doctor’s resolution to “live and die in Aristotle’s works” alludes to the figuration of orgasm as la petite mort. Sex with books leads to an orgasm of great intensity, a “little death” from which Faustus is resurrected only to be
penetrated in turn by the *Analytics*, a book whose very title puns on anal sex. In this instance, the Doctor reverses Orgel’s assertion that “power is literacy” in the play (571). Faustus figures reading as simultaneously being on both ends of an act of sodomy; he penetrates and is penetrated. Books are ravishers, capable of reducing even (or especially) the most learned men to pregnant women or sloppy bottoms. If “power is literacy” in *Doctor Faustus*, literacy is at the same time submission. Faustus’ opening monologue, in Foucauldian terms, “transmits and produces power…, but also undermines and exposes it” (Foucault 101). Literacy and its twin, perversion, subvert and disperse the very power systems which they supposedly undergird.

In *Doctor Faustus* the erotic appeal of the printed word is polymorphous and androgynous, and the play repeatedly insists that books are the only true object of the Doctor’s desire. Though he claims that he is “wanton and lascivious and cannot live without a wife” (A 2.1.145), he shows no genuine interest in procuring one from Mephistopheles; he demands only books. However, Faustus is not the only character to have an erotic attachment to the printed word. Robin, the Doctor’s illiterate servant, is just as excited by the sexual potential of conjuring books. Like his master, he recognizes the erotic value of the materiality of the printed text. From his first appearance in the play, Robin’s scenes are characterized by bawdy punning and double entendre. He brags about the magnitude of his “piquedevant” (A 1.4.3), a type of goatee whose etymology (literally a “peak in front”) suggests a more indelicate appendage. Faustus’ other servant Wagner equates Robin’s lack of employment with sexual vulnerability by characterizing him as “bare and out of service” (A 1.4.8). Robin boasts that he would sell his soul for some “mutton,” a term indicative of his hunger for “women’s genitals” more than for the “flesh of sheep” (*OED Online*), and when he jokes that lice have become “bold with [his] flesh as if they had paid for [his] meat and drink,” he reveals a tendency to figure himself as the passive partner

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5 John Donne’s “The Canonization” offers another early modern instance of an androgynous sex act leading to the death and resurrection of orgasm: “to one neutral thing both sexes fit. / We die and rise the same, and prove / Mysterious by this love” (lines 25 -27).

in a sexual act–in this case, prostitution. Even the name “Robin” appears to have been used as slang for “penis” on the early modern stage.⁷

It is not surprising that Robin’s sexually charged wordplay should also manifest itself in his comments about printed texts. After stealing one of Faustus’ books, he reveals that even though he cannot read, he intuits the sexual potential of the printed word:

I mean to search
some circles for my own use. Now I will make all the
maidens in our parish dance at my pleasure stark naked
before me, and so by that means I shall see more than e’er
I felt or saw yet. (A 2.2.2-6)

Despite his illiteracy, Robin seems every bit as bibliophilic as Faustus. Like the Doctor, he draws our attention to parts of the book that are not usually recognized as conveying meaning. His mention of “circles” echoes Faustus’ erotic fascination with the “lines, circles, signs, letters and characters” of which a text is composed. Robin, however, makes a direct connection between the components of a book and the vagina. Though the editorial tradition has recognized the sexual implications of Robin’s wordplay, it has dismissed his reference to the “circles” as a mere pun on necromancy. For instance, Bevington and Rasmussen concede that the circles to which he refers are the “magic circles drawn by the conjurer, but with the suggestion of the female sexual anatomy as well” (147), but the implications of Robin’s words go beyond punning. Because he cannot read the words of Faustus’ book, the pleasure he hopes to get from it as a material object depends entirely upon the sexual suggestiveness of the “circles” he sees in the books. By making “use” of the same printed figures that the Doctor himself fetishizes, Robin implies that the shapes and contours of words and letters (not to mention any paratextual materials like engravings, tables, or diagrams) in the book are sexually arousing in themselves. In other words, the Doctor’s conjuring book functions also as pornography avant la lettre, and Robin intends to “use” it to stimulate himself during masturbation. The book is desirable in itself because it is capable of arousing the sexual desire of the illiterate. Robin’s “use” of the book again equates perversion with illicit monetary practices–it enables him to produce pleasure (value) out of nothing. The

⁷ For instance, during her “mad-scene” in Hamlet, Ophelia punningly claims that “bonny sweet Robin is all [her] joy” (4.5.179).
play continues to insist upon the interchangeability of perversity and usury even during the supposedly “low” comic scenes. *Doctor Faustus’* discourses about sexuality blur the distinction between the modern and the pre-modern in much the same way that its representations of books and authorship do. Whereas the play’s preference for pre-modern (perhaps even anti-modern) conceptions of reading and the materiality of books undermines received notions about early modern Europe’s progress toward enlightenment, its relentless obsession with non-normative sexuality points to an even more porous boundary between licit and illicit sexualities.

While the book arouses Robin’s desire, it does not appear to *satisfy* it entirely, for his carnal appetites are so polymorphous that he seems incapable of fully articulating them because it is not the book he desires but its material replacement – the “circles” of a woman. His relationship with texts is an inverted version of Faustus’ own. The Doctor’s desire is for books, whereas Robin’s desire is produced by books. Faustus wants to get his hands on more books because of his perverse desire for them as eroticized objects, but he also expresses a uniquely modern interest in learning from them. For, as Elizabeth Eisenstein has observed, “learning to *read* is different… from learning by *reading*. Reliance on apprenticeship training, oral communication, and special mnemonic devices had gone together mastering letters in the age of the scribes” (78), but the advent of print has enabled Faustus to learn simply from reading.

Unlike Faustus, Robin is eager not to “resolve [himself] of all ambiguities” (A 1.1.82) but rather to produce more ambiguities. He is not even interested in learning to read, only in acting out the embodied process of reading because this will bring him erotic pleasure. For it is not knowledge that Robin desires but rather sexual experience – an experience beyond anything that he “e’er… felt or saw yet,” beyond even books. However much he fetishizes the book as a material object, he is always lusting for bodies outside of it, or rather, the image of bodies, for Robin always emphasizes the erotic power of vision over and above the other senses. Though he cannot read the Doctor’s book, he will “search” through it for provocative images. The village maidens will dance naked before his eyes, but it is unclear whether or not Robin even needs to get caught up in the action in order to be satisfied.

However, Robin’s fantasies are suggestive of a sex act much less glamorous than an uninhibited orgy with the maidens of the parish. It is exceedingly likely that early modern playgoers would have recognized that Robin is here confessing to a typical autoerotic fantasy.
Faustus’ book is useful because it will enable him to experience more things than he was capable of imagining during his previous fantasies. He might be able to take delight in the “circles” of the book themselves, but the text has greater value in that it augments and diversifies his voyeuristic desires. He draws our attention to the pornographic potential of both the book and the play itself. As David Frantz observes in his study of early modern erotica:

Since all readers of pornography are in large measure voyeurs, pornographers have always (since Aretino at least) made much of voyeurism within pornography. The writer of voyeuristic scenes plays on both the sexual action as well as the sexual arousal of the person viewing the action. (65)

The erotic potential of this scene rests not only in the fantasy about naked maidens but also in the spectacle of Robin’s arousal. Though there is talk of nubile female bodies, what the play actually stages is Robin’s sexual excitement at the prospect of seeing them. According to Kate Chedgzoy, the male body is “an object of great fascination and a site of diverse meanings” in Marlowe’s plays (248), and nowhere is this more evident than Doctor Faustus’ emphasis on the erotic and comic potential of male arousal. For all of Faustus’ rhetoric about his “wanton and lascivious” lust for a wife (A 2.1.144), it is only ever his own arousal that is staged. Even though the play makes reference to sex with women, the spectacle of the masculine body in a state of auto- or homoerotic excitement is consistently privileged over representations of heterosexual acts. 

Doctor Faustus as a play is itself organized around scenes celebrating and eliciting perversion. The animating force behind the action of the play is the spectacle of male eroticism, and the text itself is everywhere infused with homoerotic desire. The play figures its own existence as a printed object in terms of perversity, or that which is pleasurable because illicit, even as it critiques the limits that early modern culture places on eroticism by making such pleasures illicit. While the characters are preoccupied with the pornographic potential of early modern printed texts, the play’s fascination with voyeurism and male arousal suggests that Doctor Faustus itself is aesthetically and structurally pornographic.

The Doctor’s face-to-face encounter with Helen of Troy features a similarly revealing confluence of desire and text. Orgel succinctly identifies Helen as not the embodiment of feminine beauty but the “quintessential emanation of humanist passion – for the best book, the best poem, the best text” (574). She is less a woman than an allusion to other texts that are
infinitely more desirable. As Chedgzoy has demonstrated, the Doctor’s textual/sexual attraction to Helen is “highlighted by… gender crossings and reversals” (254) that we have observed elsewhere in the play. Faustus boasts that he will play the masculine role of Paris for her, but moments later, he figures her own physical attractions in terms of mythical male beauty, claiming that she is

brighter… than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusa’s azured arms.
And none but thou shalt be my paramour (A 5.1.106-10).

While Helen is a tissue of allusions to Ovid, she is nevertheless as capable of ravishing Faustus as the Analytics were earlier. Doctor Faustus’ version of Helen is one that “embodies both the paragon of feminine beauty and rapaciously masculine Jupiter” (Chedgzoy 254). The Doctor implies that he will play the role of rape victims like Semele and Arethusa. Again, he figures himself as the passive victim of a violently penetrative force; his relationship with this embodied text causes him to swap genders and lay himself open to rape. However, the sexual ambiguities in this scene do not end with the Doctor’s use of classical allusion. His words to Helen directly evoke images of orgasm, oral sex, and buggery:

Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.
Her lips suck forth my soul: see, where it flies!
Come, Helen, come, give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell for heaven is in these lips.

According to Doctor Faustus, “the best book” is a pornographic one, and Helen is valuable not because she arouses us but because she arouses Faustus. Her kiss elicits a sharp, orgasmic desire from the Doctor, whose soul “flies” out as if in an ejaculation. Orgasm is again figured as a little death which Helen can amend by putting Faustus’ soul back in, literally penetrating him. The kisses are thus evocative of both ejaculation and penetration. Furthermore, the phrase “her lips suck forth my soul” seems to equate Helen’s kisses with fellatio.
The scene focuses less on Helen’s beauty than on the processes of Faustus’ arousal, climax, and ultimately submission. *Doctor Faustus’* overarching fascination with voyeurism and male arousal is fundamentally pornographic. The play’s constant jokes and puns about buggery, gender reversal, and cuckoldling indicate that these supposedly “subversive” sexualities were broadly appealing to its audience because they too took great pleasure in the danger and excitement of illicit sex acts. Also, the play does not associate illicit desires with any sexual identities. Anyone can find sodomy, masturbation, and adultery pleasurable. Committing an illicit sex act or even enjoying an oblique simulation of it on stage does not testify to a perverse identity. Homoerotic desire is not abnormal in *Doctor Faustus* because there is no category of normative sexuality with which it can be compared. The play conceives of sexuality in much the same way it conceives of authorship and of print culture; it is indifferent or even hostile to the modern impulse toward categorization and the systematizing of knowledge. *Doctor Faustus* preference for the pre-modern or irrational is manifest in its refusal to recognize a coherent distinction between illicit and licit sexualities. This has led Orgel to suggest that sexual “transgressiveness is harmless” in *Doctor Faustus* (572). The entrance of Robin’s friend Rafe certainly reinforces this conclusion by suggesting that an ostler’s duties might extend beyond grooming horses.

There’s a gentleman tarries
to have his horse, and he would have his things rubbed
and made clean; he keeps such chafing with my mistress
about it, and she has sent me to look thee out. (A 2.2.7-10)

The puns about “rubbing” and “chafing” in Rafe’s speech are obvious even to contemporary audiences, but they persist in challenging current notions about sexuality by placing normative and non-normative sex acts side by side without privileging either one. This juxtaposition also challenges received notions about the parsing of sexuality in early modern England. While Robin’s fantasy about the naked maidens is hypermasculine and patriarchal, Rafe’s jokes suggest that his friend actually occupies a more ambiguous position both sexually and socially. Providing regular sexual relief to his employer seems to be as much a part of Robin’s daily labor as cleaning the stables. Robin hints that servicing his master might be part of his job-description when he responds to Rafe’s later accusation that he is illiterate:

Yes, my master and mistress shall find that I can
read – he for his forehead, she for her private study.
She’s born to bear with me, or else my art fails. (A 2.2.19)

Proof of his ability to read will come, Rafe believes, in the form of cuckolding of his master and impregnating of his master’s wife. Rafe’s words suggest Robin’s actual position as a passive subject both sexually and socially. Faustus’ book will allow him to become a doer, rather than one who is done to. Again, literacy is figured as sexual potency and “reading as penetration” (Pittenger 233).

Rafe’s punning points to acts that his contemporaries might have identified as sodomy because it concerns “sexual relations between men of differing social class” (Masten 36). Nevertheless, in Doctor Faustus the relationship between servant and master seems to fall outside of the category of sodomy, probably because the socially inferior Robin is the passive partner. Nor is the act of buggery accompanied by accusations of effeminacy on the part of either Robin or his master. In the case of the latter, the desire to commit an act of sodomy with a stable-boy is interchangeable with his desire for his wife. For Robin, being buggered appears to be just another chore, and for his master, sodomizing the help is release not a manifestation of his sexual identity. Male/male sexual relations in Doctor Faustus are “outside the stigma of effeminization” (Goldberg 56). Though technically illicit, they are not abominations.

Robin is nevertheless conscious of the indignity associated with his lack of sexual agency, and he sees literacy as a way of subverting the social hierarchy. Identifying reading with sexual potency, he claims that his master and mistress will find proof of his literacy in his humiliation and in her pregnancy. Robin emphasizes the physical nature of the metamorphosis that his “reading” from Faustus’ book will bring about – changing the “forehead” of his master by adding horns to it, penetrating the “private study” of his master’s wife. Again, discourses about texts in Doctor Faustus are intertwined with discourses about what we might now identify as non-normative sexuality. Robin’s stated fantasies suggest a history of masturbation (“seeing” the maidens of the parish naked), sexual covetousness (his desire for his mistress), sexual sadism (his desire to cuckold his master) and an apparent desire sex for group sex. Faustus’ stolen conjuring book is the means by which Robin articulates, refines, and hopes to realize his desires. The play blends modern heteronormativity with pre-modern polymorphousness in exactly the same way that it blends modern and pre-modern reading practices.
It is impossible to separate discourses about desire from discourses about books in *Doctor Faustus*. Within the world of the play, texts are desirable as material objects, and at the same time they inevitably produce and articulate other desires that seem unfamiliar from our post-Enlightenment perspective. By acknowledging that *Doctor Faustus*’ discourses about literacy are inextricably intertwined with its discourses about perversity, we open up new ways of approaching what has proven to be one of the most elusive of early modern tragedies. The play has resisted the attempts of critics and editors at bringing it into line with modern textual practices and heteronormative sexuality because its own ways of organizing desire and literacy are intractably anti-modern. *Doctor Faustus* exhibits a great deal of antipathy for the distinction between licit and illicit desire, and the play seems directly counter it by privileging perverse desire and actively trying to elicit it from the audience. Further, *Doctor Faustus*’ obsession with male arousal suggests that perversity is a more dynamic force for literary creation and the organization of sexual experience than the proscriptive legal and medical discourses that will soon aid in the construction of heteronormativity.

*Doctor Faustus* organizes sex and desire not around identities but around objects and acts that are not currently associated with eroticism. Because the play articulates perversity in terms of reading and writing, its representations of eroticized encounters with texts complicate our understanding of early modern attitudes to the printed word and to sexuality. While the coming of the book has dislodged the play from many of the restraints and limitations of scribal culture, the characters follow the pre-modern conception of texts as erotically embodied. The play’s recognition of reading as a process that involves the body and that tempts it to perversion complicates the efforts of modern editors to make sense out of the different texts and apparent aberrations of the play. *Doctor Faustus*’ insistence that texts are produced by and productive of perversion should serve as a warning to us as we try to impose modern textual and orthographic standards on it. Furthermore, the play offers a bold challenge to the sexual politics of its day that can serve as a starting point for a critical reappraisal of modern constructions of sexuality. Its refusal to privilege the licit and heterosexual over other kinds of pleasure suggests that modern way of organizing sex and desire around identities is just as reductive and irrelevant as ecclesiastical sex laws were in early modern England.
**Philaster and the Taint of Collaboration**

*Doctor Faustus* collapses sex into reading and bodies into texts in order to explore a growing tension between pre-modern and modern conceptions of literacy and sexuality, but in *Philaster* the tension between the competing organizations of literacy and sex is muted. Like Marlowe, Beaumont and Fletcher collapse textual production into perversion, and they consistently figure texts as eroticized objects and bodies as texts onto which perversion is inscribed. The complicated print history of *Philaster* is somehow fitting for a play so preoccupied with the instability of bodies. Though performed possibly as early as 1608, it did not see publication until 1620 when Thomas Walkley brought out an unbound quarto edition (Q1). The title page of Q1 identifies it as the same play that was “acted at the Globe by his Maiesties Servants;” yet critics have been dismissive of the edition’s quality and accuracy at least since Walkley’s 1622 publication of a second quarto (Q2), which he prefaced with an apology for the fact that “Philaster and Arethusa, his love, have lain so long a-bleeding, by reason of some dangerous and gaping wounds which they received in the first impression” (Q.3-5). According to Walkley’s preface, the “gaping wounds” of Q1 are both textual errors and marks of injury on the bodies of the protagonists. Moreover, the book is itself a body, one vulnerable to violence and disease, injury and disfigurement, for the earlier edition of the play, Walkley insists, was “maimed and deformed” (Q.13). With the publication of this new, amended quarto, Philaster and his beloved “will now find double favour, being reformed and set forth suitable to their birth and breeding” (Q.15-16). Walkley imagines himself as a surgeon, repairing the text of the play by suturing the wounds of its protagonists and restoring them to a physical condition more becoming of their nobility.

Until recently, critics and editors of *Philaster* have unanimously affirmed Walkley’s low estimate of Q1’s quality. Accounts of Q1’s deficiencies were inevitably couched in terms of moral disapprobation. In his “Census of Bad Quartos,” Leo Kirschbaum argues that it “cannot possibly be a transcript of the author's text” (Q3). J.E. Savage agrees with Walkley and subsequent editors about Q1’s inferiority but ascribes the inconsistencies between the quartos to censorship and hack revisions (Q43). Andrew Gurr confirms that Q1 “present[s] a text inferior in almost all respects to that of Q2” (Qxxiv), and Suzanne Gossett proposes that Q1 is actually a “carelessly written and then badly printed” version of the play. However, both Gurr and Gossett
struggle to explain why there is so much “contamination” of Q2 by the earlier text (Gurr lxxxiii). For instance, Gossett dismisses the text of Q1 as “poorly printed, with much verse mislined or set as prose” (Gossett 79), but she admits that the compositors of the second edition only “usually” know when to differentiate verse and prose (101) and that Q2 repeats many of Q1’s mislineations with only “small changes” (97). Gurr also suggests that “Q2’s lineation is really in doubt through the whole text” (lxxii).

However much critics have latched onto Walkley’s antipathy toward Q1, they have remained relatively indifferent to his recognition of the text of Philaster as embodied and have overlooked Beaumont, Fletcher, and Walkley’s preoccupation with the corporeality of texts. By identifying texts with bodies and bodies with texts, the play collapses the distinction between the real and metaphoric. Furthermore, Beaumont and Fletcher (and their publisher as well) consistently figure sex and desire as acts of writing, and writing is, in turn, figured as a potentially dangerous act of sexual perversity. Representations of textual production and sexual desire in Philaster reveal that the playwrights organize sex and desire around acts and objects rather than around identities. Editors have failed to bring Philaster in line with modern conceptions of textual integrity because the play’s representations of eroticized textual production posit perversion as a textual and sexual norm. Writing proliferates perversion in Philaster, and texts as the embodied products of perversion always resist their incorporation into a modern ideology that tries to separate sex and writing into discrete and desexualized categories.

Walkley himself first iterates the connection between sex and text in his prefatory address, “To the Reader.” His reference to “gaping wounds” registers the sexual connotations of the verb “to gape,” especially as it applies to “material objects, wounds, etc.: To open as a mouth; to split, crack, part asunder” (OED Online). By insisting that the play suffered these “gaping wounds” during its “first impression,” Walkley equates the mechanical process by which the play is made into a material object with sexual perversity. Rather than enabling faithful reproduction, the printing press tends toward a kind of sexualized violence, damaging to both the lovers and their textual representation. Walkley offers his new edition in the hopes that Philaster and Arethusa might be able “to visit upon better terms such friends of theirs as were pleased to take knowledge of them” (0.11-12). While the OED does not acknowledge the
possible sexual valences of the phrase, it seems that there was not a clear distinction between “taking knowledge of” someone and having sexual or bodily knowledge of a person (or, as in this case, persons). After all, the reader is “taking knowledge” not of the play but of Philaster and Arethusa’s bodies. Walkley’s use of the term “friend,” which could mean “a lover or paramour of either sex” (*OED Online*), might also imply a kind of sexual intimacy between the reader, the text, and the bodies of the play’s protagonists. In Walkley’s formulation, the act of reading becomes a sexual encounter between multiple partners.

Having been treated for the sexual deformities they suffered in their “first impression,” Philaster and Arethusa will now find “double favour” with those who were previously acquainted with their “sight” (0.14). Walkley is apparently conscious of the sexual connotations of the term “favour,” but the nature of this “double favour” is left ambiguous. It most immediately applies the representations of the bodily pleasures that Philaster and Arethusa experience during the play. Walkley hints at the fact that this second edition (which, according to the title page has been “corrected, and amended”) recreates, and thus doubles, the pleasure that the reader once experienced when s/he saw the play performed at the Globe. But the favour might also be double because it offers different kinds of pleasures (textual and sexual) than those provided in performance. Finally, the “double favour” implies a mutual or reciprocal pleasure shared between the reader, the protagonists, and the text of the play.

Walkley’s preface implies that the doubling of “favour” necessarily involves the bodies of the readers as well as those of Philaster and Arethusa (whose bodies are themselves the doubles of the text). The text of the play is not only embodied, it is imagined to have a kind of sexual agency as well. Walkley’s conception of reading as an eroticized act forces us to recognize that early modern reading practices are intertwined with early modern sexual practices. Instead of having separate discourses for literacy and for sex, the early English stage articulates each in terms of the other to the point that the distinction between them collapses. By recognizing texts as sexualized objects, acknowledging the body’s involvement in reading, and neglecting to mention the playwrights at all, Walkley offers a conception of literacy that undermines the traditional, unhistorical approach to textual production which, according to Jeffrey Masten, “privileges ‘writer’ and ‘reader’ according to their value in modern literate, literary culture, and elides both the prior textual exchange between writers and actors and the
oral/aural transaction between actors and audience” (“Beaumont and/or Fletcher” 340). The ambiguity of the “double favour” implicates the publishers, playwrights, theatrical troupes and audiences, and readers of the playtexts in a network of textual production distinctly different from our own. The relations that prevail between Beaumont and Fletcher and Walkley, or as Jerome McGann would phrase it, between the authors and their copyist, are not “purely mechanical” (53). The production of textual objects takes place in a social, sexualized field of exchanges among writers, printers, and readers. Meaning and knowledge are produced not by the playwright(s) working in isolation; rather, Walkley locates Q2 on a continuum of eroticized collaboration, revision, and renewal. He insists that Q2 is a “reformed” version of the play, not the original or true version.

Walkley further develops his eroticized conception of reading by identifying the proper text of Philaster with the gentility and good-breeding of its characters which, in turn, suggests that pleasure is class-marked. In Q2, Philaster and Arethusa have finally been “reformed and set forth suitable to their birth and breeding.” The bodies of the protagonists are not common, nor are the pleasures they offer. Walkley promises that the text will involve the bodies of its readers and characters in a peculiarly aristocratic sensual experience. The text is first embodied, and then it is dressed up in fashions that index its social prestige. In a move that reinforces the title page’s insistence that the playwrights are gentlemen, Walkley gestures toward the supposed refinement of the play’s readers and implies that their sexual tastes, like their literary ones, are superior to more plebian enjoyments.

What is particularly striking about Walkley’s preface is that the play itself figures reading, writing, and sex in terms almost identical to his. Beaumont and Fletcher consistently conceive of sex as an act of writing. Illicit sex, in particular, is marked off as a dynamic and dangerous act of literary collaboration in which perverse or transgressive desire inscribes itself on the body. Writing and perversity again collapse into each other. Also, aristocratic pleasures, those “suitable to [the] birth and breeding” of characters like Philaster and Arethusa, are fundamentally different from other kinds of sex and are sometimes unintelligible to baser intellects. A sexual act, then, can even be a text itself, albeit one legible only to refined sensibilities.
Beaumont and Fletcher begin to develop the connection between perversity and writing with their characterization of Megra, a lady of “honor” in the Sicilian court. As soon as she appears on stage, she is identified by the courtier Dion as:

one whom the state keeps for
the agents of our confederate princes. She’ll cog and lie
with a whole army before the league shall break. Her
name is common through the kingdom and the trophies
of her dishonour advanced beyond Hercules’ pillars. (1.1.53-7)

Megra is no mere courtesan; she is the glue that holds together the King’s various political alliances. A more appropriate metaphor for her duty at court would be the one implicit Dion’s description of her – Megra’s body functions as a de facto treaty between the King and his “confederate princes.” She is willing to have sex with a host of diplomats and foreign dignitaries to ensure the survival of the league, but her body is a text more durable than anything committed to parchment or paper because it would take more than “a whole army” to rend it asunder. Dion elaborates the connection between Megra’s sexuality and textuality by reducing her to a “name” that is “common through the kingdom.” Having explained that Megra’s perverse appetite for illicit sex has been officially and literally co-opted by the state, Dion uses a series of puns to elaborate the role of her body in the construction of the body politic, prompting his interlocutor Cleremont to follow his lead:

DION She loves to try the several constitutions of men’s bodies and indeed has destroyed the worth of her own body by making experiment on it for the good of the commonwealth.

CLEREMONT She’s a profitable member. (1.1.58-61)

By describing the Megra’s delight in trying the “several constitutions of men’s bodies,” Dion imagines her to be a kind of nymphomaniacal political theorist. Using the term “constitution” to signify both the “physical nature or character of the body in regard to healthiness, strength, vitality” and a written “system or body of fundamental principles according to which a nation, state, or body politic is constituted and governed” (OED Online), Dion equates the male body
with the political constitutions of a nation. Interestingly, early modern England lacked a written constitution, and Dion seems to imply that the Sicily of the play lacks one as well. Megra’s perversion has made her invaluable to the state because, although it has “destroyed the worth of her own body,” it has at the same time allowed her to “experiment on it for the good of the commonwealth” by making her body into the text of a union between the King of Sicily and his “confederate princes.” Dion admits just that when he greets her later with the phrase “your desires upon you” (1.1.80); Megra’s perversity is literally written on her body. Cleremont’s pun points out the paradox – Megra is debased by the same perversity that makes her “profitable.” She is useful to men and to the state because she, like a text, is a sexualized object, a “member.” Megra’s body is a text which provides the court with protection from foreign interference, but a state held together by a mesh of textual and sexual perversion seems fundamentally unstable.

Megra, in turn, recognizes desire as discourse inscribed on the bodies of others. If Dion, Cleremont, and Thasiline have the audacity to approach and “court” her and the other ladies of honor (65), they would demonstrate a lack of worldly experience. Their lack of sophistication, she says, “writes them directly untravelled” (1.1.70-1). Unlike Megra, whose “dishonour advanced beyond Hercules’ pillars,” the courtiers have a kind of provincial inexperience and sexual inadequacy written on them that suggests they would not be able to “maintain discourse with a judicious lady” (1.1.76). Her sly use of “discourse” as a euphemism for sex further elaborate Beaumont and Fletcher’s exploration of the connection between literacy and sexuality. Not all “discourse” is good “discourse,” according to Megra. She requires a partner that has eloquence, refinement, and, apparently, the stamina to “maintain” discourse. Megra here articulates the same conception of sexual and textual collaboration that animates Jeffrey Masten’s recognition of “language as a process of exchange” and his call for a historically informed, collaborative perspective of textual production that “elaborates the social mechanism of language, discourse as intercourse” (Textual Intercourse 20). Whereas Masten, citing the homosocial environment in which early modern drama was produced, privileges a homoerotic reading of early modern collaborative writing, I would more broadly argue that Beaumont and Fletcher recognize various kinds of textual production as eroticized collaborations just as they recognize various kinds of eroticism as producing texts. The same dynamic energy that animates writing animates both homo- and hetero-eroticism. Masten’s methodology provides a useful framework for approaching scenes of collaboration between men and women. In Philaster the
playwrights recognize female arousal as a particularly dynamic force behind the collaborative production of texts. At times, the male characters seem stupidly unaware of the power of female eroticism, and their failure to read female desire properly is the source of much confusion, violence, and conflict in the play.

For instance, the King’s description of his daughter Arethusa identifies girlish innocence as her most attractive quality:

Though her few years and sex  
Yet teach her nothing but her fears and blushes,  
Desires without desire, discourse and knowledge  
Only of what herself is to herself,  
Make her feel moderate health: and when she sleeps,  
In making no ill day, knows no ill dreams. (1.1.99-104)

The King insists that because of Arethusa’s age (“her few years”) and biological gender (“sex”) she has neither “discourse” to articulate her emotions nor “knowledge” to fully understand them. Unable to organize her feelings in an intelligible way, she “desires without desire.” She knows only her innocent and unimaginative self; therefore, her potential husband Pharamond need not worry about her succumbing to illicit desires.

The King imagines his daughter to be the negative image of Megra. Arethusa’s lack of adequate “discourse” makes her a blank slate; Megra’s excess of “discourse” makes her body a document of perversion. The King’s conception of Arethusa robs her of language, identity, and, when he “boldly dare[s] proclaim her yet / No woman” (110-11), gender. As if to reinforce the connection between language and perversion, he urges Pharamond to

think her modesty  
A sweeter mistress than the offered language  
Of any dame – were she a queen – whose eye  
Speaks common loves and comforts to her servants. (111-114)

He argues that Arethusa’s complete lack of discourse constitutes an aversion to sexual contact that is preferable to the “offered language” of even a queen. Beaumont and Fletcher make a
general connection between language and sex throughout the play, but once language is made into a discursive object, a text, it becomes interchangeable with sex. Since Arethusa is unmarked by desire, the King is suggesting that Pharamond will have the exclusive privilege of writing on a blank page. However, Pharamond later admits that he has no inclination whatsoever to “teach her anything belonging” to the arts of love (2.2.111). Like the King, he misreads Arethusa as abnormally frigid and sexually unimaginative. Ironically, Pharamond reveals his own perverse, even pathological sexual tendencies moments later when he callously admits that he shall have to “ravish” Arethusa once they are married (2.2.114). It is the men in the play whose conceptions of eroticism are lacking or defective. The King and Pharamond are too unrefined to recognize the smoldering depth of Arethusa’s desire. Philaster also proves unable to recognize her love for him when she has one of her ladies in waiting deliver him a message masked in “plain words” (1.2.18). Arethusa hopes that the Gentlewoman has “caught” (20) Philaster for her by delivering a simple, unemotive message with “a winning gesture and quick look” (19), but he proves incapable of properly reading the nuances of the princess’s words.

Through Megra’s manipulation of Pharamond, Beaumont and Fletcher further explore the role that female eroticism plays as a dynamic force in the production of texts. Pharamond’s seduction of Megra is figured as an eroticized act of literary collaboration, but the playwrights again conceive of the male partner in the collaboration as erotically and creatively inferior to the woman. The scene begins with Pharamond making a comically inept attempt at winning the favors of Gallatea, whose “wit” he finds enticing (2.2.43). When his powers of seduction fail him, he offers to pay for her favor, but she outsmarts him and takes off with his gold. Pharamond then turns his attention to Megra, whose uninhibited sexuality is manifest in her discourse – she “gives good words” (65). Although he thinks of himself as a smooth talker, she is clearly the more eloquent of the two. When she asks him to choose a topic for conversation, he suggests “some such pretty subject as [her]self” (71). The choice is a revealing one because Megra is indeed in control throughout the seduction. When he claims that he will “go no further than [her] eye or lip” in cataloguing her beauty, Megra challenges him to elaborate his “theme” (73) further by using increasingly provocative language to describe the lips he was incapable of adequately praising. They are “young enough, ripe enough and red enough” (75) to merit better praise. She fashions herself as the one being seduced, but she is the one dictating how her seduction should
proceed by essentially demanding that he compose a blazon for her by figuratively
dismembering the most pleasurable parts of her body and rearranging them into a more
manageable text. In the ludicrously overwrought attempt at poetry that follows, Pharamond
proves incapable of reorganizing Megra’s dismembered parts in anything approaching an erotic
or even intelligible form. Jumbling together several clichés and incongruous similes, he claims
that her lips (and, by extension, her vagina, breasts, etc.) are like “twinned cherries” (77) and that
her limbs are the bowing branches of a tree. Mercifully she grants him a kiss as a reward for his
effort, before flattering him the condescending praise:

O delicate sweet Prince!
She that hath snow enough about her heart
To take the wanton spring of ten such lines off,
May be a nun without probation. (82-5)

Megra praises his clumsy gesture toward eroticism in verse that is remarkably more lucid and
succinct than his. While feigning awed submissiveness, Megra continues to direct her own
seduction. She also reiterates the conception of texts as forcefully embodied by proclaiming that
any woman capable of resisting “the wanton spring of ten such lines” is incurably frigid. In fact,
his wretched verse has none of the evocative power of a “wanton spring,” a phrase suggestive of
the frenzied coupling of animals and people that accompanies the end of winter. She implies that
any woman capable of resisting Pharamond’s advances after listening to (or aurally reading) his
verse is perversely frigid.

Continuing her ruse, Megra insists that though she is capable of recognizing verse, she
cannot compose it without assistance:

Sir you have in such neat poetry gathered a kiss
That if I had but five lines of that number,
Such pretty begging blanks, I should commend
Your forehead or your cheeks, and kiss you too. (86-9)

With the phrase “begging blanks,” Megra plays with the erotic potential of literary composition.
She claims that the blank verse she would write would “beg” him for a kiss, but through her
knowing wordplay she presents him with the “begging blank” of her vagina. Megra suggests that poetry is like a currency which one can use to “gather” commodities like kisses and implies that the exchange of erotic verses is identical with the exchange of sexual pleasures. However, to a certain extent she is the one writing all the verses – instructing Pharamond in how he should woo her. Megra acknowledges that, in order to fulfill their desire, they must be something more than mere lovers – they must be fellow poets. Unfortunately, Pharamond’s talents as an erotic poet are negligible. By lamenting her inability to compose, she tries to guide him into taking on the role of literary collaborator. However, he lacks the wit and stamina necessary to maintain such sophisticated discourse and so proposes that she “do it in prose” (2.2.90), with bawdy pun intended. Having tricked Pharamond into believing that he is instructing her in the art of writing (and its twin, fucking), Megra flatters him further by insisting that performing the act is “easy now [that she] ha’ done’t” for the first time and suggestively promising “stick at it” in order to gain proficiency. Megra’s manipulation of Pharamond complicates Masten’s privileging of the homoerotics of early modern literary collaboration. The collaboration in this case is not between two men but between a man and a woman. Further, it is an unequal kind of literary and sexual collaboration because it is dominated throughout by the force of Megra’s desire and her skills as a poet. Though she pretends that Pharamond is guiding her hand through the motions of writing, she is the one that is directing him in the subtle arts of seduction. All he knows about sex he will “teach [her] in a short sentence,” one that “will not load her memory” (100-1). Despite appearances, she is the instructor, and he the pupil.

Arethusa also articulates a desire for a kind of literary collaboration. After Megra’s allegations about the princess’s inappropriate relationship with the page Bellario become public, Arethusa finds herself bullied by her father, rejected by her beloved Philaster, and separated from her “pretty boy” (3.2.64). So, when summoned to accompany the King on a hunting expedition, she seeks a divine collaborator to help author her downfall:

Diana, if thou canst rage with a maid
As with a man, let me discover thee
Bathing, and turn me to a fearful hind,
That I may die pursued by cruel hounds,
And have my story written in my wounds. (3.2.183-7)
Arethusa here alludes to the cruel fate of Actaeon, who, in the Book III of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, stumbles accidentally upon Diana bathing in the woods. Enraged, the goddess transforms him into a deer, and he is devoured by his own dogs. Beaumont and Fletcher’s contemporaries recognized various political and sexual valences in the Actaeon myth, chief among them the self-destructive nature of desire. Arethusa seems to invoke Diana’s wrath as a curative for her unwieldy and unrequited desires. Unlike Actaeon, however, she wishes to participate actively in the destructive transformation of her body. Calling on Diana to collaborate with her, to help author her death, she hopes both to end her suffering and to leave a record of it “written in [her own] wounds.” Her wish is ultimately to transform her body into a text – a text that would be necessarily fragmented. The record of Arethusa’s desire would be scarred onto her body just like the “dangerous and gaping wounds” that Walkley apologizes for in the preface to Q2. Whereas Walkley expresses sorrow and regret at the damage Philaster and Arethusa suffered in their “first impression,” the princess yearns for her physical metamorphosis into a damaged text.

Arethusa here counters Walkley’s abhorrence of textual deviation by articulating a desire for fragmented, “wounded,” and incomplete texts. While Walkley’s conception of texts as objects in need of repair and “reformation” becomes the normative way of thinking about textual editing and criticism after the enlightenment, Arethusa’s desire for fragmented textual objects suggests that textual perversion is not necessarily a bad thing. By having the princess advocate for the “gaping wounds” that Walkley has tried to amend, Beaumont and Fletcher register the same impulse that animates our own (frequently eroticized) desire for and curiosity about “bad quartos.” By probing into playtexts like *Philaster* in order to diagnose their errors and aberrations, textual editors try to bring the texts into line with modern norms that run counter to early modern ways organizing sex and literary production. Arethusa’s desire for textual fragmentation suggests that, rather than sorting out and separating the “good” elements of texts from the “bad,” editors and critics have been actively implanting sexual and textual perversion into them.

Arethusa’s invocation of Diana is not the only time she seeks a collaborator to help inscribe the story of her woes upon her body. While in the woods, she detaches herself from the hunting party and is confronted by Philaster, who is now deranged with jealousy. Together, they
come very close to realizing her desire to reenact the Actaeon myth. Both are suicidal but incapable of taking their own lives without assistance. “Kill me with this sword,” Philaster implores his beloved (4.5.61), who, in turn, insists that if she “fall / upon [his] hand, [she] will have peace in death” (65-6). In other words, she asks Philaster to write her death with his “hand.” However, Philaster, like Pharamond, is incapable of composing anything without a woman’s guidance. Arethusa, like Megra, must direct their eroticized collaboration herself.

**ARETHUSA** Show me then the way.

**PHILASTER** Then guide

My feeble hand, you that have power to do it,

For I must perform a piece of justice. (68-71)

Philaster is supposed to be wounding her, but in the end, she is the one who must “guide his feeble hand.” Though adamant that he must “perform [a] piece of justice,” Philaster proves unable to write upon her with his sword. Only Arethusa has the “power to do it;” so she must guide Philaster’s hand in order to realize her desire. Like Megra, Arethusa engages herself in an unequal literary and sexual collaboration with a comically inept male partner. The sexual valences of this exchange are brought into focus by the Country Fellow’s irruption into the scene. Despite the bawdy pun in the character’s name, he himself is too dense to recognize that the collaboration between Philaster and the princess is as erotic as it is violent: the lady, after all, is “guid[ing]” her lover’s “sword” with her hand. The Country Fellow’s appearance coincides with the penetration the lovers had been hinting at before his arrival, and his contributions to the scene suggest that he too has become involved as an erotic collaborator with Arethusa and Philaster even though his collaborations are coarse and unwelcome to the aristocratic enjoyments of the play’s protagonists and readers. His account of the King’s raucous hunting party evokes a loud and aggressive sexual encounter:

*Coun.* I can see nothing but people better horsed than myself,

that outride me; I can hear nothing but shouting. These Kings

had need of good brains, this whooping as able to put a mean

man out of his wits. (Q2, H4v)\(^8\)

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\(^8\) I cite Q2 here rather than Gossett for two reasons. First, because her edition changes the abbreviation of “Country Fellow” from the pun “Coun.” found in both Q1 and Q2, to the innocuous “C. Fell.” Second, because she inserts a stage direction reading “Philaster wounds her,” found in neither of Walkley’s quartos, after Philaster’s line “May
The Country Fellow’s puns function as the climax to Philaster and Arethusa’s troublingly violent sexual encounter. Once his speech ends, the lovers even exchange what sounds like pillow talk. “Are you at peace?” Philaster asks; “With heaven and earth,” she responds. When the Country Fellow tries to intervene and protect the Princess, the lovers inform him that he has misrecognized their “private sports, [their] recreations.” Common, simple, and most likely illiterate, he is incapable of reading their desire and admits as much: “I understand you not… I know not your rhetoric” (93, 98). Again, Beaumont and Fletcher have figured sex as a collaborative project in literary composition. This time, however, the collaborators have an audience, an unlettered commoner who misreads the text of their desire and who, as a result of his ignorance, violently interrupts their intimacy. If what is happening between Philaster and Arethusa is a kind of writing, the Country Fellow is inadvertently defacing the text that they have composed. Unable to properly read it, he writes over it with ill-mannered violence. In the scuffle that ensues, Philaster and the Country Fellow wound each other with their swords, inscribing new texts on each other’s bodies.

The title page of Q1 features a woodcut which complicates our understanding of what the play’s climax. In the woodcut, a wounded Arethusa, referred to only as “The Princes,” lies weeping near the left hand margin, while on the right Philaster slinks off into the woods. Arethusa’s breasts and nipples are clearly delineated underneath her bodice, as is the “gaping wound” on her chest. Even though the part of Arethusa would have been played by a boy, there is little suggestion of transvestitism in the woodcut. While it is certainly possible that some members of the theatrical audience recognized the character as unambiguously female, it seems likely that the woodcut offers us a representation of Arethusa’s body that makes it appealing to the book-buying public. The eroticized image of a wounded Arethusa on the title page suggests that the playtext of Q1 actively advertizes itself as a potentially erotic text and explains why a dashing, well-dressed “Cuntrie Gentellman” is featured in the center of the woodcut. Regardless of the fact that this character is identified as the “Countrey Gallant” in both the dramatis personae and the stage directions of Q1, the presence of a pun for the word “cunt” on the cover
would further promote the playtext as every bit the eroticized object that Walkley suggests it is in his prefatory address to the “amended” Q2. Further, Q2 reduces the social status of the character from a “Gentellman” and “Gallant” to a simple “Fellow.” The change of rank affirms Walkley’s concerns about rank and breeding in the preface. The Country Fellow is just like the unnamed persons who wounded the text of the play during its first impression, and in order to restore Philaster and Arethusa to their proper station, it is necessary that he be marked off as socially inferior to them.

The King’s reaction the secret marriage of Arethusa and Philaster also brings us back to Walkley’s discussion of the textual deficiencies of Q1. When confronted with the fact of his daughter’s marriage to the man whose throne he usurped, the King threatens the two lovers with an unusual punishment:

I’ll provide
A masque shall make your Hymen
Turn his saffron into a sullen coat
And sing sad requiems to your departing souls! (5.3.52-55)

He imagines his rage in terms of a desire to produce for them a highly stylized, literary performance, a “masque,” that will ensure their physical destruction. His boast that the masque will make Hymen “turn his saffron into a sullen coat” suggests that this text will be so destructive that their wedding guests will presently become their funeral mourners. Furthermore, the mention of Hymen implies that the text of the masque will not only cleave their souls from their body, it will shatter his daughter’s chastity before Philaster gets the chance. The text of the play figures the King as an inversion of Walkley. The latter insists that the Philaster and Arethusa suffered “dangerous and gaping wounds” during their “first impression.” He insinuates that the bodies of the plays protagonists were unintentionally mutilated during the printing process. Walkley’s goal is to “amend” their bodies and send them forth in a condition “suitable to their birth.” However, in the text of the play itself, the King conceives of his desire to disfigure and mutilate the bodies of Philaster and Arethusa in terms of producing a dramatic text. For the King, the desire to write is identical to the desire to disfigure. He is similar to the Country Fellow in that he would deface an eroticized text that he does not understand. Like his
daughter, the King yearns for fragmented texts and damaged bodies. Despite Walkley’s attempts at mediation, *Philaster* figures its own production a site of eroticized violence.

Beaumont and Fletcher’s representations of writing in *Philaster* offer us a way to reconstruct early modern ways of organizing literary and sexual experience that modern criticism and the editorial tradition have found problematic. Much like the King and the Country Fellow, critics and editors have been forced to write over textual and sexual aberrations that modern ideology has been unable to explain. By looking at the way *Philaster* figures texts as embodied, sexualized objects, we can begin to consider the play’s textual legacy in a more historically sophisticated light.
Early Modern Texts and Speculative Sexualities

The early English stage refuses to separate sexuality and textuality into discrete categories. Sex acts collapse into acts of writing and reading, while the production and reception of texts simultaneously collapses into sex. Texts are consistently figured as embodied records of perversion, while perverse desire inscribes itself on human bodies. Early modern drama thus breaks down the distinction between the “real” and the “metaphoric” by interlocking its discourses about sex and texts. By locating textual objects in a matrix of eroticized acts of writing and reading, the stage reveals an early modern tendency to organize sex, desire, and pleasure around objects and acts rather than identities. Though modern textual critics, historians of the book, and queer theorists have approached questions of textual and sexual perversity in early modern plays from different angles, their various methodological approaches converge on the way that the stage collapses sex into writing. Representations of writing and sex can be used as a pivot to unite these separate approaches to early modern drama. By looking at scenes of writing and printing in early modern drama, we are able to learn more about the dynamics both of sex and of the production of dramatic texts in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. The fact that making texts and making sex are identical processes suggests that the early modern stage conceives of the composition of texts as a social process, an eroticized collaboration between often unequal partners.

Textual scholars and historians of the book would benefit from consulting early modern drama’s figurations of writing, reading, and texts because of how thoroughly different the stage’s conception of literacy is from our own. The stage does not read like we do – in silence and with only our eyes. Instead, early modern reading practices animate the breath, hands, voice, and arms in ways that are always necessarily erotic. Nor does the stage produce texts like we do – in isolation and often in opposition to the desires and tastes of our editors, publishes, and readers. The writing, printing, and publishing of playtexts takes place in a socialized and eroticized exchange between playwrights, actors, editors, publishers, and especially readers, whose actions and desires converge on the text which is itself only ever a provisional manifestation of the various erotic and literary forces which demand its existence as an object. Early modern plays conceive of text objects as the material embodiment of the erotic energies that produce them. The materiality of texts therefore demands to be interpreted in light of its erotic nature.
Doctor Faustus’ obsession with eroticized reading practices reveals that early modern readers engaged with texts in a dramatically different way than we do now. Since reading and writing involve and excite the body, the play thus collapses them into sex. Doctor Faustus registers a tension between modern and pre-modern conceptions of literacy and sexuality by identifying books as erotically embodied objects. The physical components of the book – down to the impressions of ink that make up the letters on the page – are objects produced by and productive of perversion. Books even appear to have sexual agency in the play because they are capable of arousing Robin and penetrating Faustus. Doctor Faustus’ equation of reading and writing with acts of illicit sex also suggest that the play organizes sexuality in opposition to legal and medical discourses about sexuality. In the play, printed texts have the power to liberate the characters from the restrictive sexual mores of their society. Books are especially evocative of homoerotic desire. In the frequent scenes of male arousal at the sight of printed texts, the play comments on the liberating potential of sexual and textual perversion while critiquing the inadequately narrow definition of what constitutes licit sex in early modern England. Modern editors and textual scholars have found it impossible to reconcile the play’s celebration of the perverse with modern heteronormativity because in many ways it is a reaction against the encroachment of a sexual regime based around identities. Instead, Doctor Faustus’ collapsing of literacy into sex privileges pre-modern ways of organizing sex and desire around acts and material objects. Rather than mapping modern understandings of sexuality onto Doctor Faustus, we can use the play’s representations of reading, writing, and sex to construct a new methodological approach to early modern drama and to consider how its fusion of sex and text undermines modern understandings of sexuality.

Whereas Doctor Faustus is preoccupied with reading and the printed word, Philaster focuses obsessively on the erotic perversity of writing and the literary potential of perverse desire. The male characters in the play consistently figure Megra’s perversion as a text inscribed upon her body. They simultaneously refuse to recognize that Arethusa harbors similarly perverse desires and inscribe their own ideals of femininity on her. Megra confirms their misogyny, but Arethusa offers a counterdiscourse about female desire. Moreover, the play consistently figures sex as a kind of unequal literary collaboration between unimaginative men and masterful women. Megra and Arethusa are both the dominant partners in collaborative acts of writing perversion. By privileging the role of female desire in the process of composition, Beaumont and Fletcher
complicate our conception of early modern literary culture as overwhelmingly homosocial and misogynistic. At the same time, Thomas Walkley’s preface to the second quarto edition of *Philaster* privileges a conception of a textual production that involves the reader, the publisher, the printers, and the characters of the play in an eroticized collaborative exchange.

I shall conclude my thesis by looking briefly at Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* in order to explore the ways dramatic texts figure themselves as products of an eroticized process of literary collaboration. The play collapses literary production into sexual perversion and reveals that the early modern stage recognized itself as located in a matrix of eroticized textual exchanges. By looking at scenes of collaborative textual production in the *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, I hope to demonstrate once again that my methodological approach to early modern plays derives from their own discourses about the unity of textual and sexual experience. Further, I want to show the play pushes us away from the antiquarianism of traditional textual scholarship and toward a speculative reconfiguration of the role of the editor in the transmission of early modern drama.

In the Induction to *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, a boy actor enters to deliver the prologue to a play called *The London Merchant*. However, he is interrupted by a Citizen from the audience who identifies himself as grocer and demands that the boy and his fellow actors perform “something notably in honour of the commons of the city” (0.25-6). The Citizen’s actions set off a chain of unsolicited collaborations from other members of the audience who force themselves on stage and into the text of the play. Shrugging off the boy actor’s complaint that it would take a “month” (31) to produce a new play, the Citizen insists that they immediately perform a new scenario that features a “grocer,” like himself, doing “admirable things” (33-4). That is, he wants the play to reflect and valorize the mundanity of tradesman’s life in London. However, the Citizen is unable to articulate just what kind of “admirable things” he would like to see because his Wife interrupts him. Like her husband, she forces her way onto the stage and onto the page, becoming both a collaborator and part of the spectacle of the play itself. The Wife proposes that the grocer/hero of their new play should carry out a fantastically heroic task: “Let him kill a lion with a pestle,” she demands (43).

The boy actor is commanded to (and implicitly agrees to) produce a play that mashes together the conventions of city drama and of romance. Although he and his fellow boy actors
(as well as their playwrights, producers, and financiers who go unmentioned in the text) have professional experience with making and performing texts for the stage, the Citizen and his Wife figure themselves as the dominant partners in the production of a dramatic text by composing a new play over the text that the boy actors had originally intended to perform. The Wife confesses that her contributions to the new text (like her presence on the stage) might prove to be “something troublesome” because she “was ne’er at one of these plays, as they say, before” (49-51). When she begs the boy actor and her husband that they “bear with [her]” (54), she apologizes for her ignorance of theatrical and literary convention while simultaneously hinting at her role in the embodied process of textual production – through the collaboration of the Wife, the Citizen, and the boy actors, a new playtext is born. Like Megra and Arethusa in Philaster, she takes the lead in the collaboration and allows her erotic desires to dictate the production of the text.

Yet another collaborator lends his hand to the construction of the new play when the Wife demands that the part of the lion-slaying grocer be played by Rafe, whom the dramatis personae ambiguously identifies as “her man.” Rafe is certainly an object of desire for the Wife, but the play consistently suggests that the sexual appeal of its new lead actor is more polymorphous and elusive. The boy actor even equates the success of the play with the (mostly male) audience’s approval of “Rafe’s part,” a phrase that implies both his role as the heroic grocer and, of course, his penis. The Citizen has no doubt that his wife’s “man” will satisfy the audience. In fact, he guarantees the success of Rafe and the play alike in terms of ejaculation: “Take you no care for Rafe,” admonishes the Citizen, “he’ll discharge himself, I warrant you” (119-20).

In The Knight of the BurningPestle, Beaumont collapses the distinction between the production of dramatic texts and sex acts. The text of the play is “born” from a literary collaboration between the players and members of the audience. Further, Beaumont identifies playtexts as eroticized objects that stimulate the audience to perverse desires. Rather than privileging heterosexual desires and pleasures, the text of the play reveals early modern sexuality to be polymorphous and diffuse. Heteronormative desires sit side by side with non-normative ones. The Citizen and his Wife share with the audience a desire to watch Rafe “discharge
himself,” and the bodies of the protagonists are always tempting the audience to sexual perversion.

Modern scholars of early modern drama are in the Wife’s unenviable position. Like her, we were “ne’er at one of these plays,” and our attempts to make sense out of the plays have frequently proven “troublesome.” However, by using the plays like *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Philaster*, and *Doctor Faustus* as a guide, modern editors and textual critics can begin producing editions of the plays that recreate the “perversity” inherent in their original production. Instead of constructing editions based on 19th century guidelines of scholarship and decorum, editors should look at the ways that the plays themselves try to organize sexual and textual experience. By downplaying early modern drama’s fascination with the body as text and the text as body, most modern editions of the plays obscure the erotic energy that animates them. Textual editors and critics should turn away from scholarly practices that mangle and distort playtexts and toward speculative inquiry into how early modern plays can help us reconsider our own constructions of sexuality and gender.
Works Cited


