A WOMAN TRAPPED: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL AGENCY IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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Thesis

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INTRODUCTION

In 1591, Eulalia Page murdered her husband. The spousal murder became so sensationalized that ballads, pamphlets, and plays (now lost) were based off the crime and were circulated for more than a century after the event. *Sundrye Strange and Inhumaine Murthers* states that Page had her husband murdered because she "said she had rather dye with Strangwidge [her lover], then to live with Padge" (sig. B4r). The ballads covering her death, which are the focus of chapter one of this thesis, state similar motives. By insinuating that her problem, her motive, lies within her sexuality, the creative works that sensationalized her crime create anxiety towards women who wish to discover their own sexualities. Page desired George Strangwidge, but as a woman in the early modern period, she could not explore her sexuality, and as a result, she murdered her husband and was sentenced to death.

At a time when the moral nature of women was questioned, anxiety surrounding female sexuality invaded many public areas, and various writers took to addressing those anxieties. The possibility for women to fantasize and act on their sexual desires defies norms for the period. Laura Gowing notes, "How could an active female sexual agency be posited without invoking the 'moveable harlot' of Proverbs, or the lustful women who were the epitome of the female grotesque? The main images of desiring women were strongly negative …. Despite the widespread acknowledgement that mutual pleasure was

necessary to marriage and reproduction, female desire was characterized in a whole range of discourses as dangerous, grotesque, and unsettling" (101-02). The cultural construction that framed female sexuality was a limiting one that barred women from actively engaging in their sexual desires. Page's story is but an example of how women were warned against sexuality. Page, like other transgressive women, represents the extreme of what can happen if women attain bodily autonomy and begin expressing their sexual agency, and as a result, her actions must be revised through literature to warn other women against that very action. This thesis focuses on three major genres for the period: ballads, plays, and prose romances. By critically analyzing these genres for their construction of female sexual agency, readers can begin to understand how authors described sexual agency and how they used it to influence their various audience members.

The ability for a woman to speak publicly about her sexual desire was a delicate matter. Women who projected their sexual agency were negatively viewed. In court cases, women also had to choose their words carefully. Laura Gowing states,

> In court, women's stories of their sexual experiences emphasized one thing above all others: passivity. Defending themselves, women described 'condescending' to men, being 'persuaded to give in to the satisfying of his lust,' being 'tempted unto uncleanness,' 'yielding up her body.' Such descriptions reflect the ways in which women presented themselves in court, or in any confessional situation: weak, repentant, 'defiled'. (86)

Although Gowing refers explicitly cases of illicit sex such as rape, the ideas of passivity can apply in other areas. The ways that literary works of the period describe women's sexual agency, then, becomes crucial because of what it means for the audience. If a woman is portrayed as being in control of her sexuality, and if she is portrayed positively, then that shapes how the audience in turn will address the concept. However, if she is

portrayed negatively, then the negative portrayal works to reinforce those ideas the period places on sexual agency.

Chapter One, "Desire, Death, and the Broadside Ballad," focuses on broadside ballads. Broadside ballads were published on a single sheet of paper and typically featured an illustration alongside their text. This chapter focuses explicitly on murderous wife ballads, which is a sub-genre that featured women who murdered their husband. By the end of each ballad, the murderous wife is executed and silenced. In many cases, the murderous wife would articulate her motive lying behind the want to commit adultery, which shows active agents in control of their sexuality. Having a murderous wife articulate her desire, especially towards someone outside of her marriage, would have been extremely transgressive. Balladeers used these women's stories to turn a profit and further push against women discovering their agency and to remind listeners of the extremes that can happen to a woman who becomes independent, and they knew that sensationalizing these rare criminal acts would reinforce anxieties among many about these acts happening to other people.

Chapter Two, "Tyrannous Agency: Shakespeare and Female Desire," moves away from broadside ballads to discuss Shakespeare's construction of female sexual agency through an examination of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello*. As two plays that are vastly opposite of one another both in genre and storyline, they feature similarities in the construction and limitation of female sexual agency. Because they are plays, the dissemination of the play's formulation of female sexual desire begins to narrow to those who have access to the play in comparison to ballads. Whereas ballads were cheap and available everywhere to listen to and buy, plays only operated in the

playhouses, and one had to pay admission to enter said playhouse. By focusing on Emilia, Bianca, Titania, and Hermia, this chapter argues that the female characters in each play featured in this chapter convey a strong message about the supposed importance of women acquiescing control to the men in their lives over their sexuality, which strips them of much sexual agency.

Chapter Three, "Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* and the Challenge of Female Sexual Desire," complicates the argument about female agency with its focus on *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* by Lady Mary Wroth, a pastoral romance. *Urania* occupies a unique space in terms of readership. Ballads were ubiquitous, but access to *Urania* was limited by its temporary publication.[1] The construction of female desire in the text vastly differs from that of the broadside ballads. Although *Urania* had a limited release, the text attempts to confront the condemnation that surrounds female sexual agency in other genres and entreats the readers to see the issue that plagues the other genres. Although *Urania*'s representation of sexual agency is limited for women, and women at various points of the romance are isolated from the male counterparts, by giving a voice to the tormented women in the text and allowing them to share their stories, the text advocates for a community to be built that allows

[1] *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* exists in two parts (and both end mid-sentence). The *First Part* was the published version that produced such a scandal at court that it had to be removed from the shelves. The *Second Part* remained as a manuscript; it was not until scholars tasked themselves with creating a critical edition of the text that it was finally published. There is debate as to whether there was perhaps a *Third Part* continuation, but if there was, it has since been lost. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on the *First Part* publication as it was the one that readers of the time saw and would have reacted to.

women in the early modern period to begin discussing their own stories and hopefully begin to enact change.

This thesis aims to enlighten views on the presentation of female desire in the early modern period. By complicating the concept of sexual agency, I aspire to further understand realities for women of the period through these works. Women were constantly bombarded with denial of sexual agency, and by opening the conversation on this topic, I aim to emulate *Urania*'s attempt at creating a community by which we, as scholars, can further understand the inner workings of the patriarchal constructions in the early modern period.

CHAPTER I

DESIRE, DEATH, AND THE BROADSIDE BALLAD

During the early modern period in England, balladry was extremely popular. Broadside ballads operated in a unique situation within society. As Sandra Clark notes, balladeers advertised their ballads by singing in public areas and then also selling prints of them, which meant that men and women were reached (Clark, "The Broadside Ballad and the Woman's Voice" 104). The different modes of transmission allowed ballads to reach many different types of audiences. As a result, ballads had several sub-genres within them. Scholars like Simone Chess have identified murderous wife ballads as a popular sub-genre of goodnight ballads (131-32). These ballads operate under a typical story structure in a first-or third-person voice that follows the murderer as she prepares to be executed. They usually 1) state a motive (vague or articulate), 2) describe the murder, and 3) end with the wife asking for salvation and attempting to persuade listeners away from choices that led her to murdering her husband. Although the women were the topic of these ballads, the murderous wives did not author the ballads; balladeers who were usually anonymous would author the texts. Each murderous wife in their ballad acts out of the constricting roles that society places on her by murdering her husband, and

although murderous wife ballads sensationalize the reality of the situation, they also give these infamous women a window of opportunity to speak through the ballad to listeners, women listeners especially. Murderous wife ballads, while offering counsel to other women on the mistakes the murderous wives made, also act as reminders to women about what is and what is not acceptable behavior when it comes to female sexual desire.

Ballads operate in a unique situation in early modern England. They were not thought of as a "high" form of literature, however.[1] Balladeers often stood in public areas to promote their works by singing popular ballads, and the ballads also gained an audience thanks to the use of using familiar, popular tunes. Tessa Watt states, "Like the modern 'folksong', the early modern notion of a 'ballad' concealed a wide variety of song-types, from courtly wooing song to Scottish battle legend …. The broadside ballad publishers borrowed tunes and stories from court, city and country without discrimination, and distributed them to an equally varied audience" (13). The cheap, easy access and the variability between oral and print allowed these ballads to spread easily among social classes, and because of this, they offer us a unique look at the way that they operated in conjunction with other propaganda of the time. Sandra Clark writes,

> The anxieties generated by the ballad undoubtedly represent the fear of the spread of information, especially in printed form, to teach and empower the traditionally underprivileged. Of this the ballad was peculiarly capable, because of the fluidity of its medium, its ability to communicate to the poor and unlettered by word of mouth, its openness to customization and adaptation, and the additional qualities of memorability and auditory

[1] William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* offers a fantastic look at the ways that the ballad business operated in this period. In the play, Autolycus sells ballads and is seen performing ballads in hopes of selling them to customers. The play also references how ballads operated in Act 5 Scene 2 when one of the Gentlemen mentions, "Such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that ballad makers cannot be able to express it" in response to Perdita being found, and it speaks to the way that balladeers operated (5.2). They needed to keep up with the current news and present it in ways to attract customers.

> appeal conferred by the setting of words to well-known popular tunes. (Clark, "Broadside Ballad" 73)

With this in mind, it becomes imperative to consider how these ballads recycled certain stories to continue spreading anxieties and containing women within societal ideals. Moreover, when one considers how some ballads recycled for decades, the extent to which they restrict women's agency is even more striking.

This chapter aims to approach these ballads from two main perspectives. The first part of this chapter will discuss the ways sexual desire is represented as a catalyst for these murders. This will be accomplished by placing the ballads on a spectrum that reveals the way the wife's sexual desire is discussed in the works. I propose a spectrum that places ballads between two extremes, with one extreme labelled "articulated desire" and the other "coded desire." For those that fall between the two extremes I offer the term "hybrid desire." The second part of this chapter aims to discuss the ways the ballads use scaffold speeches. Scaffold speeches were speeches the convicted criminal made before their public execution.[2] By focusing on the ballads' uses of the scaffold speech, I aim to reveal how murderous women's supposed scaffold speeches coincide with the representations of desire and the silencing of these women.[3] The murderous wives'

[2] J.A. Sharpe focuses on pamphlets and chapbooks' depictions of scaffold, or farewell speeches: "[B]y far the most consistently reported aspect of these rituals [of execution], and evidently one which was felt to be of central importance, was the speech delivered from the gallows of the condemned. According to pamphlets, the condemned was expected to make a farewell speech, and usually did so in a very stereotyped form. The purpose of these speeches, unsurprisingly enough, was to remind spectators that the death of the condemned constituted an awful warning" (150).

[3] It is important to remember that these ballads were not written by the women themselves, and although ballads depict the women delivering scaffold speeches, there does not appear to be records confirming these speeches and are probably fictional dramatizations of what the women could have said before their executions.

decision to commit murder in these ballads, and the consequences that follow, are a result of sexual agency they develop. By reacting with spousal murder, these women's stories become moral reminders to the public on the dangers and repercussions if women realized their sexual identity. This sub-genre sensationalizes these murders by women to reinforce anxieties towards women who had sexual agency, and the trope of the scaffold speech relegates the murderous wives back into silence.

For the spectrum of female sexual articulation, I apply the label "articulated desire" to ballads that describe the murderous wife's sexuality using frank, concrete terms; when one finishes these ballads, there is no confusion as to whether the wife's sexuality played a role in the murder. The ballad focusing on Alice Arden is an excellent example of this; the ballad "[The] Complaint and Lamentation of Mistresse Arden of [Fev]ersham in Kent" was reportedly based off the play *Arden of Faversham* and other popular materials that documented the sixteenth-century spousal murder; and the ballad circulated for several decades after the murder occurred. This ballad focuses on Alice Arden's numerous attempts to murder her husband and the ways she manipulates the people around her to attempt to commit the act in her place. Arden's ballad is an example of articulated desire because of the ballad's focus on explaining exactly who Alice Arden's object of desire is and why she lusts after him; listeners cannot leave the ballad without remembering exactly what she wants from her lover, Mosby.

On the other side of the spectrum is "coded desire." Coded desire is used to represent desire that relies on symbolic language as opposed to the concrete language articulate desire relies on. This type of desire remains without a known object of desire, and the audience is left unsure as to the extent of the wife's insubordination. The ballad

operates without an admission of adultery, and its presence attempts to reinforce passivity in women. The ballad focusing on Ursula Corbet's crime is an example of this. "The Examination, Confession, and Execution of Ursula Corbet" uses an omniscient narrator to detail Corbet's motive for murdering her husband, but it obscures Corbet's motive behind the concept of not "loving" her husband, which in turn virtually conceals her sexual desire from most listeners. Because the ballad cloaks Corbet's sexual agency, the ballad relies on coded desire because listeners would have to decide whether Corbet's inability to "love" is due to her lusting after someone outside of the marriage.

I offer "hybrid desire" as a label for ballads that blend both the articulation and the coding involved with the extreme representations of women's agency. A ballad that represents this focuses on Eulalia Page's crime. "The Lamentation of Mr. Page's Wife of Plymouth" also features two additions alongside the original ballad— "Mr. George Strangwidge's Lamentation for Consenting to Mr. Page's Death, for the Love of Mrs. Eulalia, Mr. Page's Wife" and "Mrs. Page's Complaint for Causing Her Husband to Be Murthered For the Love of Mr. George Strangwidge"—that discuss Page's criminal act. Per the ballad, Eulalia Page murders her husband because she is in love with George Strangwidge. Although the ballad names her lover, the ballad does not focus on articulating the physicality of their relationship like Alice Arden's ballad does, which places the ballad between the two extremes.

For the period, open discussions of sex for women were typically frowned upon. As noted in my introduction, Laura Gowing discusses the passivity women had to adopt in public settings while discussing their sexual practices. Having a murderous wife articulate her desire, especially towards someone outside of her marriage, would have

been extremely transgressive. By dedicating a sub-genre to women transgressing the patriarchal structures, early modern balladeers capitalized on public acts that defied the constructs in place, but rather than depict these women sympathetically, balladeers exploited on their acts to further condemn said murderers. The publication of these ballads moved quickly, and the need to continue drawing in customers was crucial to the trade.[4] Murderous wife ballads would have remained in circulation because of the popularity they had and the profits that could be made from them. However, while balladeers would have sold these ballads based on appeasing paying customers, one cannot forget that in the process of advertising these ballads, balladeers also used these women's stories to further push against women discovering their agency and to remind listeners of the extremes that a woman who becomes independent can experience. By sensationalizing these rare criminal acts, balladeers inadvertently reinforced anxieties among many about these acts happening to other people.

As wives, women are supposed to be silenced and dependent. Upon marriage, they joined with their husband as a supposed single body, but their position meant that they had no voice in the combined body. By assuming their sexuality and committing murder, they are thus assuming their bodily autonomy in an extremely violent manner. Moreover, by acting against their husbands, these women are acting against the loss of identity. Murdering their husbands is also an attack on the patriarchal structures, and because of this, the punishment for spousal murder was being labeled a "petty traitor."

[4] Sandra Clark mentions that, when it comes to highly publicized crimes, ballads following the criminal from crime to execution (also called "goodnight ballads") could have been written right as the criminal was being executed or even before (Clark, "Broadside Ballad" 74). This allowed ballad writers to benefit the most financially from the event and keep up with current news.

Frances E. Dolan dedicates a chapter to the labeling of "petty traitor" in her book, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700*: "While evidence suggests that actual early modern women found many ways of challenging, outwitting, or ignoring such sexual ideologies, the representations of the murderous wife explore the most extreme, visible, threatening scenarios of resistance. The heterogeneous narratives of the murderous wife construct the conditions of wifely subjectivity as criminal, because, in violent action, the contradictions of wives' social and legal status prove uncontainable" (26-7). Being labeled thus, the women became infamous, and their transgressions against the structure became used incessantly to remind other women not to follow suit. Although murderous wives were not the only way women managed to work in the constricting structure, their actions were too public to ignore, and those actions needed to be punished even after death.[5] Therefore, it becomes vital to study these easily accessible works for the period to truly understand how the dominant voices attempted to suppress what these women did.

[5] It must be noted that the statistics of women murdering their husbands appear to be fairly low in comparison to the number of murderous wife ballads produced. Catherine Belsey, for example, points this out: "The existing historical evidence gives no reason to believe that there was a major outbreak of women murdering their husbands in the sixteenth century. What it does suggest, however, is a widespread belief that they were likely to do so. The Essex county records for the Elizabethan period, for instance, reveal no convictions for this crime, but they list several cases of frightened husbands seeking protection of the courts. In 1574 a Barnston man complained that his wife, 'forgetting her duty and obedience as a wife, had sundry times maliciously attempted to bereave her husband of his life, so that he stand in great fear' both of her and of two men from Dunmow, her 'adherents,' who haunted his house at night" (89).

Ursula Corbet and Coded Desire

During the period, speaking openly about sexual desire was frowned upon. Gowing writes, "Loose talk about sex was associated with all the worst fantasies of female disorder. At the most basic level, most of the language available was condemnatory, referring implicitly, or explicitly to whoredom" (102). Corbet's ballad, "The Examination, Confession, and Execution of Ursula Corbet," uses coded desire, which potentially shields her from some criticism. The ballad uses coded desire because it keeps Corbet's sexual agency hidden. Per the ballad's narrator, Corbet is married, but she does not "love" her husband, and this drives her to murder him. The narrator of Corbet's ballad also does not name an object for Corbet's sexual desire. Instead, her sexual agency is simply found in her inability to "love" her husband. Within the first stanzas of the ballad, the omniscient narrator states,

> In *Parshowk* was she born and bred,
> from thence to *Deford* she was wed
> unto a Man that lov'd her dear

And later, the narrator tells us:

> For want of serving God above,
> The Devil made her do this deed:
> 'Cause she did not her Husband love,
> she sought to rid his life with speed. (l. 13-5, 21-4)

The narrator, in the lines above, states that the Devil forced Corbet's hand, but in the line immediately following, the narrator reveals that the Devil's influence is because Corbet does not "love" her husband. Unlike other murderous wife ballads, the narrator never states outright that Corbet's motive is explicitly tied to adultery. There is one line in the ballad that mentions a man's name: "And then with heart most patiently, / she did forgive both old and young: / but yet she often did reply, / that *Robert Willmot* did her wrong" (l.73-6). This is the only instance a male is named, and he could be a lover, but it is

unclear. Because the ballad is not explicit as to whether Corbet committed adultery, and due to the emphasis only being on her inability to "love" her husband, this ballad becomes one of coded desire. The narrator insists that she has enough agency to not "love" her husband, and that is enough to disrupt the patriarchal constructs.

Corbet's sexual agency, her ability to decide she does not want her husband sexually, becomes her motive for murder. Other scholars have identified the moment wives declare an oath to commit murder. Simone Chess offers, "If taking an oath is a precipitating factor that enables the act of spousal murder, then part of its work is in un-swearing the original marriage vow, and in doing so, disavowing the derivative status of coverture and allowing the wife to step into independent subjectivity" (134). While I agree with this argument, I also believe that the articulation of sexual desire—coded in this instance—acts as an inciting incident, a catalyst that propels Corbet and the other wives to spousal murder and her own demise. Corbet does make a vow to murder: "She but a small time wedded was, / before she studied in her mind, / to bring this wicked deed to pass" (l. 25-7). However, before that vow can be made, Corbet articulates her dislike towards her husband, and that acts as the source for her desire to commit murder. Desire, therefore, is what propels women's agency, and murder upsets the hierarchal balance because of the emphasis early modern society placed on women's standing and the political allusions tied to marriage. Corbet relies on desire as motive and transgresses the public sphere by murdering her husband. The ballad attempts to remain coded, and therefore shield Corbet from being too judged by her peers, but it is still unsuccessful because the ending is still the same. Corbet still murdered her husband because she found her agency.

When wives murdered their husbands, they not only committed an immoral sin, but they also committed treason. Corbet's ballad mentions this in a line when the narrator states, "And so like to a wicked wife, / *petty treason* against him wrought" (l. 31-2, emphasis mine). Stuart A. Kane studies the petty treason in these ballads:

> Most fundamentally, then, petty treason involves—or rather *poses* as involving—a violent and transgressive inversion of hierarchy, or rupture of the discursive container in which, in the case of husband-murder, the feminine legal subject is situated. In killing him, a wife disrupts not just the husband's body but aspects of the political technology which constructs and maintains that body. Such a disruption, of course, was simultaneously domestic and social, private and public; as an arguably more radical form of antagonism, this form of petty treason had to be aggressively recovered in order to maintain a coherent notion of social context for the murderous wife. (224)

This is also important when looking at the sexual desire this ballad and other murderous wife ballads exhibit as a driving factor. Even more, the ballad reminds listeners that Corbet is committing petty treason; therefore, even as it codes her desire, it still takes time to force listeners to remember that her act of murder has disrupted the status quo, serving as an attack not just the personal sphere between her and her husband, but also on the public sphere and the patriarchy.

The passive nature involved with the coded desire in this ballad leads to interesting talks of religion within the text. The ballad quickly moves into how Corbet murdered her husband and how quickly she is caught and sentenced to death.[6] Halfway through the ballad, the narrator takes time away from giving the play-by-play:

> Unto the Lord that rules above,
> although her deeds were very foul:
> That he in mercy and in love,

[6] The quickness the protagonist is subdued is yet another way the ballad reinforces the anxiety surrounding agency. It reminds listeners that there is no escape for anyone who follows down this path or similar paths. You will be caught, and the patriarchy will remain intact.

would take some pitty on her soul. (l. 65-8)

The narrator takes it upon himself to ask God for Corbet's salvation, but it is the line "in mercy and in love" that is of importance. If "love" is tied to God and God's salvation, then this reveals perhaps the narrator's feelings about Corbet's actions. God is expected to rise above and do the one thing that Corbet could not do: love. This is also seen when the narrator turns to address wives directly and says that women should "live honest quiet lives, / in perfect *love* and *godly* fear" (l.95-6, emphasis mine). The narrator attempts to remind women to remain passive individuals, and the narrator wants to remind women that the only acceptable "love" is for your husband. Therefore, although Corbet's motive remains focused on "love," and the narrator codes Corbet's sexual desire within that motive, she is still condemned for it. The emphasis on God again forces readers to look at Corbet's action as being blasphemous.

Another thing to keep in mind with this ballad is the fact that it is told from a third-person point of view. Third-person narration is not necessarily rare in murderous wife ballads, but the use of it in the instance of murderous wife ballads should still be called into question.[7] A third-person narrator places necessary distance between the protagonist and the audience, and in the case of these ballads and Corbet's in particular, it makes much of the ballad feel impersonal, especially in comparison to murderous wife ballads that are in first-person. This could explain why the audience is not given a more

[7] Sandra Clark has worked extensively with broadside ballads. When discussing broadside ballads and the connection to women, Clark writes, "Many seventeenth-century ballads are specifically addressed to women, especially where the subject (marriage, relations between the sexes, gossip, confessions of criminal women) has gender-related interest; and many are written from a woman's perspective" (Clark, "Broadside Ballad and the Woman's Voice" 104).

explicit reason as to why Corbet commits murder; however, the third-person narrator operates as an omniscient narrator. The very first lines of the ballad also operate by openly calling who it is trying to persuade or counsel: "Good women all a while give ear, / Both old and young mark and take heed / Wed not where love doth not appear" (l.1-3). The focus is still on women, on maids in particular. This means that the narrator, while speaking to women, acknowledges the presence of women's bodily autonomy before marriage by stating that women must marry men they "love." Ursula Corbet's actions are morphed into a piece of propaganda; her story is used in the ballad to persuade women away from similar paths. Moreover, her story is not even allowed to be told through her own "voice"; it must pass through the omniscient narrator's voice to be heard by the public. If one views the person performing this ballad to be a male, then it truly becomes a harrowing example of the ways propaganda was used. If a man were to perform this ballad, the man, as narrator, does not need to inhabit a female personality or do the equivalent of crossdressing to act as the murderous wife. This ballad, because of the third-person narrator, becomes a morality ballad through which Ursula Corbet's actions are used to facilitate. The entirety of the ballad is told through the narrator; even Corbet's scaffold speech and direct address to women in the audience of the ballad is the narrator speaking to the audience. This effectively silences Corbet while also stripping agency from her, even after death.

Alice Arden and Articulated Desire

If Ursula Corbet's ballad represents coded desire, then it only makes sense for Alice Arden's ballad to represent articulated desire. In fact, Arden's attraction towards

Mosby, her lover and co-conspirator, is one of the primary focuses of the ballad. Her sexualization of Mosby becomes her catalyst much in the same way that Corbet's inability to "love" her husband becomes hers. "[The] Complaint and Lamentation of Mistresse Arden of [Fev]ersham in Kent" appears to operate as Alice Arden's final confession; however, Arden, the narrator, does not lament what she has done. Other scholars have spoken on that topic. Catherine Belsey writes, that Alice Arden "is the unequivocal subject of the narrative, in contrast to the play, where the title indicates that it is Arden's tragedy rather than Arden's. The ballad reduces the story to two elements—Arden's love and the series of contracts for the murder …. The ballad is a record of contracts made and broken for love. There is no explicit doubt of Arden's wickedness: her 'secret dealings' come to light and are duly punished by her death" (88). I would also argue that the focus of Arden's ballad is on her motive for murder: her sexual desire for Mosby. Arden's transgressions within the ballad, her sexual desire to be with Mosby, reveal her to be an active agent within the entire plot against her husband, and that agency is what separates Arden from the other ballads chosen in this chapter.

Arden's agency has much to do with the ways Arden as the narrator explains what occurred. Unlike Corbet's ballad, Arden's ballad is told in the first-person for most of the ballad, and Arden notes in excruciating detail how involved she was with the plot to murder her husband. But before Arden can describe the ways she manipulated others into murder, she details what leads her to this decision, and it all stems from the introduction of Mosby. Within the third stanza of the ballad, Arden introduces Mosby and shows the audience just how much she wishes to be with him:

> In love we liv'd, and great tranquility,
> Untill I came in *Mosb[i]es* company,

Whose sugred tongue, good shape, and lovely looke,
Soone won my heart, and *Ardens* love forsooke. (l. 9-12)

The introduction of Mosby follows with descriptions of his physical body. In Arden's voice, it reveals exactly what she notices about Mosby. By sexualizing Mosby, Arden's sexual desire is articulated for the audience. There is no coding involved. Therefore, the narrator ensures in another way that Arden is outside of the traditional patriarchal norms.

Arden's articulated desire defies the passive nature women were supposed to follow in early modern society. Gowing states, "The valorization of female pleasure in medical literature and popular culture did not legitimate the idea of an active female sexual body: sexual initiative was socially men's prerogative, and female sexual assertion would always be associated with whorishness, witchcraft, and sin" (85). Audience members can see this appearing in Arden's ballad. Although the ballad does state that Mosby has a "sugred tongue," and that it "soone won [her] heart," the phrasing within the sentence shows that it is still Arden who is in control, and the audience sees Arden's sexuality in a decidedly aggressive way. Arden emphasizes the physical aspects of Mosby that overtake her heart, and by emphasizing this, Arden further shows that what she feels towards Mosby is physical, sexual. It is also Arden who is shamed for this action, not Mosby, because of how it becomes part of her motive to murder her husband. Moreover, later in the ballad, readers also have mentions of Mosby and Arden together sexually. While Arden expects her hired killers to murder her husband, she states, "Now all this while my husband was away, / Mosby and I did revel night and day" (l. 117-18). Because of the earlier physical representations of Arden's desire, these lines can be read sexually. For an early modern audience, this articulation would have helped further propagate Alice Arden's depravity. She not only instigates the murder of her husband,

but she also does it because of her sexual desire for another man, and while her husband is supposedly being murdered, she is satisfying said sexual desire.

Arden's articulated desire also allows readers to see the point when she relinquishes her original vow to her husband. Simone Chess identifies a trope among the murderous wife ballads. According to Chess, most ballads feature a distinct oath made when the wife decides to murder her husband—usually a line or two before the actual murder—which acts as a breaking with the original marriage oath (132). She stresses that the moment almost always directly precedes the murder; however, I contend that in Arden's case along with other ballads, this oath to commit murder occurs sooner than Chess argues. In the case of Alice Arden, this trope begins with Mosby's introduction. In line 12, it states that Arden "forsooke" her husband and that Mosby "soone won [her] heart" (l. 12). Although it is not an open oath to commit the murder, readers still see Mosby, who is related to Arden's motive, introduced and quickly replacing Arden's husband within her heart. This means that although Arden declares her desire to murder her husband in the fourth stanza, the origin still lies within the third stanza with the introduction of Mosby. Moreover, it means that Arden's rampant sexual desire for Mosby is the motive for murder.

Arden subverts traditional ideas about women in her efforts to murder her husband. She is active in manipulating others to her bidding. As Arden describes the numerous times she and her helpers attempted to murder her husband, she mentions the various manipulations she did to recruit others to help. Throughout this work, Arden is decidedly on the outside realm of society. Society's restrictions on women forced them into a passive role. Gowing states, "At the heart of this legally passive femininity was the

assumption that women barely owned their own bodies. It was often easier to articulate a husband's property in his wife, than to express her own agency" (86). Arden, however, is not passive by any means; she is represented as the instigator of every attempt on her husband's life. By asking other people to murder for her, she deliberately attacks the public sphere in her attempt to kill her husband. Arden's ballad therefore shows how persuasive other women can be and how untrustworthy they should be. She is not just a threat to her husband; she is also a threat to the patriarchal structures against her. She transgresses those constructs and must be punished for it.

Arden's manipulations also play with traditional ideas surrounding domestic abuse. Frances E. Dolan notes that "[s]ome sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts employ an explanation for the behavior of murderous wives that we often see in today's news and in popular culture; they represent the murderer as a battered wife who resorts to violence in despair and self-defense" (32). When Arden uses domestic abuse as an excuse to murder her husband, she effectively brings into question that motive in other cases. In the ballad, Arden states that she tells the neighbor,

> [My husband] keeps abroad most wicked company,
> with whores and queanes, and bad society;
> when he comes home, he beats me sides and head,
> that *I* doe wish that one of us were dead. (l. 37-40)

This action also transgresses the dominant structure. Arden uses the idea of domestic abuse to manipulate another man to do her bidding, which further adds to the public nature of this crime. Arden's choice in using this tactic is interesting, if not paradoxical. By approaching the neighbor in this manner, Arden assumes an assertiveness that is opposite of the passivity she should have; however, at the same time, she attempts to act passive by manipulating the structure to have the neighbor conduct the murder for her.

She represents this by continually placing herself in the object of these sentences while her husband is the subject except when it comes to the final line: "That *I* doe wish that one of us were dead" (l. 40). This action shows just how much more transgressive and assertive Arden is.

On top of that, Arden, while manipulating her neighbor, attempts to employ another common anxiety applied towards husbands: she underscores the cultural anxiety about absent husbands. Moreover, the way that Arden states this insinuates that her husband is supposedly always in the alehouse, which would be another stereotype attributed to husbands. Patricia Fumerton focuses upon alehouses and broadside ballads: "Almost obsessively, we find, such ballads celebrate the alehouse as a site of vagrancy—that is, as an alternative community and home that was detached and free from the self-binding constraints of societal and, especially, familial obligations, most notably, to the wife" (505). This idea of community and vagrancy have the possibility of being seen in the lines Arden says to her neighbor. According to Arden, her husband is always away with "wicked company," which includes, per Arden words, "whores and queanes" (l. 37-8). If she is in fact trying to state that her husband is a drunkard constantly visiting alehouses, then it would tie together with her attempt to say her husband abuses her because the two were often tied hand-in-hand. This manipulation is striking, and it reveals that Arden is in complete control here and is the opposite of the passive female stereotype. She uses situations that plagued many marriages, and she is doing it to benefit her situation. These situations she uses to manipulate others are ones that plagued many wives of the time, and they are situations that gave sympathy to the woman. By using that trope to her advantage, she reveals an anxiety early modern audiences would have had

towards women able to deceive like her. Arden, through these transgressions, becomes the monster of what happens if a woman assumes her sexuality.

Eulalia Page and Hybrid Desire

While Ursula Corbet's ballad represents coded desire, and Alice Arden's ballad represents articulated desire, Eulalia Page's ballad is an excellent example of hybrid desire, a discussion of women's desire that blends the two extremes and meets in the middle. Page's murder of her husband is featured in "The Lamentation of Mr. Page's Wife of Plymouth," and immediately in the first stanza, audience members are shown that Page's sexual desire for another is her motive. In the first stanza, Page as narrator states, "My *lawless Love* hath luckless wrought my Woe, / My discontent, Content did overthrow" (l. 3-4, emphasis mine). Although her lover is not named by this point, the emphasis on her "lawless Love" shifts the balance towards a focus for Page's desire, and the sixth stanza finally helps cement this:

> But all in vain my Speeches still I spent,
> My Mother's Will and Wishes did prevent:
> Tho' wealthy Page possess'd the outward Part,
> George Strangwidge still was lodged in my Heart. (l. 21-4)

Naming Page's lover provides the audience with a direction for Page's desire and motive that is absent in Corbet's. Despite the naming of George Strangwidge, however, Page cannot truly define her relationship as physically as Alice Arden is able to do with Mosby.

Page's ballad also poses a bit of a paradoxical problem when one looks at the way that she frames her narrative versus what is happening. This ballad follows most of the title; Page attempts to lament her actions. Moreover, Page is fairly passive when it comes

to describing her motive. However, there are also areas that are assertive when compared to the rest of the ballad. Other scholars have begun to note on this as well. Sandra Clark, for example, writes that the ballad "demonstrate[s] that it was possible to represent a husband-murderer sympathetically without at the same time depriving her of agency in the crime" (Clark, "Broadside Ballad" 95). I agree that the ballad can propose sympathetic views, but I also believe that the ballad presents Page's position paradoxically; it plays with her agency while attempting to also present her as being a passive, reactionary character. Page continually states that these actions are a result of her parents refusing to allow her to marry Strangwidge, her true love. In the response ballad, "Mrs. Page's Complaint for Causing Her Husband to Be Murthered For the Love of Mr. George Strangwidge," Page states, "Eternal God forgive my Father's Deed, / And grant all Parents may take better heed" (l. 25-6). This is in conjunction with her argument that her actions are a result of her love for Strangwidge; Page's insistence on her actions being a result of her forceful marriage becomes a point of assertion while also paradoxically remaining passive due to the shift in blame to her parents' actions. As Page explains what leads up to her murdering her husband, she states:

> Cause knew I none I should despise him so,
> But such disdain within my Heart did grow;
> Save only this, that Fancy did me move,
> And told me still **George Strangwidge** was my love. (l. 33-6)

Page asserts here that her heart began to grow with hate for her husband because her heart could only love Strangwidge. Therefore, literally tied in her heart is her desire for George alongside her hate for her husband. It is also significant due to the importance of the heart in the period. The Oxford English Dictionary offers a definition of the heart's use during the seventeenth century: "The bodily organ considered or imagined as the seat of feeling,

understanding, and thought" ("heart, n., int., and adv"). The idea that the heart was the center of feeling, then, shows Page acting on those emotions, and the heart therefore becomes a place that Page finds her autonomy, even if she in essence allows her emotions, her desire, to overrule her in the process.

Although Page's ballad does not mention consummating her relationship with Strangwidge, it does mention unhappiness in her marriage bed, which would have also been an important insight into their marriage, and it discusses Page's sexual desire in a way that would not have been typically tolerated. The period placed high importance on women enjoying sex with their husbands, especially due to the belief that conception only occurred when both parties enjoyed the act. Gowing writes, "Sexual activity was understood to be necessary for women's health, sexual pleasure essential to conception. Good sex was necessary for good marriage: husbands and wives were advised to 'mutually delight' in each other, and marriages without regular sex, wrote one physician, 'shall see the house turn'd upside down'" (82). It then becomes believable that although Page does not mention the physicality of the relationship between Strangwidge and herself, mentioning of her sexual relationship with her husband allows for the possibility of more criticism by audience members even as it helps further show Page's bodily autonomy to decide what she wants sexually.

Although Page's ballad describes the actual murder, the audience is not told exactly how much Page was involved. The audience does not know if she is the instigator and manipulator like Arden, and the audience is not shown how Mr. Page dies. This occurs because of how the ballad is presented, and this erasure allows Page's ballad to remain in between the scale of Arden and Corbet's ballads. In Alice Arden and Ursula

Corbet's ballads, the audience is told how the husband finally died—Arden hires men to murder her husband, and Corbet poisons her husband. This presents an issue within Page's ballads, and it makes it unclear to the audience, therefore, as to what exactly happened. If the audience is familiar with the story, then they would know what she did. However, if the audience is new to the story, then this erasure is unique. Dolan describes how Page murdered her husband. She quotes *Sundrye Strange and Inhumaine Murthers*: "Mistress Page of Plymouth and her lover, George Strangwidge, after strangling her husband with his own kerchief and breaking his neck against the bedside, 'stretched him and laid him in his bed again … as though no such act had been attempted'" (29-30).[8] This type of murder sounds violent, so it becomes a question as to why the ballad chooses not to describe it. In the ballad, Page does lament for bringing Strangwidge into this, calling him "my Dear, which for my Fault must die" (l. 73). It is also stated in Strangwidge's response ballad, "Mr. George Strangwidge's Lamentation For Consenting to Mr. Page's Death, for the Love of Mrs. Eulalia, Mr. Page's Wife" that four people are to be executed for this crime (l. 16). The conscious exclusion of the way Page's husband is murdered ties into the narrative built about Page herself. Page in this ballad is supposed to be lamenting, asking for forgiveness, and as the narrator, Page plays into that role well by refusing to state her involvement in in the murder.

[8] This murder causes one to recall Desdemona's murder in *Othello* and the way it disrupts the peace in the bedroom and the private sphere.

Dangerous Desire and the Scaffold Speech

Scaffold speeches are a literary device that are featured within most murderous wife ballads. Other scholars have begun critically analyzing these speeches for rhetorical uses they had. Before a person's execution, individuals would give a speech—the scaffold speech—to the people watching. J.A. Sharpe has studied scaffold speeches mostly in pamphlets; however, the ideas Sharpe proposes can apply to ballads as well: "The gallows literature illustrates the way in which the civil and religious authorities designed the execution spectacle to articulate a particular set of values, inculcate a certain behavioural model and bolster a social order perceived as threatened" (148). Because the women are rising up against their husbands, and by extension the patriarchy itself, they are labeled "petty traitors" and executed in a violent way—burning.[9] Because of the spectacle that comes with public executions such as the burning that each of the women in these ballads receive, these women become shamed in an even bigger way for their crimes, and the ballad's continual use of these stories and scaffold speeches that are referenced continue shaming these women for their transgressions.

In terms of conventions, Ursula Corbet's ballad offers what can be considered the most conventional ballad out of the three focused on in this chapter, which makes sense

[9] Dolan notes that women's executions when it came to petty treason mimicked those of women who were executed for high treason: "Men convicted of petty treason were drawn to the place of execution on a hurdle and then were hanged. This punishment emphasized the shameful display of the disciplined body, but was not as heinous as the notorious executions for high treason, which involved mutilation, disembowelment, and decapitation. Women convicted of petty treason, however, were sentenced to the same punishment as those convicted of high treason: They were burned at the stake" (22). For an audience that would become used to understanding which execution signified petty or high treason, it stands to reason that women being burned regardless of the sentencing enacts a much more harrowing reality for them and are silenced much more brutally than men sentenced for the same crime.

given how coded the ballad is. Although the ballad is conventional, it still has a moment where it is unclear regarding Corbet's public repentance. In the ballad, the narrator states,

> But yet before that she did dye,
> She him and all the world forgave
> With prayers looking towards the Sky,
> That Christ her sinful Soul would save. (l. 77-80)

The ambivalent line "She him and all the world forgave" can be read two ways: she forgives the world, and/or the world forgives her. If one chooses to read the line as the narrator saying that Corbet forgives the world, then listeners suddenly have a different picture as to who Corbet is. Despite the coding involved in her ballad, this line, read with Corbet as the subject, would give her agency that the ballad's narrator tries to code in vague, abstract terms. After the ambiguous line, the narrator continues describing Corbet's death and quickly moves to the moral of her story by reminding audience members what to take away from this ballad. Because the omniscient narrator speaks for Corbet, audience members are not actually hearing this ballad from Corbet's "own voice." Moreover, the narrator reminds listeners of the ballad's morals after Corbet is executed. Corbet's death cuts off the little voice that she had and allows the narrator to manipulate her; moreover, the narrator also deprives her of the agency to warn wives herself that they must have love for the man they marry and "live honest quiet lives, / in perfect love and godly fear" (l. 95-6). Although the omniscient narrator attempts to invoke sympathy for Corbet, the fact remains that Corbet is unable to tell her own story, and she is not allowed to address women herself about the issues her story attacks. By the end of the ballad, Corbet has been successfully subdued and stripped of her agency, silenced because of her deeds, and the coding of her desire is not able to shield her from

that reality. Even the ballad that best maneuvers the patriarchal norms using Corbet's coded desire is unable to give her any true voice.

The case of Page, however, differs in terms of conventions and confession. Page's original ballad opens with her explanation for murdering her husband, and the guilt Page expresses continues until the end of the original ballad. Her ballad operates as a hybrid between articulated and coded desire, and it is written in first-person, which offers more connection with the audience, especially when it comes to the confession. The entirety of the ballad appears to insinuate that the murder would not have happened if Page had not been forced to marry Mr. Page. Clark argues that the ballad "takes the position that it was [George] Strangwidge rather than Page who was wronged. When Page asks Christ for forgiveness, it is not for her part in the murder (and on this point the full title is misleading) but for abandoning her lover [George] by marrying" (Clark, "The Broadside Ballad" 95). Although I agree with what Clark writes, I cannot ignore the way Page's reliance upon her love for George becomes her motive for murder. This reliance attempts to relieve Page of agency in the situation when it comes to murdering her husband, which shows how Page's ballad operates correctly within the patriarchal structure. As a woman, she is not meant to have that agency, and even when it comes to the admittance of her sexuality, she remains passive. She presents her situation as one where her protests went ignored, and in this way, the patriarchal structure ultimately failed her. The only way Page could act out was to murder her husband.

As a representation of articulated desire, it makes sense that Alice Arden's ballad features many differences from the others when it comes to scaffold speeches. Arden never attempts to address and advise women like readers see happening in other ballads.

Arden's ballad operates in almost the opposite way of Page's ballad; instead of focusing on lamentation, her ballad focuses on the multiple attempts to murder her husband. After the murder occurs, the ballad changes from first-person to third-person to state how each conspirator is executed. This shift is abrupt, but it represents how quickly Arden is silenced. She is not even allowed to tell listeners how she is caught nor is she allowed to reveal her sentencing. The third-person narrator must do that for her. As an active agent, Arden has described in detail the sexual desire she has for Mosby and how that drives her to murder. She has stepped outside of the constructs for women of the time, and by giving her a personal voice only to silence it at the last possible second, the ballad enacts a final punishment on Arden and reminds listeners of what happens women who would find their bodily autonomy.

Moreover, Arden is not shown getting to repent for her sins. The last lines in the stanza appear to be Arden—from the grave presumably—speaking,

> And thus my story I conclude and end,
> Praying the Lord that his grace will send
> Upon us all, and keepe us all from ill,
> Amen say all, if't be thy blessed will. (l. 189-92)

Although these lines vaguely address religion, the ballad appears to consciously redact Arden's repentance and confession, and Alice Arden therefore appears to not receive salvation. Sharpe stresses that these scaffold speeches, and the condemned themselves, were "expected to make a 'penitent end'. The recurrent theme of the pamphlet and chapbook accounts of executions was the expectation that the condemned would be brought to accept the deservedness of their execution, should attain a full awareness of the wickedness of the past life which had brought them to their unhappy fate, and that they should die reconciled to that fate" (152). Arden's ballad does not represent that

"penitent end" that Sharpe discusses. Arden is not given that opportunity, nor is she shown reconciling with her fate as Sharpe suggests. The ballad reminds the audience of Arden's cruelties and that Alice Arden was a threat to society. By silencing her, she is unable to potentially run amuck anymore, and she serves as a warning to any woman listening who might be even remotely tempted to attempt what she did.

Each of the ballads in this chapter offers differences regarding the way their scaffold speech is modified, or silenced altogether. Though different, the portrayals within these ballads reveal a striking image for these women. The scaffold speeches and the sincerity of them has been argued between many scholars; nevertheless, when it comes to murderous wife ballads, each one acts similarly. Each ballad's scaffold speech works to silence the woman for her transgressions, and it becomes a question as to whether these women, as characters in their respective ballads, are even saying these speeches at all. Regardless of the way these ballads present the women's agency, the scaffold speech—or lack thereof—acts as the final silencer. Their stories are ripped from them and used the way the patriarchal structures deem fit. Murderous wife ballads co-opt sensationalized stories and manipulate those stories to persuade others from even thinking about accessing one's bodily autonomy, and because they are everywhere in the public sphere, people cannot help but be confronted with these stories.

Conclusion

As wives, women in the early modern period lost their bodily autonomy and became their husband's property. By transgressing and murdering their husband, women in ballads gained infamy that lasted decades, sometimes even centuries. At the same time,

their stories were distorted and used by the dominant culture to propagate against what these women have done. Their stories were stolen from them and retold, presumably by men, to remind the public just how blasphemous the act of assuming one's sexual agency was, and the stories' prominence in decades following the original crime helps cement how often these stories pervaded those open spaces. Alice Arden, Ursula Corbet, and Eulalia Page all acted in what they believed was the only way that they could due to the patriarchal structures in place; they attempted to change the social structures, and when those dominant voices negated their attempts, they responded with the extreme shown in each ballad: murder.

As cautionary tales, these three ballads along with other murderous wife ballads remind the audience that a woman acting on her sexual desire is a dangerous thing that can only lead to murdering the person who best benefits from the wife not discovering it. Balladeers used these extreme examples of sexual agency and murder to play on anxieties by the public and attempt to push women back into the traditional roles patriarchal structures called for. By reviewing these appearances of bodily autonomy through the spectrum of articulation, scholars can better understand the ways writers and performers grappled with understanding these women's actions. Scholars can also use the spectrum of articulation to better understand how balladeers and other writers monetized spreading anxieties around sexual agency.

Though these ballads operate in different ways, they all attempt one purpose: to ensure no woman is ever tempted to follow suit. They act as a reminder to women that they should never access their sexual agency and should instead remain the ideal passive, quiet woman. The ballads all silence these women in some fashion, whether it is in the

form of silencing her last confession or simply eliminating her voice altogether. Alice Arden, Ursula Corbet, and Eulalia Page experienced sexual desire and bodily autonomy in a way that did not agree with the patriarchal structures, and in each ballad, their desire acts as a catalyst for the murder they commit. Their only response in this society was to enact the ultimate sin to escape, and as examples, they offer a wider view on the ways ballads operated as propaganda for the wide public in early modern England.

CHAPTER II

TYRANNOUS AGENCY: SHAKESPEARE AND FEMALE DESIRE

Early modern audience encountered representations of sexual desire in various literary genres. In chapter one, female sexual agency was focused on a ubiquitous genre. Plays, on the other hand, are not ubiquitous like ballads even though in many cases plays and ballads focused on the same topic.[1] Audience members had to pay to be in the audience of a performance. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Othello* are plays that present women whose sexual desires are manipulated, controlled by the men around them whether that is her husband, father, or some other man in a position of power, and both plays reveal women who are reprimanded by those voices for having sexual agency.

This chapter will be divided into two main parts. The first part of this chapter will analyze female characters within both *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to show their desires being manipulated by the men around them. For this section, I will focus on Emilia and Titania specifically. The second part of this essay will analyze women, Hermia and Bianca, who represent pariahs to the patriarchal structures, who are not

[1] For example, there is a play called *Arden of Faversham* that exists on the topic of Alice Arden's crime. Scholars have compared the play to the ballad.

manipulated by male intervention, and the ways the other characters reprimand them for their transgressive actions. Although it is possible to add Desdemona and other characters to this analysis, I have chosen to focus on characters that are not examined as often. By analyzing these female characters, readers can begin to understand the ways both plays work as propaganda to reinforce the passive female ideal, whose sexual desire is acceptable only when it is controlled by a man. Although chapter one focuses on the response of women who have access to sexual agency, readers can see with this chapter the response men have to the possibility of sexual agency. With plays, in this chapter especially, readers can begin to see anxiety towards women's sexuality, and by having the male characters control the woman's desire, it eliminates the possibility of consent in women and strips bodily autonomy from them.

Women's assumption of sexual agency outside of the world of theater means stepping outside of the traditional bounds. To remain without backlash from the public, many women would use passive language and urge others that their actions happened because of the male influence over them. Laura Gowing notes,

> Most of the legal accounts of sex come from women examined over illicit sex or illegitimate pregnancy. Their responses necessarily downplay their part in sex and assert the blame of their co-servants, married lovers or masters. But the very conventions of their examinations carry a cumulative power. They attest to a culture whose social conditions make it easy to assume desire and agency to be male, and to elide not only women's sexual agency, but their consent. The ease with which confessions reproduced these formulas itself says something about available language and meanings. The limits within which the sexual body was presented in legal records suggest a culture in which patriarchal social order was embodied in sexual order some time before the conduct literature of the late seventeenth century made the modest, unresponsive female sexual body not just an ideal but the norm. (86)

Women in everyday life were unable to speak about their sexuality without the people around them judging even more harshly than normal. If women could only discuss

sexuality without admitting to their consent, then the available language for women's sexuality is rape language. Rape language strips women of any agency they may have had if the act was originally consensual. It is easy to see how the plays themselves represent actions such as these. They are representing realities for women of the period while simultaneously reinforcing the structures of oppression.

Manipulated Desire in Titania and Emilia

Othello's Emilia is a representation for someone whose sexuality is controlled by the closest male in her life; however, many scholars appear to only focus on Emilia as a hero and ignore when Emilia discusses her ideas on women and who she speaks with. Solomon Iyasere has written on Emilia's feminism, declaring:

> By choosing to speak and act as she thinks and feels [at the end of the play], she attains psychological freedom, liberating herself from societal domination and from her own self-imposed restraints. From a contemporary point of view, Emilia's decision to 'speak out' is a unique existential event …. For the first time, Emilia is true to herself and she dies triumphantly, if tragically, 'in music', confronting the world with her honest feelings. (71)

If Emilia cannot attain bodily autonomy until the end of the play, such as Iyasere argues, then that means that until that moment, Emilia is trapped, controlled by her husband, Iago, and she cannot openly defy Iago's control in the public sphere. In Act 3 Scene 4, once Othello leaves, Emilia and Desdemona discuss his erratic actions. Emilia states, "'Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us" (3.4. l. 120-23). When Emilia states this, she reveals the treatment women face by the men they marry. It must, however, also be noted that Emilia's statements on the topic of women here, and for much of the play until the end after Desdemona dies, occur when she is with Desdemona

only. In the quotation above, she states this after Othello has left, and after the last line, "They belch us," she reveals that Cassio and Iago have entered the room. Once they enter the room, the only time she responds is when Iago asks her a question. It is not until she is alone with Desdemona again that she speaks more freely. Once Desdemona dies, Emilia is finally able to speak her frustrations in the public sphere against the very man who caused her hurt.

Emilia's public speech is only understood in relation to male desire. When Emilia makes the statement about women being food, it is also possible to view her words sexually. Roxanne Schwab notes this in her essay when she writes, "This statement maintains the sexual inference that men need women bodily …. Iago's behavior has taught Emilia that women are morsels that men absorb, just as food is absorbed in the digestive system. The results, however, are often disagreeable, as she observes, causing men to eruct and condemn the very objects they sought to sustain them" (Schwab). Schwab argues for the potential that Emilia is a domestic abuse victim, and the reading she gives here is possible in this argument too. By looking at Emilia's language in this way, the audience can also understand the power Iago holds over her.

If Emilia understands marriage in this manner, then it means she understands sexuality to only benefit the men, but she can only discuss this with Desdemona. In Act 4 Scene 3, Emilia and Desdemona are alone again when they begin discussing men and the way Othello abuses Desdemona. In the scene, Emilia states, "In troth, I think I should, and undo 't when I had done it. Marry, I would not do such a thing for a joint ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns, petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition. But for the whole world—'Uds pity! Who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a

monarch? I should venture purgatory for 't" (4.3. l. 81-7). Although Emilia states she would commit adultery, she ties her ability to cuckold her husband to the success it would have for Iago. These lines could be read as her acting in self-interest because of how her husband's elevation in status would include her, but the way that Emilia phrases her sentence shows that she views her actions as only helping her husband. It is to "make *him* a monarch," not "*them*" (l. 87, emphasis mine).

Because of the patriarchy's presence with Emilia's actions specifically, Emilia's statements about adultery also reveal that she would not be able to commit the action for her own sexual desire. At no point within those lines does Emilia state that she would do it because she simply wants to. This omission of sexual agency further shows how Emilia fits within the patriarchal structures when it comes to women's desires. Even when contemplating cuckoldry, Emilia can only act when it best benefits Iago. Her own satisfaction is not a factor to consider. Emilia's statements later in the scene do propose a problem to this reading, however:

> Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them. They see, and smell,
> And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
> I think it doth. Is 't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have not we affections,
> Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
> Then let them use us well. Else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (4.3. l. 104-15)

These lines, as the Folger edition notes, are included in the Folio version but not the Quarto. It strikes a question as to why these lines would have been added to the Folio. It problematizes Emilia's original statement about committing adultery for her husband's success because on one level it appears to show that Emilia says that she could also

commit adultery because men do it too. Dorothea Kehler notes this to some degree: "While [Emilia] speaks on behalf of all wives—a generalized amorphous 'we' and 'us'—her own pain and anger account for the rhetorical force of the speech, one of the strongest protests against the double standard in Elizabethan drama" (Kehler 162). Although Kehler reveals an interesting reading for Emilia's character, I also find myself drawn to the final lines of Emilia's speech when she states that men need to "use them well" (l. 114). The Folger notes that "use" can be read as "treat," but it is possible to simply read the line as "manipulate." If we read the line in that way, then Emilia's remarks still reveal underlying actions that are in line with the patriarchy. Moreover, by stating that the "ills" women do are a result of men's actions, Emilia further shows how connected her actions are to Iago's attentions towards her, and in that way, she is still tied to Iago. Moreover, it is important to remember that here, too, Emilia speaks openly about the reality of women while only in the company of another woman. Her words remain outside of the public realm until after Desdemona's death, and in this way, Emilia continues to act per the rules in the patriarchal culture.

Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is also forced to act according to the patriarchal structures. Although Titania is queen of the fairies, Oberon assumes he should control her sexuality for most of the play. The storyline between Oberon and Titania relies on an Indian boy that Titania has and Oberon wants. The only way Oberon believes he can get the boy is to drug Titania and force her act upon sexual desires with someone who turns out to be Bottom. This is an extreme example of male control over women's sexual desire. When Titania sleeps in Act 2 Scene 2, she is completely alone once the fairies leave. Titania is at her most vulnerable moment, and Oberon terrorizes her to get

what he desires. Because she is asleep, she cannot fight Oberon's actions, and while she sleeps, Oberon applies the drug to her eyes. He invades her personal space to achieve what he wants, and in that way, she is held utterly at his will. Once Titania awakes, she sees Bottom as a donkey and falls for him as the drug prescribes.

With the introduction of Oberon and Titania's conflict, Titania's control of her sexuality is placed at the forefront, and Oberon's challenge of her sexuality is equally present. In Act 2 Scene 1, Oberon and Titania meet and tension between the two is present. At one point, Titania states, "What, Jealous Oberon? Fairies, skip hence. / I have forsworn his bed and company" (*Midsummer* 2.1. l. 63-4). This quote reveals Titania's sexual agency. Titania is in control of herself, and as such, according to Oberon, and by extension the play, she must be punished for transgressing the norms of society. Jason Gleckman argues that "Oberon is determined to bring Titania into compliance, and doing so involves guiding her sexual impulses back into their properly submissive form. As part of this process, Oberon allows his consort's sexual impulses wide range in straying from him, but he also takes care to control every element of her experience" (Gleckman 28). I would add that Oberon's ability to act this way towards Titania reveals how little regard he truly has for Titania. Titania is an object that he can and will control. Oberon's need to punish Titania for her transgressions against him are so great that he does not even consider what he puts Titania through. In fact, the only reason Titania is released from her sexual desire for Bottom is because Oberon receives the Indian boy they originally fought over and decides to give her the antidote. In Act 4 Scene 1, Oberon states, "Her dotage now I do begin to pity. / For, meeting her of late behind the wood, / Seeking sweet favors for this hateful fool, / I did upbraid her and fall out with her" (4.1. l. 48-51).

Because he gets what he wants, Oberon can release Titania. At no point when she is drugged is it apparent that she knows of her condition. Titania is completely at Oberon's mercy.

Once she awakens, Titania also does not know what has happened, and Oberon's omission of the truth allows the audience to see a character unchallenged in the actions he has done throughout the play. In Act 4 Scene 1, Titania is cured, and her first words to Oberon are, "My Oberon, what visions have I seen! / Methought I was enamored of an ass" (4.1. l. 77-8). Oberon has a chance to confess, but instead he allows her to continue believing she dreamed the whole sequence. Oberon does not tell her that her dream is reality, and she therefore does not know that Oberon drugged, manipulated, and terrorized her to get what he wants. By allowing her to believe that, Oberon walks away from what he has done without negative consequence. The play, per comedy traditions, ends with Theseus, Hippolyta, and the lovers married to their respective partners and everyone making fun of Bottom and his theatrical troupe's performance. Although one might argue that it ends this way precisely because the conventions call for it, I would argue that by ending the play in this manner, the play also accepts Oberon's actions and relays a message to the audience that what he has done is conventional behavior. Regardless of the bestiality that has occurred between Titania and Bottom, it is acceptable because Oberon is the one controlling that relationship. And although the bestial relationship is public, it is contained within the stage and because Oberon controls it. As the man in power, Oberon's control and allowance of Titania to commit bestiality shows how it is acceptable for traditionally unacceptable sexual acts to be allowed as long as a man controls the extent of the relationship.

Lisa Walters argues that Oberon's actions towards Titania can be viewed as rebellious. This is because, according to Walters, popular notions of fairy culture at the time thought the fairy realm promoted matriarchy, and an early modern audience would have known this going into the play. Because Titania as queen outranks king in the fairy realm, Oberon's actions are traitorous: "[W]e see with Shakespeare how Oberon is able to exert control as a husband and king only through deception of his wife, illustrating how he does not conform to ideal models of [human] masculinity in the Renaissance. Furthermore, Oberon is treasonous; he induces political and sexual chaos as he drugs the queen, causing her desire for a lower ranking man with an ass's head. Under early modern law, he would be designated a sodomite or at least as causing sodomy" (Walters 158). Walter's argument is effective, and if we think about Titania being ranked higher than Oberon, then Oberon's actions become even more severe. By revolting against Titania, Oberon shows how even in a world where he is supposed to be subservient to Titania, he can still act according to patriarchal norms of the world outside of the play. This also reveals that the play accepts actions that would have been allowed in early modern society. For an early modern audience, seeing this might have caused them to wonder how Oberon could commit treason, but it also would have caused them to view the actions as being the norm when it comes to patriarchy. Even a queen with more power than her counterpart cannot escape her husband's influences over her, and he will not be punished in any true capacity for it.

Anxious Female Desire in Hermia and Bianca

While both plays present women whose desires are controlled by men, they also reveal women who have control over their public expression of sexual desire. One such character is Hermia from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As the play opens, Hermia's father, Egeus, appeals to Theseus to reprimand Hermia for her disobedience. This is because Hermia refuses to marry Egeus' choice, Demetrius. Her desire for Lysander is the catalyst for the action for the rest of the play. Hermia's desire therefore is also what unsettles Athens. When Hermia refuses even in front of Theseus, Egeus states this towards Lysander,

> With cunning hast thou filched my daughter's heart,
> Turned her obedience (which is due to me)
> To stubborn harshness.—And, my gracious duke,
> Be it so she will not here before your Grace
> Consent to marry with Demetrius,
> I beg the ancient privilege of Athens:
> As she is mine, I may dispose of her,
> Which shall be either to this gentleman
> Or to her death, according to our law
> Immediately provided in that case. (1.1. l. 37-46)

The audience is instantly aware of the threat of death for Hermia. Because she refuses to marry Demetrius, her father is begging Theseus, the duke of Athens, to give him permission to murder Hermia for her disobedience. This action reveals how Egeus assumes control over Hermia's desire, and because she refuses to follow his wishes, the only acceptable response is for her father, the keeper of her desire, to have her publicly executed. By murdering her, Egeus aims to ensure that the world does not become

unsettled because of Hermia's sexual agency. On top of that, Egeus turns to Theseus for permission, which furthers the extent to which men need to control women's sexuality.[2]

Theseus' interceding in this matter furthers the lack of choice women in this world, and women in the audience, have. Jason Gleckman writes, "[A]n absolute patriarchy (whose alternatives are forced marriage or death) is modulated both by the establishment of private, even autonomous, spaces for women …. Yet in Shakespearean comedy, as in Reformation England, the options of socially sanctioned, lifelong virginity and celibacy have been almost completely foreclosed" (Gleckman 25). With this reading, Theseus' intercession in this scene becomes even darker. Theseus does state that Hermia has the potential to enter a nunnery if she still refuses to marry Demetrius. However, the way Theseus paints the nunnery as a bleak life, one like a jail keeping Hermia away from the public:

> Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires,
> Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
> Whether (if you yield not to your father's choice)
> You can endure the livery of a nun,
> For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,
> To live a barren sister all your life,
> Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon. (*Midsummer* 1.1. l. 69-75)

When Theseus describes the nunnery, he tells Hermia to "question [her] desires" (l.69). Theseus even goes so far as to say that what Hermia feels towards Lysander is

[2] One can read the opening scene homosocially. Bruce Boehrer notes this about Egeus and Demetrius: "Egeus and Demetrius presuppose a model of wedlock in which the daughter/wife's desires are not only subservient to but actually subsumed within those of her father and husband …. This model of marriage, in turn, proceeds by elision of the feminine to constitute an ideal community of men parallel to the ideal feminine social space of, say, an Amazon society" (Boehrer 106). This reading of the opening scene is fascinating, especially when looking at the differences between female societies versus male societies.

inadequate, misunderstood. Women, according to Theseus, do not even understand their sexuality in the first place. As a man in a position of power, Theseus views himself as a true authority on this subject, which reveals a sharper image of what women faced according to the stage. The men around them not only want to control their sexuality, but they do so because they believe that only they can understand women's sexuality. When he continues to describe the convent by using terms such as "shady," "barren," "cold," and "fruitless," Theseus also drives home the fact that not only does Hermia not have a choice in marriage, but she also is not allowed to choose chastity. Chastity, like the nunnery, is equivalent to jail. It is a punishment. Women have one choice in men's eyes, and that is to acquiesce their agency and allow men to control them.

While audience members can see Hermia's transgressive nature accepted by the end of the play, in *Othello*, viewers see Bianca embracing her sexuality and simultaneously being shamed for it even after the play has ended. Bianca is introduced through her connection to Cassio, and during the play, Bianca's feelings towards Cassio remain constant. Her control over her sexuality appears to not be controlled by a man of power such as a husband, father, or the like. She seems to freely choose Cassio, and that choice condemns her in the eyes of the play. Throughout the play, comments are made about Bianca's possible occupation as a prostitute or courtesan. It is never openly revealed whether she is one, but a line that is commonly used to argue for her occupation as one is in Act 4 Scene 1 by Iago: "Now will I question Cassio of Bianca, / A huswife that by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes" (*Othello* 4.1. l. 112-14). The term "huswife" can be used to describe "housewife," but more commonly the term has negative connotations to it. The Oxford English Dictionary offers this definition on

"huswife": "A frivolous, impertinent, or disreputable woman or girl; a hussy" ("housewife, n"). Iago also states that Bianca "sells her desires," which could also note someone who is a courtesan because she would be selling her body. Edward Pechter argues effectively, though, about the questionable doubt in Bianca being labeled a "whore." Pechter claims that the fact that no character in the play besides Iago labels her "whore" should make viewers and readers question the truthfulness in this because Iago's actions throughout the play reveal that he is an unreliable character: "Strictly construed, Iago's words define prostitution as marketing not attractiveness but attraction, as though it is the whore who is aroused, rather than her clients. This slippage seems to have provoked no editorial or critical commentary, but in a play whose final action is driven by the projection of men's guilt onto the women who arouse sexual interest, Iago's substitution of desire for desirability should be worth at least a passing nod" (Pechter 366-67). If readers can view Iago's comments as reflecting perhaps his desires towards her like Pechter states, then it is also possible to look at Iago's words as a representation of how the characters within the play—and by extension the play itself—attempt to combat those women who are able to step outside of the relegated roles for women's sexuality.

Bianca's potential agency, however, does not change when it comes to Cassio. Elizabeth Mazzola notes this at some length when she writes, "Bianca is less an *other* than a bystander or wayfarer, witness or stray, and whether or not she is a prostitute seems less important than the fact that she is situated outside of the home and on the margins of the state" (Mazzola 40). Mazzola's argument can also be applied in general to Bianca's entrance in Act 3 Scene 4. Their interaction is in an open space; Cassio

mentions that he was going to her house when Bianca responds that she was heading towards his. Their actions are not relegated to the private sphere; they are on display for whoever to see even though they are alone on stage for this part of the scene. This presents an issue because not only is the audience introduced to Bianca, a woman with bodily autonomy, but they are also forced to watch her sexual agency invade the public, which further unsettles the balance of the patriarchal structure. Moreover, Bianca's constancy towards Cassio remains through the conclusion of the play. In Act 5 Scene 2 after Cassio has been attacked, Iago and Emilia throw insults at Bianca.[3] In response, Bianca states, "I am no strumpet, but of life as honest / as you that thus abuse me" (*Othello* 5.2. l. 143-44). Bianca's devotion to Cassio is what causes much of the comment from others in the play. Moreover, regardless of whether Cassio is a customer, Bianca truly cares and desires him. Her choice in him dictates her desire, and we cannot forget that.

The play's effectiveness in shaming Bianca continues from the play into the audience. Nina Rulon-Miller documents the long history of damnation Bianca has faced even from scholars: "Although women who choose prostitution as a career are beginning to receive some serious attention and validation in radical feminist commentary, celebrating female desire in a woman almost universally typed as a whore must surely be

[3] Emilia's comments towards Bianca have caused some scholars to note the problems it poses towards Emilia's character. Nina Rulon-Miller writes, "Emilia has become a feminist hero for many critics, but they usually write only about her diatribes against men and her valiant attempt to save Desdemona's posthumous honor. Emilia's line in V. i. 121 is a travesty to feminine solidarity, but her critics seem reluctant to ask what this woman can be doing denigrating a feminist cohort, indeed, a 'new feminist,' for her independent life-style" (108). I tend to find myself in agreement with her; Emilia's inability to support Bianca in her moment of need is striking, and one that must be considered when discussing Emilia's feminist qualities.

troublesome for mainstream feminism" (Rulon-Miller 109). The play's ability to manipulate Bianca's image using ambiguities about her is so successful that Bianca has been studied negatively even by the very people who should have been working to understand her better. In this way, the play succeeds in shadowing Bianca and forcing her sexuality to be conveyed in a negative light. The play also ensures that any woman who wishes to be confident in her sexuality will feel the same pressure and be viewed in the same way that Bianca is.

Bianca's sexuality, like Hermia's sexuality, is out of control and used to drive the play. Therefore, Bianca's sexual agency no longer belongs to her. Viewers see Bianca used as a placeholder for Desdemona when Iago tricks Othello into believing Cassio and Desdemona are together. By using Bianca's relationship to Cassio in such a way, Iago sends a message about what Bianca is to him. Iago's choice reveals that he does not even view Bianca as a person. He consistently refers to her as "strumpet," "huswife," "whore," and when he uses Bianca to procure jealousy in Othello, he does it not to target Bianca, but to target Cassio. By painting Cassio as an adulterous man, Iago tarnishes Cassio and makes him a target for Othello's violence. Iago relies on Bianca's sexual relationship with Cassio to accomplish this. Thus, Bianca's exposed sexuality unsettles the world of *Othello* even more and causes the events that happen afterwards.

The difference between Hermia and Bianca's transgressive sexualities, however, is that Hermia can get her way in the end. By the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia is back with Lysander and her father does not appear to object to the union like he does in the beginning. The play's acceptance of her sexual agency at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is striking given its treatment of Titania. One could argue that

Hermia's agency is accepted specifically because genre conventions call for it; after all, the play must end with marriage, and that includes Hermia's marriage to Lysander. However, I would add that the public accepts Hermia's sexual agency because of who she is. She is a member of higher society, which allots her more sexual agency than Bianca is allowed.

Conclusion

Both plays present women who fulfill the traditional roles for women and women who transgress those roles. The women in these plays help build a reality within the play for women while simultaneously reminding the audience of what can happen to women who exercise their sexual agency in a public space. The audience sees Hermia threatened with death, and the audience sees Emilia murdered at the hands of her husband because she finally does transgress and speak out against the patriarchal structures. Although *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy, and one that is considered to be a go-to comedy because it fulfills the tropes for the genre, there is darkness looming beneath the text. The unsettling nature might be settled by the end of the play, but the play nonetheless leaves questions unanswered. *Othello* also fulfills the genre conventions for tragedy, but it too does so from a deeply unsettled place. The murders occur in a bedroom, a private space that is destroyed because of the murders. Two women, Emilia and Desdemona, are murdered on stage, and both are given extremely personal deaths—Desdemona is smothered by Othello while Emilia is stabbed by Iago. Ruth Vanita notes this when she writes, "This is one of the rare cases where wife-murder is represented as occurring because Emilia is 'unfaithful' not sexually but mentally. She breaks faith with Iago by

choosing to be loyal to Desdemona rather than to him. The dramatic presentation of the two murders as parallels sharply undercuts the dominant ideology that legitimized the murder of an adulterous wife" (Vanita 343). With the argument Vanita proposes, however, one can see more easily how Emilia in particular is controlled by the patriarchal structures. It is when she disobeys that she is silenced. The personal death then helps remind the audience of what can happen if one attempts to challenge the public realm and fight the patriarchal structures.

Shakespeare's plays work in a unique spot. Because they are available to a wide variety of people, their message can spread quickly. As a result, looking more closely at the roles sexuality plays in these plays is imperative. Although *Othello* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are different genres—tragedy and comedy respectively—their similarities in how they present female sexual agency is striking. While giving a realistic view to women's access to said sexuality, the plays also reinforce the standards of the generic structures through the traditional endings given both plays. Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends with marriage, Oberon remains unpunished for his actions, which shows the audience that his actions against Titania are acceptable. *Othello*'s murders at the end also reinforce similar ideas, even though he is killed for his behaviors. Because of this, both plays ultimately further the social ideal of the passive female. A female's sexual desire is not hers to control. A man is the only one capable of handling her desire, and a woman's fight against that can have dire consequences.

CHAPTER III

LADY MARY WROTH'S *THE COUNTESS OF MONTGOMERY'S URANIA* AND THE CHALLENGE OF FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE

The publication of Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621), a romance that focuses on the lives (and loves) of noble characters, brought scandal to Wroth and forced her to pull the book from shelves. The published portion of the romance ends mid-sentence. The romance focuses on the love lives of many noble characters, including two female characters named Urania and Pamphilia, who encounter other women whose discussions focus primarily on their issues of sexual agency. The romance confronts the realities women faced regarding the limits of their sexual agency, and by giving women the ability to voice those limitations, the text encourages a community of readers that bridges the gap between inaction and change, particularly on sexual agency and consent. The women in these do appear to have consent, which allows for a shift from the focus of plays, as the previous chapter discussed, but the concept of sexual agency is vastly questioned within.

The Countess of Montgomery's Urania is episodic; many of the adventures happen within a few pages and end abruptly. In fact, the work itself remains unfinished in

its entirety. *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* opens with its title character searching for her real family and deciphering her new identity as a princess. As Urania learns who is who in her newfound world, she meets Amphilanthus, her brother and eventual Emperor of Rome, and Pamphilia, her cousin who becomes queen of the country Pamphilia. These three characters only make up a portion of characters within the text, but the three serve as main characters in the published portion of the romance, and their adventures make up the bulk of the text. Besides their adventures, the three main characters along with their supporting friends meet many people along the way who voice their stories, usually on the topic of love.

Scholars agree that the text refers to current events in James I's court, and in fact it received a scathing response via poem from Lord Edward Denny. The text was not published long before it was removed from shelves as well, so the accessibility of the text would have been limited. Regardless of who read the text though, the fact remains that women were discouraged from reading romances. To read a text like *Urania* forced negative stereotypes upon the female reader. The fact that the text engages with the reader in such a way is provocative, and it is one Mary Ellen Lamb focuses upon:

> [T]he containment of women's reading [of romances] performed a similar function as the containment of women's sexuality with which it was associated. At stake both in their reading and their sexuality is the status of women as subjects, able to think, to desire, to produce meanings in their minds and bodies sometimes at variance with patriarchal objectives. Both extremes of representing women readers as lascivious or chaste formed divergent aspects of a single strategy: to limit the kinds of independent meanings imagined possible for women to produce in their readings as well as in their lives. (213-14)

The readership Lamb discusses becomes important especially when discussing it in conjunction with female sexual agency, and to see what could have awaited *Urania*'s

female readers is one that will need to be remembered while reading the bulk of this chapter.

Many scholars focus on autobiographical readings of the text and have identified the ways the text operates as a *roman à clef*. Josephine Roberts makes this case through the critical introductions she writes to Wroth's work, which underscore Wroth's experiences both as an author and a woman in early modern England.[1] Many of the notes Josephine Roberts include in her edition of *The First Part of the Countess of Montgomery's Urania* focus on connections that could be made between Wroth's romance and her uncle's romance, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. The autobiographical readings inevitably direct itself to the ways the work connects to the men in Wroth's life, and, though such scholarship is indubitably important to further understand Wroth and the influences of her work, this incessant focus limits readings of *Urania*. As such, I plan to focus on the text without the autobiographical focus that other scholars use.

This paper will follow two main lines of argument. The first main argument relies on the ways the women within the romance build a community with other characters and the readers to share their stories of heartache. The second major argument focuses on the ways the romance physically isolates women from men, especially using enchantments, and what sequestering women reveals about the early modern patriarchal construction.

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[1] Josephine Roberts is undoubtedly the go-to scholar on Wroth's work and her life. The critical introductions of her editions have been a huge help in understanding Wroth both as an author and a woman in early modern England. Besides the work I use for the bulk of this chapter, Roberts also edited *The Poems of Lady Mary Wroth*, and she began work on an edition for the manuscript continuation of *Urania*, which was completed by Suzanne Gossett and Janel Mueller.

The Building of a Community of Women

The Countess of Montgomery's Urania does not necessarily encourage sexual agency, but it gives space to allow women to discuss the lack of agency they have. Many scholars have begun noting the importance of the homosocial bonds in the text. Gary Waller argues that the female relationships in *Urania* and Wroth's play *Love's Victory* "stress the importance of networks of female friends, which provide opportunities for private spaces where the more brutal aspects of hegemonic power might be escaped" (410). Even as *Urania* explores the lack of sexual agency in women, by providing the space for women to discuss that sexual agency, the text attempts to incite conversation about these issues that also plague early modern society. Naomi Miller writes:

> Wroth emphasizes the potentially empowering influence of women's bonds upon emergent female subjectivity and agency, without sacrificing the relevance of heterosexual ties. Given that she was writing within a society that tended to promote male social bonds while treating strong female ties as potentially suspect or subversive of the social order, Wroth succeeds to a remarkable extent in representing female bonding as neither preferable nor a subsidiary alternative to heterosexual relations, but rather as an enabling space within which women might learn, against formidable odds, to claim different positions as speaking subjects. (Miller, "Between Women" 184)

I would further Miller's analysis by adding that the female bonds within the text operate to give women both in the text and women readers the power to reclaim bodily autonomy. By providing the space for women in the text to discuss and find power in one another, the text acts to empower the reader as well, and it encourages the reader to define a space within their own society to discuss the issues of sexual agency as well. By forcing the conversation on sexual agency, it can begin to change ideas in society.

The community that *Urania* builds is integral to the text. Throughout, readers experience that community changing and evolving, and readers experience the stories shared between members of the romance's community. Readers are involved even if their voice is not implanted in the page. Analysis of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, published with *Urania*, focuses on the development of the community, as Watkins argues: "*Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* ostensibly focuses on a male beloved's unfaithfulness and lack of interest, but it also creates an inclusive affective community based on shared emotional suffering rather than on gender or social rank" (141-42). Watkins' analysis focuses on Wroth's sonnet sequence; however, I would add that her argument of an inclusive community with readers can be applied to *Urania* as well. The text relays several women's sufferings to the readers.

Readers see the subject of women's sufferings early in *Urania* when Perissus talks to Urania about his sorrows for lost love. The love story between Perssius and Limena is complicated when Limena is forced to marry Philargus. Perissus believes that Limena has been murdered by her husband because she refuses to stop loving Perissus when he receives a letter from her that states, "[A]ccept these my last lines, and with them the sincerest love that ever woman gave to man. I have not time to speake what I would, therefore let this satisfie you, that the many threatnings I have heard, are come in some kind to end: for I must presently die, and for you; which death is most welcome, since for you I must have it, and more pleasing then life without you" (11).[2] The story of Limena begins the romance, and it follows with other stories of lost love. By describing

[2] It is later revealed that Limena did not die; her husband had instead been torturing her for her never-ending love towards Perissus. Parselius rescues her, and as Philargus dies, he asks for forgiveness for the actions against Limena.

these issues of agency openly, Wroth's romance, like her sonnet sequence, operate to create a community of listeners not just with the other characters in the romance but also with the readers. The romance then attempts to equip the readers with the ability, ideally, to help lead the change against the limitations placed on women in the period.

The women who share their experiences typically share them from a place of sorrow. Akiko Kusonoki notes that women's sorrow is "a recurrent theme in *Urania,*" and she concludes that "in most cases the actions of Wroth's transgressive heroines reach a tragic conclusion due to a change in their lovers' affections …. [W]hilst male inconstancy and the consequent sorrow of women are simply reported in the earlier romances, in *Urania* they are consistently explored in terms of the female construction of selfhood" (124-25). The women who meet Urania, Pamphilia, or other characters in the multiple episodes are attempting to relate cautions to their listeners in the text and readers. They attempt to connect with the readers to reveal the bigger affect the patriarchal structures have on women and their sexual identities. Geraldine Wagner focuses on the socially outcast women's stories within the text and what they reveal particularly about women's bodies:

> [T]his willingness to recount their histories to total strangers does not signal a promiscuousness that makes them particularly susceptible to seduction …. The fact that their emergence as storytellers goes hand in hand not with sexual promiscuity but vows of celibacy and resignation in love supports this interpretation of their actions. Their speech is a marker of a body that is neither open nor closed, but outside the terms of such confining discourse. Coming to voice means reimagining the torn, penetrated and possessed female body of patriarchal/ masculinist discourse as infinitely regenerative in its self-contained completeness. (Wagner 586)

Wagner's focus on the backlash that could happen for women speaking up about their experiences is crucial, and it further shows how much risk women are taking by sharing their stories. The women take a chance that their stories will bring others together and

influence the listeners even if it means that their stories could bring them the negative response. As the stories inevitably return to the typical storyline of forsaken love, it can be viewed as regenerative; nevertheless, the purpose of these stories act as a reminder of how often these stories happen to women, how often women are silenced and their sexualities manipulated. Given the potential response, the choice that so many of these women make is crucial. They choose to not remain silent, and by opening themselves up to the women in the stories and the readers, they are hoping to influence the readers into choosing the same in their own lives.

Urania and Pamphilia's discussions about constancy present an example of the community that the romance between the women throughout. Conversations with Urania and Pamphilia provide safe spaces for women within the text to voice their experiences in marriage, love, and other experiences, and their position should inspire female readers to seek out similar pillars outside of the text. The simple act of voicing grievances transgresses the silent, pliant ideal for women of the period. Many of the women the two come across describe the issues they have had regarding their failed attempts exploring their sexuality. Many women's stories follow the same storyline: they meet a man that they desire, and regardless of whether they act on that desire, the man they desire crushes their heart by finding a different woman to be with. An example of this lies in Pamphilia's meeting with Alarina, a nymph who has dedicated herself to Diana after being rejected by her lover, which shows the privilege men have in the text. In their meeting, Alarina reveals that she opens up to Pamphilia only: "Great Princesse, pardon I beseech this rudenesse in mee, which hath made me dumbe, till now unable to give answer, but my lipps unseald by your great Grace, my speech made free to satisfie your

will" (*Urania* 217). Pamphilia's presence is what breaks her silence, and it is in the presence of another woman that Alarina is able to reveal her story. Although Alarina and Pamphilia's discussions focus on Alarina's relationship with her lover, the fact that they discuss this together defies the early modern ideals on the silent, obedient woman, and in this way *Urania* distances itself from other works in this thesis. Women's sexual agency is portrayed in this text as being difficult to attain in a patriarchal society like the early modern period, but by giving a voice to the women who suffer and allowing them to discuss the issue with other women, the text is attempting to begin conversations on the subject. Their discussion and complaints are what can lead the change among readers.

While the women experience stories on their travels, they also develop friendships with other women of their standing that also allow them to break patriarchal norms of female silence. Many of the women introduced in the text are friends with another female character, and the female network that Urania and Pamphilia build throughout the romance is expansive. In Naomi Miller's words, "Wroth's narrative … addresses the resilience of women in a world where fluctuations in romantic fortune may be determined by male lovers, but constancy in love is redefined by female friends" (Miller, "Narrative on the Woman's Part" 126). Although readers of *Urania* do not see many women act in response to the issues that they face regarding their sexual agency, the text aims to at least begin discussions on the subject, which means that although the women's stories are repetitive in plot, they are used as a semi-persuasive device for the readers' reactions.[3]

[3] A huge example of a woman's inability to act occurs with Pamphilia. In the text, she rejects every marriage proposal she receives. A king of a nearby country responds to her rejection by invading Pamphilia's country, also called Pamphilia, with the intent to force her hand in marriage, and the underlying tone is that he will also rape her, since one can read the King of Celicia as literally invading Pamphilia when he invades her country.

Ideally, readers, women readers especially, will join the inclusive committee the romance advocates for, and they will be the ones acting in response to the stories. The women's ability to act in response to failed romances in this text is stilted and almost nonexistent, but the purpose is to motivate the audience into action. By having women simply speak about the atrocities they have faced at the hands of the patriarchy, *Urania* does not allow their identities to be silenced, and it therefore confronts the ideals of the early modern period.

Separation and Capture: Enchantments, Isolation, and the Discussion of Constancy

The complexities surrounding sexual agency on the women's part becomes forced in the physical, spatial enchantments that occur in different countries within the romance. In the published part of *Urania* three major enchantments occur, and two of the three involve women of the text. Each of the three enchantments in the text catch at least one main character, and that character is stuck in the enchantment until other characters come to the rescue. These enchantments appear in different countries, and the general rule surrounding the enchantment is that anyone can enter, but only the chosen one(s) can save everyone. Those who are not able to pass the test remain trapped in the enchantment until the chosen one(s) come to rescue them. During *Urania*, these enchantments serve not just as a test for the characters, but also as plot devices to reveal new characters.[4] For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus primarily on the first major enchantment.

Pamphilia is saved at the last minute by Amphilanthus who defeats the King of Celicia in her honor. A queen in her own right cannot act on her own in even this instance; she must use someone else, a man, to help her.

[4] The second enchantment, for example, is used to reveal Veralinda, a character who has a similar backstory to Urania's.

The first enchantment, otherwise known as the Three Towers enchantment, challenges women primarily and isolates Urania and the other women from the men in her company. The Three Towers enchantment only occurs during Book I, but the construction of the enchantment encapsulates the entire publication. The frontispiece of *Urania* details an illustration of the Three Towers enchantment. In her introduction to *The First Part of The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*, Roberts suggests, "The illustration for the title-page of the *Urania* was chosen by someone very well-acquainted with the nature of the fiction and depicts the central episode of the Throne of Love …. Wroth might well have provided the engraver with instructions on the subject of the title-page; other aristocratic authors offered explicit guidance to the engraver concerning the choice of illustrations for their works" (*Urania*, "Introduction" cvi). This illustration introduces readers to the enchantment before they begin reading the text. By dedicating the frontispiece to illustrating the enchantment, the romance ensures that readers take what happens there seriously. As a result, readers from the beginning are led to believe in the importance of the enchantment for the rest of the text.

Urania and the others in her company are introduced to the enchantment when they arrive in Cyprus after being caught in a storm. The narrator describes the landscape the enchantment covers using bright imagery; the enchantment also separates itself from the rest of Cyprus via a river. The Towers are built in materials such as white marble, and they are decorated with different gods:

> Upon the first was the Image of Cupid, curiously carv'd with his Bow bent, and Quiver at his backe, but with his right hand pointing to the next Towre; on which was a statue of white Marble, representing Venus, but so richly adorn'd, as it might for rarenesse, and exquisitenesse have been taken for the Goddesse her selfe, and have causd as strange an affection as the Image did to her Mirtle, and Pansies, in her left hand hand holding a

> flaming Heart, her right, directing to the third Towre, before which, in all dainty riches, and rich delicacy, was the figure of Constancy, holding in her hand the Keyes of the Pallace: which shewed, that place was not open to all, but to few possessed with that vertue. (*Urania* 48)

Because of the way the gods motion, it is easy to see that the Three Towers enchantment works in three steps: the first Tower has the Throne of Desire, which is Cupid's tower; the second Tower has the Throne of Love, which is ruled by Venus; and the third Tower has the Throne of Constancy. The people who decide to attempt to complete the enchantment enter the Tower of Desire first, and if they are chosen to exit, they then move towards the Tower of Love, which leaves the Tower of Constancy as the final Tower. The text indicates that people who are "false" may enter the Throne of Desire, but that is where they will be stuck until they are released; the text also indicates that "any Lover" can enter the Throne of Love, but only the chosen ones— "the valiantest Knight, with the loyallest Lady"—can finally open the Throne of Constancy and release everyone from the enchantment (*Urania* 48-9). This enchantment situates the characters to be judged by the gods themselves; if one is trapped in the Tower of Desire, they are subjected to tortures supposedly at Cupid's hand, and if one is trapped in the Tower of Love, they are subjected to Venus' tortures. The women who are trapped in this enchantment, then, are punished by a higher power. The gods themselves are trying to confront them about their sexual agency. The enchantment ensures that those who actively engage in sexual decisions—such as Urania's choice in Parselius—will be punished for it.

By isolating the women, the romance poses a critique on the women's sexual agency regardless of whether they are supposedly in love with a man. Roberts notes in "Labyrinths of Desire: Lady Mary Wroth's Reconstruction of Romance" that "[i]n the

Urania, the men remain outside of the Tower as active agents, engaged in their supposedly heroic quests. The women are the ones who are attracted inside the towers, where they quickly become immobilized as prisoners" (186). Once everyone drinks from the river separating the enchantment from the rest of Cyprus, the men appear to forget about their respective partner. For example, Parselius "forgot all, but his promise to the dead King of Albania, for the setling his Sonnes in that Kingdome" (49). Meanwhile the women are either taunted with a false image of their partner or believe they can make it through and save everyone. Therefore, while the men are enchanted away from entering the different Towers, the women are drawn into them and are isolated from everyone but their company of women. Not only are these women prisoners, but as prisoners, the women are then subjected to torture via hallucination for their choices in men. Their isolation and subsequent torture results from the women's sexual desire. The narrative, however, also ensures that the men are able to become heroes outside of the enchantment. As Roberts notes, the men are "active agents" (186). The dichotomy between women and men in this situation provides a possible critique on the actions against women versus men for sexual agency. The men remain free and become "heroes" while the women remain trapped, tortured because of their sexual agency until the chosen ones can save them.

The way the women move in the enchantment reveals the different levels the gods will judge a character. Out of Urania's party, only one woman remains locked in the Tower of Desire: Selarina. Unlike the others, Selarina appears to be without someone to direct her desire towards; her deepest desire is to be with a "Prince," but it is never specified which prince she wants. Instead, "she was lockt into the first towre, burning

with desire to come to that sweete Prince, which still she sees before her: he calling, shee with uncessant desire striving to goe to him" (49). Urania, the title character, reaches the Tower of Love with one of her ladies and is caught there. They cannot reach the Tower of Constancy to save the others presumably locked in the enchantment. Moreover, the fact that Urania becomes separated from other women in her party is striking; she is without Selarina until the enchantment ends, which further complicates the community of female friendship. Once Urania and her maid become stuck in the Tower of Love, they cannot return to the Tower of Desire to be with Selarina. They are physically frozen in the Tower that they fail in. In the Tower of Love, Urania and her maid are tortured differently than Selarina. The narrator states that people stuck in the Tower of Love "suffer unexpressable tortures, in severall kindes as their affections are most incident to; as Jealousie, Despaire, Feare, Hope, Longings, and such like" (*Urania* 48).[5] The two are tortured using hallucinations involving the chosen men in their lives versus a general "Prince" figure that Selarina is tortured with. In the text, the narrator reveals, "Urania's maide beheld as she beleev'd Allimarlus in the second Towre, kissing and embracing a Black-moore: which so farre inraged her, being passionately in love with him, as she must goe to revenge her selfe of that injurie" (49). Urania's maid is captured using her

[5] There has been some work on comparing the enchantments Wroth describes to emblems that would have been popular around the time she was writing the text. Julie Campbell notes for the Three Thrones enchantment that "Wroth's descriptions of the tortures that entrapped lovers experience in these towers resonate with those illustrated in the popular love emblems and reflect the lessons that they depict. An emblem from Van Veen's collection that especially resonates thematically with Wroth's trial of false or faithful lovers is "Loves triall," in which "As gold is by the fyre and by the fournace tryde, / and thereby rightly known if it bee bad or good, / hard fortune and destresse do make it understood, / where true love doth remain and fayned love reside" (Campbell, "Writing Renaissance Emblems" 9).

insecurities in the man she believes she loves, which reveal anxieties in the maid surrounding adultery and racist overtones. Urania is also drawn in to the enchantment and remains stuck in the Throne of Love. This means that the enchantment does not view even Urania as the "loyallest lady" needed to unlock the final tower—Constancy.

Julie Campbell's analysis of the immobilization used within the enchantment strengthens the torture the characters are given. They are entirely exposed on the page for anyone reading to judge. In this way, the trapped women are stripped of their agency until they can be saved, and their agency is the target of the torture as it reminds the women that the men they love are free. Campbell compares the enchantment scenes in the romance to masque scenery and notes the use of immobilization that frequents both masques and the enchantments in the text: "[Wroth's] immobilized figures partake of a visual, emblematic rhetoric that holds before her readers the torments that love can wreak upon its victims …. They can do nothing to hide or dissemble their feelings and must endure the gaze of those who would watch—or read—and learn. Wroth's entrapped characters are meant, then, to provide object lessons in the trials of love for her readers. One is to observe the anguish and false joy written on their trapped or stilled forms and take heed" (Campbell, "Masque Scenery" 227). On top of that, while the women are tortured, they cannot relate their horrors to anyone else. Once the narrator tells the readers how each female character is tortured, it moves on to the next episode, and the enchantment episode is not focused upon again until Pamphilia and Amphilanthus arrive to save everyone. Even the readers are cut off from hearing these women's struggles inside the enchantment, and the readers are immobilized in the worst possible way

because they can do nothing to save the trapped women. Readers, too, must wait for the chosen ones to rescue everyone.

The women trapped within the second Tower are reminded of the potential betrayals their choices in men could do while they are trapped within here, which reveals society's double-standard between women and men. Readers are also reminded of the double-standard with the separation of women from their respective partners and their friends through the Towers. Scholars have commented to some extent on the torture the women face. Chanmi Ko argues for the romance's critique of female constancy: "Wroth shows that constant women are subject to never-ending sufferings since men do not feel qualms about their inconstancy …. Under this condition, the balanced union between man and woman is impossible …. Although the narrator unquestionably praises chastity-like constancy, the question arises as to whether this constancy is actually to be admired as much as the narrator prefers since the constant women in *Urania* are proven to be finally helpless sufferers due to the disparity between male infidelity and female fidelity" (167). Women not only are tortured because they experience sexual desire, but they also are reminded of the fact that the men are still free to commit adultery and other such atrocities, and readers see some of the men begin to act unfaithfully. Parselius meets a woman named Dalinea and forgets about Urania until she visits him in his sleep. Readers are again reminded of the complexities involved with sexual agency for women because they see Parselius allowed to find another woman and love her while Urania is still enchanted, waiting for him to hopefully return to her. Urania cannot be focused on for an episode while enchanted because while those behind the enchantment target her agency, the torture must also reflect society's response to women who partake in friendships and

attempt to critique the patriarchy, and that means distancing the readers along with most of her party away from her.

The chosen ones for this enchantment are Pamphilia and Amphilanthus. It is both Pamphilia and Amphilanthus who free everyone, but although Pamphilia grabs the keys, Amphilanthus opens the gate. Pamphilia cannot save everyone by herself; although she represents the ideals of Constancy, Amphilanthus is tied to that. It also means the greatest conflict between the both will be the question of Constancy. Moreover, even when women are isolated from others, it cannot only be a woman who saves everyone. Pamphilia receives the keys to unlock the Tower of Constancy. This detail relies on her representing the ideals of Constancy. In the text, the narrator states,

> [Pamphilia and Amphilanthus] then at once extremely loving, and love in extremity in them, made the Gate flie open to them, who passed to the last Tower, where *Constancy* stood holding the keyes, which Pamphilia took; at which instant *Constancy* vanished, as metamorphosing her self into her breast then did the excellent Queene deliver them to Amphilanthus, who joyfully receiving them, opened the Gate. (169)

When Pamphilia takes the keys to the final Tower, Constancy becomes one with her; this means that throughout the rest of the romance, Pamphilia's actions are meant to represent the ideals Constancy stands for. Pamphilia needs Amphilanthus beside her just as much as he needs her beside him to complete this mission, and although it represents their relationship in the text following this moment, it also diminishes the agency Pamphilia has within the text. In this instant, Pamphilia becomes the hero of the romance—although the question of consent is brought into question given the fact that the goddess invades Pamphilia's body presumably without permission—even as the readers are reminded that Amphilanthus also becomes the hero. One could read the dual heroes here as being representative of how change can happen in a patriarchal construct, and that means that

change only occurs when men allow women the opportunity to enact it. This also further complicates the articulation of female agency; Pamphilia's ideas on constancy reflect on her sexual agency—she chooses to remain constant after all—but once the goddess of Constancy invades her body, the question of Pamphilia's bodily autonomy is questioned because her body is no longer hers to control.

When Pamphilia succeeds in saving everyone from the enchantment, the goddess Constancy supposedly becomes one with her; in this way, a potential reading can show Pamphilia stripped of bodily agency. She is no longer in control because Constancy has invaded her body without permission. This problematizes constancy early on, and it poses issues later within the text. By posing the concept in this way, the romance brings attention to the fact that even in something that women believe they can control such as choosing to remain constant, they do not truly have that choice. Readers later see Pamphilia's ideals challenged in her own response to Amphilanthus' philandering ways. Her body appears to age drastically due to her emotional response. Urania attempts to intervene and discusses with her the concept and the realities of it in their society. Despite the discussion, Pamphilia remains strict in her beliefs.

By this point in the romance, Pamphilia's reaction to Amphilanthus pushes her to depression. Her body's response to her devotion to Amphilanthus betrays the fantasy of the ideal of constancy. Her body represents the text's image of the realities of constancy, and it reveals the constricting nature of the patriarchy against women. Urania's version of love and desire, however, posit a much healthier idea for readers:

> I am not his slave. I love Love, as he should be loved, and so deare Lady do you, and then you will plainly see, he is not such a Deity, as your Idolatry makes him, but a good child well used, flattred, and insolent thing comming over our harts, as children over the poore birds they catch before

> they can flie, thinking they master them, when indeed it is their want of wings makes their bondage; and so dear Cosin it is our want of courage and judgement makes us his slaves: take heart to your noble, and knowing selfe, let him bee as he is now a proud, then puling Babe. (*Urania* 469-70)

The romance creates tension with the concept of constancy and love to ask the reader to also think about constancy, and how a lack of sexual agency affects women in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the discussion that Urania and Pamphilia have serve to remind readers that they too are connected to the community they have built, and they too should discuss these questions with others.

Conclusion

The Countess of Montgomery's Urania attempts to establish a community both with the readers and the characters within the text. Using female homosocial bonds, the women in the text navigate the complexities surrounding female sexuality in a patriarchal society. By encouraging readers to discuss sexual agency and the like, the romance takes a transgressive stance on the topic even as it presents female sexuality in a realistic light. Women in the text are haunted by the responses to their female sexuality by men, and by using a formulaic plotline of women betrayed by men they were with sexually, the text emphasizes the double standard at work in this patriarchal structure.

The enchantment, too, works to further complicate women's sexual agency versus men's. By isolating women in the first enchantment, the romance works to punish the women within the Towers in a prison-like manner. The women are locked away for a period while their male counterparts are free to live their life however they want with whomever they choose, which serves as a further reminder of the sexual freedoms men enjoy in early modern society. The romance's underlying focus on the access to sexual

agency is found in many aspects of the romance, and by allowing women to speak about the limits to sexual desire and bodily autonomy breaks the molds of other female characters seen in this thesis. These women do face limitations towards sexual agency, but the limitations posed against their access are set to confront the realities of women in early modern England. As women, they were not encouraged to seek their own sexuality; passive women were the ideal, but vocal women have the potential to change the framework allotted them.

The romance uses both the many women's stories and the isolation the women have in the enchantment to produce a message to its readers. By posing women in such a manner, *Urania* asks its readers to question their own society for women who are portrayed similarly. *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania*'s transgressive nature lies in its ability to portray women in such a way to spark conversation and hopefully enact change. Although the romance was never circulated as much as it could have been, the romance nevertheless could be used as a tool to criticize the patriarchal norms outside of the romance.

CONCLUSION

The genres discussed in this thesis detail the differences in representations of female sexuality, but they all return to a common reflection that details it as a necessarily negative phenomenon. Although Wroth's *Urania* does not necessarily condemn women in the way ballads do, *Urania* still reveals the ways women are tortured by patriarchal structures that deny women sexual agency. One cannot miss the response from each text towards women's bodily autonomy.

Murderous wife ballads condemn women not just for committing murder, but also for exercising their sexuality outside of their marriage. The assumption of sexual desire in these texts create a severe anxiety towards this action, especially for wives as they are the topic in these ballads. Husbands could use the tropes within this sub-genre to justify their fear towards their wives, and although the statistics indicate that women were not the typical perpetrator in spousal murder, there is evidence found that reveals men's fear of that action. The easy access of the ballad allows for this anxiety to be perpetuated, and ballad's the ultimate silencing with the action of each wife's execution is meant to finally silence the women's transgressions. Murderous wife ballads offer perhaps the most blatant propaganda against female sexual desire, and its open access and the way broadside ballads were transmitted make the propaganda much more severe.

Shakespeare's plays begin shifting female sexual desire in terms of the power men have over it. As long as men can control the woman in question, she is fine; however, when a woman begins to step outside of their control, she must be dealt with. Hermia is threatened with execution, and Bianca is twisted into a figure that haunts productions even today. Although Hermia is allowed in the end to be with her choice in spouse, the fact remains that throughout the text, she is fighting the her father and Theseus' attempts to control her. Titania and Emilia, on the other hand, are both controlled by men around them. Titania's sexualization of Bottom is accepted on the stage because Oberon is in control, and Emilia's acts of agency only occur when she is alone with Desdemona. When Emilia is with Iago or other men, she returns to Iago's control over her body until the end of the play. As plays were enacted on the stage, the performances of these scenes may begin to promote similar anxieties like the ballads in chapter one. Women who act on their own independence are a threat to the patriarchy, and they must be stopped.

Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* attempts to step away from the constructions of female sexual agency discussed in the first two chapters, but even this text questions female sexual agency. Readers are introduced to conversations to begin the process of changing the cultural landscape, but because the text tortures female characters for their desires, they too are faced with condemnation for their sexualities. Women in the text are isolated and left without a community to lean on. *Urania*'s difference, however, relies on what it attempts to criticize by showing women isolated in the enchantments. The text ultimately aims to represent society's response to women's sexualities in an attempt to ask its readers to lead the change back in their own worlds.

These texts are but a sample of what exists during the early modern period, but in these genres, readers can begin to see that women were warned against accessing their sexual agency. Accessing sexual agency means risking consequences from those in power, and those in power are men. By reading texts with this in mind, scholars may begin to develop a more enlightened understanding towards how women had to navigate these constructs in order to survive in a world built against them.

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Sundrye strange and inhumaine murthers, lately committed the first of a father that hired a man to kill three of his children neere to Ashford in Kent, the second of Master Page of Plymouth, murthered by the consent of his owne wife: with the strange discouerie of sundrie other murthers, wherein is described the odiousnesse of murther, with the vengeance which God inflicteth on murtherers. London, 1591. *Early English Books Online*.

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