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978-0-521-63007-8 - Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship

Ilona Bell

Excerpt

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I

An introduction to Elizabethan courtship

Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
 To say, which have no Mistresse but their Muse,
 But as all else, being elemented too,
 Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do
 Donne, "Love's growth"¹

A QUESTION TO BE ASKED

The fall I was on sabbatical, beginning this book, I found myself looking around to see if I could recognize a familiar face behind the faces that you meet at Halloween parties. A ghoul walked over and announced that he was on his way to Siberia to buy a gold mine. Great line, I thought, wondering what he really did for a living. I said I was working down the street at the Bunting Institute, writing a book about the poetry and practice of courtship in Elizabethan England. To my surprise, he became visibly excited and said, "You absolutely must make your students memorize lots of Sidney, Shakespeare, and Donne. It's the most useful thing I did at college."

I was wondering just what he meant by "useful," thinking he was probably the kind of person who intones lofty poems at weddings and funerals, when he took off his mask and said, "When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes, I all alone bewep my outcast state . . ." ² Moved by his tone, but still skeptical about his poetics – not to mention that gold mine – I asked whether he had turned to Shakespeare for solace over the plummeting stock market. "Yes," he replied, "but that's not the main reason Renaissance poetry has been so helpful. I've used Shakespeare and Donne to woo all my lovers. It's uncanny how often their poems communicate what I want to say – better than I could say it myself. Unfortunately, there are a few problems that even Shakespeare can't resolve." Then he told me the story behind the story of the gold mine.

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He was on his way to Siberia, hoping to win back the love of his life, a gorgeous opera singer who left him when his lust for venture consumed his first fortune and he began eyeing hers. I could actually see him reciting that sonnet, still hoping his “bootless cries” (*SS* 29:3) would “pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine” (*AS* 1:4) as she walked out the door, carrying her bankbook and their CD player, leaving him to “look upon [him]self and curse [his] fate” (*SS* 29:4).³ Perhaps in Siberia he would find some newly enfranchised Russian capitalist, eager to hook up with a Shakespeare-speaking venture capitalist. “It used to be enough to be cultured and witty,” he concluded, “but after fifty, you also need to be rich.”

He ceased, as if he had uttered the final couplet and was awaiting my professorial commentary, so I told him I was writing this book to demonstrate that the Elizabethans use poems for many of the same reasons: to luxuriate in “lovely enchanting language” (Herbert, “The Forerunners”); to woo a lover and “grace obtaine” (*AS* 1:4); to enjoy the license that an artfully chosen mask provides; finally, if all goes well, to improve their stature and fortune in men’s eyes by writing or marrying well.⁴ I had just started to explain why it is so important to listen to the woman’s side of the conversation when he interrupted me. “Why,” he asked, “do you need to write a book to prove that?”

A question to be asked . . .

AMOROUS COURTSHIP

During Elizabeth I’s reign from 1558 to 1603 love poetry acquires a remarkable popularity and brilliance, unparalleled in English literary history. It is also during this period that the word courtship enters the English language, acquiring a telling concatenation of meanings: (1) behavior, action, or state befitting a court or courtier (2) the practice of the arts of a courtier; diplomacy, flattery (3) the paying of courteous and ceremonial attentions, especially to a dignitary (4) the process of courting or wooing a woman with a view to sex or marriage.⁵ When a society denotes courtly behavior, diplomacy, and ceremonies of state by the very same neologism it also uses to signify wooing a woman with a view to marriage, it seems reasonable to surmise that amorous and political courtship are intricately interconnected; that politics and courtiership are feminized; and that wooing a woman involves not only flattery and courteous attentions but also art.⁶

Most studies of Elizabethan poetry and courtship focus on courtiership – on social and literary exchanges between men, or patronage and

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preferment at court.⁷ When, for example, Astrophil describes his wooing of Stella as “this great cause, which needs both use and art” (*AS* 107:8), critics and editors generally assume that the lines must be referring to something else, something of great moment such as court politics or Sidney’s own professional advancement.⁸ This study maintains that love poetry and amorous courtship are themselves matters of “great” import for the Elizabethans.

Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship focuses on English Renaissance poetry, Elizabethan amorous courtship, and relations between early modern Englishwomen and Englishmen. It seeks above all to recover the ways in which the Elizabethans write, read, and hear love poetry. It investigates the ways in which the tropes and rhetoric of Renaissance love poetry are used to court Elizabethan women, not only at court and in the great houses but also in Elizabethan society at large.⁹ It also examines the ways in which Elizabethan women respond – in prose, in poetry, and in speech.¹⁰ Analogous developments are occurring in European poetry as well as in Elizabethan drama, epic, and romance, even as they were already stirring in medieval English literature. But one genre, one society, one historical era, and two sexes offer more than enough complications for a single volume.¹¹

The literature of Renaissance courtship is so vast that any choice of material is necessarily selective. This study focuses on texts that are addressed to or written by Elizabethan women, as well as texts that are transformed by Elizabethan women. The great continental love poems such as Petrarch’s *Rime Sparse* or Du Bellay’s *Olive* concern us not for their own evident poetic merits but insofar as they can help us understand Elizabethan rewritings of conventional Petrarchan tropes – especially those that transform the self-reflexive, idolatrous relationship between the Petrarchan poet and the Petrarchan lady into Elizabethan poetry of courtship.¹² Native English songs, Ovidean complaints, and Neoplatonism are all important aspects of English Renaissance love poetry. Still, it is difficult for an Elizabethan to compose love poetry, or for that matter to write or speak about love at all, without also using the conventions of European Petrarchism.¹³

Petrarchism is the richest vocabulary available to analyze subjectivity and to express desire. As such, it serves many of the same functions for the Renaissance that psychoanalytic terminology serves for the twentieth century. Elizabethan love poems are rarely Petrarchan, but they are often either anti-Petrarchan or what I call pseudo-Petrarchan. If we define poetry of courtship as poetry written to or for a loved one – or

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poetry written to look as if it is written for a loved one – then pseudo-Petrarchan poetry is the subset that uses the conventional tropes of Petrarchan idolatry to conceal an underlying persuasive or seductive purpose. Anti-Petrarchan poems, written for the amusement of a male coterie, have been widely discussed by twentieth-century critics; however, pseudo-Petrarchan poems, which range from brief posies or poem-and-answer sets to some of the period's most intricate and brilliant lyrics, have not been recognized as a vital category of Elizabethan verse.

Petrarchism, like Freudianism, defines subjectivity and desire as masculine, which is why twentieth-century critics often describe the Petrarchan lady as the object or reflection of male desire – the veil or slate upon which male subjectivity and male imagination inscribes itself. Yet Elizabethan women are not only objects of male desire or tropes for the male imagination; they are also writers, readers, and interlocutors, actively engaged in dialogue with men and other women.

To understand the full import of Elizabethan love poets, I believe we need to hear their voices not only confined to a male literary tradition where they can too easily seem only self-fashioning and self-advertising, but also embedded in a social and lyric dialogue with Elizabethan women – not only “in isolation, but as the *answer* or *rejoinder* to assertions current in the situation in which it arose.”¹⁴ To understand the full import of Elizabethan women, I believe we also need to hear their voices, not only isolated in a female literary tradition where they can too easily be marginalized and ignored, but also in dialogue with male writers and male interlocutors.

In trying to develop a paradigm for the poetics and practice of Elizabethan courtship, this book usually refers to the poet/lover as male and the reader/listener as female, not only because it is difficult to write expository English prose without using gendered pronouns but also because, more often than not, the Elizabethan poet/lover is male while the private lyric audience is female. Of course, Shakespeare's most intensely persuasive and notoriously intricate sonnets eternize and berate a beautiful young man. And later in the seventeenth century, Katherine Philips' poems to Mary Aubrey turn the literary conversation between men into a lyric conversation between women. There are currently only a few poems of courtship known to be written by Elizabethan women, though more will undoubtedly be identified. Yet precisely because the female poet/lover is the exception to the rule, she offers an exceptionally illuminating view of the genre.

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Elizabethan love poems are often unsigned, or assigned by different manuscripts to different authors. (“*Thoughe I seeme straunge,*” which is examined in chapter 5, is a case in point.) Since the lyric “I” is neither male nor female, it is often difficult, as Thomas Whythorne notes in his autobiography, to “judge whether [the poems] were written by a man or a woman.”¹⁵ The lyric dialogue of courtship, by its very nature, involves a continual fluctuation from male subject and female object to female subject and male object. When an Elizabethan woman reads a first person poem aloud, the lyric “I” undergoes a sex change, from male to female. Just as gender-bending is part of the fun in Shakespearean comedy, puns, syntactical ambiguities, and duplicitous figures of speech that turn traditional gender roles upside down and inside out are part of the private recreation of poetry-making and love-making in Elizabethan England. Whether my readers prefer feminist theory, gender theory, queer theory, or straight theory of one bent or another, I hope they will bear in mind that the lyric dialogue of courtship is constantly flirting with gender inversions that call conventional sex/gender roles into question.

Early modern women writers deserve greater consideration in their own right, for their writings provide an invaluable addition or corrective to the much more abundant and well-known male accounts of love and courtship. So, too, do women readers and listeners, for their numbers are far greater.¹⁶ Most studies of the English Renaissance lyric written during the last half century emphasize the literary exchange “between men,” between the male poet and the male lyric audience, whether a peer, a patron, a coterie, the reading public, or the literary profession.¹⁷ As my title suggests, *Elizabethan Women and the Poetry of Courtship* focuses on the collaborative role female writers, readers, and interlocutors play in the Elizabethan socio-literary conversation. It begins with the premise that, for Elizabethan poetry of courtship, the female lyric audience is the primary, though by no means the only, lyric audience.

Modern critics tend to assume that Elizabethan love poems could not actually have been written to or for “real” women since few early modern women are literate. Yet if we are to understand the full extent of women’s involvement with and access to Elizabethan culture in general and English Renaissance lyrics in particular, we need to consider not only writing literacy but also reading literacy and listening literacy. As the large list of printed books written for and addressed to women in the middling and upper ranks of early modern English society demonstrates, reading literacy is more common than writing literacy.¹⁸ Indeed,



Figure 1 Portrait of an Unknown Girl with a Book, attributed to Steven van der Meulen, 1567.

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portraits of Elizabethan women holding books – and the sitters range from Elizabeth I, to Dorothy Wadham, to an unknown Elizabethan woman – show that female literacy is a matter of great pride.¹⁹ Listening literacy is even more prevalent than reading literacy.

In the sixteenth century the printing press is a technological marvel that is revolutionizing the dissemination of knowledge. Yet most Elizabethans still prefer the familiar, old-fashioned experience of hearing literature recited or read aloud, just as many readers today still prefer to curl up with a good book rather than to download text onto a computer monitor. Silent reading is a relatively modern development. Sixteenth-century reading typically takes place not in solitude and silence, but orally, in the presence of others.²⁰

Anne Clifford is an exceptionally literate early modern woman who keeps a diary and loves books. Yet, instead of reading to herself, she listens to Montaigne's essays and plays, the *Faerie Queene*, the Bible, and various religious texts. Margaret Hoby keeps a journal, but she too spends a great deal of time listening to literature read aloud to her by both men and women. The chaplain reads frequently, but others read as well: "one of the men," "one of my women," "one of my maids," "little Kate."²¹ Gascoigne's Lady Elynor has a private secretary who reads to her and writes for her until F. J. appears and begins reciting poetic persuasions directly to her. (While trying to reconstruct the circumstances in which Elizabethan men and women court each other in songs and sonnets, I could not help but imagine how my extremely literary but not yet literate five-year-old daughter might respond at the age of sixteen or twenty – assuming she had *not* been taught to read but had continued listening hungrily to stories and poems – if a dashing young man appeared and, perish the thought, began to woo her with witty, passionate poems written expressly for her.)

Elizabethan architecture provides limited privacy; therefore, a person reading aloud is likely to be overheard by other members of the household. In families or social circles where men read, women can acquire listening literacy by attending to what is being read in their midst. In *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* Vives declares that women should not be permitted to read or even hear love literature of any kind: "It were better for them nat only to haue no lernynge at all; but also to lese theyr eies, that they shulde nat rede: and theyr eares, that they shulde nat here." It is tempting to equate Vives' prohibitions with actual reading practices, but to do so is to confuse prescription with description. While liberal in its defense of women's education, the *Instruction* is reactionary in its

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prohibition of love poetry; i.e., it reacts against and tries to suppress the popular songs and sonnets that are widely used to court and seduce Renaissance women. Vives censures the literature of love because, to his horror, there are so “many, in whom there is no good mynde all redy, [who] reden those bokes to kepe them self in the thoughtes of loue.”²²

Before the seventeenth century, there are relatively few women writing autobiographical prose, lyric poetry, romances, or secular literature of any kind, not only because of the low rates of female literacy but also because the Elizabethan code of ethics equates chastity with silence. Yet even the most dominant cultural codes are rarely as unremitting as they may appear centuries later, and the force of repression oftentimes reflects the pressure for change. In 1578, Margaret Tyler translates and publishes the French Romance, *The Mirrour of Knighthood*, in order to make continental literature of love more readily available to English-speaking women. Tyler’s ground-breaking preface addresses the allegation “that women may not at al discourse in learning, for men lay in their claim to be sole possessioners of knowledge.” Recognizing that her action is bound to provoke disapproval – “amongst al my il willers, some I hope are not so straight [that] they would enforce me necessarily either not to write or to write of diuinitie” – Tyler claims she was “forced” to do it “by the importunity of my friends.” Clearly, Tyler and her friends believe that Elizabethan women have not only a right but also a responsibility to add their voices to the cultural store of learning so that other women can become “possessioners of knowledge.”²³

The sheer profusion of Elizabethan literature from all genres examining courtship, marriage, and relations between the sexes suggests that *both poetry and courtship* are grappling with dilemmas larger and murkier than one man’s love for a woman. Poetry and poetics are not merely a reflection of social norms and generic codes; they are also symbolic acts that are continually reconfiguring sex and gender: “literature does more than transmit ideology: it actually creates it.”²⁴ Elizabethan poets and their lyric audiences are formed by ideological structures they may not consciously perceive; yet, their writings and actions also alter those structures in ways they may or may not recognize, which is why sex/gender roles involve not only a set of rules for practice but also a gender unconscious.²⁵

Despite its conservative roots and traditional forms, Elizabethan poetry is a living language, interacting with a wide range of literary and social forces. Elizabethan love poetry cannot be understood without

paying careful attention both to poetic convention and to poetic form – to diction, metaphor, rhyme, scansion, ambiguity, tone, and point of view. At the same time, however, Elizabethan courtship and the use of poetry in courtship cannot be understood without paying careful attention to Elizabethan social mores, Elizabethan social practices, and Elizabethan poetics.

Mapping the largely unexplored terrain where the poetry and practice of amorous courtship converge places us in the paradoxical position of trying to understand literary and social conventions simultaneously. (1) What kind of poetry is best suited to the lyric dialogue of courtship? (2) What kind of culture and, specifically, what kind of relations between the sexes produce such brilliant love poetry? (3) What kind of culture and sexual relationships does the complex, multivious lyric dialogue of Elizabethan courtship produce?²⁶ As the word multivious (which means having many ways, or going in many directions) suggests, the most brilliant poems of courtship are those in which the complexities of poetry and the complexities of history interact and magically coalesce. Chapter 3, “The Practice of Elizabethan Courtship,” and chapter 4, “The Lyric Dialogue of Elizabethan Courtship,” examine both literary and non-literary texts in order to construct a brief history of Elizabethan courtship and to document the use of poetry in courtship. The surrounding chapters read history as part of poetry, even as they read poetry as part of history.

Courtship involves both material questions of law, finance, and social practice, and murkier questions of genre, ethics, and ideology – both the quotidian and the unspoken.²⁷ Many studies of early modern women rely heavily on male-authored instructional and prescriptive texts such as conduct books or marriage manuals – texts that describe how women ought to behave.²⁸ To understand not only what Elizabethan women are told they *ought* to say and do but also what they *actually* say and do when they are courted in poetry and in deed, we need to examine poetry and prescriptive literature along with other kinds of data: legal records, medical documents, statistics, diaries, letters, memoirs, autobiographies, annotated private manuscripts, and practical, instructional materials.²⁹

The reasons for Elizabethan marriages are as mixed as they are vexed; it can therefore be difficult to know whether a suitor is professing love and desire in order to marry wealth and status, or falsely proposing marriage in order to obtain sexual favors. Sometimes the participants themselves may not know whether their aim is social and material advancement, amorous courtship, or extra-marital seduction. The

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various facets of courtship come together in the Elizabethan word, “mistress”: a woman who is courted by a man, a woman who has power, a female teacher, a woman who illicitly occupies the place of wife.³⁰ If, on the one hand, to be wooed by a man means to risk being lured or tricked into occupying the place of a wife illicitly, on the other hand, the freedom to say no gives a mistress power to influence a suitor who grievously wants her to say yes.

What many Elizabethan poems of courtship imply, though sometimes unwillingly or even unwittingly, is what many Elizabethans (and many modern critics) would rather not face: the wooing of women threatens the exchange of women, transferring authority from fathers to sons and daughters. Courtship encourages men to rout female silence – to seek female responses and to heed female objections. It also creates a discursive space for female subjects to speak out and write back – to “Answer [him] fair with yea or nay.”³¹ Only the female interlocutor can decide whether or not to say, I take thee to be my favorite, my lover, my lawfully wedded husband. By inviting or enabling a mistress to say, as Rosalind does in *As You Like It*, “To thee, I give myself” (*AYL* 5.4.117), the poetry and practice of courtship produce mistresses and wives who have grown accustomed to speaking and acting according to their own wit, will, and liking.

For courtship to work in poetry as in practice, women as well as men must have at least some freedom to act and to choose. The persuasive strategies of rhetoric give the poet/lover power to persuade a mistress. At the same time, the pressure to elicit a desired response places the poet and the poem in danger of being undone by his mistress. If her critique induces him to see his own words in a new light, he may revise the poem or write another poem with a more capacious point of view or a more compelling rhetorical strategy. If Petrarchan poetry and patronage poetry emphasize the poet’s undoing, poetry of amorous courtship is at least as likely to explore his response. Of course, there is nothing to prevent a poet from constructing a fictional poem or sonnet sequence that represents female autonomy in order to explore male subjection.

Both Elizabethan courtiers and Elizabethan poets/lovers succeed not by declaring their power, but by beseeching their private female readers, “Make what you read the better for your reading.” The male poet/lover is always in the position of *asking*, may “Your gracious reading grac[e] my verse the better,” as Harington’s epigram, “To the Queens Majestie,” wittily remarks. That is why poems of amorous courtship, originally written to woo Elizabethan women outside the court and noble households, can be readily readdressed to powerful patrons. Conversely, poems