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Introduction: “Who will believe thee, Isabel?”

On May 13th, 1631, Lord Mervin Audley was executed by beheading after a jury of his peers found him guilty of rape “on the body of his own wife.” Lady Audley testified that her husband first commanded his servant Broadway to join both of them in bed, and then coerced Broadway to rape her. She describes how Lord Audley “held both her hands, and one of her legs” while Broadway violated her amidst her resistance and her cries. In addition to physical violence, Lady Audley testified that her husband relied on emotionally coercive tactics, such as insisting that a wife’s love for a husband must extend to whomever he demands; the implication, therefore, is that when she endures these repeated sexual attacks, she is proving and performing love for her husband.

While Lord Audley (also referred to as “The Earl of Castlehaven”) is found guilty of rape and executed for this crime, he is not named as the physical rapist. As Cynthia Herrup tells us:

The physical rapist was her footman Giles Broadway, but according to the indictment, the Earl had encouraged and assisted him. Since even assisting in a rape made one a principal, both the Earl and Giles Broadway were equally culpable before the law.

Thus, Lord Audley “assisting” Broadway in raping his wife results in his being tried for rape. In 1810, a detailed account of the Audley trial was included in the London publication “Curious and Remarkable Trials.” In this collection, the Audley trial keeps

1 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, for Being an Accessary to A Rape on The Body of His Own Wife. Also, An Authentic Narrative of The Proceedings of Lady Frances Howard, against Her Husband, The Earl of Essex, for Impotency (London: T. Broom, 1810), 5, The Making of Modern Law: Trials, 1600-1926. Gale. (This digitized version is a reproduction of the original monograph held by the Harvard Law School Library.)
2 Ibid., 6.
company with accounts of other seventeenth century trials that involve various elements of sexual deviance, sorcery and witchcraft, and murder. What makes the Audley trial so remarkable? That this account contained sexual violence is not “curious and remarkable” in and of itself. However, the particular depravity of Lord Audley’s coercion of Broadway alongside his own participation in the violence against his own wife certainly seems to have made this case notable. Further, in this trial, Audley faces multiple other accusations. He is accused of sodomy by another servant, Fitzpatrick. He is also accused of coercing his servant Skipwith to lie with his adolescent daughter. Further, the record holds that Audley “kept a lewd woman in the house, and that he made four or five of his servants lie with her in his presence, and his Lordship lay with her in their sight.” The “lascivious Lord” not only facilitated sexual violence against his wife, but participated in and coerced servants to be witnesses of or participants in various sexual acts deemed perverse. This case is “curious and remarkable” because “it seems pretty plain, that this Lord has been so successful in debauching his family, and contributing to his own dishonour, that he had made [the members of his household] as bad as himself.”

For my purposes, what is also remarkable about this case is that the evidence presented, including testimony from a violated woman, led to the conviction and execution of rapists—not only Lord Audley, but Broadway as well. Nazife Bashar, in her study of rape in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, shows us why this is so remarkable:

4 Herrup, A House in Gross Disorder, 2-3.
5 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 7.
6 Ibid., 8.
7 Ibid., 9.
Clearly, ‘evidence’ for a rape case was as difficult to find then as it is now, because the proportion of rape cases rejected ‘ignoramus’ in the seventeenth century was usually more than twice as high as for cases involving other crimes.8

This dissertation is largely concerned with the limits that contain and undermine early modern women’s ability to testify to their experiences of violence without marking themselves as unruly women not to be believed. Perhaps it seems counterintuitive to begin, then, with an account of a trial in which the evidence seems to have been effective, and two men were executed after being found guilty of rape. However, beginning here allows us to understand the exception that proves the rule, so to speak. What about this “remarkable” case allowed Lady Audley to be heard and believed?

In this case, Lady Audley’s testimony is the first entered into the court record. She testifies that her husband

Pull’d him [Broadway] into Bed to him and her, and made him lie next to her, and Brodway lay with her, and knew her Carnally, whilst she made Resistance, and the Lord held both her Hands, and once of her Legs the while; and that as soon as she was free, she would have kill’d herself with a Knife, but that Brodway forceably took the Knife from her, and broke it; and before that Act of Brodway she had never done it.9

Her testimony emphasizes her own resistance, her husband’s role in facilitating her rape, and Broadway’s physical rape. Interestingly, it also highlights her immediate response in the aftermath of the attack—her thwarted attempt at suicide. In the same breath that she

9The case of Sodomy, in the tryal of Mervin Lord Audley, Earl of Castlehaven, For committing a rape. And sodomy with two of his servants, viz. (Lawrence Fitz-Patrick and Thomas Brodway) who was try’d and condemn’d by his peers April the 25th, and beheaded on tower-hill, May the 14th, 1631 (London: E. Currl, 1710), 15-16, Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. (This digitized version is a reproduction of the original monograph held by the British Library.)
emphasizes her non-consent, she highlights her attempt at self-annihilation in response to her violation. Despite the fact that this trial results in a rape conviction, Lady Audley still testifies to her impulse to punish herself. This trial does not entirely sidestep rhetoric that distrusts or indicts the victim.

In addition to Lady Audley’s own testimony to her suicide attempt, the account of the trial invokes contemporary notions of women’s suspect testimony:

It appears to have been a question, whether the lady should be admitted an evidence of the Rape, when, after so many years had elapsed, she never had complained of it before; and though it was resolved she might, yet it is allowed to be a strong presumption against a woman, if she make no complaint in a reasonable time.10

Bashar cites *The Lawes Resolution of Women’s Rights*11 (1632) and its articulation of the proper procedure that a woman should follow if she has been the victim of a rape:

She ought to go straight way and with Hue and Cry complaine to the good men of the next towne, shewing her wrong, her garments tore and any effusion of blood, and then she ought to go to the chiefe constable, to the Coroner and to the Viscount and at the next County to enter her appeale and have it enrolled in the Coroners roll: and Justices before whome she was again to reintreat her Appeale.12

Thus, in order for an accusation of rape to begin on credible grounds, a woman must have immediately left the scene of the assault, cried out in the streets, and presented her torn clothing and bloodied body to the public before bringing her appeal before the law.

In lieu of a “hue and cry” in the streets, Lady Audley uses her testimony to articulate her struggle against her attackers in retrospect. The account of the trial

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10 *The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley*, 8-9.
11 Subtitled “A Methodical Collection of Such Statutes and Customes, with the Cases, Opinions, Arguments and Points of Learning in the Law, as do Properly Concerne Women.”
mentions twice that during the violent incidents Lady Audley “cried out,” and that she “made all the resistance she could.” This makes sense given that “the legal requirements of proof of non-consent or corroboration meant that a raped woman had to present tangible proof that she had adequately resisted the rapist. Non-consent is often defined as active physical resistance.” Lord Audley, however, immediately attempts to undermine his wife with circular logic:

The Lord Audley, in his defense, said, that his wife’s testimony ought not to be regarded, since she had confessed her lying with Broadway. To which it was answered, he could not urge the fact in his defense, since he had forced her to suffer it.

Audley attempts to discredit his wife’s testimony to her rape by citing her rape. As absurd as this might seem, this logic is not entirely out of step with contemporary wisdom. Women’s sexual submission is complicated in early modern England in that “[a]n assertion of rape—that penile penetration had occurred without the woman’s consent—implied that she had been forced to submit to the rapist. But sexual submission indicated consent.” Lord Audley subtly alters his approach to discrediting his wife, but not by much:

The lady, after she had been exposed to his servants, and forced to be commonly in the same bed with them and her lord, seems to have lost all modesty at length, and to have submitted to their embraces; for he (Lord Audley) insists upon it, in his defense, that she was a lewd woman, and was got with child during his absence, which probably was the occasion of the question, whether a woman who

13 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 6.
14 Garthine Walker, “Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England,” Gender and History 10:1 (April 1998): 1-25, esp. 8. However, Walker also points out that this could be a counterproductive strategy, because it marks her as an unruly woman who might have caused her own violation.
15 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 7.
was voluntarily a whore to some, should be allowed to swear a Rape against others?17

Here, the length of time that Lady Audley endured sexual abuse is re-narrated by her husband as a sign that she was a lewd woman who must have somewhere along the line submitted to, even desired, sexual advances from his servants. Notably, this does not necessarily deny that a rape happened, but questions whether a woman who was “voluntarily a whore to some, should be allowed to swear a Rape against others?” In other words, “Can this woman even be raped?”

Of course, despite Lord Audley’s repeated attempts to discredit his wife, despite Lady Audley’s lack of a “hue and cry” in the streets, the court admits her testimony and convicting her husband. This is remarkable and begs the question: What makes this case different? What makes the court sympathetic to her suffering rather than to the victim-blaming rhetoric of Lord Audley? First, I argue that the extenuating circumstances of this case give the court no choice but to believe the veracity of Lady Audley’s testimony. The fact that Lord Audley is convicted of rape due to his assisting Broadway in the act compels Broadway’s testimony against Audley. Broadway testifies:

That he lay at the Earl’s Bed’s-Feet, and one Night the Earl call’d to him for Tobacco, and as he brought it in his Shirt he caught hold of him, and bid him come to Bed, which he refused; but to satisfy my Lord, at last he consented and came into the Bed on my Lord’s Side: Then my Lord turn’d him upon his Wife, and bid him lie with her, which he did, and he Earl held one her legs and both her Hands, and at the last (notwithstanding her Resistance) lay with her.18

Broadway testifies to three crucial things: 1. Lord Audley’s physical coercion of his wife (Lady Audley), 2. His own (Broadway’s) sexual violation of Lady Audley, and 3. Lady

17 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 9.
18 The case of Sodomy, 19.
Audley’s resistance and non-consent. The fact that Broadway offers testimony against Lord Audley means that Lady Audley’s claims are corroborated by the very man who violated her. The extenuating circumstances of this case mean that the court cannot distrust the testimony of Lady Audley without discrediting the confession of a rapist.

Second, I argue that we cannot overlook the other accusations levied against Lord Audley, most damningly the accusations of committing sodomy and facilitating the violation of his young daughter. While Lady Audley’s testimony is foregrounded in the court record, Herrup also reminds us that

The King’s attorneys said that Castlehaven [Audley] was a man disordered in his understandings of male responsibility, genteel honor, and national identity, a danger to himself and others. He had accepted the privileges of patriarchalism, but betrayed its duties.19

Lord Audley’s crimes go beyond the violation of his wife; he has violated the expectations of his own masculinity, of his duties as head of household, of his role of family patriarch. Recall, what is “plain” and free from suspicion is “that this Lord has been so successful in debauching his family, and contributing to his own dishonour, that he had made [the members of his household] as bad as himself.”20 Herrup suggests that this trial largely reflects anxieties surrounding “how to live within the accepted prescriptions of early modern English culture.”21 Lord Audley is convicted of rape, but also more subtly of failed masculinity. Lady Audley’s testimony, therefore, is not simply accepted as evidence of her own violation. It is used to punish Lord Audley, and thus crucially functions as a means to uphold the patriarchal institutions of marriage and the

19 Herrup, A House in Gross Disorder, xiv.
20 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 9.
21 Herrup, A House in Gross Disorder, xiii.
family. What happens, then, when these extenuating circumstances are not true? What happens when a woman’s violation is not legally corroborated by her attacker, when her violation cannot be used as evidence of the failures of men?

**The Double Bind and Impossible Goodness**

While this dissertation is not exclusively about experiences of sexual violence, the Audley trial is instructive in theorizing the double bind that I argue underpins expectations of women’s goodness. A good woman in early modern England was chaste, silent, and obedient to patriarchal authority. However, the Audley case shows us how these norms can easily become untenable and impossible to perform, especially in tandem. In early modern England, a woman’s chastity is paradoxically eroticized and drew unwanted sexual contact from men. If a woman protests, she violates her silence in the face of patriarchal authority. If she obeys, her chastity has been compromised. In fact, in the case of Lady Audley, she violates all three virtues in her failed attempt to resist sexual assault. What might this kind of violation mean for women who, unlike Lady Audley, do not have their testimony publicly corroborated? Women whose testimony cannot be used in the service of upholding patriarchal institutions?

In this dissertation, I argue that the impossibility of women’s goodness is deeply tied to the impossibility of testimony. In testifying, a woman might announce her violation and thus her loss of virtue. She might, in a defense of her innocence, violate her call to silence and paradoxically raise suspicion. She might, as Walker points out, attempt to highlight her struggle against violation and, instead, highlight her untrustworthiness: “A woman who described her own attempt to fight off a violent man was potentially in an untenable position. Would such a woman make a credible witness? Was she really so
chaste?” Deborah Burks succinctly tells us, “Women, though responsible for their actions, are strongly suspected of being incapable of acting responsibly.” Contained within this double bind, women’s violation is compelled, their goodness violated, and their testimony self-incriminating. I argue that the system is perpetuated when women need to seek justice from the same patriarchal structures that suspect and violate them.

**The Double Bind on the Page**

Here, I have begun my case for the double bind by turning to legal scholarship and the Audley legal case study. However, the central claim of this dissertation is that literature stages and makes legible the double bind in ways that are not always possible in, for example, a court of law or an account of lived experience. In her discussion of the metatheatricality of rape in *Titus Andronicus*, Kim Solga makes a case for theater as a “a legitimate way of knowing,” arguing that “in practice, theatre should be able to catch out the liars and dissemblers, leaving audiences in possession of an at least provisional knowledge of what happened.” In keeping with Solga, my argument rests on the premise that readers of early modern literature (and audiences of early modern drama) are given access to myriad characters’ perspectives, experiences, motivations, and private moments and thus have the opportunity to observe the mechanisms, scope, and effects of the double bind. In *Measure for Measure*, when Isabella threatens to “tell the world aloud” how Angelo asks Isabella to exchange her virginity for her brother’s life, Angelo

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responds, “Who will believe thee, Isabel?” With this question, Angelo brings into being a community of believers. Readers and audiences recognize the tragic truth of Angelo’s threat while also having no choice but to believe Isabella, having “been there” themselves.

In thinking about how early modern literature stages the double bind, I am particularly concerned with interrogating the notion of women’s complicity in their own violations—domestic violence, sexual violence, violent deaths. In this dissertation, I first take up the question: Why do so many early modern texts end with dead women, and why does it seem that only in death can a woman be fully exonerated from suspicion and blame? Further, and most crucially, why do so many women appear to accept the blame, to believe that they deserved their violations, that they even brought it on themselves? Why do they seem to believe their own complicity? Many scholars have interpreted this trope as signaling the way women internalize misogynistic accusations. Valerie Wayne reads Desdemona, for example, as a woman who cannot think herself out of her husband’s accusations: “In being termed a whore, Desdemona becomes one […] For Desdemona there is no difference at all because she is unable to resist this rhetoric when it comes from her own husband. Instead she thinks it may be right.” Of course, patriarchal narratives of women’s wickedness and susceptibility to sin and vice are ubiquitous in early modern England. The logic of the double bind is more insidious,

however, than simply reproducing and reinforcing sexist rhetoric. It sets behavioral expectations for women only to weaponize that behavior against them. In *The Winter’s Tale*, King Leontes demands that his wife, Hermione, help him to convince his friend Polixenes to stay in Sicily rather than returning to his own kingdom in Bohemia. As Leontes struggles to make his case, he turns to Hermione and implores, “Tongued-tied, our queen? Speak you.” Hermione obliges and when she succeeds with Polixenes, Leontes quickly changes course and believes her unfaithful. He observes her speaking to Polixenes and becomes suspicious and enraged: “Too hot, too hot:/ To mingle friendship farre is mingling bloods.” Hermione obeys her husband’s command to speak, but in speaking, marks herself as suspect and unchaste; goodness was impossible. She was always going to be blamed for her transgression that was compelled by the very person who condemns her. Are we, then, as scholars of early modern literature, left with a literary tradition predicated on women’s belief in their own complicity, of accepting blame and welcoming death as payment? Do dead women first lose themselves to the patriarchy in life?

I argue that early modern literature demonstrates the double bind to have more complex effects than creating self-loathing victims. In fact, my argument is in part an endeavor to trouble the heroine/victim binary that can sometimes easily inhere in the study of early modern literary representations of women. Pushing past this binary is crucial to reading the double bind; however, feminist literary scholarship has a responsibility to do so in a way that takes seriously representations of abuse. Frances

28 Ibid., 1.2.110-111.
Dolan offers a challenging “re-reading” of *The Changeling* and the character of Beatrice-Joanna, encouraging scholars to “take a break from either defending or prosecuting Beatrice-Joanna”\(^\text{29}\)—a move which, in the abstract, is in keeping with what I am suggesting. However, her approach is to also take “a break from describing what happens in *The Changeling* as rape,” arguing, “Only then can we assess the complex distributions and abuses of power between De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna and in the play more generally.”\(^\text{30}\) In citing Janet Halley, Dolan argues,

> There are also risks in continuing to call *The Changeling* a rape play. Halley raises the possibility that an emphasis on women's suffering and subordination might help ‘to authorize and enable women as sufferers.’ She asks whether feminism might be ‘contributing to, rather than resisting, the alienation of women from their own agency in narratives and events of sexual violence.’\(^\text{31}\)

While I understand and even share the impulse to read Beatrice-Joanna not simply as a woman without an agency or will, I disagree with the claim that by acknowledging suffering or violation, we “authorize” it. I argue that it is, instead, *crucial* to acknowledge and take seriously literary representations experiences of violence and abuse, for only then can we take seriously the experiences of real women. Further, I argue that in acknowledging when a woman is victimized by patriarchal power, we as scholars do not flatten her, but validate her experiences and insist that they are not her fault. It is possible to read women who are victimized by patriarchal violence in ways that confirm their senses of self without erasing their violation.

\(^{30}\) Ibid.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
In *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes imprisons Hermione for her imagined adultery with Polixenes. Leontes is surrounded by voices decrying his decision and declaring the faithfulness of Hermione, and thus he orchestrates a trial with the ostensible purpose of addressing accusations of injustice:

Let us be cleared
Of being tyrannous, since we so openly
Proceed in justice, which shall have due course
Even to the guilt or the purgation.32 (3.2.47)

However, when Hermione takes the stand, she refuses to testify. She opens,

Since what I am to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation, and
The testimony on my part no other
But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
To say, ‘Not guilty.’ Mine integrity
Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,
Be so received.33 (3.2.20-26)

Hermione does not admit guilt but demonstrates a shrewd understanding of her predicament. Her honor being called into question by her husband, she stands unable to offer testimony to her innocence. She was compelled by her husband to transgress a boundary that aroused his own violent suspicion; how can she attest to her integrity when her integrity is the very thing that her husband doubts? Leontes continues to accuse her of unfaithfulness, and Hermione responds: “You speak a language that I understand not./ My life stands in the level of your dreams,/ Which I’ll lay down.”34 She does not say that she deserves to die, or that she is at fault for her fate. She simply refuses to engage with Leontes’ accusations (“You speak a language that I understand not”), acknowledges her

32 Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, 3.2.47.
33 Ibid., 3.2.20-26.
34 Ibid., 3.2.78-80.
predicament (“My life stands in the level of your dreams”), and understands the tragic conclusion before it happens (“Which I’ll lay down”). Leontes continues in his anger: “So thou/ shalt feel our justice, in whose easiest passage/ Look for no less than death,” and persists even after he has had confirmation of Hermione’s innocence by an oracle. Nothing, not her own testimony, not the all-knowing testimony of an oracle, could convince Leontes that his wife was faithful. Only in death does Hermione convince Leontes of her innocence, a reality that Hermione acknowledges. She recognizes the scope and power of the double bind and refuses to testify. She does not believe her own complicity, she does not internalize Leontes’ accusations against her, but she perceptively, powerfully, tragically reads the double bind, and she will not allow it to force her to self-implicate—she will not give it any more of herself than it has already taken.

**Chapter Breakdown**

My argument in this dissertation rests on two pillars. First, the early modern gender hierarchy does not simply punish and kill women who transgress the boundaries of chastity, silence, and obedience. It first *compels* transgression by making this goodness, at times, impossible to attain. Faithful women are condemned as unchaste in their impassioned defenses of themselves, obedient women deemed unruly in their rejection of false accusations. The belief in women’s inherent wickedness structures literary representations of even the most virtuous women; women are caught in a double bind that compels them to an impossible task: proving their virtue in a system predicated on denying it. No system can function without an example of what cannot belong; bad

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35 Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, 3.2.87-89.
women make aspirations to goodness meaningful. Second, I argue that literary texts make legible this double bind, pulling back the veil and exposing the tragedy of these women not as their final acquiescence to the system, but as their realization that in a system dependent upon their guilt, they were marked for death not despite but because of their defenses of themselves.

My first chapter focuses on late medieval hagiographical literature, turning to the lives of saints Margaret of Antioch, Katherine of Alexandria, and Christina of Bolsena, as well as Chaucer’s *The Second Nun’s Tale*. These hagiographies each tell the story of a holy woman who insists on remaining a Christian virgin in defiance of patriarchal authorities who would compel her to be a Pagan wife. Each woman endures grisly tortures designed to compel her obedience and punish her transgressions, and she ultimately dies defending her chastity. In the moments leading to her death, her body becomes miraculous. She cannot be burned, she cannot feel the gruesome violence being enacted on her body—she, protected by God, impossibly persists. Only when God calls her to Heaven does her body finally submit to lethal violence. With the goal of articulating the way that power functions in these tales, I will anchor my analysis in two key concepts: divestment and testimony. At the outset of each tale and reinforced throughout, the virgin divests from the social, political, religious, and domestic systems of relationality and power that structure her world. I will argue that the virgin martyrs are not executed in order to prove their goodness, nor are they invested in proving their goodness that has been ensured by their commitment to virginity. Instead, in privileging holiness over obedience to men, these women are simultaneously welcomed into heaven by God and executed as bad women who have divested from the social system that deem
them so. I will then argue that this divestment is the very thing that makes their legacy so difficult to replicate by women who must prove their goodness to the same authority who accuses them of wickedness.

My second chapter turns to Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello*. The violence that Lucrece, Lavinia, and Desdemona experience is notable not only in its severity, but also in the way that it seems to compel its victims to believe their own complicity. I argue that these women do not accept their own guilt, but recognize the inevitability of their death and the inefficacy of acts of rebellion. First, I argue that the sexual and domestic violence that they experience before their death renders them abject—a process compelled by a social system in which both men’s and women’s social standing is rooted in women’s goodness and purity. The abject must be created in order to be expelled, thus shoring up the primacy of good women. Second, I argue that this state of abjection allows women to read their own double bind: they are compelled to a virtue that eroticizes and endangers them, and their testimony in the wake of their violations only further marks them for death. These women become aware of their inescapable and compulsory victimhood. Lucrece, Lavinia, and Desdemona know themselves to be *both* innocent and guilty: innocent of a crime of which they are *found* guilty by a system that demands their violation and compels their death in the face of their testimony.

My third chapter focuses on Elizabeth Cary’s Jacobean play *The Tragedy of Mariam*. This chapter is built upon a three-tiered argument. First, I argue that Mariam demonstrates that the chaste, silent, and obedient behavioral model for early modern wives binds women in a system that first endangers them and then denies their testimony.
Mariam’s faithfulness does not save her from her violently jealous husband, Herod, who executes his faithful wife on suspicion of infidelity—an execution that, in turn, assures Herod of Mariam’s faithfulness. Second, I argue that this inefficacy and illegibility of a woman’s goodness underscores the instability of the distinction itself between virtuous and wicked women. Rather than reifying virtuous and wicked “types,” I suggest that this play fundamentally challenges the notion of essentially good and bad women. Finally, I argue that this boundary-blurring between virtuous and wicked women is emphasized in the play by invoking contradictory stories in the Bible. Women in the early Jacobean period often read and interpret the Bible independently; therefore, Mariam’s allusions to biblical stories that offer conflicting understandings of the nature of womanhood suggest that the instability of the categories of “good” and “bad” women is firmly rooted in a crisis of biblical interpretation as well.

My final chapter turns to the texts of the Jacobean querelle des femmes, or the social debate about the nature of woman. I begin with an analysis of Aemilia Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum, arguing that it works against a central premise of the querelle des femmes: that the Bible’s sinful women suggest the inevitable sinfulness of all women. Lanyer provides a redemptive reading of Eve, highlights a history of powerful and transgressive women in the Bible, and even writes women into biblical stories with holy men. I then turn to the “pamphlet wars,” a public debate inaugurated by Joseph Swetnam’s infamous The Arraignment of Women. I argue that Arraignment is the most explicit articulation of the early modern double bind. However, the rhetorical nature of this pamphlet does something profound: it invites rhetorical responses from women that can debate the logic of the double bind, rather than offering personal testimony to their
own goodness which will be weaponized against them. I turn to two specific responses to Swetnam: Rachel Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastomus* and Ester Sowernam’s *Ester hath hang’d Haman*. Indeed, the success of these rebukes is rhetorical: both writers playfully expose and mock Swetnam, all while turning biblical authority around on him, exercising great exegetical control over the Bible in the service of defending women Without testifying, these writers weaponize the double bind against itself, casting aside what does not serve them and writing their own redemptive biblical exegesis.
Chapter 1: “Dystourbles nought my martyrdom”: Divestment, Testimony, and the Impossible Legacy of the Virgin Martyr Legends

Introduction

A good woman must be executed in order to prove her goodness. This simple, dark premise certainly seems to be the basis of myriad early modern stories. Shakespeare’s Lucrece can only escape the stain of her assault through self-annihilation. Despite identifying her attackers, Shakespeare’s Lavinia must be sacrificed by Titus in order to resolve the problem of her brutalized body. Elizabeth Cary’s Queen Mariam can only be celebrated as a faithful wife after Herod publicly executes her for infidelity. Shakespeare’s Desdemona is only absolved of imagined wickedness at the violent hands of Othello. This dissertation will ultimately argue that each of these women is the victim of a double-bind, a system that eroticizes women’s goodness, compels women’s violation, weaponizes their testimony against them, and demands their death as perfect testimony to their goodness that endangered them in the first place. Rather than framing this double-bind as a troubling “model” for women’s goodness, I argue that it instead signals the impossibility thereof. In attempting to prove her goodness, a woman can only call it into question, thus ensuring her death, and in death, she is restored.

Before taking up these early modern texts and their executed women in earnest, I begin in this first chapter with a genealogical move. If, as I will argue, we are to understand the double-bind as a system that underwrites a literary tradition, where does this tradition develop and how does this system emerge? In answer to this question, I turn to the late medieval hagiographical tradition of the virgin martyr legends, tales united by the formulaic and brutal executions of their holy heroines. Karen Winstead reminds us
that “virgin martyrs were among the most popular subjects of art and literature.” Their widespread circulation is notable given that the way the genre seems to insist so unequivocally on the imperative of the death-of-the-good-woman while also making claims to exemplarity. The saints in these stories are women who are venerated as most holy exemplars by their devotees, and these most holy women endure unimaginable tortures and violent deaths as a rule. The violence that structures these women’s final moments has long invited sharp censure from feminist scholars who condemn the tales for trading in “pernicious messages that suffering is heroic and that dying young is glamorous.”

In her study of representations of sexual assault in Jacobean drama, Karen Bamford implicates the virgin martyr legends in the “sanctification of the victim of sexual assault,” arguing that “So important are the saints’ lives to Jacobean drama, both for the model of the female heroic and the values that inform that heroism, that an analysis of sexual violence on stage must begin with a brief account of the hagiographic tradition.” Certainly, we must attend to the virgin martyr legends if we are to understand a genealogy of violence against women in early modern literature. However, I will make two claims about this genealogy that intervene on the crisp narrative that directly links the execution of virgin martyrs with the execution of victims of violence on the early modern stage. First, I will argue that the virgin martyrs are not executed in order to prove their goodness, nor are they invested in proving their goodness that has been

37 Ibid., 3.
ensured by their commitment to virginity. Instead, in privileging holiness over obedience to men, these women are simultaneously welcomed into heaven by God and executed as bad women who have divested from the social system that deems them so. Second, I will argue that this divestment is the very thing that makes their legacy so “pernicious.” These ostensibly exemplary tales are impossible to replicate by women who must prove their goodness to the same authority who accuses them of wickedness.

My goal is not to argue for the feminist potential in these hagiographies, but to more carefully articulate the ways that power enacts itself in these tales and how these women negotiate these power systems. Only then can we understand a genealogy of violence in a way that does not flatten all women’s experiences of violence into an imprecise category of victims-of-patriarchal-brutality. Only then can we begin to understand the reasons why women’s death on the page becomes an inevitability in different contexts—a question which I believe is a much richer one for feminist scholarship to take up.

Of course, these saints were understood to be models of holiness, and this question of exemplarity has elicited much scholarly debate about whether this hagiographical tradition is oppressive to its female readers or whether it provides models of resistance. These debates identify central paradoxes about the way the virgin martyrs experience violence, and thus this project is indebted to these debates even as it pivots from them. Critics of the tales’ brutality have indicted these tales not only for their apparent glorification of women’s suffering and death, but also for the implicit connection between the necessity of death and protection of chastity:

Many feminists have argued that virgin martyrs legends participate in a system of myths that has sustained women’s subjugation through the ages. An extreme
expression of the argument goes something like this: virgin martyr legends insist that the only good woman is a chaste woman; a woman’s chastity is guaranteed only by her death; therefore, the only good woman is a dead woman.39

Indeed, these tales, again and again, show us women who choose death rather than marriage to a pagan, i.e. sexual impurity. However, these tales undeniably do not give us portraits of passive women who meet the anger of men quietly. Thus has led to “completely different readings” of these martyrs that “have also emerged from feminist perspectives”:

Focusing on the saints’ defiance of their persecutors rather than on their victimization, some have heralded the saints as valiant rebels against an oppressive patriarchy. Many feminists have noted that no other medieval literary genre portrays women in such a wide variety of ‘empowering’ roles: as preachers, teachers, sovereigns, scholars, and social activists.40

Feminist scholarship, then, becomes irreconcilably fraught. Are these tales of women who capitulate to a violent system that demands their annihilation or instead portraits of resistant women who model rebellion against “an oppressive patriarchy”? 

Note Winstead’s use of the language of “focus” to delineate these two approaches to reading these legends. One approach “focuses” on the inevitable death of the virgin, while another focuses on the “empowering” roles she inhabits before her death—both to the exclusion of the other. Even scholarship that acknowledges both aspects of the tales seems to be invested in refuting the implications of one. Elizabeth Roberston writes that she rejects the notion that the patriarchal violence of the tales necessarily means that “medieval women readers of virginity literature must therefore internalise misogyny. Medieval women could use the principle dramatised in virgin martyr legends, [namely] 

39 Winstead, Chaste Passions, 3.
40 Ibid., 3.
that consent makes a marriage.”\textsuperscript{41} I argue that a feminist approach to analyzing the tales must necessarily account for the paradox rather than speculating about which lessons might stand out despite it. For example, can the “lesson” of these tales be about women’s power in marriage when marriage is, in fact, often impossible? Arraigning these tales for glorifying the brutal execution of good women or recovering the tales’ lost story of women’s rebellion are approaches that both fall short, in terms of the stories of the saints themselves and their legacy of violence in literature.

With the goal of articulating the way that power functions in these tales in order to better understand the nature of the virgins’ experience of violence, I will anchor my analysis in two key concepts: divestment and testimony. At the outset of each tale, and reinforced throughout, the virgin divests from the social, political, religious, and domestic systems of relationality and power that structure her world. By divestment, I do not simply mean critique; these are not tales of reform. Divestment is complete, irreversible, wholesale rejection of these systems of power and the moral evaluations that inhere therein. The virgins divest from their roles as marriageable women, they divest from their family structures in their vocal and unyielding rejections of their parents, they divest from the political system that abides by the emperor’s power, they divest from the religious system that honors pagan gods. In doing so, in refusing to acknowledge the power systems in her world, the virgins do two things simultaneously: From the beginning of their stories, they ensure their goodness in the eyes of God, and they mark themselves as unassimilable, bad women in the eyes of the world. This is not a genre about how to be a

good woman in the world, nor is it a genre about women who must prove their goodness through their deaths. This is a genre that portrays a woman’s realization that goodness in the world is impossible. Therefore, in her divestment from that world and her securing her place in heaven, she marks herself as a bad woman who must be expelled from a world that can no longer contain her.

Once the holy virgin has divested from the power systems that structure her world, she is held as good and bad simultaneously, but by different authorities. Given this paradox, I argue that her torture and death are not in the service of ensuring her chastity or proving her goodness. She needn’t prove her goodness to God, because her divestment has blessed her from the beginning. Her chastity has also been ensured by her divestment, as evidenced by the ways in which her body miraculously resists attempts to violate her or torture her into submission. She also is not attempting to prove her goodness to those who call her wicked, as she has abandoned the moral evaluations of the world. So what, then, do we make of the virgin’s torture, her excoriations of her persecutors, and her death, if they are not all in the service of testifying to and ensuring her goodness? I argue that her moments between divestment and death are, in fact, a form of testimony, but to the power of her God, not to her own personal goodness. She never actually becomes a good woman in the eyes of her persecutors; their conception of a good woman does not shift. In fact, she often becomes even more hated, considered more abject by her primary persecutors who remain firmly committed to a world she has abandoned. Even when her testimony—her censure of male authority, her miraculous body, her religious authority—affects those around her, it is all in the service of inviting others toward divestment, which begins with conversion. Her converts are not those who come to believe her
individual goodness and individual men’s wickedness, but her converts are those who come to believe that she represents a new religious order, and are often executed themselves for this conversion, this divestment.

Thus, in the moments after the virgin has divested and still inhabits the world, her world becomes a double one. She lives, but has unequivocally chosen death over remaining in a world where goodness is impossible. Thus, as a woman who is both good and bad, dead and alive, every action she takes and everything that happens to her and her body has double significance. Her tortures mark her body as a bad, unassimilable, and unrescuable woman—her blood is drained, breasts ripped off, flesh torn from her bones—she is essentially a living corpse, a body whose boundaries have been irreparably violated. However, she continues to insist that she does not feel the pain she is meant to feel, her punishment ineffective as she proclaims the goodness of her lord as she miraculously survives. She is wicked and holy, bad and good. Tortures cannot annihilate her. She defeats pagans and demons alike. She stops men’s hearts with her defiant body. She calls powerful men lunatics. She converts thousands. She is ultimately executed not because she needs to preserve her chastity that has been miraculously preserved throughout the entire tale. A good woman is a dead woman because goodness is impossible to perform in the world; goodness requires complete divestment. A good woman is a dead woman because a good woman is a bad woman.

My argument about divestment and testimony will be anchored in readings of the hagiographies of Margaret of Antioch, Katherine of Alexandria, and Christina of
I will then address the issue of exemplarity, the aspect of these tales that seems to haunt feminist scholars even as much as the violence itself. Turning to Chaucer’s *The Second Nun’s Tale* as a final example, I argue that the legacy of these tales into the early modern period is as “pernicious” as scholars have suggested, but not because they provide a model rooted in proving women’s goodness through their death. Instead, the exemplarity of these tales is insidious because the choices of the virgin martyrs are, in fact, unreplicable by early modern women who are unfairly accused by men of wickedness—of sexual impurity, of infidelity. Accusation solicits defense, defense requires proof, and proof can only be demanded by a power that you acknowledge. The virgin martyrs never offered defenses of themselves against the accusations of men because they did not recognize their power nor the power of their moral judgments. They chose divestment and martyrdom, and this sanctioned their testimony to God’s power. However, women who respond to accusations of wickedness coming from their husbands

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42 Sherry Reames, “General Introduction,” in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints*, ed. Sherry Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), 1-22, esp. 9-10, 13-14. In this chapter, I will be using Middle English vernacular translations of these saints’ legends. Reames comments on the Latin sources of the legends in her compilation: “Some early studies […] credit a single “universal” collection of abridged legends, the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine, with having shaped virtually the whole tradition in Middle English from the *South English Legendary* to Caxton. This is a great over-simplification […] If one hopes to find the exact source or sources of a given Middle English legend […] one must usually look well beyond the *Legenda*. Hundreds of other Latin books about the saints were available in late-medieval England, and many of them even had the same practical advantages that evidently commended the *Legenda* itself to potential translators: brief, efficiently abridged narratives; handy organization, following the liturgical year; emphasis on “universal” saints, whose area of patronage could be defined very broadly, rather than more localized saints who were closely connected with particular places and institutions” (9-10). For Reames’ bibliography of principal collections of saints’ Lives in Latin, see her General Bibliography on pages 13-14 of her introduction.
and fathers whom they love or other male authority which they acknowledge are doomed to fail. When men at once call you to be pure, violate you, and accuse you of impurity, your keepers of moral authority, your attackers, and your accusers are one and the same, and thus your testimony to your own goodness can never succeed. The virgin martyrs legends show us women who choose to be bad women in the eyes of the world, who choose death, in order to testify to the goodness of God. Their literary legacy is populated by women who desperately want to prove their goodness to the world, who want to live, but whose testimony only further implicates them and insists on their annihilation.

**Divestment: “Thye goddys ar made of stoone”**

When the virgins divest from power structures—political, domestic, and religious— they do not leave room for return or reform. The saints are not interested in creating space for themselves amongst the pagans through mutual understanding, nor are they invested in offering careful, measured explanations to their befuddled families. Why must this rejection be so complete? Why do the virgins immediately give up on the world they inhabit so entirely, willingly marking themselves out for martyrdom rather than, perhaps, offering a critique of the power systems and making a case for their own goodness? Critique is impossible because women’s goodness as performed by the virgins—devout Christianity and bodily purity— runs so antithetical to the world they occupy that it has fatally endangered them from the beginning of their lives. That is, their goodness is wickedness and inherently demands annihilation.
Saint Margaret

In the stanzaic life of Saint Margaret of Antioch (~13th century), she is marked as a potentially dangerous woman even as an infant. Her pagan father seems to immediately sense his daughter’s otherness and moves to have her killed:

Theodosy it was his name. One God loved he noghte;
He beleved in false goddys that were with hondys wroghte.
They had a chylde schulde crystened be, it ranne hym welle in thoughte.
He comaunded whann hit was borne it schulde be broghte to noughte. 43

The mere specter of his infant daughter being baptized leads him to order her execution. Her mother intervenes to save her, secretly sending her to be raised by a nurse who does, indeed, baptize her. Thus, at age fifteen, “She [Margaret] bytoke her maydenhede as Jhesu wolde her deme./ Sche loved Him with herte and gladlye wolde Hyme queme.” 44 Not only, then, is her Christianity threatening, but she has denied men access to her body. Christian, chaste Margaret cannot remain safe; the danger she faced in her infancy is but delayed, for Olibrius, “lord/Of Asye and Antioche” 45 has made two proclamations: “For to dystroye Crysten peple” and that “he wolde have her [Margaret] to wyfe.” 46 In either case, she is destroyed.

Olibrius betrays himself as being sexually infatuated with Margaret when he makes an alternative plan for her if she does not come from a free family and therefore is not a suitable wife. Upon seeing her, he demands that his men bring her to him, declaring

Bye my lay, if sche be comen of kynrede free,
Of alle women that I knowe beste thanne schalle sche be.

43 “Stanzaic Life of Margaret,” in Middle English Legends of Women Saints, ed. Sherry Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), lines 9-12.
44 Ibid., lines 9-12.
46 Ibid., lines 37-38.
“For her fayre bewté, if sche be come of thral,
By Mahound, her maryage schalle sche not lese alle.
Fulle fayre I wylle her clothen, in purpylle and in palle;
Sche schal be my lemman, I telle you nowe alle.47

If Margaret “be come of thral,” Olibrius plans to make her his “lemman” and shower her in fine things; he will demand to have access to her body either as wife or as mistress. “Her fayre bewté” has enthralled him, suggesting that her purity is what makes her alluring. In John Lydgate’s The Lyfe of Seynt Margaret (~15th century), the connection between her Christian purity and her sexual appeal is made especially explicit:

He was ravesshed anoon with hir beauté,
Hir grete fairnesse whan he dide adverte,
Hir fresshe face eke whan he dide see;
Hir hevenly iyen perced thurgh his herte,
Brent in his corage with importable smerte.
This cruel wolfe, for love inpacyent,
Cast him devowre this cely innocent.48

Margaret’s “beauté,” “grete fairnesse,” and “hevenly iyen” make her sexually desirable and therefore endanger her. Olibrius claims that “Of wommanhede she is the verray welle”;49 ironically, her Christian “wommanhede” makes her desirable—desire which would compromise the very purity that pagan Olibrius lusts after. Margaret’s Christian goodness endangers her and is impossible to maintain. She cannot critique, persuade, or reform—she must divest.

In the stanzaic life, the “Saryssones” (i.e. Olibrius’ men) first approach Margaret with a threat masquerading as a request. They attempt to assuage her fear before she has expressed it: “‘Damysel,’ thei sayden, ‘we wolle thee not smyte./ Olibryus oure lord of

47 “Stanzaic Life of Margaret,” lines 41-46.
49 Ibid., line 124.
Antioche so ryche,/ He desyres thee to wynne; fulle welle it maye thee lyke.’’ The implication, of course, is that she may keep her life if she capitulates to Olibrius’ request that he should make her happy. Notably, Margaret does not protest; she does not attempt to convince them to leave her be in peace, to allow her to continue her life as a chaste shepherdess. She immediately marks herself as a woman who has divested; she does not acknowledge their power (she calls them “foule gostys”51), and she announces her preparedness to be martyred. She does not even address her response to these men, but directly to Christ:

Alle my kynne I have forsake; to Thee, knelynge on my knee, Jhesu Cryste, my good Lord, to Thee I betake me. Gladlye I wylle for Thi love in erthe a martyre for to be, Nowe has he his houndys on me sette, that I ne may not flee.52

Margaret emphasizes that her commitment to Jesus is to the exclusion of all else. She has “forsak[en]” her family and, recognizing the threat of Olibrius’ “houndys,” announces that she will “gladlye” be martyred. She has no responsibility to her role as daughter on earth and therefore is prepared for death. When Olibrius’ men bring her to him regardless of her utter rejection, she responds to his direct request by highlighting her commitment to Christ to the exclusion of her ability to fulfill her role as marriageable woman:

“Well be my Lord that I beleve uppon./ I wylle not lese His love for noon erthelye man.”53 Again, she has rejected the social system in its entirety—she has abdicated her roles as daughter and wife, and only recognizes the power of her God in the face of social and political power of the world. Olibirus recognizes this and imprisons her:

50 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 52-54.  
51 Ibid., line 66.  
52 Ibid., lines 67-70.  
53 Ibid., lines 89-90.
He sawe it was no bote  
To stryve withe that mayden, so stedfastely sche stode.  
He baad men schulde bynde her, both honde and fote,  
And sithen her in preson— ‘that ye mowe turne her mode.’

Margaret’s divestment from the social and political systems of power has left them at an impasse.

Margaret’s Christianity makes it impossible for her to participate in social and political systems of Antioch, and it is her divestment from Paganism that is the basis of this impossibility. Olibirius becomes infuriated with Margaret’s unwillingness to recognize his power: “‘Mayden,’ he sayde, ‘this is my posté,/ Haste thou nou yghen that thou mayste hit see?’” His exasperation at the inefficacy of his political power to compel her is followed by a demand that she recognize the power of his gods: “Believe on my goddys, yit I rede thee,/Or for thi God that thou leveste on martyred schalte thou bee.”

Again, she does not plead, she does not ask for mercy, and she does not acknowledge his power of coercion. She fires back:

“Thye goddys,” sche sayde, “ar made of stoone.”
Of my Lordys joye telle may ther noone
Though thou have posté of my flesshe and boon,
To take from Cryste my soule power haste thou noone.

Not only has she levied the greatest insult against Paganism—that its gods are false, that its power is imagined—she has divested from her very body. She acknowledges Olibirus has power over her life, but this is not the power he ultimately desires. He desires sexual

54 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 99-102.  
55 Ibid., lines 151-152.  
56 Ibid., lines 153-154.  
57 Ibid., lines 155-158.
power over her body, power over her choices, over her commitments, over her beliefs—all of which he cannot have if she does not recognize the source of his power.

In John Lydgate’s Lyfe, Olibrius upon meeting Margaret, demands to know Margaret’s religion. She responds, “ful demure and sobre of contenaunce,” proclaiming

I am Cristen, in verry sothfastnesse;  
And in that lawe, withoute doublenesse,  
For lyf or dethe playnly I wille abide,  
Persevere stable, and varien on no side.58

When Lydgate’s Olibrius attempts to compel her to “consente/ to [his] desire,”59 she upbraids him: “Be assured that I have no drede,/ To deye for Him [Jesus], and al my blode to shede. “60 Olibirus has no power to compel Margaret because in her divestment—in her rejection of parents, husband, and emperor, in her presumed martyrdom—she has negated any social, political, and religious power of Antioch. In doing so, she has refused to prove her goodness, which has been confirmed by her Christian God at the outset.

Saint Katherine

Like the story of Saint Margaret, the stanzaic life of Saint Katherine of Alexandria (~13th Century) introduces Katherine first and foremost as a persecuted Christian in a pagan society. She is the daughter of king Costus and is first described as “an holy virgyne,”61 a “bolde” maiden “of wyt and wysdom”—traits that are tied to her love of Christ: “Sche lovyd Jhesu, though sche bar blame—For Hys love was here lyf solde.”62

58 Lydgate, “The Lyfe of Seynt Margarete,” lines. 158-161.  
59 Ibid., lines 211-212.  
60 Ibid., lines 223-224.  
61 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” in Middle English Legends of Women Saints, ed. Sherry Reames (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003), line 6.  
62 Ibid., lines 54-56.
She is not simply a virgin, but one who bore blame for her Christianity, the religion to which she “solde” her life. From her first introduction, she is framed as at odds with the social and religious order with no chance of wavering—she is dangerous and, therefore, in danger. This description of Katherine is immediately followed by an edict from Emperor Maxencus demanding homage to pagan gods from all his subjects:

For eythir they scholde don sacrefyse  
To hys mawmetys imaad of tree,  
Of ston and bras, on alle wyse,  
Eythir they scholde imartyryd be.63

This description of pagan gods as made of “ston and bras” echoes Margaret’s proclamation that “Thye goddys ar made of stoone,” and the specter of martyrdom comes just as early.

Katherine is not afraid of this threat of martyrdom, nor does she attempt to negotiate with the emperor. In fact, when she greets him, her first words are of Christ and his power:

Jhesu Cryst be with thee then,  
Ryghtwyse Kyng and heyghe Justyse,  
That tholyd deth for synful men  
And hadde pousty for to ryse.64

She continues to reflect on Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection, ending with an accusation against the emperor: “This folk that thou hast hedyr brought/ Thou doost hem make the devyl servyse.”65 So striking is this speech that “this emperour awondryd was/ of this maydyn, fayr of vyse,” he asks her to explain herself: “Why dyspraysyst thou our

63 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines 77-80.  
64 Ibid., lines 85-88.  
65 Ibid., lines 99-100.
god dys so/And holdyst hem of so lytyl pryse?” He then imprisons her upon her unwillingness to recant. He later attempts to compel her conversion by promising to honor her as a queen, with temples, shrines, and riches. She responds vehemently that the power he offers means nothing to her:

    Be stylle, thou fool! I saye to thee,
    Thou redes me to ful mekyl synne!
    What man wolde idampnyd be
    In helle for ony worldys wynne?67

Her divestment is clear. She neither recognizes nor fears his power as a “fool,” and believes that no reasonable person would risk hellfire for paying homage to the power systems that Maxenceus represents. She continues,

    I have to Jhesu Cryst my love:
    He is my spouse, bothe oute and inne;
    I hope to come to His hevene above,
    There joye and blysse schal nevere blynne.68

Katherine unequivocally marks herself as a woman who will never marry, as she has wedded herself to Christ. She cannot be coerced, despite her punishments, because she does not give credence to the moral evaluations of her goodness and threats to her safety that are levied by the social, political, and religious systems of power of Alexandria.

    Abandoning his promises of wealth and glory, Maxenceus threatens Katherine with tortures and death if she does not renounce her faith. Katherine is unmoved by his threats of violence; She proclaims “Nevere in my lyf, be God above,/ My flesch, my blood ne wole I spare,” emphasizing that threats to her life will never have the power to

67 Ibid., lines 257-260.
68 Ibid., lines 261-264.
compel her, for “Blely wole [she] martyryd be/For Hym with peynys grete and smale.”  

As she prepares for her death, she reminds those who watch on, “Dystourbles nought my martyrdom.” Neither the promise of political power nor the threat of death has any effect on Katherine’s resolve, so much so that it drives Maxcenceus into an unstable rage of disbelief. Her divestment—her refusal to acknowledge the different kinds of power Maxcenceus attempts to wield in order to coerce her into obedience—negates the need to prove her goodness against evaluative measurements that she rejects.

_Saint Christina_

“The plot of the Christina legend […] is so full of improbabilities that some modern readers have found nothing good to say about it.” Saint Christina, “probably the most aggressive and indomitable of all the legendary virgin martyrs,” certainly occupies the pages of her hagiography improbably. She survives three rounds of brutal tortures, violently takes down her oppressors, miraculously is rescued from fatal circumstances—for modern readers, her hagiography feels more like a comic book than a saint’s life. Reames reminds us that her popularity attests to the fact that “medieval readers and writers obviously reacted to the legend differently, and there is something to be learned from trying to see it through their eyes.” If we engage with William Paris’ _The Life of St. Christina_ (~1397-1399) as seriously and carefully as other legends despite its many

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69 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines 437-438, 441-442.
70 Ibid., line 687.
72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
fantastical elements, we are met with a virgin martyr whose divestment is starker even than Margaret or Katherine.

The very first lines of the tale foreground her commitment to Christ through using the language of “martyr” and “virgyn”:

Seynte Cristyn was a maide bryghte,
As clerkis in bokes hath rede and seen;
Sche served God both daye and nyghte
As martyr shuld and virgyn clene.\textsuperscript{74}

Already, her devotion to God and her virginity are mentioned in the breath as her identity as a martyr. She cannot live and be a Christian virgin. The stanza continues, describing Christina’s family and her relationship to them:

In Itayle she was borne, Y wene,
And come of kynne were grete of myghte,
But she forsoke them all bedene
And holle hir herte to Criste she highte.\textsuperscript{75}

In the first stanza of the tale, she is described as having “forsoke” her family in order to devote her whole heart to Christ. In order to be a Christian, she must divest from her role as daughter. As with Margaret, her divestment, her Christianity, accompanies a great and alluring beauty that makes her the object of desire. After describing her forsaking of family, Christina is described as “so faire, that maiden myld”\textsuperscript{76} that she won the hearts of “man, woman, or child.”\textsuperscript{77} Specifically, “Many men desired that may/ And wolde hafe

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., lines 5-8.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., line 9.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., line 11.
wedded hir if thei myghte.”78 Christina is another virgin whose Christianity demands she vacate her role as daughter, but her purity makes her covetable by pagan men.

Unlike Margaret’s and Katherine’s, Christina’s tale does not begin with her explicit vulnerability to lustful men. Urban, her father, keeps her locked in a tower in an attempt to force her to worship pagan gods. She secretly keeps incense that she uses to worship the Christian God, and she prays for martyrdom before she is forced to worship false gods:

To no fals goddes of mawmentrie,
For dred of non that wold hir byde;
She prayed to Christe that she myght dye
And martire be, or that betyde. 79

Christina will not be compelled by domestic power (her father) or religious power (paganism) that she does not recognize. What is remarkable about Christina’s tale is that her father is given a few moments of earnest concern for his daughter, who he feels is being deceived by Christianity:

For I will to my doughthire goo;
With faire wordes Y shall anon
Make hir to lefe, if she saie soo.
And truly, but she sacrifice doo,
She shall be wrouthe or I - the ton -
For it will breke myn herte in too
To witte my daughter so begoon.80

This language is repeated when Christina rebukes him for his request: “Als wrothe as he myght be;/ Hym thought his herte wold breke in too/ For Cristyns lofe, his daughter free.”81 Urban’s proclamations that Christina’s Christianity will “breke [his] herte in too”

79 Ibid., lines 69-73.
80 Ibid., lines 82-88.
81 Ibid., lines 126-128.
certainly do not lessen the horror of his imprisoning and brutalizing his daughter. They do make Christina’s responses to her father—her *utter* rejections—feel even more powerful:

Thi doughter, Ubran, clepe me noght
For fadere will Y never clepe thee
For on Jhesu is all my thoughte
And His child, sir, will Y be.82

She does not reciprocate his sentiments, nor does she appeal for understanding or mercy. She insists that she will never again call him father, for she considers herself to be Christ’s daughter to the exclusion of her worldly family. When Urban insists that she is his “faire doughter”83 who must pay homage to pagan gods, she retorts, “Thou wenes thou speke right well, ywisse,/ But as a fole thou spekes me to.” Christina is not invested in salvaging a relationship with her father, nor does she ask for his mercy or attempt to negotiate. She refuses to recognize his power over her and thus owes him neither love nor fear nor loyalty.

Christina undergoes tortures at the hands of her father when she refuses his demands to worship pagan gods. When Christina’s mother hears of this, “she tere hire clotehs and felle in swoun.”84 Her mother, who did not participate in the decision to imprison and torture her, is distressed to learn of her daughter’s condition:

And after she hyed to that dongioun;
She had so wepped, hir chekes were wete.
Whan she se Cristyn, she felle downe
Anon to hir doughter fete.85

83 Ibid., line 105.
84 Ibid., line 172.
85 Ibid., lines 173-176.
She, weeping, throws herself at her daughter’s feet, begging her to change her mind in order to escape her father’s tortures. Christina responds, “Wherto thi doughter clepes thou me?” 86, and implies that her name comes from Christ, her true parent. The emotional appeal of a distraught mother has no power over Christina, for she no longer recognizes her ties to her parents. Christina has rejected her parents, has committed herself to virginity, and has disavowed pagan gods. She even attempts to destroy the gods that sit in the tower with her, as is reported to her father: “Thi doughter made the falle—/ Oute at the wyndow all are thei.” 87 She, like Margaret and Katherine, has rejected the version of women’s goodness upheld by the political, domestic, and religious structures of their worlds, and, in doing so—in refusing to acknowledge the systems of power meant to structure her life and decisions, in choosing Christianity, in divesting—has marked herself as a threat to be annihilated. She meets this annihilation without fear and without protest; these threats and condemnations come from illegitimate authorities to whom she need not prove her goodness or worth.

**Testimony: “Alle is to me grete joye that ya wene is woo”**

While my account of the divestment of the virgin martyrs foregrounds the saints’ apparent control over what authorities they recognize, this divestment does not prevent them from undergoing heinous tortures. Their refusal to acknowledge social, political, and religious power to compel their obedience or demand adherence to a certain conception of women’s goodness, in fact, elicits anger and violence from the rejected authorities. From the time of her divestment, each virgin occupies a kind of double-

87 Ibid., lines 143-144.
world; she is a bad woman whose brutal tortures further mark her as an unassimilable woman in a world that she has rejected, a world that she threatens. However, her divestment also has ensured her goodness in the eyes of God, and her tortures, her imperviousness to pain, her miraculous survival, her defeat of demons serve as testimony to the truth of his power. She is simultaneously held as bad and good by separate authorities, and she does not recognize the authorities that condemn her. Therefore, her testimony is not in response to accusations of wickedness; it is not in defense of herself. Her virginity has confirmed her goodness by the relevant religious authority (note that her virginity is always protected, even amidst horrible bodily tortures), and so her torture and death are not in the service of protecting her chastity, and thus her goodness. She dies because a good woman is a bad woman. Her death is the final testimony to God’s power, and her final act as a bad woman on earth.

_Saint Margaret_

Saint Margaret’s divestment angers emperor Olibrius so greatly that he attempts to torture her into submission and ultimately orders her execution. The brutality that takes up the majority of Margaret’s story has rightly alarmed critics, drawing criticism specifically for the ways in which it apparently upholds the man/mind, woman/body binary. Elizabeth Roberston argues that Saint Margaret’s hagiographical tradition presents a model of female sanctity that assumes a woman’s essential inescapable corporeality. Because a woman can never escape her body, her achievement of sanctity has to be through the body. Her temptation by the devil will be through the body and most probably will be sexual. She can overcome that sexual temptation only through her body, primarily by countering her physicality with her endurance of extreme physical torture […] These defining characteristics of female sanctity reflect the age’s more general views of the nature of woman.88

There is no denying that Saint Margaret’s story is one that is rooted in the violent acts performed on her body and the miraculous responses that her body has to these violations. Further, if we consider virginity to be a bodily state, indeed “her achievement of sanctity has to be through the body.” However, if our primary objection to the her story is the gruesome violences she endures, I encourage us to think of these tortures not as assurances of sanctity. Her body is certainly a site of retaliation, as violent authorities attempt to exert their power in the last way they can. If they cannot frighten her with the consequences of denying their gods, if they cannot weaponize their political power, if they cannot compel her by invoking family loyalty—they will attempt to subdue her body. Even then, her body is vulnerable to violation but miraculously avoids the pain and death until she chooses to die. Enduring physical torture is not, then, a way to ensure sanctity, a way to atone for sexual temptation, or a way to prove her goodness. It is simultaneously her punishment for being a wicked woman and testimony to the power of God.

In the stanzaic life of Margaret, when Olibrius fails to convince Margaret to renounce Christianity and become his wife, he orders his men to “Honge her uppe by the here, her Lord for to tene!/Bete her with scorgys tyl ye her dede wene!” Once they string her up by her hair and whip her with scourges, “The blode ranne from her bodye as watyr dos of schyve/ Tylle that they alle wendyn sche hadde departed the lyve.” Margaret’s body is drained of blood, so much so that her torturers believed her to be dead. Indeed, this torture should have killed Margaret. When Olibrius arrives to witness

89 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 117-118.
90 Ibid., lines 121-122.
her tortures, however, she speaks boldly, “Thou doyste as thou kenneste after Sathanas thin eme./ Me thinketh thise paynes swetter then mylkes reeme.”

Not only is Margaret still alive, she claims to enjoy the tortures. This so angers Olibirus that he exclaims with incredulity, “Ne geveth sche not an hawe;/For alle the Peyne that ye her doon, sche sette not bye a strawe!” It is unbelievable to him that she could be so physically and emotionally unaffected by these brutal tortures. These tortures and her response to them mark her as unassimilable—she cannot be a woman of this world and have a body that survives total blood loss. Her bloody, brutalized body is abject, a symbol of her wickedness, of her expulsion from the world. However, her survival, her claim that these tortures are “sweter then mylkes reeme,” serve as physical testimony to the power of God.

Olibirus continues his attempts to torture Margaret, ordering his men to pour hot oil over her. However, when they do, “The oyle ranne down by her hede as water doth fro welle/ The angel her kepte, they myghte her note qwelle.” Again, hot oil should have killed her, but her miraculous body, protected by angels, experiences this torture as water being poured over her head, evoking the imagery of baptism. In John Lydgate’s *The Lyfe of Saint Margaret*, onlookers to Margaret’s torture weep for her, imploring her to acquiesce to Olibrius and halt the violence: “But now, allas! Thi body is all rede,/ Steyned with blode, whereof we han pité.” Her brutalized body is further described as enduring would-be-fatal violence: “The rede blode rayle about hir face, lyke a river

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91 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 129-130.
92 Ibid., lines 131-132.
93 Ibid., lines 265-266.
94 Ibid., lines 241-242.
rennyng on the grene.”95 After noting the bloody abjection of her body, they specifically remark on the loss of her womanhood: “Whi has thou lost thyn excellent fairenesse?/ Whi hast thou lost thi shape and thy beauté?”96 Margaret’s tortures have made her unassimilable; tortures have robbed her of the qualities that made her desirable, her body an open wound. However, even in this state, she rebukes the people: “Goth hens, ye fals counsaylirys./Ye wordly peple, unsad and ever untrewe.”97 She is unequivocally marked as a bad woman, but persists in defending the power of her God—her body attests to her wickedness and the truth of Christianity.

In addition to facing public tortures, Margaret faces demonic foes while imprisoned. She encounters a “lothelye dragon” who attempts to consume and kill her on account of her devotion to Christ:

The lowe fleye oute from his tonge as the fyre of brymeston.  
That mayde felle to grounde tylle sche craked everye boone.  
He toke her up in his mowthe; he swalowed her anoon;  
Thorough vertue of her he braste, that harme hadde sche noon.98

Again, despite having her bones cracked and her flesh burned, Margaret’s miraculous body not only survives, but also destroys the body of the demon who could not come into contact with such holiness without annihilation. A second demon attempts to destroy her, and she overcomes him, setting her foot against his neck. In Lydgate’s hagiography, she then proclaims:

Remembre of thee how I have victorye,  
A clene mayde, by powere femynyne,  
Whiche shal be rad to myn ecrees of glorye.  
Perpetuely putte eke in memorie,

95 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 269-270.  
96 Ibid., lines 246-247.  
97 Lydgate, “The Lyfe of Seynt Margarete,” lines 253-254.  
98 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 183-186.
How a mayde hath put under fote
Sathan, that is of synne crope and roote.99

She claims that her goodness, her “powere femynyne,” has enabled her to survive these
demonic attacks. Her death needn’t ensure her goodness, which is evidently upheld by
her commitment to God and imbues her body with miraculous powers. However, this
virtuous body with fantastical abilities is also a mark of Margaret’s troublesomeness, a
mark of an inverted world in which a mere maiden can defeat pagans and demons—a
mark of her inevitable execution.

The clearest evidence that Margaret’s public torture and execution is in the
service of testifying to the power of God rather than proving or ensuring her own
goodness is her conversion of witnesses. Her survival does not make space for her
goodness in the world, it does not save her, and, importantly, that was never her goal, for
she explicitly called for her own martyrdom. Her miraculous body is made possible by
her goodness as a Christian virgin, but what it proves, what it testifies to, is Christian
truth: “Manye for that miracle turned ther moode fulle swythe/ and byleved on Jhesu
Cryste, both men, children, and wyfe.”100 Despite these many conversions, Margaret is
still executed. Even Malcus, the executioner, is converted after he “sawe the angeles” that
attended to her, but he still carries out the execution.101 Notably, Margaret is only killed
when she explicitly directs Malcus, “smyte of myn hede. Forgeven is thee that synne.”102
Despite testifying to the truth of her God, Margaret still cannot inhabit this world, and she
recognizes this. She has recognized this from her first moment of divestment. She has

99 Lydgate, “The Lyfe of Seynt Margaret,” lines 316-322.
100 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 279-280.
101 Ibid., lines 295.
102 Ibid., lines 328.
never been fighting for her life, for a place in this world, for her goodness to be
recognized. From the beginning she has utterly denied every tie she has to the world in
the service of bearing witness to her God’s truth; in doing so, she is tortured as a wicked
woman, marked as unassimilable, and annihilated.

Saint Katherine

The tortures Saint Katherine undergoes at the hands of Maxenceus similarly
punish her as a bad woman, mark her as abject other, and insist on the power of the
Christian God. Like Margaret, when she is whipped, “They made here body al red blood
ren/ That first was whyt as wahles bon.” Note that her body is not only brutalized, but
robbed of its specific feminine fairness. She is no longer a “whyt” beautiful maiden, but a
punished, abject one. Maxenceus also orders her to be starved in prison. However, God’s
angels come to Katherine in prison, heal her wounds, and sustain her through starvation.
Katherine’s survival in prison is the basis of the queen’s conversion to Christianity; for
when she arrives and finds Katherine well, she exclaims, “Kateryne, fol weel is thee!/ With
Jhesu Chryst meche mayst thou don,/ We have seen al thy prevyté.” After the
queen and her knight bear witness to Katherine’s miracle, “they were pul preste/ to suffre
deth for Goddys sake;/They levyd in Jhesu alther beste.” Immediately upon
conversion, the queen’s martyrdom is similarly foretold. The queen converts hundreds of
people, and thus draws the ire of the emperor. Maxenceus threatens “But thou forsake
Jhesu ful prest,/This schal be thy jugement.”

Fyrst thy pappys of thy brest

103 “Stanzaic life of Margaret,” lines 281-282.
104 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines 330-332.
105 Ibid., lines 358-360.
106 Ibid., lines 529-530.
With yrene hookes schole be rent;
And aftyrward withinne a thrawe
Thou schalt be hevedyd, ar evere I stent,
With houndys and foules al todrawe,
Thorwgh myn owne comaundement. 107

The first torture that he lists is that her woman’s breasts be torn apart by hooks—it is
designed to first and foremost violate her woman’s body in such a way that forever marks
her as a punished and discarded woman who cannot be reabsorbed into society. The
queen loses her breasts as Katherine loses her once “whyt as wahles bon” skin. A
precursor to Katherine herself, the queen is executed because she is both good and bad—
because a good woman is a bad woman.

It is worth noting, here, that Katherine’s testimony is not only bodily. Before
resorting to torture, Maxenceus attempts to compel Katherine to abandon her Christianity
by summoning the great philosophers of his land to convince her. He sends his
messengers to convene “alle the wyse men of hys lande” and ask “Yyf they with here
wysdam and here wyt/Myghten ovyrcome that mydyn yyng.” 108 Maxenceus still frames
this using the language of domination; he does not imagine the philosophers engaging in
an equal and respectful dialogue with Katherine, but instead wielding their power as wise
men to subdue her and stamp out her Christianity. Katherine’s mind and heart cannot be
subdued by the power of a philosophical and religious tradition she does not recognize,
and she thus remains unchanged. What’s more, her testimony to the truth of Christianity
converts the philosophers, who, when questioned by the emperor, “They sayden, on Jhesu

107 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines 531-536.
108 Ibid., lines 147, 151-152
that deyde on tree/ They wolde beleve withouten ende.” 109 This so “argevyd”110 the emperor that, in a rage, he “swoor he scholde quyte here hyre,” promising revenge. He “hem bynden feet and hande” declaring “They sholde be brend as brennyng brande/He garte hem caste al in gret feer.”111 He burns the philosophers who are called martyrs “fro Hym that dyde upon the tree.”112 Katherine’s testimony, here, is not at all rooted in her insisting on her own personal goodness, nor does it fundamentally change the world which she inhabits, shifting the conception of women’s goodness such that her’s can be recognized. Her testimony, again, is to her God’s power, which first compels conversion and then elicits execution—for, like, the queen, and like Katherine herself, these converts who have rejected the religious and political authority of the pagan emperor are marked as bad citizens who must be expelled—bad citizens who are welcomed by God: “To hevene were here soulys bore,/In Goddys frayry for to be.”113

Like Margaret, Katherine’s execution has dual significance. It is a moment when she is finally, violently expelled from the world as a bad woman, but, in the same moment, God calls his holy emissary into heaven. When her death is ordered by the enraged emperor, Katherine reflects once more on his lack of power over her:

   My soule greve he ne may,  
   For therof hath he no pousté.  
   Tak it to thee now, I thee pray,  
   Into the blysse that evere schal be!114

109 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines. 219-220.  
110 Ibid., line 221.  
111 Ibid., lines 222, 224-225.  
112 Ibid., line 230.  
113 Ibid., lines 231-232.  
114 Ibid., lines 721-724.
She explicitly denies his power over her soul, and directly asks God to take it “now” into heaven. God responds, “Come, my doughtyr! Come now smerte,/For herd is now thyn orysoun.” In the moment that God calls her soul to heaven, the world expels her body:

Sche stoupyd doun undyr the swerd -
Here swyre was whyt as ony swan.
Swythe he smot here hed off there,
But for the blood the mylk out ran.

Her neck, restored to its original whiteness, is severed, marking her as unassimilable with finality. Even in death, her miraculous body testifies to the miracles of her God as milk spills from her veins rather than blood. She has not died to prove or ensure her goodness; neither on earth nor in heaven. She is executed as a wicked woman who divested from the power structures that make meaning in her world, and is welcomed into heaven for the same. Her testimony cannot save her, and was never meant to in the first place.

Saint Christina

The excesses of Saint Christina’s tale mean that her tortures and miraculous responses both mirror and surpass those of Margaret and Katherine. She has three separate persecutors: first her father Urban, and then two pagan men, Dyons and Julian, who seem to arrive in the tale in order to finish the job that their predecessors could not—to punish Christina adequately for her refusal to abandon her commitment to Christianity and virginity. Christina’s miraculous survival takes on distinctive tone; she taunts her attackers and reacts violently against them. She is, of course, welcomed into heaven by God in her final moments, but Christina’s tale most strongly underscores the fact that her execution on earth is profoundly a reaction to a woman marked as wicked, not a woman

115 “Stanzaic life of Katherine,” lines 741-742.
116 Ibid., lines 751-753.
who is attempting to protect or prove her goodness. This goodness is so unequivocally ensured by her commitment to God that she can violently act out and jeer at her oppressors without fear, for she need not prove her virtue. Her bodily testimony, like that of Margaret and Katherine, is in the service of God’s truth. Christina is the most obvious example of a woman whose goodness in the eyes of God sanctions her disdainful rejection of those who condemn her—of a good woman who is a bad woman who is a dead woman.

When Urban becomes sufficiently enraged with his daughter’s destruction of the pagan gods in her tower, he orders her to be stripped naked and beaten: “And bete hir, nakyd as she was bor!” However, after being beaten until her attackers grew exhausted with exertion, “it seyd bi hir she felt no sor”—she seemed to feel no pain. Not only does her body not experience torture in the way it is meant, but she lashes out at her father: “Withoutyn honour and shame, I say/Abhomynable to God arte thou!” Her bodily imperviousness in-and-of itself could testify to God’s power, as with Margaret and Katherine. However, Christina’s vehement condemnation of her father as abominable to God further insists both on the supremacy of her God and her status as an unruly woman. Urban continues his attempts to punish and subdue his disobedient daughter in ways that we have seen before—by tearing her pure flesh with hooks:

Hir flesch, that was so white and shene,
It shuld be scraped of bi the bon
With hokyd nayles, sharpe and kene.
He bad that all hir lymmes bedene
Thei shuld be brokyn, on be on.

118 Ibid., line 159.
119 Ibid., lines 161-162.
120 Ibid., lines 224-232.
Like the bodies of Margaret and Katherine, Christina’s “white and shene” woman’s flesh is violently violated. Her flesh is ripped from her bones, which are subsequently broken. These tortures mark her as an unassimilable woman and should have incapacitated her, pushing her to the brink of death. Instead, Christina survives with what appears to be full control of her mind and body. More than that, when she sees her discarded flesh on the ground, “She toke a pece that was of kytte,/And even she caste at Urban’s eye;/And he had not blenchyd, she had hym hitte.” Christina picks up her own flesh and hurls it at her father, causing him to duck. While she throws it, she spits, “Have here a morcell, teraunt—take it!—/Of the flesche was getyn of thee.” Her miraculous survival serves not only as testimony to God’s power, but also as a macabre reminder of Christina’s divestment. She has so thoroughly rejected her father’s power over her that even the flesh that “was getyn of [him]” cannot be weaponized against her. Urban’s repeated efforts to torture and kill Christina are thwarted, resulting in him being struck dead when he swears that she will be beheaded “Tomorne, if I be lyvand man!” Christina’s testimony attests to the power of God, reminds us of the totalness of her divestment, and insists on her incompatibility with the world she inhabits.

Dyons enters the tale after Urban’s death with no introduction other than his desire to kill Christina: “Than cam Dyons with evyll spede/To make an ende of that virgyne.” He attempts to torture and kill her by putting her in “a grete vesell of hyrne fyne/fll of oile, pyche, and rosyn”; however, once cast into the vat of hot oil, “She lay

122 Ibid., lines 239-240.
123 Ibid., line 296.
124 Ibid., lines 305-306.
still and toke non hede.” Frustrated by the inefficacy of this torture, he orders his men to rock “hir to and froo/to make hir Payne more violent,” but Christina “laye also innocente/In credyll rokked, the feyld no wo.”125 Christina both “thanked God she was not shente,” and taunts Dyons:

Thi tormentes truly drede I noght.
And syn thou have thus begon,
Let noght, to thi malice be wroght
Or thou me to dethe have brought.126

She has testified to God’s power in the same breath that reminds Dyons that his tortures have no power over her, demanding that he not stop until she is dead—highlighting the futility of his power. When Dyons hears that Christina’s miraculous body has converted “Thre thowsand Sarzyns,” his “hert it braste in too,” and he dies. As with Urban, Dyons attempts to torture Christina are of double significance—they insist on her wickedness and incompatibility with the world even as they underscore the ultimate power of the Christian God.

Julian enters as mysteriously as Dyons: “Than come the thirde schrew at the laste:/Julyan, wele Y wote, he highte”127—a man whose first act in the tale is to order Christina to be cast into an oven. Christina’s persecutors seem to function as relatively indistinguishable representatives of the system that wishes to expel her. Ultimately, her tale is not one in which she is accused of wickedness and must defend herself, not a tale that demands proof of her goodness. It is a tale in which the world she inhabits goes to

126 Ibid., lines 338-341.
127 Ibid., lines 380-381.
war with her with the goal of elimination; the world tries again and again to expel her for her wickedness, not despite but because of her testimony to God’s power.

Julian’s tortures begin in a familiar place, but soon grow more idiosyncratic. His first attempt is, as mentioned, thrusting Christina into a hot oven. When it becomes clear, however, that “of that hete no more felte she/than sche in a bathe had been,” Julian changes tactics in a surprising way. He elicits the help of Marces, a snake charmer. He asks Marces to sick his deadly snakes on Christina since she managed to withstand the heat of his oven (so much so that she “songe ther as a maery maye”). Christina, predictably, “hath no drede of theym”; less predictably, the snakes do not attack her, but instead begin to care for her body:

For swett hir nek was wondre wete -  
Too wormes lykkyd it clene away.  
Too wente downe unto hir fete;  
Thai lykkyd them clene, and ther thei lay.

Finally, after licking her neck and feet clean, “At hir pappis too honge to play, As thei wold soke that maydyn swete.” The snakes begin to hang from her breasts as if they were nursing. This is the most remarkable element of this encounter with Marces and his snakes, as it functions as a dark parody of acceptable womanhood. Later Julian orders Christina’s breasts, described as “als rounde, ywysse,/As an appill that growes in the feld,” to be cut off, just like Katherine’s. Before this violent marking of her body as a violated, unassimilable woman, the snakes-nursing episode functions as an inversion of

129 Ibid., line 395.  
130 Ibid., lines 417-420.  
131 Ibid., lines 421-422.  
132 Ibid., lines 441-442.
her womanhood. Her womanhood is abject in the same moment that her body testifies to the protection of God’s love.

Infuriated both by the inefficacy of his tortures and Christina’s testimony to her God, Julian retaliates by cutting out her tongue: “Kytte oute hir tonge! It does me woo.” \(^{133}\) Not only can Christina still speak afterwards as if the violence never happened, she also

\[
\begin{align*}
toke hir tonge upe, where it lay, \\
And even sche caste it at Julian eye, \\
That aftir nevermore alway \\
On that syde myght he noght see.&&^{134}
\end{align*}
\]

Christina continues to speak, to testify, \textit{and} she picks up her discarded tongue, which has no value to her, throws its at Julian’s eye and blinds him. Her bodily tortures do not simply serve as testimony to God’s power and protection, but underscore both her absolute disavowal of Julian’s power and her antagonism with a world in which she cannot remain. Like Margaret and Katherine, Christina’s death has a double-significance. “For ire and wreth,” Julian shoots Christina with arrows, “but when Cristyn was smyten so, Hir soule wente up to heven so brighte”\(^{135}\). Unequivocally, Christine is executed as a bad woman who has rejected and antagonized the power systems that attempt to contain and control her. Her bodily testimony, i.e. the violence her body endures and miraculously survives, is not in the service of protecting her chastity or proving her goodness, but is simultaneously punishment for wickedness and evidence of God’s power. Neither Margaret nor Katherine nor Christina are defending themselves from

\(^{134}\) Ibid., lines 465-468.  
\(^{135}\) Ibid., lines 486-487.
men’s accusations of wickedness, nor are they ever faced with God’s doubting their virtue. From the moment of her divestment, each virgin is judged as bad and good by separate authorities, and these hagiographies tell the story of what happens when a woman’s allegiance is to her God and her goodness is not compatible with the power of men.

**The Problem of Exemplarity**

If the virgin martyrs present us with a model of women’s goodness anchored in total divestment and testimony to religious truth that ultimately must end in death, what can these hagiographies teach us about the literary legacy of women who undergo violent executions in the service of proving their goodness? Do these legends, “judiciously chosen both to inspire and to direct religious women,” give us a paradigm that celebrates violent violations of women as their only path to goodness or holiness? If the lessons of these tales were always meant to be instructive to women readers, are the fates of the saints doomed to be repeated forever? While the literary legacy of the virgin martyrs into the early modern period is undeniable, I argue that its perniciousness lies not simply in its glorification of violent sacrifice. Instead, the dangerous inheritance of these tales is also their inimitability. These tales certainly rely on grotesque violations of the female body that Winstead calls “thinly disguised pornography,” a legacy that is invoked in texts like *The Tragedy of Mariam* and *Titus Andronicus*. In addition to eroticized violence, however, these hagiographies also portray women who participate in effective testimony. The effectiveness of this testimony depends on the fact that the saints

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137 Wintead, *Chaste Passions*, 3.
are not attempting to testify to their own goodness in the face of men who doubt or deny it. What happens, then, when the men who violate women are part of the same authority, part of the same system of power that must deem them good? What happens when women must prove their goodness to doubtful husbands and fathers who believe them guilty? The divestment of the virgin martyrs is what makes possible those elements of the tales that some feminist scholars have identified as empowering—their outspokenness, their refusal to be silenced, their steadfastness. This is precisely the element of the tales that cannot be replicated by women who must be held good and holy by worldly institutions and powers that are often the same institutions that violate and condemn them.

The exemplarity of the legends and their inherent inimitability was always going to create a paradox for women readers. Catherine Sanok explores the nature of virgin martyr exemplarity at length, noting the particular way in which the legends “address a feminine audience, often explicitly, identifying the saint as a gendered exemplar.”138 Sanok further comments on this phenomenon, noting that the virgin martyr legends, in addressing a female audience thus constructed a kind of “feminine community” of reading, religious women, despite the diversity of such a community:

Medieval women were surely too diverse in their person experience and their social identities to form a single coherent interpretive community. But saints’ lives, although they sometimes also acknowledge differences based on age, sexual status, and class affiliation, generally imagine a collective feminine response.139

139 Ibid., xii.
Sanok notes the fact that “exemplarity is, on the surface, a regulatory fiction: saints’ lives present idealized feminine behavior and encourage female audiences to adopt it.” In addition to ostensibly prescribing a model of women’s behavior for diverse female readership, Lynn Staley underscores this idealized behavior of good women as threatening to medieval society. She speaks specifically about Chaucer’s Saint Cecilia in *The Second Nun’s Tale*.

Cecilia offers a complete reversal of accepted social norms: she deceives her parents and others about her marriage; she dominates her husband; she engenders none but spiritual offspring; she belongs to an underground sect outlawed by Roman law. She not only presents a challenge to authority (something she shares with many saints), she offers a new ordering of hierarchies far more threatening than any of the Wife of Bath’s solutions to contemporary relationships.

The “challenge to authority” and “new ordering of hierarchies” that Staley mentions are what I would more strongly articulate as divestment. When women readers whose would-be husbands are Christian men rather than violent pagans, divestment becomes more complicated. Staley continues, “If Cecilia can accuse Almachius of making gods of stone, of worshipping only images, of what might she accuse the Church during the period from 1373-1385, when the Church was a decidedly political institution?” Women are being encouraged to imitate saints whose performance is rooted explicitly in total worldly divestment by the inherently worldly institutions, like marriage and the Christian church.

Sanok picks up this line of analysis regarding *The Second Nun’s Tale* when she points out the friction between the Saint Cecilia’s model of goodness and medieval “dominant social codes”: “the Second Nun’s performance of a hagiographic text responds

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140 Sanok, *Her Life Historical*, ix.
142 Ibid., 329.
to discursive arenas—public preaching, civic performance, and feminine devotional practice—that were as closely controlled and potentially threatening to dominant social codes.” The divestment of the martyrs proves to be the troublesome element of the tales even for their original intended audiences. The actions of the holy exemplars are paradoxically threatening; we begin to see the creation of the double-bind in which the same authority holds women as good and bad simultaneously.

The problems of divestment and testimony becomes even clearer when we follow the legacy of the legends into the early modern period. While in the medieval imagination “the Christian heroine was almost invariably a virgin,” in early modern England, “Married chastity rather than ‘nunnish virginity’ became the ideal state for women.” If the legends give readers women who choose to divest from their social worlds specifically in order to avoid marriage, what does this mean for a new version of women’s holiness that now valorizes wifehood? When it deeply matters to early modern women whether their fathers and husbands—patriarchal authority—holds them good, when divestment is impossible, what happens when the same patriarchal authority is what endangers, violates, accuses, and condemns women?

Karen Bamford points out, “The hagiographical tradition […] emerged on the Jacobean stage, where it profoundly affected the representation of female heroism. The virgin martyr sets the implicit standard for the heroine threatened with sexual

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violence.” Donaldson, Violence, 74. Certainly, the violence of the tales is replicated, and we should attend to that violent inheritance. However, I argue that this violence does not result from the replication of this “standard” of goodness, but instead from its impossibility. In early modern literature, when woman is threatened by sexual violence, her divestment from patriarchal authority cannot protect her, for her marriageability or her wifehood is a marker of her goodness. When a woman whose idealized goodness is located in “married chastity” comes under suspicion of infidelity, impurity, or wickedness, she must appeal to the moral judgement of the patriarchy, the same authority that levied the accusations, or worse, violated her. This inherently renders her testimony ineffectual. She cannot testify to her goodness when, for example, she must appeal to the same power that compels her violation or insists that her innocence signifies wickedness. The virgin martyrs refuse to recognize political, religious, and social power systems that accuse them of wickedness; they are never directly concerned with accusations against them. The testimony they offer is not the service of proving their goodness, which to God and them is never actually in question. However, when women whose goodness is equated with their marriageability, they cannot simply choose martyrdom when they are threatened by violence or accusations. They become double-bound. The same patriarchal authority that valorizes marital chastity eroticizes it, the same authority that holds a chaste wife good doubts and violates her, the same authority that dictates women’s good actions suspects them. The virgin martyrs leave a legacy of impossibility: the double-bind of proving one’s goodness to authorities who mark them as wicked.

146 Bamford, Sexual Violence, 32.
Conclusion

This chapter is rooted in tracking a genealogy of literary violence against women, with the clear purpose of charting a disjuncture. However, the glaring, unaddressed connection between the virgin martyrs and their early modern legacy remains women’s execution. These texts all still end with dead women. Divestment cannot save the lives of the martyrs, and the double-bind that I will explore in the remainder of this dissertation demands women’s execution. If these different relationships between women and systems of power both lead to the same violent end, are the differences that inhere significant? Does pointing out the divestment of the martyrs undercut a feminist critique of the violence they still undergo? Is it more important to feminist scholarship to attend first and foremost to shared experiences of violence, to the compulsory death of women, to condemn the violation and torture of women rather than parse out the particularities of power that distinguish one experience of fatal violence from another?

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, my goal has not been to suggest that the virgin martyrs inhabit a world where their exercise of agency, their fierce independence, should eclipse their torture and death, while the violation and death of early modern women on the page is somehow more tragic. Feminist scholarship is right to point out the noxious problems of celebrating the death of women in any context. It is my belief, though, that paying careful attention to the nuances of these stories is crucial, in that only then does literature help us understand the complicated and insidious ways that violent power takes hold and oppresses the vulnerable. We do ourselves a disservice if we refuse to acknowledge for example, the way that women’s agency can be weaponized against them, or how women’s testimony is often compelled in order to further condemn them.
Rather than relying on catch-all heuristics about patriarchal violence, we should insist on tracking the nature and transformation of oppressive power in literature such that we do not flatten victims into a type, such that not miss the futilities and possibilities of resistance.
Chapter 2: “Not Dead? Not Yet Quite Dead?”: Abjection and the Double-Bind of Shakespeare’s Violated Women

Introduction

“Nobody. I myself. Farewell.” With these final words uttered to a distraught and confused Emilia, Desdemona “commends [herself] to [her] kind lord,” and dies (Othello 5.2.134). Desdemona miraculously has the chance to wrench back a few breaths from life to speak Othello’s name to a sympathetic ear. Instead, she harrowingly appears to abdicate. For feminist criticism in particular, Desdemona’s “Nobody. I myself.” is especially significant, in that it appears to be emblematic of a phenomenon that persists: women’s internalization of the narratives of their own complicity in the violence they experience. This admission of guilt fundamentally alters Desdemona’s character; her strength throughout the play culminates in a vulnerability in death, leaving her susceptible to believing her own complicity. Her voice is subsumed under a single utterance—a self-negating utterance that serves to swallow Othello’s violence and wretch her own guilt. Tragically, it seems, Desdemona is victimized twice—once by her husband’s violence, and again by the violence of women’s internalized shame.

Indeed, scholars have long noted the striking submission of Desdemona. Valerie Wayne frames Desdemona’s submission not as complicity but as a symptom of her internalization of misogynistic narratives. She writes that in Desdemona’s mind, “in being termed a whore, Desdemona becomes one […] For Desdemona there is no difference at all, because she is unable to resist this rhetoric when it comes from her own

husband. Instead she thinks it may be right.”148 Wayne reads Desdemona’s behavior as “show[ing] how misogyny spreads within a text and culture, for as it works through language, it constructs the very thoughts and deeds that Desdemona did not do.”149 Desdemona then becomes a character who cannot think herself out of her own complicity—a woman who cannot believe herself to be other than what she is in the imagination of her husband.

I aim to build from this feminist critical foundation. In doing so, however, I also suggest that reading Desdemona as an interpolated victim who lacks the ability to identify the root of the violences she endures misses important aspects of Desdemona’s character, and fails to understand how the play is staging the double-bind that confines early modern women’s ability to offer testimony to their experiences of violence and demand redress. Early modern women were inscribed within a system—both social and legal—designed to illicit their testimony and weaponize it against them. Thus, in telling their stories of violence—in testifying—women were not always able to speak freely about their experiences, or, if they did, their testimony might not bring justice. I argue that literature intervenes on this problematic, troubling the notion that women’s testimony signifies women’s belief in their own complicity, making legible aspects of women’s experiences of and responses to violence. Thus, if we insist on focusing only on Desdemona’s moment of testimony—her “Nobody. I myself.”—we, at best, paper over the play’s staging of her attempts at self-defense, and, at worst, suffer a misreading of her

final lines that confirms rather than problematizes prevailing notions of early modern women’s complicity in their experiences of domestic and sexual violence.

Before turning to Othello, I begin with The Rape of Lucrece and Titus Andronicus. I argue that these two texts are early Shakespearean attempts to thematize the double-bind later found in Othello. Lucrece and Lavinia are both victims of sexual violence who testify to their violation but are killed regardless. One way to parse the fates of these women is to rely on the lens of objectification and dehumanization; these women are symptoms of injustice and tragic self-sabotage. However, drawing from Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, I offer an alternative interpretation, rooted first in the argument that the literary representations of Lucrece and Lavinia make legible what I will call the abject suspension of these violated women. This abject suspension is a condition under which women, after experiencing sexual or domestic violence, become briefly suspended between life and death as a condition of their abjection. It is within this abject suspension that Lucrece and Lavinia recognize their violation and the fault of their attackers, but are also trapped within a system that inevitably demands their life as proof of innocence—a system whose very existence depends on the guilt of violated women until their death exonerates (and neutralizes) them.

Kristeva gives us the quintessential example of a rotting corpse as abject; that which is profoundly not-I, “corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.” She goes on to explain, however, that it is not simply the visceral rejection of a corpse that renders it abject, not simply its “lack of cleanliness or health that causes

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abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."\textsuperscript{151} Lucrece’s and Lavinia’s violated bodies, then, viewed as both contaminated and contaminating, threaten social order in their ruptured boundaries. These bodies threaten the subject, the \textit{I}, in this case the men whose identities depend upon the protection of women’s bodily boundaries: the fathers who wish to marry off their daughters (Titus) and the husbands who marry them (Collatine). Once rendered abject, I argue that Lucrece and Lavinia become suspended between life and death. A kind of suspension or “hovering” is inherent in Kristeva’s conception of the abject, as Rina Arya notes: “Abject things cross boundaries, making their states indeterminate and it is this in-between state that renders the object abject.”\textsuperscript{152} The abject “lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated”\textsuperscript{153}; a condition of abjection is the inability to be “ingested or incorporated into the system but they remain a threat.”\textsuperscript{154} Lucrece and Lavinia are suspended between life and death in that while they are alive, they cannot reinhabit the social roles vacated by their violations, but still signify a threat to this social order and thus must die.

It is this abject suspension that serves as the foundation for my argument that Shakespeare's women are neither complicit in their own death nor interpolated by narratives of their own guilt. From their abject suspension, Lucrece and Lavinia can recognize the ways in which they are double-bound by a system that enables their violation and compels their testimony, only to weaponize that testimony and condemn

\textsuperscript{151} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 4.  
\textsuperscript{152} Rina Arya, \textit{Abjection and Representation} (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 27.  
\textsuperscript{153} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 1.  
\textsuperscript{154} Ayra, \textit{Abjection and Representation}, 5.
them anyway. They are women consciously trapped by the inevitability of their death when they try to speak in their defense. Lucrece and Lavinia know themselves to be innocent of a crime of which they are found guilty by a system that compels their death. 

It is specifically the recursive nature of the abject that allows for this recognition on the part of Lucrece and Lavinia; the “I” subject depends on the “not-I” abject for its own existence, for maintaining its boundaries and identity. Therefore, violated, abjected women are a necessary part of a system predicated on linking men's status and women's worth to the protection of women's bodily virtue. Lucrece and Lavinia do not believe themselves to be complicit but recognize that their violation and the insistence on their guilt are part and parcel of a system that would never have believed their testimony in the first place.

It is from *Lucrece* and *Lavinia* that I turn to *Othello*, Shakespeare’s most nuanced exploration of the abject suspension of violated women. I argue that Desdemona's abject suspension begins not with a bodily violation or physical breach of boundaries, but with Othello's belief in this violation. This belief in Desdemona's sexual impurity is enough to render her abject, to mark her, in Kristeva's words, as “a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.”\(^{155}\) Once rendered abject, Desdemona can offer no testimony to her innocence that does not further implicate her—she is double-bound, just as Lucrece and Lavinia. She must die; she is the abject suspended. What is remarkable about Desdemona is that her suspension between life and death is finally made literal after Othello murders her. As is widely remarked on, Desdemona appears to die twice at the end of *Othello*; Othello smothers her, yet she “comes back” to offer her final words to Emilia. Here,

Desdemona is, literally, always and already dead, and thus Desdemona recognizes the inefficacy of her testimony and the inevitability of her death. In this abject suspension, Desdemona is both innocent and guilty; she recognizes the injustice of Othello’s violence and acknowledges that despite her innocence, she was “guilty” as soon as Othello believed her to be. Desdemona’s “Nobody. I myself.” is, first, a recognition of this; she is guilty because she is perceived to be. Desdemona’s “Nobody. I myself.” is, first, a recognition of this; she is guilty because she is perceived to be. Desdemona’s need not accept her guilt; it is something determined and carried out by Othello. Second, Desdemona's words signal her recognition of her abjection: she is neither subject nor object, she is in-between—she is “Nobody. I myself.” She is what the system needs to bring into existence in order to annihilate. Her violation is compelled, her testimony weaponized, her guilt insisted on, and her death inevitable. Ultimately, then, _Lucrece, Titus_, and _Othello_ are examples of how literature does something profound—it contextualizes moments of women’s “failed” testimony, challenging the notion that this is a failure at all. Rather, this “failed” testimony is a symptom of a systemic double-bind that manufactures and demands women’s guilt in crimes committed against them.

**The Epistemology of Rape**

In thinking about how Shakespeare’s texts intervene on the early modern problematic of women’s testimony in the face of abjection, I turn toward Garthine Walker’s crucial study on the adjudication of rape in early modern England in which she addresses the epistemological difficulties in reading the scarce legal records of reported sexual assaults and the ensuing trials. She is responding to scholarship that has foregrounded “the significance of metaphor in early modern women’s rape narratives” and the fact that in women’s accounts of their violations, “the raped body ‘scarcely
appears.’”  This scholarship links the absence of sexual violation in these accounts to victimized women’s memory repression. Walker troubles this link, suggesting that reading the apparent elisions in this way misses the agency and intentionality that women employ in their retellings. Rather than repression, Walker suggests that what better explains the notable erasure of women’s experience of rape as such has more to do with women’s conscious recognition of the limitations that structure what they can say without losing credibility.

Walker first highlights the impossibility of women’s narration of rape given the perceived connection between women’s sexual submission and women’s consent. She writes, “An assertion of rape […] implied that she had been forced to submit to the rapist. But sexual submission indicated consent.” Thus, if women focused heavily on the act of sexual violence in their testimony, they risked undermining the very claim of violation that they intended to make: “Telling of rape involved a wretched paradox: the portrayal of a sexual act in which female submission was absent. This, it seems to me, is a compelling explanation for the absence of detailed accounts of sex in so many rape narratives.” Walker’s identification of this paradox underscores a wider social reality that women were up against: the belief that women were complicit in the violences that they experience.

If to submit was to consent, women’s testimony needed to carefully avoid this suggestion. Therefore, a woman might highlight her struggle, her resistance. In fact,

158 Ibid., 6.
Walker writes that this was the legal definition of non-consent: “The legal requirements of proof of non-consent or corroboration meant that a raped woman had to present tangible proof that she had adequately resisted the rapist. Non-consent is often defined as active physical resistance.” 159 However, these legally imperative descriptions of physical resistance are also not heavily featured in women’s testimonies. Walker attributes this to a calculated decision that women made in response to yet another paradoxical bind. She writes, “Only a discordant, disorderly, dishonourable woman used violence […] A woman who described her own attempt to fight off a violent man was potentially in an untenable position. Would such a woman make a credible witness? Was she really so chaste?” 160 In narrating physical resistance, a woman risked marking herself as an unruly woman, calling into question the very vulnerability and chastity that she was attempting to prove. A woman who narrates forced “submission” risks suggesting her consent, while a woman who insists on physical non-consent risks suggesting that she was “asking for it”. Therefore, Walker argues, women avoided explicit language of sexual violence in their testimonies, instead sublimating this violence into metaphorical descriptions of “disruption and pollution.”

Walker’s methodology is underwritten by a commitment similar to my own as I approach Shakespeare’s texts—a rejection of reading the peculiarities and elisions in women’s testimony about sexual violence as symptoms of the way that patriarchal and misogynistic structures infiltrate, determine, and limit women’s understanding of themselves. Instead, Walker’s analysis foregrounds women's recognition of their double

159 Walker, “Rereading Rape,” 8.
160 Ibid., 9.
bind rather than their internalization of it. This is particularly helpful context as I turn to *Lucrece, Titus, and Othello;* where there appears to be women’s interpolation into and capitulation to patriarchal power structures, there is instead a recognition of how these power structures have trapped them. Walker calls our attention to the ways in which the violences that early modern women experienced were so often self-implicating, especially once a woman decided to offer testimony. Similarly, I argue that Shakespeare’s literary imaginary makes explicit what these legal documents cannot: the thoughts, experiences, and violations of these women leading up to their moment of testimony. Like the women in Walker’s legal accounts, Shakespeare’s women are double-bound by a system designed to abject women and insist on their punishment.

**Lucrece’s Rape and Rage**

Walker pushes us to think carefully about early modern women's profound awareness of the boundaries imposed upon their bodies and their testimony. With this in mind, I turn to Lucrece, the quintessential example of a violated woman who believes in her own guilt. Shakespeare’s Lucrece laments “[her] life’s foul deed” and believes only “[her] blood will wash the slander of [her] ill”—of her “crime,” “stain,” or “pollution.”

Scholars have argued extensively about Lucrece’s internalization of her own guilt, her belief that she must sacrifice her corrupted body. While this is undeniably true, I argue that it misses crucial aspects of Lucrece's response to her violation. In the early modern imagination, a raped woman becomes unchaste, polluted, unable to occupy her role as faithful wife; she cannot be reintegrated. In this way, she is both abject—contaminated

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and contaminating—and suspended: “The abject hovers ‘at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable’ […] but is itself unassimilable, which means that we have to contemplate its otherness in its proximity to us but without it being able to be incorporated.”\(^{162}\) After her violation, Lucrece is both alive and already dead, and she recognizes this. This last point—her recognition—is crucial, as recognition is not the same as acceptance. Lucrece also indicts Tarquin and imagines a world in which the double-bind that compels violated women to death is broken. Through the literary imaginary, we see Lucrece recognize that her testimony cannot exonerate her; however, we also see her condemn the injustice of a system that facilitates her violation and then demands her death as payment.

Lucrece’s suicide has haunted feminist scholarship: how can we understand her fatal guilt when she is blameless? In her landmark essay on *Lucrece*, Coppélia Kahn writes, “Shakespeare focuses our attention on the curious fact that Lucrece acquires a moral stigma from being raped.”\(^{163}\) Some scholars answer this problem with a refraction of the crime: given the Roman context, Tarquin’s crime is against Collatine rather than Lucrece.\(^{164}\) Lucrece becomes not guilty of her own violation, but instead a symbol of her disgraced husband, and thus, Rome. However, decentering, even eliding, Lucrece’s violated body and the experience of sexual violence is not a satisfactory reading of Lucrece’s self-destructive shame. For, as Kahn reminds us at the outset of her article,

\(^{162}\) Arya, *Abjection and Representation*, 4.


“The central problem in Shakespeare’s Lucrece is rape.” Kahn points out what she sees as the fundamental disjuncture between the world of the poem and the reaction of modern readers: “Our difficulties in comprehending the basis on which Lucrece judges herself guilty of such a crime arise from her conception of herself as a woman in a patriarchal society, a conception which renders irrelevant for her the question of moral responsibility in rape.” I would like to follow Kahn in her framing of Lucrece’s guilt as a product of her context—a context that, in some ways, sacrifices moral culpability on the altar of women’s bodily purity. However, I would also reframe Kahn’s use of “irrelevancy.” While Lucrece, from her abject suspension, certainly recognizes that the fact of Tarquin’s moral responsibility cannot exonerate her, I also argue that his moral responsibility is highly relevant to Lucrece’s imagining a world beyond the one that has trapped her in guilt and inevitable death.

I turn first to the rape itself and the system that compels it. Lucrece’s experience of violence occurs within the double bind that ensures her victimization and silence. Lucrece is a chaste and faithful wife to Collatine, and it is this chastity that makes her irresistible to Tarquin. Chastity becomes dangerous for women, while violated (read: unchaste, abject) women are considered dangerous to society. Further, when Tarquin is attacking her, Lucrece attempts both to struggle against him and to talk him out of assaulting her. Tarquin interrupts her: “‘No more,’ quoth he, ‘by heaven, I will not hear thee./ Yield to my love. If not, enforced hate/ Instead of love’s coy touch shall rudely tear thee.’” Here, Tarquin silences Lucrece’s protestations, physically and rhetorically.

166 Ibid., 49.
167 Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece, lines 667-669.
trapping her. He silences her (“I will not hear thee”), telling Lucrece that she can choose between being violently raped (“enforced hate”) or yielding to “love’s coy touch.” Of course, this is a false dichotomy, for in “yielding” to Tarquin, Lucrece neither consents nor accepts his “love”—violence always remains. However, Tarquin threatens to attack her with more force if she continues to struggle; she must choose between two types of violences, one of which has been labeled as “love.” Indeed, Tarquin forces Lucrece to “yield” to his “love” also when he re-narrates her “choice”: If she struggles, he will kill her and slander her name, if she “yields,” he will not tell anyone of her violation. Again, she is presented with a false dichotomy: to struggle and be met with violence and slander or to yield to “love” and secrecy. Lucrece “yields” in order to avoid slander, death, and further violence—but in doing so, she is still violently violated, still abjected. All this, too, is tied up in the “erotic quality of Lucrece’s chastity.”168 Her faithfulness underwrites Tarquin’s desire to rob her of it; she is, from the outset, trapped in a system that demands chastity, eroticizes it, and compels her submission to violence. This suggests, then, that this social system compels the creation of the abject. Arya writes:

> The abject then is that which traverses and transgresses; that which endangers a structure and finds itself on the wrong side of the boundary, often giving rise to the prohibitions specified by the taboo. The boundary is in place to safeguard systems and functions and to separate and demarcate different states, such as life and death, and the sacred and the profane. 169

In Lucrece's case, then, her abjection reifies and protects the system from which she is cast out; a system in which women's virtue is crucial for both men’s and women’s statuses is a system that needs the abject—the unvirtuous, the contaminated. The literary

169 Arya, Abjection and Representation, 4.
imaginary illustrates this double-bind to the reader: we see and hear Tarquin’s threats and Lucrece’s impossible “decision” which is no decision at all, and we encounter them in a way that Collatine does not when Lucrece testifies. We bear witness to her inevitable abjection.

When Tarquin leaves after raping Lucrece, the text reads, “He thence departs, a heavy convertite;/ She there remains, a hopeless castaway.” In these lines, Tarquin becomes repentant—something only possible after a woman has been violated—and Lucrece becomes a “castaway.” Immediately following the assault, the poem recognizes Lucrece’s social death in her abjection, as does she herself: “[Tarquin] in his speed looks for the morning light;/[Lucrece] prays she never may behold the day.” Light will expose what has been done—something from which Tarquin can escape but for which Lucrece can never atone. Just as her testimony could not alter the course of Tarquin’s violence (“I will not hear thee.”), neither can her testimony save her. Carolyn Williams writes, “Any public announcement of her plight increases her humiliation; her acknowledged violation may also cast doubt on her veracity. Rape either gags her or robs her words of significance.” Testifying to the violence in front of Collatine demands her self-sacrifice: her “rape is authenticated in death.” Lucrece, paradoxically bound, raped for her chastity, self-effaced in her testimony; she lives but cannot make a choice that does not end in her self-annihilation—she is the abject suspended.

170 Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece, line 744.
171 Ibid., lines 745-746.
173 Ibid., 105.
Despite the inefficacy of her testimony and her apparent acceptance of her own complicity in her “crime,” Lucrece also unequivocally identifies Tarquin as the guilty party. From her abject suspension, Lucrece, when she is not offering testimony to others, is able to express herself in solitude—profoundly literary expressions available only to the reader. These expressions demonstrate that despite Lucrece’s recognition of the “stain” that she has incurred and the inevitability of her own death, she is deeply resentful of the system that sacrifices her for her own violation. During her famous apostrophes to Night, Opportunity, and Time, Lucrece turns a violent anger toward Tarquin as she demands of Time:

Let him [Tarquin] have time to tear his curled hair,  
Let him have time against himself to rave,  
Let him have time of Time’s help to despair,  
Let him have time to live a loathed slave,  
Let him have time a beggar's orts to crave,  
And time to see one that by alms doth live  
Disdain to him disdained scraps to give. 174

Lucrece specifically imagines Tarquin starving and engaging in self-directed violence. She fantasizes about Tarquin’s body being in deprivation and pain, punished by his own hand. As she continues to rail against Tarquin, she imagines him overcome by fear and self-hatred such that he kills himself:

At his own shadow let the thief run mad,  
Himself himself seek every hour to kill!  
Such wretched hands such wretched blood should spill;  
For who so base would such an office have  
As slanderous deathsman to so base a slave? 175

174 Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece, lines 981-987.  
175 Ibid., lines 997-1001.
Lucrece’s violent imaginings transpose the violences she has endured and the self-annihilation that she knows she must endure onto Tarquin; she imagines a world outside this abject suspension that presupposes her death, a world in which justice demands from her aggressor what is currently being demanded from her. Lucrece, then, recognizes the inevitability of her death and the inefficacy of her testimony, but she can also identify the ways in which this conception of justice is mistaken and cruel.

As Lucrece continues, she recognizes that she rails “in vain” and “this helpless smoke of words doth [her] no right.” Thus, she compels herself to suicide, and wonders at her own hesitance:

Poor hand, why quiver'st thou at this decree?
Honour thyself to rid me of this shame:
For if I die, my honour lives in thee;
But if I live, thou livest in my defame:
Since thou couldst not defend thy loyal dame,
And wast afeard to scratch her wicked foe,
Kill both thyself and her for yielding so.

Here, she articulates why she must kill herself, but she also laments the fact that her “poor hand” “couldst not defend” herself against Tarquin, as she was “afeard to scratch her wicked foe.” Of course, recall that Lucrece’s “fear” of fighting back was ensured by Tarquin’s threats. While she mourns her inability to fight off Tarquin, she imagines a world in which women are no longer victimized by men’s ability to threaten them with violence and slander: “Stone him [Tarquin] with hardened hearts harder than stones./ And let mild women to him lose their mildness./ Wilder to him than tigers in their wildness.” While her “poor hand” was compelled by fear to cease resisting, she

176 Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*, line 1027.
177 Ibid., lines 1030-1036.
178 Ibid., lines 977-980.
imagines a world in which Tarquin is the victim of stoning, and that the “mildness” of women is exchanged for a violent “wildness” directed at Tarquin himself. She specifically comments on the injustice of women being physically overpowered by men, and then being punished for it:

O, let it not be held
Poor women’s faults, that they are so fulfill’d
With men’s abuses: those proud lords, to blame,
Make weak-made women tenants to their shame.179

Again, she imagines a world in which the shame of men’s violence belongs to men themselves, rather than being projected onto victimized women. While she recognizes that she, caught between life and death, cannot alter her fate, she fundamentally rejects her suicide as satisfactory form of justice.

The final moment that underscores Lucrece’s recognition of the injustice that traps her and structures her reality is her violent response to the painted representation of Sinon, the Greek soldier responsible for facilitating the Trojan horse attack. When she begins reflecting on Sinon, and how “so much guile” lurked behind a kind façade, “Tarquin’s shape came in her mind the while.”180 She continues to think on Sinon’s deception, always associating him with Tarquin, finally violently lashing out at the painting:

Here, all enraged, such passion her assails,
That patience is quite beaten from her breast.
She tears the senseless Sinon with her nails,
Comparing him to that unhappy guest
Whose deed hath made herself herself detest:
      At last she smilingly with this gives o'er;
      'Fool, fool!' quoth she, 'his wounds will not be sore.181

179 Shakespeare, The Rape of Lucrece, lines 1257-1260.
180 Ibid., line 1536.
181 Ibid., lines 1565-1568.
Lucrece, whose “poor hand” failed to attack Tarquin in the flesh, is out of “patience” and “senseless[ly],” furiously tears at the deceptive face of Sinon, within which she has located the deceptive face of Tarquin. She literally tries to destroy a façade which enables men’s deception and violence, and she does so out of a desire to reject and punish Tarquin’s violence against her. She ceases only when she realizes “his wounds will not be sore”—the violences, the anger, the pain she expresses in this abject suspension can do nothing to redress her wrongs, can do nothing to save her. Lucrece, then, while acknowledging her “stain”—one that demands her death—also privately indicted and acts out against the patriarchal structures that implicate her in her own violation, imagining a world in which men are held accountable for their actions, where women’s testimony does not doom them, and where it becomes possible for women to achieve redress for their injuries.  

**Lavinia: Impossible Philomel**

Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* gives us another example of a woman whose experience of rape compels her execution. Lavinia’s rape, as well as Titus’ revenge on Chiron, Demetrius, and Tamora, is modeled after the rape, mutilation, and revenge of

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182 Livy, *The History of Rome, Books 1-5*, ed. and trans. Valerie M Warrior (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006): 79-81. It is worth noting that in the original Livy source material, Lucretia seems to be unequivocally self-indicting, even in the face of reassurances from Collatine and Lucius Junius Brutus: “They tried to console her distress by shifting the guilt from the woman who had been forced to the man who had done the wrong, saying it is the mind that errs, not the body. For where there has been no intent, there is no blame” (81). However, especially in an early modern retelling, this kind of ostensible exoneration feels disingenuous given the ways in which unchastity is punished. Further, as we have seen, proving an untainted mind—proving, against Tarquin’s testimony, that she did not “submit,” that she remained resistent but not unruly—was a near impossible task.
Philomela from Book VI of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Of course, the important
difference between Lavinia and Philomela is that Philomela exacts revenge and escapes
while Lavinia is killed. I argue that in evoking the myth of Philomela but fundamentally
altering it, Shakespeare’s *Titus* reinscribes Lavinia-as-Philomela within the same double-
bind that dooms Lucrece. With Philomela as her example, Lavinia attempts to exact
revenge and transcend her abject suspension; however, Shakespeare has redrawn and
reified the boundaries on this realm, rejecting the possibility for transcendence, and
containing Lavinia within the early modern double-bind.

When Lavinia returns to the stage after her assault, the stage direction reads
“Lavinia, her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished.” Demetrius and
Chiron, her attackers, cruelly mock her inability to speak or communicate in writing:

    *Demetrius*: So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
    Who ‘twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.
    *Chiron*: Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
    An if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe.

Demetrius and Chiron underscore her sudden separation from those around her. In doing
so, the brothers call attention to her bodily mutilation—her bloody wrists where her
hands were, her bloody mouth where her tongue was—her abjection:

    Abjection occurs when the boundary of the self, to give an example, is under the
    threat of invasion by, for instance, ‘things that are decaying and putrefying, that
    are contaminated and contaminating, and are thus associated with impurity and
death – such as corpses; open wounds; crawling, pulsating maggots’.

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183 *Shakespeare’s Ovid: Being Arthur Golding’s Translation of the Metamorphoses*, ed.
184 *Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus*, 2.4.
185 Ibid., 2.4.1-4.
Not only is Lavinia unable to communicate, not only is she “ravished,” now viewed as socially “contaminated and contaminated,” but she has fresh open wounds, “a crimson river of warm blood/ like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind/ doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips.”\(^{187}\) Her violation has made her abject.

When Tereus rapes Philomela, he cuts out her tongue in order to prevent her from offering her testimony. With her hands intact, however, she is able to weave a tapestry describing what has happened to her and send it to her sister. In the loss of her hands, Lavinia-as-Philomela has suffered mutilation in excess of Philomela. Demetrius and Chiron continue, “\textit{Chiron:} An ‘twere my cause, I should go hang myself.\textit{ Demetrius:} If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord.”\(^{188}\) The brothers mock Lavinia’s inability to commit suicide; they have trapped her until her father kills her. Notably, these comments imply that Lavinia must ultimately die; however, she cannot achieve this alone, so, for the moment, she remains. She is both alive and dead—she is the abject suspended. This abject suspension becomes even more clear when Lavinia is first brought by her Uncle Marcus to her father, Titus:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Marcus:} Titus, prepare thy aged eyes to weep
\textit{Or if not so, thy noble heart to break.}
\textit{I bring consuming sorrow to thine age.}
\textit{Titus:} Will it consume me? Let me see it, then.
\textit{Marcus:} This \textit{was} thy daughter. (emphasis mine)\(^{189}\)
\end{quote}

The deliberate use of the past tense signals that her mutilation has already killed her, despite the fact that she lives. Marcus and Titus are not even aware, yet, of the extent of her injuries; specifically, they seem to be unaware that she was raped. Her voice effaced

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 2.4.9-10.
\(^{189}\) Ibid., 3.1.59-63.
in her mutilation, she must rely on the Andronici men to “read” her. Marcus wonders aloud why she is weeping, which prompts Titus to wax poetic about his pain in observing his daughter in such a state:

Shall we cut away our hands like thine?
Or shall we bite our tongues, and in dumb shows
Pass the remainder of our days?
What shall we do? 190

Titus essentially asks, “Shall we abject ourselves to be with her?”—a tragic rhetorical question whose answer is always no, a question that misses the fact that she has been raped, a question that only serves to highlight Lavinia's isolation in her abject suspension.

In Book VI of *Metamorphoses*, Tereus keeps Philomela alone and silenced in the woods after her rape, convincing Procne, his wife and Philomela's sister, that Philomela is dead. Philomela is the abject suspended. When Philomela finally devises a way to offer testimony in weaving a tapestry, however, she is able to communicate her violation to her sister, who comes to rescue her from the forest. Ultimately, Procne and Philomela murder young Itys, Procne and Tereus’ son, and feed him to Tereus as revenge. Once Tereus discovers that his son has been killed and that he has consumed him, Procne and Philomela escape his wrath by transforming into birds. Philomela is avenged and survives; she pushes her way back against and out of her abject suspension. With Philomela as a model, Shakespeare’s Lavinia appears to attempt this same miraculous escape. She cannot weave, as does Philomela, but she desperately searches for alternative methods of testimony. She manages to come by a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and uses this to communicate what she truly would have “had she had tongue to speak”:

*Titus*: Soft, so busily she turns the leaves.

190 *Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus*, 3.1.130-133.
Help her. What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus’ treason and his rape—
And rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy.191

Despite the excesses of her mutilation, Lavinia manages to testify to her rape. She even
takes her testimony a step further and writes her attackers’ names in the sand. The stage
direction reads, “She takes the staff in her mouth, and guides it with her stumps, and
writes.”192 This stage direction gives us a powerful image of a silenced, bleeding woman
trying to wrench her voice back, and attest to her experience.

Of course, this brings us back to the inefficacy of women’s testimony after their
violations. Bethany Packard reminds us, “in providing her father and uncle with an
obvious narrative, [Lavinia risks reminding them that she ought not to be alive.”193 When
women offer testimony to the violences they have endured, they often implicate
themselves rather than exonerate themselves. Why, then, does Lavinia work so hard to
offer this testimony? I would argue that Titus Andronicus alludes to Philomela in order to
ultimately reject her story for early modern women. Lavinia is presented with a story of
transcendence that she attempts to mimic; not only does Lavinia testify to her rape, but
she insists on writing out the names of the assailants—accusations that demand justice,
revenge. Just as her mutilations have been in excess of those of Philomela, perhaps so can
her revenge be. Why, then, does Lavinia’s attempt at transcendence fail? Detmer-Goebel
underscores part of the “problem” with Lavinia’s testimony and revenge: “Lavinia’s
telling of rape is valued because men need to know and not because her experience

191 Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, 4.1.45-49.
192 Ibid., 4.1.76.
193 Bethany Packard, “Lavinia as Coauthor of Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus,” Studies
in English Literature 1500-1900 50, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 281-300, esp. 292.
counts. In other words, telling is constructed as enabling men’s revenge rather than authorizing women’s experience.”  

Indeed, Titus embarks on his own revenge: “For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,/ And worse than Procne I will be revenged.” Titus determines the method of revenge, attempting to mimic The Metamorphoses, but crucially altering the story such that Lavinia still needs to be sacrificed.

Lavinia is abject in relation to Titus as subject; Titus’ social role as a father depends on Lavinia's virtue, and thus is threatened by her violation. Recall that the abject both threatens and upholds social roles; the social system is shored up by the threat, the subject defined by the abject. Like that of Lucrece, Lavinia’s violation is compelled, necessary. When Demetrius and Chiron commit to violating Lavinia’s marital chastity, Demetrius says, “She is a woman, therefore may be wooed;/ She is a woman, therefore may be won.” Later, he elaborates: “This minion stood upon her chastity/[…] and shall she carry this unto her grave?” Like Lucrece’s chastity, Lavinia’s chastity compels her violation; even simpler, her violation is ensured because “she is a woman.” This social system links both men's and women's social status to women's virtue, eroticizes this virtue, and demands its violation. The system is designed to create the abject; virtuous men and women are only virtuous in relation to unvirtuous, abject women.

Therefore, when Titus exacts his revenge in the name of his fatherhood, this revenge cannot save the abjected Lavinia. Procne and Philomela are able to transcend and

195 Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, 5.2.193-194.
196 Ibid., 2.1.83-84.
197 Ibid., 2.3.124, 127.
escape only after their inversion of and divestment from these very same familial structures that Titus seeks to uphold and defend. Philomela is no longer the necessary abject after she and Procne have divested from the social system. Procne abdicates her roles as wife and mother; while mothers are meant to give life and nurture their children, she, instead, kills her son. While wives are meant to serve their husbands and bear their children, Procne wrenches away Tereus’ power, causing Tereus to literally consume and erase his progeny. In redressing the wrongs done to Philomela, Procne and Philomela participate in a revenge narrative that fundamentally divests from the social system which depended on the abject woman and thus produced the double-bind. However, Titus’ revenge is predicated on redressing the wrongs that his ravished daughter has brought upon his fatherhood. When he executes Lavinia, he says, “Die, die Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,/ And with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die! [He kills her.]”198 Despite Lavinia’s attempts to emulate Philomela in order to escape her abject suspension, her actions demonstrate the most powerful example of the double-bind—in striving to achieve mythic justice, she is even more strongly inscribed in the system that had marked her dead from the minute she was raped.

**Desdemona as “Nobody” and “I myself”**

With Lucrece and Lavinia, Shakespeare demonstrates how literature can illuminate the double-bind that undermines early modern women’s ability to testify to their experiences of violence. I turn now to Desdemona, whose abject suspension similarly prevents her testimony from exonerating her. I argue that Desdemona's abjection begins with her father's belief in her transgression and is confirmed with

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198 Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, 5.3.45-46.
Othello's belief in her sexual impurity. Her abjection, then, is not a bodily state per se, but the belief in her transgressive, unvirtuous body. Recall that for Kristeva, it is not simply the “uncleanliness” that marks the abject, but “what does not respect borders, positions, rules.” Therefore, from her abject suspension, Desdemona, from the outset, cannot offer any testimony that does not ultimately implicate herself further. Importantly, Desdemona is not raped as are Lucrece. I argue that Othello's belief in Desdemona's previous violation—her sexual impurity through infidelity—renders her abject in a way that demands annihilation rather than sexual violation. Desdemona is Shakespeare’s most carefully “double-bound” woman, an argument anchored in the fact that Othello is a play whose action depends on dramatic irony—on the reader being the only witness invited to every scene. This allows the reader to observe how Desdemona’s double-bind has been structured and upheld from the onset of the play. While we recognize the inefficacy of Desdemona’s testimony, this only becomes clear to her when her abjection suspension is made literal in Act V. When she literally is suspended between life and death, her “I myself” is no longer the self-implicating statement of a martyr, but a tragic recognition that there was never any testimony she could offer to break her double-bind or deny her guilt.

Before Desdemona appears on stage, she is already rhetorically double-bound and compelled toward abjection. Upon finding Desdemona's bedchamber empty, Brabanzio sputters “O unhappy girl!—with the Moor, say’st thou?—Who would be a father?—How didst thou know ‘twas she?—Oh, she deceives me/ Past thought!”199 Brabanzio immediately grieves his tainted fatherhood and laments that any man would be a father to

199 Shakespeare, Othello, 1.2.164-167.
daughters. Despite the uncertainty of whether Desdemona has been abducted or has left
on her own accord, Brabantio's “She deceives me/ Past thought!” signals that her absence
is inherently duplicitous. Desdemona is already “unhappy,” deceptive, and the
threatening unvirtuous woman.

As Brabantio continues, he rhetorically sets up the double bind that contains
Desdemona. Once Roderigo confirms that Othello and Desdemona are married,
Brabantio desperately exclaims:

Brabantio: O heaven! How got she out? Oh, treason of the blood!
Fathers, from hence trust not your daughters’ minds
By what you see them act. Is there not charms
By which the property of youth and maidhood
May be abused? Have you not read, Roderigo,
Of some such thing?200

Brabanzio first calls attention to Desdemona’s specific transgression—leaving his home
without his permission (“How got she out?”). Desdemona has engaged in threatening
boundary-crossing; in moving beyond the space of her father’s home, she now occupies
the uncontrolled space beyond the domestic, thus marking her as dangerous, abject in her
father's eyes. Brabanzio identifies this as a “treason of the blood”—a deep betrayal of
him as a father, for Desdemona, having left his home and married without his permission,
has altered his use of her as his daughter. These opening lines outline the relationship
between a woman's virtue and social status of the men who live in relation to her.

Brabanzio goes on to explicitly seal the double-bind: “Fathers, from hence trust not your
daughters’ minds/ By what you see them act.” Before Desdemona has even been present
on stage, Brabanzio warns against trusting her actions. He implies that the actions of

200 Shakespeare, Othello, 1.2.170-175.
young women should not be taken at face value, and that the deception of their “minds” is likely being shrouded in misleading behavior. Desdemona’s credibility is, from the beginning, undermined; even if she testifies to her honesty, Brabanzio plants the seeds of distrust. Further, while Brabanzio condemns Desdemona as deceitful, he also wonders if her “youth and maidhood” have been “abused” by “charms” or Othello’s magic. He later claims that “If she in chains of magic were not bound,” she would never have secretly married Othello. Of course, Desdemona is called on stage to dispel this, but it is important to note that in her absence and in her father’s imagination, she is simultaneously a deceptive, transgressive, unvirtuous woman and a victim who was stripped of her agency and acted upon. She is a double-bound—both guiltless and abject.

Desdemona is called onstage by Othello in order to offer testimony—both on behalf of her choices and in defense of Othello. One of the senators asks, “But, Othello, speak./ Did you by indirect and forced courses/ Subdue and poison this young maid’s affections?/ Or came it by request and such fair question/ As soul to soul affordeth?” Othello is compelled to “speak,” to offer testimony about Desdemona’s “affections” and her choices. Othello, however, chooses to call for Desdemona’s testimony, instead—to allow her to speak for herself, to defend her choices, to exonerate him. He is the first person on stage who thinks to ask Desdemona herself, despite the fact that the men on stage have been vehemently debating her actions and experiences in her absence. Othello responds to the senator:

I do beseech you,
Send for the lady to the Sagittary,
And let her speak of me before her father.

Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.2.66.

Ibid., 1.3.110-114.
If you do find me foul in her report,
The trust, the office I do hold of you,
Not only take away, but let your sentence
Even fall upon my life.203

In response to Othello’s call, Desdemona is led on stage, being met with her father
echoing Othello’s call for her testimony: “I pray you hear her speak./If she confess that
she was half the wooer,/ Destruction on my head if my bad blame / Light on the man.”204
(Recall that even when Brabanzio believed Desdemona to be Othello's victim, he called
for fathers to “trust not your daughters’ minds”; now, he promises that if she “was half
the wooer,” then he would have been wrong to blame Othello. In both scenarios,
Desdemona is guilty in the imagination of her father. Of course, in response to
Brabanzio’s “Come, hither, gentle mistress:/Do you perceive in all this noble company/
Where most you owe obedience?” Desdemona claims “a divided duty” to her father and
to her husband, thus confirming her agency in the choice to leave her father’s home and
marry Othello.205 Her testimony, here, marks her as dangerous as she was before she
offered her voice. She has transgressed her father’s established boundaries, and has done
so willingly.

Following Desdemona's testimony to her freely-chosen marriage, Othello is called
to Cyprus and raises the issue of where Desdemona shall live: “I crave fit disposition for
my wife.”206 However, there is not a consensus as to what this “fit disposition” should be:

Duke: Why, at her father’s.
Brabanzio: I will not have it so.
Othello: Nor I.
Desdemona: Nor would I there reside

203 Shakespeare, Othello 1.3.114-120.
204 Ibid., 1.3.174-177.
205 Ibid., 1.3.177-179.
206 Ibid., 1.3.234.
To put my father in impatient thoughts
By being in his eye. 207

Desdemona follows this by proclaiming that she wishes to go with Othello not only for
her father’s sake, but for her own desires to be privy to “the rites for why I love
[Othello]”—i.e. to witness his duties as a solider.208 While Desdemona seems to make this
decision, it follows her father’s rejection; Desdemona’s transgression has forever
changed her, marked her as an unruly daughter—she is unassimilable, abject to
Brabanzio. Further, her desire to go to Cyprus with Othello, to remain outside the realm
of the controlled domesticity, confirms this unruliness: “Just as Desdemona’s relocation
to Cyprus is the most unfit of her physical dispositions, so her very request to accompany
Othello there is the most troubling—and most portentous—instance of her agency.”209
While Desdemona remains a faithful wife throughout the play, her transgressions have
marked her as abject for Brabanzio and have already called her chastity into question in
Act I.

The final way that Brabanzio confirms the double-bind is when he exchanges his
criticisms of Othello for a warning: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:/She has
deceived her father, and may thee.”210 Othello responds definitively, “My life upon her
faith.”211 First, this warning does not simply exonerate Othello, of course—it recasts
Othello as a potential victim. Second, and most crucially, Brabanzio calls on Othello to

207 Shakespeare, Othello, 1.3.238-243.
208 Ibid., 1.3.256.
209 Lena Cowen Orlin, “Desdemona’s Disposition,” in Shakespearean Tragedy and
Gender, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (Indianapolis: Indiana
210 Shakespeare, Othello, 1.3.289-290.
211 Ibid., 1.3.291.
“look to her, if thou hast eyes to see” (emphasis mine). He compels Othello to observe Desdemona carefully, lest she “deceive” him—the implication being wifely infidelity. However, Brabanzio opened the play with a warning to fathers: “Trust not your daughters’ minds/By what you see them act.” Brabanzio both denies that one can believe in the goodness of women based on how they seem to behave, yet he warns Othello to “look” to his wife. Othello can only rely on how his wife “act[s],” and the play has denied at the outset that a woman’s actions indicate heart and mind. In this way, Desdemona becomes double-bound: she must seem faithful in order to avoid suspicion, but her faithful behavior is already inherently suspect. Iago repeats Brabanzio’s language in Act III when he is working to raise Othello’s suspicions against Desdemona. Othello claims, “I’ll see before I doubt” (emphasis mine), and Iago responds:

*Iago:* Receive it from me, I speak not yet of proof:
*Look* to your wife; Observe her well with Cassio.
Wear your *eyes* thus: not jealous, nor secure.
I would not have your free and noble nature
Out of self-bounty be abused. Look to’t.212 (emphasis mine)

In response to Othello’s call to “see” Desdemona’s unfaithfulness, Iago suggests, as did Brabanzio, that he “observe” her behavior and determine her fidelity. Iago reminds Othello, “She did deceive her father marrying you;/ and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,/she loved them most,” echoing Brabanzio while also calling into question whether how Desdemona “seems” can be taken for how she *is.*213 Thus, just as Brabanzio does, Iago both calls Othello to determine Desdemona’s faithfulness by observing her, but also undermines the connection between her observable behavior and

212 Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3.3.194-198.
213 Ibid., 3.3.204-206.
her true desires. Othello can only ever have damning “ocular proof,” for women’s behavior and women’s testimony, though necessary for proving their innocence, can only ever confirm guilt. Desdemona is double-bound—she must prove her innocence within a system that can only ever speak her culpability.

Despite this fatal paradox, Desdemona continues to futilely defend herself from accusations of infidelity throughout the play. However, for Othello, convinced by Iago's machinations, Desdemona’s imagined infidelity has marked her as abject: “Ay. Let her rot and perish, and be damned tonight,/ for she shall not live!” From this abject suspension, Desdemona insists on her innocence regardless. In fact, Desdemona vocally maintains her innocence even in the face of violence from her husband;

*Othello:* Devil!
*[He strikes her.]*

*Desdemona:* I have not deserved this!

Desdemona immediately and unequivocally rebukes Othello. When she does implore Othello to explain his erratic anger, she follows with an unwavering defense:

*Desdemona:* Upon me knee, what doth your speech import?

   I understand a fury in your words.

*Othello:* Why, what art thou?

*Desdemona:* Your wife, my lord: your true and loyal wife.

*Othello:* Come, swear it, damn thyself.

Desdemona offers clear and unchanging testimony of her faithfulness—testimony that can only “damn [herself]” because she is always and already guilty. When Othello comes to the bedchamber to kill Desdemona—their privacy compromised by the gaze of the reader—she maintains her innocence:

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215 Ibid., 4.1.227-228.
216 Ibid., 4.2.30-34.
Desdemona: If you say, I hope you will not kill me.
Othello: Hum!
Desdemona: And yet I fear you, for you’re fatal then
   When your eyes roll so. Why I should fear I know not,
   Since guiltiness I know not, but yet I feel I fear.217

Desdemona affirms that she is free from “guiltiness” and has done nothing that warrants such violent rage. Further, even more than her defense of her innocence is her angry answer to Othello’s command to “think on [her] sins” in preparation for her death; she immediately responds, “They are loves I bear to you.”218 This is crucial, given many critics’ identification of Desdemona’s apparent love of her husband, even in murder, citing her final “commend me to my kind lord” as her apparent exoneration of Othello219 However, in these earlier lines, we have an angry Desdemona who calls the “loves” she bears to her husband “sins.” While she remains constant in her defense of her chastity, she laments the love she has for Othello. In fact, once she utters these lines, she never expresses love for her husband. When accused explicitly of committing adultery, she demands that Othello “send for the man,/ and ask him,” while insisting “I never did/ offend you in my life, never loved Cassio.”220 While she defends her past actions, she no longer insists that she is his “true and loyal wife”; she pleads with Othello to hear Cassio’s testimony, not to save her marriage, but to save her life.

Many scholars read Desdemona’s emergence from death and final words to Emilia as a last effort to perform perfect wifehood, to prove her fidelity by exonerating her husband:

Desdemona: Oh, falsely, falsely murdered!

217 Shakespeare, Othello, 5.2.35-39.
218 Ibid., 5.2.40
219 Ibid., 5.2.122
220 Ibid., 5.2.49-50, 59-60.
Emilia: Alas, what cry is that?
Othello: That? What?
Emilia: Out and alas, that was my lady’s voice!
[She opens the bed curtains.]
    Help! Help, ho! Help!—O lady, speak again!
    Sweet Desdemona! O sweet mistress, speak!
Desdemona: A guiltless death I die.
Emilia: Oh, who hath done thus deed?
Desdemona: Nobody, I myself. Farewell.
    Commend me to my kind lord. Oh, farewell! [She dies.]221

Desdemona is given an extra few moments of life as she reaches back from death into her abject suspension, and yet she does not name Othello. Orlin argues that in this moment, Desdemona dies on a lie rather than condemn her husband, while others argue that Desdemona *believes* her guilt—that she has internalized Othello’s accusations and believes herself complicit in her own death (recall Valerie Wayne’s “Instead she thinks [Othello’s accusations] may be right.”)222. Both readings affirm that Desdemona loves her husband so deeply that she refuses to implicate him, even offering protection as she repeats his accusations of her guilt. Orlin notes that this reading does present the reader with an inconsistency in Desdemona’s character, but one that we need not resolve. She argues that Desdemona is an “artfully created embodiment of female behavior and feminine responses, in all the variety and ambiguity perceived by men,” “[exemplifying] all the tragic confusions about women that men hold.”223 This argument rests on rejecting the impulse to read Desdemona as a character, instead reading her as a projection of the early modern male imagination—a projection of the enigma and confusion that underwrite men’s understanding of women’s behavior.

221 Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.115-121.
222 Orlin, “Desdemona’s Disposition,” 181.
223 Ibid., 181, 183.
While I value the argument that we should always remember that literary characters are imagined, I also argue that the literary imaginary of *Othello* presents us not with a character who is a confused amalgam of early modern ideas about women, but instead with a character whose double-bind reflects early modern women’s experiences of violence. This final “I myself” is so markedly out of step with the Desdemona of the rest of the play; thus, rather than reading this as an enigmatic inconsistency, I instead read her utterance as symptomatic of her realization of her double-bind. While Desdemona has remained a chaste wife throughout the play, she has been caught in the paradox first outlined by her father: she must prove her fidelity, although she can only be read as guilty. Desdemona attempts to vehemently disabuse Othello of his suspicions; however, her testimony only serves to anger him further—to call her “Strumpet” or “Devil” or act violently against her. Recall Walker’s argument regarding the testimony of women—often the act of offering testimony only further implicated the woman who spoke. So is the case with Desdemona. Further, when Othello begins to strangle Desdemona, she pleads and struggles with him:

*Desdemona*: Oh, banish me, my lord, but kill me not.
*Othello*: Down, strumpet!
*He attacks her.*
*Desdemona [struggling]*: Kill me tomorrow; let me live tonight!
*Othello*: Nay, if you strive—
*Desdemona*: But half an hour!
*Othello*: Being done, there is no pause.
*Desdemona*: But while I say one prayer!
*Othello*: It is too late.
*He* smothers her.224

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224 *Shakespeare, Othello*, 5.2.78-83.
Here, Desdemona desperately pleads with Othello to allow her to live. She grasps at straws, suggesting banishment instead of death, suggesting even a simple delay of the murder in order to bide time. Presumably, Desdemona recognizes that a delay might give another person the opportunity to offer testimony on her behalf, given the inefficacy of her own. Further, the stage direction \[struggling\] is crucial here; Desdemona is not simply pleading—she is fighting back physically. Again, recall Walker’s argument that a woman who physically struggled against her assailant risked being labeled an unruly woman, thus further implicating herself in the violence that she is experiencing. The same seems to be true for Desdemona, given Othello’s exasperated “Nay, if you strive—” response to her struggle. Up until these final moments Desdemona has attempted to impossibly defend herself in a system that only recognizes women’s behavior as suspect—in which women’s defenses serve only to further indict them.

It is with this in mind that I read Desdemona’s final exchange with Emilia. Desdemona is already dead, but steals a few breaths to first proclaim, “Oh, falsely, falsely murdered!” This is not the post-mortem exclamation of a woman who believes herself to be complicit in her own death. Neither is the claim “A guiltless death I die.” Even in this now literal abject suspension, she maintains that she is unjustly murdered. However, in response to Emilia’s specific inquiry “Who hath done this deed,” Desdemona responds “Nobody. I myself.” First, little attention has been paid to Desdemona’s “Nobody.” This suggests more than a simple belief in her complicity. “Nobody,” is a refusal to name anyone; a refusal to testify. Of course, someone did this, and of course Desdemona knows this. However, she also seems to recognize that her bearing witness to this will not matter. She has already offered up testimony, she has rebuked, she has struggled—to no
avail. Speaking from this space in which she is always and already dead, the violated Desdemona recognizes the double-bind. She is already dead despite whatever testimony she offers. Her naming of Othello cannot change this, cannot change the fact that she was found guilty in Act I. Her “I myself,” then, is neither the last action of a devoted wife nor a symptom of internalized misogyny; it is, instead, a recognition that she was always faced with an impossible task—to prove her innocence when her guilt was presumed before she ever was on stage. Desdemona is most abject in this moment; she is both “Not-I” and “I”—she is “Nobody” and “I myself.”

Conclusion

During the final scene of Othello, we hear Othello utter “Not dead? Not yet quite dead?” as he is strangling Desdemona. He then muses, “I, that am cruel, am yet merciful:/I would not have thee linger in thy pain,” and thus, “[He smothers Desdemona again.]” Of course, Desdemona does linger, moving between life and death, perplexing those on stage as well as those in the audience. The suspension of Desdemona and her enigmatic final words are emblematic of her predicament throughout the play. In the final scene, we wonder: When does Desdemona die?, while the play as a whole stages the question: Why is Desdemona’s death inevitable? In Lucrece, Titus, and Othello, we have examples of how literature can make this inevitability legible. Rather than reproducing contemporary early modern notions of women’s complicity, these texts confront and challenge the reader with the paradox that prevents women from achieving justice for their experiences of sexual and domestic violence: the fact that their testimony can only condemn them. Finally, these texts do not simply confront us with the compulsory annihilation of the abject—with the reasons why the violated woman is always compelled
to death. They exceed this confrontation by presenting the reader with the recursivity of the social system; the abject *must* be created. Virtuous women are nothing without unvirtuous women, and virtuous men are nothing without both. For Lucrece, Lavinia, and Desdemona, calls to virtue are calls to violation, are calls to death.
Chapter 3: Impossible Chastity and the Myth of the Good Woman in The Tragedy of Mariam

Introduction

Elizabeth Cary’s closet drama *The Tragedy of Mariam: The Fair Queene of Jewry* (1613) has long been one of the key texts at the heart of feminist criticism of early modern literature. *Mariam* is a play that is explicitly concerned with the dangers and dilemmas of the chaste, silent, and obedient paradigm for womanhood and wifehood. In the previous chapter, I argue that Shakespeare stages an early modern double bind that constrains and punishes women. Women are called to perform chastity, silence, and obedience; however, these virtues endanger them, compel their violation, and punish them with death. Their testimony can only further indict them, and in their final moments they recognize that they were doomed at the outset. As I turn to *Tragedy of Mariam*, I will argue that Cary’s play goes beyond staging the double bind; it functions as a polemic against the impossibility of women’s goodness within the double bind.

Scholars have been talking about *Mariam* as a kind of polemic for decades. In her 1980 essay on *Mariam*, Elaine Beilin lists “the unusual prominence given to a virtuous woman’s psychological conflicts” and “the polemic on the question of woman’s place” as two of “the most remarkable elements of *Mariam.*” Indeed, as a closet drama, *Mariam* is written not for the stage, but for private reading; therefore, its women characters are given a remarkable amount of uninterrupted speaking time. In addition to the unique

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226 Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, *Stuart Women Playwrights 1613-1713* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 22. Cuder-Domínguez remarks that in the beginning of the play, “Cary appears to be breaking new ground by providing women with the opportunity to voice
form of the closet drama, many scholars have also noted its particular social function. While Danielle Clarke has suggested that all Renaissance women’s writing should be considered political writing, closet drama in particular “could be more politically dangerous than plays written for the public stage, since these manuscripts circulated freely within coteries without having to meet the scrutiny of the Master of revels.” In the case of Cary’s Mariam in particular—a play for which “marriage is the battleground”—many scholars have connected its genre to its ability to offer polemical commentary on early modern expectations of wifehood in its portrayal of a good wife executed. I argue that Mariam is polemical not simply in its portrayal of Mariam’s devastating lack of autonomy, but in its portrayal of a woman who is both celebrated for being good and who knowingly disobeys her husband in defense of herself. Of course, this disobedience stokes the flames of Herod’s suspicion, and she is executed; she was in danger both in obedience and disobedience alike. Therefore, the play is polemical in its insistence that women’s goodness is incompatible with their safety. Ultimately, the play fundamentally troubles the categories of good and bad women, even as Mariam vehemently believes that she is good.

While Mariam continually professes her innocence, she, unlike Lucrece, for example, is not a woman who strives to perform chastity, silence, and obedience without question. Mariam recognizes early on that in being wholly submissive to her husband’s

their views of ongoing events for four full scenes, thus giving them the power to shape the reader’s reactions at least in this initial stage.”


228 Cuder-Dominquez, Stuart Women Playwrights, 16.

will, she endangers herself. Herod is a jealous husband who has “barr[ed] her from liberty,” has murdered her family members, and has issued an order calling for Mariam’s execution in the event of his own death—for he believes that if he should lose his life, her life should follow. Therefore, she refuses to share his bed and celebrate his return from war. However, she continually asserts her unfailing chastity and innocence despite her disobedience. Much of Mariam’s understanding of her own virtue stems from her opposition to Salome, whose desire to separate from her husband, rooted in sexual desire, is portrayed as fickle and selfish rather than legitimate. Salome presents readers and critics of the play with what Lyn Bennett calls “the Salome problem.” How can critics read *Mariam* as a critique of the dangerous restrictions on the autonomy of wives when Salome’s expression of autonomy is portrayed not only as unfaithful, but also as lascivious? Reflecting on the interpretative wrinkle that Salome presents, Bennett writes that analyses of the play that depend on reading Mariam’s virtue and ultimate death as a symbolic proto-Christian martyrdom “typically avoid exploring the play’s representation of Salome, whose characterization as the most reprehensible type of woman surely challenges Cary’s alleged feminism. Few critics have attempted to offer a redemptive reading of Salome, and many, quite frankly, seem to have no idea what to do with her.”

This chapter argues that *Mariam* could not function as a polemic without Salome. In doing so, I am moving away from the paradigm that, as Jessica Murphy writes, asks whether literature portrays women’s acquiescence to or defiance of patriarchal expectations ( chastity, silence, obedience) “in order to measure the successes or failures

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231 Ibid., 5.
of female characters in fictional texts.”\textsuperscript{232} This paradigm has tended to read “Virtue and vice [as colliding] through Mariam’s and Salome’s opposing views on marriage,” understanding, “Mariam [to be] chaste, loyal, and naïve as Salome is lustful inconstant, and scheming.”\textsuperscript{233} Ultimately, within this framework, “this conflict gives way to a Christian allegory, by which the drama is resolved.”\textsuperscript{234} I, instead, argue that \textit{Mariam} is not a play that is “resolved,” but one that is torn asunder as Mariam attempts to inhabit the ever-shifting category of “good woman,” and in doing so, finds herself executed as a wicked one. This play does not take for granted the stability of patriarchal characterizations of women’s goodness and wickedness; instead, it gives us Mariam and Salome whose characterizations cannot be neatly contained in a good/wicked binary. Scholars have noted the instability of virtue in \textit{Mariam}; Murphy comments on the competing notions of chastity within the play and the ways in which Mariam’s behavior is both “chaste and unchaste”: “In Cary’s case, highlighting the many and opposing meanings of chastity within her play allows her to reveal the difficulty women might have in living up to an ideal of behavior that is difficult to pin down.”\textsuperscript{235} I aim to build from this analysis to argue that the play does not simply demonstrate competing notions of chastity, but the breakdown of “goodness” and “wickedness” in the characters of Mariam and Salome.

Crucially, Mariam and Salome themselves insist on a binary opposition rooted in hate. Mariam truly believes that her virtue stands in contrast with the vice of Salome, and

\textsuperscript{233} Beilin, “Elizabeth Cary,” 55.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{235} Murphy, \textit{Virtuous Necessity}, 33.
Salome understands herself to have rejected all that Mariam stands for. Of course, they are right in important ways; Mariam desires to be understood as good and innocent, Salome has openly cast aside all patriarchal expectations and is unfazed by accusations of wickedness. However, both women are willfully disobedient to their husbands in favor of honesty and self-interest. The Salome/Mariam paradox, then, is no longer “the Salome problem.” These characters need not stand in utter contrast to one another, nor does the existence of Salome undercut the feminist potential of the play. Instead, the problem becomes an emblematic paradox. This paradox is inherent in the formulation of the chastity double-bind for women—a paradox wherein virtue and vice become inextricably bound up in one another and thus impossible to entirely disentangle.

I will begin this chapter with a turn to Thomas Bentley’s *Monument of Matrones*, which, I will argue, is a text that ostensibly is concerned with offering women a guide for being virtuous, but in effect betrays a belief that women are inherently wicked and must have their worst impulses controlled by men. This text indicates the double bind that is at play in *Mariam*: goodness is something to which women must aspire but can never attain. *Monument* reads the Bible as evidence of women’s wickedness, including citations for many of its claims. In this chapter, I also argue that *Mariam* is a text that is itself concerned with biblical exegesis, particularly invoking celebrated women from the Old Testament—an aspect that has been largely ignored in favor of reading Mariam as a symbolic Christian martyr. However, in *Mariam*, the resultant exegetical lessons about women’s virtue are not stable. Just as *Mariam* is a text characterized by impossible behavioral standards for wives, it is also a text underwritten by an exegetical anxiety about understanding and reconciling the portrayals of good and bad women in the Bible.
with social expectations. In the course of the play, the fairness of Mosaic marriage law is questioned, and the multifaceted and, at times, contradictory, stories of Miriam, Esther, and Bathsheba are invoked, all of which introduce crucial resonances that transform the play into a complex and irreconcilable exploration of biblical precedent and exegesis for women and wives.

Salome’s survival at the end of the play throws Mariam’s execution into stark relief. Salome’s rejection of the authority by which she is condemned allows her to survive, while Mariam’s insistence on her innocence, her belief that she can perform chastity within the system that marks it as inherently suspect keeps her contained in the double-bind and, thus, ensures her death. Cary’s Mariam reveals the impossibility of understanding, performing, and maintaining the behavioral norms expected of early modern women and wives in particular. Indeed, The Tragedy of Mariam stages chastity in particular not simply as multivalent and complex, but as a concept that collapses in on itself as it purports to protect and venerate women even as it endangers them and divests them of modes of resistance. Virtue and vice collide in this collapsing chastity, and this confusion culminates in the execution of an unchaste wife, lamented in death as a chaste martyr—the play torn asunder.

The Chastity of Wives in *The Monument of Matrones*

While the call for women’s chastity in literature has often been strongly tied to the protection of women’s virginity, discourses of chastity in the early modern period are, of course, deeply tied to the ideal of marital chastity. This certainly moves beyond virginity, demanding both sexual faithfulness and availability to one’s husband. For wives in particular, this call to chastity also becomes intimately tied to the virtues of silence and obedience as well. A wife’s disobedience, chastising words, or unsanctioned speech all might be considered acts of unchastity—acts that compromise her faithfulness to her husband and suggest a problematic openness. The conflation of these categories and the sublimation of disobedience and “unruly” speech into the realm of unchastity constructs a set of behavioral expectations for women that seemingly pits many forms of women’s autonomy and self-expression and, at times, self-defense against the integrity of her faithfulness.

Thomas Bentley’s *The Monument of Matrones* (1582) gives insight into the ways in which the call for marital chastity among early modern wives is predicated upon an encompassing notion of behavioral control. More than this, *Monument* illustrates the ways in which the chastity of wives is always inherently suspect; once a woman can no longer claim virginity, the source of her innocence has been compromised. Monument has been identified as the largest compilation of women’s writing in the early modern period, given that many of the chapters, or “Lampes of Virginitie,” are composed of the devotional writings of Anne Askew, Katherine Parr, and Lady Jane Grey, among others.

237 Of course, as I argued in the last chapter, the irony is that virginity is eroticized and violated.
Suzanne Hull writes, “In fact, *The Monument of Matrones* comes close to being an entire female library between two covers.” While this is true, this description of the volume fails to also recognize the ways in which Bentley’s own writing and editorializing subtly yet decidedly convey an anxiety about women’s autonomy, particularly the autonomy of wives. Bentley’s compilation, which is ostensibly meant to be instructive and inspirational for women, is organized around seven “Lampes of Virginitie,” the highest and holiest of virtues. The Sixth Lampe in particular is meant to be a “Mirrour for Maidens and Matrons: OR, The seuerall Duties and office of all sorts of women in their vocation out of Gods word, with their due praise and dispraise by the same.”

This Lampe weaves together Bentley’s own writing and commentary with his invocation of biblical verses in order to offer a framework within which women could understand their proper roles. While this Lampe proclaims itself to be a “mirrour” for “all sorts of women,” it very soon becomes clear that this Lampe is preoccupied with the behavior of wives in particular. Further, while this is a text ostensibly written primarily for the edification of women, this Lampe quickly abandons its assumption of female readership and instead directly addresses male readers, fomenting the anxieties of husbands about unruly wives. Ultimately, *Monument* reads as a text that rests on the assumption that a woman does not have the capacity to be a good wife, and only constant vigilance and

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239 Thomas Bentley, “The sixt lampe of virginitie conteining a mirror for maidens and matrons: or, the seuerall duties and office of all sorts of women in their vocation of Gods word, with their due praise and dispraise by the same,” in *Monument of Matrones* (London: H. Denham, 1582), 1, Early English Books Online.
control from her husband can curb her worst instincts. Nestled in between the pages of women’s writing is Bentley’s commentary that, in the same breath, claims to counsel women to be good while warning husbands that this is impossible.

The first section in “The Sixth Lampe of Virginitie” is titled “Of Virginitie, and the state of single life, together with the dutie of Virgins, of Maids, or single women.” While Bentley does spend the two first paragraphs speaking about the holiness of virginity (“It is good for a man to be [single, or a woman to be a virgin]” (brackets his), the focus of the section quickly moves to marital roles, and the relationship between husbands and wives:

There is a difference also between a virgin and a wife: the virgin or unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holie both in bodie and in spirit: and attaine unto it sooner than the maried wife, bicause she is without cares: but she that is maried careth for the things of the world, how she may please hir husband.240

In his juxtaposition of virgins and wives, Bentley associates the highest form of chastity with virginity—a chastity that is untainted by sexuality—while the chastity of wives is tenuous and unstable. This is a subtle articulation of the double bind; wives are called to “please their husbands,” but also cannot attain “holi[ness]” as easily as virgins, given that wives are now “of the world.” At the outset, the goodness of wives is, at best, suspect.

Soon, this “mirrour for maidens and matrons” abandons its assumptions of female readership, addressing itself, instead, to husbands. Bentley warns husbands about the dangers of giving wives autonomy within marriage, often specifically couched in terms of permitting transgressions of obedience and silence. Bentley titles the next section “Of consenting to the wiues lawfull or unlawfull acts, etc.” Notably, this title

assumes unspoken subject to unequivocally be the husband, while the wife is transformed into the object; despite the stated purpose of the Lampe, women are no longer the ones looking in the “mirrour.” Bentley writes

Husbands must beware how they consent or obeie their wiues in unlawfull things prohibited by God’s lawe. For Adam not so much to please his wife, as mooued by ambition at hir persuasion, did eate of the forbidden tree in paradise, and it turne to his sore punishment. For therefore God said thus unto him: Bicause thou hast obeied the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee, saiing: Thou shalt not eate of it: cursed is the earth for thy sake. Gen. 3, 6, 11, & c.241

Here, Bentley invokes the virtue of obedience and presents the dystopian inverse: the obedient wife now commanding and manipulative, the husband now obedient and submissive. This dynamic, of course, is epitomized in Adam and Eve, whose marriage is referenced as a warning for men against the dangers of heeding wife’s influence. These first two sections of “The Sixt Lampe of Virginitie,” then, rapidly move from a focus on virginity to a focus on wifely chastity—on the ways in which wives cannot maintain their own chastity without the vigilance of her husband.

The issue of “souereigntie”—the inverse of obedience—is explored further in the subsequent section, titled “Of the husbands headship, power or souereigntie ouer the wife.” Bentley continues cataloguing and editorializing biblical excerpts in order to speak to contemporary anxieties about the power, disobedience, and unsanctioned speech of wives. Here, Bentley foreground fears of what might happen if a husband allows his wife to have power over him. He writes:

Give not the power of thy life unto a woman, least she ouercome thy strength, and so thou be confounded : that is, let not thy wife haue rule ouer thee. For if she once get the maisterie, then will she be contrarie unto thee, take awaie thine hart

and strength, and bring thee to confusion among thine enimies, [as did Eva to Adam: Dalila to Samson; Jezabel to Achab: Herodias to Herod, &c.] Eccles. 9

This passage is directly addressed to husbands: “Give not the power of thy life […] lest she overcome thy strength, and so thou be confounded” (emphasis mine). This is not a “mirror for maidens,” but a warning for husbands. Specifically, this excerpt suggests that in order for wife to have power, she must take it from her husband. Power, in this way, is a zero-sum game; Bentley suggests that a woman’s intrinsic inclination is to usurp every ounce of power her husband has, given the chance. Once this usurpation of power occurs in a marriage, the husband has irrevocably compromised his ability to compel his wife to obedience, leaving him weak, ineffectual, and susceptible to embarrassment. Bentley goes on to reiterate this even more strongly:

Give the water no passage, no not a little: neither give a wicked woman libertie to have her will, or to go out of dores. For if she walke not in thine obedience, she shall confound thee in the sight of thine adversaries: cut hir off from thy flesh, &c. Eccles. 25, 27.

Here is an explicit caution against allowing women to have “libertie” or her own will, or even to “go out of dores” on her own. Acting on her own accord is rejecting her call to obedience, which again, leaves her husband open to the scorn of his “adversaries.” This “Lampe of Virginitie” makes clear that a disobedient wife is an unchaste wife, and betrays the deep-seated cultural fear of a willful wife. More than this, while Bentley cautioned against giving a “wicked woman” liberty, he also warns, “give not the power of thy life unto a woman.” Wicked women and women in general often become conflated, especially when speaking about the dangers wives propose to their husbands. In a book

243 Ibid., 16.
ostensibly invested in celebrating the ways women can be virtuous, Bentley seems to rest on the assumption that the nature of women is to ruin men, and that this ruin can happen through a variety of transgressions linked to women’s autonomy.

This Lampe also establishes the connection between wifely unchastity and unsanctioned speech, continuing to use the “thy”/husband “she”/wife language. Bentley invokes biblical warnings about confiding in one’s wife, as she might betray you, her unfaithfulness taking the form of speech shared with other men:

Keepe the doors of thy mouth from hir that lieth in thy bosome. Mich. 7,5. [That is, be not hastie to reueneale secretes unto thy wife : least others plowing with thy heifer (as the Philistines did with Dalila Samsons wife, unto whom at hir dissembling teares and impudent importunacie he disclosed his riddle) reape the fruits of thy wished harvest, and so turne thee to wrath and displeasure, as it did him. Read Judg., 14]

Not only does this warn against disclosing secrets to your wife, it describes her potential betrayal in the crass language of unchastity: “others plowing with thy heifer”—that is, others speaking with your wife—will become privy to the secrets she carries.

Unsanctioned speech is explicitly compared to a breach of chastity. In this way, marriage is inherently dangerous. Bentley includes a section on “The dispraise of wicked and foolish women” in which he invokes the biblical condemnations of “a loude crying woman:”

“The double or pratling tongue, hath cast out many vertuous and honest women, and robbed them of their laboure. Eccl. 28. 15”

Unsanctioned speech compromises the virtue and integrity of a would-be good woman (except, Bentley does not seem to offer a version of marriage wherein the wife is “vertuous and honest” by

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244 Bentley, “The sixt lampe of virginitie,” 16.
245 Ibid., 92.
246 Ibid., 92.
nature). Further, in a section concerning “the dutie of wiues toward their husbands,”[247]

Bentley invokes the Pauline injunction[248] to female silence:

> Let the woman learne in silence with all subjection. For I permit not a woman to teach, neither to usurpe authoritie ouer the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eue, and Adam was not deceiued (first), but the woman was (first) deceiued, and so became the instrument of Sathan to deceiue the man, was giltie of the transgression. Notwithstanding, though therefore God punisheth them with subjection.[249]

In this letter to Timothy, Paul is speaking[250] specifically about women’s religious authority—their right to speak in church, to offer commentary on the word of God. However, Bentley carefully contextualizes this instead as silence owed to a husband—a duty of wives. Bentley’s *Monument*, then, a text organized around the virtue of “virginitie,” is largely concerned with defining the terms of wifely chastity; no longer “virginitie,” wifely chastity is portrayed as barely possible, impossible, even if a wife is left to express any kind of autonomy, most notably, disobedience (read: choice) and unsanctioned speech (read: self-expression).

**Cary’s Mariam and The Impossibility of Chastity**

It is within this barely possible notion of chastity, and thus, the impossible goodness of wives, that Cary’s *Mariam* situates the portrayal of the lives, motivations, and relationships of its central female characters, Mariam and Salome. When obedience and silence are considered to be integral to the fulfillment of marital chastity, any

[248] See 1 Cor. 14:34-35 (AV) and 1 Tim 2:11 (AV).
expression of women’s autonomy might risk compromising the integrity of her chastity. Moreover, each of these behavioral categories is already suspect in wives. *Mariam* critiques the double bind that this creates, insofar as the demand for unequivocal obedience and controlled speech at times creates conditions of unsafety suspicion, despite a woman’s faithfulness in marriage. The very norms that are supposed to protect wives endanger them. It is this double bind that tears the play asunder, telling the story of women who attempt to navigate these conditions to two very different ends.

In her 1994 study of the canonicity and race politics of Cary’s play, Dympna Callaghan critiques the way in which she understands “feminist criticism [to have] proceeded with […] ‘business as usual’ even as it endeavored to change the structure of patriarchal canonicity by attending to the work of the first original play in English by a woman [*Mariam*].”251 She pushes scholars of the play to confront the idea that “to change the canon is more than simply a matter of changing texts—it is to change the conditions and practices of reading all texts.”252 While Callaghan’s specific critical lens that she brings to Cary’s play is that of racial politics, her intervention is instructive for all scholars of *Mariam*. She pushes *Mariam* scholarship to move beyond the impulses that originally worked to integrate the play into the early modern canon—impulses to reject universal aesthetic value, impulses to take seriously a female playwright writing a closet drama whose central characters are women and whose central questions revolve around their experiences. Of course, these impulses have been and continue to be invaluable for

252 Ibid., 164.
the study of Cary’s play; however, much scholarship born out of these impulses has not moved beyond the feminist analytical lens of “measur[ing] the successes or failures of female characters in fictional texts”253 against patriarchal expectations. This lens has most often produced readings of the play that understand Mariam as the chaste martyr, unfairly accused, unjustly slain, and Salome as the wicked, uncontrolled, unchaste woman, agent of disorder and deception in the play. While these readings do not wholly ignore the complexities of these two characters, their binary opposition is rarely deconstructed. In following Callaghan’s prompt to read differently, I argue that Mariam does not give us an uncomplicated foil in Mariam and Salome. Instead, the play critiques the impossibility of the patriarchal expectations with the double bind, thus disrupting not only the “measurements” of a good woman (Mariam), but also that wickedness which they are measured against (Salome). While both Mariam and Salome understand themselves to have utterly rejected the other, this binary collapses when the values that structure (goodness/wickedness) it crumble.

With a closet drama, Elizabeth Cary could more freely address and critique the dangerous double bind of marital chastity. Along with Diane Purkiss’ argument that closet drama could be more politically subversive given its quiet circulation away from the public stage, Miranda Nesler argues that closet drama “provided a socially protected space for women’s public authorship and acting. Within closet spaces, writing was considered a silent and admissible performance for women because it occurred in ostensibly isolated locations.”254 Of course, the irony of this with respect to Mariam in

253 Murphy, Virtuous Necessity, 5.
particular is that as a closet drama never meant for the stage, it could include long blocks of uninterrupted speech from its female characters. Mariam, alone in the scene, opens with a 78-line speech. This powerful speech of iconic oscillation immediately articulates the central dilemma of the play: Mariam is lamenting her competing feelings of loyalty and hatred for her husband, Herod. Notably, the very first line of this speech is “How oft have I with public voice run on,” already signaling to the reader that she is prone to “public” (read, unsanctioned) speech. Thinking back to Monument, wives who violate the call to silence do often in public spaces. Therefore, this opening line would signify to the reader that Mariam might be considered, at the outset, an unruly woman. The opening continues:

How oft have I with public voice run on
To censure Rome’s last hero for deceit
Because he wept when Pompey’s life was gone,
Yet when he lived, he thought his name too great?
But now I do recant, and, Roman lord,
Excuse too rah a judgment in a woman!
My sex pleads pardon: pardon then afford;
Mistaking is with us but too common.

Here, Mariam has an apostrophe to Julius Caesar (“Rome’s last hero”), whom she admits to criticizing in the past for his inconsistency in first calling for Pompey’s death and subsequently mourning him. She apologizes for this “rash judgement,” blaming her “mistake” on her womanhood—again, framing herself as an unruly woman. She has publicly upbraided a male war hero, and is expressing regret for her seemingly unwarranted scorn.

As the speech continues, she articulates the reasoning behind her recanting:

“Now do I find, by self-experience taught/ One object yields both grief and joy.”

“This object,” for Mariam, is her husband Herod, whose death in battle has just been reported.

She continues

When Herod lived, that now is done to death,
Oft I have wished that I from him were free;
Oft I have wished that he might lose his breath;
Oft have I wished his carcass dead to see.
Then rage and scorn had put my love to flight,
That love which once on him was firmly set;
Hate hid his true affection from my sight,
And kept my heart from paying him in debt.

Mariam describes herself as a wife full of hatred, rage and scorn, wishing for her husband’s imminent death in order to secure her own “free[dom].” The beginning of this speech seems to paint Mariam as a wicked wife out of the Sixth Lampe of Virginitie: contrarian, publicly outspoken, anxious to have independence, working to bring her husband to destruction. However, having presented the reader with this image, Mariam interrupts and complicates it in her articulation of the extreme control that Herod exerted over her freedom:

And blame me not, for Herod’s jealousy
Had power even constancy itself to change;
For he, by barring me from liberty
To shun my ranging, taught me first to range.
But yet too chaste a scholar was my heart
To learn to love another than my lord.
To leave his love, my lesson’s former part,
I quickly learned; the other I abhorred.

257 Cary, The Tragedy of Mariam, 1.1.9-10.
258 Ibid., 1.1.15-23.
259 Ibid., 1.1.23-30.
Here, Mariam claims to have had “constancy” of love for her husband before his jealousy, his “barring [her] from liberty,” became too suffocating for her love to continue. His attempts to control her behavior, to lock her away, to “shun [her] ranging” prevented her from freely loving him. Of course, recall that Monument holds that Mariam could never have performed faithfulness without this kind of control. While these attempts at control taught Mariam “to leave [Herod’s] love,” she defends her chastity: “But yet too chaste a scholar was my heart/To learn to love another than my lord.” While Herod’s attempts to divest Mariam of autonomy and compel her to obedience leave her full of resentment toward her husband and her lack of freedom, she believes herself to be chaste in that she has not been romantically or sexually unfaithful.

As Mariam’s speech continues, we learn that her resentment toward her husband, now complicated by reports of his death, is due to more than simply his attempts to control her. Upon reflecting on Herod’s death:

But now his death to memory doth call
The tender love that he to Mariam bare,
And mine to him; this makes those rivers fall,
Which by another thought unmoistened are:
For Aristobulus, the loveliest youth
That ever did in angels shape appear,
The cruel Herod was not moved to ruth.260

Despite Herod’s attempts to control her, Mariam finds herself mourning her husband in his death (as Caesar did with Pompey). However, “cruel” Herod’s murder of Mariam’s brother Aristobulus “unmoisten[s]” her tears. Mariam oscillates between the role of dutiful wife who mourns her husband’s untimely death in battle, and a wife who has been locked away by a jealous husband—a husband responsible for her brother’s murder. In

260 Cary, The Tragedy of Mariam, 1.1.31-37.
her mind, she is both at once; she articulates grievances against Herod even as she
mourns him. The most damning grievance, though, is to follow. After lamenting her
brother’s death, Mariam continues:

How happy it was that Sohemus’ mind
Was moved to pity my distressed estate!
Might Herod’s life a trusty servant find,
My death to his had been unseparate.
These thoughts have power his death to make me bear,
Nay more, to wish the news may firmly hold;
Yet cannot this pulse some falling tear
That will, against my will, some grief unfold.261

Mariam here describes the orders the Herod gave, in confidence, to his counselor,
Sohemus: that if Herod should die in battle, then Mariam should be killed as well.
However, Sohemus has betrayed Herod’s secret intentions, informing Mariam of his
orders while letting her live. In hearing this from Sohemus, Mariam discovers that
Herod’s jealousy extends even beyond the grave; he demands that Mariam’s death be
linked to his—compelling her to obedience even in death. Herod’s demands of obedience
from his wife are not only predicated on a totalizing lack of autonomy, but also create a
real and present danger for Mariam as obedient wife. Mariam’s resentment toward her
husband and desire for freedom, which perhaps initially seem shocking, are now
contextualized within her warranted fear.

Even with the knowledge of these threats on her life, Mariam’s duty to and love
for her husband continue to compete with her hatred, fear and resentment:

And more I owe him for his love to me,
The deepest love that ever yet was seen;
Yet had I rather much a milkmaid be
Than be the monarch of Judea’s queen.
It was for naught but love he wished his end

261 Cary, The Tragedy of Mariam, 1.1.47-54.
Might be to my death but the vaunt-courier prove;  
But I had rather still be foe than friend  
To him that saves for hate and kills for love.262

Mariam’s emotions are tearing her in two incompatible directions; she wants to be faithful to her husband who she believes had “the deepest love” for her, but she also feels angry and betrayed by his murderous jealousy. She chastises herself for the latter (“Hard-hearted Mariam!”263), and ends her speech weeping for husband. However, her speech has effectively demonstrated the central conflict of the play: how does a wife perform faithful chastity when it demands unequivocal obedience and refraining from critical speech even in the face of danger? More to the point, does a wife perform chastity when her husband endangers her in order to ensure it? And finally, can Mariam’s heart both be a “chaste scholar” even as it harbors feelings of resentment as well as love?

Mariam’s own internal conflict between competing notions of chastity is not the only site of confusion in the play. Other characters are equally torn between deeming Mariam chaste or unchaste, especially upon the revelation that Herod, in fact, lives, and hopes to return to a faithful wife who, unbeknownst to him, has forsaken her love for him. In her analysis of Mariam, Murphy writes

Mariam understands her chastity in terms of her role as wife, but her understanding clashes with that of others. It is not that she alone does not understand what is expected of her; rather, it is that no one in the play can pin down the specifics of the expectation of chastity. These multiple interpretations of Mariam’s behavior in The Tragedy of Mariam reveal the multivalent nature of chastity and the cultural expectations that require it. Cary demonstrates the problem of defining chastity by exposing its inherent contradictions.264

263 Ibid., 1.1.63.
264 Murphy, Virtuous Necessity, 26.
What Murphy calls “multivalent” I would call impossible, which is demonstrated in Mariam’s conversation with Sohemus before Herod’s return. Upon learning that Herod lives, Mariam is shaken and upset, to which Sohemus replies: “Be not impatient madam; be but mild;/ His love to you again will soon be bred.” Sohemus, here, attempts to discipline Mariam’s anger, asking her to again occupy the role “mild” wife, awaiting the return of her husband’s “love.” Mariam strongly retalates: “I will not to his love be reconciled! /With solemn vows I have forsworn his bed.” Mariam boldly claims that her vows of marriage have been replaced with “solemn vows” to reject her duty to a jealous husband; her language notably claims the power to abandon marriage vows, something not afforded to early modern women. After Mariam’s proclamation, the following exchange occurs between Sohemus and Mariam:

*Sohemus*: But you must break those vows.  
*Mariam*: I’ll rather break  
The heart of Mariam. Curséd is my fate!  
But speak no more to me. In vain ye speak  
To live with him I so profoundly hate.  
*Sohemus*: Great queen, you must to me your pardon give.  
Sohemus cannot now your will obey.  
If your command should me to silence drive,  
It were not to obey, but to betray.  
Reject and slight my speeches, mock my faith,  
Scorn my observance, call my counsel naught;  
Though you regard not what Sohemus saith,  
Yet will I ever freely speak my thought.267

This crucial exchange demonstrates first that Mariam vehemently refuses to perform the duties of wifehood for a husband who is a threat to her own life. Moreover, in her disobedience and outspoken critique of her husband, she calls for Sohemus, advocate of

266 Ibid., 3.3.15-16.  
267 Ibid., 3.4.134-146.
Herod, to “speak no more.” Sohemus replies that he will not her “will obey,” and will not allow Mariam “[him] to silence drive” (emphasis mine). Not only is Mariam transgressing the calls for wifely obedience and silence, she demands them from Sohemus, whose “faith” and “observance” lie with her husband.

Even as Mariam maintains that she will “not to [her] prison turn again,” she maintains her chastity: “Let my distresséd state unpitied be;/Mine innocence is hope enough for me.” With this, she exits the scene. Sohemus, left alone, responds thusly:

Poor guiltless queen! Oh that my wish might place
A little temper now about thy heart!
Unbridled speech is Mariam’s worse disgrace,
And will endanger her without desert.
[…]
But fare thee well, chaste queen! Well may I see
The darkness palpable, and rivers part,
The sun stand still—nay, more retorted be—
But never woman with so pure a heart.

Though Mariam is guilty of “unbridled speech,” rashness, a refusal and usurpation of calls to obedience and chastity, she maintains her “innocence,” and Sohemus maintains that she is “chaste” and “pure.” This flies in the face of contemporary wisdom that wifely chastity must abide by obedience and chastity—the contemporary wisdom that Mariam struggles with in her opening speech, and the contemporary wisdom reaffirmed by the Chorus’s infamous response to this scene. The chorus opens with what seems to be an answer and reprimand to Sohemus:

Tis not enough for one that is a wife
To keep her spotless from an act of ill,
But from suspicion she should free her life,
And bare herself of power as well as will.
Tis not so glorious for her to be free

269 Ibid., 3.3.63-66, 87-90.
As by her proper self restrained to be.270

The Chorus stands here to remind the reader of the expectations for a wife, namely to divest herself of “power” and “will,” so as not to draw suspicion, even in innocence. However, as we see in Monument, her chastity was inherently suspect, and the notion that she could protect it from suspicion, is a fiction. The Chorus reminds the reader, as articulated in Monument, that chastity can be violated by disobedience and unsanctioned speech: “Her mind, if not peculiar, is not chaste. /For in a wife it is no worse to find/ a common body than a common mind.”271 Taken together with Mariam’s exchange with Sohemus, the proclamations of the Chorus seem to corroborate Christina Luckyj’s argument about women’s speech in early modern literature: “Considered as alternative forms of repression and control, neither speech nor silence initially appears to be a promising approach to early modern women.”272 Here, again, is the double bind: in her attempts to be a faithful wife and protect herself, Mariam is “chaste” and unchaste, “pure” and wicked, “guiltless” and a betrayer.

When Herod returns, Mariam refuses to greet him joyously and she refuses to share his bed. When Herod expresses confusion and indignation at this reception, he asks her to perform happiness for him in order to rid him of his “unkind conceits” toward her. However, as we know from the opening of the play, Herod harbored these “unkind conceits” already, fearing his wife’s unfaithfulness from the beginning; a wife’s chastity is inherently suspect. Mariam responds: “I cannot frame disguise, nor never taught/my

271 Ibid., 3.4.242-243.
face a look dissenting from my thought.” Mariam stands in outright defiance of her husband’s demands—demands to perform her duties as wife. Mariam’s refusal to welcome her husband home leave him susceptible to Salome’s machinations, who persuades Herod that Mariam is attempting to kill him (though, one might wonder whether he could have been persuaded even in the absence of Mariam’s obstinacy).

Convinced of Mariam’s falsehood, Herod accuses her of being unchaste as well:

She’s unchaste;
Her mouth will ope to ev’ry stranger’s ear.
Then let the executioner make haste,
Lest she enchant him if her words he hear.
Let him be deaf, lest she do him surprise
That shall to free her spirit be assigned.

Unchastity, here, is explicitly unsanctioned and manipulative speech. Now, while the reader knows that Mariam has not actively tried to poison Herod, as Salome has convinced him, and neither has she “[opened] to ev’ry stranger’s ear,” these accusations are not entirely unsupported by the text. Mariam’s first lines in the play include an admission that she often “[wished] [Herod’s’] carcass dead to see.” Further, she has, in fact, had conversations with Sohemus in particular during which Herod’s confidences were betrayed. These might very well be considered breaches of chastity, though they were in the service of defending her own safety. Mariam stands in defiance of the good/wicked binary.

The play ends with Mariam’s execution and a dramatic return to celebrating her as a chaste wife. On her way to be executed, Mariam laments her shortcomings, but defends her chastity:

274 Ibid., 4.7.77-82.
Had I but with humility been graced;
As well as fair, I might have proved me wise;
But I did think, because I knew me chaste,
One virtue for a woman might suffice.275

Mariam, here, encapsulates her struggle: a desire to be understood as chaste despite her transgressions against silence and obedience. In fact, her desire to be understood as chaste in and of itself is her problem, because Herod always fundamentally feared her unchaste. However, after her death, Herod declares, “I hold her chaste ev’n in my inmost soul,” and even the Chorus decries the death of “guiltless Mariam” and says of Herod, “He both repents her death and knows her chaste.”276 With this ending, the play frays at its seams. Mariam has tried unsuccessfully to perform chastity and live, ending in her execution; in her death, her accusers abandon their accusations, reaffirming the kind of chastity that Mariam did perform and for which she was executed. Mariam leaves the reader confounded; for Mariam, chastity was both hers and never hers—something she performed but warred against—something constant but impossible.

The Salome/Mariam Paradox

The impossibility of chastity and goodness with the double bind is what, I argue, deconstructs the Salome/Mariam paradox. The play’s critique of this impossibility and the danger that it brings into the lives of wives is made meaningful in the relationship between Mariam and Salome, not negated by the wickedness of Salome. My intervention builds from Murphy’s schematic regarding the functions of “good” and “bad” women in literature and the ways in which they are used to influence female readers; Murphy argues that literature must include “bad” women as well “good” women

276 Ibid., 5.1.76, 5.1.272, 5.1.282.
if it is to help inscribe social norms—the “bad” woman is a boundary keeper without whom the “good” woman would be unremarkable and even indiscernible. In the case of *Mariam*, I would argue that Cary’s Mariam and Salome are deliberate complications of this paradigm. While Mariam and Salome certainly function as oppositional in many ways, their desires are bound up in one another, and their behavior—caught in the chastity double bind—not as different as it appears.

There is no denying that Mariam and Salome function as enemies in this play. Mariam repeatedly slights Salome, belittling her, addressing her as “base woman,” continually suggesting that Salome is of lesser birth than she herself. In retaliation, Salome works to convince Herod that Mariam is plotting his murder, thus leading him to execute his wife. These women want to believe that they are the antithesis of the other. In particular, Mariam, who remains invested in being understood as good, thinks of Salome as the bad woman who makes her meaningful. Moreover, the language used to describe Salome and Mariam differs greatly, which does suggest that those who inhabit the world of the play also believe that the two are meant to function oppositionally. Herod, speaking to Salome, declares:

> Yourself are a goodly creature here,  
> Yet so unlike my Mariam in your shape  
> That, when to her you have approachéd near,  
> Myself hath often ta’en you for an ape.278

277 Murphy, *Virtuous Necessity*, 6. Murphy writes, “I would like to trouble the assumptions about women who appear to conform and the literature that offers them advice, by positing that both ends of the spectrum of feminine virtue strive to socialize women into certain behavioral patterns. Portrayals of both “good” and “bad” women are used to construct the ideal of feminine virtue. Thus, female characters who behave contrary to social prescriptions are just as important to those prescriptions as the female characters who follow them.”

Mariam’s beauty overshadows Salome, as does, relatedly, her virtue. Mariam’s character is entirely devoid of the sexual appetite that underwrites Salome’s desire to leave her husband for another lover. Mariam is not characterized as self-indulgent, fickle, and crass, as is Salome. However, rather than functioning as typified “good” and “bad” women, giving women boundaries for wifely behavior, Mariam and Salome are subtly linked—in desire and in behavior—in order to illustrate the difficulties in identifying and adhering to virtue within the chastity double bind.

Given the impossibility of chastity within the play, Mariam’s behavior slips between the porous boundary of virtue and wickedness. Erin Kelly builds from this in her suggestion that Cary characterizes Mariam as a “troubling and troublesome” in an endeavor to remind readers that “martyrs are always rebellious.” In keeping with Kelly’s focus on female martyrdom as a cite of necessarily of both virtue and rebellion, I would argue that Cary even deliberately evokes the kind of language used in the medieval virgin martyr legends from the first chapter of this dissertation. Recall that these legends include the attempted execution of these “troublesome,” disobedient, yet virtuous women; however, their bodies miraculously react against the violence inflicted upon them—fire doesn’t burn them, water can’t drown them, weapons can’t harm them.

Similarly, when Herod has decided that Mariam must be executed, he struggles to settle on a method of execution:

> Nay she shall die. Die, quoth you? That she shall. But for the means—the means! Methinks ‘tis hard To find a means to murder her withal;

Therefore I am resolved she shall be spared.280

Dismayed by Herod’s confusion about how to execute Mariam—what should be a straightforward task, Salome responds, “Why? Let her be beheaded.”281 However, Herod answers her suggestion as if she has suggested an impossibility: “That were well./ Think you that swords are miracles like you?/ Her skin will ev’ry curt’l’ax edge refell,/And then your enterprise you well may rue.”282 Herod describes Mariam’s skin as impenetrable to weapons, and he meets each of Salome’s subsequent suggestions with similar rebuttals. When Salome suggests drowning, Herod answers, “Indeed, a sweet device./ Why, would not ev’ry river turn her course/ Rather than do her beauty prejudice;”283 when Salome suggests burning, Herod refutes her with, “’Twill not be Flame is from her derived into my heart./ Thou nurset flame; flame will not murder thee./ My fairest Mariam, fullest of desert.” Herod calls forth the tradition of the virgin martyrs, whose bodies reject the violences meant to punish their rebellion. Herod ironically describes the way in which Mariam’s virtue will protect her body from harm, all while attempting to determine an effective way for punishing her wickedness. Like the virgin martyrs, Mariam is both a good woman and a bad woman. Unlike the virgin martyrs who are executed by pagan tyrants, however, Mariam is executed by the very authority who calls her to an impossible chastity.

While Salome could certainly not be mistaken for a chaste and faithful wife, her desire to separate from Constabarus—her rebellion—is importantly connected to

281 Ibid., 4.7.5.
282 Ibid., 4.7.5-8.
283 Ibid., 4.7.15-17.
Mariam’s desire to divest herself from wifely duties to Herod. Salome’s connection to Mariam thus complicates the notion of her own wickedness; Salome is more than simply a “bad woman.” While the motivations of these two characters differ (Mariam’s being righteous anger and self-defense, Salome’s being sexual satisfaction), their justifications are undeniably similar. Cuder-Dominguez notes

Salome’s bid for female desire contributes to cast her as the villain, for it signals a transgressive, incontinent sexuality. At the same time, Salome becomes the most active agent of disorder in the kingdom, the one who can bring about far-reaching and long-effecting changes. 284

Salome’s “agency of disorder” is marked in her speaking to her lover Silleus, when she announces her plan to divorce her husband Constabarus in order to be with Silleus openly:

Who hates his wife, though for no just abuse,
May with a bill divorce her from his bed.
But in this custom women are not free;
Yet I for once will wrest it.285

Salome here critiques the biblical law which allows men to divorce their wives “for no just abuse,” while this same right is denied to women. These lines could just have easily been uttered by Mariam herself, who certainly feels that she has just reason to separate from Herod. Further, Salome’s pledge to “wrest” the privilege of divorce is revisited in Mariam’s response to Sohemus: “With solemn vows, I have foresworn [Herod’s] bed.” While their motivations are different, Salome and Mariam rely on similar justifications, most explicitly articulated by Salome: the power of divorce should not lie solely with men.

284 Cuder-Dominguez, Stuart Women, 25.
285 Cary, The Tragedy of Mariam, 1.5.11-14.
When Salome announces to Constabarus her plans to divorce, he endeavors to
discipline her into the double bind:

Didst thou but know the worth of honest fame
How much a virtuous woman is esteemed,
Thou wouldst like hell eschew deserved shame,
And seek to be both chaste and chastely deemed.

Notably, this rebuke of Salome is strongly reflected in the 3 Chorus’ rebuke of Mariam,
who must maintain her virtue not only through her chastity, but by freeing her life of
“suspicion”—she must “be both chaste and chastely deemed”—a feat that the play goes
on to demonstrate is impossible. Salome responds with words that closely mimic
Mariam’s own grievances against Herod:

Thou shalt no longer call me wife;
Thy jealousy procures my hate so deep
That I from thee do mean to free my life
By divorcing bill before I sleep.286

Accusations of “jealousy” that restricts “freedom” are precisely the accusations that
Mariam levies against Herod. In fact, recall that Mariam rebukes Sohemus, “In vain ye
speak/To live with him I so profoundly hate.”287 The language that Mariam and Salome
use to describe their feelings toward their husbands are remarkably similar. Further,
speaking about her resolve to divorce Constabarus, Salome declares, “Though I be first
that to this course do bend/ I shall not be the last, full well I know.”288 Here, Salome
implies that her struggle and her desires are not unique, that they are shared among
women—a statement corroborated by Mariam’s experiences. Thus, desires of Mariam
and Salome are intimately tied to one another, deconstructing the binary that many
scholars have identified. Further, while in some ways the play indeed pits Mariam’s virtue against Salome’s wickedness, both women transgress the boundaries of chastity through an outspoken rejection of the authority of and duty to their husbands. The Salome/Mariam paradox, then, is no longer “the Salome problem.” These characters are not meant to be understood in utter contrast to one another, nor does the existence of Salome undercut the “feminism” of the play. Instead, the problem becomes an emblematic paradox. This paradox is inherent in the formulation of the double bind for women—a paradox wherein virtue and vice become inextricably bound up in one another and thus impossible to entirely disentangle. The crucial difference between these women is that, in the end, Mariam is executed in her attempt to perform the impossible, and Salome survives in her outright rejection of it.

Biblical Precedent and Exegetical Crisis in Mariam

If we reject a reading of Mariam as a Christ-figure, an unequivocally good and misunderstood woman martyred for the sake of her virtue, we need not reject all religious resonances in this play. I argue that Cary’s Mariam is a play that is invested in biblical exegesis—specifically, in highlighting the exegetical crisis facing wives who look to the Bible in an attempt to understand models of goodness. As we see in Bentley’s Monument, the Bible is cited in the early modern period as evidence of women’s wickedness. Of course, the Bible also includes myriad women who are celebrated in their service to God or God’s people, many of whom are in the Old Testament. While much has rightly been made of Cary’s conversion to Catholicism and its influence on her writing,289 less has

289 Of note, also, is Cary’s dedication of her translation of the Catholic polemic “The reply of the most illvstrious Cardinall of Perron, to the ansvweare of the most excellent King of Great Britaine,” to the Catholic Queen Henrietta Maria.
been made of the influence of the Old Testament on Mariam, a play set in ancient Palestine. I argue that the characters of the play invoke narratives from the Old Testament that often include celebrated women. However, rather than functioning as a rebuke to the kind of exegesis Bentley is performing, these invocations are characterized by an exegetical crisis. The celebrated women of the Bible often do not adhere to the chastity, silence, and obedience themselves. Mariam, then, is a play torn asunder, first by the impossibly of chastity, and second by the irreconcilability of biblical precedent.

In her 2001 essay on “the exegetical tradition” in Mariam, Lyn Bennett offers a crucial and sustained exploration of biblical exegesis within the play. She argues

Mariam and Salome can be read as Cary's critical commentary on contemporary constructions of women and, more importantly, as this playwright's probing engagement with the kind of scriptural exegesis that was so often invoked to define such types. Cary's revisionist offering of the Crucifixion story is undoubtedly significant, but her questioning of scriptural interpretation is, I think, much broader than Mariam's story alone suggests.  

290Michelle Ephraim, Reading the Jewish Woman on the Elizabethan Stage (New York, Ashgate Publishing, 2008). In her study of the Jewish woman in early modern drama, Michelle Ephraim notably excludes Cary from the primary analysis of her book. However, in her epilogue titled “Jewish Women, Women Writers, and Elizabeth’s Legacy,” Ephraim writes, “Cary’s adaptation [of Josephus’s Antiquities of the Jews] reflects her reputed familiarity with rabbinic and Christian biblical scholarship and, potentially, her knowledge of Hebrew” (153). In her epilogue, she speaks to the writings of both Cary and early modern poet Aemilia Lanyer: “Cary and Lanyer, I argue, take further the authoritative stance assumed by the male writers and exegetes who have been the focal point of this book: they use scriptural and literary archetypes of Jewish women to express their own agency as interpreters of the scripture challenging male interpretations of these figures and, ultimately, forging an exclusive bond between female writer, subject and reader” (153). Ephraim speaks to the exegetical impulse that underwrites Cary’s writing, briefly arguing that this impulse is connected to a kind of gendered agency. In building from this, though, I want to suggest that in Cary’s case, this exegetical “bond between female writer, subject, and reader” and the challenge that this poses to “male interpretations” does not result in a clear and emancipatory biblical message for women.  

291 Lyn Bennett, “‘Written on my tainted brow’,” 6.
Bennett uses this framework to examine the ways in which Mariam and Salome typify and complicate the Mary/Eve dichotomy. What Bennett does is open the door for understanding Cary’s female characters through the lens of complex biblical exegesis performed by women writers and readers. Her analysis, however, stays relatively firmly rooted within the Mary/Eve dichotomy, a Christian teleology that does not necessarily account for other ways in which the Old Testament comes to bear on the play. It is a turn toward other Old Testament narratives that characterizes my own interjection. For example, when Salome first voices her desire to divorce Constabarus, she voices her grievance with Mosaic law in particular:

It is the principles of Moses’ laws, 
for Constabarus still remains in life.
If he to me did bear as earnest hate 
as I to him, for him there were an ease; 
A separating bill might free his fate 
from such a yoke that did so much displease. 
Why should such privilege to man be given? 
OR, given, to them, why barred from women then? 
Are men than we in greater grace with heaven? 
Or cannot women hate as well as men? 293

Salome makes a specifically biblical critique here, reproaching the law of Moses for being unfair to women in proscribing them from obtaining “a separating bill” of divorce while affording the same right to men. This sentiment is importantly echoed by Doris, who accuses Mariam of adultery for marrying her once-husband, Herod. Mariam cites Mosaic law in her defense of Herod’s divorce of Doris, and thus in defense of her own marriage, her own chastity:

Was that adult’ry? Did not Moses say 
That he that, being matched, did deadly hate

Might by permission put his wife away
And take a more beloved to be his mate?294

Mariam cites the Mosaic divorce law in defense of her own chastity, a flagrant irony insofar as these same laws allowing her marriage prevent her own divorce. Doris answers Mariam’s retort with a strong defense of her own virtue:

What did he hate me for? For simple truth?
For bringing beauteous babes for love to him?
For riches, noble birth, or tender youth?
Or for no stain did Doris’ honor dim?
Oh, tell me, Mariam, tell me, if you know,
Which fault of these made Herod Doris’ foe.295

Doris pushes back against the notion that Herod divorced her out of hatred, as she lists all of the ways in which she fulfilled her duties as faithful wife. The implication here, of course, is that Herod left Doris in favor of Mariam’s youthful beauty—in favor of his lust. This exchange demonstrates the ways in which Mosaic biblical law leaves women’s desires unaccounted for, while justifying men’s decisions that ignore and/or compromises the integrity and chastity of women. For Doris in particular, and ironically, Mariam after her, this exchange highlights the way in which the women’s goodness does not protect them.

Mariam also invokes the Old Testament in Herod’s comparison of Mariam to Queen Esther. As Herod laments Sohemus having told Mariam his plan to have Mariam killed in the event of his death, Herod reflects on the beauty and virtue of his wife:

Had Asuerus seen my Mariam’s brow
The humble Jew, she might have walked alone,
Her beauteous virtue should have stayed below
While Mariam mounted to the Persian throne.296

295 Ibid., 4.8.67-72.
296 Ibid., 4.7.129-132.
Here, Herod claims that Mariam would have eclipsed the “beauteous virtue” of “the humble Jew,” Queen Esther. What is notable about Herod’s invocation of Queen Esther is that her story is distinctly not one of chastity, silence, and obedience; in fact, it is a story in which a woman transgresses each of those categories in the service of God. The story of Esther begins with King Ahasuerus deposing his wife and queen, Vashti, for her disobedience (another example of the male power to divorce). The King then gathers beautiful maidens to form a harem from which he will choose a successor for Vashti. Esther is chosen out of this group to be queen; having been part of a harem and having spent nights with the King during this process—Esther is certainly not a chaste woman, especially by early modern standards. Further, Esther remains an important Jewish figure for her intervening on behalf of her people, who were in danger of being slaughtered by order of the king. Esther demands an audience with her king, unsummoned—a transgression punishable by death. However, Ahasuerus pardons her, and allows her to speak on behalf of the Jewish people. Esther is neither silent nor obedient. However, she is celebrated for her “beauteous virtue,” and is considered in early modern England to be one of the great women of the Bible. The obscurity of biblical messages regarding chastity, silence, and obedience does not offer Mariam, Salome, or Cary’s female readers a way out of the double bind; but it does offer a strong critique of the literally impossible standards that inhere in it.

Conclusion

Cary’s Mariam not only critiques the way in which the double bind creates impossible standards for women but shows her readers in the opening lines that we would not find a good woman in the pages to follow. Mariam has already indicted herself in her
resentment of her husband, and her resentment stems from the fact that Herod had
indicted her as unchaste even before the play began. Chastity is not simply multivalent
and complex, but an impossible concept that collapses in on itself as it purports to protect
women and lift them up even as it endangers them and divests them of modes of
resistance. Virtue and vice collide in this collapsing chastity, obscuring what is truly good
and what is truly just. This confusion culminates in the execution of an unchaste wife,
lamented in death as a chaste martyr—the play torn asunder.

When Salome announces to Constabarus that she plans to divorce him,

Constabarus responds

         I prithee, Salome, dismiss this mood,
         Thou dost not know how ill it fits thy place:
         My words were all intended for thy good,
         To raise thine honour and to stop disgrace.297

Salome responds, “To stop disgrace? Take thou no care for for me,/ Nay, do thy worst,
thy worse I set not by.” Constabarus articulates the lie of the double bind: that patriarchal
expectations are for women’s “good,” that they will protect their “honor” and save them
from “disgrace.” Mariam is the play’s answer to this. However, Salome’s answer is
equally powerful; she does not argue for her honor, nor does she ultimately attempt to
make herself and her choices legible. She “set[s] not by” his threats of punishment, and
asks not for his understanding, but his divestment. Salome survives the play in refusing to
claim the goodness that beheads Mariam, and this leaves us with a powerful lesson about
the impossibility of navigating a system rigged against you.

Chapter 4: “Breaking the Double Bind: The English querelle des femmes and Women’s Exegesis”

Introduction

The *querelle des femmes*—a “centuries-old [...] debate over the nature and worth of womankind”\(^{298}\)—ignites in England in the seventeenth century. In the English context, this debate specifically takes up the question of whether women are inherently weak-willed, sinful, and corrupt. The English *querelle* is a public debate epitomized in a series of texts published in heated opposition to one another. These texts have long elicited both enthusiastic scholarly attention and vehement responses because they are, indeed, exciting. They are boisterous, often irreverent, animated, and bold. They are immersive and compelling—sometimes in their audacity, sometimes in their utter spectacle. Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignment of lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women* (1615) is one of the most vitriolic texts published censuring the corrupt nature of women, oscillating between hyperbolic and vulgar metaphor—women become “adders, serpents, and snakes,” “scorpions,” “cursed cow[s]”—and particularly damning biblical examples of sinful women. Rachel Speght’s response to Swetnam, *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1615), and the pamphlet attributed to the pseudonymous Ester Sowernam, *Ester hath hang’d Haman* (1617), marry biting satire and careful exegetical argumentation in their endeavors to discredit Swetnam as a blasphemer and a fool. The energy behind the pamphlet wars demands the same level of animation and investment from any of their readers—seventeenth century or otherwise.

This attention has produced vehement scholarly debate, much of which centers on what these texts have meant for feminist scholars. Many feminist scholars have found these written spars thrilling in their “proto-feminist” potential. Christina Luckyj writes of this strand of scholarship, “The Mouzell is thus widely heralded as a proto-feminist text, whether written to oppose Swetnam’s virulent misogyny in the querelle des femmes or to ‘look past Swetnam to engage worthier antagonists.’” Indeed, the fierceness that accompanies Speght’s and Sowernam’s careful excoriations of Swetnam’s admittedly spurious logic and wild claims seems ripe for celebration by feminist scholars. However, other scholars have pushed back against this tendency to read these responses as coherently “proto-feminist,” arguing that this scholarship might be underwritten by overly presentist associations between women’s polemic and our current understanding of feminist politics. Luckyj suggests that the “[proto-feminist] consensus tends to overlook two inconvenient facts” with regard to Rachel Speght in particular: that her pamphlet was published by the same press as was Swetnam’s, and that she, in her affirmation of the marriage hierarchy, albeit a respectful and harmonious one, “actually recycles commonplaces of Puritan marriage doctrine uttered by just those male writers (including Swetnam) that Speght allegedly seeks to refute.” For Luckyj, celebrating these texts as proto-feminist relies on the willing erasure of historical circumstance and textual inconsistency.

300 Ibid., 114.
Diane Purkiss offers perhaps the most enduring and uncompromising critique of the “politically dangerous” tendency to establish an easy link between what we as contemporary critics understand to be the political goals of Mouzell for Melastomus and Ester hath hang’d Haman and the motives, desires, and identities of their authors. In fact, she critiques those who too readily believe the pseudonym Ester Sowernam necessarily belongs to a woman at all, cautioning against making claims that feel most exciting for feminism without considering the complexities that trouble such claims. She writes, “The kind of attention paid collectively [to the querelle des femmes texts] suggests that many critics understand feminism to be a relatively recognizable political and literary category which, though historically variable, is also visible across historical boundaries.” She cautions critics to be wary of their own tendencies to indulge a “desire to recognize the present in the past, to name what we can term our own history,” or, more succinctly, a “desire for material girls, women as real as ourselves.” For Purkiss, it is “reductive” to allow these affective attachments to tell us a coherent story about these texts, their authors, and their feminism that is likely much more complicated and historically specific.

Much of this scholarly debate stakes central claims in the identities and political desires of the writers who respond to Swetnam and the integrity of the feminist message in these texts. These questions are salient and by no means settled; however, in exclusively focusing on questions like “Are these writers really who they say they are,

301 Loosely, “A muzzle for black mouth.”
303 Ibid., 70.
and do they really believe what they espouse?” or “Is this proto-feminism that we can rally behind or does this problematically rely on antiquated marriage roles?” we miss what is, I will argue, the most remarkable element of this public debate. I aim to situate my analysis of the *querelle des femmes* in the context of the double bind examined in the previous chapters of this dissertation. This double bind, seen most clearly in literature, begins with the call for good women to perform chastity, silence, and obedience. However, these virtues, at times, become impossible to perform or attain, whether because of the threat of physical violence that accompanies them, or because of the belief that women are inherently wicked, and therefore that women’s performance of these virtues is necessarily deceptive. In particular, women’s acts of testifying to their goodness mark them as unruly; testimony is often seen as a violation of all three virtues. Finally, women are violently punished or killed for their transgressions, only to be celebrated in death as the good women they promised they were. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Lucrece’s chastity is eroticized and elicits Tarquin’s violent lust; however, she cannot resist him for fear of retaliation, but if she “yields,” she is also ruined. In *The Tragedy of Mariam*, Mariam’s husband endangers her life with his demand that she be executed in the event of his death, but her disobedience and vocal expression of anger mark her as an unruly and dangerous woman. The texts of the *querelle des femmes*, however, do not stage the trial of one woman, offering a referendum on her life and (im)possible goodness. The *querelle des femmes* instead is rhetorical; Swetnam makes an argument about all women which functions as the clearest and most explicit articulation of the double bind, and his detractors, in turn, are not testifying to their own personal goodness, but are engaging in
careful logic and strategic satire to undermine the primacy of these notions. The double bind is up for debate.

The rhetorical nature of this debate is crucial for a few reasons. First, rhetorical responses like Speght’s and Swetnam’s can deploy a careful logic to expose inconsistencies in the argument about women’s fundamental wickedness. These writings call attention to the double bind while simultaneously, in certain moments, turning its circular logic back onto men, pointing out the ways in which this kind of thinking can just as easily implicate sinful men—the double bind folds in itself. Second, the satirical mockery of Speght and Sowernam is not out of step with Swetnam’s inflated rhetoric. In this way, Speght and Sowernam can employ laughter as a way to playfully undermine his authority, but also as a convincing referendum on the logic of the double bind.

Further, this debate is occurring in a time when many Protestant women are reading the Bible independently and therefore beginning to engage in their own biblical exegesis, making the exegetical nature of Mouzell for Melastomus and Ester hath hang’d Haman in step with a phenomenon happening more widely. Swetnam’s explicit reliance on and citation of scripture opens the door for writers to meet this with alternate interpretations and biblical counter-examples. Further, this rhetorical invocation of biblical precedent lays the groundwork for a subtle but crucial reframing of chastity, silence, and obedience. Biblical women’s virtues can be celebrated specifically in how they work to further the will of God, rather than serving men. Mouzell and Ester often cite biblical women whose performance of these virtues simultaneously fulfills the will of God while deceiving, undermining, even employing violence against men: Judith’s stealthy beheading of Holofernes with only the knowledge and help of her maidservant,
Deborah’s declaration the “Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman,” 304

Rebekah’s deception of Isaac to ensure the birthright of Jacob. 305 Further, these texts offer redemptive readings of despised biblical women (Eve) or glorify biblical women who are remembered as great women who are favored by God despite transgressions (Miriam). The Bible is always unassailable but is no longer the exclusive domain of male interpretation. 306

In this chapter, before turning to the pamphlet wars, I will by analyzing a more recognizably literary text that strongly comes to bear on these debates. Aemilia Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum was published in 1611, four years before Joseph Swetnam’s pamphlet was released. I begin here for two reasons. First, I demonstrate the ways in which these debates, before published, were still being held in earnest. Lanyer prefaces her volume of poetry with an address to “all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome,” with the stated purpose of “mak[ing] knowne to the world, that all women deserve not to be blamed,” and that “such points of folly [are] practised by evill disposed

304 Judg. 4:9 (AV).
305 Gen. 27 (AV).
men.” Second, I argue that while her poetry does not function as an explicit retort (as do *Mouzell* and *Ester*), it demonstrates a kind of literary engagement with the themes of these debates. Though her collection is largely a meditation on the passion of Christ, she also anticipates the kinds of exegetical work that Speght and Sowernam deploy. She highlights powerful biblical women who disciplined men, offering a poetic apology for Eve, and reminds readers of the actions that Pontius Pilate’s wife took to prevent execution of Christ. I will draw heavily on biblical texts in order to demonstrate the way in which Lanyer’s poetry, sanctioned by a new biblical exegesis, takes literary creative liberties that allow for women’s goodness to be located in transgression of the very behavioral norms used to contain and condemn them.

I then turn to Joseph Swetnam’s *The Araignment of lewd, idle, froward, unconstant women*, arguing that its publication marks an important moment for the *querelle des femmes* in its being a public and published articulation of the double bind, and in its being an invitation for rhetorical engagement and debate. Swetnam’s tract draws on all aspects of the double bind: ostensibly drawing a distinction between good and bad women while simultaneously emphasizing the impossibility of women’s goodness; attempting to weaponize women’s self-defense against them; citing biblical precedent in his claim that men are always better off without women. I conclude with analyses of Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastomus* and Sowernam’s *Ester hath hang’d Haman*. Speght begins by stating that her hope that she shall be deemed “by the iudicious to haue the victorie,” which would mean she “both hit the marke whereat [she] aymed,

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and obtained that prize which [she] desired.” These pamphlets are not personal defenses of their own goodness, offering the very testimony that will ensure their destruction. Instead, these are debates to be won—these writers are hoping for “victorie,” not survival. Their evidence is not their own good behavior or pure motives, but their logic, humor, and exegetical control. Ester Sowernam even goes as far as to say that the act of writing itself is a defense of women, as it is ultimately in the service of God and the defense of his creation. These writers take on the double bind itself, rather than try to prove an individual woman’s innocence within it.

Much attention has been paid to Ester Sowernam’s identification as “Neither Maide, Wife, nor Widdowe, yet really all, and therefore experienced to defend all.” Does this mean she is a whore? A man? Are we as readers actually being lied to? Laughed at? Was Rachel Speght’s response solicited by her publisher? Does she really believe what she writes? As Diane Purkiss warns, are we allowing ourselves to be too easily persuaded by what we want to be true about these writers? These questions are all undeniably relevant if we are invested in making historically accurate claims about the identities of these writers, and if their identities come to bear on our understanding of their “proto-feminism.” I advocate for a shift in scholarly perspective that moves away from interrogating the authenticity of these writers’ identities; instead, the power of these pamphlets stems from the inability to identify them with the personal experience and perspective of a single woman. Being “Neither Maide, nor Wife, nor Widdowe” means

that her (the rhetorical figure of Ester Sowernam) performance of chastity, silence, and obedience becomes murky. The double bind cannot be weaponized against a woman who is all and none of these things at the same time. The identity of Ester Sowernam and the motivations of Rachel Speght are less important than what these texts offer to a growing population of reading women: a defense of the goodness of women that does not demand annihilation.

**Aemilia Lanyer’s Radical Exegesis**

While Joseph Swetnam’s *Araignment* is said to “[inaugurate] the rancorous Jacobean skirmish in the centuries-old *querelle des femmes,*” the pamphlet wars were not the only seventeenth texts that took up the themes and questions of this debate. Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is one of these texts. As Michele Osherow notes, “The volume is presented as a poetic celebration of Christ’s passion, but it is intricately bound with, and explicitly relies on, Lanyer’s celebration of women.” In fact, scholars have long debated the “central purpose” of Lanyer’s work “because it expresses religious feeling while complaining of men’s condemnation of women.”

Some have even suggested that Lanyer’s title misrepresents the work as primarily a poetic meditation on the crucifixion, when it is at least equally a “protofeminist defence of women.” In some ways, this category crisis makes the dubious assumption that Lanyer’s poetic religiosity must, in some ways, be a trojan horse for her messages about women. The strength of her defense of women, however, does not preclude the

311 Osherow, *Biblical Women’s Voices*, 104.
312 Ibid., 104.
earnestness of her piety, in the same way that, as Lewalski notes, Robert Southwell’s Saint Peters Complaynt brings together a meditation on crucifixion and “outbursts of misogyny,” for example.\textsuperscript{314} In this way, Lanyer’s Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum is part of a literary conversation that precedes the rhetorical “rancorous Jacobean skirmish” of the pamphlet wars; as Osherow notes, the querelle des femmes is “a battle in which she engages poetically.”\textsuperscript{315}

Lanyer’s prose preface “To the Vertuous Reader” articulates in no uncertain terms the author’s desire for her poetry to intervene on the conversation about women’s wickedness. Her many dedicatory poems written to various female patrons frame Salve Deus as a work addressed to and in praise of a community of women. Lanyer affirms this framing in “To the Vertuous Reader,” declaring that her work is “for the generall use of all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome; and in commendation of some particular persons of our own sexe.”\textsuperscript{316} Lanyer moves from praising women to disciplining men, addressing the querelle des femmes in earnest. She condemns evill disposed men, who forgetting they were borne of women, nourished of women, and that if it were not by the means of women, they would be quite extinguished out of the world, and a finall ende of them all, doe like Vipers deface the wombes wherein they were bred, onely to give way and utterance to their want of discretion and goodnesse.\textsuperscript{317}

Lewalski reads this as signaling the “the imagined presence of male readers as well,” thus “prompt[ing] a switch to polemics: the epistle makes a brief but forceful contribution to

\textsuperscript{315} Osherow, Biblical Women’s Voices, 104.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid.
the *querelle des femmes.*”\(^{318}\) Indeed, this language is the most unflinchingly polemical thus far, calling out what Lanyer sees as the hypocrisy of men who denigrate women without whom they could not exist.

However, in between her praise of virtuous women and her censure of slanderous men, Lanyer also offers a word of caution to certain women, who “forgetting they are women themselves, and in danger to be condemned by the words of their owne mouthes, fall into so great an errour, as to speake unadvisedly against the rest of their sexe.”\(^{319}\) This warning functions not simply as polemical, but brings to the forefront the trap of the double bind. Women feel compelled to condemn bad women, presumably to distinguish their own goodness. As I have argued in earlier chapters of this dissertation, identifying and punishing “bad” women is what makes women’s “goodness” meaningful by contrast. What Lanyer points out here, however, is the way that this distinction collapses in on itself; a woman condemning bad women risks being “condemned by the words of [her] owne [mouth]”; she is not speaking simply against “bad” women, but against “the rest of [her] sexe.” Lanyer is thrusting the double bind into the spotlight; women who strive to distinguish themselves from “bad” women, women who work to perform goodness, will inevitably be swallowed by the rhetoric of women’s wickedness. This distinction between “good” and “bad” is a porous one at best, functioning as a method of discipline and control that does not, in practice, guarantee protection for any women.

What underscores and makes possible this double bind is the belief in women’s intrinsic susceptibility to sin. Chastity, silence, and obedience serve as behavioral

\(^{318}\) Lewalski, *Writing Women,* 225.  
\(^{319}\) Lanyer, “To the Vertuous Reader,” 48.
markers of women’s goodness, and biblical examples are used as evidence of women’s inability to truly perform these virtues, with Eve as the most salient. In “To the Vertuous Reader,” Lanyer works to challenge this use of the Bible, first reminding her readers of sins of men chronicled in the Bible as well: “Such as these [those men who denigrate women], were they that dishonoured Christ his Apostles and Prophets, putting them to shamefull deaths. Therefore we are not to regard any imputations, that they undeservedly lay upon us.” If women’s goodness is rendered suspect by biblical authority, then men’s goodness is similarly questionable. More than this, Lanyer refers her readers to biblical women who have been celebrated as women who, in the service of God, have worked to undermine men who “have tempted even the patience of God himselfe, who gave power to wise and virtuous women, to bring down their pride and arrogance.”

Lanyer references not only the way that women are instruments of God’s will, but also the susceptibility of sinful men to good women. Lewalski animatedly describes Lanyer’s catalogue of good women: “Marshaling biblical examples with rhetorical force and flair, she argues that God himself has affirmed women’s moral and spiritual equality with or superiority to men, and more than that, their call to exercise military and political power.” Indeed, these are the bold claims that Lanyer makes. I would suggest that what Lanyer does is even more radical than celebrating women’s exertion of power over men; she “marshals” women whose goodness often depends explicitly on the violation of chastity, silence, and obedience in serving God’s will or protecting God’s people. This

320 Lanyer, “To the Vertuous Reader,” 48-49.
321 Ibid., 49.
322 Lewalski, Writing Women, 225.
violation is celebrated rather than punished, and, in this way, these biblical women undermine the double bind.

Lanyer makes sure not only to include a celebration of biblical women, but also to carefully mentions each of the men brought to justice by these women as well. She follows her declaration that God has used women to “bring down” the “pride and arrogancie” of men with her biblical evidence:

As was cruell Cesarus by the discreet counsell of noble Deborah, Judge and Prophetesse of Israel: and resolution of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite: wicked Haman, by the divine prayers and prudent proceedings of beautifull Hester: blasphemous Holofernes, by the invincible courage, rare wisdome, and confident carriage of Judeth: & the unjust Judges, by the innocency of chast Susanna: with infinite others, which for brevitie sake I will omit.323

According to Lanyer, these women are notable in their exertion of power, their wisdom, their prayerful interventions, and their favor in the eyes of the lord. These women also in many ways represent the kinds of transgressions that men fear most from early modern women; these biblical women are often ungovernable, acting outside of and, at times, with flagrant disregard for male authority—whether political authority or the authority of a husband. Some of these women even wield their sexual appeal to achieve their goals—goals that align with the work of God. The violations of chastity, silence, and obedience that accompany their actions are not violations at all; instead, these behaviors are celebrated as enacting God’s will. In the preceding chapters of this dissertation, I have argued that texts like The Rape of Lucrece, Othello, and The Tragedy of Mariam illuminate the devastating consequences of the double bind: women are called to perform chastity, silence, and obedience only to have these virtues weaponized against them.

323 Lanyer, “The Vertuous Reader,” 49.
Lucrece’s chastity is eroticized and violently taken from her, Desdemona and Mariam mark themselves as dangerous in their defenses of their virtue. However, Lanyer provides a biblical basis for understanding transgressions against male authority as good in their elevation of God’s will over the will of men.

Lanyer first mentions Deborah, whose life is detailed in the book of Judges. She is introduced in the Bible as “a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel and that time.” In the beginning of Judges 4, Israel has been punished by God, allowing it to fall into the hands of King Jabin and the captain of his army, Sisera. Deborah calls Barak, an Israelite military commander, and asks him, “Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded” that he go and meet Sisera’s army to deliver Israel from the rule of Jabin. Barak replies, “If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, Then I will not go.” Already notable is Deborah’s authority and power; she summons Barak and questions his inaction, to which he replies that he will only take action with Deborah by his side. Deborah answers him, “I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.” Deborah unequivocally denies Barak’s “honour” in his quest, insisting this this honour shall instead belong to a woman is met with no protest. Deborah derives her power from God alone, and therefore, Barak does not fear her power, but relies on it.

324 Judg. 4:4 (AV).
325 Judg. 4:6 (AV).
326 Judg. 4:8 (AV).
327 Judg. 4:9 (AV).
When Deborah says that God will “sell Sisera into the hands of a woman,” she speaks of Jael, “the wife of Heber the Kenite.” While Deborah’s power and authority inverts the chaste, silent, and obedient model of women’s behavior—men obey her without protest—Jael’s slaying of Sisera presents a true violation of these behaviors. When Sisera flees Barak’s army, he flees to Jael’s tent, “for there was peace between Jabin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite.” Sisera comes to Jael because her husband is an ally. Jael welcomes Sisera into her tent (specifically, she “went out to meet Sisera,” transgressing the boundaries of the domestic), doting on him and inviting him to rest: “Turn in, my lord, turn in to me; fear not.” Barak commands her to “stand in front of the tent” and answer any inquiries about his whereabouts with feigned ignorance. Instead, “Jael Heber’s wife took a nail of the tent, and took an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the nail into his temples, and fastened it to the ground: for he was fast asleep and weary.” Jael not only betrays Sisera, but also her husband’s “peace” with Sisera, and does so in her own home through deception, disobedience, and violence.

Jael’s actions easily map on to early modern anxieties about ungovernable women whose willfulness undermines and threatens her husband’s autonomy. In fact,

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328 Judg. 4:17 (AV); Both Lanyer and the Book of Judges introduce Jael in this way, foregrounding her wifehood.
329 Judg. 4:17 (AV).
330 This is less remarkable in the context of the Old Testament, and more notable for the early modern reader. Leaving her domestic space, especially in order to exchange words with a man who is not her husband (in her husband’s absence) and invite him into her home, transgresses early modern expectations for wives. This could easily be read, in another context, by an early modern reader as suspicious behavior that signals unchastity.
331 Judg. 4:18 (AV).
332 Judg. 4:21 (AV).
Osherow points out that later in the seventeenth century, Milton links Delilah—famed biblical villaness—with Jael in *Samson Agonistes*. Delilah says, “I shall be nam’d among the famousest of women, sung at solemn festivals […] Not less renown’d then in Mount Ephraim, Jael, who with inhospitable guile smote Sisera sleeping through the Temples nail’d.” Not only does “Milton’s juxtaposition of these biblical women [paint] Jael as an alluring, cunning, trickster,” it suggests that Jael’s actions are acts of betrayal, not acts of goodness, and that she is motivated by “inhospitable guile” rather than a desire to enact the will of God. However, the Bible celebrates her actions in the song of Deborah:

“Blessed above women shall Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite be, blessed shall she be above women in the tent.” Jael is not Delilah, despite her disobedience and deception; the Bible unequivocally supports Lanyer’s reminder that women’s disobedience can be for the glory of God.

Lanyer also cites Judith’s “invincible courage, rare wisdome, and confident carriage.” The widowed Judith is perhaps the clearest example of a biblical woman violating early modern behavioral norms in the service of God. The Book of Judith is

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334 John Milton, “Samson Agonistes” in *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 600-601. What Osherow perhaps overlooks in her invocation of this moment from *Samson Agonistes* is that Milton himself might not believe Delilah’s analogy. Milton’s Delilah could be read as invoking a celebrated biblical woman in order to misleadingly place herself in her lineage—an attempt to reframe her own deceit as heroic. As readers, we might immediately balk at Delilah’s invocation of Jael, reading this moment as one underwritten by Delilah’s self-delusion. If we read Delilah this way, this could also be expressing an anxiety about the ways in which women can commit acts of deceit and disguise them as acts of goodness. Regardless, this moment does, indeed, function as a reminder that violence and deception can be in the service of God despite the ways in which they can also be used for malice.
336 Judg. 5:24 (AV).
found in the Apocrypha to the King James Bible. Notably, in their introduction to this book in their critical edition of the AV, Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch suggest that while there are political reasons for Judith’s relegation to the Apocrypha (e.g. “the book’s generally positive view of Samaritans, or approval of an Ammonite’s conversion”), “The decisive factor in relegating Judith to the margins may instead be its peculiar representation of feminine power. Certainly the story is designed to set masculine weakness against female strength, as its overall structure strikingly reveals.”

The “radical” story of Judith, while apocryphal, was widely read, widely celebrated, and widely represented in art and literature, thus providing Lanyer with a powerful example of women’s triumph over the sins of men.

In Judith 8, Ozias, leader of Bethulia, has decided to surrender to the general of the Assyrian army, Holofernes. Judith intends to challenge the soundness of this decision and sends her handmaid to summon Ozias and the elders. Upon their arrival, she greets them with an immediate objection: “Hear me now, O ye governors of the inhabitants of Bethulia: for your words that ye have spoken before the people this day are not right.” She goes on to suggest that their plans to surrender defy the will of God:

337 The Book of Judith is considered deuterocanonical by Catholics.
340 Molekamp, *Women & The Bible*, 112. Molekamp writes, “The Apocryphal books were printed in the Geneva, Bishops, and King James Bibles. Edward Vaughn, in his Bible reading manual of 1594, urges that the Apocrypha ‘are books to be read at home, and not in the congregation’. This makes the Apocryphal books particularly relevant when thinking about women who are independently reading and interpreting the Bible.
341 Jth. 8 (Apoc.).
342 Jth. 8:11 (Apoc.).
“And now who are ye that have tempted God this day, and stand instead of God among the children of men?” After hearing her rebuke, Ozias responds with deference and confirmation, “All that thou hast spoken hast thou spoken with a good heart, and there is none that may gainsay thy words.” Judith then announces that she plans to take direct action herself: “Hear me, and I will do a thing, which shall go throughout all generations to the children of our nation.” However, she boldly issues the warning “But inquire not ye of mine act: for I will not declare it unto you, till the things be finished that I do,” demanding that her handmaid be the only person to accompany her on her mission. Judith is explicitly disobedient, challenging the elders of Bethulia and insinuating that they are sinful in their abandonment of the will of God. She does not remain silent (“Hear me now”); in fact, she silences the elders with her preclusion of any inquiry into her plans. Ozias’ departing words are, “Go in peace, and the Lord God be before thee, to take vengeance on our enemies.” Judith is not punished for her insubordination, her vocal assertion of her plans, or her silencing of powerful men; she is insubordinate to powerful men in the service of God, and therefore she is met with support, rather than fear.

Judith’s violations of chastity are embedded in her plan to defeat Holofernes. Before she embarks on her mission, she calls on God for his divine intervention: “Give into mine hand, which am a widow, the power that I have conceived./ Smite by the deceit of my lips the servant with the prince, and the prince with the servant: break down their

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343 Jth. 8:12 (Apoc.).
344 Jth. 8:28 (Apoc.).
345 Jth. 8:32 (Apoc.).
346 Jth. 8:34 (Apoc.).
347 Jth. 8:35 (Apoc.).
stateliness by the hand of a woman.” 348 Judith explicitly links the “deceit of [her] lips” with God’s will; she asks God to bless her deception. She leaves Bethulia with her handmaid having “decked herself bravely, to allure the eyes of all men that should see her.” 349 She travels to the Assyrian outpost, claiming that she has fled from the Israelites, seeking to offer Holofernes advice in his conquest. Holofernes believes Judith, and eventually invites her to drink and dine with him. Judith replies, “Who am I now, that I should gainsay my lord?,” and then “decked herself with her apparel and all her woman's attire.” 350 Judith weaponizes her sexuality to lure Holofernes into a state of vulnerability: “Holofernes his heart was ravished with her, and his mind was moved […] And Holofernes took great delight in her, and drank more wine than he had drunk at any time in one day since he was born.” 351 Judith’s deception and sexual overtures are what enable her final act of violence: the beheading of the drunk Holofernes in his own bed, before bringing his head to her maid and leaving “together according to their custom unto prayer” 352—a reminder that this was all in the service of God.

Lanyer writes of Judith’s “invincible courage, rare wisdome, and confident carriage,” and the Bible shows that these attributes are attended by defiance, deception, sexual overtures, and aggression. However, these behaviors are not met with fear or anxiety. When Judith presents the head of Holofernes to Ozias, “he fell down on his face, and his spirit failed. But when they had recovered him, he fell at Judith’s feet, and

348 Jth. 9:9-10 (Apoc.).
349 Jth. 10:4 (Apoc.).
350 Jth. 12:14,15 (Apoc.).
351 Jth. 12:16; Jth. 12:20 (Apoc.).
352 Jth. 13:10 (Apoc.).
reverenced her.” 353 Finally, after the Assyrian army is defeated without their general, “Then all the women of Israel ran together to see her, and blessed her, and made a dance among them for her: and she took branches in her hand, and gave also to the women that were with her./ And they put a garland of olive upon her and her maid that was with her.” 354 Judith’s conquest is met with fainting awe by male leaders and ends with a communal celebration of all of the women of Israel. Like Jael’s, Judith’s duty to God demands a certain amount of disregard for male authority, a willingness to deceive, and an act of fatal violence.

While I have engaged in extended biblical analysis of several principal examples of Lanyer’s defiant biblical women, I would be remiss if I did not also touch on “the divine prayers and prudent proceedings of beautifull Hester,” told in the book of Esther, and “the innocency of chast Susanna,” told in the apocryphal story The History of Susanna. 355 Esther, queen of Persia, saves the Jewish people from the violent machinations of Haman by explicitly disobeying male authority—that of her king and

353 Jth. 14:6-7 (Apoc.).
354 Jth. 15:12-13 (Apoc.).
355 Louis F. Hartman, The Book of Daniel, The Anchor Bible 23 (New York: 1978). The History of Susanna is “considered apocryphal by Jews and Protestants, but deuterocanonical by Roman Catholics” (3). This story is included in the apocryphal appendices to the King James Bible, and is included as Daniel 13 in Catholic Bibles; Carey A. Moore, Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions, The Anchor Bible 44 (New York: Doubleday, 1977). Carey Moore dispels the notion, however, that apocryphal texts are not considered important by Protestants and Jews, calling this perception “inaccurate on many counts” (xi). Moore writes, “all the additions to Daniel are clearly intrusive and secondary, that is, they were added at various times after what we call canonical Daniel had taken its ‘final’ form” (24). He emphasizes that while the story of Susanna is “intrusive” to the Book of Daniel and thus included in the Apocrypha, “Church Fathers found ample occasion to refer to the book” (81). Moore specifically notes, “To be sure, Church Fathers would sometimes cite Susanna, along with Esther or Judith, as being a fine example of a good, God-fearing woman” (27).
husband. Esther seeks an audience from her husband with the full knowledge that the penalty for appearing unsummoned before the king is death. King Ahasuerus pardons her, however, and allows her to speak. Thus, she is neither obedient nor silent; she breaks custom and risks her life in order to raise her voice in defense of her people. Susanna’s defiance is quieter, but a salient example of a woman who escapes the double bind. Susanna’s chastity—like Lucrece’s, like Lavinia’s—is eroticized, leading two elders to attempt to rape her. Her predicament maps onto Lucrece’s almost exactly; the elders warn, “If thou wilt not, we will bear witness against thee, that a young man was with thee: and therefore thou didst send away thy maids from thee”, to which Susanna replies, “I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death unto me: and if I do it not, I cannot escape your hands.” Unlike Lucrece’s laments, Susanna’s shrieks draw the attention of others, and the assault is interrupted. Despite this, when people discover her in what appears to be a compromising position, they still condemn her to death. However, her testimony before God that the elders “have borne false witness against [her]” results in Daniel, influenced by God, intervening on her behalf and halting her execution. Esther serves as another example of a woman whose disobedience is in the service of God’s people, and Susanna’s story articulates the double bind while giving an example of God’s will superseding the law of men.

I have analyzed Lanyer’s “To the Vertuous Reader” with a strong exegetical impulse, and I have done so in order to foreground the fact that many women who are reading Lanyer’s text in the seventeenth century are also reading and interpreting the Bible independently. Lanyer’s allusion to these biblical women points readers back to

356 Sus. 1:21-22 (Apoc.).
these stories, inviting them to read them and interpret them in light of her framing: God uses these biblical women to punish “evill disposed men.” These biblical women by early modern standards are transgressive, threatening, and ungovernable, but are celebrated in the Bible for bravely enacting God’s will. Lanyer’s preface shows us that the Bible is not the domain of men who wish to legitimize social distrust, demonization, and punishment of “bad” women. In fact, these bad women are often the good women of the Bible.

Of course, in order to fully address the ways in which the Bible has been used to underscore the inherent sinfulness of women, Lanyer needs to account for arguably the most troublesome biblical woman: Eve. Eve represents not only women’s propensity toward sin, but also wives’ threats to their husbands. In an earlier chapter in this dissertation, I reference Thomas Bentley’s *Monument of Matrones* (1582) and its many warnings issued to husbands about unruly wives. These largely stem from Eve’s behavior in Genesis; Bentley writes:

Husbands must beware how they consent or obeie their wiues in unlawfull things prohibited by God’s lawe. For Adam not so much to please his wife, as mooued by ambition at hir persuasion, did eate of the forbidden tree in paradise, and it turne to his sore punishment. For therefore God said thus unto him: Bicause thou hast obeied the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee, saieing: Thou shalt not eate of it: cursed is the earth for thy sake. Gen. 3, 6, 11, & c.357

This fear, rooted in Eve, moves beyond simply warning husbands about the sinful influence of their wives, but of any influence at all:

Give not the power of thy life unto a woman, least she over came thy strength, and so thou be confounded: that is, let not thy wife hauve rule ouer thee. For if she once get the maisterie, then will she be contrarie unto thee, take awaie thine hart and strength, and bring thee to confusion among thine enimies, [as did Eva to Adam: Dalila to Samson ; Jezabel to Achab: Herodias to Herod, &c.] Eccles. 9358

358 Ibid.
The contemporary wisdom, rooted in biblical example, is that wives’ influence over their husbands is dangerous, and with the damning example of the temptation and fall of Eve, these warnings are difficult to dispute. If a redemptive reading of the Bible is possible, it must not overlook Eve’s disobedience and susceptibility to sin.

Lanyer includes an embedded poem titled “Eves Apologie,” in which she offers a sympathetic reading of the infamous first sinner. Before I turn my attention to her defense of Eve, however, it is crucial to first attend to Lanyer’s framing device. “Eves Apologie” is part of a poetic apostrophe to Pontius Pilate, the man who adjudicated the trial of Christ and ultimately allowed him to be condemned to death. Lanyer begins this apostrophe:

O noble Governour, make thou yet a pause
Do not in innocent blood imbrue thy hands;
But heare the words of thy most worthy wife,
Who sends to thee, to beg her Saviours life.359

Lanyer here points the reader to a verse in the gospel of Matthew, wherein Pontius Pilate’s wife implores her husband to halt the execution of Christ: “When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him.”360 Notably, this verse is rather ambiguous regarding the content of her dream. In fact, there are extra-biblical legends, for example in medieval mystery plays, that attribute this dream to the influence of Satan who fears the salvation of souls that Christ’s death will

360 Matt. 27:19 (AV).
Therefore, Lanyer’s invocation is even bolder in its insistence that Pilate’s wife was acting in defense of Jesus Christ and not in opposition to divine will. Cleverly, Lanyer prefaces her poetic apology for Eve with an example of the fatal consequences of Pontius Pilate’s refusal to heed his wife’s guidance. Lanyer even pleads, “Let not us Women glory in Mens fall./Who had power given to over-rule us all.”

Why would women “glory” in this lapse in judgment from Pontius Pilate? Lanyer continues: “Till now your indiscretion sets us free,/And makes our former fault much lesse appear”; that is, Pontius Pilate’s sin of condemning Christ to death eclipses the sin of Eve.

Lanyer then moves to addressing the “Eve problem” in earnest, beginning first by foregrounding the hierarchy that inheres in many early modern conceptions of gender relations: Adam, created first and in God’s image, rules over Eve, created from his own flesh to be a helper. Notably, this version of creation, found in Genesis 2, seems to ignore Genesis 1. Genesis 2 gives us an Eve that was created from the rib of Adam in order to be his helper. However, Genesis 1 narrates the creation of man quite differently: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”

Why, then, does Lanyer not simply use Genesis 2 as a reference point for her “apologie,” foregrounding an alternative account? This approach is more akin to what the anonymous writer of the pamphlet _Haec Vir_ (1620) does in answering...
the pamphlet *Hic Mulier’s* (1620) vitriolic attacks against women who cross-dressed. In *Haec Vir*, the “mannish-woman” who has come under attack says,

> You condemn me of Unnaturalness in forsaking my creation and contemning custom. How do I forsake my creation, that do all the rights and offices due to my Creation? I was created free, born free, and live free; what lets me then so to spin out my time that I may die free?365

While it is impossible to say with certainty why Lanyer does not choose to invoke Genesis 1 in her attempt to rescue Eve, there are some clear effects of her choice to focus solely on Genesis 2. The vilification of Eve is so ubiquitous in early modern England that a pivot to Genesis 1 might function as more of a deflection than a true “apologie” that addresses the most egregious accusations levied against her. In choosing to situate her defense of Eve solely within the world of Genesis 2, Lanyer manages to *account for*, rather than reject, the premise that Eve was created to be subservient, a move that turns patriarchal logic in on itself rather than creating an impasse of competing narratives. Further, this move allows Lanyer to offer a stronger indictment of Adam based on his more powerful position. While Genesis 1 is certainly a notable absence, Lanyer’s focus on Genesis 2 allows her to take the power out of some of the most salient critiques of Eve, and therefore, of women.

Lanyer writes, “Our mother Eve, who tasted of the Tree,/Giving to Adam what shee held most deare,/Was simply good, and had no powre to see.”366 She refers to Eve’s “undiscerning ignorance” while heavily criticizing Adam:

> But surely Adam can not be excusde,  
> Her fault though great, yet hee was most too blame;  
> What Weaknesse offerd, Strength might have refusde  

Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame.\textsuperscript{367}

Lanyer does two crucial things in these excerpts. First, she exposes the logical inconsistency of both insisting on the surpassing gravity of Eve’s sin and the surpassing authority and closeness of Adam to God. Second and relatedly, she makes a distinction between the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve. While neither of them had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge yet, Eve’s “undiscerning ignorance” and “weaknesse” seem to be contrasted with Adam’s “being Lord of all” and his “strength.” Lanyer is subtly suggesting that if Eden’s hierarchy is used as a general rule to emphasize the weakness of women, it must also be used to emphasize the greater culpability of men.

Lanyer emphasizes Eve’s ignorance, but also her awareness of her own ignorance, thus making her susceptible to the serpent’s duplicity:

\begin{quote}
If \textit{Eve} did erre, it was for knowledge sake,  
The fruit beeing faire perswaded him to fall:  
No subtill Serpents falsehood did betray him,  
If he would eate it, who had powre to stay him?\textsuperscript{368}
\end{quote}

Lanyer contrasts Adam’s shallow desire for the “faire” fruit with Eve’s desire for what the fruit might bring—knowledge and understanding. She continues: “Yet Men will boast of knowledge, which he took/\textit{From Eve’s fair hand, as from a learned Booke.}”\textsuperscript{369} Lanyer implies that using Eve as a biblical example of women’s wickedness ignores the ways in which her quest for knowledge is mimicked by men. Following this line of reasoning, Laynner sets up her own double bind. She condemns Adam’s sin as greater because he was “fram’d by Gods eternall hand,/\textit{the perfect’st man that ever breath’d on earth,}” but later

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{367} Lanyer, “Salve Deus,” lines 777-780.  
\textsuperscript{368} Ibid., lines 797-800.  
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid., lines 807-808.
\end{footnotesize}
says, “If any Evill did in her remaine/Beeing made of him, he was the ground of all.” Adam is both the “perfect’st man,” thus making his fall greatest, and the source of any evil in Eve. Lanyer has turned the logic of despising Eve in on itself—Is Eve the weaker vessel? Then Adam should have known better. Is Eve wicked? She was taken from Adam’s own body.

Lanyer’s *Salve Deus* participates in the *querelle de femmes* before the pamphlet wars begin in earnest four years later. In her endeavor to undermine the belief in women’s inherent wickedness, Lanyer’s collection anticipates the exegetical bent of Speght and Sowernam’s responses to Swetnam, highlighting the centrality of biblical interpretation to this social debate and demonstrating the radical possibilities of women’s reading practices. *Salve Deus* recovers a tradition of biblical women whose enactment of God’s will is part and parcel of their transgression of early modern behavioral norms, and it offers a redemptive reading of Eve that exposes the logical and exegetical inconsistencies inherent in the critique of her in the first place.

I have called Lanyer’s exegesis radical, and by this I mean *Salve Deus* orients biblical reading practices toward resistance. She means to position *Salve Deus* “contrary to this custome,” i.e. the custom of women speaking ill of one another, as a rebuke to men who “deface the wombes wherein they were bred,” and “to inforce all good Christians and honourable minded men to speake reverently of our sexe.” Her readings of the Bible are in the service of warring against prevailing social beliefs and practices; that is, scriptural truth is her means, not her end. Her end is political, and her means

370 Lanyer, “To the Vertuous Reader,” lines 809-810.
371 Ibid., 48, 50.
exegetical. Lanyer’s explicit politicizing does something crucial: it confronts readers with the reality of the social and material effects of exegesis. In a moment when women are beginning to read the Bible much more widely, Lanyer’s *Salve Deus* insists that reading the Bible is as connected to lived experience as it is to the salvation of the soul.

**Joseph Swetnam and the Articulation of the Double Bind**

If Lanyer’s *Salve Deus* is resistant toward inflamed rhetoric against women, Joseph Swetnam encapsulates the hostility of this rhetoric four years later. In 1615, Joseph Swetnam publishes *The Araignment of lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women*, articulating the misogyny of the *querelle de femmes* in its clearest form and with its most forceful terms. Lewalski comments on the “formal polemic controversy over women,” suggesting that its vigor “owed more to rhetorical convention than to ideological conviction or emotional involvement […] Most of the writers were participants in an on-going game of wit.”372 Many scholars approach the pamphlet wars with caution due to this perception that these are rhetorically rather than ideologically motivated, evidently troubled by the notion that Swetnam and his detractors might not actually believe everything they write with the vehemence that comes across in the pamphlets. I argue that inquiring into the beliefs of the writers is, firstly, a futile endeavor, and second, indeed less important than the rhetorical interventions of the writing. Swetnam’s piece, “a jumble of proverb lore, rowdy jokes, invective, authorities, anecdotes and examples pertaining to women’s lechery, vanity, shrewishness, and worthlessness, cobbled together from the entire tradition of misogynist writing,”373

373 Ibid., xxi.
launches a public debate whose power lies in the explicit articulation of the double bind of women’s behavioral norms, and the invitation, then, to rhetorically dismantle it.

Recall that in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, I argue that a pillar of the early modern double bind is that performing chastity, silence, and obedience becomes dangerous for women, but violation of these norms is equally dangerous. Swetnam’s pamphlet clearly articulates the logic of this double bind, as he seems to anxiously anticipate responses from women. After beginning his piece condemning the “heinous evils of unconstant women,” he follows this vitriolic opening with the declaration, “I know I shall be bitten by many because I touch many,” both predicting responses from women and categorizing them as animalistic “bites,” implying that they are instinctual, angry, and personal. He continues:

but before I go any further, let me whisper one word in your ears, and that is this: whatsoever you think privately, I wish you to conceal it with silence, lest in starting up to find fault you prove yourselves guilty of these monstrous accusations which are here following against some women. And those which spurn if they feel themselves touched prove themselves stark fools in betraying their galled backs to the world, for this book touches no sort of women but such as when they hear it will go about to reprove it. 375

Swetnam clearly spells out the logic and trap of the double bind here. His *Arraignment* spends much energy condemning all women, but he implores women to “conceal [their responses] with silence,” lest they prove themselves to be exactly as “heinous” as he accuses them of being. He specifically suggests that the women who feel prompted to respond so out of feeling personally “touched” by the accusations, and thus should not

375 Ibid., ii.
respond so as to avoid exposing themselves. Of course, this logic relegates all women to silence, thereby leaving these allegations against women unanswered. In silence and in speech, women are wicked.

Swetnam continues to speak about women’s hypothetical responses to his pamphlet, and in his dwelling on the possible retaliation of women, he makes the double bind all the clearer. He writes, “I think it were not amiss to drive all the women out of my hearing […] And for better proof I refer myself to the judgment of men which have more experience than myself, for I esteem little of the malice of women. For men will be persuaded with reason, but women must be answered with silence.”376 Not only does Swetnam outright condemn as wicked any woman who would respond, but he promises to meet any of these responses with silence. He continues: “Let them censure of me what they will, for I mean not to make them my Judges, and if they shoot their spite at me, they may hit themselves. And so I will smile at them as at the foolish fly which burns herself in the candle.”377 Swetnam restates the belief that women’s defenses of themselves can only harm themselves, and that he will delight in the metaphorical self-immolation of these women who attempt to do so; in other words, he promises a kind of gaslighting to any women who respond with defensiveness. Swetnam’s belaboring of this point is ungraceful and does more to condemn his own writing than the responses of women; however, it is a crucial moment in the querelle des femmes in that it thrusts the logic of the double bind into the arena of public debate.

376 Swetnam, “Epistle to the Reader” iv.
377 Ibid., v.
Swetnam makes an ostensible distinction between good and bad women—a distinction which almost immediately collapses in on itself. This is another pillar of the double bind—calling women to be good while denying the possibility of women’s goodness. The collapse of this distinction is unsurprisingly most strongly present in Swetnam’s discussion of Eve. He interpolates the voice of Moses in order to condemn Eve and therefore all women:

Moses describes a woman thus: “At the first beginning,” saith he, “a woman was made to be a helper unto man.” And so they are indeed, for she helps to spend and consume that which man painfully gets. He also saith that they were made of the rib of a man, and that their froward nature shows; for a rib is a crooked thing good for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature, for small occasion will cause them to be angry.378

One can hardly misinterpret “women are crooked by nature,” despite its spurious exegetical logic. Swetnam’s Eve deliberately “procured” the Fall due to her innate corruption, and this innate corruption represents all women. Swetnam writes, “A Buck may be enclosed in a Park; a bridle rules a horse; a Wolf may be tied; a Tiger may be tamed; but a froward woman will never be tamed.” His commentary on Eve concludes that all women are “froward,” and thus, the conclusion becomes that no women will ever be tamed; all are threatening—even, and perhaps especially, those who claim not to be.

Swetnam returns to discrediting women’s speech when he states, “For they have tears at command, so have they words at will and oaths at pleasure; for they make as much account of an oath as a Merchant doth which will forswear himself for the getting of a penny.”379 Again, he both groups all women together as liars and weaponizes their

379 Ibid., 8.
oaths and testimony against them. He draws on biblical examples like Delilah and Jezebel to support the severity of his claims. However, toward the end of his pamphlet, Swetnam makes gestures toward distinguishing good from bad women again, beginning with an uncontroversial good woman—“the Virgin Mary, mother of all bliss.”  

He also mentions “Susanna, for her chastity and for creeping on her knees to please her husband.” This is a particular reading of Susanna that is importantly distinct from what Lanyer offers; Swetnam carefully elides Susanna’s condemnation of sexual assault and instead reads her as self-effacing in her obsequiousness to her husband. The most telling of Swetnam’s good women is his description and celebration of Lucretia: “Likewise, Lucretia, for the love and loyalty that she bore to her husband. Being unkindly abused by an unchaste lecher against her will, she presently slew herself in the presence of many rather than she would offer her body again to her husband, being but one time defiled.” Lucretia’s goodness is dependent upon her willingness to sacrifice herself “for the love and loyalty that she bore to her husband.” Swetnam’s good women shore up his articulation of the double bind: good women are good insofar as they submit themselves to the dangers that accompany this goodness, and any woman who defends her goodness is froward, manipulative, and therefore, at best not to be regarded, and at worst, punished.

Rachel Speght’s Rhetorical “Mouzell”

Rachel Speght pens her response to Swetnam two years later in 1617, Lewalski describes as a “living refutation of Swetnam’s charges against women” in which “she

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381 Swetnam, “Chapter III,” 47.
382 Ibid., 47-48.
presents herself as religious, learned, serious, truthful, eminently rational, engagingly modest, unassuming, justifiably angry yet self-controlled, and courageous in defending wronged women and their Creator.” 383 This high praise has been tempered by other scholars who suspect that Speght’s responses may have been solicited to reignite the controversy, or others who take issue with Speght’s refusal to abandon Protestant marriage doctrine in her discussions of marital relationships. I argue that while these concerns are highly relevant if we are interested in specific claims of “proto-feminism” or of author intentionality, they overlook the fact that Speght’s response functions as a rhetorical engagement with a historically specific set of power dynamics that animate the double bind. Speght’s “proto-feminism” might be tempered or undermined by commitments to now antiquated ideas of marriage or by her publisher’s desire for inflammatory writing. However, its exposure of the logic of the double bind as articulated by Swetnam does offer a powerful rejoinder to the early modern power structures, regardless of her impetus for writing.

I have argued at length in this dissertation that early modern literature demonstrates the futility of women’s offering personal testimony to their own goodness, for this testimony is easily weaponized against them. This is precisely the reason that the rhetorical nature of Speght’s engagement is crucial. Speght does not suggest feeling personally “touched” or threatened by Swetnam’s accusations, as he suggests guilty (read: all) women will. She is distinctly not offering personal testimony to her own goodness. Instead, she writes,

The consideration of this (right Honourable and Worshipfull Ladies) hath incited me. (though yong, and the vnworthiest of thousands) to encounter with a furious

enemy to our sexe, least if his vnjust imputations should continue without answere, he might insult and account himselfe a victor. 384

She is not defending her personal goodness, for these defenses are only self-implicating and depend largely on distinguishing oneself from the whole of women’s wickedness. Instead she assumes a rhetorical position of defender of “our sexe,” speaking on behalf of all women to ensure that Swetnam cannot “account himselfe a victor.” She continues, stating that her response is a rejection of the tacit consent of silence:

Secondly, if it should haue had free passage without any answere at all (seeing that Tacere is, quasi consentire) the vulgar ignorant might haue beleueed his Diabolicall infamies to be infallible truths, not to bee infringed; whereas now they may plainely perceiue them to bee but the scumme of Heathenish braines. 385

She rejects the notion that her response is the mark of a personally guilty conscience while also exposing the double bind of demanding silence from good women—silence signals tacit consent, signals an acceptance of their own condemnation. Speght refuses to be blamed for her speech and blamed for her silence, “because armed with the truth, which though often blamed, yet can neuer be shamed.” 386

Speght does not take the tack of defending women immediately; instead, she excoriates Swetnam’s logic. She addresses Swetnam directly, matching his own use of hyperbolic metaphor: “In which excrement of your roaring cogitations you haue vsed such irregularities touching concordance, and obsuered so disordered a methode, as I doubt not to rely on, that a very Accidence Schollar would haue quite put you downe in both,” so much so that “if one would make a Logicall assumption, the conclusion would be flat against your owne Sex.” As an example of his “disordered a methode,” she writes,

385 Ibid., 3-4.
386 Ibid., 4.
“In your Title Leafe, you arraigne none but lewd, idle, froward and vnconstant women, but in the Sequele (through defect of memorie as it seemeth) forgetting that you had made a distinction of good from badde, condemning all in generall.”387 She elaborates on Swetnam’s logical inconsistency, and, in doing so, exposes the insidious logic of the double bind:

You promise a Commendation of wise, vertuous, and honest women, when as in the subsequent, the worst words, and filthiest Epithites that you can devise, you bestow on them in generall, excepting no sort of Women. Heerein may you be likened vnto a man, which vpon the doore of a scurrie house sets this Superscription, *Heere is a very faire house to be let:* whereas the doore being opened, it is no better then a dogge-hole and darke dungeon.388

This metaphor does not simply function as a rejection of Swetnam’s spurious and inconsistent claims; it uncovers the lie of the social belief women’s goodness: women are called to be good, but instead are *always* condemned. Speght even goes as far as to suggest that the double bind is an act of purposeful deception; the misleading sign “*Heere is a very faire house to be let*” is a clear analogue for “*Chaste, silent, and obedient women will be celebrated as good women.*”

Having laid bare the trap that Swetnam lays for women, Speght moves toward a careful exegetical dismantling of his biblical evidence, focusing sharply on his reading of Eve.389 She begins by calling his readings of the Bible not only incorrect, but blasphemous: “in dishonoring of God by palpable blasphemy, wrestling and peruerting

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388 Ibid.
389 Speght, like Lanyer, does not invoke Genesis 1 in her re-reading of Eve. However, in refusing to cite a version of the creation story wherein Adam and Eve are created equal, she opens up the door to her argument that Eve, created from a rib rather than from the dust of the earth, is *more perfect* than Adam. A curious omission, but one that also enables some of the more powerful claims of her exegesis.
euerie place of Scripture, that you haue alleadged.”

She then offers her own reading of Eve, some of which is reminiscent of Lanyer’s poetic “Eves Apologie.” Speght writes of Adam: “And he being better able, then the woman, to haue resisted temptation, because the stronger vessel […] should haue yeelded greatest obedience to God.”

Speght rejects Swetnam’s characterization of Eve as a result of the “mischief” of her mind: “in her giuing of the fruit to eate had she no malicious intent towards him, but did therein shew a desire to make her husband partaker of that happinesse.” Speght draws on the rhetoric of Eve’s weakness and ignorance, arguing that Adam’s disobedience is greater than Eve’s. More radically, Speght offers an exegetical rebuttal to Swetnam’s conclusions about Eve’s “crooked” rib. She writes: “God extracting a rib from [Adam’s] side, thereof made, or built, Woman; shewing thereby, that man was as an vnperfect building afore woman was made, and bringing her vnto Adam, vnited and married them together.” In Speght’s exegesis, Eve is not inherently sinful due to her method of creation, but Adam, instead, is imperfect without Eve, given that her creation depended upon an alteration to his body. Speght follows this line of reasoning further:

For man was created of the dust of the earth, but woman was made of a part of man, after that he was a liuing soule: yet was shee not produced from Adams foote, to be his too low inferiour; nor from his head to be his superiour, but from his side, neare his heart, to be his equall..

Speght contrasts the materiality of Adam’s and Eve’s creations: Adam was made from dust, Eve from God’s most perfect creation—does this not suggest that Eve is somehow
more perfect than Adam? At least, it seems, Speght would have her readers understand that Eve should be considered Adam’s equal, due to the location of the rib “neare his heart.” While these interpretations are certainly leaps from the text, they are no more leaps than Swetnam’s assertion that Eve is inherently evil because “a rib is a crooked thing.” Speght’s reading of Eve both exposes some of the logical inconsistencies of Swetnam’s tract while offering radically different interpretations of the Bible that challenge the notion of women’s inherent wickedness.

Speght moves from her reading of Eve to articulating claims about the “the finall cause, or end, for which woman was made,” just as Swetnam does. However, Speght writes that this cause “was to glorifie God, and so be a collaterall companion for man to glorifie God, in vsing her bodie, and all the parts, powers, and faculties thereof, as instruments for his honour.” Notice, here, that Speght foregrounds woman’s duty to God rather than to husband. She shares this duty with her husband, but her “parts, powers, and faculties” are meant to be used in the service of God above all else. Speght then turns back to the Bible to underscore her claim, following Lanyer in her cataloguing of biblical exemplars; she writes that woman is called “to sound foorth [God’s] prayses, like Miriam,” and “to give good councell unto her husband, the which hee must not despise.” She calls for husbands to heed the counsel of their wives, citing several biblical examples:

for Abraham was bidden to give eare to Sarah his wife. Pilate was willed by his wife not to have anie hand in the condemning of CHRIST; and a sinne it was in

396 Ibid.
397 Ibid.
398 See Exod. 15:20-21 (AV).
him, that hee listned not to her: Leah and Rachel councelled Iaacob to do according to the word of the Lord.\textsuperscript{400} Women are called not to silence and not to unquestioning obedience to their husbands, but instead to intervene on behalf of God when their husbands have fallen astray.

Whether Speght’s writing was fueled by her passion and conviction, by her publisher’s desire to reignite a profitable controversy, or by a combination of both, \textit{A Mouzell for Melastomus} marks a crucial moment in the \textit{querelle des femmes}. The pamphlet’s simultaneous dismissal of Swetnam’s illogic \textit{and} its taking seriously the consequences that this illogic has for women make this rhetorical and exegetical engagement particularly significant for understanding and undermining the double bind. Speght calls explicit attention to the ways in which women’s silence is compelled and then weaponized against them, and she frames her response to Swetnam not as a defense of self, but a rhetorical rejoinder. Thus, her ability to both identify the double bind of women’s silence and avoid personal testimony allow her to do what Lucrece, Lavinia, Desdemona, and Mariam could not—lay bare the impossibilities of women’s goodness within contemporary modes of thinking—both social and religious—and turn to the Bible for alternative traditions of good women.

If Lanyer positions \textit{Salve Deus} as intervening on the gendered rhetoric “Often [has she] heard,”\textsuperscript{401} Rachel Speght’s exegesis directly antagonizes this rhetoric as offered point by point by Swetnam. Swetman’s pamphlet, of course, inaugurates the pamphlet wars and is the provocateur that prompts Rachel Speght. However, I would argue that the content and tenor of \textit{Mouzell} is indebted to \textit{Salve Deus}; Speght’s refusal to denigrate bad

\textsuperscript{400} Speght, “A Mouzell,” 19. See Gen. 21:12 (AV); Matt. 27:19 (AV); Gen. 31:14-16 (AV).
\textsuperscript{401} Lanyer, “To the Vertuous Reader,” 48.
women, her redemptive rereading of Eve, and her willingness to position this reading with a larger takedown of “a furious enemy to our sexe,” are all moves that Lanyer makes first. Swetnam brings the debate into the public sphere, but Lanyer paves the way for Spegght to position herself as an exegete in defense of all women, thus laying the foundational work for Spegght to excoriate the double bind as articulated by Swetnam.

**Radical Abstraction of Ester Sowernam as Speaker**

In 1617, the pamphlet *Ester hath hang’d Haman*, another direct response to Swetnam’s *Araignment*, was published under the name Ester Sowernam. While Spegght’s pamphlet has created disagreement among scholars about its proto-feminist possibilities, Sowernam’s pamphlet is an even more troublesome and controversial text, beginning with the author’s pseudonym. “Ester Sowernam” is a pseudonym created against Joseph Swetnam’s name, punning on “Swet” vs “Sower.” Besides cautioning readers not to make assumptions about the author’s identity or gender, Diane Purkiss also considers the possibility that this adoption of a playfully belligerent pseudonym signals the “taking-up of the position of a disorderly woman for the purpose of signifying disorder of some kind, domestic or political.”

Purkiss wonders whether this disorder precludes reading Sowernam’s text as earnest, and whether this text is an “unstable enactment of the signifiers of femininity” whose form undermines the stated purpose. Jo Carruthers responds to Purkiss’ call for deep caution, suggesting that perhaps “Sowernam takes her role as a troublesome female seriously, and even views it as a valid and authoritative

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403 Ibid., 84.
position.” 404 I would like to follow Carruthers here and suggest that the “disorder” introduced by the Sowernam pseudonym is essential to the significance of the pamphlet, and that the abstraction of author in favor of disruptive speaker allows the pamphlet to most effectively critique the logic of the double bind as articulated by Swetnam.

Purkiss remarks that “Sowernam’s’ speaking voice and position, like her signature, are products of the debate genre as written by Swetnam,” 405 suggesting that this compromises the force of the pamphlet’s message. Scholars who share Purkiss’ cautious approach are uncomfortable with both the Sowernam pseudonym and how the speaker introduces herself: “Written by Ester Sowernam, Neither Maide, Wife nor Widdowe, yet really all, and therefore experienced to defend all.” 406 Carruthers discusses the scholarly anxiety that surrounds this enigmatic signature: “Although it has been heralded by some as feminist polemic, critics often approach the pamphlet with caution because its force is dampened by the author’s deliberate use of a perplexing riddle that undermines authority and coherence.” 407 Similarly to the disagreements about Rachel Speght, this caution is critical if we are invested in making claims about the identity of the author, the relationship between what is written and the author’s experience, etc. However, I would argue that the speaker is more crucial, here, than the author, and that the elision of author in favor of an enigmatic speaker indeed supports the force of the pamphlet’s message, rather than detracts. This pamphlet gives us an abstracted speaker who cannot fit into any of the three acceptable women’s roles—virgin, wife, or widow—

405 Purkiss, “Material Girls,” 86.
but also claims to speak for all. The abstract nature of the speaker moves the pamphlet further from personal testimony than even Rachel Speght achieved, thus entirely avoiding the charge that this response is born out of personal guilt rather than rhetorical investment. More than that, the speaker (for whom I will use the feminine pronoun) claims to be outside of the virgin/wife/widow paradigm while also having authority to speak from all positions, thus sidestepping calls for chastity, silence, and obedience, which function differently for each of these social roles. Sowernam’s “disorder” and disruption are productive rather than problematic.

As Sowernam begins her argument, she describes the moment when she first became aware of Swetnam’s tract. She describes an ordinary dinner turning to the *querelle des femmes*: “As nothing is more usual for table-talk, there fell out a discourse concerning women, some defending, others objecting against our sex. Upon which occasion, there happened a mention of a Pamphlet entitled *The Arraignment of Women*, which I was desirous to see.”408 This brief anecdotal moment signals that these pamphlet wars are not simply responding to Swetnam’s vitriol. Sowernam shows her readers, first, that it is common for discussions of women’s worth to come up in everyday scenarios, and second, that Swetnam’s tract influences these conversations. Like Speght’s, her critique begins with the recognition that Swetnam’s logic depends on the inherent contradiction of the double bind, or the call for women’s goodness that is undermined by its impossibility:

> I found the discourse as far off from performing what the title promised as I found it scandalous and blasphemous. For where the author pretended to write against

408 Sowernam, “Ester hath hang’d Haman,” 87.
lewd, idle, and unconstant women, hee doth most impudently rage and rail generally against all the whole sex of women.409

In addition to exposing the trap of Swetnam’s logic, she also specifically calls him a blasphemer for using the Bible to denigrate women. She describes the primary reason that she undertakes her “enterprise” as the desire “to set out the glory of Almighty God in so blessed a work of his creation.”410 Here, Sowernam positions her response as something that is taking down a blasphemer for the greater glory of God, rather than, as Swetnam would have it, as a personal response, written out of anger, that can do nothing but further implicate her. In short, Sowernam reclaims the Bible and declares, “He raileth without cause, I defend upon direct proof”.411

Sowernam then turns to the “Eve problem,” taking the tack, like Speght, of first exposing the illogic of Swetnam’s exegesis—what she calls a “patched and misshapen hotch-potch”412—before suggesting her own alternative reading. She begins by taking up Swetnam’s claim that “Woman was made of a crooked rib, so she is crooked of conditions.”413 She then turns this line of reasoning in on itself, writing, “Joseph Swetnam was made as from Adam of clay and dust, so he is of a dirty and muddy disposition. The inferences are both alike in either: woman is no more crooked in respect of the one, but he is blasphemous in respect of the other.”414 Of course, she takes a humorous jab at Swetnam here, but also follows his logic to condemn Adam. Her tactic here is, arguably, not to earnestly suggest that Adam is “of a dirty and muddy

410 Ibid., 88.
411 Ibid., 89.
412 Ibid., 88.
413 Ibid., 91.
414 Ibid., 91.
disposition,” but to lay bare the missteps that underlay Swetnam’s exegetical leaps. Sowernam then launches into her most sustained critique of the logical loop that inheres in Swetnam’s blasphemous (by her account) reading of Genesis. She asks, “Did woman receive her soul and disposition from the rib, or, as it is said in Genesis, ‘God did breathe in them the spirit of life’?”  


This rhetorical question, designed to expose Swetnam as antagonist to biblical truth, is followed by her taking his line of reasoning to a logical conclusion: If we “Admit that this author’s doctrine be true,” we must then ask, “if woman received her crookedness from the rib, and consequently from the man, how doth man excel in crookedness, who hath more of those crooked ribs?”  

| 416 | Ibid., 92. |

Sowernam is grounding her argument fundamentally in weaponizing Swetnam’s reading against himself and, therefore, all men: “See how this vaine, furious, and idle author furnisheth woman with an argument against himself and others of his sex.”  

| 417 | Ibid., 92. |

Sowernam certainly is suggesting that Swetnam is wrong, but does so, first, not by earnestly refuting his claims but by demonstrating that his claims unravel quickly and undo the exegetical claims that he purports to make against women in the first place.

Sowernam does, then, provide her own alternative understanding of Eve’s creation, recalling many of the claims that Speght makes in Mouzell. She writes that “Adam was not so absolutely perfect, but that in the sight of God, he wanted an Helper” and subsequently proposing: “that God intended to honour woman in a more excellent degree, in that he created her out of a subject refined, as out of a quintessence. For the rib is in substance more solid, in place as most near, so in estimate most dear, to man’s
heart.” This reading certain does much to rescue Eve from her status as infamous sinner, corrupted from her inception. However, I would argue that the impact of Sowernam’s reading (and, for that matter, the similar claims that Speght makes) is not in the specific redemptive reading of Eve that she offers. Instead, the power of Sowernam’s reading is in its possibility in the first place. She illuminates what I will call the “exegetical space” that surrounds this foundational biblical story used as evidence against the goodness of women for centuries. The Bible is an unassailable document, its authority paramount. However, Sowernam demonstrates to her readers, first, the illogic of prevailing readings of Eve, and second, the possibilities for exegetical “answers” to these prevailing readings. She, like Lanyer, like Speght, supports her claim to women’s capacity for good by turning to Old Testament exemplars, citing figures like Deborah, Jael, Judith, and Esther. She also includes Rebekah, who “by God’s providence” famously deceives her husband Isaac in order to secure Jacob’s birthright. Sowernam continues the tradition of elevating women’s responsibility to God over responsibility to man—”What choice God hath made of women to be instruments to derive his benefits to maninde”—and in doing so invites new readings of the Bible that unravel the double bind, rather than reify it. Sowernam-as-speaker cannot testify to her own goodness, for she is an abstraction; she is neither widow, nor wife, nor maid, and yet all. In this way, she sidesteps the trap of the double bind and offers the biblically based possibility of

418 Sowernam, “Ester hath hang’d Haman,” 93.
419 Ibid., 96.
420 Gen. 27 (AV).
women’s goodness—a goodness that is characterized by closeness to God rather than loyalty and submission to men.

Sowernam’s abstraction is radical in that it refuses to make a claim to virtue or even humility in order to sanction an exegetical and logical rejoinder. Ester is intentionally frustrating in its claim to be all women and none at all, a move which I argue stands firmly in the lineage of Lanyer and Speght. Lanyer declines to “denigrate” bad women, and Speght lays bare how expectations for good women can be impossible to attain. Both recognize the futility of dividing women into hierarchical groups when the hierarchy is doomed to collapse in on itself. Therefore, Sowernam-as-speaker refuses to participate whatsoever in this ordering. Instead, she articulates a redemptive exegesis that rejects the mechanisms of patriarchal gatekeeping that inhere in the double bind.

Conclusion

Aemilia Lanyer, Rachel Speght, and Ester Sowernam are not claiming to be of surpassing goodness or virtue themselves. What is notable about these texts is that each of them is making a claim about women’s capacity for goodness and virtue. In doing so, they highlight that this capacity is what has been in question all along. How can women strive to be good in a social context that denies this possibility? The crucial contribution that these texts makes to the querelle des femmes is the recognition that what women are up against is not simply a misreading of their personal virtue. Instead, the double bind is a rhetoric of power that constrains and punishes, operating on a social level and materially affecting the lives of early modern women more generally. Salve Deus, Mouzell, and Ester are invested in turning a patriarchal logic in on itself, which requires collectivity rather than individual protest. Aemilia Lanyer includes a dedication “To all vertuous
Ladies in generall”\textsuperscript{422}; Rachel Speght writes in “consideration” of “right Honourable and Worshipfull Ladies”\textsuperscript{423}, Ester Sowernam writes “To all right honourable, noble and worthy ladies, gentlewomen and others virtuously disposed of the feminine sex.”\textsuperscript{424} These writers are not suggesting that all women are virtuous; these dedications would not need to include the designations of “vertuous,” “honourable,” or “worthy” if they were. However, these dedications do suggest that “vertuous” women have been collectively victimized by the double bind’s rhetoric of power, and that personal defenses of virtue will not be a safeguard.

Ester Sowernam recounts a particular conversation amongst women regarding Swetnam’s \textit{Araignement}, writing, “I did acquiant some of our sex with the accident, with whom I did advise what course we should take with him.”\textsuperscript{425} Their resolution was to engage with his arguments thoroughly and fairly, so “that the world might take notice there was no partial or indirect dealing, but that he had as much favour as he could desire, and far more than he did or could deserve.”\textsuperscript{426} Movingly, this anecdote foregrounds the collectivity that is integral to Lanyer’s, Speght’s, and Sowernam’s engagement with the \textit{querelle des femmes}. These works all depend on the fundamental rejection of defending one’s personal goodness against the relative failures of other women, for this process is self-defeating and an insidious way of reifying the very double bind women they are attempting to escape. Instead, these writers (or speakers, as it were), meet Swetnam’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[423] Speght, “A Mouzell,” 3.
\item[424] Sowernam, “Ester hath hang’d Haman,” 87.
\item[425] Ibid., 104.
\item[426] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
claims not with personal indignation, but with a careful, collective, and biblically based
defense of women’s goodness, indicting the trap of the double bind with the hope that
“the world might take notice.”
Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have made the case that goodness as a category for early modern women to aspire to can, at any moment, be weaponized against any aspirational good woman. Women believe that if they adhere to chastity, silence, and obedience, their bodies, their good names, and their places in society will be safeguarded by their own virtue. However, these three virtues are not so straightforwardly good. A chaste woman is both inherently suspect and eroticized; in defense of her suspect chastity, she necessarily violates silence, and in defense of unwanted sexual contact, she violates obedience. Once a woman is the object of suspicion or illicit desire, her virtues endanger rather than protect her, and only in her final moments does she recognize that she was always doomed. In chapter two, I argue that bad women are created in order to shore up a system predicated on using the categories of good and bad as a method of control. Therefore, the virtues that women are called to perform collapse in on themselves at times, producing bad women to punish. As I conclude this project, I want to briefly turn toward a group of “bad women” that has remained on the periphery of my argument: what can be gleaned from the experience of “bad women” who were never celebrated as chaste—who do not have chastity and virtue to lose in the eyes of men? What might this teach us about the double bind?

The Witch of Edmonton (1621) dramatizes the story of Elizabeth Sawyer, a woman convicted of witchcraft in Jacobean England. In the play, Elizabeth opens Act II alone on stage lamenting the fact that she has been the target of scorn and disgust.
Powerfully, her first line is, “And why on me?” We are immediately thrown into the middle of her frustrations, signaling that she does not understand why she is the object of such hate. She continues

why should the envious world
Throw all their scandalous malice upon me?
’Cause I am poor, deformed, and ignorant,
And like a bow buckled and bent together
By some more strong in mischiefs than myself,
Must I for that be made a common sink
For all the filth and rubbish of men’s tongues
To fall and run into?

She suspects that people’s hatred toward her is tied to her being marked as abject—she has neither money nor status, nor is she young and beautiful. In this way, she becomes morally suspect, and by her own estimation, a receptacle for “filth and rubbish” that does not belong to her. She foregrounds the specific accusation that men levy against her: that she is a witch. She reflects:

Some call me witch,
And being ignorant of myself, they go
About to teach me how to be one, urging
That my bad tongue—by their bad usage made so —
Forspeaks their cattle, doth bewitch their corn,
Themselves, their servants, and their babes at nurse.
This they enforce upon me, and in part
Make me to credit it; and here comes one
Of my chief adversaries.

She highlights, here, how hatred of an imagined category of woman actually instructs women on how to be bad. Their accusations against her are not things that she yet knows

429 Ibid., 2.1.8-10.
how to do; the accusations *teach* her what a witch is, what a witch does, and what she can
do to anger and punish her “adversaries.” We then see men arrive on stage and confirm
this very dynamic, calling her “witch,” accusing her of trying to curse them, and beating
her. At the end of the scene, Elizabeth says, “‘Tis all one/To be a witch as to be counted
one./ Vengeance, shame, ruin light upon that canker!”

She decides to become a witch, summoning a familiar and plotting her revenge; she has been abused as if she already had
committed these acts and feels that she has nothing left to lose and only vengeance to
gain. We have watched, in one scene, a woman who is denigrated by society choose to
inhabit the category that haunts her. The very accusation of witchcraft creates the witch.

In Act IV, two countrymen discuss the need to execute Elizabeth Sawyer, “else
our wives will do/ nothing else but dance about our country maypoles.”

In Act II, Elizabeth wonders why she must be the “common sink” of men’s disdain. These two
countrymen give us our answer: directing a preponderance of hatred and revulsion toward
an ugly, impoverished woman who could never be celebrated as a good or virtuous first
*creates* a witch to punish, then punishes the witch in order to her mark her as boundary
keeper. As the scene continues, Elizabeth Sawyer is asked to defend herself against
accusations of witchcraft (Of course, as we have seen, there is no testimony to be offered
in this situation that could save her). She responds, “A witch? Who is not?/ Hold not that
universal name in scorn then.”

Rather than offer a defense of herself, Elizabeth
suggests that this category for which she has been singled out is actually “universal.” She
speaks of “city-witches, who can turn/their husbands’ wares, whole standing shops of

431 Ibid., 4.1.10-1.
432 Ibid., 4.1.103-104.
wares./ To sumptuous tables, gardens of stol’n sin.”

She points to the fact that “Now an old woman/ ill-favoured grown with years, if she be poor/ Must be called bawd or witch.”

She speaks of “she on whose tongue a whirlwind sits to blow,” and rhetorically asks, “Is not that scold a witch?”

What Elizabeth is suggesting here is that “witch” is a category created to contain women who are never considered virtuous. In this way, “witch” becomes a category into which undesirable women can be thrust; this can then be used as justification for their execution.

In the immediate moments before her execution, Elizabeth veers off course. She has the sudden recognition that what she has done in order to gain revenge on her adversaries has been the very thing that sanctions her annihilation. What she believed she was weaponizing against her abusers is in reality being weaponized against her. As she is being dragged away, she protests in panic:

Have I scarce breath enough to say my prayers,  
And would you force me to spend that in bawling?  
Bear witness, I repent all former evil;  
There is no damnèd conjuror like the devil.

She attempts to distance herself from her “evil,” seeming to forget all along that her evil was presumed from the beginning. She also tragically identifies “the devil” as the “damnèd conjuror” that lured her to witchcraft, thus confirming the accusation against her: that she became a witch in order to do the devil’s bidding. Of course, she embraced witchcraft because she was already suffering the social consequences and she wanted

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434 Ibid., 4.1.122-124.
435 Ibid., 4.1.127.
436 Ibid., 4.1.130.
437 Ibid., 5.3.48-51.
revenge on her persecutors. The “damnèd conjuror” is not the devil, but the double bind.
Just as virtuous women are violated for their virtue and punished for their violation,
women who are reviled indict themselves as the very thing they are accused of in their attempt to fight back.

Crucially, these categories of bad women do not simply punish their members; they work to convince all women that the category of “good woman” can protect them from punishment. For example, in witch trials, women were searched for “the witch’s mark,” an evidentiary tool whose “importance remained central” to English trials.\textsuperscript{438} The witch’s mark was either associated with sexual contact with the devil or with allowing her familiar to suck her blood. The witch’s mark “most commonly took the form of a teat-like growth in the pudenda” and “was seen as confirmation of guilt” of witchcraft. Only women were selected to search other women for this mark. Ostensibly, this was in order to avoid the impropriety of strange men searching a woman’s unclothed body, for in order for the evidence to be reliable, there needed to be a group of observers who reached a consensus. These women chosen to inspect the accused witch, often described as “a scolder, a swearer, an unquiet woman and a general nuisance among her neighbors,” were, in comparison, described as “honest matrons,” “women of credit,” or “sober women.”\textsuperscript{439} These women become interpolated into the process; not only are they juxtaposed as good women against bad women, but they also produce the bad woman’s guilt. They do so in part to protect their own goodness; they are instead participating in the very system that can be weaponized against them.

\textsuperscript{439} Ibid., 183.
These juries of good women were not only used in trials against women accused of witchcraft. In the same collection of “Curious and Remarkable Trials” from the introduction to this dissertation, there is an account of the “Proceedings in the Divorce between the Lady Frances Howard, & Robert Early of Essex; before the Archbishop of Canterbury, the bishop of London, & other Commissioners, in 1613, in the Reign of James I.”

Lady Frances Howard wished to bring a bill of divorce against her husband on the grounds that even after years, he refused to consummate their marriage. As part of the evidence gathering, Lady Howard was also physically inspected:

The Archbishop, and the rest of the Reverend Judges, observing from the Allegations that both the Earl and the Countess were very desirous to be divorced, ordered a Jury of Matrons to be Impannelled, to inspect the Countess, and see if she was still a Virgin, as was pretended on both sides, and whether she was capable of performing the duties of the marriage bed whereupon she was searched, and the Jury found that the Lady was fit for matrimonial embraces, and capable of bearing children, but that she was still a Virgin, and three Ladies that attended the Jury also deposed that they were present when the Jury made the inspection, and that they gave good reasons for the judgment they made.

In this case, the “Jury of Matrons” is given the task of determining Lady Howard’s virtue vis-a-vis outward signs of virginity and physical signs that she was capable of “performing the duties of the marriage bed.” This is, at the outset, a vague and dubious task, similar to locating the proverbial “witch’s mark.” This vague and dubious evidence, then, is taken as absolute proof of goodness or wickedness. The same mechanism that is used to condemn the wickedness of some women is used to confirm the virtue of others.

What I mean to gesture toward at the end of this project is the way in which reading literature can help us see new dimensions of power systems. Elizabeth Sawyer

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440 The Trial of Lord Mervin Audley, 10.
441 Ibid., 11.
seems to condemn herself with her lament: “There is no damnèd conjuror like the devil.”

However, it is her opening speeches in Act I that anchor us in the truth of her subjugation. It is the speeches of the countrymen in her absence that show us why her subjugation is crucial within a patriarchal society. Literature can challenge the very binaries—good/bad, virtuous/wicked—that prop up these systems of oppression. This is not to suggest that all experiences of oppression are the same. Instead, when members of a marginalized group must make themselves legible within a binary—must compete for a celebrated identity predicated on the denigration of another—it obscures the ways in which this system continues to control and hurt all members. There is something promising, though, about reading literature that gives us women who divest together and survive—Procne and Philomel—or reading women’s writing that refuses to build a defense of women on the backs of others—Aemilia Lanyer and Rachel Speght. What literature can show us is that radical action does not demand that one appeals to their oppressors; what liberation demands is defiant solidarity.
Bibliography


The case of Sodomy, in the tryal of Mervin Lord Audley, Earl of Castlehaven, For committing a rape. And sodomy with two of his servants, viz. (Lawrence Fitz-Patrick and Thomas brodway) who was try’d and condemn’d by his peers April the 25th, and beheaded on tower-hill, May the 14th, 1631. London: E. Currl, 1710. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale.


