

“DARKE HIDDEN VERTUOUS”:
DECONSTRUCTING THE VIRGIN FIGURE IN MARY WROTH’S *LOVE’S VICTORY*
AND JOHN FLETCHER’S *THE FAITHFUL SHEPHERDESS*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER TWO: STAGING THE VIRGIN.....	3
ASSEMBLING THE VIRGIN FIGURE.....	3
THE PROTESTANT VIRGIN	3
THE VIRGIN BODY	4
THE VIRGIN IN PASTORAL TRAGICOMEDY	5
MARY, DIANA, ELIZABETH	8
PERFORMING THE VIRGIN	9
CHAPTER THREE: THE VIRGIN AND PETRARCHAN POETICS.....	14
THE PETRARCHAN DYNAMIC	14
CLORIN’S CONSTANCY	16
THE VIRGIN AS BELOVED	23
LOVE’S VICTORY: SILVESTA’S VIRGIN VOW	26
THE UNRESOLVED PETRARCHAN LOVER	29
CHAPTER FOUR: THE VIRGIN’S DIVINE BODY.....	34
ASSIGNING MEANING TO THE VIRGIN BODY.....	34
SILVESTA AS VIRGIN MARTYR.....	35
THE VIRGIN MARTYR IN CONTEXT	36

SILVESTA AS RELIGIOUS INSTRUMENT	38
CHASTE LOVE AND DISEMBODIMENT	41
THE VIRGIN MARTYR’S IMMORTALITY	42
THE HUNTINGTON MANUSCRIPT	45
CLORIN’S GIFT OF HEALING	47
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION	54
BIBLIOGRAPHY	56

ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the virgin figure as deployed by two Protestant playwrights. Clorin in John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c.1608) and Silvesta in Mary Wroth's *Love's Victory* (c.1620) are anomalous characters, remaining firm in their celibacy past the close of their respective plays. My research considers the use of these virgin figures in connection to early modern constructions of gender and sexuality, analyzing the virgin's significance for theatrical performance, Petrarchan poetics, and female religio-political action. While Wroth uses Silvesta to challenge limitations on the virgin body's potential, Fletcher ultimately reinforces a patriarchal sex/gender model, although both plays demonstrate the utility of the virgin figure as a discursive tool.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the help of my stellar graduate committee. Thank you to my advisor Dr. Christina Luckyj, for your guidance and support on this project, and throughout the duration of the Dalhousie MA program; thank you to my second reader Dr. Roberta Barker for your thoughtful and engaging comments; and thank you to my third reader Dr. Andrew Brown, for your feedback at the final stage of the revision process.

A heartfelt thank you to my partner Pierry, who has been very patient.

Finally, thank you to my mother, who I could not have done this without.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

While the “shepherdess sworn to chastity” is an archetypal figure in the genre of pastoral tragicomedy (Lewalski 92), the characters Clorin in John Fletcher’s *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c.1608) and Silvesta in Mary Wroth’s *Love’s Victory* (c.1620) fulfill a less common trajectory by remaining firm in their celibacy past the close of their respective plays. Theodora Jankowski demonstrates the significance of this choice (for both character and playwright) when she explains that, “a woman who resists male penile penetration of her vagina – and the consequent male economic and social control of her physical body – by remaining virgin must be viewed as unusual” (5). As a prismatic figure embodying competing religious, political, and mythological discourses, the virgin offers a rewarding point of departure through which to read the sexual politics of these two pastoral tragicomedies.

The Faithful Shepherdess, infamously unpopular with its initial audience, was first staged by the Children of Blackfriars in 1608 or 1609 (Squier 8). Fletcher’s play did, however, eventually meet a more positive reception at Queen Henrietta Maria’s court in 1634, and critics often point to Clorin as a figure whose modelling of virginity, resembling the Virgin Mary, may have appealed to the Catholic queen (Dunn-Hensley 178). *The Faithful Shepherdess* is a play that Mary Wroth was “almost certainly aware of” (Towers 438) when she wrote *Love’s Victory*, which was likely performed at her sister’s wedding in 1619 by Wroth, her friends and family (Hannay 220-21). Sharing a common genre and yet occupying very different contexts of production and reception, *The Faithful Shepherdess* and *Love’s Victory* invite a comparative analysis of the distinctive figure of the virgin as deployed by two Protestant playwrights.

As a site denoting anxieties about the porous boundaries between closure/openness (Scholz 10), and corporeality/spirituality (Berry 4), the virgin’s body is especially enmeshed in

questions about the stability of selfhood, identity, gender and sexuality. *The Faithful Shepherdess* and *Love's Victory* specifically employ Clorin and Silvesta in their explorations of Petrarchan discourses and religio-political action, such as martyrdom and political leadership. Influenced by Sarah Salih's *Versions of Virginitiy in Late Medieval England*, where she advises that research on constructs of virginity must "begi[n] with the assumptions that there is more to virginity than sexual inexperience, and that virginity may be conceptualized as a gendered identity which can be constituted in culturally significant action" (1), my research will demonstrate how Fletcher and Wroth each engage their virgin figures in complex performances of gender and desire, either challenging (as Wroth does) or endorsing (as Fletcher often seems to) patriarchal ideologies. While Fletcher's Clorin remains tied to more conservative ends than Wroth's Silvesta, both characters ultimately demonstrate the centrality of the virgin to an investigation of body, self, and gender for early modern playwrights and audiences.

CHAPTER TWO: STAGING THE VIRGIN

ASSEMBLING THE VIRGIN FIGURE

Fletcher and Wroth engage with a number of contemporary Protestant discourses on the virgin's meaning, as well as with conventional approaches to her staging. The virgin figure underwent important semantic and semiotic adjustments during the sixteenth century (Jankowski 95). Fletcher and Wroth were therefore required to negotiate with relatively recent shifts in meaning. The generic conventions of pastoral tragicomedy additionally inform the structure of these two plays and their virgin characters. Finally, the incorporation of the virgin figure into drama invites consideration of how an embodied medium may have influenced her presence in early modern culture. This chapter will focus on these contexts for the production of Fletcher and Wroth's virgins.

THE PROTESTANT VIRGIN

In *Pure Resistance* Jankowski outlines changes in “the language used to describe sexual continence” over the course of the sixteenth century, driven by religious, social, and economic shifts (95). Jankowski specifies that the term ‘virginity’ “describes a state of physical intactness before sexual activity” and usually applied to unmarried women, while the term ‘celibacy’ was “used primarily to describe the bodily condition of the vowed religious,” and the word ‘chastity’ was applied to describe purity both before and after marriage (95). While Catholic doctrine emphasized the virtue of celibacy as a symbolic renunciation of the material world, the Protestant prioritization of marriage indicated that female virgins would eventually please and reward their father and husband through matrimony, as opposed to strictly pleasing God and being rewarded in the afterlife (11). In other words, as the purpose for female virginity shifted

from being primarily spiritual to being explicitly economic, the “fear that a consecrated virgin may... lose her place among the heavenly elect [was] transmuted into the fear that the virgin – that is, the unmarried daughter or sister, may lose her value” (Kelly and Leslie 17). When Fletcher assigns the word ‘virgin’ to Clorin, then, through her title “the virgin of the grove” (1.2.61), he specifically affirms her state of bodily purity, a detail which will be important to our investigation of her vow within a Protestant context. Similarly, Silvesta’s choice to become a nymph in Diana’s band, and her refusal to recant on this decision at the end of the play, affirms her position as a permanent virgin, and complicates the social role she fulfils within post-Reformation culture.¹

THE VIRGIN BODY

My project will consider the post-Reformation negotiation of virginity’s semiotics. In religious and political contexts, scholars have demonstrated that early modern audiences and readers are often asked to think about whether virginity exists as a material entity or as a more abstract virtue. Writing about virginity in late medieval England, Salih suggests that “[t]he theological siting of virginity in the self is complex. Virginity is not, primarily, a bodily site, and yet the body is inescapably involved in its production” (13). The power attributed to the hymen as proof of virginity sits at odds with understanding virginity as essentially spiritual (Salih 27; Loughlin 56); yet, Salih also cites Augustine’s influential assessment that “virginity is sited in the will, not the body: hence raped women can still be accounted virgins if their will to remain virgin is unimpaired” (26). Sarah Carter’s analysis of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

¹ Nearly every critic of the play has recognized the anomaly of Silvesta’s choice within the constructs of her culture: as Naomi Miller writes, “Although Silvesta is not unique among romance protagonists in professing freedom from desire after suffering a rejection in love, her difference emerges in her steadfast assertion of a new subjectivity for herself, which cannot be shaken even by the presence of a faithful male suitor, the Forester.” (53)

iterations of “The Rape of Lucrece” presents responses to (and doubts about) Augustine’s argument (58), illustrating what Marie Loughlin describes as the virgin body’s “epistemological” instability (55). Philippa Berry also demonstrates how, “The Renaissance discourses of love certainly attempted to deny the materiality of the ‘chaste’ woman they idealized...But the mysterious bodily presence of woman haunts these systems” (3-4). And, finally, Susanne Scholz establishes the significance of Elizabeth I’s virginal body in the English imagination, writing that “In its conjunction with images of the Queen’s virginity, it linked a fiction of continuity through time with an image of territorial integrity; it envisaged synchronic and diachronic stability in the image of the Queen’s inviolate body” (5). Given such fraught terms of identification, Silvestra and Clorin in *Love’s Victory* and *The Faithful Shepherdess* must contend with the question, what sets the virgin body apart from other bodies? My research will return often to this question, as I examine the virgin body in relation to theatrical performance, Petrarchan desire, and religio-political power.

THE VIRGIN IN PASTORAL TRAGICOMEDY

Both *The Faithful Shepherdess* and *Love’s Victory* fall under the generic umbrella of pastoral tragicomedy. Pastoral offers “a liminal, borderland place that blends dreaming and waking worlds, the possible with the improbable” (Collins 3) and tragicomedy, referring to “a mixed genre especially popular at the Renaissance courts of Italy, France, and England” (Lewalski 89), tends to employ similar fantastic elements. Fletcher infamously included a prologue to his 1609 publication of *The Faithful Shepherdess* after its failure onstage, explaining that the play was “a pastoral Tragic-comedie” and its reader should “Understand therefore a pastorall to be a representation of shepherds and shepherdesses, with their actions and passions, which must be such as may agree with their natures” (“To the Reader” lines 11-13).

Fletcher additionally explains that tragicomedy is “a representation of familiar people, with such kinds of trouble as no life to be questiond, so that a God is as lawfull in this as in a tragedie, and meane people as in a comedie” (“To the Reader” lines 26-28). Fletcher’s prologue reflects the emergence of “an interest in tragi-comedy as a separate form of composition” during the sixteenth century (Kirk xxxiv), while his insistence on defining his approach to pastoralism has prompted critics such as Curtis Perry, George McMullan, and James Yoch to differentiate between Elizabethan and Jacobean pastoral elements and to demonstrate the genre’s political significance.

Fletcher’s play combines Italian and English pastoralism: critics have identified Tasso’s *Aminta*, Guarini’s *Il Pastor Fido*, Spenser’s *The Fairy Queene*, and even Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as intertexts for *The Faithful Shepherdess* (Kirk xx-xxiv). The play centers on the nighttime (mis)adventures of shepherds and shepherdesses in a pastoral world governed by Pan. The central plot follows Perigot and Amoret, established at the beginning of the play as chaste lovers with plans to meet in the woods later that night. Amarillis, a shepherdess who loves Perigot and who possesses magical abilities, disguises herself as Amoret to seduce him. In response, Perigot stabs her, believing her disguise. My analysis will concern the character Clorin, the virgin shepherdess who opens the play. Clorin has vowed a life of virginity in honour of her dead lover. Along with the assistance of a satyr, she acts as healer for the other characters in the play. Clorin additionally attracts an admirer, Thenot, whom she frightens away by feigning lust. At the end of the play, Clorin assists with restoring the pastoral world to order.

Love’s Victory is also written in the pastoral tradition, and may even be in conversation with *The Faithful Shepherdess* (Towers 483). Barbara Lewalski highlights the importance of

noting the generic context of Wroth's play, arguing that, "Comparison with [pastoral] texts allows us to inspect the literary and political choices Wroth's drama incorporates"; for Lewalski, Wroth redirects the pastoral genre to feminist ends (89). The plot of Wroth's play follows the goddess Venus and her son Cupid as they design a plot to teach humans a lesson on love's power. The central characters, Musella and Philisses, are in love, but must overcome obstacles such as Philisses' doubt and jealousy in order to confess this love to one another. Once they do, they meet another obstacle: Musella is arranged to marry the character Rustick. Musella and Philisses then plan to commit suicide at the Temple of Love, although they are ultimately resurrected by Venus and, finally, married. The object of my analysis will be the character Silvesta, who plays a large role in *Love's Victory's* ending. Silvesta begins the play in love with Philisses, but when her love is not returned she pledges a vow of chastity to Diana. Like Clorin, Silvesta attracts an admirer in the Forester. In the final act of the play, Silvesta assists her friends Musella and Philisses, providing them with a potion that is credited with saving their lives. Although she is sentenced to death for her action, prompting the Forester to offer his life in exchange for hers, Venus ultimately reveals that Silvesta was working on her behalf.

This summary of *Love's Victory* is based on the Penshurst manuscript of the play; however, a different version exists in the form of the Huntington manuscript, which, among other dissimilarities, is most notably lacking the Penshurst's resolution. Marta Straznicky and Paul Salzman have each made a case for the Huntington as a manuscript "consciously unfinished" in the manner of other Sidney family writers (Salzman "Reading" 84). Straznicky writes that "while the Penshurst manuscript seems in many places to transcribe the Huntington text...there are also hundreds of substantive variants between the two versions, few of which... indicate a straightforward process of revision" (82). My work on *Love's Victory* will take both

manuscripts into account, remaining open to the possibility of the Huntington as a complete work in its own right.

MARY, DIANA, ELIZABETH

In Sharon Yang's analysis of the 'female pastoral guide,' she draws attention to a renewed interest in the "sacred virgin" during the Renaissance, interpreting this phenomenon as a means of channeling devotion for the Virgin Mary into admiration for the Protestant Queen (103). Elizabeth was additionally associated with the chaste Goddess Diana who, as we will see in the next chapter, plays a key role in Petrarchan love dynamics (Berry 5). Elizabeth I offers important context for the presence of female virgin characters on public, court, and private stages not only during her reign, but after her death as well. The Virgin Queen utilized a "medieval configuration of courtly love, transmitted to England in its Renaissance, Petrarchan version" to fashion herself within a "familiar symbolic structure in which a powerful, remote, chaste, socially superior woman conferred favor on, and withdrew it from, knights who fought to serve her" (Rose 196). In addition to courtly love discourses, Elizabeth incorporated pastoral conventions into her use of "virginity as a tool of realpolitik" (Jankowski 195), casting herself as the harbinger of the 'golden age' (Rose 196). Political allegories for Elizabeth, then, appeared in plays produced throughout her reign, from John Lyly's *Endymion* to Sidney's *Lady of May*, combining pastoral and Petrarchan elements.

My perspective on Elizabeth I's relationship to Silvesta and Clorin has been largely inspired by Jankowski, who writes, "I have consistently downplayed the importance of the Virgin Queen because her iconic presence has not created the discourse of virginity I have been examining; at most, it is also a product of this same discourse" (194). While Elizabeth I's

presence is closely intertwined with any virgin figure produced by the early modern imagination (195), she is not the only productive guide for analyzing the virgin's meaning. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Marina Leslie suggest that the tendency to center Elizabeth I's importance "has created a focus but also a blind spot in the study of the poetics of virginity in the Renaissance" (18). Therefore, my research will explore alternative lenses through which to interpret the virgin figure.

PERFORMING THE VIRGIN

How do the theoretical conceptions of virgin women that existed for early modern Protestants connect to the physical staging of 'virgin' bodies? How might early modern audiences have responded to or understood depictions of sexuality onstage, whether deviant or hegemonic? Brian Pietras describes Fletcher's idealized female characters as designed to "move the audience to virtue" (70), but can we assume that an audience's affective experience would necessarily involve clear admiration for the 'good' examples of femininity and condemnation of the 'bad'? How do we account for the material existence of erotic norms and preferences in early modern culture? Can the virgin be a source of material attraction in the same way that she represents a literary ideal? Cynthia Marshall references an experience of "pleasure for both poet and reader" implicit in Petrarchan poetry (67), while Philippa Berry describes a "specifically feminine eroticism in the figure of Elizabeth as a chaste beloved" (6), gesturing towards a sexualized perception of the virgin that is particularly suited to the audience/actor relationship achieved through performance. Considering the staging of Fletcher and Wroth's respective virgins will help us to better understand the virgin's positioning within a sex/gender dynamic for early modern audiences.

The Faithful Shepherdess is tentatively supposed to have been performed by the Children of Blackfriars (alternatively known as the Blackfriars Boys, Children of the Queen's Revels, and Children of the Chapel) between 1608 and 1609 (Squier 8). The performance of the play by boy actors complicates (or intensifies) the questions I have posed concerning an early modern audience's relationship to onstage depictions of gender and sexuality. Julie Ackroyd's work on the child actor calls for a similar consideration of the interstices of gender and performance on the early modern stage, writing that, "Situating the child actors' portrayal of female characters within the early modern gender structure can...help us explore how audiences would have reacted to these actors' presentation of female characters" (59). Ackroyd argues that, while watching the child actor perform, "The viewer holds a dual perspective knowing that he is not watching a woman perform whilst at the same time he is watching a female character working through the scene being presented" (70). As a result of this slippage and indeterminacy, Ackroyd tells us, "the performer can consequently be seen as possessing a homoerotic charge" (70). Interestingly, Clorin models a similar impression of duality when she feigns desire for her pursuer, Thenot, insisting that he "[s]ee what a holy vowe, for thee I breake" (4.6.30). Fletcher's inclusion of this kind of 'performed' sexuality by a chaste female character may have complemented the performance of femininity by a male child actor.²

Kathleen McLuskie observes that when Perigot stabs Amoret, the "spectacle of chaste victim falsely accused offers its theatrical pleasures in cameo form" (203). Similarly, Clorin's confession of desire for Thenot, requesting of him that "Clorin, thy Clorin, now dare undertake" (4.6.26), allows for a safe erotization of the virgin; the illusion of this scene, like a dream

² Jankowski briefly enquires into the complexity of this kind of performative layering in plays like Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Lyly's *Gallathea*, asking "how is the homoerotic desire for/between boy players to be understood in terms of a love/desire that is expressed by 'women' characters?" (23-4).

sequence, allows the audience to voyeuristically enjoy watching the female love-object return the lover's desire, without witnessing her collapse into the 'real' female desire that early modern misogyny feared and anticipated of women. Here, the dramatic irony of the scene might allow for the audience's pleasure even if it quells Thenot's. In this way, Clorin in *The Faithful Shepherdess* creates a pleasing double-image catering to desires, fears, and cultural regulations simultaneously. Layered overtop of the performance of femaleness by a male child, it may not have mattered that Clorin's sexual advances are 'false' within the world of the play. If, as Ackroyd argues, "highly sexualized female characters in the children's theatres... suggest that the audience was meant to feel a degree of desire towards the female lover roles contained within some early modern plays" (82), it is possible to see similarities in the shift between androgyny and desirability that occurs when the child actor presents as a female character, and when the virgin character presents as a seductress, each potentially offering an eroticized experience to the audience.³

Love's Victory, which was likely written for private performance at either Wroth's home of Durance, the home of Sir Edward Dering, or else the Sidney family's Penshurst Place (Hannay 220-1), enacts a very different relationship between performer and audience when compared to *The Faithful Shepherdess*. Although little exact information is known about the staging of the play, Margaret P. Hannay suggests the 1619 wedding of Barbara Smythe, Wroth's sister, as a possible context, noting that "The Penshurst manuscript date [1620] would fit, and the drama, with its family references, has the feel of an occasional piece" (221). Most importantly, unlike the performance of *The Faithful Shepherdess* on the public stage by the Children of Blackfriars

³Ackroyd tells us that, "The child actor was a gender-free blank canvas who could realistically interpret any part, male or female" (90) while Jankowski writes of the adult virgin woman as "those who confound the sex/gender system *not* by trying to be men, but by *not being* 'women'" (12).

(Squier 8), *Love's Victory* was likely performed by a cast of women, possibly including Wroth herself (Hannay 221; Salzman "As You Like It" 130).

Wroth's staging of Silvesta, then, deviates from Clorin's embodiment of the desiring and desirable virgin. *The Faithful Shepherdess's* interest in "duality and transformation" (Bliss 305), enacted through Clorin's feigned desire for Thenot and Amarillis's transformation into the likeness of Amoret, is complicated by the presence of male actors playing female characters. How would the presence of an actual woman onstage in a play like *Love's Victory* affect an early modern audience's experience of the performance? Clare McManus explains that in the court masque tradition, an additional influence on the style of Wroth's pastoral, "Bringing the cross-dressed male and the 'real' female body together in the same stage picture...further emphasized the legitimate presence of the 'real' female body on the masque stage" (99). Although *Love's Victory* does not feature cross-dressed males, the presence of female performers, who portrayed characters through both speech and movement, might "provide a potential re-vision of the enforced silence and passivity of the Jacobean female masquers, of whom Wroth was one" (Miller 124). The female performers in *Love's Victory*, therefore, likely provided a contrast to both public theatre and court masque conventions, offering the audience a potentially different understanding of the relationship between body and performance.

In her opening speech, Silvesta references a change of clothing, explaining, "As I, for once, who thus my habitts change,/Once sheapherdes, butt now in woods must rang;" (1.1.121-2). Based on the reference to her attire, it's likely that Silvesta was costumed as a nymph, with huntress clothing and a bow (Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 201). Critics have been divided in their interpretation of Silvesta's costuming: does this description mean that she is "cross-dressed" and therefore drawing attention to the "artificial nature" of gender performance, as

argued by Wynne-Davies (“Absent Fathers” 65)? Or, in contrast, is Silvesta’s clothing an assertion of female agency that “marks Silvesta’s significant rejection of the trials of desire, allowing autonomy” and, in effect, challenging the “notion that all the femininity we need is contained within...male, cross-dressed bodies” (Salzman “As You Like It” 132-3)?

Silvesta’s costuming, I propose, establishes the character in two ways that differ from Clorin’s presentation in Fletcher’s play. Silvesta tells us that her vow to Diana “allowes noe sight/Of men” (149-150). Of course, this does not apply to the contract between performer and audience; however, Silvesta’s mythological costuming reorganizes the performer’s body, distancing the female performer’s ‘real’ bodily presence from the economy of desire fostered within the play. While Fletcher’s performative layers of gender and desire might augment, and invite, an eroticized consumption of Clorin’s virginity, Silvesta’s costuming has the opposite effect, establishing both Silvesta’s assertion of control over her self-image for the duration of the play, and inviting the audience to see character before gender. Furthermore, Silvesta’s clothing marks her as a recognizable stock character, and affirms her part within the play’s generic construction: Wynne-Davies suggests “Silvesta’s distinctive dress...might refer to a masque costume which could be readily identified by a coterie audience” (“Absent Fathers” 55). In this way, Silvesta’s nymph costume would allow the audience immediate insight into the conventions with which Wroth is engaging, so that they could be equally attentive to her subversions.

The stage, then, affords the virgin figure an embodied presence that allows her to interact with the early modern sex/gender system in complex ways. While it is impossible to determine any definite response audience members may have had to these virgin figures, my hope is that opening this line of inquiry will suggest her significance to the workings of desire and embodiment in early modern culture.

CHAPTER THREE: THE VIRGIN AND PETRARCHAN POETICS

THE PETRARCHAN DYNAMIC

Sixteenth and seventeenth-century English love poetry influenced by Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* follows a general set of conventions: the suffering lover-persona expresses his desire for a cold (even cruel) beloved through poetry with no hope that his longing will be fulfilled or his love returned (Marshall 57). The lover-persona's unending (because unreturned) desire ensures that he will continue to produce poetry; in order to be lauded for his skill, the poet must remain unhappy in love, and constant to a chaste mistress (57). Petrarchan discourses, then, inspire readers and critics to question whether "their fundamental aim [is] the praise of the lady, as some scholars of an earlier generation assumed, or the establishment of the poet's own subjectivity, as many of their contemporary counterparts would assert" (Dubrow 15). Petrarchan poetry hinges on the dynamic between chaste beloved and desiring lover, offering an important window into the role of the virgin within early modern economies of gender and desire. While Naomi Miller asserts that, "The other side of (male) desire is understood to be (female) chastity, which simultaneously elicits and validates the prescribed direction of that desire" (22), critics such as Heather Dubrow and Cynthia Marshall are also aware of the ways that this formula folds in on itself throughout Petrarchan poetics, blurring gender distinctions and power balances (Marshall 11; Dubrow 4).

The Faithful Shepherdess and *Love's Victory* reconsider the roles of Petrarchan lover and chaste beloved within seventeenth-century Protestant culture by dramatizing female virgin experiences of thwarted or unrequited love, which parallel and yet diverge from those of their male suitors. While a number of critics have remarked on both *The Faithful Shepherdess* and *Love's Victory's* investments in subverting Petrarchan poetics, pointing to Clorin and Silvesta's

respective modelling of socially productive behaviour in order to challenge the stasis of their male counterparts (Miller 131; Clarke 109; Pietras 70; Bliss 301), I would add to these arguments that the use of a female virgin for this corrective emphasizes cultural concerns about early modern women's social productivity, personal gratification, and self-fashioned subjectivity.

The Faithful Shepherdess opens with Clorin's vow to remain a virgin, inspired by the death of her lover. Lucy Munro interprets Fletcher's choice to begin his play with a woman's soliloquy as a modification of traditional pastoral elements in order to privilege a "female experience" (180); however, Fletcher's opening scene does more than present a feminine perspective. Clorin's soliloquy privileges her role as the active and embodied lover of an absent beloved. Her dedication to a deceased love object aligns her with Petrarchan discourses, and allows for comparison between her experience of desire and the experiences of the desiring men who populate the play. Silvesta, on the other hand, loves Philisses, who does not return her love. In this way, Silvesta represents a standard Petrarchan speaker at the outset of *Love's Victory*. However, because her love interest in turn loves Musella, Silvesta makes the decision to reject suffering for love and become a follower of the chaste goddess Diana, renouncing the position of Petrarchan lover. By exhibiting desire for a love object, Silvesta and Clorin's situations are suggestive of a typically male role in the Petrarchan dynamic. Yet, unlike the Petrarchan poets for whom the lover's amorous failure is his poetic success, Fletcher suggests that Clorin's capacity to produce healing magic is a suitable substitute for her withdrawal from the sexual economy. Wroth, however, uses Silvesta to challenge this male-centric paradigm.

In addition to considering female desire for a male beloved, Fletcher and Wroth draw attention to the subjectivity of the female Petrarchan beloved, and to the eroticization of the virgin body. As is standard within Petrarchanism, Clorin and Silvesta are each a source of desire

for male characters, not in spite but *because* of their virginity. Fletcher and Wroth's use of an "absolute" as opposed to "transitional" virgin (Loughlin 54) in the role of the beloved betrays a contradictory matrix of behavioral expectations placed on the desired woman by the Petrarchan lover, who demands that the beloved remain simultaneously desexualized and eroticized; independent and powerful, yet subject to the desires of the poet.⁴ Additionally, the embodiment attendant on theatre presents a more multi-dimensional perspective on the virgin beloved than a reading experience may allow for. Marshall notes that "it is worth asking how the physical selves of the poet, the beloved, and the reader figure into Petrarchanism" (82); performance's basis in physicality perhaps makes this question even more urgent. Importantly, these two plays dismantle a conventional fetishization of the beloved through the lover-poet's eyes, as both Clorin and Silvesta take the stage before their admirers do, and are clearly present as their own, distinct, persons. Dubrow argues that while Petrarchanism and anti-Petrarchanism "are indeed often about subjects like politics, history, or the relationships among men...they are always – and often primarily – about love, desire, and gender as well" (10). Fletcher and Wroth's deployments of a virgin beloved in these two plays highlight the utility of the female virgin figure as a discursive tool used by both male and female early modern writers to negotiate constructions of gender and desire.

CLORIN'S CONSTANCY

In her opening lines, Clorin praises the absent beloved and indicates her ongoing love for him:

⁴ Naomi Miller gestures towards this contradictory pattern of demands, writing that the "female beloved is often characterized by a quality of elusiveness that serves both to perpetuate male desire and to allow masculine constructions of her identity that are not limited by any professed subjectivity on her part" (29).

Haile, holy earth, whose colde armes do embrace
The truest man that ever fed his flockes:
By the fat plains of fruitfull Thessaly.
Thus I salute thy grave, thus do I pay
My early vows and tribute of mine eies
To thy still loved ashes: thus I free
My selfe from all ensuing heates and fires
Of love; all sports, delights and jolly games (1.1.1-8)

Sitting uneasily between an ascetic renunciation of worldly pleasure and Protestant commendation of marital constancy (Loughlin 54), the instability of Clorin's discourse aligns her with the Petrarchan lover, who similarly remains devoted to the chaste beloved and set apart from private, familial life. Lee Bliss, too, affiliates Clorin with Petrarchanism, writing, "By loving Clorin [Thenot] has, in a way, chosen to love death, for her chastity is a living memorial to her dead lover" (301), a summary that highlights similarities between the two situations. Clorin's oath of static dedication to her "truest man" (1.1.2), which cannot now be reciprocated, might be interpreted as "unproductive," the description Munro ascribes to Thenot, Clorin's own admirer (182). However, Fletcher asks his audience to assess Clorin's desire on different terms than they interpret Thenot's, due to her female body.

Loughlin recognizes in her detailed analysis of the "epistemological problems" attached to Clorin's virginity that, by using the term 'virgin' to describe a woman whose virginity stems from a love vow, Clorin "combines in her person...perpetual or absolute virginity and transitional virginity" (54-55). Additionally, Yang suggests that the combination of virgin, lover, and widow in the person of Clorin, given the impetus for her vow, "defuse[s]" the threatening

qualities of each role, constructing a character who is not as independent as the widow or virgin, nor as sexualized as the lover (158). Considering Clorin's vow that "thus I free/My selfe from all ensuing heates and fires/Of love; all sports, delights and jolly games" (1.1.6-8), Loughlin similarly argues that, while resembling "the sexual abstinence usually undertaken by religious women and men and highly valued in ancient Christian ascetic tradition," Clorin's virginity nonetheless acts as an analogue for Protestant marital chastity (54-55). However, technically free from a husband's authority, Clorin's situation is more complex than that of a chaste married woman. Clorin was not, in fact, married to her lover. This is particularly noteworthy given the logic of procreation driving Protestant discourses of chastity within marriage (Jankowski 80). Furthermore, Clorin's vow of constancy to her deceased lover is not as typical of early modern social mores as one might assume. Jennifer Panek challenges a critical tendency to assume that early modern English culture spurned remarriage, suggesting that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "[encouragement of the] remarriage of widows was never exactly a new-fangled Protestant notion preached to a resisting public" (22). The reasons that a woman might be encouraged not to remarry included the well-being of her children, or "a prudent desire to protect one's estate for posterity" (38). Neither of these options, of course, apply to the unmarried Clorin, who does not economically benefit from her lover's estate. In fact, there are Protestant treatises on remarriage that are eager to persuade a woman like the childless Clorin to marry, citing "the duty of yonger widows and women, which is to marry and to beare moe children" (Edward Topsell, qtd. in Panek 33). Deployed neither as part of a marital bond nor as a religious commitment, the particularities of Clorin's resistance to ("re")marriage emphasizes the intensity of her love for the deceased shepherd, rather than the economic considerations or desire for independence that may have appealed to her analogue, the widow (38). While I agree with

Yang and Loughlin that Clorin's relationship to her dead lover de-escalates the threat she poses as an unmarried woman, I think that the specifics of her vow warrant further investigation.

Searching for a figure of patriarchal authority, critics of the play have paid particular attention to the character Pan, the God ostensibly served by Clorin (Yang 156), and who is commonly interpreted as an allegory for James I (Yoch 132). However, Clorin's opening vow of chastity is not offered to Pan: her virginity is figured much more clearly in connection to her dead lover. When Clorin's speech opens by directly addressing her lover's grave, she places the emphasis of the first scene on an individual rather than any deity. Susan Dunn-Hensley observes that Clorin's "evocation of the dead lover follows the rhetorical pattern of the virgin saints' evocation of Christ as lover" (180); however, importantly, Clorin has replaced Christ with an individual. This emphasis appears consistent with a growing cultural interest in the individual, particularly in Renaissance discourses of love, which Philippa Berry suggests manifested as an "increased concern with *personal* progress (psychological as well as social)" (18). A product of the "humanist orientation" that Bliss recognizes in the play (299), and related to the human capacity "to achieve virtue on a modest scale" that James Yoch interprets Clorin as encouraging (132), her oath is directed towards a concretized addressee, in the form of the deceased shepherd. As a result of this individuation, Clorin's vows are specifically related to male reputation, as Clorin assures her beloved that "all are dead but thy deare memorie" (1.1.23). Despite the reversal between the more typical formulation of male speaker/lover and female object/beloved, Clorin remains a marker of "masculine wholeness," Berry's description of the female beloved's ideological role (2). Nancy Cotton Pearse suggests a similar idea when she writes that Fletcher's inversion of the faithful shepherd's gender in Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* "to create a faithful shepherdess...necessarily altered [the theme], for the word *faithful* when applied to women

implies not only constancy but also chastity” (135). Clorin’s loyalty is figured as her lover’s earthly, rather than heavenly, reward for being ‘true.’ In this way, Fletcher redirects the power of the female virgin figure back towards her deceased lover. Although Clorin is fulfilling a typically male position, acting as the desiring figure of the disembodied beloved,⁵ her agency becomes sublimated to her deceased lover’s image; as “living memorial” (Bliss 301), Clorin’s virginity is redirected to secular, worldly ends.

Vowing “And heere will I, in honor of thy love,/Dwell by thy grave” (1.1.26-7), Clorin seems to be modelling the type of ‘chaste’ marital love accepted and promoted by contemporary theologians (Loughlin 55); however, her failure both to reproduce and to live as a *feme covert* under male authority undercuts the purpose of, to employ Jankowski’s economic language, the virgin’s ‘fetishized’ potential. Jankowski highlights the issue of “social productiv[ity]” as being a central component of English sixteenth and seventeenth century discourses, writing that, “The virgin may represent potential, but the wife is economic fulfillment, as she reproduces humanity in her own body” (100). Chastity within marriage, referring to sexual faithfulness, ensured a verified patriarchal lineage, while at the same time prioritizing procreation (80). Importantly, however, Clorin’s virgin vow proclaims a life of selflessness: “Onely remembring what my youth did gaine,/In the dark hidden vertuous use of hearbs:/That will I practise, and as freely give/All my endeavours, as I gaine them free” (1.1.29-32). Bliss insightfully argues that Clorin “avoids [Thenot’s] self-absorption...[by] transform[ing] private and romantic commitment into a generalized benevolence towards all the suffering creatures of wood or village” (301). More specifically, Clorin figures the gift begotten by her virginity as a virtue “gaine...free” (1.1.32),

⁵ Berry describes Dante’s Beatrice as “disembodied angelic guide” and writes that Petrarch’s Laura “was accorded many of Beatrice’s immaterial or ‘angelic’ attributes; indeed, she too was asserted by Petrarch to have died midway through his sequence” (22).

terminology that exemplifies the frequent “economic treatments of chastity” cited by Katherine Gillen as a staple of early modern writing (19). Explicitly connecting her medicinal talents to a state of physical virginity by describing the “secret vertue” that lies “In hearbs applyd by a virgins hand” (1.1.39-40), Clorin makes an argument for virginity as the gift that keeps giving: a painless investment with bountiful return.

Clorin’s reference to her ‘free’ gift could also reflect the Protestant theological mandate that virtue comes from faith freely blessed by God rather than from works designed to earn His salvation. This reading of Clorin’s words and actions places emphasis on the spiritual role that enables her to live a saint-like existence of constancy and benevolence; she has been chosen by God to live an exceptional life. Like Elizabeth I, whose virginity was not meant to serve as a model for the average woman (Jankowski 13), Clorin’s physical virginity is a marker of her singularity. Clorin’s adult virgin status is therefore neither attainable by other women nor a result of Clorin’s personal agency.

However, in many ways Clorin also models a vision of female independence. Dunn-Hensley suggests that although “some might argue that Clorin has become an agent for the patriarchy at the end of the play” her healing powers “can be read as an assertion of the Sacred Feminine” (182). Dunn-Hensley goes on to observe that Clorin “clearly challenges social expectations about the role of women” (182). In a similar vein, Jankowski reads a subversion of gender roles in William Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* and Margaret Cavendish’s *The Convent of Pleasure*, both of which feature ‘queer’ virgin characters, whose “resistance extends to the economic sphere, for none of the virgins is dependent upon any man for financial support” (184). It’s arguable that Fletcher instills in Clorin the same kind of independence which Jankowski reads in *Measure* and *Convent*.

Clorin, then, possesses qualities that point to both her empowerment and her disempowerment as a female subject. However, I think it is important to consider how Fletcher's interest in Clorin's virginal state colours his portrayal of her power and independence. Loughlin interprets Clorin's reference to her "dark hidden vertuous use of hearbs" (1.1.30) as a continuation of the themes of secrecy found throughout Clorin's description of her virginity which evoke the "intact hymen" (55). While Clorin's knowledge base and spiritual agency is admirable, Fletcher's language makes it difficult ever to disconnect fully Clorin's person from the potential her body represents within the early modern sex/gender system. Furthermore, unlike the widowed "vowess" whose chastity "appear[s] to have often been driven by economic motives and benefits" and who "tended to be busy, worldly women of the mercantile elite with much property to safeguard for their children" (Panek 22), Clorin's social role is detached from the kind of economic power a widow may have benefitted from, limiting consideration of her agency to how her body specifically may contribute to social stability.

Clorin's framing bears commonalities with Jankowski's summary of Erasmus' "The Wooer and the Maiden," in which virginity is likened to "the *promise* of agricultural or mercantile fulfillment," explicitly relating the virginal body to proto-capitalist discourses (88). Even without active participation in a marriage, Clorin defends her seemingly unfulfilled virgin potential with an equivalence expressed in the economic terms of a virtue "gaine...free" (1.1.32); however, rather than using participation in English commerce or philanthropy as a means of chaste reproduction, as the widowed benefactress was able to do, Clorin's body remains the circulating commodity, carrying its worth "intrinsically" rather than "extrinsically."⁶

⁶ Katherine Gillen uses this phrasing to describe the virgin's body as commodity, writing "While economic treatments of chastity often undergird articulations of contingent, performative selfhood shaped by the exigencies of exchange value, they also figure in the ideological processes by which intrinsic value is recovered, reconfigured, and redistributed among different sorts of subjects" (19).

THE VIRGIN AS BELOVED

As a virgin, Clorin is a natural object of Petrarchan longing, fulfilling a role assigned to Diana, enacted first in Ovid's Diana-Actaeon myth, which Petrarch reproduced in his *Rime Sparse*, and which subsequently became the governing metaphor of early modern love discourses, including those directed towards Elizabeth I (Vickers 270; Berry 6). In *The Faithful Shepherdess* Fletcher provides a cleverly satiric portrayal of male desire for a virgin beloved: Thenot's insistence to his beloved, Clorin, that she "not invite/Desire, and fancy from their long exile" (2.1.147-8) models the lover's paradoxical refusal to be satisfied; a key element of the Petrarchan mode. Pietras explains that, "[Thenot] remains stuck, caught between his desire for Clorin and his need for her to refuse" (59), and interprets Thenot as a means for Fletcher to "critique...the Petrarchan success narrative by refusing to crown the long-suffering Thenot with the laurels of poetic fame" (59). However, I am more interested in Clorin's response to Thenot's admiration, as she attempts to navigate the strictures placed on her body and reputation. Clorin's feigned desire, used as a tactic to frighten Thenot away, clearly unveils the paradox of Thenot's desire for desire (Pietras 60). However, Clorin's interaction with Thenot also betrays a more complex gender dynamic when considered through the lens of female experience. One might link this point to Joyce Green MacDonald's analysis of the Ovidian politics at the heart of *Love's Victory*, which she describes as "a narrative mode deeply shaped by principles of women's sexual victimization" (449). MacDonald writes that, "Wroth's nymphs inhabit a space that is dangerous to them precisely because they are women, however consciously they have removed themselves from the complexities of courtship and courtiership" (455). MacDonald goes on to argue that the "story of Diana and her nymphs finally comes to be read not as a story about women's active choices of each other, but as a story revoking the possibility of their refusals by

men” (457); similarly, Clorin’s inability to remove herself from the play’s sexual economy despite her best efforts to make her unavailability explicit unveils a darker subtext about female sexual agency, and the danger that accompanies being on the receiving end of desire.

Clorin’s capacity to cure illnesses, among which she lists “love-sick[ness]” (1.1.36), has been the most popular lens through which to read her interaction with Thenot. However, although Clorin offers to “cure thee of disease or festred ill” (2.2.85) when Thenot first enters her bower, and before she is aware of his particular affliction, once Thenot admits “fairest, know, I love you” (2.2.98), elimination of his suffering does not remain Clorin’s central priority. Her first reaction to Thenot’s love-confession is that “Thou hast abused the strictness of this place” (2.2.100) and insulted her dead lover. Dunn-Hensley interprets this reaction as a parallel to depictions of “virgin saints spurning their suitors” (179); however, Clorin’s affiliation with a (deceased) human male lover in fact situates her response in a much more worldly, rather than mystical, context. Clorin threatens that her lover’s ghost may rise up in “vengeance” (2.2.106), as Thenot has “offred sacrilegious foul disgrace/To the sweet rest of these interred bones” (2.2.101-2), demonstrating the necessary defensive strategies of female behaviour in the face of admiration. It is difficult not to read Clorin’s exaggerated threats of ghostly revenge as a defensive strategy: Thenot has entered a feminine space to admit desire, and Clorin does not have the physical protection of her beloved. Perhaps this accounts for Anne Margaret McLaren’s offhand description of Clorin’s later ruse as informed by “self-protective ambiguity” (288). Furthermore, Clorin suggests that by admitting his love, Thenot has infringed on the rights of her lover, fashioning himself as “A rival in that virtuous love that he [Clorin’s lover]/Embraces yet” (2.2.115-6). Thenot’s suffering of ‘love-sickness’ is therefore not without its consequences for Clorin. She is framed as having all of the power, and also liability, in the situation: passively

acquiescing to remain Thenot's object of desire would risk her lover's reputation and integrity (as he cannot defend himself, being dead), but satisfying Thenot's desire could only possibly be accomplished by eliminating her chastity, therefore equally damaging both hers and her lover's reputations and love bond. Clorin's encounter with Thenot demonstrates the dangerous social and moral expectations assigned to women fulfilling the role of beloved.

In response to Thenot's love confession, Clorin decides, "by witt to Cure a lovers payne,/Which no hearb can" (4.5.9-10), and tells Thenot, "[I] offer upp my selfe, here on this ground,/To be disposd by thee—" (4.5.36-37). Clorin's solution of feigned wantonness, which Lee Bliss reads as a "direct imitation of the transformed Amarillis courting Perigot" (301), is not only a clever corrective for Thenot's 'illness,' but indicates the contradictory social demands women must adhere to in order to maintain a pure sexual state, a clean reputation, and a chaste love-bond. The early modern fascination with discrepancies between being and seeming have been well-documented, particularly chastity's tendency to "inspire[e] interrogations into the relationship between external appearance and interior essence" (Gillen 13), and McLuskie observes that "the problems of ocular proof of chastity, so difficult to achieve in the social world" are elsewhere in the play "solved with the aid of a magic taper" (203). McLuskie's analysis is equally applicable to Clorin's scene with Thenot, where her performance of wantonness is distinguished from true wantonness by a guaranteed state of inner purity. The success of her plot to feign desire is assisted by the essential deification of her lover who, since dead, cannot be limited by the same doubts and insecurities as the earthly Perigot, solving the problem that Nancy Cotton Pearse suggests accounts for the play's lack of dramatic action because, "for a woman there can be no internal struggle with lust, for, once a woman admits lustful imaginings, she is no longer chaste" (147). If Thenot's lust is circular and impossible, the

behavior expected of Clorin, a woman desired for her chastity, is equally so; as Kelly and Leslie observe, “the notion that virginity both attracts and repels leaves the issue of responsibility for male desire unresolved, while locating the sin of failed virginity in the woman” (24). Clorin’s scene with Thenot suggests that inner female purity will be recognized (whether by God, the audience, or a deified lover) and rewarded, while true unruly female desire will be punished, as in Perigot’s extreme reaction to Amarillis. However, McLuskie also notes that, “The play demonstrates the difference between an ideological and a theatrical treatment...The sense that chastity is infinitely precarious is established from the beginning of the play,” specifying that dramatized chastity must be “besieged” in order to foster theatrical and narrative interest, despite the moral transgression this besiegement represents (201). Clorin’s performance of lust demonstrates an additional way that theatrical and ideological discourses on chastity differ: while Fletcher seemingly offers Clorin as an example of admirable constancy, her situation heavily depends on the interpretive stability that the audience’s “complicity with her motivation” (Clark 31) affords.

LOVE’S VICTORY: SILVESTA’S VIRGIN VOW

Silvesta, like Clorin, is doubly implicated in a Petrarchan dynamic; McLaren even suggests that, “Forester and Silvesta’s relationship may owe something to the example set by Clorin in Fletcher’s *Faithful Shepherdess*” (288). Silvesta engages in an act of desiring that cannot be returned before being cast herself in the role of beloved. Her figuration of virginity presents a telling contrast to Clorin’s: rather than a ‘free gift’ Silvesta describes her chastity as “purchas’d with love’s pain” (3.1.32). Instead of a valuable asset in the patriarchal sexual economy, intended to be used for a profitable return much like Clorin’s virginal body, Silvesta

“ha[s] wun chastitie, in place of Love” (1.1.156): Carolyn Ruth Swift argues, “Silvesta suggests that chastity is important to women, not because it is moral and not because it is the only route to marriage, but because it leads to freedom” (183). In this way, Silvesta renders chastity a valuable prize rather than a form of currency, and a product of maturation rather than a passive remainder from youth, reflecting Jankowski’s observation that for ‘queer virgins’ “virginity indeed becomes the end rather than the means of their lives” (171). Although Fletcher employs economic terminology to make an argument for virginity as an investment in social productivity,⁷ Wroth changes the variables in the equation altogether, figuring love as the investment and a chaste lifestyle as the purchase.

As most critics of the play have observed, Silvesta characterizes her virgin state as one of contentment and freedom (Waller 241; Miller 140; Swift 183; Dawkins 139), positioning her experience of chastity as “hapy and blest” (1.1.128) in contrast to love’s “Slavery, and bondage” (1.1.159); a reference to the Petrarchan suffering that is a product of desire (Cerasano and Wynne-Davies, 201). Unlike Silvesta, Clorin not only vows sexual continence, but physically removes herself from the world that the shepherds occupy. She promises that “No more the company of fresh faire Maids/And wanton shepherds be to me delightfull,/Nor the shrill pleasing sound of merry pipes./Under some shady dell, when the coole winde/Plaies on the leaves” (1.1.12-15); as Bliss observes, “Fletcher marks the limits of [Clorin’s] choice. She remains in her bower with her satyr acolyte, estranged now from the on-going rhythms of village life” (301). Silvesta, however, remains “central to the social world of the lovers” (Miller 53),

⁷ Jankowski connects this term to the Virgin Mary: “Masters uses the Virgin Mary as an ideal example of a virgin who, as a mother, is socially productive” (100). I am using the phrase here, similarly, to refer to culturally sanctioned actions deemed to be positive and to contribute something useful to society.

maintaining friendships with Musella and Philisses, and even “unexpectedly appear[ing] within the [friends’] fortunetelling game” (Larson 186).

Silvesta’s participation in the games and music of *Love’s Victory* is especially interesting when compared to Clorin’s explicit renunciation of song and dance. While *The Faithful Shepherdess* does include music, one song is sung “by the lascivious Cloe that brings suitors running to her side” and the other as a “hymn to Pan” (Henze 385). In fact, Catherine Henze observes that “Fletcher...often uses music to portray loose women” (386). However, Lewalski describes “the paragone of Chastity and Love” performed by Silvesta and Musella in *Love’s Victory* as one of the “love songs” which was likely sung or set to music (101-103). In fact, this staging was used in Stephanie Hodgson-Wright’s 1999 production of the play in association with the Poetic Justice Theatre Company, with Silvesta and Musella taking turns playing an instrumental accompaniment to the other’s singing (Hodgeson-Wright). The inclusion of music in *Love’s Victory* likely stems from Wroth’s own experience as a masque performer (Towers 436); however, the participation of women in this kind of performance was not without contention. McManus writes that, “Puritan criticism, and some contemporary drama such as *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, depicted the court’s masques as threatening female chastity, calling them ‘so pernicious, that divers honourable women have been ravished [...] by their means’” (53). While Fletcher’s tragicomedy seems to express similar misgivings about the inclusion of the female body in song and dance, Wroth does not limit her virgin character’s performance of music. Unlike Clorin, Silvesta is allowed to find pleasure in embodied artistic mediums, despite having rejected the pleasure of heteronormative desire.

THE UNRESOLVED PETRARCHAN LOVER

While she denies her own production of heteronormative desire, Silvesta finds herself the love object of a Petrarchan suitor (McLaren 282). Her admirer, the Forester, notably differs from Thenot: his love for Silvesta apparently predates her vow of virginity. However, like Thenot, the Forester is aware of his love's futility. After berating Philisses for causing Silvesta to join Diana's band of nymphs, Forester explains that he would have been happier if another man had "obtain'd the chiefe of beauties' store./For then I might have her sometimes/beheld," (1.2.258-59), since "my thoughts did assend/Noe higher then to looke. That was my end" (1.2.263-64). The Forester's approach to love is held in contrast to Lissius's, who claims "if ever I showld chance to love,/The fruitfull ends of love I first wovld move" (1.2.273-4). Forester responds, "I wish you may obtain your hart's desire./And I butt sight who waste in chastest fire" (1.2.275-76).

The Petrarchan dynamic between Silvesta and the Forester is clearly more directly based in Ovidian mythology than the dynamic between Clorin and Thenot is. MacDonald's analysis of the Ovidian context for the motif of sight present in the Forester's pursuit asserts that "The place where *Love's Victory* begins its attempt to face down Ovidian pastoral is its preoccupation with looking and being seen" (449). MacDonald details Ovid's Actaeon-Diana myth, in which Diana is viewed bathing by Actaeon, and as a punishment, he is turned into a stag and pursued by his own dogs; in MacDonald's words, Diana "projects onto Actaeon her own experience of victimization" (450). While MacDonald notes the myth's potentially empowering subtext of sexual victimization turned against the oppressor, Nancy Vickers reads this myth as the source of Petrarch's figurative dismemberment of Laura's body, explaining that "the fateful first perception of Laura – an image obsessively remembered, reworked, and repeated – assumes a mythical analogue and mythical proportion" (271). Engaging with the centrality of sight within

Ovid's myth and Petrarch's lyrics, the Forester begs Silvesta, "Doe nott, O, doe nott mee of sight bereave./For without you I see nott" (2.2.31-2), arguing that granting him such vision is natural: "give mee butt this leave/To doe as birds, and trees, and beasts may doe;/...Bee nott to nature, and your self unleeke" (2.2.29-40). However, Silvesta responds that, "Protest you may that ther shall nothing bee/By you imagin'd 'gainst my chastite./Butt this I doubt" (2.2.45-6). Silvesta's fears have additional basis in the Christian context of Matthew 5.2: "Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart." Her concern, then, is with maintaining control over her own person and image.

MacDonald sees Silvesta's fear as a product of the sexual threat attached to the play's Ovidian discourse, arguing that the Forester, "may not fully grasp the conviction of danger that leads Silvesta to withhold herself even from his sight" (454). To MacDonald, in the end, Silvesta's dedication of chaste love to the Forester maintains involvement within a heterosexual network of desire, and she cautions against reading the play as "a triumphalist feminist fable of women's romantic empowerment" (455). I would like to suggest, however, that the conclusion to Silvesta and Forester's relationship is perhaps more complex, and not quite as easily fitted into a heterosexual mold.

Silvesta offers an alternative to her own futile desire for Philisses by framing virginity as a valid and beneficial life choice; in her opening speech, Silvesta wishes that Philisses, who is in a state of tortured love for Musella, "were as free as I" (1.1.153), and presents another case for chastity's supremacy over love at the beginning of the third act, imploring Musella to "behold my gaine" (3.1.31). However, the case made by Silvesta for a peaceful, and even commendable, choice of virginity is never presented as a viable option for the men in the play, and Naomi Miller notes that "it is significant that [Silvesta's] assured choice of a life of chastity is associated

specifically with her femininity, while the Forester's unfulfilled longing for a union with Silvesta restricts his masculine agency to his offer to die in her place," demonstrating "the gap between masculine and feminine experience" (168).

S.P. Cerasano and Marion Wynne-Davies have interpreted each couple in *Love's Victory* as the representation of a love type, with Silvesta and the Forester coupled in ideal Neoplatonic chastity (94). By offering to die in Silvesta's place, the Forester, as most critics agree, proves that his love is truly spiritual, as opposed to physical, and is therefore rightfully rewarded by Silvesta (Yang 135). Given this interpretation, it is curious to consider the Forester's final lines, which express a mixture of sorrow and pleasure. Silvesta offers "For you kind Forester, my chaste love take./And know I grieve now only for your sake" (7.1.519-20), and critical responses to the play appear overeager to interpret this line as an indication of the pair's platonic coupling, which may or may not ultimately lead to a less chaste union: Lewalski writes that Silvesta and the Forester's "names predict their final union" (95), and Jane Kingsley-Smith suggests that, in the end, "Silvesta might embody 'chaste love' through marriage as through virginity" (130-1). Yet, after Silvesta's exit, the Forester announces, "My joys encrease, she grieves now for my paine./Ah, hapy proffer'd lyfe which this can gaine./Now shall I goe contented to my grave./Though noe more hapines I ever have" (7.1.521-24). This response does not exhibit a vision of freedom and bliss equal to Silvesta's description of her chaste lifestyle, and the Forester's phrasing, referencing Silvesta's pity as the event that will send him "contented to [his] grave" (7.1.103) suggests a singular chaste contact between the two, rather than an ongoing union.

Unlike Clorin, Silvesta is unladen by the responsibility of bringing the Forester's Petrarchan stasis to an end. While the Forester's offer to die in her place effectively brings some closure to his circular desire, this sacrifice does not come to be, and significantly, Silvesta's

virginity is not ultimately figured as a 'payment' for his actions. The "closure" to the pair's narrative detaches Silvesta's ending from her courtier's; although Carolyn Ruth Swift claims that through Forester, Wroth "establishes the possibility that a man may recognize a woman as having an independent existence and goals" (179), the Forester's final lines undercut such a neat interpretation. While the Forester is content that Silvesta "grieves now for [his] paine" (7.1.521), the presence of such a persistent pain points to his insatiable desire to behold, or hold, Silvesta. While it may seem that Silvesta's "chast love" (7.1.519) partially resolves the Forester's Petrarchan dilemma, his prediction that "noe more hapines I ever have" (7.1.524) indicates that he is unwilling to let go of his image of Silvesta as the idealized beloved, and choose instead a better-matched love interest who can reciprocate. Many critics highlight Wroth's valorization of female agency, pointing to Silvesta's refusal to be firmly coupled by the end of the play, despite hints at a union between her and Forester. Danielle Clarke argues that, through having the "Forester doomed to faithful but unrequited love," Wroth "demonstrates the non-viability of liaisons not based on mutual consent" (Clarke 110). I would like to underline that the split between the two characters' narrative endings, with Silvesta exiting before the Forester, detaches her from the responsibility of solving the Forester's melancholy. Wroth neither champions the Forester's Petrarchan torment, nor alleviates it, and McLaren aptly summarizes the close of the play by noting that love "remains shadowed" (292).

Forester's contentment with Silvesta's immaterial commitment to "grieve now only for [his] sake" (2.2.98-99) additionally detaches Silvesta's material person from her presence in the Forester's imagination. Danielle Clarke observes that, "Rather than having her female characters attempt the problematic task of finding a subject position within Petrarchism, Wroth seems to allot this particular discourse to men" (Clarke 109). I would like to add that these options,

paradoxically, are allowed simultaneous expression by virtue of performance's element of embodiment: Silvesta's exit suggests to the audience that she continues to live a coherent, intact life apart from the Forester while simultaneously remaining the subject of his poetic fantasies, perhaps becoming herself "an image obsessively remembered, reworked, and repeated" (Vickers 271). Unlike the textual violence that both MacDonald and Vickers attribute to Petrarch's Actaeon, whose "response to the threat of imminent dismemberment is the neutralization, through descriptive dismemberment, of the threat" (Vickers 273), and who controls through poetic reproduction "the fears inspired in male spectators by a female object that has constituted itself outside the purview of men's glances to name it and fix it in social and sexual place" (MacDonald 451), Wroth's final distinction between the idealized Silvesta of the Forester's imagination, poetics, and memory, and the living Silvesta of Diana's band suggests that the two can exist simultaneously without the Forester's version taking precedent. McLaren identifies a tension in *Love's Victory* "between the image of woman in popular mythology...and her everyday subordination imposed in the name of love" (280); Silvesta ultimately subverts both of these categories, by retreating from the audience's view before the close of the play, and finding agency in privacy.⁸

⁸ In the Huntington manuscript, Silvesta's relationship to the Forester receives even less closure than their pairing in final act of the *Penshurst*. While it provides no clear conclusion to the Forester's love, the Huntington version of the play emphasizes Silvesta's role in ensuring the union between Musella and Philisses, as this is her final scene. In this same scene, Silvesta responds to Musella's complaint that Philisses will not articulate his love for her, asking, "What, will hee loose what he did most desire?" (3.1.43). Kingsley-Smith observes that, in this scene, the "assumption that 'chaste' and 'desire' might work together...shapes Silvesta's subsequent role in *Love's Victory* (131). Silvesta plays an integral part in solving the Petrarchan stasis of the two lovers; in this way, Silvesta's final role in the Huntington manuscript is not as the Petrarchan beloved at all, but, as in the *Penshurst*, an instrument of Venus who leads the lovers to their eventual "victory" – although the nature of this victory, as we will see, differs drastically between manuscripts.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE VIRGIN'S DIVINE BODY

ASSIGNING MEANING TO THE VIRGIN BODY

In the previous chapter, I reflected on how Clorin and Silvesta are positioned within the gender dynamics of a patriarchal Protestant culture. This section demonstrated that Fletcher and Wroth, following contemporary rhetorical conventions (Gillen 1), use economic metaphors and Petrarchan poetics, two discourses concerned with individual and social value, to represent chastity. Accounting for virginity in economic terms is one way that the virgin body disturbs categories of embodiment and disembodiment; as Gillen explains, “Chastity’s commodity status, combined with the Protestant emphasis on chastity as an interior virtue, renders its essence inscrutable” (12). In other words, it is difficult to locate chastity’s value as a literal entity. The next part of my project will explore this disjuncture between ‘essence’ and sign, in order to consider how meaning is assigned to the virgin body within religious and political discourses.

The problem of assigning meaning to the virgin body in *Love’s Victory* and *The Faithful Shepherdess* becomes especially pertinent when considered in terms of the virgin figure’s divine associations. Silvesta and Clorin are central to their respective play’s use of the supernatural to drive narrative and provide resolution. While Clorin’s abilities extend from her virginity, “evoking the sacred virgins (saints, martyrs, holy women) of medieval Catholicism” (Dunn-Hensley 179), and serving to purify the other characters in the play, Silvesta’s self-sacrifice in the Penshurst manuscript presents her as a virgin martyr in conversation with hagiographical texts such as John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* (1563). Each playwright’s use, or destabilization, of the virgin body as a vehicle for divine power is directly invested in locating the source of virginity’s importance as a religious and political tool.

SILVESTA AS VIRGIN MARTYR

In the Penshurst manuscript of *Love's Victory*, Silvesta's martyrdom plot begins when she learns that Musella and Philisses intend to take their own lives together in the Temple of Love, in order to avoid being separated by Musella's arranged marriage to Rustic. In response, Silvesta brings the lovers a vial of poison, which she describes as "fitter meanes to wed you to your grave" (5.1.244), preventing the couple from using a dagger instead. After the lovers drink the potion, Simeana and Silvesta lay the corpses out on "love's alter" (5.1.260), and Silvesta is sentenced to death at the stake for facilitating the death by poison. However, the Forester has a dream vision of Silvesta being burned as a martyr and intervenes, offering his life in exchange for hers, a trade which Venus accepts. The priests then ask Rustic to "disclaime the right/In lyfe was tyed to you, now to her sprit" (5.1.477-8) and relinquish his claim to Musella, and Rustic acquiesces, responding that "to [Musella] all claime I doe refuse" (4.7.482). At this point, the priests proclaim "the Triumph of love's victory" (5.1.486), and the lovers are revived. Venus explains to all that "Sillvesta was my instrument ordain'd" (5.1.491-2), and Silvesta reveals that it was Venus who "sent the drink hath weded [the lovers] to joye" (5.1.515-6).

Critical focus on Silvesta's choice to assist Musella and Philisses with their death pact tends to champion Silvesta's performance of a selfless act of friendship,⁹ or else to emphasize her ingenuity and resourcefulness, describing her as a more successful Friar Lawrence character (Lewalski 302; Roberts 312; Kusunoki 80; Swift 177). However, there has been less

⁹ Critics such as Naomi Miller, Barbara K. Lewalski, Gary Waller, Heidi Towers, and Miranda Dawn Munson have covered extensively Wroth's illustration of homosocial friendships between women, and the implications of Silvesta's service to Musella. For example, Naomi Miller writes, "Wroth's works re-present the potential resilience of female discourse in a world where fluctuations in romantic fortune may be determined by male lovers, but possibilities for subjectivity are forged in the bonds between women" (5), and Heidi Towers describes Wroth's pastoral world as an "egalitarian community where the bonds of friendship endure within and across gender boundaries" (436). While the friendship between Silvesta and Musella will not be focus of my analysis, it should be acknowledged as an important aspect of the martyr sequence.

consideration of how the historical and political context of her martyrdom assigns meaning to her virginity. Clarke does provide a valuable assessment of Silvesta as a “martyr figure,” writing that Silvesta is “willing to sacrifice herself, and her life, in the service of Diana and chaste love, as the Forester’s dream vision of her indicates” (117). Clarke reads Silvesta’s actions through the intertext of Petrarch’s *I Trionfi*, moving through the stages of “Chastity over Love”; “Death over Chastity”; and finally “Fame over Death” (117). However, Clarke’s reading does not account for the confluence between virginity and martyrdom in the cultural imagination from which Wroth is drawing, and which, I will argue, she is rewriting.

THE VIRGIN MARTYR IN CONTEXT

John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, published as four separate editions during the sixteenth century (1563, 1570, 1576, 1583), was widely popular among both general readers and religious radicals (Marshall 87). *Acts and Monuments* endeavors to rework a Catholic paradigm of sainthood into a Protestant paradigm of martyrdom, including virgin martyrs shaped by “a model female piety predicted on a distinctly Protestant sensibility” (Werth 62). Foxe’s work is perhaps best-known for its violent descriptions of physical torture and debasement (Marshall 87); this is an intimate engagement with the body that is not unrelated to gender (Truman 36; Monta 199). James C. W. Truman argues that Foxe’s virgin martyr provides a symbol for the maintenance of spiritual integrity even while the body is violated, writing, “The intersection of sexuality and suffering upon the female body was vital to the development of the activist, self-justifying, and self-contained individual who would become the dominant model of Protestant subjectivity” (36). Using the example of Anne Askew, a Protestant martyr whose autobiographical account of torture was edited first by the martyrologist John Bale and later revised by John Foxe, Truman suggests that Foxe’s martyrology figures martyrdom as a rape narrative, in which “the final

application of physical violence spells an ironic victory for the victim, who defies the physical threat of the violator with her eloquent resistance” (42).¹⁰

Foxe’s text exerts a clear influence on Dekker and Massinger’s *The Virgin Martyr*, performed on London’s public stage in 1620, around the same year that *Love’s Victory* is estimated to have been performed for a coterie audience (Monta 194). Susannah Brietz Monta’s analysis of Dekker and Massinger’s play illustrates the central role of the virgin martyr’s female gender within the play’s incitement to religious action, writing that by subjecting the titular virgin martyr to torture, the drama highlights “the spiritual strength contained within the weak vessel of the female body” (211). The virgin’s body is also an appropriate site for inducing piety because it allows for a physical representation of inner purity. Like Truman, Monta reminds us that in *Acts & Monuments*, Foxe “praises the physical purity of early church martyrs as coextensive with the purity of their consciences” (197) and in effect “conflat[es] physical chastity with integrity” (204): Protestant martyrologists like Foxe “were willing to celebrate the virginity of early church martyrs provided that their spiritual integrity wins just as much praise” (206). Monta argues that, therefore, in a play like *The Virgin Martyr*, the threat of “ravishment” is synonymous with religious conversion, as the virgin martyr’s capacity to remain self-contained and unopened is coterminous with remaining secure in her faith (209).

In her discussion of another author influenced by Foxe, Tiffany Werth writes that virgin martyr (or virgin saint) narratives “offe[r]...a charged template for literary and gendered recuperation” to writers such as Philip Sidney (61). Featuring two virgin martyr figures, Sidney’s *Arcadia* is particularly relevant to *Love’s Victory*, given Wroth’s investment in her uncle’s work,

¹⁰ Truman also suggests that accounts of male martyr deaths, while more common than those of women, nevertheless had to contend with the martyr as a feminized position, in a process that Truman describes as “a complex shift which creates martyrdom as an overdetermined site for the contradictory impulses of horror, pleasure, and devotion that circulate around male homoeroticism in early modern culture” (44).

which is commonly listed as an intertext for her writing (McLaren 285). Werth's interest in the incorporation of saint-inspired martyrs into post-Reformation literature outlines the tension between the supernaturalism of romance plots, and post-Reformation Protestant writers' emphasis on "a less supernatural wonder grounded in a very human constancy" (61). She writes that "Sidney undoubtedly knew his Foxe, and the trial structure of the captivity episode unfolds along parallel lines [to Foxe's account of virgin saints]" (75), going on to describe Cecropia's torment of Philoclea, in hopes that she will break Philoclea's "resolution to remain true to her beloved" (75). Like Pamela and Philoclea, in *Love's Victory* Silvesta displays admirable constancy (although not to a lover) both through her virginity and through her dedication to friendship. While she serves both Diana and Venus, her virtue is technically rooted in human, rather than supernatural, achievement. However, unlike Pamela and Philoclea, Silvesta's refusal to relinquish her chastity is not the source of her punishment; rather, her sacrifice upholds the true love of her friends.

Using Silvesta, Wroth challenges virgin martyr narratives, such as those identified by Truman, Monta, and Werth, in which the virgin martyr becomes valuable only through a poetics of physical violation. Rather than sacrificing her virginity, either literally or metaphorically, as the basis for her martyrdom, Silvesta acts from a virgin ethos of prioritizing spiritual concerns over material ones, and is martyred as a result. Therefore, Silvesta's virginal body is not the most important aspect of her self-sacrifice.

SILVESTA AS RELIGIOUS INSTRUMENT

In order to demonstrate how Silvesta's martyrdom challenges contemporary martyr narratives, we must first account for Silvesta's actions as an agent of Venus in the Penshurst

manuscript. There is little unanimity in the critical interpretation of Silvesta's actions. Some critics recount with confidence Silvesta's "skill in potions" which "produces a happy resolution" by putting the lovers to sleep (Lewalski 302), while others remind us that the nature of the potion is less certain: MacDonald summarizes that, "Silvesta ultimately gives what she believes is poison to Philisses and his chosen love Musella" (453) and Marion Wynne-Davies observes that, "even though Silvesta points out that Venus 'sent the drink' and the goddess acknowledges that the shepherdess was her 'instrument,' there is no suggestion that the poison was a sleeping draught or that the death was faked" ("Liminal Woman," 68). Wynne-Davies' interpretation of the play hinges on Wroth's "rework[ing]...of the liminal woman through the representation of female characters who must appear to be simultaneously living and deceased" (66), claiming that at the end of *Love's Victory* Musella occupies a liminal state of life and death, dramatizing the threat she bears to patriarchal order (80). I would like to build on Wynne-Davies' suggestion that the potion Silvesta supplies to the lovers does, in fact, kill them, and suggest that we should take seriously Silvesta's initial explanation for her actions: "A drink I gave them made theyr soules to meete,/Which in theyr clayie cages could nott" (5.1.354-5).

Perhaps there is a critical desire to map Silvesta's actions as courageous and clever in a way that appeases a modern sensibility: through this interpretation, Silvesta administers Venus's potion aware that her friends will live safely, but that her actions may be misinterpreted. However, when Venus says that, "Silvesta was my instrument ordained/*To kill, and save her friends*, by which sh'hath gained/Immortal fame, and bands of firmest love/In their kind breasts where true affections move" (5.1.75, emphasis mine), she casts Silvesta's actions as a demonstration of faith and sacrifice. Venus does not describe Silvesta's actions as a trick, but indicates that Silvesta really did facilitate deaths; this description suggests that Silvesta

knowingly and purposefully administered the potion to kill her two friends. If we consider Silvesta's actions on behalf of Venus in this light, the role of faith in the story is emphasized: faith in the capacity for the spirit to triumph over the body, an element of the play that Wynne-Davies attributes to the Sidneys' "literary evocations of Christianised neoplatonic erotics, in particular [Robert Sidney's] sonnet sequences" ("Liminal Woman", 69); faith in Venus as an authority, even when her advice appears destructive; and faith in women's power "to determine their own destinies" (Roberts 315). Claire Dawkins writes that, "Silvesta's service to Musella is figured as a kind of religious act that she performs as Venus's agent" (145), going on to specify that "Her religious service is not a form of slavery, for she emphasizes her own will as she rushes to Musella's aid" (146). Dawkins notes that Silvesta's attitude towards religious service changes over the course of the play, as Silvesta moves away from viewing "service as a loss of will" (138). I agree with Dawkins' assessment of Silvesta's relationship to Venus: agency and divine guidance are ultimately not mutually exclusive. The religious act in *Love's Victory's* final sequence, and the specific selection of Silvesta to complete it, indicates that her virgin oath has prepared her for transgressive religious action; not as the result of bodily purity, but because her devotion to Diana similarly requires faith and bravery. This interpretation is consistent with Erin E. Kelly's reading of the use of martyrdom discourses in *The Tragedy of Mariam*, where she argues that, "Through her problematic title character, Cary critiques early modern attempts to obscure the rebellious qualities of religious martyrs" (35). Silvesta's decision to remove herself from the marriage market, as critics have observed, is an act of rebellion, integrity, and strength, which informs her later actions on behalf of Venus.

CHASTE LOVE AND DISEMBODIMENT

I do not want to suggest that Wroth deviates fully from contemporary understandings of virginity by situating Silvesta's service in the spiritual rather than the corporeal realm. Berry writes that, "The hypothesis that a chaste woman could serve as a bridge between the material world and an invisible spiritual dimension enabled Petrarchan poet and Neoplatonic philosopher to elaborate a new concept of masculine wholeness and self-sufficiency through or across her idealized figure" (2). In *Love's Victory*, Silvesta serves as such a bridge; however, her action primarily supports female self-realization, as opposed to male. Silvesta's actions free Musella from patriarchy's control over her material body (Miller 214; Kusunoki 80). Significantly, Silvesta halts the spilling of the lovers' blood and the breaking of their flesh: she shares a symbolic closure of the body with her friends, underscoring how the logic of her virgin oath to Diana is not so different from the true love encouraged by Venus; Silvesta "clearly works as an ally to love" (Dawkins 145). Perhaps this is what Clarke intimates when she refers to the "double-meaning" of "Silvesta's substitution of death by knife for death by sleeping draught" (117). Rather than allow the lovers to 'consummate' their 'marriage' with a dagger,¹¹ resulting in the sexually suggestive presence of blood drawn by a phallic instrument, Silvesta offers poison as alternative means to achieve spiritual union. This substitution, eliminating the act of consummation associated with death by dagger, symbolically supports Wynne-Davies' interpretation that the death sequence demonstrates, "spiritual love must triumph over bodily passion before it can be blessed with survival" ("Liminal Woman," 68). Although Musella does not choose to become an acolyte of Diana, her resistance to marrying Rustic enacts a control

¹¹ Danielle Clarke characterizes Musella and Philisses' deaths as an analogue for marriage, writing, "Marriage is repeatedly equated with death, Musella's wedding to Rustic entailing the death of love, and the loss of self. By contrast, Philisses and Musella's death-pact is presented as an indissoluble solution...Death substitutes for marriage, which it closely resembles" (116).

over her own body that is similar to Silvesta's vow of virginity; as Alison Findlay points out, for the lovers "suicide is an affirmation of agency, of individual power over adverse circumstances, over loss" ("Four Weddings" 90). Silvesta's plan to "rescue" (5.1.177) Musella from being "made to ty/Her faith to one she hates" (5.1.174-5) is designed to assure that the couple's hands are not "spotted with [their] blood" (5.1.246) but instead allow "theyr soules to meete,/Which in theyr clayie cages could nott" (5.1.354-5), replacing the incontinence of bloodshed with the chaste symbolism of death by poison. If chastity "often seemed to connote, not the negation of woman's bodily difference, or her own sexual desires, but rather the survival of a quality of feminine autonomy and self-sufficiency which could not be appropriated in the self-serving interests of the masculine subject" (Berry 18), Musella's love-driven death pact similarly releases her body from the demands of a patriarchal marriage market. By delivering the potion, Silvesta enables a symbolic recognition that Musella and Philisses' "mutual love" (Miller 54) is not predicated on sexual consummation, but on spiritual kinship. In a culture where, "men determine when girls are ripe for penetration and who can or should have the authority to do the penetrating" (Jankowski 5), and where penetration, then, "merges as a central signifier for appropriation" (Scholz 159), the prioritization of spiritual as opposed to sexual union is also an assertion of female agency. While Musella and Philisses later enter into a marriage contract, the death sequence accentuates the faith that all three characters hold for the power of love as a spiritual union.

THE VIRGIN MARTYR'S IMMORTALITY

In her emphasis on Silvesta's "Immortall fame" (5.1.493), Wroth draws on Protestant martyr discourses to establish Silvesta as an important religious and political actor. Clarke notes that the

martyrdom sequence in *Love's Victory* “uses the idea of female martyrdom and fame” (107), citing “the triumph of Fame over Death,” which is outlined in Petrarch’s *I Trionfi* (117). For Protestant martyrologists, establishing fame through textuality was a means to assert public memory of the martyrs’ actions, and to “inspire[e] imitation beyond [the text] itself” (Truman 56). Jennifer Summit describes the Protestant martyrologist John Bale’s turn to “textual culture,” writing that Bale “insists that his text offers ‘commemoration’ instead of relics” (154), meaning of the martyr’s death is established not through their remains but through their (textual) memory. Wroth aligns Silvesta with this culture of commemoration: Silvesta expects her name to “win eternity” (5.1.441) because “noe true hart will lett my meritt dy” (5.1.442). If “the topos of martyrdom presupposes a higher realm of spiritual authenticity... [and] displaces the dominant figures of this world by trumping their authority” (Marshall 91), then in *Love's Victory*, Silvesta’s actions displace Patriarchal authority. Furthermore, Venus continues to refer to Silvesta’s historical reputation after she has been acquitted from her death, explaining that Silvesta’s actions have gained her “Immortall fame, and bands of firmest love/In theyr kind breasts, where true affections move” (5.1.493-4). By asserting that Silvesta’s actions are worthy of commemoration regardless of her physical sacrifice, Wroth marks a new space for female influence, and as Akiko Kusunoki observes, encourages “female engagement with political issues” (81). Although Truman identifies suffering as a central aspect of Foxe’s text and later martyr narratives, writing that “It is this personal suffering that defines the acts of good men and gives authority to the Protestant martyr” (38),¹² Silvesta’s martyr sequence does not rely on suffering violation or humiliation at the hands of her tormentors. Rather than using an erotics of suffering to frame Silvesta’s role in Venus’s plan, Wroth ultimately redirects attention away

¹² While Truman refers to men here, it is important to remember that he also asserts that the suffering martyr paradigm was based on female virgin martyrs (36).

from Silvesta's virgin body and towards the commemoration of her action. Therefore, while Wynne-Davies argues that Silvesta is sentenced to be burned "martyr-like" ("Liminal Woman", 79) because she "challenges conventional female roles, and as such, must be...contained" (79), I would like to suggest that Silvesta's martyrdom should not be read as a punishment, but as an honour bestowed by a matriarchal deity.¹³

Venus's emphasis on Silvesta's bravery contrasts with the Forester's dream vision of Silvesta's death, which frames Silvesta's body as a "sacred ofring" (5.1.416). The Forester invokes conventional Petrarchan poetics in his description of Silvesta's death by dissecting her body with his praise; pointing to the whiteness of her skin; and contrasting her body with the heat of the fire: "My thought I sawe Silvesta's faire hands ty'de/Fast to a stake wher fire burnt in all pride,/To kis with heat those most unmatched limms" (5.1.411-3). Forester's dream-image maintains Silvesta's role as the beloved, with the fire that 'kisses' her body figured as her only successful suitor. This infuses the dream with the "martyrdom-as-rape" metaphor that Truman identifies as a trope in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (24), suggesting that Silvesta's heroism consists merely of sexual/spiritual resistance and constancy. The Forester's dream-image of Silvesta locates her value in her uncontaminated body, imagining that, "virtu with her shape like habitts trims/Her self with her" (5.1.414-5). Such a stylized portrayal of Silvesta underscores a discrepancy between a male and female valuation of the Protestant virgin martyr, and by the end of the play Silvesta's role is solidified as a central religious/political actor, rather than the static symbol of purity that the Forester imagines her to be. As Paul Salzman observes, "Silvesta's integrity implies that the romance plot is not the only plot for a female narrative" ("As You Like It" 133).

¹³ Naomi Miller notes that "'love's victory' [is] conceived in terms of the sovereign matriarchal powers of Venus and, at long last, of Musella's mother as well" (130).

In fact, Silvesta's bravery is directly contrasted with the Forester's own self-sacrifice.¹⁴ While the Forester does act courageously to save Silvesta's life, and therefore "Silvesta learns the Forester is a true Platonic courtly suitor worthy of her chaste love" (Yang 135), the Forester's courage does not extend beyond his love for Silvesta, and is therefore essentially private in nature. In comparison, Silvesta's actions set a new precedent by nullifying patriarchal control over Musella's body, enacting influence in the public realm.¹⁵ Kusunoki also centers the political significance of Silvesta's actions, reading her as an analogue for Lucy Harrington, Countess of Bedford, who not only assisted Wroth's tryst with her lover, but was a strong supporter of the Protestant cause and active in the Bohemia affair (81). Silvesta's association with a political and religious figure makes Wroth's subversion of the Protestant martyr narrative even more compelling.

THE HUNTINGTON MANUSCRIPT

Given the significance that Werth attributes to the ending of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, which denies Sidney's chaste female martyrs "miraculous protection" in a purposeful rejection of romance's typical deus ex machina resolution (78), it's curious to consider the implications of the Huntington Manuscript, which ends just as the lovers prepare to take their own lives. According to Werth, Sidney's text, left without closure, "suggests a miracle might be needed to solve its tensions," and therefore demonstrates "a creeping anxiety about the success and promise of [the] 'Reformation'" (95). Denying Musella and Philisses the protection of either

¹⁴ Similarly, Werth claims that Sidney's revised 1590 *Arcadia's* "saintly narrative motifs raise the romance heroine in stature above their masculine counterparts in a manner markedly different from the *Old Arcadia* or other contemporary romances" (80).

¹⁵ Alison Findlay makes a similar observation about Iphigenia's martyrdom in Lady Lumley's *Iphigenia at Aulis*, writing, "By actively embracing her death for the cause of the *polis* Iphigenia becomes a citizen of the state, challenging the exclusive masculinity of the public arena" ("Reproducing *Iphigenia*" 142).

Silvesta or Venus, does the Huntington similarly present an anxious perspective on love as a destructive force?

Straznicky presents a compelling suggestion about the ending of the Huntington manuscript, writing that “the play might have arrived at a state of resolution not within the dramatic narrative, as it does not, but in a masque-like dance of actors and spectators” (90). Straznicky bases her interpretation on a speech delivered by Cupid, which appears to invite the audience to do “[their] part in subduing Cupid’s power and ending the shepherds’ torments” (89). Although this speech, Straznicky writes, may not be inserted at the conclusion of the Huntington, “Wroth’s scribal practice of moving sections of text around...leaves open the possibility that it could have been inserted at a later point in the play” (90). What is interesting about such an ending, given my interpretation of Silvesta’s contribution to the death pact in the Peshurst manuscript, is that a masque sequence similarly asks the audience to dwell in the possibility of the lovers’ deaths enacting a kind of ‘victory,’ even without resurrection. By inviting the audience into a dance with the characters, the Huntington ending not only suggests a form of ‘afterlife’ for Musella and Philisses, allowing their bond to extend beyond the narrative of the play even without rescue, but challenges the audience to view the lover’s pact as the Peshurst’s Silvesta does, displaying belief in death as a spiritual communion. While Wroth surely did not intend for this kind of resolution to represent a ‘happy’ ending, it may be viewed as one where love is indeed victorious, if the antagonist to the lovers is viewed strictly as the patriarchal prioritization of dynastic interest at the expense of female freedom.¹⁶ In this formulation, like Foxe’s division of the martyr’s body into “destructible flesh and transcendent body-and-soul” which translates into “the insistence that they [the martyrs] are not ‘really’ destroyed but transferred to another

¹⁶ As Kusunoki observes, this theme is another similarity between Wroth’s play and *Romeo and Juliet* (74).

dimension” (Marshall 102), a conclusion of *Love’s Victory* that suggests the lovers do take their own lives might possess a triumphant, although melancholic, meaning.

CLORIN’S GIFT OF HEALING

Just as Silvesta contributes to the resolution of *Love’s Victory*, Clorin’s supernatural abilities, which are “attributed to a mystical power springing naturally from the female virginal body” (Loughlin 53), play a central role in resolving the conflicts experienced by the shepherds and shepherdesses in *The Faithful Shepherdess*. Bodies take on a critical importance in this play, as the “literary metaphor of ‘love’s wounds’ [is] literalized” (Squier 29) and the “body is presented as saturated with the spiritual qualities of virginity” (Loughlin 61). Loughlin addresses how *The Faithful Shepherdess* complicates the boundary between virginity’s physical and symbolic signifiers, arguing that the virgin body’s “increasingly problematic status leads to displacement of the hymen by those secondary, external, and supposedly more certain signs of sexual purity” such as Clorin’s supernatural abilities (56). I agree with Loughlin’s assessment that the displacement of Clorin’s virginity onto exterior signs arises from the inherent instability of virginity as a quantifiable state; however, Clorin’s role as virgin healer relates to the play’s interest in desire and sexuality in more pernicious ways.

James Yoch and Curtis Perry have suggested that Clorin operates as a figure for Elizabeth I through her healing and civilizing abilities (Perry 61; Yoch 130). Perry writes that “In Clorin’s formulation, virginity is given an essentially governmental power: it can ‘bind fast’ the ‘uncivill,’ restore order to torrential, civilize” (61). Clorin explains at the opening of the play:

Of all greene wounds I know the remedies,
In men or cattell, be they stung with snakes,

Or charmd with powerfull words of wicked art,
Or be they love-sicke, or through too much heat
Growne wild or lunaticke, their eies or eares
Thickned with misty filme of dulling rume
These I can cure, such secret vertue lies
In hearbs applied by a virgins hand (1.1.33-40)

Clorin's specific supernatural actions performed later in the play purify body and spirit, "serv[ing] as a regenerative force, healing the physical and spiritual wounds of less virtuous characters" (Britland 138). Phrased differently, Clorin administers innocence, by removing marks of violence and signs of lust from the shepherds and shepherdesses who seek out her care. By extending to Clorin the ability to purify other bodies, Fletcher centers physical virginity in relation to her religious and political power.

However, despite her supernatural abilities, Fletcher takes care to emphasize that Clorin is a human, rather than a divine being (Kirk 175). When Clorin realizes her capacity to "draw submission/From this rude man and beast [the satyr]" (1.1.104-5) she says: "Sure I am mortal./The daughter of a shepherd; he was mortal./And she that bore me mortal: prick my hand./And it will bleed; a fever shakes me, and/The self-same wind that makes the young lambs shrink/Makes me a-cold, my feare says I am mortall" (1.1.105-10). Fletcher's interest in emphasizing Clorin's humanity is reminiscent of the Protestant effort to "de-transcendentalize" the Virgin Mary; Summit argues that "by presenting [Mary's] life as that of an ordinary, pious woman...Luther articulates a model of female 'experience' to counteract the practices and beliefs associated with female prayer of revelation" (125). Clorin's humanity not only undercuts her authority in relation to the God Pan (Yang 156), but establishes virginity as a state available

to other human women. This is an effect that Yang recognizes in the mortal ‘pastoral guide,’ noting that characters such as Clorin may have provided an easier source of identification for female audience-goers than female deities would have (102), just as the Virgin Mary’s mortality in the eyes of Protestants, “can inspire us to strive to emulate her sacredness” (171).

Throughout the play, Clorin is affiliated with the natural world, as “her virtue allows her a more than mortal participation in natural processes” (Bliss 301). Because of her own physical purity, Clorin appears to operate in harmony with the natural world, which is sensitive to the presence of unchaste bodies and minds, requiring the Satyr to perform tasks at Clorin’s request such as “Purg[ing] the Ayre from lustfull breath” so that she can perform her healing (4.2.61); Yoch observes that “Fletcher present[s] the countryside as having a moral character, supported by a net of words including ‘purged,’ ‘holy,’ and ‘virtuous’” (130). Clorin’s association with nature is another way that she evokes Elizabeth I, who signified “the restitution of paradise” and whose body “sometimes appears to be Eden itself” (Scholz 87). While critics read Clorin’s Elizabethan characterization as a nostalgic mode, pointing to the desire to restore Golden World order within the play, and as a commentary on the court of James I (Yang 164; Finkelppearl 110; McMullan 62), I would like to explore the implications of assigning Elizabeth’s “Edenic associations” (Scholz 9) through which her virginity was positioned “above the fallen state of earthly woman” (Yang 101) to Clorin’s body. Clorin’s acts of healing specifically align the loss of virginity with the loss of Eden, exhibiting the play’s anxieties about women’s bodies as a source of widespread corruption.

Amarillis’s use of Amoret’s body to seduce Perigot in *The Faithful Shepherdess* points to a fear of female bodies out of control, “provid[ing] the vehicle for exploring the thin lines that divide ‘good’ women from their dangerous and contaminating sisters” (Dunn-Hensley 182) and

“suggest[ing] the coexistence of chaste and lustful feelings in love” (McLuskie 202). Likewise, in her discussion of the Una/Duessa sequence in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, which is commonly acknowledged as a source for Fletcher’s Amoret/Amarillis plot, Scholz suggests that Duessa’s transformation into Una’s likeness points to anxiety about “open, penetrable bodies which lack stable boundaries” (89). Additionally, Sullen Shepherd’s assertion that, “Now lust is up, alike all women be” (2.4.135) is another way that *The Faithful Shepherdess* reflects the early modern conceit that women’s bodies were a “porous, penetrable entity that must be rigidly policed to contain its potential subversiveness” (Scholz 10). The Sullen Shepherd’s statement is clearly meant to express his perversity, making his words difficult to trust. However, when combined with the layered performances of femininity audiences are privy to onstage, the Sullen Shepherd’s words have the additional effect of destabilizing any woman’s claim to purity. Earlier in the play, the Sullen Shepherd makes a similar statement that alludes to women’s interchangeability, claiming “all to me in sight/Are equall; be they faire, or blacke, or browne,/Virgin, or carelesse wanton, I can crowne/My appetitie with any” (4.2.10-13). Like Scholz’s claim that in the sixteenth century “an allegedly universalist selfhood emerged through the exclusion of materiality, corporeality, and ‘nature’, all of which were implicitly feminized” (57), the Sullen Shepherd’s words suggest that all women are alike when considered in relation to sexual intercourse, placing a particular emphasis on women’s corporeality as the basis for their identities. The play’s suggestion that female bodies possess an inherently destructive sexuality undercuts the kind of spiritual chastity enforced by a Protestant exaltation of marriage: virginity remains “a crucial material condition” within the play, as Loughlin suggests in relation to Clorin’s chastity tests (61). Furthermore, Dunn-Hensley underlines the fact that while all of the women in the play are “physically intact...Only Clorin has renounced the body completely

through a vow of perpetual virginity” and therefore “only she has real power” (181); in this way, the play enforces a distinction between Clorin’s “perpetual virginity” (Loughlin 53) and the “transitional virginity” (54) of the other characters, belying a skepticism about the capacity to control female sexuality even within the confines of marriage.

In *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* Valerie Traub writes, “the trope of psychological re-virgination, in which ‘polluted’ female characters are killed metaphorically in order to be fantastically ‘reborn’ as chaste and pure indulges in a nostalgia for a female body untainted by wayward desire” (24). In *The Faithful Shepherdess*, rather than using “Confinement, monumentalization, and death,” the three re-virgination tactics listed by Traub as most common in early modern drama (24), Fletcher has Clorin administer an actual cure to bring Amarillis’s body “again/To virgin state” (4.5.156-7). Yang is right when she notes that “Clorin’s purity is a strong bulwark protecting women from the control of depraved creatures and society from the damage of a woman out of control” (159), but I would like to expand on the particularities of how this message is deployed. In her analysis of Amarillis’s healing, Loughlin writes that Clorin’s cure, “reinforces rather than challenges the hegemony’s construction of virginity as a supremely important physical state” and demonstrates how throughout the play, “women are ‘brought’ and ‘brought again’ to those constructions that are the most socially useful, to that violence which creates the virginal body as made for both public and private dissolution” (62). To Loughlin’s analysis, I would add that this treatment of Amarillis’s body mimics the circular logic of the play as a whole, ensuring that none of the characters will go forward over the threshold of marriage, yet also refraining from directly challenging this outcome as the natural destiny for all women.

There is no marriage to close the play. In fact, critics have complained about the static quality of the plot, noting that “the situation at the end [of *The Faithful Shepherdess*] is for all purposes exactly what it was at the beginning” (W.W. Greg qtd. in Pietras 54) and that, “first [the play] dramatizes the failure of the Priest’s government, then it turns around and celebrates its reinstallation” (Perry 66). Indeed, although the plot is resolved, the play ends by accentuating the threat of future trouble. In the final scene, Clorin advises the Satyr to “watch./About these Thicks least harmlesse people catch/Mischiefe or sad mischance” (5.1.258-60), presenting a circular vision in which the fall of Elizabeth’s Eden occurs, only to be ‘brought again’ to unity; the ‘Golden World’ becomes as renewable as the ‘virgin state’ of Amarillis’s body, preventing forward motion in time. Consider, in comparison to Fletcher’s ending for Amoret and Perigot, the union of Musella and Philisses at the end of *Love’s Victory*. While in the latter play, “Mother reclaims Musella and Philisses as ‘mine’ and then releases them to the care of a love that will bless them with fertility” (Findlay, “Four Weddings,” 92), *The Faithful Shepherdess* does not champion a fertile future. Although Amoret and Perigot come together, their relationship does not appear to move forward, as is indicated in Amoret’s wording: “And let us *once more* in despite of ill./Give hands, and hearts *again*—” (5.1.115-6, emphasis mine). Perigot, for his part, vows to God that he will find “in hottest day/Coole Christall of the fountaine, to allay/My eager thirst” (5.1.118-20): in the end, “Virginitie is glorified” (McMullan 69) rather than chaste marriage.

Scholz writes that in the *Faerie Queene*, “the confrontation of each of th[e] enclosed bodies with a grotesque, leaky, or permeable one reveals this enclosure to be an artificial or utopian condition” (71). I would argue that a similar, but inverted mechanism is at work in *The Faithful Shepherdess*: the Elizabethan equivalence of Clorin’s body with an Edenic Golden World

characterized by purity emphasizes the unstable and corrupting influence of any female body that engages in sexual penetration, even within marriage. Virginity's classification as a specifically premarital condition (Jankowski 4) overlaps with being a prelapsarian condition as well, imbuing the virgin body with temporal significance. If "the way poems consist of various approaches to expressing the same ideas over and over again, shows them to be driven by a desire for their own perpetuation" (Marshall 70), Fletcher's cast of characters are similarly caught in a perpetual 'transitional' state of virginity, consistently renewed, so as to ward off the destructive power of female sexuality, which acts as a reminder of "those forces [men are] struggling to transcend and deny: mutability and decay leading to death" (Berry 4). Unlike Silvesta, Clorin's "real power" (Dunn-Hensley 181) will not be used to challenge the status quo.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Bridging political, religious, sexual and poetic discourses, the virgin body is rich with meaning. While Silvesta and Clorin each present their respective playwrights with a tool to interrogate (or reinforce) ideological norms, we have also seen how representations of the virgin body often elude simple interpretation. The performance of Fletcher's play by child actors, in conjunction with Clorin's performance of female desire, suggests a potential erotization of the virgin body on the early modern stage, and reminds us of the virgin's ability to produce a real-world affective experience. In contrast, the performance of *Love's Victory* by a cast of women suggests the possibility of a less sensationalized virgin.

Each playwright additionally employs a Petrarchan dynamic, casting the virgin in the role of lover and beloved. Though Fletcher emphasizes Clorin's body's role within a proto-capitalist, patriarchal economy, he nonetheless provides glimpses of Clorin's uniquely female subjectivity as she engages with her suitor. Wroth, on the other hand, uses the Petrarchan dynamic to challenge a male-centered definition of virginity's meaning, detaching Silvesta as beloved from the Forester's narrative control.

Finally, both playwrights invest their virgin figures with a connection to divinity; while Silvesta works alongside Venus, Clorin cures the surrounding shepherds and shepherdesses of lust and impurity. Through Silvesta's martyrdom sequence, Wroth defines new ways for the virgin to produce meaning, basing Silvesta's martyrdom on her spiritual commitment and action rather than on the threat of sexual attack. Fletcher, too, explores the virginal body's meaning: Clorin's body takes on an Edenic significance similar to that possessed by Elizabeth I. However, the play's preoccupation with female sexuality ultimately leaves the development of its female characters stagnant, limiting Clorin's potential influence.

While Wroth uses Silvesta to challenge limitations on the virgin body's potential, Fletcher ultimately reinforces a patriarchal sex/gender model. However, both plays demonstrate the virgin body's utility as a discursive tool, with undeniable significance for considerations of gender, desire and identity in these two early modern plays.

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