COURTLY LOVE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

AN ABSTRACT

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

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BY

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In Queen Elizabeth I’s court in the late fifteenth century there was a sharp 
decline in the popular use of the heavily stylized, aristocratic type of love known as fin 
amour, or courtly love. It therefore became less guarded by the elite and more accessible 
to its appropriation by socially disadvantaged groups who could capitalize upon the 
remaining respect/nostalgia that courtly love still evoked in literature. This dissertation 
examines three early modern works written by authors from socially disadvantaged 
groups that modify courtly love in specific ways that push its definition to be more 
socially inclusive, and thus push their audiences to reexamine the value of these groups. 
Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight if the Burning Pestle* examines honor and implies that 
genuine honor is encouraged by the middling sort and their distinguishing set of values; 
Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* advocates a derivation of courtly love that 
emphasizes emotion and complexity to make the position of a courtly lover possible for 
women; Richard Barnfield’s homoerotic sonnets encourage an aesthetic perspective on 
love, distancing his work from moral judgement.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..............................................................ii

INTRODUCTION.............................................................................1

Chapter

1. Francis Beaumont: Courtly Love and the Values of the Middling Sort in
   *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*............................................28

2. Mary Wroth: Ambiguity and Multiplicity in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*..................78

3. Richard Barnfield: Presenting the Homoerotic to an Academic
   Audience..................................................................................124

CONCLUSION..............................................................................174

BIBLIOGRAPHY...........................................................................189
Introduction

When the popularity of courtly love began to wane in the late 1500s through the early 1600s and other paradigms of love encroached upon its dominance with the social elite, essential elements from its philosophy, no longer guarded as the distinct purview of those with genteel blood, were appropriated by some very unorthodox authors who recreated the role of a courtly lover in ways that broadened greatly its definition. These authors from comparatively disadvantaged social positions were able to utilize some of the inherent contradictions within the doctrines of courtly love and its place as an essentially medieval philosophy in a modern society to write some ingenious literature that encourages its reader/audience to reevaluate their entire perception of love and who is most qualified to fill the admired role of courtly lover. The process of rethinking this position and allowing people outside of the traditional upper class men into the role entailed a reevaluation of those social groups who formerly had been almost universally excluded from the position. In the work of Mary Wroth, for example, putting a woman in the active role of lover instead of the traditional passive role of beloved forces the question of why the gender division of roles exists at all, and emphasizes the unreasonable assumption implicit in courtly love discourse that only men pine after an unreachable beloved. The writings of Mary Wroth, Francis Beaumont, and Richard
Barnfield all rewrite courtly love in a manner that encourages their audiences to rethink some of the most deep-seated of contemporary social stigma surrounding groups like women, the middling sort, and men with homosexual leanings.

All of the works considered in the following chapters are accordingly prime examples of Alan Sinfield’s theory of cultural change. When Sinfield addresses the issue of how cultural change may still occur in spite of the fact that all subjects within a given society are produced by, and whose thoughts are therefore bounded by, the limits established by the dominant discourse, he theorizes that, “dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself even as it attempts to sustain itself” (752). Sinfield illustrates this point with the example of Shakespeare’s Desdemona. Desdemona was very much subject to the dominant ideologies of her day. She fulfilled the pre-scripted roles of a dutiful daughter and later a (tragically) faithful wife to Othello, but her initial act of the play in defying her father to marry a man of her own choice seems to be so potentially subversive. Rather than imagining that Desdemona has managed to think completely outside of the contemporary mode of discourse into which she was born, Sinfield points out that this radical act was given implicit encouragement by the preeminent ideologies of her day in the form of an

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unresolved contradiction. The early modern understanding of marriage included the perception of women as property.\(^2\) A woman was her father’s property who was then transferred to her husband upon their marriage, a paradigm that demanded absolute obedience to father before marriage and to spouse afterward; but this stark understanding of matrimony was hardly its sole defining characteristic. Seventeenth-century marriage also included the idea of marriage as a “fulfilling personal relationship” and one of mutual love (753). When Desdemona falls in love with Othello, contemporary standards of behavior contradict each other, at once demanding that she obey her father and that she marry the man she loves and with whom she will have a tender, satisfying relationship.\(^3\) Lawrence Stone describes this particular early modern conflict of ideals as “dutiful children experiencing ‘an impossible conflict of role models.’\(^4\) They had to try to reconcile the often impossible demands for obedience to parental wishes on the one hand and expectations for affection in marriage on the other” (754). This specific conundrum of early modern standards is representative of the many unacknowledged, or poorly glossed over contradictions in dominant ideologies that provide “faultlines” in their usually smooth, natural-seeming facades. These ruptures, if they become the sites of


cultural conversation, allow people to identify, at least momentarily, the artificial nature of a reigning ideology, and potentially imagine alternate ways of seeing the world. There are, of course, some ideologies that are more closely guarded than others. There are some doctrines that are considered sacred and therefore, even if they contain the kind of fractures that Sinfield points to as the means of cultural disruption, it is less likely that they will become a site of discussion or debate. If we look at Christianity, for example, the many contradictions embedded in its theology majorly went overlooked for hundreds of years by faithful practitioners of the religion who held the tenets to be sacrosanct. However, beginning with the Protestant revolution and moving into the Age of Enlightenment when science began to compete with religion as a dominant ideology, Christianity began to lose its unquestionable status. The faultlines in its doctrines increasingly were noticed and emphasized in the discourse between Christian sects and between the scientific and religious communities leading to an escalating number of criticisms to the point that, in the twenty first century, they are no longer even remarkable. When a discourse loses its association with power, it markedly becomes easier to both identify and point out the contradictions within it. There is an opportune point in the decline of an ideology when it is still respected enough to cause serious reflection but not so sacred as to be indisputable that makes it particularly apt as a vehicle of social change. Courtly love was exactly at this point when the writers discussed in the following chapters were writing plays and sonnets about love.

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This is not to imply that fin amour from its inception had been so inviolable that it was never questioned nor that it never became the subject of satire. Anyone even passingly familiar with *Le Roman de la Rose* is very much aware of how fin amour became the subject of very pointed mockery as early as 1230. There are even satirical elements that question some customs of fin amour in works that scholars point to as models of courtly love: Andreas Capellanus’ *De Amore*, for example, or Chretien de Troyes’ *Lancelot* (Robertson 2). Like many philosophies, it came in and out of popularity evolving over centuries to fit circumstances and preferences. The alternate versions of courtly love that began to crop up at the turn of the seventeenth century incorporate elements from various of its adaptations. While there were always those who ridiculed the tenets of courtly love or criticized it on religious grounds, few writers attempted to alter the idea of courtly love in ways that defy some of its most venerable precepts until the period in question.\(^6\) It is therefore helpful, before the close analysis of these works, to look at the term “courtly love” and know the basic forms that courtly love took between 1150-1590.\(^7\)

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Seemingly, the definition of “courtly love” ought to be intuitive since it brings to mind immediately images of knights and ladies and refined, chivalrous conduct, but there have been several different definitions of it through the course of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship, some of which have crucial differences. Several scholars take issue with using the term at all, insisting that it is an anachronism invented by Gaston Paris in 1883 as a translation for the French term “fin’amours,” or refined love, the definition of which is extremely varied depending upon which scholar you choose to believe (Robertson 3). However, scholars E. T. Donaldson, Larry Benson, and Albrecht Claussen, all identify “amor cortez” as a term used as an alternative for “fin’amours” by original, twelfth century troubadours (Wollack 2). Even the most conscientious of cultural materialists should therefore feel at ease with the use of the term in modern scholarship. As for a definition, some critics have based their understanding of the term on medieval romances, others the original troubadour lyrics, and still others Andreas Capellanus’ The Art of Courtly Love, leading to certain discrepancies (Robertson 3-4). In 1936, C. S. Lewis famously defined it as having four principal characteristics, one of which was adultery (Lewis 2-3). Gaston Paris similarly insisted that courtly love was inherently furtive and illicit; but more contemporary scholars take issue with the idea that courtly love was by definition adulterous, or, in fact, that it held strictly to any of the characteristics that Lewis or Paris believed were essential. Irving Singer, for example, points out that the troubadours, “frequently rule out adultery as a part of true love.

Sometimes they even exclude the possibility of coveting another man’s wife sexually. In

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its later developments, troubadour poetry often turns into mere paeans of praise that even a jealous husband could find gratifying” (Singer 21).

Admitting that courtly love does not have the trans-generational cohesiveness that both Lewis and Paris implied (and which would make identifying courtly love in literature much easier) Singer goes on to define courtly love as “a cluster of ideas that may not imply one another on all occasions but often go together in a characteristic manner recognizable in the period we are considering” (21). Courtly love should not be characterized as that which fulfills all the qualities on a list, an undeviating system of thought, but as a flexible category the influence of which can be seen in any particular love affair which manifests one or more of a list of novel attributes that coalesced in the end of the eleventh century to produce a new way of conceiving a loving relationship between a man and a woman. Both because it considers courtly love in this less stringent manner and because of Singer’s close examination of multiple generations of writers in a deliberate attempt to see if there is anything like a consistent set of values/qualifications that can define the concept, his definition of fin amour is particularly valuable. It pinpoints the features of courtly love that are unique to it, that differentiate it significantly from concepts of love that predate it, and that remain attached to it for the duration of its existence. When I refer to courtly love in the rest of this dissertation, I therefore refer to those relationships that rely on one or more of the following as a distinguishing trait:

sexual love between men and women is in itself something splendid, an ideal worth striving for; (2) love ennobles both the lover and the beloved; (3) being an ethical and aesthetic attainment, sexual love cannot be reduced to mere libidinal impulse; (4) love pertains to courtesy and courtship but is not necessarily related to the institution of marriage; (5) love in an intense, passionate relationship that establishes a holy oneness between man and woman. (Singer 23)
These qualities manifest themselves throughout the various phases of courtly love’s evolution. They are present in the very beginning of courtly love in the poetry of the troubadours written in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Provence where the inequality between the genders is accentuated and the beloved lady is placed on a pedestal because of her ability to inspire art and encourage civilized, chivalrous behavior (Singer 34). The manner of idealization of both the beloved and the love itself is one of the innovations of the troubadours that deviates from all preexisting ancient Greek, Roman, or Arabic poetry. While all kinds of literature may idealize the beauty of the beloved, troubadour poems made one beautiful woman into a representation of everything that the lover finds worthwhile in life and the love the troubadour has for his lady is not a means of approaching a divine relationship with God as is the case in Platonic love or the love described in the Arabic poems of Ibn Hazm, but is transcendent unto itself (47). Fin amour was a means of locating joy in life rather than in the afterlife (51). This does not mean that the original form of fin amour is hedonistic. Quite to the contrary, the troubadours used an idealized object “to arouse sexual desire and then to frustrate that desire for the sake of spiritual ends of pure devotion and the writing of poetry” (53). Troubadour poetry often insisted upon the frustration of sexual desire in adoring the physical perfections of a lady whose high social status or marital status precluded the possibility of sexual union. This frustration which might have caused misery to the lover is reframed as the source of energy and motivation that inspire the idealization of the lady and in turn motivates the lover to create the sublime, the expression of the ineffable in poetry. Frustration is therefore the close companion to joy, rather than misery (52).
This Provencal period of troubadour love poetry ended abruptly with the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) in the south of France, but not before Bernard de Ventadour, one of the most talented and often imitated of the troubadours, had moved north to the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, and further north for her marriages to the King of France and subsequently to the Duke of Normandy. Ventadour under the patronage of Eleanor spread the concept of courtly love through Aquitaine, Normandy, and also in England after the Duke was crowned Henry II of England in 1154. Through Ventadour and other troubadours who moved from court to court throughout Europe, the popularity of courtly love spread and by the late twelfth century there were courtly love poems written in Provencal, Northern French, German and even Latin (O’Donaghue 4). The rapidity of the dissemination of the doctrines of fin amour testify to the great influence and attention that the literature received (5). As its popularity spread to Italy, Italian troubadours migrated to Provence to master the Provencal language enough to replicate the original troubadour poetry (4).

The spread of fin amour to the north of France contributed to the creation of a second wave of courtly love, still characterized by the qualities listed above but distinct from the love found in Provencal poetry. First, the gender disparity was reduced greatly. In these works it is not only the woman who finds herself on a pedestal in later courtly love poetry, but the men are often idealized as great heroes with pure hearts as well. Chretien de Troyes who produced works between the years of (about) 1177 and 1190 wrote his superb romances during this period and undoubtedly was influenced by the patronage of Marie of France, the Countess of Champagne and the daughter of Eleanor of
Aquitaine, to infuse them with the tenets of courtly love.\(^9\) They are not, however, all about pining for an untouchable lady. The heroes of his works, Erec, Cliges, Yvain, Lancelot, and Perceval, are notably admirable on their own before any influence from their virtuous female counterparts. Secondly, “In its northern version, courtly love is sometimes adulterous, generally sexual in its obvious intent, and only rarely interested in the values of unrequited yearning. The mutuality of amorous emotion and the sharing of beneficial pleasure become the norm” (Singer 34). The transcendence of sexually frustrating devotion no longer takes such a prominent role. Thirdly, this is when Andreas Cappellanus’ famous *Tractatus amoris & de amoris remedio* (1185) was written.\(^10\) The Provencal poets’ understanding of love was “a conglomeration of scattered expressions,” but in the northern adaptation of fin amour, the concepts governing courtly love were established firmly enough to inspire an attempt at codification (Singer 59). Cappellanus’ work is notable both as evidence of the consolidation of the idea of courtly love and because it incorporates both courtly and religious love.\(^11\) For decades the idea of courtly love had existed as an alternative to religion and was sometimes considered a blasphemous version of religion in its adoration of a mortal woman instead of the Virgin

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\(^10\) Capellanus’ work is also influenced directly by the Countess of Champagne. Capellanus was her royal chaplain.

Mary. The contradictions and incompatibilities between these very distinct types of love were most often ignored in the literature of courtly love. It was assumed that lords and ladies in twelfth century Europe would strive to be good Christians, but the literature they read for pleasure that centered around fin amoure was thus far completely incompatible with that goal, a paradox which showed no marked. Previous literature rarely attempted to address both a passionate love for mortal women and a love of God. Capellanus’ *Tractatus* is organized into three sections, or books. The first discusses how one might acquire love and love’s definition, the second is concerned with how one can keep the love one has acquired and the third discusses the “elimination and rejection” of mortal loves in favor of love of God (Singer 59). The third section seems to negate the elaborate reasoning of the first two books. Scholars have debated a few different theories of why Capellanus designed his work in this way, but however one chooses to read the *Tractatus*, what is most notable about its paradoxical reasoning is the fact that it highlights the general incompatibility of courtly love with Christian doctrine and indicates the increasing need to find some sort of compromise between the two, to find a way to incorporate both into a coherent system of belief for people whose existence necessitated contact both with the court and with the church.  

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13 Alexander Denomy suggests a solution to this issue in his book *The Heresy of Courtly Love* when he points out the medieval movement occasionally called a belief in “double truth” (60). This position held that there were two methods of discovering truth, natural reason and faith. The contradictory nature of Capellanus’ book comes from accepting this, and prioritizing faith over reason. While this would justify the puzzling nature of the *Tractatus*, in no
This second permutation of courtly love created in the North of France and England only sustained minor changes in the early years of the thirteenth century. Bernard O’Donoghue describes this period in his book *The Origin of Courtly Love* when he explains three different directions that courtly love evolved the period after the year 1200: “Firstly some poets develop the form of the poetry and the abstraction of ideas within it to a very high degree of refinement” (6). This was done primarily by the German version of the Provencal troubadours, the minnesangers, and their 14th and 15th century counterparts the meistersingers who cared more for the perfection of form than the content of the song leading to a much less inspired, stiff, in some ways predictable form of expression. 14 O’Donoghue also deems the new Provencal poets’ verses as particularly uninspired because they focused so specifically on developing the religious terms used so often in early troubadour poetry. 15 This laser focus upon one single aspect of the courtly lyric led to “a loss of...vigour” (O’Donoghue 6). Whether or not we choose to view these forms of poetry as decidedly inferior, they were much more concerned with formal elements of the poetry instead of the expression of emotion; as the emotional states of the lover form such an integral part of courtly love, O’Donoghue may very well be correct that “if it had been left to the late, religious troubadours...the influence of the courtly love would have been dead by 1250” (9).

section of his work does Capellanus identify any dichotomy between faith and reason, nor is there a strict division of natural versus divine truth in the sections. Both are often alluded to in one breath.


15 See esp. the poetry of Macabru for specific examples of troubadour use of religious terminology.
Fortunately for the canon of western literature, a revitalization of the courtly love tradition began in the thirteenth century in Italy when it was taken over by some rather well known poets like Dante, Petrarch, and Cavalcanti. Occasionally scholars refer to the melancholy type of pining for an unresponsive beloved often found in sonnet sequences as Petrarchan love, giving the impression that Petrarch invented his own version of love different enough from the courtly variety to merit its own category; but, while it’s true that Petrarch contributed some major innovations to fin amour, the emotions felt by his speaker are very much in line with those outlined in earlier troubadour works. He feels that his love for his beloved Laura is something splendid and ennobling, and certainly does not see his love as nothing but a libidinal impulse. Petrarch’s love is, however, significantly more tortured and sadder in tone than the joyous lays of medieval Provence due to the fact that he directly confronts the contradictions between the ideology surrounding Christian charity and that of courtly love. He wants to be morally good, in the Christian sense of that word, but he cannot give up passionately loving a woman who is not his wife, which makes him a sinner according to church doctrine. Petrarch internalizes this contradiction between competing doctrines and vacillates between seeing

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17 There are any number of examples in Petrarch’s sonnets of how his understanding of love exemplifies the exalting power attributed to it by the troubadours. For instance, in sonnet 13 he writes: “From her to you comes loving thought/ that leads to highest good, while you pursue it./counting as little what all men desire:/ from her comes that spirit full of grace/ that shows you heaven by the true way’:/so that in hope I fly, already, to the heights. See also sonnet 14 for an instance of Petrarch’s belief in the potential for a holy oneness between man and woman that transcends Laura’s death: “Sometimes a doubt assails me in the midst/ of sad tears: how can these limbs/ live separated from their spirit?/ But Love replies: Do you not remember/ that this is the privilege of lovers,/ freed from every other human tie?”
his love as a snare that draws him away from God and seeing it as a blessing that elevates his soul (Singer 134).

Dante also confronts the conflicting ideas between Christian love and courtly love. Many of the modifications to courtly love during this period are a result of these and other contemporary poets’ attempts to fit these two doctrines into one coherent system of belief (129). Dante’s Beatrice, for example is portrayed as a “New Creation” from God, something more perfect than any other human who came before her (save the Virgin Mary). She provides as much religious inspiration and motivation to follow the doctrines of the church, as she does poetic inspiration. Dante turns the idealized lady into a vehicle to bring one to the love of God. All loves are organized into a hierarchy and Beatrice’s love is so perfect that it easily redirects Dante’s affections from her towards God himself. This alteration of the beloved into a kind of saint removes or at least discourages much of the overt sexual desire in the courtly love relationship and sets the stage for Petrarch’s difficulty in attempting to love God and Laura simultaneously.

Although the Italian Renaissance masters produced ways of intermingling charity and courtly love, none of their solutions would have been considered doctrinally correct by any strict interpretation of church tenets. There is no definitive resolution between the two and because Italian Renaissance poets, especially Petrarch, were particularly

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influential in England when courtly love underwent a resurgence in the court of Elizabeth I, these same issues play a tremendous role in the poetry produced during her reign. Elizabeth was a great admirer of courtly love and insisted upon its use by her courtiers when addressing her (Murray 131). Elizabeth’s fondness for courtly love probably stemmed from both its obvious charms and because its custom of adoring an idealized lady gave any male courtiers who were uncomfortable with a female monarch a familiar paradigm through which to accept her superiority and therefore leant itself to the solidification of her power (Low 27). Whatever the reason for her choice to prefer the rhetoric and tenets of courtly love, it re-popularized the understanding of love as a passionate veneration of a woman, and under her patronage early modern authors began a craze of writing sonnet sequences all more or less patterned after Petrarch and a revival of chivalric romances. The most prominent of these authors were men like Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, and Samuel Daniels. Sydney wrote his sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella* sometime between 1580 and 1584 and Spenser published his *Amoretti* in 1594. They both go to great lengths to idealize their beloved ladies indicating a sincere respect for and desire to imitate courtly love lyrics that lasted through the end of the sixteenth century when over a dozen other minor sonnet sequences

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were also written in a similar style. Sidney’s close allegiance to the Petrarchan tradition is revealed in his speaker’s continual attempts to harmonize his sexual desire for Stella with a desire to also see her as the epitome of virtue. During the 1590s and especially into the seventeenth century there is a distinct lessening in the popularity of courtly love. The 1590s was a particularly difficult time for young men in London as there was a large migration of them from the countryside, causing fierce competition over jobs and heiresses both between each other and with the older generation (38). As an inevitable accompaniment of this, the traditional approach to literature in which *imitatio* was an accepted and encouraged practice, fell out of favor since it promoted similarities and depended on a fraternal pool of ideas whereas the atmosphere of London in the 1590s promoted fierce competition in which one’s professional survival depended upon setting oneself apart from competitors, not simply recreating their work. Originality therefore became essential and another rehashing of courtly love was not advisable. The rhetoric of courtly love also began to be associated directly with manipulation and politics.

Queen Elizabeth’s insistence upon the use of courtly love rhetoric from the men surrounding her at court meant that terms and speech patterns associated with courtly love also were identified immediately with political petitions for land or court offices. This might not have lessened the popularity of courtly love if the use of it had actually resulted in the bestowal of favors, but Elizabeth was well aware that traditional ways of gaining favor with the monarch were no longer the types of things that it would most benefit her to reward. Granting offices to those who perform heroic actions in battle like

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medieval knights, or who could write the most beautiful poetry would not result in
surrounding herself with savvy, clever political advisors, which is who she really needed
in order to help her govern a kingdom that was faced with a unique combination of
problems that all required skillful political machinations like the tremendous surge of the
population in London, newly expanding markets overseas, and increasingly fraught
international relations in the wake of Reformation and Counter-Reformation politics.
Anthony Low writes of this particular time period that:

Preferment seemed ever less likely in men’s minds to be a confirmation of noble
worth and ever more likely to be a step up the ladder of manipulation, pretension and
greed with men like Lord Burghley, of little aristocratic mien, securely at the top. The
Tudor policy of creating new nobles and gentry, to support a line of initially dubious
legitimacy and with largely new political, economic, and religious ambitions had already
damaged the mystique of the patronage system, whose best justification was its origin in
the feudal ideal of loyalty and service. Ambition to confirm one’s aristocratic identity
and serve the state was degenerating into social climbing and competition for spoils. (27)

When noble lords who fulfilled the aristocratic ideals of bravery, loyalty,
devotion, etc, like Philip Sidney or Walter Raleigh, were passed over for other men with
more political cunning, the expected rewards for loyal service were dissolved completely
rendering courtly love rhetoric superficial and impotent (28). Its social and political
cache diminished especially in the later years of Elizabeth’s regime, the 1590s. It was
therefore in this last decade of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth
century that writers were motivated to explore new possibilities in the conception of love
and to redesign elements of courtly love to make it more relevant to contemporary concerns.

The three writers I will examine here are all writing at the tail end of the Elizabethan revival of courtly love, when the rhetoric of courtly love was losing its popularity especially with those in or close to the court. Accordingly, the first writer’s modifications to courtly love that I shall examine are those of Francis Beaumont who recovers the tropes and rhetoric of the courtly love tradition for the newly expanding demographic of the “middling sort,” those people who worked for a living but were prosperous enough that they were able to save for the future, for whom mere survival was no longer a pressing worry. This social group included both successful artisans and merchants, some of whom were becoming wealthy enough to buy their way into the gentry and procure their own estates outside the city. The allure of social climbing becomes a theme in Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, which directly addresses the issue of locating honor in a world that no longer rests on the presumption of chivalry as a code of governing behavior among the nobility. The tradition of courtly love requires a lover to be at least a knight in rank, and to live by a code of virtuous conduct. Beaumont exposes the paradox inherent in traditional fin amour that implies that a high social rank and an admirable degree of virtue necessarily go together. He gives a very unique amount of credit to the relatively new set of virtues espoused by those in the middling social ranks and indicates how they contribute to the creation of a middling class courtly lover. Beaumont finds ways throughout his play to imply that their devotion, dedication, and virtue makes them more like the chivalrous medieval knights than their social climbing contemporaries who long after the title of “knight”
rather than any of the standards of behaviour that come with it. Courtly love calls for nobility and sacrifice on the part of the lover, but neither of these are typically a part of seventeenth-century courtship in which the woman’s fortune is as much an object of scrutiny as any of her personal characteristics. This contradiction becomes the occasion for *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*’s examination of class and love and motivates a pointed examination of a modern understanding of honor which points to the worth of the middling classes and the superficiality of the upper classes.

As mentioned earlier, when Lady Mary Wroth, the only female author of an English sonnet sequence, takes on the active, masculine role of lover and writes sonnets to her male beloved in her sonnet series *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*, she transmutes one of the oldest established mores of courtly love. The gender reversal of this position allows Wroth not only to induce her audience to reconsider the possibilities of women in love, but also highlights several of the most puzzling, least desirable aspects of courtly love already acknowledged by the male poets who re-popularized fin amour decades earlier. The Elizabethan iteration of courtly love followed so faithfully in the wake of Petrarch that, while it promised something transcendent, it actually focused much more on love’s miseries and vexations. Poets like Philip Sidney, Thomas Wyatt, and even William Shakespeare to an extent, struggled to reconcile lust with the idealism and distant adoration of courtly love. Just as in Petrarch this led to a tortured state of being that was ironically glorified by writers and audiences alike, the lover earning a beguiling mix of admiration and sympathy for his pains and his production of moving literature. Wroth brings her readers’ attention to the incongruity of presenting love as elevating and idealistic while experiencing it as misery. Her speaker avoids a preponderance of that
miser by resisting the Petrarchan tradition of using love poetry to solve philosophical conflicts and pursue one specific goal, the capitulation of the lady. Wroth’s *Pamphilia* uses rhetoric more like the original troubadours who prioritize the expression of the tumult of emotions that accompanies fin amour, over attempting to use rhetoric as an instrument of precision. It is a tactic that is in many ways similar to Luce Irigaray’s description of *écriture féminine* and its expression of *joi*. Wroth’s descriptions of love utilize a deliberate ambiguity so that her poems may simultaneously express multiple perspectives on love and even entertain two conflicting ideas at the same time. It is her style of writing which gives her the ability to convey complicated, often self-contradictory emotional states, giving her an advantage over male poets who wrote during the sonnet craze and often expressed frustration about being able to express their emotions adequately. *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* thus brings attention to several inconsistencies in the philosophies of courtly love without ever having directly to address them and resort to an unwinnable debate of ideas. It brings its reader to question the custom of the exclusively gendered roles of male lover and female beloved, to question the necessity of the tortured state of the Petrarchan lover, and in so doing, to reconsider the source of happiness for a lover; is it in conquering the beloved or in the state of being in love? The multiplicity of interpretations to which Wroth opens up her work also allows her audience to see Pamphilia as either extremely authoritative or as passive and quiet as the conduct-manual ideal of a Renaissance woman. Wroth can walk the line between proper and improper in ways that challenge but do not breach contemporary gender standards.
Finally, in the sonnets included in Richard Barnfield’s work *To Cynthia, with certaine Sonnets, and the legend of Cassandra*, Barnfield’s speaker, Daphnis, professes a love for a young shepherd, Ganymede, that is decidedly more sexual than the more ambiguous homoeroticism found in Shakespeare’s sonnets to the golden youth, forcing his audience into a more direct scrutiny of homosexual love. William Shakespeare’s homoerotic sonnets to the golden youth are so ubiquitous in English classrooms, so unthinkingly canonical, that the rarity of homoerotic love poems is not always thoroughly considered and when it is, it is often too quickly glossed over with an explanation of the importance given male friendship in the early modern period and the unexpectedly intimate rhetoric used to describe such relationships; thus implying that the sonnets were acceptable since even the passionate affection they describe never breaches contemporary limits of a platonic homosocial relationship. This is true to an extent, of course, but it ignores the fact that in the discrete moral atmosphere of the sixteenth century, extreme condemnations of sodomy were the norm. Homosexual acts between men had been officially illegal in England since 1533 when Parliament passed the “Buggery Act,” in which, “the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with mankind or beast” was made into a capital offense for which perpetrators could be hanged (Yearling 55). Alan Bray has most famously pointed out that the marks of a platonic male friendship, a relationship that was hailed during this time period as a

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23 Alan Bray elaborates on the universal disapproval of homosexuality, that the “‘common sense’ view [in the early modern period] was that homosexuality was an abomination.. and it is difficult to exaggerate the fear and loathing of homosexuality to be read in the literature of the time.

24 Qtd. in Rebecca Yearling, “Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Verse” (*SEL* 1500-1900, 53:1).
foundational part of society, were remarkably similar to the signs of an intimacy that went beyond accepted societal bounds (50). The distinctions between platonic and non-platonic relationships therefore began to blur, which made slandering a platonic relationship much easier, and made the certain condemnation of a homosexual one rather more difficult.

This gave writers quite a bit of room to play with homoerotic imagery and plot lines, but there was an especial problem in the case of lyric poetry as opposed to epic poetry or plays. Lyric poems more intimately relate the reader to the actions being described both in time and place; they do not have the advantage of placing the action in ancient Greece or contemporary Italy where lascivious things were assumed (by the English) to be going on. They also decrease the distance of the reader from the action in the choice of pronouns. Epic poems and plays could use “he” and “they” where lyric poetry uses “I” and “thou” placing the reader in the position of the speaker or his beloved with any recitation of the work. It is perhaps for this reason that Shakespeare’s sonnets, unlike his wildly popular minor epics Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece, were not unquestionably accepted in his day. When they were first published in 1609 there is no record of their receiving any special acclaim, and after this first publication no one bothered to attempt a second edition for another thirty one years, a strange oversight considering that many of Shakespeare’s plays were published during his lifetime, the First Folio was published just after his death in 1623 and the Second Folio less than ten years later in 1632. Moreover, in the preface to the 1640 edition of the sonnets, the editor, John Benson, writes that they, “had not the fortune, by reason of their infancy in his death, to have the due accommodation of proportionable glory with the rest of his
ever-living works. [ … ]” suggesting that they were neither well known nor well thought of. He goes on, “I have been somewhat solicitous to bring this forth to the perfect view of all men, and in so doing, glad to be serviceable for the continuance of glory to the deserved author in these his poems,” which implies that this was the first time the sonnets had ever been printed, a claim he could only make if he were sure that the first edition was forgotten. This second edition, more popular than the first, is well known for several alterations to the original text which allow the reader to believe that the sonnets to the golden youth were actually addressed to a woman, and went as far as to change several pronouns in order to make this illusion complete. These very particular alterations make it not much of a leap to assume that the greater sexual orthodoxy of the second edition allowed for part if not all of its greater success (Yearling 54). Barnfield’s daring innovation should not, therefore, be discounted in spite of his well-known contemporary and some spare room in the cultural atmosphere for homoerotic intimations.

In a direct comparison with Shakespeare’s work, Barnfield is strikingly more corporeal, and thus pushes the boundaries of the acceptable further, in his descriptions of his beloved. Shakespeare’s sonnet 20 is often considered to be one of the most homoerotic. It’s most suggestive lines read, “A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted/ Hast thou, the master-mistress of my passion;/ A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted/ With shifting change, as is false women's fashion;” (Shakespeare 1847). The fact that it is a comparison of the youth to a woman which inspires the speaker’s admiration implies an attraction to him similar to that a man would feel toward a woman, i.e. a sexual attraction. He loves him because he has an aesthetically pleasing, feminine beauty. This is most definitely homoerotic, but it remains heteronormative. The beloved
is worthy of love because he is so much like a woman, not because he is a young man.

This is hardly as blatantly sexual, or homonormative as Barnfield’s sonnet 16:

Cherry-lipt Adonis in his snowie shape,  
Might not compare with his pure ivorie white,  
On whose faire front a poet’s pen may write,  
Whose roseate red excels the crimson grape,  
His love-enticing delicate soft limbs,  
Are rarely fram’d t’intrap poore gazine eies:  
His cheeks, the lillie and carnation dies,  
With lovely tincture which Apollo’s dims.  
His lips ripe strawberries in nectar wet,  
His mouth a Hive, his tongue a hony-combe,  
Where Muses (like bees) make their mansion.  
His teeth pure pearle in blushing correll set.  
Oh how can such a body sinne-procuring,  
Be slow to love, and quicke to hate, enduring? (Barnfield 35)

Barnfield’s speaker compares his beloved to Adonis, rather than a woman. Ganymede is admirable because his beauty surpasses that of a youth attractive enough to sexually entice gods and those things that draw the speaker’s attention are his beloved’s limbs, lips, and tongue, not his heart and his admirable constancy. This is praise for a body that as a “sinne procuring,” definitely inspires sexual fantasy and hopefully (for the speaker’s sake) sexual fulfillment, for a male body that leads the speaker to imagine embraces and passionate kisses. This is undeniably sexual and, while Shakespeare gives the reader room to imagine that his speaker’s admiration for the youth is because he happens to resemble a feminine ideal, Barnfield’s Daphnis admires his beloved because of his resemblance to the epitome of masculine beauty. His speaker both lusts after and loves men specifically.

The genius of Barnfield’s sonnet sequence is therefore the clever tactics he uses to buffer his subject matter for those who would be unsympathetic to this kind of openly
homoerotic love affair. His vivid descriptions of Ganymede and the physical pining Daphnis experiences are couched in the impartial attitudes practiced in a university setting, which shapes the perspective of his ideal audience - a coterie of young male university graduates - and provides its own kind of distance from the subject matter that encourages homosexual attraction and love to be rationally analyzed outside of ideological prohibitions against them. This emphasis on the rational contributes to the unusual perspective the series takes on courtly love. Other sonneteers occasionally point out that their immortality is dependent upon the greatness of their verse, but the emphasis is always on how the verse will immortalize the beloved, as if all his effort is solely for a love tribute. Modern scholarship has pointed out how courtly love and sonnets especially, ultimately draw attention to the poet’s idealized self much more than the virtues of the beloved, but in the verses themselves the admired lady/youth is the one who receives the glory. Unlike these poets, Barnfield creates sonnets that are unusually metafictional and depend upon the education of their audience to highlight continually the manner of their own construction and place them in comparison with other great literary works in order to elevate him into the company of other great authors. Accordingly, the beauty of courtly love is depicted as a conscious aesthetic effort which is to be appreciated no matter the subject matter of the poem. Therefore, unlike Wroth, who emphasizes the neglected importance of emotional fulfillment and draws the reader’s attention away from rhetorical precision, Barnfield prioritizes cleverness of

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construction and craftsmanship over everything else. The continual revelation of the work as art, not an organic expression of emotion, clouds the sincerity of the speaker and allows Barnfield more easily to confront some of the stereotypes that boxed in seventeenth-century perceptions of homosexual relationships. For example, the stereotypical roles which prescribed the relationship between an older man and his young, male, lover are significantly altered in *Cynthia*. Barnfield uses courtly love tropes and rhetoric to portray a relationship often assumed to be based on a power differential, one that was shameful especially for the younger partner, into something adoringly tender. Barnfield therefore confronts the puzzling contradiction within courtly love that it professes to be the most personal, passionate and deeply felt of practices but is known by most people through elaborately contrived literary works and tends to be considered less admirable if it is not accompanied by poetry or songs.

None of the three texts examined in the following chapters attempts a revolution against the dominant ideology of courtly love. It is rather in the clever subtleties of their alterations to fin amour and how their changed iterations of courtly love compare so favorably against the traditional types of courtly love that they show such potential to debase the perception of the original and supercede it. Sinfield writes of the power of dissident literature that “it may derive its leverage, its purchase, precisely from its impartial implication with the dominant. It may embarrass the dominant by appropriating its concepts and its imagery” (757). In the writings of these three authors we can see working historical examples of this theory of social change. They all demonstrate the appropriation of elements of a dominant ideology used to forward the interests of those traditionally excluded from its practice in ways that illustrate its inconsistencies and
contradictions. While it is usually impossible to say that any one text definitely had a
subversive effect on culture, by highlighting the fractures in the coherence of courtly love
in a historical moment which was already witnessing its decline we can say that these
texts are evidence of a new flexibility in the perception of love and give hints as to how
eyear modern culture was reimagining one of the most essential concepts used to define
individuals and society.
Chapter 1:

Francis Beaumont: Courtly Love and the Values of the Middling Sort in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*

In this chapter, I will examine the results of removing courtly love from its usual literary contexts of chivalric romances and lyric poems (especially sonnets) and placing it instead into the gritty world of the Jacobean city comedy - a theatrical genre that seeks to portray reality rather than an idealistic fantasy; a move that leant itself to the creation of a new version of the courtly lover. Interestingly, while city comedies included gallants as often as men outside the gentry in their cast of characters, when Francis Beaumont effects this change of setting, he chooses to place a merchant’s apprentice in the role, a young man whose social status, so far below the knighthood, traditionally implied that he was too boorish to even feel the refined emotion of fin amour. This elevated status bestowed onto a lower class youth is made believable in the early modern period by the changes in the social structure in early modern society.

In the sixteenth century, there was an inevitable lessening of the perceived differences between the landed gentry and those merchants and artisans in London known as the “middling sort” of people when there began to be social mobility between the two groups. Younger sons of the gentry cut out of inheriting by primogeniture laws often made their way in the world by obtaining an apprenticeship to members of the middling
sort, which moved them onto an equal or inferior social status with successful men of the middling sort. At the same time, the most successful members of the middling sort were able for the first time to accumulate great fortunes from trade and purchase lands and titles ensuring that they and their children would be the social equals of landed gentlemen (Grassby 353). Both new titles and the power that comes with great amounts of wealth gave these affluent members of the merchant and artisan guilds a substantial amount of social and political power. Even those of the middling sort who were not given the means to create fabulous wealth had a reasonable expectation to open their own business and thrive at a comfortable income level far above the poverty of laborers and peasants (Rappaport 340). These types of people, comfortable with the potential to be more than comfortable, made up the majority of men and women in London. They were therefore powerful as a demographic even when most of them possessed modest wealth (173). The middling sort of people was a growing social group throughout the seventeenth century, one which began by aping the values and manners of their social superiors, but gradually solidified enough to identify with their own unique set of values.

It is at this historical moment, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the middling sort is gaining a sense of themselves as a group, that Beaumont writes *Knight*, and portrays the romantic lead as a courtly lover who is also the epitome of middling sort values. This initially seems like a contradiction since courtly love is up to this point has very much been the purview of aristocrats and gentry, but the play depicts the middling-sort-ish code of ethics of the apprentice in a favorable way that implies that it is more conducive to a sincere fin amour than any of the elaborate rhetorical trappings of Medieval aristocratic courtly lovers, or the social pretences of other seventeenth-
century members of the middling sort who mimicked the manners and preferences of the
gentry just to be accepted into their social circles. Both courtly love rhetoric and the
imitation of the titled social ranks are represented in ways that emphasize their
superficiality, while characters like Beaumont’s hero and heroine, who see the value in
their own class, avoid the superficial and develop true love. The rest of this chapter will
go on to analyze the specific strategies used by Beaumont in Knight to associate the
middling sort with sincerity in love and life, with fin amour, and consistently imply that
those who seek nobility in simply aping mannerisms or literary conventions are doomed
to reside in a shallow world of appearances only.

In Knight, the spectacle of a grocer from a middling social class putting on the
attitudes of a medieval knight affords the audience the chance to see just how
uncomfortably, how comically, those stances hang on someone accustomed to reading
about knights rather than ever actually holding a sword. All of this mockery of a grocer
turned incompetent knight is ironic, however, since it is trepidation of seeing unflattering
caricatures of average citizens on the stage that initiates the storyline to begin with. The
prologue to Knight declares it to be a completely different play, a city comedy called
“The London Merchant,” but two players counterfeiting audience members interrupt the
action with the grievance that city comedies invariably portray London citizens as absurd.
In defiance of this trend, they demand that their own apprentice, Rafe, be allowed on
stage to play a London citizen who does “admirable things,” which they clarify to mean
heroic actions like those from a chivalric romance. Hence the interjection of a grocer
turned knight who ridiculously beats down barbers he insists are giants. In spite of the
absurdity of this supposedly improvised plot, it is thematically similar to the originally
intended play. Both of the pretended citizens, George, a grocer, and his wife, Nell, object
to the portrayal of a very specific social class, demanding greater respect for the middling
sort. Similarly, in “The London Merchant,” a lower class citizen defends his rights and
self respect in spite of a rivalry with a gentleman. The penniless apprentice of a rich
merchant falls in love with his master’s daughter and defends his right to marry her in
spite of her father’s preference for a rich gentleman suitor who also wants his daughter’s
hand in marriage. The conspicuous paradox of these two plot lines is that they both seem
to insist upon the value of people outside of the gentry and aristocracy while still
depreciating characters from the middling classes.

This irony has not been the focus of contemporary criticism of *Knight*, however.
The pointed focus of the rivalry between rich vs. poor and middling vs. gentle status has
led many modern critics to focus on its depiction of the early modern social hierarchy,
but they most often examine the treatment of a social class as a whole and use that
depiction to explain the puzzling nature of the play’s reception. *Knight* seems perfectly
innocuous to twenty-first century readers, but in its first performance in 1607 the play
was a notorious flop.²⁶ So what was it about the play that made it so unpopular? Andrew
Gurr has pointed out that the pathetically bad taste displayed by George and Nell in their
insistence upon a knight from their own social circles provides the overarching satire of

²⁶ The major evidence for the play’s poor reception comes from the prefatory letter attached to the
first printed version of the play by its publisher, Walter Burre, which reads:
SIR, this vnofortunate child ... was by his parents (perhaps because hee was so vnlike his brethren) exposed
to the wide world, who for want of judgment, or not vnderstanding the priuy marke of Ironie about it
(which shewed it was no ovspring of any vulgar braine) vttely reiected it: so that for want of acceptance it
was even ready to give up the Ghost, and was in danger to have bene smothered in perpetuall oblivion, if
you (out of your direct ANTIPATHY to ingratitude) had not bene moved both to relieve and cherish it.
the play, mocking the crude tastes of the middling sort of people. Gurr, Sheldon P Zitner, and Alexander Leggatt suggest that there were enough average citizens in the audience to make this biting depiction of the middling sort of people offensive and to sour its reception. John Doebler contrarily suggests that the criticism of George and Nell was not severe enough for the specific, upper-class tastes of the Blackfriar’s theatre. Michael Shapiro also takes his line of criticism from the specific audience at the Blackfriars who were collectively either members of the gentry or were ambitious to become so. He argues that there were no admirable aristocratic characters in the play, a shortcoming in the eyes of the social climbers in the audience who wanted to enjoy the fantasy that they were in an exclusive, upper-class arena. This would have been an important part of the more expensive ticket price at the Blackfriars. All of these critics tend to look at the overall depiction of a social class, whether the play glorifies or debases or ignores a class of people as a whole, but the play does much more intricate work than that. Knight promotes a burgeoning class subjectivity of the expanding middling sort of people that were beginning to define themselves as a group not out of money or family connections, but from a specific code of ethical behavior.

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allowed them to perceive themselves as more worthy than people from either lower or upper class social ranks (Fitter 116-117). In *Knight*, while this leads to a flattering depiction of some characters from the middle of the social scheme who embrace this meritocratic attitude, others from similar social circles who do not embrace this perspective do not receive particularly favorable treatment. Characters from the middling ranks who are still invested in a hierarchy with the nobility on top, rather than seeing the value in their own social class, are portrayed as either ridiculous or mercenary. This chapter will examine Beaumont’s appropriation of courtly love and fusion of it with middling class values in *Knight* and its resultant effects which combine to grant social capital to those members of the middle social ranks who embrace a code of ethics peculiar to the center of the social scheme and belittle those who choose to still glorify the upper classes. It will also consider the possible social ramifications of the creation of characters who exemplify an amalgam of middle and high class virtues in a period when authors of all classes were invested in attempts to reclaim the inner, innate nobility they saw as characteristic of the feudal knights from chivalric romance. The portrayal of a mere apprentice as both a skilled merchant and a courtly lover/virtuous defender of justice who has the means to effect positive change in a seventeenth-century mercantile society forces a reevaluation of what it means to be noble. By making a low ranking member of the middling class the successor to the practiced ethical conduct of medieval knights, the play distances the concept of nobility from birth or money. Beaumont’s hero and heroine thus break down barriers between social classes and present the posh audience of the Blackfriars with characters who were technically their social inferiors,
but who were possessed with qualities that nevertheless made them admirable.  *Knight* therefore represents a unique, socially leveling theatrical experience in which an upper class audience was encouraged to esteem social inferiors.

Research done by Brent E. Whitted already indicates the likelihood that Francis Beaumont would be inclined to write works which have this kind of socially equalizing effect to create camaraderie between otherwise socially distant members of his audience. Whitted’s article, “Staging Exchange: Why *The Knight Of The Burning Pestle* Flopped At Blackfriars In 1607,” provides evidence both for why a gentleman like Francis Beaumont (son of Sir Francis Beaumont of Grace Dieu and Anne, the daughter of Sir George Pierrepont) would be inclined write a play with egalitarian themes and why such a play was likely to be received coldly by the audience at the Blackfriar’s theater. The Blackfriars was the especial haunt of rich and influential people (Gurr 19). Audiences consisted mostly of members of the upper classes and students from the Inns of Court who believed themselves to be on their way to a higher social status if they were fortunate enough to secure lucrative positions. In accordance with the higher social rank and ambition of its patrons, this indoor theater (in which everyone had a seat and there were no groundlings) “was a place that people attended in order to be seen” (Whitted 114). Normally on the bottom of the social scale represented by the Blackfriars audience, part of the reason the students from the Inns of Court and the universities regularly visited the theater was both to see themselves as a part of upper class circles and to

“offset” their low ranking status within those circles with energetic, clever criticism of their betters, the gallants who filled the more expensive seats. The Blackfriars was a venue that encouraged a rigid social hierarchy (Whitted 116). One contemporary account describes the experience of play-going at this particular theater as an extremely competitive comparison of oneself, one’s dress, one’s seat, and one’s pretensions of all kinds, to all the other audience members.32

Beaumont’s playwriting background was very much at odds with the atmosphere at the Blackfriars, which makes it very likely that he would make some misjudgements in his choice of material. Only a handful of years before the first performance of *Knight*, Francis Beaumont was writing plays as a student at the Inns of Court.33 He wrote his *Grammar Lecture*, a mock oration that was designed to categorize the varying motives of law students, usually dependent on their age and social background, to be performed in the Inner Temple somewhere between 1601 and 1605. This work is emblematic of the function that drama was supposed to fulfill in the collegiate setting among law students. Whitted describes these dramatic works put on during holiday revels as, “designed to foster collegiality among men who were otherwise competing for advancement in London.” He goes on to point out that as a playwright accustomed to these expectations,

32 See: Fitzgeoffrey, Henry. *Satyres: and Satyricall Epigrams: with Certaine Observations at the Black-fryers* London, 1617: STC 10943. [Although this particular reference is several years later than the first performance of *Knight*, for earlier, but similar observations about the audience of the Blackfriars, see: Jonson, Ben. Prefetory Verses. *The Faithful Shepherdess.* By John Fletcher. 1608. (Jonson’s description of the Blackfriar’s audience: ‘wise and many-headed Bench ... Compos’d of Gamester, Captaine, Knight, Knight's man, / Lady, or Pusil’, all ‘rank'd in the darke’. ) See also: Day, John. Induction. *The Isle of Gulls.*] 1606. (describes the very particular tastes of gallants in the Blackfriars audience who all make conflicting demands on the Blackfriars company.)

“Beaumont appears to have projected the community he inherited from the Inns — defined during revels by the occasional assimilation of men from varying social classes, and with individually divergent motives for being there, into a cohesive community — onto the Blackfriars' clientele, whose motives for attending a play were driven more by aggressive socioeconomic competition” (114). Beaumont’s early years as a writer were therefore practiced in creating a socially levelling effect though it was in all likelihood a mistake to push these particular ideas upon the Blackfriar’s audience.

Not only Beaumont’s background, but the literary atmosphere of the early seventeenth century would have encouraged the writing of a play that worked to reduce the degree of difference between social echelons. Theodore Leinwand’s influential work, *The City Staged*, already makes the argument that *Knight*, along with the majority of other city comedies in the early seventeenth century, tended to break down the strict social hierarchy often considered characteristic of the early modern period. Other plays from the same period (*Westward Ho, Northward Ho, Michealmas Term*, among others) draw attention to the unrealistic nature of class stereotypes by exaggerating their associated characteristics to the extent that it is very difficult to ignore the difference between the staged characters and their three-dimensional counterparts in the real world (Leinwand 52). They also tend to mock citizens from all ranks of society equally. Gentleman gallants and middling class merchants are equally satirized (47). Finally, even when city comedies depicted social groups as competing and therefore distinct entities, they tended to emphasize the similarities of their most base motivations, stemming from sex and greed, and how these motivations encourage the social groups to cast the others in terms of social stereotypes (51): gallants, for example, *want* to see
merchants as greedy and miserly because it justifies plots (motivated by their own desire for riches) to relieve those merchants of their wealth under the guise of a moral lesson.

Though the tactics listed above were the most notable of those employed by playwrights to subvert social class, Leinwand admits that *Knight* sets itself apart from other Jacobean comedies since it has none of these common characteristics and begins to see the ramifications of this in terms of Beaumont’s preferential treatment of one specific group, but his two-page analysis goes no further than to admit that, in terms of recreating stereotypical roles, “a no holds barred satire on the City would have called for a clever Humphrey, and it would never have countenanced the success of an unrepentant Jasper” (65). The would-be gallant receives too much criticism and the apprentice a little too much credit. So, unlike its contemporaries, *Knight* is therefore not set up to mock everything equally, but Leinwand does not follow his own line of reasoning into a complete analysis. Instead he makes the cursory decision that the characters from the frame, “The London Merchant,” do not count for very much and focuses like most other critics on the admittedly inventive aspects of the meta-theatrical characters, Rafe, George and Nell (65). Leinwand claims that the audience’s attention is invariably attracted to the “energy” and “inventiveness” of Rafe instead of the “tired,” “conventional” romance between Jasper and Luce. It is, however, obviously problematic to assume that what

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draws the attention of the modern scholar is the same as that which drew the attention of the original seventeenth-century audience; seventeenth-century audiences saw Malvolio as the most memorable character of *Twelfth Night*, for instance, rather than focusing on the love triangle of Orsino, Viola and Olivia, which seems the obvious focus of the play for most twenty-first-century viewers. Leinwand’s evaluation also ignores the more subtle but equally inventive aspects of Jasper and Luce’s character and storyline.

As Leinwand intimates but never thoroughly considers, the fact that *Knight* lacks many of the distinctive characteristics of a typical city comedy, even in its original configuration as “The London Merchant,” creates a vastly different representation of social class than simply making all characters universally ridiculous or insinuating a critique of common social stereotypes. Unlike the gritty interpretation of motives in many city comedies that boil down most human impulses to lust or avarice, Jasper and Luce’s love for each other is pointedly set up to defy mercenary motives. Many of the other characters in the play demonstrably have money or social status as their ultimate goal, but they are set up as a foil to the main love affair which represents an ideal affection outside of practical concerns. *Knight* certainly uses some typical characteristics from social stereotypes in the figures of, most notably, Venturewell, Rafe, George and Nell, but they are not so one-sidedly negative, so exaggerated as to imply the characters have only a single, predetermined dimension. George and Nell are simple-minded and have unsophisticated tastes, which is what one would expect from a stereotype of citizens as opposed to gentlemen, but they are also generous (Nell invites the audience to her

home for wine and a pipe of tobacco after the performance is over) and seem to have a genuine affection for their apprentice; they come from the middling classes for whom money was an important consideration, but their motives are not mercenary. At the close of the play, Nell also invites rather than narrow-mindedly refuses to listen to a critique of Rafe’s performance, which she and George have just directed. They are open to an education of their tastes rather than being incurably mired in their own point of view in spite of the fact that a rejection of upper-class values in favor of the hard work and clean living of middling classes was a constant theme of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature written for the middling classes (Brooks 81). There are therefore enough unexpected, positive traits intermingled with stereotypical ones that make it dubious if these can even be considered caricatures. All of this points to Knight having distinctive goals and a different effect on its audience rather than repeating the same common, socially equalizing satire. In the singular world of Knight, some things are idealized rather than mocked and it is in the use of these things that Beaumont not only critiques the foibles of certain social types but constructs a different system of social valuation that relies on virtue in contrast to the usual ones that rely on birth, profession, or wealth. Knight is still very much egalitarian in its major themes, but it seeks to even out social status by evaluating people on a different scale rather than portraying all classes as equally ridiculous.

The most obviously idealized thing in the play is the love between Jasper and Luce. Their relationship is portrayed in terms that link it to courtly love more than to any practical, middling class conception of love concentrated on producing an economically sound, mutually beneficial marriage. Medieval portrayals and descriptions of courtly
love almost always include the fact that it is inherently ennobling (Singer 25). In its original form, courtly love always made the lovers into better, braver, more charitable people (26). The association of courtly love with the creation of virtuous individuals tends to provide the lovers with an alternate schema for the estimation of social worth. There is a rich literary precedent for courtly love and its associated nobility of action/emotion seemingly allowing the lovers to evaluate their actions on a scale set apart from a standard social hierarchy. In *Sonnet Sequences and Social Distinction*, Christopher Warley analyzes Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella* in these very terms. In sonnet 21, Astrophil’s desire for Stella is as much a desire for noble motives as it is for any particular woman:

In admiring the fairness of Stella, Astrophil is also expressing his “Nobler desires,” his will to live up to “Great expectation” and produce a suitable “harvest.” His desire is quite specifically a social desire for a different conception of nobility, a wish to become more noble - a “Nobler” desire. As an imaginary, this ideal nobility does not theoretically correspond to either Astrophil’s existence as “birthright” or “goods.” Nobility itself becomes an object of desire, a social position that imaginatively reconciles the contradiction between status and class. (80)

In sonnet 41 the speaker similarly seeks to justify his place in the upper ranks of society by the refinement of emotion produced by Stella. Astrophil seeks an inner nobility of mind which the he associates with feudal, medieval knights who also experienced fin amour. Unfortunately for Philip Sidney, the sonnets do not demonstrate that any nobler desires are actually realized; rather they merely reflect the “conditions which provoked the desire” (81). The speaker is caught between two different understandings of social hierarchy; an older, feudal version of social class in which his noble status is understood to be innate/natural and another more modern conception in
which he realizes that his noble class is based on his possessions and wealth (79). In other words, his social class is always in relation to other people, always proportional to the amount of use one can get out of one’s status determined by rates of exchange (90). The confusion over “what constitutes social distinction” has been noted as a continual concern of society that shows up in many sonnet sequences in the late 1500s-early 1600s, the most notable of which (Samuel Daniel, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Michael Drayton, Barnabe Barnes, Thomas Lodge, Henry Lok, etc.) similarly envision nobility as something innate and pure but come from marginal social classes that depend greatly on material wealth to survive (96). In literature, the idea of an inward nobility was always desired but necessarily balanced by the reality that virtue was not practical in earning a living, or providing social power/mobility.

_Knight_, written during the same time period as the sonnet sequences examined by Warley, is concerned with this same issue of real versus ideal social valuation, what Johan Huizinga distinguished as “representative ideals,” things that “actually exist in culture” and “compensatory ideals,” “compensations for what did not exist but was considered desirable” (Singer 20). It tries to negotiate between an ideal of inward nobility associated with fin amour and the realities of a social world where virtue has little to no market value. The hero and heroine of the play are clearly the most virtuous

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35 Warley notes that Sidney is particularly aware of distinction of social rank due to the fact that he had a kind of “quasi-aristocratic” status. He was the “occasional” heir to Leicester, but was always a member of the “lesser” nobility (Social Dissonance..pp72-73) For further details about the unique situation of Sidney’s social rank see: Mary Crane, _Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England_. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 190-192; Kennedy, William. _The Site of Petrarchism: Early Modern National Sentiment in Italy, France and England_. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 170-171.

characters, their motives are far from mercenary, and they are made to be esteemed by
the audience because of the lingering ideal of courtly love that still had some social cache
in the early seventeenth century, but they are on track to social and probably financial
depreciation (if not ruin) with their elopement until they are able to counterfeit a status
that allows them to threaten Luce’s father with undesirable consequences. The play
therefore illustrates the social irony that courtly love creates the most admired characters,
but admiration from the audience does nothing to better their social or material
circumstances. Jasper creates a happy ending to their love story through cleverness, but
traditional virtues like bravery and faithfulness are only ever recognized and admired by
those who have no material stake in their actions.

Jasper is the most cunning character of the play and comes up with the schemes
that allow him to run off with Luce and, in the end, to make sure that they both receive
what they are owed from Venturewell (a dowry and a completed apprenticeship).
Leinwand explains that the ability to gull, “or to operate a commodities scheme...offers a
structure within which the competing members of disparate status groups can arrange
themselves” in a hierarchy different from that of official social relations, but the gull-er is
rarely admirable (52-53). He is more often revealed as a “powermonger” (53). In
Knight, however, gulling is not used to achieve undue advantages, but is used to receive
fair treatment, and it is not even used to procure material goods until an attempt to escape
the materialistic world of London and its socially ambitious inhabitants fails. The
cleverness of a city merchant (in the case of Jasper, an apprentice merchant) that is so
often associated with a lust for power and cupidity in other seventeenth-century drama is
allied with the virtuousness of a courtly lover in Knight, becoming a tool for justice.
Cleverness is redefined as a virtue in the unique system of ethics that characterizes the contradiction of a middling class courtly lover. Jasper combines virtues of both characteristically upper and middling classes to redeem the ideal of inner nobility and allow the audience to evaluate the characters based on a hierarchy of excellence of character that is complementary to (rather than contradictory to) a world of commodities and exchange rates. If cleverness is a virtue, than social status is a reward for virtue in the play. Inner nobility does, in fact, create status.

Ranking characters on the amount of virtue they possess is the aspect of the play that really marks it out as a champion of the middling sort and a challenge to the early modern social hierarchy. It explains the play’s superficially odd tendency to praise some and mock others with virtually identical social standing, and why Jasper is made to embody both the positive qualities esteemed by the emerging middling class, while also being directly associated with an upper class, ennobling construction of love. Jasper’s character draws together cherished ideals from multiple social levels and in doing so is ensured to be understood as the most honorable character and a character for whom virtue is more important than status. With his portrayal of the comfortable assimilation of a valued version of fin amour into the middle/low social classes, the play disrupts accepted social categories in a way that attempts to make a meritocratic system of valuation attractive to even those in upper echelons of society.

Of course, elements of courtly love and chivalric romance appear prominently in many characters in *Knight*, not just in its hero. But the supporting character’s conception of love is markedly different from the way it appears in Jasper and Luce. To understand Beaumont’s use of courtly love, it’s important to know the complex social history courtly
love already had in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Lori Humphrey Newcomb in her book *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* points out that chivalric romances had cross-class appeal throughout the early seventeenth century.\(^{37}\)

There were literate members of every social class that loved to read stories of knights and ladies; of great deeds that won fair maidens. There was however a growing show of distaste for popular romance among the literary elite. Chivalric romance was enjoyed by all but not openly. For the educated, it had become the fashion to scorn the low brow tastes of the middle and working class people who were just beginning to include measurable numbers of the literate (Newcomb 79). The pivotal place of fin amour within the plots of these romances implies its almost universal popularity, at least as far as a form of popular entertainment. This popularity of the chivalric romance is complicated further in the realities of courtship. Queen Elizabeth I had re-popularized fin amour in her court early in her reign and encouraged her male courtiers to treat her as the unreachable lady from troubadour poetry, a strategy which, in an age lacking in paradigms of female authority, undoubtedly helped her consolidate power by allowing men to feel more comfortable in their subordinate position.\(^{38}\) However, this strategy eventually led to signature behaviors and rhetoric associated with courtly love losing their status as indicators of sincere affection by the early seventeenth century (Low 29).

Because the rhetoric of courtly love was used as often to ask for political favors from a monarch as to praise a virtuous lady, it began to be associated with the machinations of

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social advancement as much as love.\textsuperscript{39} This was compounded by the fact that those who received social advancement were not necessarily those who were seen as honorable and forthright, but those who were particularly good at political maneuverings like Elizabeth’s favorite, Lord Burghley. Thus the use of the rhetoric of courtly love with its usual accompaniment of faithful service was increasingly revealed as fruitless, an exercise in futility (27). It lost credibility in real life situations. The upper classes would have looked down on very formal manifestations of fin amour in 1607 when \textit{Knight} was first performed, while those with less refinement would have been the only ones to still openly enjoy a chivalric romance.

Though the formal, medieval type of courtly love had fallen out of favor, essential aspects of fin amour were taken by early modern poets and used to create a more modern version of courtly love without the antiquated rituals. Anthony Low in his book \textit{The Reinvention of Love} points out that John Donne, John Milton, Richard Crashaw and Thomas Carew are all poets who contribute to the evolution of fin amour from a one sided adoration of an untouchable lady to a more mutual love, one that is private instead of feudal or social. That love is still described as a holy oneness with the beloved, borrowing terms from religion to emphasize the mystical nature of the union, it still involves a shifting of loyalties that places the beloved unquestionably at the top, but it involves love from both participants and avoids dramatic literary or social gestures.

About Donne’s poems in particular Low writes that they “mark not just the discovery but,
in a real sense, the invention of an inner space, a magic circle of subjective immunity
from outward political threat and from culturally induced anxiety,” (31). Discussing one
specific poem of Donne’s, he writes in the same vein that:

within the social universe contemporary with Donne’s poem [“The
Progresse of the Soule”], the equivalent of the Ptolemaic or traditional
system was to say that the king is both sun and center of all things, the
source of social and political life, of patronage, of wealth, even of personal
identity. Donne’s revolutionary metaphor implicitly exiles the king and
his clients to the periphery and shifts the psychosocial center from the
court to the lovers’ private space. (52)

The trend within intellectual circles, those at court or who attended the
universities and the Inns of Court, was therefore toward an insulated, private type of
affection that secluded itself from the world and avoided the stylized forms of courtly
love. This type of love that was en vogue for the literary elite would hold especial appeal
for the higher class audience at the Blackfriars theater. The poets who were instigators in
this transformation of fin amour would have moved in similar if not the same social
circles as the educated, literary elite that filled the audience. John Donne, the earliest of
the writers, wrote most of his most famous love poems in the 1590s while he was at
Cambridge, ten years before the creation of Knight, and George Herbert entered Trinity
College in 1610, only three years after Knight’s performance. Francis Beaumont wrote
his play concurrently with this intellectual movement that altered the perception of love
especially for lettered individuals, and he was performing it for the London audience that
was most likely to include a large number of them.

Knight therefore aligns itself with an upper class perspective when, throughout the
play, outward, overtly formal manifestations of courtly love are mocked (its association
with elaborate rhetoric, melodramatic story lines, etc) while sincere and private affection
is lauded; while this could seem to exalt Jasper and Luce’s tastes or behavior above that of their social equals, the middling social class virtues Jasper espouses are also, often simultaneously with his love, depicted as genuine and internalized. This is especially true in contrast with the other characters whose social position or amorous desires provide conspicuous parallels to Jasper’s. These characters distinguish themselves from Jasper and Luce most notably with their longing to climb the social hierarchy rather than be content with the inherent worth in the middle classes. In *Knight*, social climbing is continuously linked with an empty facade, while genuineness is associated with the both Jasper’s particular strain of love and his internalized code of morals.

A middle class able to scoff at social climbers because they already believed themselves to be worthy in their own right was a fairly recent phenomenon. A sense of identity for the middling sort of people, merchants and artisans prosperous enough to live comfortably but who didn’t own land or titles, emerged gradually through the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth centuries. Their collective identity based on a code of ethics which included values like hard work, thrift, and self control caused a war between the cultures of their own burgeoning bourgeois class and a fading medieval culture of integrated community which came to a height in the first decade of the seventeenth century when *Knight* was written and first performed (Fitter 117). The pride that these artisans and merchants began to have in their standards of behavior brought with it, according to Chris Fitter, “a monied authoritarian primness, a new snobbery of sanctimonious repressiveness, that rejoiced in scapegoating the poor” (116). This resulted in a “clash of cultures” between the old, medieval sense of identity as a town or region where the poor played an accepted, essential role and the early modern emphasis
on class distinction through disciplined behavior (117). Medieval festivals with dancing and drinking had formerly been ways for the community to celebrate together.\textsuperscript{40} They were often organized by the church itself; church ales (festivals with wassailing) were used to raise money for church officials and to support the town poor, but any type of carousing gradually fell into disrepute as disorderly conduct.\textsuperscript{41} By the first decade of the seventeenth century, rich middling class citizens (and even members of the gentry) increasingly used elected church offices to police the poor, to decide who was a part of the deserving poor and who was not, to break forcibly into taverns on Sunday mornings and make sure the inebriated still attended church, and bring up anyone on charges who was particularly rowdy (118). All of this points to a new confidence in the self-worth of the middling sort of people as a group so assured that their way of life was superior that they had the right to impose it on others.

The audience of \textit{Knight} is made aware that Jasper epitomizes a distinctly middling sort code of ethics in the very first scene of act one. In this scene, Venturewell, Jasper’s master, discovers the love between Jasper and his daughter and he is horrified at the thought of Luce making such a poor match. When Venturewell subsequently demands that Jasper leave his house, Jasper attempts to defend himself from Venturewell’s anger by reminding him of those worthy elements of his character that have allowed him to perform so well at his job for all the years he has served as an apprentice (typically seven


\textsuperscript{41} See also: Underdown, 52 and Hill, Christopher. \textit{Society and Puritanism in Pre-revolutionary England}. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997: 152.
years). The virtues he chooses to emphasize are pointedly the very ones that a member of the gentry would not find particularly praiseworthy:

…I am yours,
Bound both by love and duty to your service,
In which my labour hath been all my profit.
I have not lost in bargain, nor delighted
To wear your honest gains upon my back…
Or lavishly in play consumed your stock. (I.17-22)

Jasper’s first line of defense here is that his labor has been all his profit. This can be read in a couple of ways, either pointing out that, as an apprentice, he has received no wages, which seems rather obvious and would be a non sequitur as the rest of his speech is designed to point out virtues for which Venturewell should be grateful, or drawing attention to the fact that he actually considers labor to be profitable unto itself, even without the compensation of ready money. The scorn with which the aristocracy in the early seventeenth century looked down upon manual labor, and the premium they placed upon leisure, makes the admission of finding profit in work seem especially foreign to any upwardly mobile circles (Thomas 82). Robert Burton declared during the period in question that, “‘Amongst us, the badge of gentry is idleness: to be of no calling, not to labour, for that’s derogatory to their birth’” (83). While some in the lower classes as well tried to avoid work and viewed it as primarily a primeval curse stemming from original sin, they did not see it as derogatory to their station or attempt to avoid it on principle (78). The value of hard work was, however, esteemed by religious leaders, Protestant and Catholic alike (86). It was seen as a mark of good character, an indication that a man had a “‘generous disposition of the soul’” and enough self-respect to refuse to live off other people’s work (103).
It’s important to note here that Jasper’s hard work and temperance make as much of a stark contrast with his poor, lower-class father’s profligacy, as the admired idleness of the gentry. When Jasper’s mother points out to her husband, Master Merrythought, that he is virtually bankrupt and asks how he will survive the rest of his life, he replies:

> Why, how have I done hitherto this forty years? I never came into my dingy room but at eleven and six o’clock I found an excellent meal and drink a’th’table; my clothes were never worn out but next morning a tailor brought me a new suit; and without question it will be so ever. (I.404-409).

In Merrythought’s forty (plus?) years of life, he has never bothered to plan or work. He spends money as soon as he has it and assumes that other people’s labor will magically fill his needs as it has thus far. This depiction of Merrythought helps to confirm the myth, comforting to people within middling and high social ranks, that the poor were poor by their own choice, due to their own laziness, and that they were not particularly miserable in spite of their poverty. In a general social context this skewed perspective on the lower classes normalizes the feeling of superiority the middling sort began to feel over them. They deserved a higher social standing because they were more virtuous.

In the context of the play, this sets Jasper apart from his father and emphasizes, counter to the established early modern system of hierarchy, that family does not determine one’s social class. The same thing that separates him from the upper classes sets him apart from the lower ones as well; he lives by a prudent code of behavior.

Jasper then goes on to describe his business prowess. He’s a man who doesn’t lose in a bargain and therefore must know how to maneuver a contract in retail to always

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42 So as not to misleadingly paint the entire upper end of the social scale as completely self-righteous, it’s worth noting here that in early modern London, the care of the poor was a preoccupation for government and citizens alike. Wealthy people consistently and altruistically left money for the poor in their wills and churches constantly collected alms for the poor.
get an equal or better outcome than his opponent. Again this is a talent that other merchants would admire, but the gentry associated merchants with a certain degree of avariciousness because they were so invested in profit, and because the trend among merchants at the time was to give up trade for the despised practice of usury, which involved less risk, after having gained enough capital. Taking pride in bargaining cleverly would therefore seem like taking pride in unscrupulous manipulation to someone from upper class circles. Jasper then mentions specifically that he does not use Venturewell’s money to dress himself lavishly, even though shows of wealth through a display of finery were an ingrained part of aristocratic culture. London apprentices were legally required to wear only the clothing provided for them by their masters, which was hardly the most fashionable or highest quality, and to keep their hair cut short, unlike the fashion at court of nobles who kept their hair long. Steven R. Smith points out that this particular rule was resented by many apprentices and often violated, so the fact that Jasper does not violate this rule at any time during the years of his apprenticeship distinguishes him all the more from an average apprentice many of whom longed to dress in finery that allowed them to pass for a higher social class than they actually possessed (Smith 150-151). Jasper goes on to reinforce this by implying that he is a saver of money rather than a wasteful spender of it, though lavish entertaining and gift giving were another important marker of proper aristocratic conduct. All of this separates him from any aristocratic pretension, and indicates that he finds value in the practices of his own social class.

Jasper concludes the list of mistakes he avoided as an apprentice by declaring, “These, and the miseries that do attend them,/ I dare proclaim are strangers/ to all my
temperate actions” (23-25). While temperance might have been a virtue professed by the aristocracy under Elizabeth when they were consciously trying to reclaim elements of medieval chivalry, by 1607 the Jacobean nobility was known for temperance in neither its spending habits, which were excessive occasionally to the point of impoverishment, nor its control of temper, which is evident from the pervasive culture of dueling which flourished under the extreme sensitivity of the aristocratic sense of honor. By choosing to focus on these particular virtues, Beaumont identifies Jasper right from the first scene of the play as a representative of the middling classes who believes in the value of their way of life as distinct from the aristocratic set of values admired and practiced by the upper classes.

In Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social dominance, an alternate perspective on society that works to lessen the strictness of its hierarchical structure and create more egalitarian attitudes is considered an attenuating myth (Jost 246). Like feminism, or Marxism, the most often cited examples of attenuating myths, this early modern middling class belief in their own virtue, their belief that their status was merited and that it made them superior to even members of the gentry, works to allow its adherents to reevaluate the social structure and see alternative ways of organizing society. While it makes sense that members of the middling sort were increasingly apt to adopt this perspective, the upper classes obviously had a lot of stake in maintaining traditional methods of evaluating people. In Knight, in order to begin to shift the perspective of more recalcitrant viewers, an opinion commonly accepted by the upper classes and the

upwardly mobile is made to parallel this particular attenuating myth, accentuating its logic in a way the Blackfriars’ audience was already primed to accept. The specific modifications made in the seventeenth century adaptation of courtly love, the perceptual separation of outer from inner qualities and the preference for inner as the more genuine of the two had already been performed. The play attempts to do the same work with the perception of social class. *Knight* emphasizes the fact that the middle class system of ethics accentuates inner qualities while the traits typically valued by the traditional social hierarchy tend to be outward and therefore superficial ones.

Both Jasper’s admirable virtues and his love for Luce are brought to the attention of Venturewell in the same conversation. Though Venturewell was the man who should have been most aware of both things, he somehow managed to be ignorant of both. This could also have indicated that Venturewell was simply a dullard, but his success as a merchant means that he can’t be written off as an idiot. It could also mean that the merchant is just so self-centered that he notices nothing that doesn’t directly affect his bottom line, but his mercenary motives in marrying Luce off to a wealthy gentleman would seem to indicate that he would have appreciated Jasper’s frugality and good business sense had they been performed in any remotely conspicuous fashion. The unobtrusive manner in which Jasper has performed both his duties and his courtship of Luce are therefore brought to the attention of the audience at the same time at the opening of the play. Jasper has apparently not made a point of drawing attention to his virtues. He has just quietly gone about with his admirable behavior without demanding immediate praise. Similarly, Jasper and Luce have made none of the grand, overt gestures of love after the fashion of knights in stories, but they have kept their
relationship very much a private one. Both Jasper’s ethics and his love affair are not
performed for any outward appreciation, but for a personal sense of contentment.

If the sincerity of a private code of ethics is associated with a private type of love
affair in the first conversation between Jasper and his master, they are allied more closely
when Jasper’s love, which involves risk and requires virtues in order to sustain it, is
compared with that of Master Humphrey, Luce’s gentleman suitor. Jasper’s love for
Luce is portrayed as conspicuously more sincere than Luce’s rich suitor, Master
Humphrey, because he is willing to lose his social standing altogether in order to pursue
ture love. Before the action of the play begins, Jasper and Luce have agreed upon a
strategy to remain together in spite of her father’s disapproval. They decide to have Luce
declare her willingness to marry Humphrey, but only if he will indulge her love for
romantic stories and pretend to elope with her into a nearby wood. This would all be
with her father’s permission, of course, but they would play at being illicit lovers. Jasper
would then meet her and her pretend fiance at a designated spot in the woods and beat
down any resistance from Humphrey, allowing Luce and Jasper to run off together
without any interference from her father. The real elopement with Jasper is masked by a
false one with Humphrey. The secret is held privately by Luce and Jasper alone, while
the false elopement is discussed with her father. The contrast between the two is
deliberate and inescapable. As far as either one of them knows, their elopement will
result in Luce’s disinheritance, and, in the first five minutes of the play, does result in
Jasper losing his place as an apprentice. The couple is therefore completely destitute
even as they pursue their plan to run off into the forest to get married. Both courage and
loyalty are required to pursue his love after he is cast off by his employer and when
Jasper proves that he possesses them both, he makes it especially obvious that Humphrey risks nothing in his affection or his fake elopement. In his desire to marry Luce he only displays a materialistic desire for her fortune. Master Humphrey is literally associated with falseness and superficiality in pursuing a fake elopement, and subsequently displays no internalized virtues in the adventure. An admirable character is therefore a necessary condition (at least in the world of Knight) for sustaining a sincere love, both of which are placed in direct contrast with Master Humphrey with his mere facade of love is unwilling to put anything at risk. The contrast between higher class Humphrey and middling sort Jasper is therefore the fact that one love is specifically characterized by superficiality and materialism and the other is defined by sincerity and virtue.

Humphrey’s association with empty forms is also evident even before the elopement in his other attempts to seem like a courtly lover. The sonnet had been extremely popular in courtly poetry of fin amour since Petrarch’s influence reached England, and blank verse was typically used in dramatic monologues and soliloquies of love in the early modern theatre (Burt 8). Humphrey tries to appropriate this medium of fin amour, but fails to understand the substance behind it. He is not content with just blank verse or a sonnet rhyme scheme, but exaggerates this practice by speaking in the annoying chime of heroic couplets. Beaumont has arranged these couplets so that they are not only cloying, but awkward as well. Humphrey’s first lines to Luce are:

Fair Mistress Luce, how do you? Are you Well?
Give me your hand, and then I pray you tell
How doth your little sister and your brother,
And whether you love me or any other. (I.121-125)

The jarringly quick transition from a polite inquiry about her family’s health to asking her for a declaration of love, forces the realization that her family’s health is only brought up because it gave Humphrey a convenient rhyme, and illustrates the sacrifice of substance and sense on his part for form. Similarly, in his attempts to mimic the conventions of courtly love Humphrey again goes overboard, attempting to bend the undeniably mundane circumstances of his first meeting with Luce to fit the mold of a predestined meeting between a knight and his lady. Humphrey first laid eyes on Luce when he was stealing rabbits from her father’s warren. Her father’s game keeper fetched Luce, the lady of the house, to bring charges against Humphrey when caught; a circumstance that is both patently ignoble, indicating the distance between Humphrey and any real virtue, and small – not epic by any interpretation of the word. Yet he tries to spin circumstances that were originally just an annoyance to Luce, into something both epic and admirable by using the antiquated diction of old romances and indicating the depth of his emotion by pointing out how he “broke [his] tiller” upon the meeting (136), or broke the crossbeam of his crossbow. This last detail is a comically ordinary revision of courtly romances in which the knight might very well have some physical manifestation of his sudden infatuation with the newly met lady – but it wouldn’t be something as trivial as sitting down clumsily and breaking a crossbow. Both of these rather pathetic attempts to re-create himself as a knight and his relationship with Luce as a traditional courtly love indicate that Humphrey is committed to a shallow, outmoded understanding of love as something that consists merely of an easily catalogued and repeated series of performances. As the only character in the play ostensibly from the gentry, Master
Humphrey is the character who ought to have been the one most acquainted with the evolution of fin amour into a closeted space for lovers alone, but Beaumont pointedly gives him the bad taste to prefer the archaic, performative version of love, denying any innate link between social class and good taste and instead highlighting the similarly internalized nature of both a private kind of love and a bourgeois code of ethics and how logically they fit together in the character of Jasper.

Analogous to Jasper’s sincerity in both love and the distinguishing features of his class identity (his ethics), Humphrey is also superficial in both his approach to romance and his understanding of social class. While he declares himself to be of “gentle blood” in his very first conversation with Venturewell, he is most likely someone originally of lower rank who recently bought his way into the gentry. When the merchant assures him that Jasper, his rival, has been sent away, Humphrey thanks him and adds as a virtual non sequitur, “...and ere I stir,/ It shall be known, however you do deem,/ I am of gentle blood and gentle seem” (I. 84-86). His very eager insistence upon his gentle status when it hadn’t even been questioned betrays an anxiety about his status not usually found in those who have an unquestioned right to it. The impression Humphrey gives the audience is therefore that he is not from a long ancestry of gentle blood, but is creating the best show of gentle manners that he can in order to assume the part. Representing aristocratic speech patterns as blank verse in early modern drama allowed certain characters’ rhetoric to give the impression of being more thoughtful, measured, deliberative and balanced as opposed to that of lower class characters whose speech sounded by comparison both untutored and ordinary. Humphrey’s sing-song rhetorical style implies an imperfect understanding of upper class speech patterns. He recognizes that they he ought to speak
in verse as someone from the upper classes, but he overplays his poetry, making it too obvious; like a member of the nouveau riche who has the bad taste to wear too many jewels and look gaudy rather than tasteful. A certain amount of blank verse sounds noble, measured, well spoken, but Humphrey only recognizes the importance of the medium rather than the reason behind its use. Humphrey’s strategies for social climbing are all about imitation, acting like someone else, rather than initiating any real change in himself.

As a poor imitation, his acting is easily seen through by others, a fact made obvious when Jasper pointedly draws attention to the shallowness inherent in Humphrey’s type of social climbing. He directly criticizes Humphrey’s artificial performance of social class in his lines to Venturewell at the beginning of the play when he says, referring to Venturewell’s intentions to marry Luce to Humphrey, that, “I cannot think you mean to match her / Unto a fellow of so lame a presence,/ One that hath little left of nature in him,” (I.31-33). Jasper’s indictment of a lack of any “nature” left in Humphrey suggests Jasper’s recognition of Humphrey’s demeanor as something contrived, a false pretense that can easily be read as such, and therefore fails at its primary goal of allowing him the privileges associated with having gentle blood. The term “lame” suggests that Jasper sees the attempt to mimic aristocratic behavior as a crippling, rather than liberating enterprise. Following this logic, if imitation is inhibiting, then not following in the wake of the fashions and trends designed by the elite is therefore freeing. Jasper’s characterization of Humphrey’s methods of social climbing implies that social climbing of any sort will always be “unnatural,” just a superficial act,
while those who do not follow in the footsteps of the aristocracy, those who value their own social class rather than aspire to another, are both natural and free.

Social climbing becomes an object of ridicule by specifically associating it with superficiality even in the alternate plot insisted upon by the staged interruption of George and Nell. Their apprentice, a young man named Rafe, plays the part of the grocer turned knight errant. Like Humphrey, he becomes absurd due to his belief in the inherent superiority of the upper classes which he shows through his desire to mimic their way of life rather than find value in his own. Rafe, the knight of the pestle, tries to move upward by simply declaring himself to be a knight and performing what he perceives to be the correct gestures, speech patterns and mannerisms of members of the nobility in the thirteenth century. He puts a premium on the appearance of gentility rather than any sincere, practical virtue, so much so that it is clear that his primary goal is the self-aggrandizement of being taken for a member of a higher social group rather than the internalization of the virtues espoused by any code of conduct, medieval or modern. Rafe’s assumption of the persona of a medieval knight is admittedly out of a longing for fame. He asks himself in the first scene:

But what brave spirit could be content to sit in his shop, with a flappet of wood, and a blue apron before him, selling mithridatum and dragon’s water to visited houses that might pursue feats of arms, and, through his noble achievements, procure such a famous history to be written of his heroic prowess? (I. 268-274)

It is his desire for a place in legend that drives him to decide to become a knight. In his preparations to live the life of a hero, rather than the traditional night spent in prayer or vowing to uphold certain virtues, Rafe focuses on crafting his language. He
wants, more than anything for himself and his associates to sound like a knight and his entourage:

My beloved squire, and George my dwarf, I charge you that from henceforth you never call me by any other name but “the right courteous and valiant Knight of the Burning Pestle;” and that you never call any female by the name of a woman or wench, but “fair lady,” if she have her desires, if not, “distressed damsel;” that you call all forests and heaths, “deserts” and all horses “palfreys.” (I. 294-302)

Rafe then goes on to test his squire and make sure he knows how to address a passing gentleman as well as a lady. His priority is not the service he will do to the people he’ll meet. He could easily head off in search of adventure and help people in need without mimicking the language of medieval romances. The priority he places on enveloping himself in the rhetorical regalia of these stories, especially in how his squire is addressing strangers, indicates that more than anything he wants the recognition he thinks is due to a knight. However, Rafe is not delusional. He is not Don Quixote. He knows that he isn’t really a knight; indeed, in his choice of title he brings a continual awareness to his original profession as a grocer. So, it isn’t a sincere psychosis that plagues him, just a desire to gain the fame and glory through an elaborate act. In all fairness, Rafe does exhibit instances of bravery and tries to do good deeds, but in every situation the good he might have done takes a backseat to the performance of his adventure: his insistence upon elaborate language makes all interactions take agonizingly longer than necessary; his refusal to recognize modern conventions leads him to try to stiff an innkeeper of his pay, hardly the kind of honorable action befitting a knight; he easily falls for an innkeeper and barber’s plot to make a fool of him by convincing him that the barber is a giant, and though he wins the fight with his “giant” he has still only
succeeded in vanquishing the local barber. Again, this is hardly a noble action by any standard. All of these continually show the audience Rafe’s preferment for the performative aspects of knighthood rather any commitment to truly honorable deeds.

Similar to Jasper’s comments about Humphrey, in his first encounter with Rafe Jasper’s comments draw attention to the inevitable constriction involved in imitation. His lines to Rafe while stealing Rafe’s weapon of choice (his pestle) and knocking him about the head are recited in verse as if coming straight out of a romance and placed in quotation marks (though Jasper is not quoting any known text):

‘With that he stood upright in his stirrups, and gave the Knight of the Calf-skin such a knock that he forsook his horse and down he fell; and then he leaped upon him, and plucking off his helmet—’ (II.345-350)

The title “Knight of the Calf-skin” refers, of course, to the fact that romances were traditionally written on vellum, and suggests that Jasper identifies Rafe as the direct product of these stories, a character “written,” or at least whose major characteristics were predetermined, by an antecedent, aristocratic literary tradition, rather than an individual who moves under his/her own volition. When Rafe, an apprentice unfamiliar to the customs and priorities of the aristocracy, appropriates this medieval version of a courtly lover he it is both clumsy and superficial. Similar to Humphrey who inadvertently reveals his true status, Rafe reveals himself to be very far from any aristocratic ideal and makes himself an object of ridicule that the Blackfriars audience can take delight in mocking. In contrast, by reciting the lines in imitation of a quote, Jasper, makes himself the author of the adventure and “writes” himself in as the victor of the battle, which comes to pass in reality as he “recites” the lines. The entire encounter
can therefore be read as an illustration of the weakness inherent in the project of following the social script of another social class, following forever in the traditions dictated by the aristocracy, versus taking charge and creating new kinds of heroes for adventures.\textsuperscript{45} In attempting to live out the fantasy of a courtly love narrative, Rafe allows himself to fall under the “author”ity of someone else, those with higher social status. Becoming an author, on the other hand, allows Jasper to shape his own destiny and play by a different, more advantageous, set of rules. He is a middling class character and a lover but avoids becoming a pitiful pretender. The tacit conclusion of this episode is again that imitation is folly and by extension, if one does not imitate anyone else, one must find a way to value oneself. Jasper, who did not play by the traditional script wins the encounter.

It’s notable here that the virtues Jasper reveals while pursuing his love are those that would have been perceived as admirable to all social classes, not just artisans and merchants. Jasper is identified as emblematic of middling class ethics in the first scene, but the rest of the play goes out of its way to make Jasper admirable to upper classes as well as the middle ones. Courage especially and independent thinking were considered virtues among all young men, though especially so for the upper classes. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the education for young men from the gentry and aristocracy was organized around the principle of pushing young men to develop

\textsuperscript{45} Jasper’s assumption of authority here is also potentially similar to Christopher Warley’s assessment of the speaking subject of Michael Drayton’s Ideas. Warley argues that the speaking subject of sonnets altered in the seventeenth century to more directly parallel that of King James I’s poetic works which assert their own authority rather than the apologetic nobility of Edmund Spenser’s which constantly seeks to justify its right to speak. See Sonnet Sequences and Social Distinction in Renaissance England pp 162-169.
independence of thought and action (McCormack 405). Young, male members of the
gentry and aristocracy were encouraged to display independence of judgment even to the
extent that they were allowed and even expected to disagree with their parents’
assessment of problems and courses of action and choose what they believed was right,
as long as it was still within the guidelines of a common code of ethics (422). Jasper
defies all of the adult authority figures in his life building a life for himself outside of his
parents expectations and against the objections of his master. Another aspect of Jasper’s
personality that would have been admired by upper classes is his mocking and beating of
Rafe. While this may seem brutal to a modern audience, one must consider the
atmosphere of the war of railing that was in full swing in the early seventeenth century.
The higher price of admission at the more exclusive theaters in London like the
Blackfriars drew a higher percentage of the upper class and educated than the public
amphitheaters (Gurr 89).

Over time, this created two divergent theater repertoires, one for the educated who
loved a well-written play (118), and one for the less educated who preferred a brilliant
spectacle (104). While there is serious debate in modern scholarship about the extent of
the division between the private and public theater traditions, (especially in the early
years of the century as the divergence wasn’t really settled until the 1630s), there are

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46 Henry French and Mark Rothery have examined the values system that adolescent gentlemen were supposed to imbibe before reaching adulthood and remark how other scholars, Steven Shapin and Anna Bryson, “have noted how commentators associated gentlemanly status with personal fitness to exercise power, and (therefore) with individual moral superiority derived from truthfulness, self-restraint, and independence of judgement (and means). As Shapin has observed, “the culture that testified to the gentleman’s identity… laid particular stress upon the facts of his independence and integrity relative to individuals in other social categories.”” They go on to point out how M. McCormack’s work similarly identifies independence and virtue as the characteristics that upper class men believed should distinguish them from lower classes, “He (McCormack) describes a political discourse that privileged freedom from obligation, ‘a broadly common culture of manly virtue and assertive individualism’ that stretched from the uncorrupted independent gentleman in parliament to the artisan groups depending their rights collectively. See page 405
some things known for certain. In the private theaters, the fashion was for overt, vicious mockery of anyone the playwright found ridiculous, especially the lower classes and the more transparent drama they preferred. The ability cleverly to cleverly put down another was admired especially by the students of the Inns of Court who were loyal attendees of the Blackfriars theater (186). For them it was a marker of social status to be a wit (Lesser 55). When Jasper and Luce mock Master Humphrey and when Jasper mercilessly puts Rafe in his place, this would not have made him unsympathetic to the audience. On the contrary, it would have made him more admirable to an audience who condoned this type of railing as a marker of refined tastes. Jasper is a hard working apprentice who possesses an uncanny number of traits that would have been admired by upper class patrons. These traits build on the foundation of the exclusive and admired type of love practiced by Jasper and Luce which similarly draw admiration from classes more inclined to mock or dismiss an apprentice then praise him.

While Rafe, a fellow apprentice, and Humphrey, a rival for Luce’s hand, provide the primary foils for Jasper’s virtue and sincerity, a marked shallowness, especially in the understanding of love and the type of nobility manifested by the courtly lovers in popular stories is endemic to almost all the characters in the play. When Humphrey declares himself to be of gentle blood, Venturewell’s only response to this is to agree, replying, “Oh, sir, I know it certain” (I.87). There is no indication that this line should be taken as anything but sincere, though it’s brevity might easily suggest dismissiveness, leaving the audience to conclude either that Venturewell, too, understands “nobility” as the most superficial version of itself, completely swallowing Humphrey’s terrible mimicry; or that, as a merchant whose riches have made him at least as powerful as members of the gentry,
he simply doesn’t care enough to examine the issue. Humphrey’s money is more
important for him than any other factor, even his social rank (or lack thereof) and his
daughter’s potential happiness. The citizen and his wife have a slightly more liberal
understanding of who can legitimately claim nobility, but they still put considerable stock
in the idea that one of its essential elements is a theatrical, appropriately authoritative
show. They expect powerful speeches or the epic type of adventure (slaying dragons, and
conquering armies) that an audience can expect to find in the noble-born heroes of
popular drama. When they insist that the grocer in the play, “do admirable things,” (I.38)
they refine that request to be something along the lines of killing a “lion with a pestle”
(I.46) instead of any act of courage that might reasonably be witnessed in the streets of
London. George and Nell’s demands only superficially insist on the value of citizens.
They choose to glorify the talents of a good soldier rather than the talents of a grocer or
merchant, and thus reinforce the standards of feudalism that elevate those who were
handy in a fight instead of those who were clever strategists or skilled craftsmen. By
stipulating that Rafe must perform the same types of actions as a knight they turn their
middling class hero into one who can only be seen as either a baffoon or a lunatic. As
with Humphrey and Venturewell then, this desire to locate value in the conventional
rhetorical trappings of nobility and to imitate these rather than find any more profound
source for value, only leads to justified ridicule.

Jasper and Luce are not concerned with an outward performance of their identity
or their love at all. Their love is an exceedingly private affair that is rarely described at
all. The play opens after they have already fallen in love, but no one knows about it.
They have kept their courting subtle enough for her father to be completely taken
unawares. Their scenes together are remarkable for their lack of poetic speeches. Their exchange before they part, just before they put into practice their risky plan for elopement, consists of short exchanges with some metaphors, but all of them to prosaic things that would be out of place in a courtly love lyric:

Luce: Why, how now, friend, struck with my father’s thunder?
Jasper: Struck and struck dead unless the remedy be full of speed and virtue. I am now What I expected long, no more your father’s
Luce: But mine.
Jasper: But yours and only yours I am; That’s all I have to keep me from the statute. You dare be constant still?
Luce: Oh, fear me not... (I.42-48)

When Jasper says that Luce’s love is the only thing to keep him from the statute, he refers to the Acts for the Relief of the Poor issued in 1598 and 1601 which allowed for the incarceration of able-bodied beggars who refused to work (Harris 75). Vagabonds and masterless men were considered a threat to the order of the city and by law belonged either in work houses or the House of Correction. By quite incorrectly saying that Luce’s love keeps him from being a vagabond/beggar, he indirectly compares it to either employment or wealth. This is hardly a romantic metaphor, though it does express his belief that Luce’s affection for him raises him up to a better state of being. A beautiful sentiment in a fairly prosaic package. Jasper avoids the lofty metaphors of courtly love poetry and hence appears more sincere since his metaphor is not an obvious copy of a thousand other works. This is also noteworthy since unusual and prosaic metaphors were another growing trend in fashionable coterie poetry. Today we recognize it as one of the hallmarks of the metaphysical poets, many of whom, as previously mentioned, were
integral in the movement that reinvented fin amour for a new generation. The freshness of this tactic and its association with avant garde literature in the seventeenth century would also have indicated both intelligence and sincerity on Jasper’s part.

Jasper’s statement that love itself kept him from poverty and homelessness is ironic here since it is for Luce’s love that he literally risks becoming homeless and almost ends up with neither job, fortune, or fiance. If inner nobility rather than a superficial version of it is lauded in the play, this remark is a subtle way of pointing out that, while love is ennobling, it really has no practical value. A sincere, loving heart could just as easily lead to destitution as to a happy ending if other, more practical virtues are not added to it. Jasper is a clever apprentice and knows how to strike a lucrative bargain. It’s fair to assume that he knows how to read people and situations. In the beginning of the play, he counts his business acumen as one of his virtues for which he should be rewarded. This social and business savvy is manifested in the clever ruses he creates throughout the play, the last of which wins him material advantages. It is only when cleverness, accounted a virtue by the middling sort, is added to the virtues of the courtly lover that he can actually flourish in society. The values from the middling sort are pointedly what allows an inner, sincere kind of nobility to be translated into social status.

When Jasper absolutely must describe his love for Luce, it is in terms of a mystical oneness that mirrors descriptions of love created by early Renaissance theorists of love like Marcilio Ficino and Baldasarre Castiglione, and it implies that Jasper and Luce belong in their own untouchable sphere, separate from the problems that beset ordinary human beings. Castiglione and Ficino describe fin amour as a unity or concord with the beloved in quasi-mystical terms similar to the writings of Donne or Milton. The
reverence which was originally applied to a religious atonement carried over into courtly love and into the seventeenth century variant of it. In act V, Jasper addresses Venturewell in the guise of his own ghost, pretending that he has died of a broken heart. He has already spirited Luce away from her father’s house in such a clever way that Venturewell believes she has mystically evaporated because she couldn’t stand to be parted from him. In a speech meant to instill a sense of guilt, Jasper declares:

Fond world wretch, who dost not understand
In death that true hearts cannot parted be.
...thy daughter is quite born away
On wings of angels…
to far out of thy reach…
...But she and I
Will in another world enjoy our loves,
Where neither anger, poverty,
Nor any cross that troubles earthly men
Shall make us sever united hearts. (V.9-18)

Jasper describes their relationship as united hearts, an inexplicable joining of their souls, that cannot be affected by those things that are most likely to adversely affect an average marriage. This description is paradigmatic of the contemporary adaptation of fin amour as a private, closeted affair between two lovers that would have been understood as a mark of sincerity. As a type of love that was admired by the upper class and upwardly mobile members of the audience, this grants a mere apprentice and the daughter of a merchant some appreciable social capital.

Beyond merely relocating an admirable sincerity in low-born characters who were not often granted such refined feelings, there is a subversive irony in Jasper’s speech in that, while he appears to be lamenting his inability to find a place for himself and his beloved within the social bounds of reality, he is, in reality, laying the ground-work to
ingeniously create a space within society to accommodate them. If he had truly been speaking from beyond the grave, his protestations would have been very much in line with the traditional use of courtly love in stories as an isolated incident that made no lasting impact on the organization of society. The death of the lovers has been the resolution to many (if not most) famous courtly love stories in the literary canon. Courtly lovers are socially disruptive in the sense that they defy societal standards, often putting their loyalties to each other ahead of their loyalty to king, country or family. Denis De Rougemont’s classic analysis of Tristan and Iseult looks at the antagonism in the story between the chivalric code of ethics and that of feudalism and, “hence between two kinds of duty and even two ‘religions—’” (33). In chivalric romances, the hero and heroine’s loyalties, their choices, and even how they choose to comport themselves are always split between love for authority figures and social order (love of father/family, king, lord, judge) and love for their beloved, a conflict that typically provides most of the driving action of the story. Courtly love stories are usually tragic because the lovers realize that there is no permissible space for them to occupy in society and they must die to be together. In the case of Tristan and Iseult, their rebellion against feudal loyalty was an isolated one. They do not insist upon forcing their relationship into society; in fact, they don’t even try. The only time that Tristan and Iseult are together for any length of time is when they escape from court and live together in a life “harsh and hard” in the forest of Morrois (De Rougemont 29). They must leave all organized society altogether to be united, and in the end they die one shortly after the other when Tristan perishes from a mistaken belief that Iseult has betrayed him and Iseult dies of grief. Jasper’s speech in the end of Knight is understood by Venturewell to validate this older version of fin amour
where the lovers find society’s restrictions to be too great for them to surmount and must perish to be together; a potent comment on the trammels of society but one that does nothing to change the hierarchical order.

For the audience, who knows that Jasper is still alive, the speech cannot refer literally to another world. It must instead be taken figuratively to refer to another way of living, a different perspective on life, where neither her father’s anger nor their lack of money would prevent them from being together. If they were to run away together after informing her father that they had both died, they will still be in England, respectable members of the same society, perhaps poorer than they were, but having devised a way to make Venturewell’s anger relatively impotent; but Jasper’s ruse is even more subversive than just allowing he and his beloved to run away together. He uses Venturewell’s guilt over contributing to his daughter’s “death” to manipulate him into admitting that, were they still alive, he would welcome them with open arms. After this admission, Jasper and Luce reveal themselves and Venturewell accepts their love and supports their desire to be married. Through ingenuity they achieve literally what lovers in Donne’s poems create figuratively— a world where the social order cannot dictate their love. They create that world, not in a forest completely detached from all social contact, but within London itself. Perhaps deliberately in contrast to the isolationist, often self-destructive tendencies of their aristocratic predecessors, Jasper and Luce prove themselves to be cunning and resourceful as well as caring and brave. They directly change their social reality instead of retreating from it. Knight therefore translates an upper class ideal into a middling class reality. The inner, innate nobility that Edmund Spenser and so many other sonneteers
sought to find in themselves makes a space for itself in commercialist London if middling
class virtues are granted validity alongside those of the aristocracy.

In the process of this, the play indicates just how powerful this new doctrine of
love was, especially in the perception of social class. In poems, love is depicted as
existing in its own world, denying all worldly influences any power. If this ‘love trumps
all’ attitude is brought into real life situations, than lovers are justified in defying any
number of social norms or expectations to make space for their love, as Jasper and Luce
do in denying parents, a master, and social betters any authority over them and in
matching money with poverty in marriage. Denying social pressures power in the arena
of love grants lower class lovers the same rights and privileges as their upper class
counterparts. Similar to the middling class code of ethics that is largely meritocratic, puts
men of differing social status, and asks them to earn their neighbor’s respect, love that
denies society any influence gives all men an equal right to practice it and prove their
love is special. It is doubtful that, when crafting an adaptation of courtly love, early
modern poets recognized that if carried through to its logical end it had a socially
levelling effect, but *Knight* brings attention to this by featuring and validating the
freedom attendant upon lovers from lower social classes on account of their participation
in this kind of love.

As long as Jasper remains willing to defy a strict social hierarchy, things
remarkably go his way. His mother’s jewels are left directly in his path in the middle of
the forest. When he fights against Rafe he wins easily, though Rafe is supposed to be
quite the strapping lad. However, there is a point in the play where Jasper attempts to
impose on Luce a very strict hierarchy of behavior of husband over wife, and when he
does, his plans begin to fall apart. In the beginning of act 3, Jasper enacts a chapter of the Patient Griselda myth. In every version of this tale, Griselda is a peasant woman who is chosen to marry a lord. The lord then decides to test her loyalty by treating her poorly, taking her children from her, letting her believe that they have died, and leaving her in poverty just to see if she will remain faithful and sweet tempered to her husband. In the end, having proved her loyalty, the lord reveals that her children are all alive and well, returns them to her and returns her to her place at his side as the lady of the manor.

Taking on the persona of the lord in this traditional myth, Jasper decides to try Luce’s loyalty while she sleeps in the wood after they have successfully escaped from her father. Declaring his love to be free from the caprices that are usually attributed to women, Jasper pronounces himself free from any of the typical difficulties of young lovers, but decides to test Luce’s loyalty anyway in order to make her constancy famous in story and legend long after she is gone. This is Jasper’s one lapse into a desire for societal glory (a desire which would also ensure his own fame as the husband of the women of unfailing loyalty) and his one attempt to play a prescribed role rather than an original one of his own making. He wakes Luce and pretends to be angry with her, standing near her with his sword drawn, and tells her that he is about to kill her for having displeased him. In spite of the fact that Luce has done nothing wrong, she does not return Jasper’s feigned anger, but kneels before him, still besotted with him, declaring her willingness to die if that is what he wants.

The idea that a wife should submit to her husband no matter how flawed or morally questionable his actions or intentions were, the very attitude Jasper demands from Luce in this instance, is one that is continually commended by conduct books, but
one that rarely existed in actuality. It is a social standard that is not practically applicable like the absolute authority of a father over his children’s emotions or a master over his apprentices’. The Puritan, majorly middle class, idea of marriage was one in which the wife was to obey her husband, but only as long as his decisions were righteous. When his judgment went astray, she was no longer required to follow blindly. To the contrary, Jasper’s actions mirror the idea of absolute power and authority favored by King James I and, by extension, the royal court. James I writes in his *Works* about the divine right of kings that:

> Kings are also compared to fathers of families: for a king is truly Parens patriae, the politique father of his people… Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth…God hath power to create or destroy, make or unmake at his pleasure, to give life or send death, to judge all and to be judged nor accountable to none. (King James)

The king is equated with the fathers of families in this excerpt, indicating the equivalence of these two roles in the rather extreme, even obscene, amount of power they were supposed to wield over either their subjects or wives and children. James compares men in these positions to gods with the power of life and death, and without accountability to anyone beneath them. This absolute authority, favored by the King and the aristocracy, is exactly what Jasper attempts to exercise over Luce. He tries to enact authority over her life and death and expects to be obeyed in spite of the fact that his behavior is without justification and therefore morally wrong. When Jasper falls in line with an aristocratic ideal and adds nothing of the practical wisdom from the middling sort to moderate it, his plans begin to fall apart. When he imposes, even momentarily, a hierarchy in which he stands above Luce and dictates terms like a courtier, chance no longer goes his way.
Venturewell happens upon them in the moment that Jasper still has his sword drawn and before he can admit to Luce that his manner was adopted just as a test. Venturewell then beats him soundly and takes his daughter home. Jasper’s good fortune ends when he takes on a scripted role that supports the existing social hierarchy rather than maintaining behavior based on ethical standards. An even passing allegiance to a traditional, feudal social hierarchy and a desire for fame causes the hero to lose his love. The most inwardly kept, treasured aspect of his life and identity is incompatible with standards of valuation that depend on notoriety or power.

A preoccupation with social class and social climbing initializes both the original plot of “The London Merchant” and the improvised plot of The Knight of the Burning Pestle, the combination of which poses a conspicuous difference between characters who locate nobility in either aristocratic trappings and rhetoric or in an internalized set of ethics. Knight is therefore very much invested in negotiating the problem with aristocratic identity that faced the upper classes as the early modern period progressed and members of the gentility and nobility were forced into a realization that their status was not, as they would like to believe, based upon an innate superiority, but was a commodity equal to their goods and influence. The absurdity of both Humphrey and Rafe who locate nobility in outward characteristics depreciates the idea that social superiority was a matter of learned behavior, speech, or education. Venturewell believes that nobility lies in money and titles, and he is not proven wrong in terms of the social capital that lies in both of these things, but he is depicted as cold-hearted, materialistic, and cruel. He disregards his own daughter’s wishes for her marriage, breaking her heart, and throws out his apprentice of nearly seven years without any means to support himself
all to make sure that his future family can claim gentle status. While he may very well be correct that a title would win some social influence, the audience is hardly enticed to follow his lead. Jasper on the other hand pursues love and virtue in all its forms. He is the possessor of a demonstrably internalized set of ethics and is admirable in many ways that make him an attractive hero to audience members from multiple social backgrounds. This cross-class range of virtues which includes his skill in business, his cleverness, means that virtue actually results in social status. Jasper is in the unique position of not having to apologize for or imaginatively recollect (like Spenser’s Astrophil) why he might deserve his social status. Expanding the parameters of what it means to be noble, or what can be considered a virtue, allows for the creation of a character who is innately virtuous and whose social status at the end of the play reflects that virtue, not blind fortune or scrupulousness. Jasper therefore presents the viewers with a solution of sorts for the aristocratic crisis of identity, but this solution is inextricably linked with the middling classes and is embodied in the person of a penniless apprentice. It is clearly questionable how this particular compromise would have been received by an audience already possessed of rank or longing to obtain it.

By valorizing a system of social ranking that stresses virtue and implying the incompatibility of this system with other, more hierarchical methods of organizing society, *Knight* commends a very egalitarian social scheme to its audience and works to reduce class differences, but it does so in a much more radical way than other Jacobean drama. It is very specifically the combination of upper class ideals with middling class virtues that gives characters in *Knight* both admiration and a place in society. The blend of praiseworthy qualities from multiple social ranks in its hero works to illustrate the
merits of all these traits and expand the perception of virtue for both middling and upper class members of the Blackfriar’s audience. The similarities that the play highlights between the more upper class ideal of an inner, sincere, private affection and a middling class esteem for inward, modest, genuine virtue serves to draw attention to the semblance between social ranks and gives each class a conceptual scaffold with which to understand and accept another social circles’ choice of ideals. So far Knight simply creates a greater understanding between social groups, but the play leans toward glorifying the middling sort of people as those characters with genuine, inner nobility exclusively come from a merchant’s household. The idealized, innate nobility of feudal knights in stories who lived by a strict code of ethical conduct and possessed the capacity for courtly love is depicted as existing again in early modern culture hand in hand with the strict ethical conduct of the hard-working citizens of London. There is nothing in the play to indicate that this same type of admirable conduct could not exist in members of the upper classes, but they are conspicuously absent from the play’s cast of characters. As a relative rarity, therefore, the play puts middle class characters in the position to be admired by the gentry attending the play, and even elevates them above anyone in the audience by placing them in the enviable, self-sufficient social position of courtly lovers.
Chapter 2:  
Mary Wroth: Ambiguity and Multiplicity in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Any project to re-examine *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* in terms of its negotiation of gendered subjectivity may initially seem threadbare scholarly territory considering the number of scholars in the past few decades who have already examined this aspect of Mary Wroth’s sonnet sequence; but upon reading the bulk of Wroth scholarship one can’t help but realize a strange lack of close readings of the text. Clare R. Kinney notes in “Turn and Counterturn: Reappraising Mary Wroth’s Poetic Labyrinths” that the reincorporation of Wroth’s work into the literary canon after years of obscurity happened at the same time as the “displacement of primarily formalist approaches to literary texts by alternative methodologies (such as gender studies, psychoanalytic criticism, New Historicism, and cultural materialism),” which has inadvertently done Wroth’s work a disservice. It has resulted in a dearth in close textual reading of her work (85). Kinney continues to note that:

Her sonnets did not enjoy those prefatory decades of formalist attention that canonical male authors received...As a consequence, many rich discussions of the poems’ biographical, social, and political contexts, of their gendered revision of available genres and of their enactment of both female agency and “transgressive” female authorship rarely confront a preexisting history of interpretive wrangling at the level of the individual poem and tend not to offer complete readings of complete poems. Sampling the poems to support larger arguments, Wroth’s critics have often worked at the level of the sound byte, offering interpretations that
imply a poem under discussion is reasonably transparent. (85)

My concerns echo Kinney’s with regard to the existing canon of Wroth scholarship. This chapter, for example, is influenced greatly by the Naomi Miller’s theories in *The Changing Subject*, but I find that her lack of textual evidence or specific claims make for a weak argument overall (at least in terms of her treatment of Pamphilia). Keeping this in mind, I have sought to re-examine how Wroth’s mediation of gender and power relations is manifest in stanza and sentence level rhetoric, to look at not how one would expect a female author to respond to the early modern restrictions on female authorship, but examine how her idiosyncratic manipulation of language and sonnet conventions creates a different kind of speaking subject, one that skirts the edges of respectability without broaching them.

Many of Wroth’s critics begin with the presumption of extreme female suppression in the early modern period. While it hardly bears restating that women did not have nearly the same kinds of opportunities for writing that men did in the early seventeenth century, there is some debate about just how repressed women writers were, especially when assessed as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group; and how much that social repression may have been reflected in the writing they produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\(^\text{47}\) Due to the pre-existing presumption of disadvantageous social conditions for women writers in the sixteenth century, Wroth has most often been read as a paradigm for the repressed female artist. The strongest proof for this understanding of her work lies with a specific interpretation of the incident of Edward Denny’s (the Earl of Norwich, a prominent nobleman at court) pointed criticism

\(^{47}\) See Sidney L. Sondergard’s *Sharpening Her Pen: Strategies of Rhetorical Violence by Early Modern English Women Writers* pgs 14-16.
of Wroth’s *Urania* and her supposedly timorous reaction to his comments in a letter she wrote to the Duke of Buckingham.\(^{48}\) Denny indites her work in very gendered terms, indicating that it is hardly her place as a woman to write love stories. In her letter Wroth declares her intention of removing *Urania* from the possibility of publication, and apologetically (?) states that her writing was never meant to offend anyone. This apparently chagrined reaction combined with the general societal disapproval of women’s writing in both the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries contributes to the assumption too many make that Mary Wroth was very much in thrall to contemporary gender stereotypes and was therefore easily cowed when anyone implied that she may have transgressed accepted gender limits.\(^{49}\) Because of this, most of the readings of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthes* focus on the fact that her sonnets are considerably more inwardly focused than those of her male contemporaries and extrapolate from this fact that the subject position of her speaker, Pamphilia, is a kind of problematic feminization of the male speaking position in Petrarchan love, a submissive, passive woman who has even been read as the architect behind her own objectification in order to create a place


for her to stand in the strictly gendered roles of Petrarchan courtly love.\textsuperscript{50} The implication of much of this criticism is that in order for a woman to find a place as the speaker in the patriarchal realm of the sonnet sequence, she will have to be in a pre-emptively defensive position, anticipating criticism of her endeavor by always withdrawing, retreating, or enclosing herself. This type of criticism undercuts much of the independence and strength that might have been seen as inherent in a woman (the first woman) writing her own sonnet sequence.

While Wroth’s work does have to negotiate the social stigmas directed towards women and women writers in particular, the ways in which she goes about legitimizing her enterprise are not those of a patient Griselda. She isn’t pleased just to be allowed to exist and happy to cast herself or even her speaker in the role of a suffering penitent in order to convince a male readership that she presents no threat; nor indeed would this have been the most productive manner of procuring sanction for her work as it would merely uphold the most enfeebling female stereotypes of Wroth’s day. In order to create a speaker who is not a supplicating wretch but who also does not transgress gender boundaries to an extent that would have induced fear, disgust, or ridicule, Wroth creates a new type of subject position for her speaker that utilizes deliberate ambiguity to both

present a more complex and realistic persona and allow for shows of strength couched in such a multiplicity of possible interpretations that they grant the audience considerable freedom of interpretation. The polysemous nature of her sonnets encourages the preexisting prejudices of the reader to dictate the type of woman they discover in Wroth’s Pamphilia, giving the author the opportunity to push boundaries, to show a new level of feminine strength to those willing to admit its possibility, while avoiding the unpleasant task of refuting charges of presumptuousness from those whose rigid mentality would never admit that there is any benefit to feminine authority irregardless of how it was presented. Wroth constructs this clever indeterminacy in three principle ways. First, Wroth utilizes the strategies of the medieval troubadours to prioritize the emotional content rather than the objective meaning. Second, unlike most other early modern sonneteers who never reveal the theatricality involved in the embellishment and hyperbolic praise of their beloved lady, Wroth draws attention to the fact that the figure she is in love with is as much a creation of her own imagination as it is a real man. Her admission of the element of personal creation in love allows for a radical definition of the emotion as well as a distancing of her speaker from any accusations of improper behavior in any real life scenarios. And third, she allows the ambiguity of her work to surround even her speaker and especially the relationship her speaker has with the love object of the poems. Their continually fluid relationship is reflected in the indeterminate power relations between them and allows the speaker to fill the role of both a proactive charmer and a passive lady at the same time.

On a very basic level, it seems only logical that Wroth would have deliberately tried to use rhetorical strategies that would be empowering to her and other female
writers since it is as unlikely then as now that an intelligent, independently minded woman like Mary Wroth would have been so completely under the sway of social expectations that she would have retreated inwardly (even if it were only for show in her rhetoric) at one or two critics’ complaints that her writing was improper. Indeed, the historical evidence supports the idea that Wroth’s reaction to Edward Denny’s letter was not as apologetic as many critics have been lead to believe. Many critics faithfully follow the lead of Josephine Roberts’ introduction to her 1992 edition of Wroth’s poems which purports that Wroth’s letter to Buckingham is in response to the one she received from Denny which demanded Urania’s withdrawal from sale, and Gary Waller similarly claims that Wroth’s attempts to pull the poem from sale were specifically motivated by Denny’s gendered insults and admonitions (Smith 409). Rosalind Smith, however, examines the original source in detail and finds significant points that bring Roberts’ interpretation into question. First, it is likely that Wroth wrote her letter to Buckingham before Denny’s letter ever came to her attention, drawing into question whether she was ever intimidated into withdrawal or whether, perhaps, her letter to the Duke came from a different impetus altogether (411). Second, Smith goes on to point out that Wroth also writes a rather scathing poem in response to Denny’s letter in which she successfully uses the same flawed line of logic that he uses to depreciate her gender to point out problems with the social expectations for the male gender. Her clever, sharp response hardly sounds like the reaction of an intimidated, repentant woman. The letter which contains the poems also contains an implied threat to Denny that she could easily circulate their correspondence within their shared social circles to defend her actions and writings, which is quite the opposite of apologetic (412). Whether a response to Denny or not, in
her letter to Buckingham she does plead that she never meant to cause offense, however, even the sincerity of this declaration comes into question when we remember that the very genre in which she writes (the roman a clef) inherently includes occluded references to current events and people, not all of which could be complimentary if the piece was to be at all entertaining. Wroth couldn’t have written *Urania* without the desire at least to needle those she found ridiculous, even if outright offense hadn’t been the goal. Her protestations of innocent intent can therefore only be taken so far. Smith goes on to theorize that her letter to the Duke was more likely meant as a political maneuver, making it seem as if she was trying to avoid offending people when she, not unreasonably assuming that the letter would find its way into circulation in court circles, was simply drawing attention to the fact that she had a powerful ally in Buckingham on her side should controversy over her work become more intense. Whether or not we follow Smith’s line of reasoning to the extent that we discount Wroth’s apology completely, there is still compelling evidence that her response to criticism was not as contrite as has often been accepted.

Wroth’s biographical details bear out the fact that she was an extremely intelligent woman who was used to making her own decisions and even helping others with their decisions from an early age. Wroth was born in 1587, the eldest daughter of Sir Robert Sidney and Lady Barbara Gamage. She therefore was raised with a privileged education both because of her social status as a noblewoman and because her father and his family connections were involved in the literary world and connected with court circles. Her father was quite a linguist and thus Wroth was probably also educated quite thoroughly in

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51 This chapter relies primarily on the biography *Mary Sidney, Lady Wroth* by Margaret Hannay for details of Wroth’s life, but for another notable biography, see *Lady Mary Wroth* by Sue Taylor.
languages, one of which was almost certainly French (Hannay 65). Wroth also undoubtedly read quite widely on a variety of subjects during her formative years, similar to the education received by her father and uncle. Sheila Cavanagh’s work on Wroth convincingly suggests that because of the many references and elements of contemporary debates that surface in *Urania*, Wroth probably read from subjects as diverse as “hermeticism, civic responsibility, primogeniture, death, and global awareness,” (65). In all likelihood Wroth was therefore not limited to reading subjects that would have been considered “feminine.” She was, on the contrary, extremely well versed on the important issues of her day. Wroth also corresponded with her father regularly as soon as she was old enough to pen a letter, which was from around the age of eight (43). By the time she was nine, her correspondence with her father as well as her conversations with her guardians began to include her own opinions and advice upon how the household should be run. When her father was in the process of choosing a new steward for the estate (also when she was only nine), she was a major influence upon her father’s choice, and she continued to be a major influence upon the running of Penhurst, the family estate, for years, even after her own marriage (62). She was, therefore, hardly a woman accustomed to being ignored or passed over.

Evidence for Wroth’s independence of mind is also found in her later life. She was a woman accustomed to power and privilege. Although her family was poor in comparison with other noble houses during her childhood, she was accepted into exclusive court circles after her marriage to Robert Wroth and was one of the few ladies at court with enough favor with the queen to gain a coveted role in Ben Jonson’s first

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52 See also Cavanagh, Sheila T. *Cherished Torment: The Emotional Geography of Lady Mary Wroth’s Urania.* Duquesne: Duquesne UP, 2001. p 2.
court Masque, The Masque of Blackness. She acted in several other masques and was a popular patroness of the arts, none of which indicates a shrinking personality. Wroth also exhibits exceptional strength of will in her choice to have an affair with her cousin, William Pembroke. In terms of the scandalous nature of an affair between cousins, Margaret Hannay writes of this that, “although the rules on marriage of first cousins were ambiguous (it was still incest for Catholics on the Continent, but had been declared legal under Henry VIII), some unease remained - enough that Samuel Dugard, for example, wrote a treatise on the marriage of cousins germains before he married his own cousin Lydia (Hannay 102). So, while Wroth’s involvement with her cousin William Penhurst may not have caused the kind of outrageous scandal that would prove her to be wanton or brazen in any sense of those words, it would indeed have been viewed slightly askance. The more scandalous element of their relationship was its adulterous nature. Though her husband had died, William’s wife was very much alive, and the birth of their bastard children placed all of Wroth’s social standing at risk (251). Wroth was ostracized by a great deal of society, if not by all of her own family, and the affair ruined any possibility of a second marriage which might have saved her from the extreme debt in which her husband had left her (253). All of which provides rather compelling evidence that she was, indeed, willing to go against the social norms of her society in order to pursue those things she considered most important. Propriety was hardly her most pressing concern.

Wroth was also continually a presence in artistic circles, becoming a patroness of the arts following in the footsteps of her illustrious family members. She was not an outsider to good music, literature or poetry and cultivated it in those around her that she found with talent. Robert Jones, a contemporary composer who had formerly dedicated work to her father dedicated his fifth book of airs to her in 1610 (Hannay 157). George Chapman honors her along with other members of her family in the dedication to his translation of Homer, Sir John Davies writes a poem praising her family’s dedication to music as well as one praising her specifically. These are, of course, in addition to the more famous dedicatory sonnet written to her by Ben Jonson (159). Even after she withdrew from court life in 1614, Lady Wroth continued to push against societal expectations for women in terms of her involvement in the arts. Her most notable achievement is the writing and publication of the immense chivalric romance, *Urania* (1621), a lengthy and ambitious work even when considered against comparable romances by male authors of the same period. Assuming the role of patroness and author indicates that Wroth was not reticent to assume the responsibilities of an arbiter of contemporary taste.

It is also not reasonable to assume that Wroth’s writing must have been extremely careful and timorous since she was the first woman to try anything like this. Enough women writers had preceded Wroth and were certainly known to her that it is unlikely she felt herself to be completely alone and treading on forbidden ground. Queen Elizabeth I had written Petrarchan poetry from a female perspective some thirty years earlier. Elizabeth was not only known by Wroth but admired and must have been contemplated by her a great deal as she figures as Wroth’s inspiration for the character of
Pamphilia in *Urania*. Wroth’s own aunt, Mary Sidney, the Countess of Pembroke, was also undoubtedly an exemplar for her. Sidney had not only translated the biblical psalms with considerable literary freedom, but helped her brother write the *Arcadia*, a courtly romance which was also a known inspiration for Wroth as *Urania* is in many ways a continuation of the same tale. While these two women had a direct and provable influence on Wroth, other women were opening doors in all genres of literature in the years leading up to the creation of *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*. Aemilia Lanier had already published *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611), a volume of religious poems, before Wroth’s work would approach completion ten years later. Lanier’s work is especially notable in that it portrays women as the more perfect possessors of the essential qualities of Christ, rather than men, who usually were assumed to be the more perfect gender similar to the way Wroth’s sonnets would later work to realign the paradigms for who was and was not the superior courtly lover.\(^55\) Around the same time that Lanier’s work was published, Elizabeth Cary was also completing her closet drama, *The Tragedy of Mariam*, which circulated in court circles several years prior to which, Anne Dowriche had written and published her history of French religious wars, *The French Historie*. By the time that Wroth began her work, therefore, notable breakthroughs by women into the genres of romance, drama, history and poetry had all already taken place. A noblewoman writing a substantial work of literature would still have been unusual in he 1560’s, but hardly unheard of.

While these are the most contemporary examples of women Wroth would have known who were writing in similar genres, there were even more women writing on the continent whose work predates hers. There is no direct proof that Wroth was familiar with these writers, but it is likely, given her extensive education in languages and literature that they were known to her as well; Marguerite of Navarre and her work, the *Heptameron*, Christine de Pisan and *The City of Ladies*, in France were almost certainly among the works available for Wroth and both of these treat the intricacies of courtly love as a topic among the many they cover in their respective collections of stories.

Italian ladies had also already written love poems in the style of Petrarch years before Wroth would attempt it. Gaspara Stampa, who wrote in Italy during the early to mid sixteenth century wrote hundreds of poems, many of them dealing with love, in which she negotiates a speaking position for a woman writing in the courtly love tradition.

Similarly, Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara were Italian female poets who wrote collections of love poems in the early sixteenth century, establishing a position for a female speaker within courtly love literature almost a century before Wroth would need to accomplish the same. It’s worth noting here as well that female religious writers were certainly well established, if not abundant, by the early seventeenth century, especially since there are significant parallels in the imagery and emotional states portrayed in the writing of female mystics and martyrs and Wroth’s *Pamphilia*. Anne Askew’s *Examinations*, for one sixteenth century example, describe the emotions and thoughts of a woman undergoing an interrogation designed to get her to admit to something improper. Her clever, often evasive, but doctrinally correct answers set a precedent for a woman to be strong and even combative while remaining within the realm of propriety. Wroth’s
work was also preceded by such writers as Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Catherine of Sienna, all of whom, while significantly earlier, contribute to a long standing tradition of female writers specifically involved in writing (or dictating) lengthy self-examinations not so far removed from Pamphilia’s emotional journey through the course of her sonnet sequence.

Wroth certainly had enough female authors to create a tradition that would not leave her feeling as if she were beginning from a blank slate in her attempts to write, and in this instance her position as a member of the Sidney family undoubtedly also played a role in bestowing on her the confidence of a woman with a legacy to follow. Wroth’s biographer makes note of the fact that, as a child, she probably was privy to conversations between her father, uncle, aunt and various educated guests on the subject of poetry. She was very familiar with the writings of all three of her illustrious family members (Mary Sidney, Sir Philip Sidney, and her father Robert Sidney) and thus supported with the concept that literary achievement was a family affair. If any woman in the seventeenth century began her writing from a position of strength, it was Mary Wroth.

All of this does not invalidate the critical tradition completely, of course. Going back for a moment to Smith’s project to debunk Wroth’s Buckingham letter as evidence of her being silenced and emotionally shut down by social mores, even if we see the Buckingham letter as a political maneuver, the very fact that she would need this kind of backhanded trick of an insincere apology to ensure her own social future is evidence that, as a woman, more extraordinary and somewhat more duplicitous means were required for her to keep a place in the literary world than were required for male authors. It would be
equally as foolish to ignore the fact that prescribed gender roles were both present and influential as to grant them more power than they deserve. Typical courtly love as it was understood in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was, after all, a rather rigidly gendered social creation.\textsuperscript{56} It placed the male lover in such an active, even aggressive, role that it made the position of the lover difficult to mesh with the socially lauded female role as a passive, silent help-meet. The male lover typically wrote sonnets with the stated goal of winning a specific woman’s favor and gaining either sexual access to her or marriage with her. Given early modern gender expectations, a woman attempting to put herself in this place, attempting the pursuance and eventual conquer of a man, would have been viewed as unnatural by enough of society to keep most educated, upper class women from attempting it. Denny’s accusations toward Wroth of being a “hermaphrodite” and a “monster” indicate the extent to which it was considered by some to be unnatural for a woman to attempt to take on roles that were typically reserved for men. Thus, while allowing that Wroth’s sonnets ought to be read as more than just evidence of masculine repression, one must not lose sight of the fact that \textit{Pamphilia to Ampilanthus} is the only female authored sonnet sequence to arise out of what was a craze for them in the early modern period, a fact that indicates the opposite of encouragement for such an enterprise.

In Wroth’s writing there is, accordingly, evidence both of concessions to the social pressures that defined gender roles as well as evidence of an independent mind at

work. It is true, for example, that the sonnets in *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* evince aspects of the love that are notably quieter and more thoroughly expressed internally than those characterizing the love that Philip Sidney or Edmund Spenser describe in their sonnet sequences. However, it is not merely an avoidance of male attributes and their substitution with feminine versions that we find when comparing male authors’ preferred forms of fin amour to Wroth’s, nor is the position of her speaker something expressing merely oppression and lack. Quite to the contrary, Wroth recreates fin amour in some ways that contradict and in some ways attempt to correct aspects of the more popularized, patriarchal love found at court. In fact, nearly all of the specific problems with fin amour that Philip Sidney’s speaker wrestles with in *Astrophil and Stella* are addressed in some way in Wroth’s work, and most of them are overcome to various levels of success.

Wroth’s project in writing *Pamphila to Amphilanthus* is therefore not merely to write herself into the role of a courtly lover (an empowering project all on its own even with socially ameliorating alterations to that position that lessen its direct influence on its intended recipient) but rather it is to subtly remind her readers of the frustrations and failures inherent in the position of lover, at least as it was understood in contemporary court circles, and indicate solutions to these in a form of fin amour that is more patient, self-sacrificing, and internal. Wroth’s speaker seems to experience a desire to compete with her male predecessors in a kind of moderated anxiety of influence, rather than simply find a humble station among them as a fellow author.

Wroth’s sonnet sequence, specifically in its use of the ambiguity mentioned earlier therefore addresses concerns that are specifically brought up by Sidney and other male sonneteers in reference to those aspects of fin amour that make it particularly
problematic, that make male authors question either its sincerity or validity as a valuable way of spending time; as she does so Wroth builds a version of fin amour that is unique and more approachable for women by creating a subject position that is aware of the problems of idealizing another and therefore avoids creating a fantasy of the beloved in the Lacanian realm of the Imaginary. Because of this, Wroth’s speaker approaches fulfillment through a process that accesses a feminine joi, rather than relying on a masculine, goal-oriented desire. Luce Irigaray’s essay “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” develops her theory of female “mimesis” which explains how mimicry, the kind employed by a female author writing in a male dominated, Petrarchan vein, can actually be a recuperative activity for female subjectivity; not in a mimesis circumscribed from all originality, but in one that plays with original forms and tweaks standardized genres to allow for the discovery of the feminine within language. Irigaray’s theory is that a new type of female subjectivity will not become manifest through a deliberate, reasoned description of what that subject ought to be (an act that would subordinate the feminine to a masculine use of language), but the feminine in language will become apparent through “jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and a meaning that are excessively univocal” (Irigaray 78). She continues to explain that:

[Rather than asking and attempting to answer logically], “‘What is woman [?]’ [a feminine writer should] repeat/interpret the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject they should signify, [and] that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side. (78)

Wroth’s work falls precisely within Irigary’s parameters for a feminine work.
Pamphilia’s adaptation of a courtly lover does not seek to live a life where desire is continually frustrated in an attempt to reach an unattainable beloved. Instead, by the end of the sonnet sequence, Wroth’s speaker finds joy in loving with or without reciprocation. Her joy is in becoming a lover with admirable qualities. As such she has multiple virtues to perfect and practice, multiple ways of finding pleasure outside of the one, undeviating goal of male sonnetters, obtaining the physical or spiritual capitulation of their beloved. Wroth’s speaker is therefore more self-aware than the typical Petrarchan lover, who is consistently unaware of the futility of desiring an idealized phantom and dwells in misery when the hope of attaining his end goal is continually dashed. Her approach to fin amour is such an unusually felicitous take on the possibilities of love that it provides a striking contrast with the portrayal of love in other sonnets. Similarly, other facets of her very particular affection for Amphilanthus alter the tactics of male lovers in ways that, in their skillful avoidance or overcoming of typical problems encountered by lovers, provide an attractive alternative to the type of love that was popular in male-dominated court affairs. Pamphilia’s general satisfaction in conjunction with these other elements suggests that the speaking subject she creates doesn’t just retreat from a male dominated world; she indicates the cracks in it and writes an alternative script for it, showing how altering the traditional, male form of desire would be beneficial.

Part of the passage from Irigaray quoted above is also cited in the Naomi Miller’s chapter on Mary Wroth in her book *Changing the Subject*. Its inclusion in the beginning of her chapter leads the reader to believe that she will go on to show how Wroth’s work performs this function of creating disruptive excesses in writing for early modern England, but her analysis of Wroth’s poems in *Pamphilia and Amphilanthus* stops short
of presenting any compelling textual evidence that this is the case and conversely (perhaps inadvertently?) focuses on evidence that the speaker of the poem is more successful at using language for precision, to convey a specific, unilateral image, than even her male counterparts (146). Miller points out that Wroth subverts the traditional Petrarchan sonnet subjectivity by breaking down traditional gendered roles. In the common trope of the poet as painter, the woman, his mistress, is figured as the object the painter attempts to capture on his canvas, reducing the woman’s worth to the wholly superficial. Wroth’s female speaker pointedly brings up the notion of a painter but does not fill the traditional female role of a work of art. Miller quotes the last four lines of Wroth’s sonnet 83, which read, “Love will a painter make you, such, as you/ Shall bee to drawe your only deere/ more lively, parfett, lasting, and more true/ Than rarest woorkman and to you more neere,” and concludes that Wroth:

moves away from the male Petrarchan obsession with the physical beauty of form to her own concerns with love. The double meaning of ‘true’ in Wroth’s sonnet alluding not only to the accuracy of the likeness but also to the desired constancy of the male beloved …[connects] the power of representation with successful passion. (157)

Miller interprets the passage to mean that Pamphilia’s version of love will make a lover so skilled in representation (one assumes writing or painting) that he/she will not only be able to accurately depict their beloved but will also gain the power to draw their beloved to them and make them true or faithful. While this interpretation does emphasize the alteration in the priorities of the speaker from appearance to behavior in the lover, it sees Pamphilia’s use of language - to convey an accuracy of likeness - as the same as her male predecessors. She is just more successful at the same task.
The eight lines preceding the cited passage, however, reveal how the poem as a whole confronts the very idea of accuracy:

How bleſſ'd be they then, who his fauors proue,
   A life whereof the birth is iuſt deſire?
Breeding ſweete flame, which harts inuite to moue,
   In theſe lou'd eyes, which kindle Cupids fire,
And nurfe his longings with his thoughts intire,
Fix't on the heat of wilhes form'd by Loue,
   Yet whereas fire deſtroyes, this doth alpire,
Increafe, and fofter all delights aboue. (91)

Line four (which, depending on the version of the poem one read can be either “these eyes” [Folger transcription] or “those eyes” [First printed edition]) can either be read to refer to the eyes of the beloved or to the eyes of the lover herself. If they refer to the beloved’s eyes, the reciprocation of a faithful desire is not the sure reward of accurate representation. There is no surety of reciprocation at all. He who chooses to prove Love’s favours and live a life defined by affection/obsession may surely breed “sweete flames,” but they are only ever invited to move in the beloved’s eyes. There is no indication in the poem that the lover’s skill with language somehow grants her a mystical influence over her beloved’s emotions and makes her passion “successful.” If the poem refers to the lover’s eyes (which is more likely as the poem’s focus is on the effects on an individual who chooses to live by love), it’s significant that these eyes, the lover’s means of perceiving the world, are kindled by “Cupids fire.” They are inhibited or perhaps helped but most definitely influenced by love, implying a subjective, idiosyncratic point of view. The subjectivity of the perspective of the lover in this poem is reinforced by the fact that his every thought is focused on his beloved but not on his physical beauty.

There is no blazon or any sort of catalogue of easily observable virtues that others can
confirm. Instead the lover’s focus is on the “wishes” formed by love, on phantasmagorical future events. This hypothetical lover lives in his own head. When the poem reaches the point that declares that love will make a lover a painter who will render a “true” portrait of his beloved, the reader should already question how someone who lives in a world of daydreams will render this most accurate picture.

The last four lines do state that the likeness created by the lover will draw the beloved nearer to him, but given the context of the other lines which emphasize the inward effects of love, it is more likely that this stanza also describes internal effects of love, especially since the likeness created by the lover is clearly not meant to be read literally; love will not suddenly grant you the training and talent of an artist. The lover is placed in deliberate contrast with a workman of great talent whose work will be clumsy in comparison to the lover. What kind of portrait is more precise and more lasting than the physical work of a painter hindered by the limitations of his tools and the decay of time? The lover is clearly creating a mental image of the beloved which will certainly make the lover feel near to his beloved, but not physically draw him closer in reality. As this hypothetical portrait only ever exists in the love-addled brain of someone fervently pining, it also draws attention to a subjectivity in the lover’s perspective that defies the usual sense of accuracy. If Pamphilia displays a greater sense of confidence with language and never despairs, like other prominent sonnet speakers, over her inability to adequately express her love, her confidence with language is because her priorities do not lie in more successfully filling the role of painter/poet, as Miller suggests. Wroth implies that representation is entirely subjective in this poem, and therefore never in any sense wrong, and that it is linked to an intensity of emotion that initiates the creation of a
glorified internal image of the beloved. Wroth does not attempt the impossible of accurately conveying idealized beauty through an artistic medium. Instead, she acknowledges that the vividly romanticized mental portrait of the beloved is a result of a very subjective, infatuated emotional state and, as I aim to show in the next few pages, she finds a way to more effectively convey complex emotion than her male counterparts. These ways of conveying emotion and prioritizing the subjective are what combine to create a disruptive excess of meaning from Wroth’s work.

The surplus of emotion that Wroth’s work links with inspired representation is depicted as a trial to be overcome, or that cannot be overcome in other sonnet sequences. Although, it seems intuitive that all speakers of love sonnets should be especially dexterous in their talents for expression, they predictably lament their clumsy attempts to maneuver language into an adequate enunciation of emotion. Sidney writes, for example, in sonnet LV from Astrophil and Stella that:

Muses, I oft inuoked your holy ayde,  
With choisest flowers my speech t' engarland so,  
That it, despisde, in true but naked shew  
Might winne some grace in your sweet grace arraid;  
And oft whole troupes of saddest words I staid,  
Striuing abroad a-foraging to go,  
Vntill by your inspiring I might know  
How their blacke banner might be best displaid. 
But now I meane no more your helpe to try,  
Nor other sugring of my speech to proue,  
But on her name incessantly to cry;  
For let me but name her whom I doe loue,  
So sweet sounds straight mine eare and heart do hit,  
That I well finde no eloquence like it.

Here, Sidney’s speaker discusses his supreme efforts to effectively convey his distress at his mistress’ continual refusal. He appeals to the muses and uses whatever inspiration he
can possibly glean from them to enhance his words, to sugar then sufficiently, to effect her heart. In other words the speaker wracks his brain for the appropriate words in appropriate order to encapsulate his passion and grief. The reader must assume that his attempts all fail. He is unable to find any rhetorical way of communicating the types of emotion he experiences, as in line 9 he abandons his efforts to write his feelings into a poem. The speaker decides instead to simply repeat her name over and over, finding in inarticulate repetition, perhaps the inflection or the desperation of that utterance, an eloquence, which is to say a persuasive power, that goes beyond the limitations of rhetoric. Thus, when his main goal is the conveyance of intense emotion, Astrophil sees language as a restraining force rather than one full of possibilities.

Shakespeare’s sonnet 23 similarly alludes to the difficulty in properly conveying emotion. After bewailing his inability to speak the true extent of his love, the speaker laments:

O! let my looks be then the eloquence
And dumb presagers of my speaking breast,
Who plead for love, and look for recompense,
More than that tongue that more hath more express’d.
O! learn to read what silent love hath writ:
To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fine wit.

Shakespeare’s speaker concedes in a similar manner to Sidney’s that at times there is simply no avenue available in language to properly express emotion, and then asks the recipient of his words to read the extent of his love in his face rather than force him to attempt to clumsily use words any further. Similarly in his sonnet 85, Shakespeare refers to his “tongue-tied muse” which, while others are free to praise his beloved, leaves him unable to do anything but assent to their praise rather than be able to adequately articulate
his own. In the third quatrain of the sonnet Shakespeare clarifies this further by writing, “Hearing you praised, I say ’Tis so, ’tis true,’/ And to the most of praise add something more;/ But that is in my thought, whose love to you,/ Though words come hindmost, holds his rank before.” Thus the praise that his beloved deserves is not just that which is given by others. This isn’t a case of the speaker simply not being able to communicate as effectively as other poets around him. Rather, none of them, himself included, have the capacity to express the perfections of the subject of the poem. The speaker adds something more to the given praise, but it must remain in his thoughts as words do not provide him with the tools to articulate what that ineffable quality is. The fact that the speaker and his rival poets are in love with the object of the poem is the factor that makes praise so difficult. The proper expression of the extent of love exceeds the limits of language.

These sonnets provide paradigmatic examples of a topic that most sixteenth century sonneteers include among their works. There is a general concern for the constraints on poetry due to its medium, words, and their incapacity to stretch beyond certain limits to convey very particular emotions. Wroth’s Pamphilia, on the other hand, continually conveys a confidence in language to accomplish her ends. Part of her ability to successfully represent passion is in her ability to express the tumultuous emotions of a courtly lover more accurately and beyond the abilities of other poets by utilizing multiple meanings of words and ambiguous syntax to simultaneously convey various meanings. This can sometimes make her work dense and difficult to follow. However, her work

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conveys more particular and a greater variety of emotions by utilizing the confusion for which she has been criticized in the past.

Due to her confusing syntax, some critics have written off her work as being of poor quality, or an inexpert copy of her uncle’s work; however, it is the confusion in Wroth’s sonnets that allows her to circumvent one of the most pressing concerns of her male sonneteer predecessors. Male sonneters were preoccupied with the shortcomings of language in expressing emotion; Wroth’s work, on the other hand, is designed so much around the expression of emotion that it is occasionally even detrimental to the conveyance of the objective meaning of the poem. Paul Hecht has noted this when he recommends that we read *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* as we would listen to punk rock.\(^{58}\) Hecht is correct in my view, though a more pertinent comparison, and one from which Wroth conceivably drew inspiration, is with the work of the original troubadours who popularized fin amour in the twelfth century\(^{59}\). Wroth’s purposeful ambiguity calls to mind Julia Kristeva’s description of these artists’ work in which the conveyance of one single, concrete meaning was not the priority. Kristeva reminds us that the earliest poetry that can be rightly categorized as communicating fin amour was entirely composed of song lyrics and that the medieval, Gregorian system of musical annotation was “precise for pitch, but [had] no concern for duration, hence for rhythm, [making] the deciphering of those witnesses to courtly song very problematic,” (281). This allowed the singers a

\(^{58}\) See Paul Hecht’s “Distortion, Aggression, and Sex in Mary Wroth’s Sonnets”

\(^{59}\) For information about sixteenth century studies of the troubadours and the contemporary availability of their poetry see John Haines’ *8 centuries of Troubadours and Troveres: the Changing Identity of Medieval Music* pages 50-53.
considerably greater range of personal expression with the music than would be allowed with modern sheet music, for example, and within its structure they could emphasize or downplay phrases or entire stanzas by dwelling on them or skipping over them quickly. This intriguing variance encouraged the individual performances of these pieces to focus on the communication of very particular emotion, the emotion of the singer in the moment, rather than the reiteration of the emotion written by the composer into the score.

Kristeva points out that the “meanderings…expressive vocalizations, spasmodic windings…[etc],” i.e. these personalized touches upon the music, “constitute in fact the first encoding of the singer’s amorous transports, the tokens of his joy or joi… The song is his essential signifier and signified. It carries no referential, objective signification, it is the meaning of joy. The song is not a metaphor but, is the most direct inscription of jouissance,” (281-282). The precedence of affect over an “absolute meaning,” is further magnified within the lyrics of the songs by several rhetorical techniques. Troubadours would often use homophones that, with their similarity of sound and disparity of definition drew attention to the arbitrary nature of signs’ meanings. They would also use oxymorons or logical paradoxes the resulting confusion of which encourages listeners to feel certain emotions rather than come to reasonable conclusions and their songs were often reluctant to end with any final, concluding statements, trailing off instead at certain pivotal moments or changing topics before phrases or sentences could be completed.

Wroth benefits from the ability of her poems to communicate emotions more directly than a clear rhetorical message in two ways. Male sonneteers typically approached their poems with the clearly articulated objective of obtaining the affections and/or carnal knowledge of the subject of the sonnets, usually a lady. Comparatively few
of Wroth’s sonnets are designed clearly to gain the affections of her beloved, the vast
majority of them are designed to wrestle with her own emotions and convey either the
frustration or the elation of a lover. An emphasis on the emotion rather than the result
allows Wroth’s speaker to avoid being perceived as an aggressive pursuer, a shockingly
unfeminine stance in the seventeenth century, but still allows her to break from the
flattened female stereotypes in other sonnet sequences in which the beloved lady appears
as a cruel, emotionless, other. The speaker’s ability to express multiple meanings at the
same time is also beneficial in that it allows Wroth to convey several meanings which,
when combined and compared act as a literary collage; the interplay of these meanings
against one another implies yet another layer of understanding. Wroth’s speaker has no
reason to complain of the strictures of language when she is able to convey nuances of
emotion within these multiple meanings that a sonnet designed around one meaning
cannot. The rhetorical vagaries in Wroth’s sonnet sequence therefore clear a space for the
work of a female author while at the same time improving upon the sequences of recent,
male authors by removing the need for one of their most consistent and wistful
complaints.

If not lamenting the limitations of their own rhetoric, male sonneteers who follow
after the conventions set by Petrarch had emotions that were continuously at war one with
another. Petrarch set the standard in his sonnets of describing an idealizing soul at odds
with very carnal desires. Irving Singer describes Petrarch’s work starting from the first
poem as:

lament[ing] the vanity of [Petrarch’s] courtly love; and the remaining
[sonnets], which celebrate his lifelong devotion to a lady he calls Laura,
shunt back and forth between the sentiments of a troubadour and those of
a devout Christian. Try as he may, Petrarch cannot harmonize the two sides of his nature, and his failure is the cause of painful anxiety. His feelings for Laura are too painful to be renounced; yet his religious beliefs convince him that this is what he must do. (131)

Renaissance Italian poets, Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri also deal with the apparent conflict between religious standards of virtue and the lust involved in courtly love (Singer 158). *Astrophil and Stella* follows this tradition perfectly. In sonnet 52 Astrophil even attempts to separate his beloved into two different beings rather than attempt to find any kind of compromise between an idealized sort of worship and a sexual desire, “Well, Love, since this demur our suit doth stay,/ Let Virtue have that Stella's self; yet thus,/ Let Virtue but that body grant to us.” In effect he tells virtue to take the soul as long as he can have her body.

Other writers before Wroth do attempt to find a kind of compromise between religious and courtly love that Petrarch and Sydney could not. Wroth’s efforts to combine the two are a part of a long tradition of philosophers and writers of love poetry, but rather than alter one or both to make them seem more similar or more compatible, Wroth simultaneously glorifies them both.

A good example of the range of meanings that can be communicated within just one of Wroth’s sonnets can be seen in the second sonnet of the final crown of sonnets that completes the cycle. The preceding sonnet (important in this case as the sonnets that make up the crown all lead into one another, the first line of the second repeating the last line of the first) places the speaker in a metaphorical labyrinth where she is confused about what direction she should head until she decides to leave all of her directional problems behind and, to quote the first line of the second sonnet, “leaue all, and take the
threed of Loue,” (86). Taking up the thread of love turns out to not be a way out of her maze as we would expect, however. In the description of love that follows her decision to take up love, the reader is presented with an open ended picture of the effects and qualities of love that make the subject of love as much of a labyrinth as that which had previously plagued the speaker. Love is described in reverent, dependable terms as well as terms that suggest lust and effervescence. While over the course of the following sonnets the former of these views will be emphasized to the point that the reader can assume the speaker recommends love as an anchor, not a toy, within the bounds of each sonnet, the ambiguity of the language and the juxtaposition of contrasting images allows the dimensions of playful infatuation and desire to remain attached to love in the reader’s mind and the sonnets therefore express a more solemn perspective on constancy in love even while retaining the happy, trembling anticipation of a youthful crush. Examples of how Wroth accomplishes this are found in the rest of the crown’s sonnet number two, which reads:

Which line straite leades vnto the soules content,
Where choice delights with pleasures wings doe moue,
And idle fant'sie neuer roome had lent.
When chaste thoughts guide vs, then our minds are bent
To take that good which ills from vs remoue:
Light of true loue brings fruite which none repent;
But constant Louers seeke and wish to proue.
Loue is the shining Starre of blessings light,
The fercuent fire of zeale, the roote of peace,
The lasting lampe, fed with the oyle of right,
Image of Faith, and wombe for ioyes increase.
Loue is true Vertue, and his ends delight,
His flames are ioyes, his bands true Louers might. (86)

These lines indicate that Wroth’s speaker finds multiple kinds of delight in loving Amphilanthus, all of which are not logically compatible with one another, but which
together indicate a level of joi, an outpouring of a variety of emotion that trumps her need to create a cohesive, rational statement about what those emotions are or even which of them is the most important. Kristeva points out that the vexed syntax of the troubadours allowed for multiple readings of the same lines, and similarly in line four here, the poem could either imply that idle fantasies were never lent any room, they do not belong with true love, or that they never lent out the room they already occupied, they remain an ever present part of true love. This is problematized further by the word “pleasures” in the second line, since the glorification of pleasure rather than a more pious reward implies a description of a more worldly, courtly form of love, rather than the more “chaste” variety that she purports to champion in line five. In earlier sonnets (sonnets 14, 21, and 23) moreover, the speaker gains a great deal of pleasure from her fantasies of her beloved, which confuses the idea that idle fantasy should be considered separate from the delight and pleasure offered only one line before. It is only after the poem has encouraged its reader to imagine their own versions of what “choice delights” moved about with pleasure’s wings could be, a phrase which certainly does not immediately conjure images of chastity, that lines five and six imply a more pure form of love in which thoughts remain concentrated on the lover and free from lust. Both excitement and titillation manage to be present in this description of love, even when it is directly stated that the chaste variety of love is the one that allows one to achieve the good blocked by sin (line 6). Moreover, even the statement that chaste thoughts leads to our good is conditional. The speaker specifically begins the statement, “When chaste thoughts guide us…” rather than stressing it as a moral imperative. Lines 9-12 have a correspondingly mixed message as to the nature of the love the speaker celebrates. “Love is the shining Starre of
blessings light,” could mean either that Love if the source of all blessings, the star from which the light of blessings is produced, or, if “light” is read as an adjective, love is the source of one particular type of blessing, the “light” variety. The use of light as an adjective has its own ambiguity as it could mean either gentle, evanescent, requiring little effort, or free from care or sorrow, all of which imply a less solemn version of love than if love is seen as the source of all good. Love comes off in this line as being both a permanent, reverent thing and associated with pleasant, gentle, fleecy, easy moments that provide happiness without gravity. The religious imagery that follows tends to associate love with piety and constancy again, except for the fact that some of the imagery is contradictory. Fervent zeal and peace, for example, provide contrasting rather than harmonious images of what love could be; the first burning, in constant action and flux and the second constant, invariable, and unperturbed. The multifaceted impression the reader is given of love in this sonnet therefore does not paint a clear picture of a coherent emotion, rather it expresses love as a conglomeration of both pious constancy, playful lust, quiet contentment, and passionate commitment; all distinct, but all of which do, in fact, form admirable aspects of love. Love is glorified and the joi of the speaker in her amorous state is clearly expressed because of the confusion around what love is. The speaker, and by extension the reader, feels many aspects of love at once. The sonnet achieves an outpouring of emotion though it may lack lucidity in expressing a coherent idea.

By dwelling comfortably in ambiguity, Wroth’s sonnets solve the problem of the difficulty of accurately expressing something as complex as the emotion of ardent affection, but this was hardly the only problem that beset early modern authors of
sonnets. The women that male sonneteers set about describing were, in theory, real people, but their appearance on the page rarely depicted them in realistic terms. They were, on the contrary, idealized in the extreme (Shakespeare famously uses this very fact to parody his contemporaries in sonnet 18). Because of this, the possibility that the speaker of the sonnets will realistically achieve his goal of capturing his lady is literally impossible. Even Edmund Spenser who ends up marrying the woman to whom his sonnets were addressed will not end his days married to the exquisite creature who lives in his verse, but will live, like the rest of the world, with a person just as flawed as he is himself. The immanent frustration and disappointment inherent in chasing an ideal is something that nearly all speakers of sonnets are doomed to, yet Wroth finds a way to save her heroine from these frustrations and in doing so implies that the anguish of the early modern sonnet is not inevitable, indeed the simplicity of her solution makes the repeated agony of other speakers seem a bit doltish.

Other critics have noted that Pamphilia’s version of love tends to be internalized, and that is true at least in comparison to other sonnets, specifically in terms of her love object. Wroth seems to imply that her speaker has, even from the very beginning of the sonnet sequence, a conscious knowledge that fin amour is as much an effect of idealization and fantasy as it is from the external influence of the beauty or virtues of the beloved. We begin to see Pamphilia’s acknowledgement that love is generated from within in the first sonnet which is notably more involved in the speaker’s subconscious desires than speakers in other sequences. Sidney’s Astrophel’s love for Stella bloomed:

Not at the first sight, nor with a dribbed shot,  
Loue gaue the wound, which, while I breathe, will bleede;  
But knowne worth did in tract of time proceed,
Till by degrees, it had full conquest got.

Stella’s perfections slowly convince Astrophel to love her. Similarly in the Amoretti, the speaker discusses falling in love with his beloved due to her many virtues. Pamphilia’s love is born in a situation that has strikingly little to do with the man she will fall in love with. The beginning of Wroth’s first sonnet reads, “WHen night's blacke Mantle could most darknesse proue,/ And sleepe (deaths Image) did my senses hyre,/ From Knowledge of my selfe, then thoughts did moue/ Swifter then those, most [swiftnesse] neede require.” Rather than consciously building up evidence about the perfection of the loved one, Pamphilia’s love first comes upon her in her sleep, when rational evaluation is impossible and when she does not even have knowledge of herself. After denying her speaker any consciousness, Wroth makes the interesting move of still granting her thoughts that move more swiftly even than her senses. Thus her senses had nothing to do with her love for Amphilanthus: rather she attributes her love to a distinctly different species of thought – that which possesses her during sleep. In her dreams, Venus and Cupid appear, Cupid shoots a burning heart into her chest, and Pamphilia laments that since then, “O me, a Lover I haue beene,” (7). The Cupid that she addresses off and on for the rest of the sonnet sequence, and the one she often confuses with Amphilanthus, is therefore generated by her own dreams.

Pamphilia also complains explicitly of love’s use of “phant’sies,” which seems similar to the fantasy of Venus and Cupid that appeared to her in her dreams in sonnet 14. In it she complains of her powerlessness and captivity, a state of being that love has forced upon her. She questions if she really must submit to the tyranny of love and then describes the manner in which love causes men and women to submit to his
power, “Loue first shall leaue mens phant’sies to them free,/ Desire shall quench loues flames, Spring, hate sweet showres” (23). The first step in love’s domination is to set their “phant’sies” or fantasies free. Of course a phantasy could be defined at the time as, “the image impressed on the mind by an object of sense,” which implies a very realistic mental apprehension of an existing object, and in terms of love could be an accurate understanding of the beloved’s appearance and virtues; but in this case, the phantasies are set “free.” Setting free men’s fantasies could refer to letting them take up more conscious time and energy, i.e. fantasy is no longer under control by the conscious mind but images of the lover come unbidden and starts to take up inordinate amounts of time. It could equally refer to fantasy being set free from the restrictions of reality, implying a mental image that is released from any accurate rendering of reality and allowed to invent pleasant fictions. In either understanding of Pamphilia’s line, the imagination and its ability to magnify the beloved in the mind of the lover is an integral part of love. To fall in love with someone’s imaginary virtues or to find yourself unable to stop thinking about someone, leads to infatuation. Pamphilia seems to be at least partially aware of the fact that love is driven by the internal workings of the imagination as much, if not more, than the charms of the beloved.

The duality between a lover’s idea of her beloved and the reality of him is confronted again in sonnet 21:

When last I saw thee, I did not thee see,
It was thine Image which in my thoughts lay
So lively figur’d, as no times delay
Could suffer me in heart to parted be. (31)

Here, Pamphilia, as an infatuated lover, makes no distinction between her lover in
actuality and her internal picture of him, imagining that the last time she saw him was just the last time she spent time imagining him close. Her understanding of her lover isn’t even always a conscious one, but one that comes to her in her sleep:

And sleepe so fauourable is to me,
As not to let thy lou’d remembrance stray:
Lest that I waking might haue cause to say,
there was one minute found to forgett thee.
Then, since my faith is such, so kinde my sleepe,
That gladly thee presents into my thought,
And still true Louer-like thy face doth keepe,
So as some pleasure shadow-like is wrought.
Pitty my louing, nay of conscience giue
Reward to me in whom thy self doth liue. (31)

Pamphilia’s plea to Amphilanthus here is that he ought to love her because she thinks of him constantly, even in her sleep. She gets pleasure even out of her dream, or fantasy encounters with him, and believes herself worthy of reward because of her ability to mentally carry her lover with her constantly. But, like a love-sick teenager with a crush on a celebrity, Pamphilia draws no distinction between her imagined lover and the real one. She believes that he lives in her already, because his image appears to her so easily.

Pamphilia’s pleasure is again portrayed as deriving from her thoughts rather than any actual interaction or sight of Amphilanthus two sonnets deeper into the sequence when she compares her internal pleasures to the outward pursuits of the others that surround her, “When euery one to pleasing pastime hies/ Some hunt, some hauke, some play, while some delight/ In sweet discourse, and musicke shews ioys might:/ Yet I my thoughts doe farr aboue these prize” (33). While others look for diversion, she can only take pleasure, not in being near her beloved, but in thoughts of him, and indeed she makes a point of the fact that she can only hold discourse with herself, and even music
which traditionally soothes the heart of the lover proves merely a distraction from her
own thoughts of love:

When others hunt, my thoughts I haue in chase;  
If hauke, my minde at wished end doth flye:  
Discourse, I with my spirit talke and cry;  
While others musick choose as greatest grace.  
O God say I, can thes fond pleasures moue,  
Or musick bee but in sweet thoughts of Loue?

While other sonneteers find inspiration in the surrounding world to help them praise their
beloved or find ways to express their pain through analogies to the very pursuits that
Pamphilia disdains, she chooses instead to turn her thoughts away from everything
external. Sidney famously compares his desire for his beloved to a rider who spurs him
on like a horse. Others compare their beloved to the hart that they hunt. Wroth seems to
choose to mention those pursuits that lovers have most often made mention of in their
work so as to differentiate herself from the traditional sonnets and draw attention to the
fact that her love is more all encompassing, more distracting, but at the same time making
it more internal and dependent upon her own thoughts rather than observation and
reflection in comparison to the love portrayed in the sonnet sequences preceding hers.

Pamphilia’s recognition that what she loves about her beloved is an internal
creation of her own allows her to transition more easily into the type of selfless, constant
affection that becomes her ultimate achievement at the end of the sequence. Rather than
constantly burning for an impossible goal, Pamphilia alters the goals of a lover in
choosing not to attempt to pursue a fantasy goal in reality. The characteristics that Wroth
adds to her version of fin amour tend to be those associated in literature (both secular and
sacred) with Christian charity, the unconditional love that God sheds freely on mankind.
For the duration of the sonnet sequence, Wroth’s speaker goes through a series of trials and self-examinations as similar to mystics and martyrs as it is to the sufferings of Petrarch before she reaches the most perfect stage of her love. Courtly lovers often go through long periods of suffering, but they rarely learn wisdom and acceptance to the extent that she does by the end of her sequence, a discrepancy that is helped along by the fact that they believe their fantasy goals are achievable and independently existing and therefore continue to pursue them, while Pamphilia realizes the futility of this and therefore looks for alternatives. When Pamphilia reaches the final stage of love, therefore, the beloved’s capitulation to the lover’s pleas is phased out of importance. Similar to a mystic learning to embody agape, Pamphilia’s happiness no longer relies upon succeeding in her goal of captivating his attention and affection. She learns to find joy in spite of any trials with which she is faced. In the secular context of sonnets, this might sound unduly subservient on the part of the lover, but Pamphilia does not turn out to be merely subject to the capricious whims of her beloved, which might have seemed a step backward in terms of female empowerment. As mentioned earlier, however, she never takes on the self-deprecating, masochistic role of a patient Griselda who worships her husband and believes herself to be inherently inferior. Quite to the contrary, Pamphilia gains a sense of empowerment from her goal of perfecting her ability to love. After all, it is she who becomes God-like through the process of loving; she becomes a being who sheds unconditional love and support and who is unfailingly patient. This is a dramatic shift from male lovers whose adoration for their ladies merely spins more rhetorical gilt with which they embroider the fictitious divinity of their idealized beloved. Generations of critics have pointed out the sonnet’s ability to draw attention not only to
the subject of the poem, but to the authors’ rhetorical mastery. The author’s creation in a sonnet sequence is not only a portrait of a divine woman, but also the ethos of a skilled, complete, talented man; it is an indirect portrait of himself as well. The traditional lover creates an idealized self through the writing of sonnets; He can see himself as attractive and whole because of his eloquent ability to paint his lady. Wroth’s speaker is admirable not only because of her writerly ability, indeed her portrait of her beloved is notoriously lacking in the kinds of visual details for which other poets prided themselves, but, because the qualities manifested in the speaker become increasingly those that were admired in all commonly approved tracts on religious love, she creates the persona of a speaker that is admirable in her own right rather than as a reflection of what she can artistically create; all of which tends to legitimize her writing further as it links it rhetorically and thematically with those modes of writing that were already acceptable for female authors, religious polemics, conversion tales, and martyrdom experiences.

While Wroth reorders the value system embedded in a typical sonnet sequence with her employment of ambiguity in the ways mentioned above, her version of sonnets not only questions the best way to evaluate the worth of an individual, but also examines gender dynamics typical in sonnets and questions to what extent the male speaker and author should have power over a female lover. Wroth accomplishes this by constantly making it dubious who her speaker is addressing: Love itself, i.e. Cupid, or her male beloved, Amphilanthus. By making it impossible to absolutely determine which is the

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60 Susan Lauffer O’Hara writes an extended explanation of how this confusion can be cleared up easily if one pays attention to medieval traditions of courtly love in which “Cupid never betrays his faithful worshippers, and he can subjugate the cruellest beloved” (51) she goes on to argue that remembering this fact makes it easy to determine whether Pamphilia is addressing Cupid or Amphilanthus. But this does not explain why Wroth did not simply make this clear in the poems themselves with minor changes in the pronouns and capitalization. Nor does it explain
recipient of her praise or complaint, Wroth creates sonnets in which the speaker can be read as either subservient or empowered, denying the sonnet itself the power to subscribe roles of weakness or strength to the persons within the love relationship. Her sonnets do not employ words as a way to dominate the object, circumscribing his/her power, as in most other sonnet sequences; rather, they deny the reader any way of determining for sure which participant in the relationship is the more powerful, and in so doing disallow the struggle for dominance or power from being a defining element in the relationship.

The confusion between Love and beloved is already present in the sequence by the third sonnet. Here Wroth plays with the difference between Love and beloved in order to walk a line between male and female roles, which also forces her version of fin amour into a more internal form than traditional courtly love. Most of sonnet 3 seems to clearly be addressed to Love himself, “Yet is there hope, then Love but play thy part,/ Remember well thy selfe, and think on me;/ Shine in those eyes which conquered haue my heart,/ And see if mine, be slacke to answer thee” (9). Pamphilia here is clearly asking love to shine in the eyes of her beloved; though addressed ambiguously as “Love” which could indicate either, she makes a clear separation between love and Amphilanthus when she asks love to shine in his eyes. However, later in the poem she asks the subject of the poem to:

Watch but my sleepe, if I take any rest,  
For thought of you, my spirit so distrest,  
As pale and famish’d, I for mercy cry.  
Will you your seruant leave: thinke but on this,  
Who wears Love’s Crowne, must not doe so amisse  
But seeke their good, who on thy force do lye. (9)
It is a typical trope in the world of fin amour for thoughts of the beloved to disturb the lover’s sleep (Shakespeare’s sonnet #43; Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella sonnets 32, 38, 39), it is, however less than typical for a lover to stay awake at nights pondering on the abstract idea of love, or even considering the awesome power of the god of love.

Because it fits so perfectly into a known literary pattern, the “you” the speaker addresses here is therefore most likely to be read by her audience as a reference to Amphilanthus, in spite of the lines undeniably addressed to Love earlier in the same sonnet. The last two lines can therefore be read as being addressed to either Love or Amphilanthus, both of which supply a very different interpretation. If the lines are addressed to Love himself, Pamphilia is, in essence, schooling a deity in how to properly behave towards his worshipper. She tells him that if he desires her to remain his servant, he should not abuse his power and watch her suffer, but seek to influence her lover to return her affection.

While this is a cheeky, very much empowered stance to take with the god of love, it would have been an accepted understanding of the duties of a king of any sort. He should treat his subjects as a father would his children, seeking their correction and their welfare with all of his rulings. Recalling this standard of behavior to his remembrance implies a speaker who knows what is right and wrong even more clearly than those who rub elbows in magisterial spheres, and who feels comfortable enough among royal company to speak her thoughts aloud. If, however, they refer to her beloved, there is no literal crown or reasonable expectation of duty. The crown he wears is a metaphorical one that the speaker gives him specifically so that she can employ a desperate plea to a duty that does not truly exist. The speaker sounds pathetically willing to abase herself, reminding
her lover that she is under his power and that she relies upon him, and manipulative rather than straight dealing. These two very different versions of the speaker of the poem imply a strength and moral rectitude in Pamphilia’s request while portraying some of the less admirable tactics a dis-empowered lover might be compelled to use in order to manipulate her lover into a more amenable, reciprocal relationship. Thus the reader sees the position of the lover in its potential to be both a role that issues commands and one that supplicates for favors, and the struggle for dominance of one lover rejecting the other or of one lover attempting rhetorical mastery over the other can no longer be the main focus of the sonnets when the reader is unsure of where exactly the majority of the power lies.

In sonnet 46, Wroth again employs ambiguity in ways that both empower her speaker and improve upon existing tropes of courtly love. When Wroth’s speaker addresses “Love” in the first line, there is already ambiguity over whether she is complaining to a flesh and blood man, her beloved, or to an imagined deity, Cupid himself. In the second line this confusion is compounded and multiple interpretations of the poem begin to take shape. She explains in that line that he has made her, “So thine, as if for thee I were ordained” (61). If addressing a man, “ordained” here must mean that she feels he has made her so attached to him that she feels like their love is predestined, similar to that of lovers from chivalric romances. Pamphilia notably does not declare their love to be ordained, but rather contests that he has made her so much his that it is as if their love were of this epic variety. This line therefore implies that Pamphilia’s love is something that would stand the test of any distance or trial or intervening party, but she would not have the compulsion of the stars to blame, rather it would be the charms of her
lover that she found to be as compelling as destiny. This kind of self imposed loyalty is therefore a compliment to his attractiveness and points to the exercise of her free will in the match. Both the power dynamics of the relationship and the emotions conveyed are therefore already fairly complex. Pamphilia’s ethos is that of a lover attempting to convince her reluctant beloved that he ought to return her love because it is as if they are complimentary beings. It is a compelling argument both because of its clever flattery and the attractive, profound loyalty expressed. Because of this, she seems intelligent, even cunning, engaged, and active. Even if we read the reference in this line to her beloved taking possession of her (being made “so thine”) as a submissive note as this could be read as offering herself as a possession of sorts, the line as a whole cannot be read as passive since the idea of being predestined never works in only one direction. In literature a pair of lovers is often destined to be together, but one would be hard pressed to find a story of one lover predestined to pine for eternity while his beloved finds love with someone else. Pamphilia’s plea if addressed to a beloved is therefore also a subtle reminder of his obligation to love her back. Her place is thus, active, and coming from enough of a position of power to feel free to remind him of his duties, in a sense correcting his behavior as much like a parent or mentor figure as a lover. While containing elements that superficially seem submissive, the speaker retains her position of power over her subject.

If addressing the god Cupid, the word takes on a more religious connotation and implies that she has become an acolyte in training to be a devoted priestess to Love. As the mortal worshipper of a deity, the power is all on the side of the god, and the position of the speaker is more that of someone forced into the position of taking vows. The
emotion conveyed here is therefore more of a desperation, and implies the profound power that love has to completely control the thoughts/actions of those under his sway. This also conveys devotion to the addressee of the poem, but a powerless, worshipful variety that is generally thought to be bounded by greater obligation than the role of a lover. The distinction between these two readings makes a great difference in how the passage is understood. While the posturing involved in the subject position of a courtly lover has always ostensibly placed the lover in the subordinate position, worshipping their own version of the divine Laura or Beatrice, scholarship on sonnets has long been aware of the objectification of the beloved and her comparatively passive role due to her portrayal laying completely within the hands of the lover. The power dynamics of writing to a deity, even a mythical one like Cupid, invariably swing in the other direction, with the speaker begging the ear of someone who will be presumed by readers to be quite powerful and whose reputation and place in history cannot be adversely affected by any poetic depiction. The poet is still in an active role, but Cupid has enough presence in collective imagination that a sonnet sequence cannot materially alter his image. Also, in the presentation of the speaker as subordinate to his subject, the hierarchy cannot be perceived as a temporary one due to conventions of fin amour; one, in traditional sonnets, where emotion has subdued the male, who should have been more dominant of the two. By smudging the boundary between her lover and the god of love, Mary Wroth creates a subject position for her speaker that is socially subservient to that of her male beloved, but as the author of her sonnets, she is still has the power to define him. She is both above and below him, powerful and weak.

Wroth’s negotiation of power dynamics is confounded further with the lines that
She looks for respite from the pangs of love in a well, but, oddly, upon seeing her own reflection she is fresh embraced by love. She calls herself a “living glass,” in which love sees himself; a reflection of love so perfect that when she looks at her own face she can only see either love or her beloved. If it is the former that she sees, she has taken on enough of his characteristics that she sees herself as materially altered to be the ideal lover. If she sees her beloved in herself, it seems rather that she has modeled herself not after the ideal lover, but has taken on traits from the man she worships. Again, the difference between modeling oneself on an ideal conception of love and becoming so much like an existing lover that she cannot distinguish her own face from his any longer, is a tremendous one. As a female poet attempting to write from the male subject position, the ideal position for her is hazy at best. As she tries to invent the ideal, she is confronted with the existing gendered ideals of a female passive figure who is defined by her lover and the ideal male position that crafts the situation and begs pardon of an idealized beloved he has to some degree invented. The female speaker, Pamphilia, can be neither of these entirely, but her encounter with her own reflection implies aspects of both that she is attempting to bind together. Seeing her own face as a reflection of her male beloved provides a brilliant analogy of the position of the worshipped female in most male-authored sonnet sequences. She is not a separate, unique individual, but a literary
creation that the male author uses as an opportunity to display his own rhetorical brilliance. She is very much a reflection of him. Pamphilia, as a reflection of her male lover, falls into the traditionally feminine role. However, the ambiguity inherent in the sonnet also allows the reader to understand her as a reflection of the god of love, one with power over who loves and who does not. The male author of the sonnets writes the story of the lovers and defines both of them. Rather than the imprint of her male lover she bears the image of a divinity who has power over love, rather like the male authors who invent and execute their love stories. Wroth’s deliberate use of ambiguity therefore ensures that her speaker can walk the line between male and female roles in fin amour. She is both or neither depending on how the individual reader chooses to understand her work.

Wroth’s alterations to the subject position of the speaker in her sonnets work together to challenge some of the traditional aspects of sonnet sequences that are particularly antipathetic to a female speaker. Rather than endeavoring to convince, or seduce, or win the lover in a pursuit that potentially ends in catching her like she is a prize, an aggressive single-minded end which would have seriously transgressed societal standards of passive female behavior, changing the focus of the lover to a successful portrayal of emotion and to the education of an admirable character still allows the speaker to claim undeniably admirable qualities that would have been recommended as appropriate for both genders. Moreover, these qualities would have been those that the church recommended, making it difficult for critics of her work to deny the virtuousness on the speaker’s enterprise. The constancy and devotion displayed by the speaker, which, by the end of the sequence, become the hallmark of her character in spite of the complex
and often contradictory emotions that she endures and expresses, are virtues that are most often recommended for women, as well as qualities found in God himself. Wroth therefore makes her heroine both appropriately feminine as well as potentially powerful; a trend she continues by blurring the line between her beloved and Love himself, which in several sonnets allows Pamphilia to claim a position at once of power and of subjection. The subject position of the speaker of Wroth’s sonnets is therefore not multi-layered, but multi-faceted, as women facing the realities of early modern life would have been as well. They would undeniably have been officially subject to the authority of men in their legal identity as wives and daughters, as well as envisioned by much of society as inferior to their male counterparts, while at the same time unofficially exerting significant influence if not openly wielding power within their households, among their families, at court or over their lovers. Wroth’s subject position gives the female speaker the same room to stand in literature as she herself had in her real life, influenced as she was in some ways by society’s pressures while maintaining control of her own affairs and exerting influence over men of many walks of life. Wroth’s work also provides a foil for the way that male authors tend to use language. Many, if not most of her sonnets either retain the ability to mean several things at once, simultaneously accept opposing viewpoints, or rely upon an admittedly subjective viewpoint that implicitly denies a singular truth and encourages reader interpretation. All of these methods use language as a net to catch a multiplicity of meanings and to connect to many things at once instead of the more traditional, masculine use of language that aims to catch one thing at a time. Surely Wroth does not exhibit the same kind of disruptive excess that Luce Irigaray does in her essays, but they certainly demonstrate a range of original uses for language and in
so doing make the attentive reader aware of the limitations of a system of writing that aims for logic and clarity above everything else.
Richard Barnfield: Presenting the Homoerotic to an Academic Audience

While Mary Wroth’s adroit innovations in her poems are primarily focused on her speaker, there are some drawbacks to this approach. Manipulating the speaking subject to influence the audience means that the poet must work with the readers’ preconceived notions of how that speaker should be, especially if that speaker is a woman. Wroth must make compromises so as not to transgress social boundaries too far and alienate the audience. Pamphilia can urge the reader. She can wheedle a slow acceptance, but she cannot demand. To create a permissible space for a more radical representation of an untraditional speaker, the author of a subversive set of poems would need to tinker with the audience itself, procuring a more broad-minded approach to his work before even introducing the speaking subject. In the 1590s, Richard Barnfield wrote one of only two known early modern sonnet sequences in which a male speaker addresses a male beloved. To alleviate some of the potential backlash from such a controversial piece of writing, rather than utilizing a veil of ambiguity that plays with (and occasionally to) preconceived notions of gender or sexual identity, in his second published set of poems, Cynthia; With Certaine Sonnets, And with the Legend of Cassandra (referred to hereafter as Cynthia), Barnfield attempts to alter the perspective with which his reader approaches the work. Barnfield manipulates the mindset with which his readers approach his text
into one of the few points of view in the 1590s that would allow him to write explicitly homoerotic love poems without risking harsh censure from his readers, something that had just occurred in the reception of his first published work. This approach allows him to create an environment in which homoerotic love can be considered, and portrayed in different ways without any reflexive condemnation from the more conservative faction of his audience.

Richard Barnfield is an unusual poet both in what we know of his life and in the odd dichotomy of his critical reception. We know even less about Barnfield’s life than we do about Shakespeare’s. We know he was born in 1574, which makes him only ten years younger than William Shakespeare, and, while he is only ever identified as a minor Elizabethan poet, he has been attributed with significant literary talent by an impressive group of literary critics: Frank Kermode, C.S. Lewis, W. Carew Hazlitt, Algernon Swinburne, Edward Arbor, Tucker Brooke, Kenneth Boris, George Klawitter, etc. (Boris 13, 21). Talented, but not particularly rich, Barnfield was the son of minor gentry in Shropshire who sent him to Brasenose College, Oxford when he was 15 years old. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1592 but was never admitted to the Masters’ program. Beyond this, the historical record only tells us for certain that he went on to publish three books of poetry (The Affectionate Shepherd in 1594, Cynthia with certaine sonnets and the legend of Cassandra in 1595, and The Encomion of Lady Pecunia in 1598) and the broadside “A Lover’s Newest Curranto” (1625). We also know that he was disinherited in favor of a younger brother, and that he died in 1627. We can speculate that he met Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Shakespeare, and Watson, as they all receive encomia in his verses, but we cannot know for sure since it was common practice
for poets to write encomia to other writers whose work they admired, but had never actually met. These writers could even be centuries dead and still inspire vivid verses of praise that imply a personal relationship. Andrew Worrall speculates that Barnfield was disinherited because of his homosexuality, but we can never really know precisely why he lost his birthright (32). While we can only hypothesize as to how Barnfield’s possible homosexuality (or at least his poems’ expressions of homoerotic desire) was received by his family, his critical reception over the years is directly related to the homoerotic content in his poems. Critics tend to either insist that the homoerotic content of Barnfield’s poems is just posturing, or they dismiss his work as potentially morally harmful because of the sincerity of the homosexual admissions (Boris 14). C. S. Lewis, for example, admires Barnfield’s talent, but insists on the badness of Barnfield’s poems because of their potential to corrupt readers. Harry Morris’ 1963 book, Richard Barnfield, Colin’s Child similarly labels his work “perverse” (15). Other critics, ironically even those who would not be inclined to condemn the poems simply because of their homoerotic content, do not read the homoeroticism as sincere. As might be expected, late nineteenth-century critics like Alexander Grosart encourage readers to identify Barnfield’s homoerotic stance as nothing more than a pose (Boris 13). There was some confusion between in the biography of Barnfield that led scholars to believe for

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62 C.S. Lewis declares in almost hyperbolic praise of Barnfield that he could, “steal from Shakespeare and add something worth adding,” and that “there are comic stanzas [in ‘The Prayse of Lady Pecunia’] that almost anticipate Byron” (Qtd in Borris, Kennet, “Critical Introduction”)

years in some details of his life that have recently been revealed to be from the life of his father. The will of a Richard Barnfield reveals that he was the owner of a fairly wealthy plot of land with a country house. Other historical records tell of this same Richard Barnfield marrying and having a child later in life, but this Richard was revealed by later scholarship to be the poet’s father. The author Richard Barnfield never married and died a very poor man due to his aforementioned disinheritance (Norton 1). Grosart assumes the poet to be heterosexual due to his supposed marriage and therefore takes his claim of imitating Virgil at face value (Grosart xxiv, xviii). In spite of this new scholarship, the poems still don’t read as undeniably genuine expressions of homosexuality. In Alan Bray’s now canonical work, Homosexuality in Renaissance England, he also declares the content of the poems to be “not about homosexuality” but just a conventional way of discussing homosocial relationships (Bray 61). The feigned/unfeigned nature of the love portrayed in Barnfield’s sonnets is therefore a pivotal critical disagreement that has split the interpretation of his work for centuries. But, given the nature of potential repercussions of writing homoerotic love poems in the sixteenth century, the confusion that these sonnets has generated should be understood as not a flaw in his work, but a clever, and most likely purposeful rhetorical maneuver that allows his work to walk the fine line between proper and forbidden.

William Shakespeare’s homoerotic sonnets to the golden youth are so ubiquitous in English classrooms, so unthinkingly canonical, that the rarity of homoerotic love poems and the virtually universal condemnation of sodomy which characterized the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries are often simply ignored. When not ignored they are often glossed over quickly with an explanation of the importance given male
friendship in the early modern period and the unexpectedly intimate rhetoric used to describe such relationships, implying that the sonnets were acceptable since even the passionate affection they describe never breaches contemporary limits of a platonic homosocial relationship. But both of these approaches avoid situating the sonnets in the discrete moral atmosphere of the sixteenth century when extreme condemnations of sodomy were the norm and even effeminacy was strenuously denounced by some for being a mere enticement to the sin of sodomy. Sodomy had been officially illegal in England since 1533 when Parliament passed the “Buggery Act,” in which, “the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with mankind or beast” was made into a capital offense for which perpetrators could be hanged (Yearling 55). Sodomy was considered so aberrant as to be confusedly associated in people’s minds with other hidden, duplicitous sins such as treason, hypocrisy, and heresy (papism, witchcraft and anabaptism) all of which were considered crimes against nature (Bray 20). This being the case, authors who wanted to write about erotic relationships between men were constrained by some fairly rigid limits of popular opinion, and risked having their writing shunned if they were too explicit about a passionate, physical love between men.

This being the case, many authors of the period became well practiced in alluding to homosexual attraction, implying it, but never stating it. Homoeerotic titillation was

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64 Alan Bray elaborates on the universal disapproval of homosexuality, that the “‘common sense’ view [in the early modern period] was that homosexuality was an abomination., and it is difficult to exaggerate the fear and loathing of homosexuality to be read in the literature of the time. Homosexuality in the English Renaissance. p 62.


65 Qtd. in Rebecca Yearling, “Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Verse” (SEL 1500-1900, 53:1).
common, made possible by the wide range of possible interpretations of homosocial ties in the early modern period.\textsuperscript{66} This was especially true in the late sixteenth century when the social markers meant to distinguish a platonic male friendship from a sexual one became increasingly ambiguous. Alan Bray has most famously pointed out that the marks of a platonic male friendship, a relationship that was hailed during this time period as a foundational part of society, were remarkably similar to the signs of an intimacy that went beyond accepted societal bounds. Male friends in the early modern period would often share public embraces and kisses, and sleeping together in the same bed was a sign of close friendship and trust, not de facto proof of a sexual relationship. Rather than the presence of improper intimacy, it was really the absence of certain important “conventions of friendship,” that made a relationship seem suspicious or unnatural. One of these conventions was that both of the men in the friendship needed to be gentlemen, and the other was that the bond between men was supposed to be a “personal” one, not a “mercenary” one (Bray 50). Thus the equality of the men in the friendship was an important factor in indicating a sincere friendship. This is an important distinction given that in Barnfield’s \textit{Cynthia}, the lovers (I use this term loosely since it’s never clear if Ganymede accepts his suitors advances) are not the same age. The speaker mentions several times that he is more advanced in age than the object of his attention. Bray’s work also points out that there is a strange disparity between the official stance on sodomy and the probable reality of homosexuality during the sixteenth and seventeenth

\textsuperscript{66} For example, Christopher Marlowe’s “Hero and Leander,” written in 1598, in which the physical charms of the male hero receive more attention and explicit description than the heroine, Shakespeare’s “\textit{Venus and Adonis},” which similarly dwells on very erotic descriptions of the hero’s body, Shakespeare’s gender-bending comedies, Spencer’s \textit{The Faerie Queen}. See also Mary Bly, \textit{Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage} (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 78, for a description of multiple homoerotic plays put on by the popular Whitefriars Theatre Company.
centuries. While sodomy was perceived as a hideous crime on the level with treason and heresy, it was extremely rare for a man to be held up on charges of sodomy alone.\(^{67}\) It was almost exclusively tacked on to the two latter charges most likely as a kind of amplification of their abhorrence, a tacit declaration that the individual in question was beyond saving. Conversely, homosexual activity, Bray theorizes, occurred “on a massive and ineradicable scale” (Shepard 116). While there is no hard evidence in the historical record to prove that this was the case (Even Bray argues from the lack of evidence as a poignant indicator), it is a reasonable assumption given the extremely limited access young men had to women especially as members of the university or the Inns of Court.

As students, young men and boys were by rule supposed to abstain from the company of women; women were legally banned from the chambers of all university students (119). While the legal record from Cambridge University, for example, includes many examples of boys being found with women in their rooms, there is certainly not the deluge of cases one would expect as a reflection of hundreds of fulfilled adolescent sexual needs. Students at the universities lived in very close quarters conducive to physical contact if not physical intimacy allowing homoerotic activity certainly much more opportunity and lack of risk than seeking out women in the town. In addition, the young men attending university in the early modern period did not have to contend with the stigma of being a homosexual as a choice of identity, one regularly depreciated by their surrounding society, as men did in future centuries when the idea of homosexuality was altered from

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\(^{67}\) Homosexual acts between men had been officially illegal in England since 1533 when Parliament passed the “Buggery Act.” Sodomy was considered so aberrant as to be confusedly associated in people’s minds with other hidden, duplicitous sins such as treason or hypocrisy; all three of which were considered crimes against nature.
being considered an act, into something that shaped one’s entire character.\textsuperscript{68} During the Renaissance homosexuality was seen as a sin to which all men were prone should guard against making it much more conceptually accessible than when it came to be seen as the exclusive predilection of a fringe group.

In spite of what this suggests, there is, again, very little hard evidence of homosexuality in early modern Universities. There are, in fact only two cases of disputes over homosexual relations in the Cambridge records, both legal cases against defamation of character, and in both cases the age difference between those allegedly involved was at least as important as the equivalence of gender. In one case a doctor of Divinity of Pembroke Hall accused another fellow from the college of having had a variety of affairs with both ‘lasses and wenches’ and ‘boyes,’ (Shepard 117). The same sex accusations were not received with any especial sensationalism, they were not even remarked upon outside of the initial accusation and the case was dropped. As Alexandra Shephard interprets the evidence, “The imputation of same-sex relations was in all likelihood a by-product of a different dispute, acting as ammunition in a malicious attack. Its veracity seems secondary to the concerns both of the litigants and of the court,” (118)\textsuperscript{69} A second court case involved a fellow of Trinity college suing three of his pupils for defamation of character in making allegations that he had “committed the act of buggery” with them, and further accused him of seducing them into the act. Ultimately all three of the students recanted, however, and the historical record implies that there was a pre-existing


grudge against the teacher in question, all three students already having tried to defame
his character by spreading rumors that he had been having an affair with his maid (118). 70
Again, in an extensive record of litigation, these are the only cases within Cambridge
records that involve accusations of homosexual activity, and there is evidence that one of
the primary aims of both of the accusing parties was to defile the reputation of the
accusee. A homosexual relationship with young boys, specifically one of the elder man’s
pupils is the tactical accusation used in both cases, the desired defamatory effect of which
implies that there was something particularly damning in an abuse of power used as
sexual leverage. This was at least as scandalous as any choice of the gender of the
younger party. Whether the accusations were based on truth or not, the accusers knew
that the predatory aspect of sexual relations would cause damage to a reputation. This
seems to support Alan Bray’s theory that homosexual relations between students of the
same age and situation at the university were relatively unremarkable and also supports
Bruce Smith’s analysis of the wide variety of types, or what he calls “myths,” of
homosocial relations in early modern England, and the markedly different ways that they
would have been understood by their audience.

Taking his cue from Pierre Bourdieu, Smith expands the idea of a “habitus,”
Bourdieu’s term for the spectrum of possible actions that lie open to all people (actors) in
society at any one moment in time. While there are no ironclad rules that people follow
to elect their everyday actions and conversations, there exists a “matrix of perceptions,
appreciations, and actions” that confines but does not determine how people will act in
any given social context. These unwritten customs of thought and behavior are so

70 For specific details, see CUL, CUA, Ann House c. Walter Lassels, Comm.Ct.II.3, fo. 191. and CUL CUA, Robert
ingrained as to be acted on (almost exclusively) unconsciously. Smith point out that the habitus that guide social action are constantly being re-structured. A new interpretation of the past, a new understanding of accepted social myths, opens avenues of action in a habitus that were previously unconsidered. It is for this reason that Smith places a great deal of importance upon the stories that were told about homosexuality and homosocial relationships. While the official position of the Church and the state was a violent condemnation of any sodomitical practices, there were several categories of myths/stories that were the common reading material for the students at the universities as well as other members of the educated elite that involved different dynamics between men in homosexual relationships and allowed early modern men ways to think about intimacy between one another in spite of official condemnations. Most of these stories come from the classical literature that the young men were reading as a part of their university education. Pastoral poetry, especially Virgil’s Eclogues, in which young shepherds often engage in erotic (but not always explicitly sexual) behaviour conceptualized a possibility for homosexual behavior among young men that Smith dubs the myth of the “passionate shepherd.” While hardly allowing the shepherds’ actions to be embraced as exemplary conduct, these stories gave their readers a way to think about homoeroticism outside the juridical condemnation that was the official line of the government and the church (Smith 114). Following the example of poets like Virgil there began to be a wealth of pastoral poetry written in the universities by young poets

71 Any distinction between church and state is obviously lessened or destroyed after Henry VIII. It should also be noted that the original motivation for sodomy laws was probably as much to help solidify the need for the new Church of England as any moral outrage. (See Smith, Bruce. *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England*. U of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991. pp 43-45. for a discussion on the political motivations for sodomy laws) Moral arguments were, however, used to publicly justify the codification of such laws, see pages 50-51 of the same source.
who wanted to follow in the footsteps of Greek masters. These adaptation of classical works, like Richard Barnfield’s first work, *The Affectionate Shepherd*, are particularly noteworthy because, by altering a traditional form, a traditional myth, the way in which homoerotic relationships were perceived was potentially changed as well - avenues of thought and action that had been outside the unconscious barriers of the habitus were made possible, or at least discernable for the first time.

Barnfield’s second work, *Cynthia*, is notable not only for altering existing early modern myths of homosexual relationships, but also because it is such an unusual amalgam of homoerotic myths and literary forms. The *Cynthia* sonnets are written with pastoral motifs. Both the speaker and the object of the poems are ostensibly shepherds, but they are not pastoral poems, they make up a sonnet sequence; they are a unique mix of pastoral elements and Petrarchan ones. Similarly, though both of the men involved in the love affair are shepherds, which would imply that the author is utilizing the same narrative pattern of passionate shepherds mentioned above, the speaker is considerably older than the object, which alters the entire dynamic of their relationship according to the majority belief in the early seventeenth century. Another oft repeated story that formed one of the myths of homoeroticism in the early seventeenth century was that dubbed by Bruce Smith as “Master and Minion.” The story of Jupiter descending from Olympus to carry off Ganymede (the most widely recognized myth of homosexual desire in the early modern period) became a pattern used to categorize stories of older men in positions of power who made younger men their objects of sexual attention (Smith 191). Alan Bray points out how very often this unequal power relationship figured into all kinds of clandestine sexual relationships when he writes, “What determined the shared
and recurring features of homosexual relationships was the prevailing distribution of power, economic power and social power, not the fact of homosexuality itself. It is a crucial realization,” (Bray 56). This hierarchical type of relationship exactly reflected the early modern social structure. The power play between men set at differing levels of power was eroticized to such an extent that it became, “…the very subject of Renaissance legal discourse about sodomy: power-bedeviled sexual relations between a man and a ‘boy,’” (Smith 194). This type of relationship was mocked in an endless number of satires, with the younger of the two men almost always receiving the brunt of the criticism (Smith 196). The Ganymede, the “boy,” in the couple was mocked for taking on a feminine role, for being the submissive vessel of someone else’s pleasure. The designation of “boy” is, however, not as straight-forward as it might appear. “Boy” as an appellation was used as often to designate someone of lesser rank, a servant/slave, or to convey a sense of contempt, to imply that the speaker is on a higher moral/ethical level. There is evidence of it being used in reference to homosexual partners as old as 29 years of age (195). The more important indicator of the status of the Ganymede was not his age, but the power differential between him and his influential admirer.

When Barnfield crafted his sonnet sequence and addressed it to a younger man whom he specifically designates, “Ganymede,” the most well-known submissive, homoerotic partner in storied history, there is no way he was not conscious that he is

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73 A brief sampling of contemporary works including this type of satire are: Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida (the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is expressly mocked by Thersites); John Marston’s, The Scourge of Villanice, which goes so far as to obliquely criticize the homosexual relationship between King James and his minion, George Villiers; Thomas Heywood’s Pleasant Dialogues and Dramma; and Ben Jonson’s Sejanus (though in Sejanus the emperor receives at least as much censure as his young lovers).
deliberately playing with the often mocked stereotype of an effeminate, accommodating, adolescent lover. In the alterations he makes to the character types from myth and satire, he is addressing and amending the way in which the majority of his contemporary critical audience would be most likely to characterize homosexual/homosocial relationships. In *Cynthia* both the sense of anything predatory on the part of the older lover and the spineless, effeminacy of the “boy” are challenged. This is a risky move when one considers that the critical attention his poems had already received marked him out as subversive on account of his highly homoerotic content. His first book, which also included sonnets to another man, *The Affectionate Shepheard. Containing the Complaint of “Daphnis” for the love of “Ganymede,”* was openly criticized, prompting Barnfield to include a pointed apology for it in the preface of his second poetic effort, *Cynthia,* which reads:

> Some there were, that did interpret *The affectionate Shepheard,* otherwise then (in truth) I meant, touching the subject thereof, to wit, the love of a Shepheard to a boy; a fault, the which I will not excuse, because I never made. Onely this, I will unshaddow my conceit: being nothing else, but an imitation of Virgill, in the second eglogue of Alexis. (Barnfield 90)

Rebecca Yearling discusses the implications of this in her article “Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Lyric Verse” when she writes that:

> This preface is rather obliquely phrased, but it seems clear that Barnfield’s aim is to excuse and defend his previous work against detractors who felt that his subject—a homoerotic relationship—was inappropriate...Barnfield attempts to protect himself and
his poem by claiming that his work was not intended to be a celebration of homoeroticism but was merely a display of respectable classical *imitatio*. (53-54)

In short, Barnfield claims that his extremely passionate series of poems written to a shepherd boy was not meant to be taken as a profession of actual love, but merely an exercise, a rhetorical challenge in which he attempted to follow in the literary footsteps of Virgil. This was a common enough practice for young men in the universities and the Inns of Court, so it was a fairly legitimate appeal even considering the especially passionate nature of his first work (Smith 88). “It was all just pretend,” he says in effect, leaving the reader of his current piece in the position of having to judge the author’s sincerity through the page. This second set of poems was therefore explicitly written under the cloud of his former efforts. Already under the suspicion that his homoeroticism was not merely an exercise, that it breached even the hazy boundaries between masculine friendship and something more, he writes his second set of poems with the awareness that homoerotic love poems needed a justification; they required significantly more rhetorical maneuvering to allow them to remain within permissible social limits.

There is therefore significant critical debate about the sincerity of the apology given that it openly declares the authors’ previous intent to imitate Virgil, an act of an intellectual, but is ironically tacked onto a work that contains yet another set of exceptionally erotic love poems from one man to another. Critics like Claude Summers and Andrew Worrall both argue that the apology is therefore feigned. It is a sop thrown to his detractors, a veil, but quickly forgotten in his enthusiasm for his subject. They see a contradiction in the apology and the content of the poems. Perhaps it was even meant to give his readers something to look forward to, an act of titillation rather than apology.
Other critics see the admission of an imitation of Virgil as not a veil which allowed the author to disclaim the content of the poem, but as a direct admission of the homosexual content, as if he were saying, “Virgil was explicitly homoerotic and therefore I shall be as well” (See 70). There is, however another possibility for the purpose of the apology. The specific identification of Barnfield’s last work as an intellectual exercise may not be meant to veil the homoerotic content (or not just that), but to indicate that both his previous work and the current one are meant to be read in a specific way; once being told that the work they are reading is meant as an exercise, it alters the mindset of the audience from reading with an escapist pleasure in mind to reading with a significantly more critical eye. Fledgling, student poetic efforts are very much meant to be discussed, critiqued and judged; they are for experience and practice as much as their writer might hope for them to become masterful sources of inspiration. Insisting on a label of imitative intellectual exercise for his first homoerotic work would by implication extend that label to Barnfield’s current work which in many ways also imitates the situations of classical pastorals. Inviting his audience to approach his work critically, as judges, significantly alters their perspective and sense of mastery over the text and an academic arena alters the things that were and were not acceptable as subject matter. Barnfield’s apology acts as, not (or not only) a veil for the homoeroticism of the piece, but also a tacit indication of how the sonnets should be approached.

If the introduction had been the only mention of academic exercise in writing, it could all too easily have been dismissed as a mere facade, not only by 21st century critics, but, more importantly for the literary survival of the author, by critics of his own day who had already shown their willingness to act as a moral police. Barnfield does not
content himself with a veil quite that flimsy thrown over his work. Quite to the contrary, the theme of intellectual exercise/academia is intrinsically woven into the sonnets, giving grounds for his assertion that his work is merely an act of imitation for those who might choose to malign his work, while simultaneously declaring his kinship and sympathy with his target audience of the society of young, all-male students at the universities and the Inns of Court. Other critics have noted that Barnfield’s first work was addressed specifically to the young students in the universities, a unique, all male coterie of readers in early modern London with shared experience with the same or similar classroom experiences and social issues and an exclusive depth of knowledge about the language of the Greek classics and modern, court centered poetry written in the style of Petrarch (Smith 103). Barnfield’s second work similarly depends upon the especial erudition and open-mindedness of this specific audience to thoroughly understand his work.

The association that Barnfield creates between the sonnets and the atmosphere of the university is immediately solidified beyond the hint in the preface in the first three sonnets with their unusual inclusion of various aspects of dialectic debate. These introductory sonnets, which build the vantage point of the reader for the rest of the sequence, each involve a version of intellectual debate similar to that which made up the bulk of exercises and examinations in a sixteenth-century university education, and that was the hallmark of a seventeenth-century intellectual. Joel B. Altman describes in detail the development of a culture of debate amongst the highly educated members of society beginning as early as the end of the fifteenth century and increasing in prominence into the seventeenth (31-64). According to his work in *The Tudor Play of Mind*, an utramque
partem method of inquiry was not simply “in the air” [in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries]:

It had been cultivated by humanists in the Tudor grammar school an institution developed to produce men of firm moral conviction whose rhetorical skills would equip them for responsible public life. Here young boys were confirmed in Christian ethics and and at the same time taught to look for at least two sides of every question- an ideological conflation that left its particular mark on on much of the literature of the period. (43)

Even in their earliest levels of schooling, young men were taught to look for the underlying principles in fiction and nonfiction and to see them as different sides of a question, “rashness versus caution, profligacy vs cupidity” and to find the pros and cons of each. This foundational education that stressed an eristic perspective was rigorously solidified at the university level. Barnfield had graduated from Oxford only three years before writing the Cynthia sonnets, ensuring that the difficulties of the university curriculum were still fairly fresh in his mind. One of these, one that invariably caused a great deal of anxiety for its participants, was a very public display of their level of skill in dialectical debate. In fact, the bulk of an Oxford education at the end of the sixteenth century consisted of readings on dialectic from classical works written by Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Hermogenes, and philosophy from Aristotle, Pliny and Plato (Mallet 172); on top of this, all the major benchmarks of achievement in the university involved a series of exercises created to teach students to practice a rigorous kind of communal debate. Typically, in these exercises a senior scholar, either a student who had already achieved a bachelor’s status or the teacher himself, was designated the ‘opponent’ who proposed the subject of debate, and a junior scholar was designated the
'respondent' (168). Every student was required to participate in a certain number of these exercises per year, and the selected respondent was never allowed to decline the invitation to argue his side. These debates were performed in front of an audience. They were also announced by the tolling of a church bell that invited any and all university students to attend (169). Not only did this type of debate form a pivotal part of the yearly curriculum, but a similar disputation was also the test required of university students before they were allowed to achieve the degree of a bachelor. In a series of one on one debates known as the Lenten determination, those being tested for possible bachelor status would dispute with 13 senior students, nine of whom were required to agree that the candidate deserved the bachelor’s degree before it would be granted to him (182). This guaranteed that no one graduated until they became sufficiently practiced in dialectical argument that they were comfortable enough to argue any arbitrarily assigned side of an issue in front of a fairly large group of their peers: a not inconsiderable skill. During the latter half of the sixteenth century, an additional requirement was added to the bachelor’s education which required students to perform an exercise known as the “declamation” to give them practice in the composition of prose and public speaking. The declamation was a prepared speech for or against a certain theme. One week participants would take the pro position and the following week the con position would be taken, ensuring that university students were also well practiced in considering and logically arguing both sides of an issue (194). All these benchmarks in university achievement involved developing skills in debate and dialectic to the degree of proficiency that would ensure their ability to argue against even their own most adroitly crafted theses.
The keen association of dialectic exercises with academia and the unusual prominence of dialectic in the first three sonnets creates parallels between them and university exercises, re-emphasizing the claim in the preface. The second sonnet, for example, involves a hypothetical debate between Beauty, Majesty and Virtue, all of whom believe they have the right to claim the speaker’s beloved as their own since they can all lay claim to various of his attributes: “Then Vertue comes, and puts her title in./ (Quoth she) I make him like th’immortall Gods./ (Quoth Majesie) I owne his lookes, his Brow,/ His lips (quoth Love) his eies, his faire is mine…” (lines 3-6). The outcome of this debate is hardly a matter of life and death since it is not even a matter of debate as to whether the youth has these qualities, but only which type of virtue he possesses in greater abundance. The tone of the virtues is not tense or rash but calm. They concede when one or the other of them makes a good point (line 9) and use polite phrases to disagree like “And yet” (line 7). There is a lot of reasoning and persuasion to be found in other sonnet sequences, but it is not nearly as polite and hardly ever logical. In Astrophil and Stella, for example, Astrophil reasons with the personage of Virtue in sonnet 4 explaining impassionedly why she should leave him alone because he is hopelessly under the sway of love and virtue is just too difficult for him anyway, an argument neither logical nor calm. Sidney includes another debate in sonnet 52 which is very similar the Barnfield’s second sonnet. In it, Love and Virtue both vie for possession of Stella, but the language involved in Virtue’s pleading his case is especially emotional, hardly dispassionate at all, and the end to the debate is both illogical and excessively violent. Virtue pauses in his plea to interject an effusive moment of praise of her name, and goes on to vehemently deny Love any possession of Stella save her appearance, “...in Stella’s
self he may/ By no pretense claim any manner place,” (lines 10-11). Virtue denies Love any claim, even the rhetorical veneer of a claim, twice in one line. By denying the power of any rhetorical veneer and insisting on a more essential understanding of truth, the “strife” between Love and Virtue is removed from the realm of intellectual debate where the power of rhetoric is an acknowledged tool. In the end Love and Virtue divide Stella between them, tearing her soul from her body and granting the soul to Virtue and the body to Love, a legitimate violence rather than the feigned one that we will find in Barnfield’s work. Both the five wits and the five senses receive a similar dismissal from the speaker of Shakespeare’s sonnet 141 who finds himself in love in spite of all physical evidence and rational thought. Love is a kind or irrepressible madness that sweeps everything away, even a person’s identity. In a notable contrast, there are no unwieldy passions or arguments in the opening of Barnfield’s work. True, the virtues’ disagreement in sonnet 2 is compared to a war in the last line, but this brutal metaphor only serves to highlight the comparative calmness of the debate. There is no winner or conqueror as there would be in a legitimate fight. Rather, in the end Beauty and Majesty simply yield to Virtue to resolve the conflict, and ironically both Beauty and Majesty present the reader with more instances of their influence on the beloved than Virtue does. If the reader were asked to judge their various arguments on the merits of the evidence at hand, Virtue would not have been the winner. Debating a subject that is not a matter of serious concern in a polite, controlled atmosphere that is more like a game than a war, the outcome of which is declared rather than seized, is more than mildly reminiscent of an academic exercise. While Barnfield could easily have depicted the interaction between these virtues as either legitimately violent or, at very least, involving indignation or
exasperation on the part of the contestants, he chooses instead to reproduce, not a heated argument, but a measured, intellectual debate. 

Barnfield reproduces not only the situation of an academic debate, but, in the first and third sonnets, also recalls the unique perspective of sixteenth-century students on reason. Reason as a personage or a topic surprisingly finds its way into a number of other major works of courtly love literature, but Barnfield’s use of reason is markedly different from the role reason has traditionally played. Again in *Astrophil and Stella*, both in the example mentioned above and in sonnet 10, Sidney portrays reason as having no place at all in the realm of love. His speaker brings it up only to declare that it should stop trying to insert itself into issues of passion and emotion since logical thought is invariably defeated by Stella’s very presence. To Astrophil, reason is therefore subordinate to passion; it may be invoked to support the speaker’s love, but only if one blindly accepts that Stella as the highest good, and then seeks with reason to defend love, rather than starting from the premise that love might not factor into a fulfilled life at all. Famously in *The Romance of the Rose*, reason is similarly an opposing force to the madness and chaos of love, a position which implies that reason has the ability to discern a correct, righteous way of living against which love is opposed (de Lorris 3190-3332). Reason (or Wisdom) is also a single being in many medieval representations of it.\(^{74}\) She is personified as one woman and often appears in the context of various personified virtues like Patience and Faith, the association with which makes it appear that Reason is as unadulterated and single minded as a character from a morality play. For Barnfield,

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\(^{74}\) Further notable literary examples include: various classical versions of Penelope, Gregory of Nyssa’s portrayal of Macrina, Lady Philosophy from Boethius’ *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and Dante’s Beatrice. For further details, see Helleman, Wendy Elgersma. *The Feminine Personification of Wisdom*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009.
however, reason is not a part of oneself that must be either subordinated to passion or completely rejected by the individual, and reason is not so solid and reliable that it can fill the place of an angelic advisor.

Barnfield’s version of Reason as depicted in the very first sonnet is remarkably portrayed not as one entity, as it is in virtually all references to it in other sonnet sequences, but as a group of thinking beings who arrive together at a consensus. In this sonnet “Conscience” is cast in the part of a judge in a trial to determine if the speaker’s beloved is at fault for provoking thoughts of love, and, not one, but twelve reasons are conjured up to make a jury. The very fact that there are twelve reasons, not one unified being set up to represent reason is interesting and changes how reason must be perceived by the sequence’s reader. In a jury, men have different opinions at the start of the trial and debate things together in order to hopefully come to a consensus. Reason is pointedly not the judge of the trial. He is not one person with one opinion who has the ability to dictate undisputed truth. Reason is multiple. Even within reason there are many opinions and many rational sides, and the truth that is reached is not necessarily the only one they could have found. Barnfield’s reader is therefore free to wonder if a minority of the “reasons” on the jury had, in fact, reached a different conclusion. A jury is also an extremely terrestrial thing to be linked to reason in a poetic metaphor. It was made up of twelve presumably reasonable, but hardly omniscient and invariably fallible human beings. In an average criminal case, like the one of larceny depicted in the poem, an early modern jury was “closely guided by the bench,” but “was allowed to weigh all the evidence in light of both the defendant’s reputation and bearing and its own conception of his just desserts” (Green 106). Placing reason in the very mortal position
of a jury trial where the truth is a matter of argument and judgement removes the possibility of an omniscient point of view, the existence of a pure truth that can be declared with certainty. The depiction of reason here therefore places itself very much in sync with sixteenth-century university education, where argument on both sides of an issue is necessary before judgment; a depiction which forces the realization that debate can produce any number of results depending upon who happens to be arguing the point.

The emphasis on the idiosyncratic results of utilizing reason found in the first sonnet is reiterated by the speaker in the third sonnet which begins with a recitation of a list of schools of philosophic thought and what they consider most praiseworthy in the world:

The Stoiks think, (and they come neere the truth,)  
That vertue is the chiefeest good of all,  
The Academicks on the Idea call.  
The Epicures in pleasure spend their youth,  
The Perrepatetickes judge felicite,  
To be the chiefest good above all other,  
One man thinks this: and that coneeaves another:  
So that in one thing very few agree

All of these rational schools of thought reach different conclusions as to what is the most important thing in life. The contradictions between these four schools of thought are made explicit by Barnfield’s listing them and their primary aims one after the other. Especially to anyone who has studied these schools of thought like Barnfield’s ideal, university-educated audience, this sonnet stands as a reminder that all these schools of thought may use reason to reach their conclusions but their conclusions are widely divergent. The Stoics, for example, considered virtue to be the highest good, which, in their interpretation meant the elimination of passions. If this is near the truth according to
Barnfield’s speaker, Daphnis, he is valorizing a point of view that is almost exactly opposite his own that is stated at the end of the poem. For Daphnis his nurturing his passion for Ganymede is the highest good; the Stoics would tear out that passion and replace it with tranquility. Mentioning the Stoic ideal of Virtue may also be an accession to a traditional definition of manliness, the classic ideal of virtue. Recognizing its worthiness as a standard of behavior that would resonate well with his all male audience before he begins to challenge its comprehensiveness with other equally reasonable perspectives. An especially masculine reader would begin with a comfortable perspective and then be asked to question it with the conclusions of other schools of thought. The reader then holds the possibility of multiple possible conclusions that exist simultaneously. Barnfield’s first three sonnets therefore all recall to the mind of the reader both the circumstances of an academic debate as well as a scholar’s perspective on logic and reason as very malleable tools that tend to be manipulated to the point of sophistry to serve individual interests.

Placing his reader in the shoes of an academic by presenting him with outlooks very specific to that role also invites a specific kind of reading. If the reader is put into the role of a scholar, that occupation by habit demanded a very different kind of reaction to sonnets than that of a casual reader who read for mere pleasure. The student audience at an Oxford’s dialectical exercises were not just passive observers but were invited later in the proceedings to interrogate the participants. If they were not called upon to participate directly in the debate, there was always the distinct possibility that they would be called upon to participate in a related debate in the future; there was therefore an

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important advantage to be gained by listening carefully to all of the arguments and counterarguments. Similarly, most reading done in the university could not be consumed casually, but would be scrutinized and interrogated by its reader since it would more than likely be needed later in a discussion or debate. Placing the readers of his work in the position of scholars was a tacit invitation for his reader to approach the piece critically with an emphasis on the rational while simultaneously recalling the exclusive male environment of the university with its emphasis on homosocial and homoerotic bonds. A hypercritical manner of reading was encouraged in the first sonnet by explicitly placing his reader into the role of a distant, rational critic and leading him to occupy the same perspective as the jury in the first sonnet. While the pronouns used in the first three lines of the sonnet (“stole away my heart,” “rob’d me of my chiepest part”) place the reader in the role of the lover when reading the sonnets aloud, for the majority of the poem (the last eleven lines) the reader performs the actions of the jury. When given what they are told is a list of evidence proving a certain point, any reader accustomed to even elementary logic will habitually evaluate the evidence as it is laid before them. Therefore, as Barnfield’s reader encounters the evidence line by line, it is assessed and a conclusion is reached alongside the jury. Barnfield has also notably placed the last three lines of the sonnet in the second person, which puts the reader in the position of announcing the jury’s verdict to the speaker. The reader therefore explicitly casts judgment on the subject of the poem.

Allowing his audience to occupy the position of critic/jury member instead of immediately making them share the role of either lover or beloved gives the reader a more comfortable distance with which to consider the sonnets rather than be involved or
even implicated in them. Homoerotic love was, especially problematic in lyric poetry as it placed the reader in a position of involvement with the love affair, an uncomfortable position for any conservative readers, but this awkward association is mitigated in this case by the unusual position the reader occupies in this opening sonnet. The sonnet sequence pointedly does not begin with a description of the speaker’s passion or even his beloved’s virtues, topics which often fill the opening lines of sonnet sequences and which in this case would put the reader in the position of admiring the beauty of and professing strong emotions for another man.76 The distance afforded Barnfield’s reader thus creates a comfortable place from which his reader can lucidly consider the unfolding affair while avoiding feeling even vaguely implicated in it. It also, perhaps most notably, repositions the judgement of homoerotic love in an esoteric, theoretical discussion rather than a religious setting that liberates it from the cause of its immediate repudiation. In the first sonnet what was often immediately dismissed as deplorable without a second thought can finally be carefully considered. Barnfield makes room for a taboo subject by simply placing it in a different venue in which it will be considered hypothetically and by addressing it to the all-male coterie audience of the university students where the homoerotic was an accepted part of the university curriculum and, in all likelihood, a significant part of university life.

The third sonnet of the sequence not only works in tandem with the first two to encourage the reader to take on the critical perspective of a scholar, but is embedded with an implied argument for just such a reader to logically complete. Sonnet 3 questions the association of homosexual love with malicious sins like treason and implies that sodomy

76 See the opening of Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella, Petrarch’s first sonnet, Spenser’s Ammoretti Sonnet I, Mary Wroth’s first sonnet and Shakespeare’s sonnet I.
is comparatively harmless. This sonnet, again, goes through a list of schools of thought that use reason to come to completely different conclusions about life. The last three lines of the poem go on to explain that while these groups of men find their highest good in seeking out various things, the speaker finds his utmost delight in gazing into the eyes of his beloved. The implied argument here is that if no unquestionably absolute good exists, if there is not one perfect way to live but a multiplicity of admirable choices of things to pursue, all of which can be justified by a reasonable argument, one may as rationally justify the love of another man as the ultimate good as anything else. Indeed, the end of the poem seems to doubly justify the harmlessness of homosexual love in comparison to some of the more vicious choices of others: “Let cruell Martialists delight in blood,/ And Mysers joy their bags with gold to fill:/ My chiefe good, my chiefe felicity,/ Is to be gazing on my loves faire eie (lines 11-14).” Barnfield’s description of “martialists” as both cruel and delighting in blood paints a picture of a dangerous and sadistic sinner, one that has succumbed to the cardinal vice of wrath, one who certainly will destroy the lives of others in his pursuit of joy. Misers in their pursuit of gold would immediately be associated with another cardinal sin, that of avarice, a sin which also seriously harms others. A miser is clearly apt to unfeelingly take joy in the financial ruin of others as long as he was able to fill his coffers with gold. The use of these particular examples, both of which directly correlate with Christianity’s most deplorable vices, forces the comparison between them and the love he has for his male friend. The pursuits of money and violence are both manifestly harmful to not just the sinner, but to those who surround them. In the lines immediately following these comes the gentle description of his love, which is portrayed (at least in this sonnet) as a kind of passionless
devotion. All he desires is to be allowed to gaze at his beloved’s beautiful eyes. The reader’s understanding of the sin of sodomy is challenged here. While sodomy was also considered a subset of the cardinal sin of lust, his devotion for his beloved here seems to be free from any unruly passion. He is completely in control of both emotions and urges by being content with the most harmless and lustless of contact, one devoid of even his beloved’s touch. Harmless to even his beloved and certainly to those around him, the speaker of the poem is clearly on a higher moral level than “mysers” and “martialists,” and yet neither the avaricious nor the bloodthirsty were considered to be as deviant as a man suspected of sodomy, nor were these vices confusedly associated with the treacherous betrayal of friends and country. Without any statement that sounds remotely like a defense of same sex attraction, this strategic comparison allows his homoerotic love affair to seem benign, and implies a critique of his society’s comparative tolerance for beliefs that are portrayed here as truly depraved. The order of the sonnets therefore works to put readers into a frame of mind willing to accept the most rational conclusion rather than relying on instinct, tradition or emotion, and then makes the most rational conclusion one that is lenient, even accepting of homoerotic love.

While this would seem to be the perfect perspective to impress upon his readers in order to justify a homoerotic love affair, Barnfield is not content to leave even this hint of approval for homosexuality completely unveiled. He clouds the issue of all unqualified conclusions by ironically positioning his reader as a rational critic, while simultaneously calling attention to the problems with reason’s judgment and its tendency to create idiosyncratic truths rather than universal ones. His audience takes on an especially fraught position that encourages them to make judgments and simultaneously question
the truth of those judgments. His second sonnet points out the limits of a dialectic form of determining truth by drawing attention to the arbitrariness of how things are categorized. This poem asks, “is the youth majestic or beautiful, or virtuous?” Parts of him clearly belong to each category, so if we insist upon calling him one thing instead of recognizing the complexity of his make-up, it is an oversimplification of just how marvelous a creature the young man is. While virtue might be considered essentially more admirable than beauty or majesty, the youth would not be a fit object for a dedicated sonnet if he did not possess all three. The point of including this discussion in a sonnet of praise at all is to highlight the young man’s possession of all three in such great amounts that it’s impossible to determine which is the dominant trait. Therefore, the various attempts of these three excellencies to claim the entirety of the youth as belonging to one or another of them therefore represents a real reduction in complexity for the sake of resolving a dialectical argument and the fact that a winner is declared at all is merely a matter of expediency, not of truth. This is something that could easily be said to take place in the first and third sonnets as well. In all the situations with which the reader is presented, dialectic continually fails to reveal any kind of undisputable truth and instead only manages to oversimplify the issues to create comforting falsehoods. The situation of a trial by jury in the first sonnet emphasizes the imperative of reaching one verdict, of deciding upon one way to look at the events under consideration, in spite of the many reasons that make up the jury. While the fallibility of the jury is not a major theme, it is noteworthy that the jury is hardly given an exhaustive list of circumstances from which to draw their conclusions; they do the best with the half knowledge presented in the middle five lines of a sonnet. The entire trial is metaphorical of events inside the
speaker’s head, who is very much godlike in this instance since he knows all the thoughts and motives of the victim of the “crime,” yet those judging the case are not presented as gods who already know the intent of all the persons involved, but men who deliberate with limited information and eventually come to a verdict. Along with the notably fallible way his reason is depicted, the very fact of a trial in which a man is separate from and must be corrected by his reason and his conscience, pointing to the multivalent state of opinion and conclusion even in one’s own head. Even one person possesses a variety of opinion and must (over-?) simplify their understanding of the subject to reach a single opinion. Using reason to sift through and make judgments upon a selection of evidence is also what the schools of philosophy in the third sonnet do in order to reach their particular conclusions. They all have experience, facts, and reason at their disposal in order to decide the best way to spend their energy and time, but they come to seven or eight solutions for the meaning of life. They all want to make sense of life, but reason and discussion, the bases of philosophy, will not guarantee a unilateral response.

Barnfield presents his reader with three very important circumstances in which one all encompassing answer is desired, but in all three instances the fractured nature of reason is as prominent as the answers. The most reasonable response to sonnet three is to note that a homoerotic attraction to another man is completely (or at least comparatively) benign, but this is immediately tempered with the question, “how far can we trust reason?”

The introduction of this degree of skepticism in the first three sonnets invariably alters the perception of the rest of the sequence and that of the speaking subject. The existence of Barnfield’s subject as a distinct personality in love is continually in question. He is a strong personality who creates his own reality in many senses, but, as the
sequence also repeatedly draws attention to its own construction, he is also clearly a
creation himself. He is patently fictive which both enhances and detracts from the
originality of his depiction as a strong, morally perceptive homosexual man. The
speaking subjects of most other sonnets sequences leave no evidence that they are not
thoroughly convinced of their lovers’ perfections. Barnfield’s subject, on the contrary,
subtly admits in sonnet III that to others his beloved is not the highest good, nor should
he be so considered. “Let the Stoiks have their Virtue if they will,” he emotes in the
ninth line. Rather than calling upon all the world to recognize the perfections of his
beloved, he grants the Stoics the right to believe whatever they like, “and all the rest [can
have] their chiefe-supposed good,” as well (line 10). His lover is his “chiefe felicity”
and his alone. While the subject does go on in later sonnets to hold Ganymede up as
“Heaven’s joy, worlds wonder, nature’s fairest work…” (sonnet 10 line 2) he has already
planted the idea that a “chief good” can be peculiar to one person and that clever rhetoric
can be used to realign the perceived hierarchy of good/bad. If later in the sequence, in
sonnet eighteen, the speaker argues that the entire world stands “amazed” at his beloved’s
face, the sincerity of this claim is brought into question. Does the speaker really believe
that his beloved is a wonder of the world, or is he just exercising his rhetorical skills to
paint his beloved as such? Because skepticism begins the poem, the reader is never
allowed to forget the possibility that this is just a clever use of words to justify a personal
preference, rather than the discovery of a celestial treasure. There is never a space in
Barnfield’s sequence where the audience is allowed to dwell in the enthralled space of a
lover who blindly believes that his beloved is perfect. The reader is compelled to ask, “Is
this love or is this just a clever argument?” and, more controversially, “Is there really a
difference between the two?” Barnfield’s subject, Daphnis, is therefore a clever rhetorician and debater, one clever enough to re-create the world in his own terms, and who is set up to be admired for his intelligence much more than his (possibly purely rhetorical) passion.

Of course questions of real love versus its adequate expression in words were already quite common among literary young men in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The rhetorical nature of love and the ease with which it could therefore be counterfeited had become very apparent as tropes and stylings of courtly love began to seem contrived and the court and the literary minds of London began to lean towards the more intimate, less formal rhetoric found in poems like those of John Donne. The conventions of courtly love that had been revived under Queen Elizabeth had served their purpose for years and helped her solidify her power in the midst of jostling courtiers. However, encouraging courtiers to treat her as the unapproachable lady from troubadour myth associated love with patronage at the very moment when aristocratic preferment was losing its luster as a bastion of noble worth. Under Elizabeth those men who received swift advancement were those who were practiced at the subtleties of statecraft, skills seen by the more established nobles as a combination of “manipulation and pretension” (Low 27). If noble action was never rewarded, as per the formula for love in chivalric romances, one pivotal aspect of courtly love, its roll as an ennobling institution was revealed as empty rhetoric. Even courtly love outside the court was associated with manipulation more than genuine emotion. The substantial influx of

young men into London in the 1590s measurably increased the competition between all of them for wives, positions and patrons. Among educated young men, clever rhetoric was one extremely valuable way to distinguish oneself either to a rich patron or to a wealthy heiress. The monetary value in being able to able to write flattering verse to a female readership increased its association with manipulation rather than undying love. The element of manipulation was especially apparent in courtly love lyrics since they were designed to place the beloved in an apparent position of power/control, a position so far from the social reality that it was an obvious fiction meant to flatter rather than convey anything akin to reality. All these reasons contributed to what critic Anthony Low called the “reinvention of love” in the 1590s and 1600s in which poets move from writing about love as something “social and feudal to something essentially private and modern,” (33). In the poetry of new, metaphysical poets, the depiction of love refutes the old understanding of love as a chaste, idealized passion and recreates it as something on a smaller scale and rather more full of compromise with an acceptable measure of lust.

Barnfield was in the same generation of poets as Donne and was writing in London at the same time as Donne was living in the Inns of Court studying law. They probably frequented similar intellectually inclined social circles, and would have been subject to the same social pressures of intense competition and similar concerns about expanding the canon of love poetry beyond traditional forms. When Barnfield encourages the academic leanings in his audience he targets his poetry at the audience of

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young men at the universities and the Inns of Court and simultaneously targets an audience that is collectively concerned with all of these issues. In writing a series of sonnets about loving an admired beauty from afar at this particular time, the onus is therefore on Barnfield to recover or rehabilitate this courtly trope and make it relevant to a new generation of young scholars. If the idea of worshipping an untouchable lady had soured under Elizabeth, this was especially true in the 1590s, the last decade of her reign when any hope of returning to a feudal ideal was gone and disillusionment had solidified. Although a traditional part of courtly love was that it was essentially ennobling, when Barnfield was writing it would have come off as disingenuous for any poet to purport that a devoted, courtly style of love realistically encouraged virtue. Barnfield’s approach to love in his sonnets cleverly salvages courtly love in a way that speaks to this audience of young, intellectual students. Barnfield alters the idea of the beloved inspiring virtue and faithfulness into the beloved simply being inspiring. Barnfield’s love for his beloved is not ennobling because it inspires great deeds or quests or virtue, but because it inspires great poetry; The poetic subject of Barnfield’s work is intelligent, clever and talented, qualities for which all speakers in sonnet sequences were designed to be admired, but which were usually secondary to passion. Barnfield’s subject is much more like an author than a lover; the sincerity of his affection is marginalized to emphasize instead poetic excellence.

Spenser’s beloved in the Amoretti is a celestial beauty who raises him from baseness, and Mary Wroth becomes more selfless and god-like through her devoted passion for Amphilanthus. Barnfield’s speaker, Daphnis, hardly mentions virtue at all. It is therefore worth asking if Barnfield’s depicted love is courtly at all. While Barnfield’s
speaker certainly does worship his beloved and attributes to him divine qualities, he implies that he could have chosen some other object of devotion. His beloved is perfect because he chooses to see him that way. Troubadour verse tends to imply that the lover had no choice but to fall in love, thus attributing some power to the beloved. To be struck by Cupid’s arrow is to be afflicted with love from an outside source over which you have no authority. Daphnis allows his beloved’s beauty to charm him. His beloved is pointedly judged to be innocent of the crime of stealing his heart. If love is a choice that is entirely internal, no mystical outside force is influencing either party, what ennobling power can love have? The answer for Barnfield is not that love makes him a better, more virtuous person. There is no hint in the sonnets that his love makes him humbler, more patient, or more devoted and it would have been problematic for him to imply that a homoerotic love increased virtue when the vast majority of people were predisposed to believe the exact opposite. The one thing that Daphnis undeniably gains from his love for Ganymede is the poetry that issues from his affection; choosing to love makes him clever and articulate. Of course, all the beloved ladies of past sonnet sequences have been the moment of inspiration for the composition of poetry, but Barnfield differentiates his work from other sequences by making his poems very self-consciously constructed. His speaker consistently draws the reader’s attention to the sonnets as a carefully contrived arrangement of language and a perceptive reply to the growing canon of love literature. Barnfield’s depiction of courtly love thus maintains a worship of an unapproachable beloved and an emotional journey that bestows on the lover admirable qualities, making it a courtly style of love, but the sincerity of that love, its reality as something that exists outside of the sonnet sequence, is deliberately brought
into question. This rids his sequence of those aspects that were most likely to seem
disingenuous, and makes poetry itself the only definite object of worship in the poem.

Writers of sonnets a generation earlier most often attempted to make their sonnets
appear to be spontaneous outpourings of emotion, with their speakers aware of the poetic
tradition but characterizing their own poetry as not an addition to the canon but as an
exception to it. For example, Sidney’s sonnet number three from *Astrophil and Stella*
reads:

Let dainty wits cry on the Sisters nine,
That bravely mask’d, their fancies may be told:
Or, Pindar’s apes, flaunt they in phrases fine,
Enam’ling with pied flowers their thoughts of gold.
Or else let them in statelier glory shine,
Ennobling new found tropes with problems old...
For me in sooth, no Muse but one I know:
Phrases and problems from my reach do grow,
And strange things cost too dear for my poor sprites.
How then? Even thus: in Stella’s face I read
What love and beauty be, then all my deed
But copying is, what in her Nature writes.

Astrophil describes the efforts of most poets in deprecatory terms because they
are less than original in their attempts to mimic the work of a classical poet and because
their words are overwrought. The speaker’s work, to the contrary, supposedly sets a new
precedent of originality and spontaneity as the poet receives his inspiration directly from
Stella’s face rather than the tired sources of antiquity. His work is nature itself running
directly onto the page. Sidney uses language in this sonnet to insist that his work
involves no manipulation of language at all, a patent ruse that attempts to throw a veil
over the process of the construction of the poems. Spenser similarly attempts to make his
poems seem like impromptu emotional outbursts that bypass the need for either language or labor in sonnet number three of the *Amoretti*:

So when my tongue would speak her praises due,  
It stopped is with thought's astonishment:  
And when my pen would write her titles true,  
It ravished is with fancy's wonderment:  
Yet in my heart I then both speak and write  
The wonder that my wit cannot endite

This is a familiar trope in sonnet writing in which the speaker bemoans his inability to adequately express his emotions; they are, it is implied, beyond the scope of rhetoric and, in an act of misdirection, the reader’s attention is drawn away from the language of the poem and instead directed to his own personal experiences of strong emotions, experiences which are then superimposed on those of the speaker. The reader remembers the emotion but not the manner in which language was manipulated in order to arouse it.

Barnfield’s poems, to the contrary, are self-referentially literary. They do not ask the reader to imagine that which is outside language. They highlight the sometimes arbitrary components of language and bring the reader’s attention to the existing canon of literature and the poet’s job to compete with literary masters. Language and skill in manipulating language, cleverness, becomes a major focus, just as it was in eristic debates at Oxford. The standards for excellence always reflect the values of his coterie readership. This is especially the case in the second half of the sequence after the speaker has revealed his love to his beloved (sonnet 11), an ironic turn since if he were truly writing to a beloved in order to win his love, sincerity of emotion would surely be the most important thing to emphasize, and one that again draws into question the sincerity of the depicted obsession. In the sonnet immediately following the declaration of his
love, Barnfield writes the most interesting poem of the entire sequence which pointedly
draws the reader’s attention to the fictional, often contrived nature of the depiction of
love in sonnet sequences. One of the most common conventions of the early modern
sonnet sequence is the use of a pseudonym in place of the name of the beloved. Philip
Sidney, Mary Wroth, Samuel Daniel, and Michael Drayton all write sonnet sequences
around the same era as Barnfield, and use pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of
the real beloved. None of these poets, however, within their same body of work breaks
that fiction to point out that they discuss the person indicated by the alias as a completely
separate individual from the person of the beloved. For all but one of the poems in his
sonnet sequence Barnfield addresses his beloved as “Ganymede,” but sonnet 12 begins:

Some talk of Ganymede th’Idalian Boy
And some of faire Adonis make their boast,
Some talke of him whom lovely Laeda lost,
And some of Ecchoes love that was so coy.
They speake by heere-say, I of perfect truth,
They partially commend the persons named,
And for them, sweet Encomiums have framed:
I onely t’him have sacrific’d my youth.

Here, his real beloved is explicitly separate from the mythological figure of Ganymede.

This differentiation draws attention to the rest of the sonnets as, to a greater or lesser
extent, a fictional construction. It could indicate that “Ganymede” is just a pseudonym
given to his beloved for all but this sonnet, or that all the other sonnets are about a
fictional beloved; but however this unusual admission is interpreted, it draws attention to
the deliberate employment of poetic convention and the startling effect of tearing it away.
Something about these sonnets is patently fictive, but the reader is left unable to discern
one from the other. Barnfield also uses the word “framed,” in line 7 to describe the
praise found in sonnets in general, a word that indicates careful choice of diction and arrangement of phrases. Sidney points out the same trait as characteristic of most sonnets in his third sonnet quoted above, but his sonnet does not put itself in the same category as those worthy of censure. Barnfield, however, implies the inclusion of his own works in the category he censures. The opening line of Barnfield’s sonnet is, “Some talk of Ganymede th’Idalian Boy...” and as he himself has just “talked” of Ganymede for half a sonnet sequence, his own work must be included in the censure in lines 5-6. This specific criticism about the nature of writing about love, that the object is often so far removed from the writer that the love must be just a posture, accentuates the possibility of the insincere, constructed nature of Barnfield’s own work as well as other poetry that makes claims to be the direct result of heavenly inspiration. In the same vein, in line 6, Barnfield’s speaker describes how authors of canonical poetic works “partially commend the persons named,” emphasizing a degree of bias involved in the poem’s choice of praised object and implying a certain amount of hyperbole in the praise. This portrayal of rhetoric is far from organic or objective; instead literature here is cobbled together by human beings who invariably impose upon their subject an idiosyncratic perspective.

The nature of literature/rhetoric as invention and not revelation is similarly emphasized in line 5 where Barnfield writes that those who attempt to imitate the classics and write about mythological figures, or those who read poetic accounts of these these figures, have no way of knowing what degree of beauty they actually possessed. The speaker calls a thousand years of literary tradition “heer-say,” highlighting the inability of modern readers to verify any of the ancient myths. They should, therefore, be understood to be as unreliable as rumor, as an exaggerated human creation rather than an accurate reflection
of reality. This same point is reemphasized in line thirteen at the end of the poem, which reads:

As for those wonders of antiquitie,
And those whom later ages have injoy’d
(But ah what hath not cruel death destroide?
Death that envies this world’s felicitie),
They were perhaps less fair than poets write.
But he is fairer than I can indite.

Barnfield’s speaker’s suspicion about the objective veracity of classical literature insists that his reader remember that poems convey that which is fictional rather than accurate. The cumulative effect of painting this picture of poetry gives an ironic double effect to the last line of the poem. The majority of Barnfield’s readers cannot have been able to call upon first hand knowledge of the beloved praised in his poems even if they had come across him in real life since he remains unnamed. The beauty of the beloved in Barnfield’s own sonnets therefore remains as much hearsay as the histories of the ancients to those in the process of reading the poems. When the speaker declares that his sequence alone can be trusted as an accurate relation of the excellencies of his subject, what is most forcefully conveyed to his readers is the extreme unlikelihood of this statement rather than the possibility that this sonnet alone is the only unequivocal expression of beauty. “Even this,” the sonnet implies at its close, “is unverifiable; even this may be beautiful, but is also potentially and probably false.” Barnfield continually re-circumscribes his audience into the role of skeptics, recreating the intellectual atmosphere of the university where everything is up for debate.

If the moment of metafiction in sonnet twelve subtly debunks the idea that written accounts, especially poetry, are a bastion of truth, the subsequent sonnets comprising the
second half of the series reinstitute a standard of judgement for poetry that has nothing to
do with the genuine-ness of the emotions or the unparallelled beauty of the beloved.
Every poem in the second half of the sequence either accentuates the medium used to
write poetry or expresses an anxiety over the sonnets’ place in the historical literary
canon; collectively they lead the reader to pay attention to the clever use of words
especially in comparison to the comparable use of rhetoric in historically prominent
works. Sonnets thirteen, fourteen and nineteen all deconstruct their own language to a
greater or lesser extent, drawing the audience’s attention to the words used to construct
the poems. In sonnet thirteen, Barnfield uses a rarely used Petrarchan device, an echo of
the speaker’s words in the margins of the poem, to illustrate the speaker’s conversation
with himself about the perfections of his beloved:

Speake Eccho, tell; how may I call my loue? Loue.
But how his Lamps that are so christaline? Eyne.
Oh happy starrs that make your heauens diuine:
And happy lems that admiration moue.
How tearm'st his golden tresses wau'd with aire? Haire.
Oh louely haire of your more-louely Maister,
Image of loue, faire shape of Alabaster,
Why do'st thou driue thy Louer to dispaire?
How do'st thou cal the bed wher beuty grows? Rose.

In four of the lines, the echo of the last word seems to answer the question asked by the
speaker. By far the most impressive aspect of this sonnet is the poet’s ability to find
words that can plausibly provide echoes of his own that still provide logical answers to
his self-directed inquiry. This clever agility with words takes center stage in this poem
and the reader’s attention is drawn to the arbitrary nature of language. A large part of
what makes the poem enjoyable is the discovery of often overlooked coincidences of
language. In line one, the fact that a common noun for someone you are in love with is
also used as a pet name; in line two the fact that that which is so often complimented as being “christaline” happens to sound exactly like the word’s last syllable, etc. Unlike the majority of love sonnets that attempt to express beauty or emotional states through inventive metaphor, here the emotion of the speaker takes a backseat to his linguistic dexterity. Similarly, sonnet fourteen contains a clever manipulation of a word as the most memorable part of the poem. This sonnet describes the gift of a glove to his beloved with the justification that Ganymede should keep the glove next to his heart due to the fact that removal of the ‘g’ from the word leaves ‘love.” Drawing attention to the composition of the word out of letters emphasizes the peculiarity of the arbitrary meanings we attribute to words and the poet’s superior gift of observation in recognizing and attributing meaning to a similarity overlooked by most people. Sonnet nineteen is also remarkable for the attention it draws to the building blocks of language. It reads as a standard sonnet for most of its lines, directing a plea to Ganymede that he “entertaine loves fire within” his “sacred breast,” but ends with an odd and almost awkward shift in focus from the love for the beloved to a fondness for language itself:

(Love thee, because the beautie is divine;  
Love thee, because my self, my soule is thine;  
Wholie devoted to thy lovelie feature)  
Even so of all the vowels, I and U,  
Are dearest unto me, as doth ensue.  

The holy oneness the speaker find with a symbolic union with his beloved is one of the defining features of courtly love, and because of this the first three lines above hardly draw notice. The translation of the speaker’s admiration for his beloved to a fondness for the two vowels I and U, however, is yet again an attribution of meaning to a happenstance of language. There is no rule of linguistics that insists that the personal
pronoun must be the same as one of the vowels. It just happens to be that way in English. These coincidences of language that Barnfield dwells on in these three sonnets all emphasize the plasticity of language rather than its shortcomings. The majority of other authors of sonnet sequences tend to draw attention to the inability of words to adequately express certain moments of emotional states, but Barnfield’s Daphnis simply alters the amount of meaning already attributed to language to fit his needs. Language is portrayed not as a hindrance in its rigidity but a malleable substance with arbitrary meanings attributed to certain combinations of letters that could just as easily mean something else or something more. The passionate love that Daphnis has for Ganymede is an occasion that inspires the poet to reinvent the significance of various aspects of language and it is the cleverness of these alterations that receives our attention more than the tempestuous emotions of a frustrated lover. In the hierarchy of values of the universities and Inns of Court, the verbal adroitness displayed in these sonnets would win the author significant admiration from his peers. These sonnets are designed to impress those who spent a substantial amount of time and effort manipulating words in exercises that encouraged deliberate attempts at sophistry.

The sonnets in the second half of Barnfield’s sequence that do not explicitly draw attention to the raw materials of language tend to make reference to the existing canon of classical and Renaissance literature. Sonnet fifteen makes reference to “cuntry shepheards swains” who became the lovers of gods like Apollo and Jove, a general allusion to the work of many Greek poets who write about such subjects, and more specifically mentions these shepherds rising in the morning to tend their sheep.

79 A notable exception to this is Barnabe Barnes’ sonnet 51 from Parthenophil and Parthenophe.
when “Molorchus gins to peepe,” (line 13). This is especially meaningful given the fact that the myth of Molorchus is treated specifically in a poem written by the Greek poet Callimachus, to whom other poets writing about the same myth inevitably refer. As the original and most famous source of information about the shepherd, Molorchus, the reference to him would bring Callimachus to the mind of anyone with an education in classical literature. An allusion to Callimachus’ work acts as a subtle reinforcement of Barnfield’s project with his own sonnet sequence. Callimachus championed shorter poems that required a greater amount of craftsmanship, as opposed to epic poems like the Iliad where the sheer volume of words made the same attention to detail impossible. As a champion of seeing poetry as a deliberate and careful arrangement of words, an allusion to Callimachus points the reader once again to the manner of structuring a poem and to an historical precedent of openly acknowledging the effort and care of writing poetry.

Barnfield’s use of classical references also positions his work as a continuance of a long line of poetry stretching back to ancient Greece. His speaker is, according to this sonnet, another shepherd who speaks in “harsh” verse who asks to be given credence because of the history of shepherds loved by gods. He casts himself as a successor to the poetic tradition, rather than an exception to it. This was an unusually direct indication that the author longed to be part of the pantheon of great authors that are remembered, revered, and studied, a longing that would assuredly find sympathy in an audience that had spent years imitating these classical authors and learning about their greatness. Through these verses Barnfield indicates his sympathetic, first hand knowledge of the desires and

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80 “Callimachus’ account was famous amongst later writers, who regularly used it and referred to it; he dealt not so much with the heroic aspects of the story, as with the unexpected theme of Heracles’ stay with the poor-peasant farmer of Nemea, Molorchus” Easterling, P.E. The Cambridge History of Classical Literature. Cambridge UP. 1985: (p 557).
motives of his audience and implies both through his skill and his knowledge that he
deserves a place in literary history.

In sonnet sixteen, however, he complicates the apparent simplicity of his claim in
the preface that his efforts are to merely to recreate pastoral poetry in the style of Virgil
as a schoolboy might imitate a masterwork. It is obvious from the beginning of the
sequence that Barnfield’s poetry is something new rather than an imitation of past styles.
His work is an amalgamation of past and present; he chooses to write pastoral subject
matter, but with the faithful pining of a courtly lover in a Petrarchan sonnet sequence.
The sixteenth sonnet specifically draws attention to these differences by including in the
last two lines a comparison between the speaker and Ixion, a myth mentioned by Virgil in
the Aeneid, not the Eclogues. Ixion is the hero of a tale that is not fit for a pastoral poem
in any traditional sense. He is a mythological king who kills his father in law after his
father in law steals horses from his stables and subsequently wanders in exile for years
unable to purify himself for the grievous sin of killing his own kin. Eventually Zeus takes
pity on him and invites him to Olympus as a guest. Ixion unwisely falls in love with
Hera while there and Zeus tests his loyalty by creating a false version of her out of clouds
which Ixion makes love to, breaking all rules of hospitality, and ends up chained to a
fiery wheel in the underworld for eternity. The tale of Ixion is one that Barnfield’s
readers would associate with epic poetry both due to its incorporation in the Aenead and
its subject matter of the disgrace and fall of a king. It is an odd choice and one that subtly
challenges the popular belief in the universities that any poet’s career should mirror that
of Virgil: beginning with bucolics, moving to georgics, and ending with an epic.
Drawing attention to the parallels between the simple lovesick shepherd of pastorals and
the grandiose sins of a murderous king breaks the usual divisions between genres and underscores the originality of Barnfield’s work rather than its submission to tradition. It’s worth noting here as well that Callimachus was a vociferous champion of not following slavishly in the footsteps of great poets from the past, hence his repudiation of the epic, the style of Homer, in favor of shorter works. In the sonnet immediately after that which brings Callimachus to the mind of his readers, Barnfield uses a technique that indicates that he, too is an innovator of poetry. The rest of sonnet sixteen is a beautiful account of the speaker’s painful, yearning fantasies of Ganymede when he is far away, but in spite of the fact that this tribute to the speaker’s passion takes up the majority of the poem, the concluding couplet ensures that the reader is never allowed to cease his continued awareness that the poem is a work of art. It is innovative, a contemporary reply to Petrarchan love and Greek pastorals. The love might very well be sincere, but the way the love is expressed is at least as important if not more so.

Metafictional in so many ways, the entirety of the sonnet sequence in *Cynthia...* is constructed to create a distance between the audience and the homoerotic content and continually bring the reader’s attention to the manner of its craftsmanship rather than just the emotional journey of the speaker. Positioning his readers as critics with reminders of their stringent regimen of academic skepticism and including reminders of even the fallibility of reason itself works in two ways. Barnfield gives the reader a more comfortable distance from the love affair, as judges rather than participants, even readers with conventional sexual mores would be more inclined to read and enjoy his work. He opens this door wider by insinuating that clever words and sophistry used so often in academia for dialectical debate to determine answers tend to lead only to idiosyncratic
judgement, not universal truth. While the speaker invites judgement on his love, as the reader follows the logic of the sequence, any judgments made are simultaneously questioned, implying that a condemnation of his love and the work as a whole would be unenlightened. To the intellectual coterie audience for which this work was intended, an accusation of fatuousness would have been especially biting, giving Barnfield’s strategy here an especial weight. Drawing his reader to have a critical, skeptical perspective on his work makes them much more likely to pick up on the artful web of cracks in the fictional facade of the piece. All these metafictional cracks emphasize the skill involved in its creation and buttress the claim he makes in the introduction, that this is an intellectual exercise and the practice of writing poetry is his motivation, not a genuine affection for another man. Whether or not Barnfield had a sincere love that he was trying to express or not does not change the fact that this intricate showing of poetic knowledge and skill legitimizes his work and veils the homosexual references. The deniability woven into the sequence presumably made it easier and less risky for Barnfield to challenge some of the embedded homosexual stereotypes, as he does throughout the sequence. As just one example, the old man preying upon a feminized adolescent boy, the master/minion myth found in the myth of Ganymede and Zeus, is turned on its head. Ganymede is loved instead by another shepherd, Daphnis, one who repeatedly mentions how young his love makes him feel, putting the two men on almost equal footing. Ganymede, the younger man, is the one with the power in the relationship, continually refusing or ignoring Daphnis’ advances. The sexualization of the power differential is greatly diminished, allowing Daphnis’ love for Ganymede to seem much more sincere. Homosexual love is portrayed in a considerably more positive light than in popular
satirical plays. Under the guise of acting as an apprentice poet experimenting with words, Barnfield creates a space for himself to repaint homoerotic relationships and render a new, sympathetic picture of a homoerotic lover. Barnfield’s Daphnis is intelligent, independent and strong willed, three qualities that aren’t often applied to early modern homosexual stereotypes. He chooses love as his own particular highest good and by granting everyone else a similar right or responsibility of a choice of the most important thing in life, he dares the rational individual to deny him the same freedom. The speaker’s love is neither inflicted upon him by personal weakness, as Petrarch’s and Sidney’s speakers sometimes indicate, nor is it the result of mischievous deities (Cupid, Venus) as Wroth’s subject suggests. The subject of Barnfield’s sonnets is therefore one of the most empowered subjects found in early modern sonnets. Love is not an affliction, but a choice, and a choice among any number of possible lifetime pursuits. Daphnis consciously creates his own world in a sense that nearly every other sonnet subject only does unconsciously, if at all. He re-orders that which the world tells him to value and makes his own idiosyncratic personal claims to that which is lovable and beautiful.
Conclusion: Shakespeare, Enshrinement and Friendship

The previous chapters have demonstrated how three particular adaptations of courtly love are potentially subversive given their tendency to encourage their readers to reimagine concepts as fundamental as social rank, gender, and sexuality. If courtly love was not already experiencing change in the works of other important writers, however, it would have been impossible, or at least considerably more difficult, for these three writers to bend the concept of fin amour to such an extent that it was able to reimagine such socially embedded stereotypes. The particular ways in which Beaumont, Wroth and Barnfield amended courtly love all stem from pre-existing trends in the evolution of fin amour. Two trends in particular would have definitely been familiar to an early modern readership since they were popularized in the works of William Shakespeare. So as to more accurately gauge the extent and type of change to fin amour contributed uniquely by these authors to the more general cultural evolution of the early modern understanding of love, I would like to briefly describe some of Shakespeare’s more well-known contributions and alterations to fin amour.

As courtly love fell out of favor and its more farfetched conceits came into question, many authors who still admired the concept of fin amour fin tried to find ways to reconcile the realities and limitations of day to day life with the more beautiful elements of the courtly. Shakespeare was one of the most popular figures in defining and
perpetuating this conciliatory movement, and his uses of courtly love therefore relate
directly to the issue of fitting courtly love into the realities of actual relationships (Singer
223). Of course, to thoroughly examine all of Shakespeare’s works that include elements
of love, or even specifically courtly love, would take a book-length work. In the limited
space of this conclusion I will therefore only briefly point to some of Shakespeare’s most
notable uses of courtly love that collectively combine to establish two major
reconceptions of fin amour, both of which find unique ways to continue to admire fin
amour, to keep its lofty ideals alive, in spite of an increasing acceptance of its
incompatibility with the imperfections of life. Shakespeare’s tragedies that portray
courtly love are often cited as some of the most beautiful love poetry ever written, but,
while glorifying love to the extreme, they also tend to illustrate that courtly love
inevitably clashes with the flaws in society. The audiences for these works are therefore
put in the paradoxical position of both admiring the concept of fin amour and shrinking
from finding it in reality. In essence, courtly love is assigned the place of an untouchable
ideal that can be admired but should not be reached; it is put into a position similar to the
idealized lady that is an integral part of its own history. In Shakespeare’s comedies, a
strict interpretation of courtly love with its rules and distanced lovers is depicted as
inferior to a love based on friendship that allows an acknowledgement of the flaws in
one’s significant other. This more familiar version of love retains some aspects of fin
amour, but makes it more likely for love to continue after marriage as there will be no

moment of disillusionment. In Shakespeare, it is almost always through one of these methods, either enshrinement or familiarization, that allows for courtly love ideals to still be admired even with the general acknowledgement that they cannot realistically form the basis for any practical belief system.

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is one of his earliest plays that contributes to the enshrinement of courtly love. The title characters have a beautiful love affair that is described in glorious, courtly terms, and involves the kind of unstinting devotion appropriate for fin amour. Romeo literally admires her from a distance as he stares at her on the balcony, compares her to the constant sun, claims that her cheeks surpass the stars in their radiance, etc (2.2.1-24). If there was any doubt that Romeo’s love for Juliet is meant to approximate the sublime adoration of a courtly lover, it is placed in deliberate contrast with his more brief, earthy desire for Rosaline at the beginning of the play, where Romeo’s chief complaint is that she has sworn to be chaste, which is inconvenient for his plans for her. When he meets Juliet he exclaims, “O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!/ It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night/ like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear-/ Beauty too rich for use, for us too dear” (1.5.41-44). Juliet is beauty “too rich for use” too celestial for lust. Objectively she is more lovely than any of the other ladies in the room. In spite of the idealization of Romeo’s love here, the attitudes on fin amour in the play are not unanimously positive. Mercutio always replies to Romeo’s tendency to

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idealize women with bawdy comments that tear down the idea of courtly love, and
Juliet’s nurse similarly envisions love as only its most physical manifestation. Questioning the value and place of fin amour is therefore woven into the dialogue as well as the overall effect of the play. Of course, Mercutio’s practical preference for lust over fin amour is justified by Romeo and Juliet’s disastrous end. The restrictions of their social situation trump the power of their love just like the case of Tristan and Iseult.

The pointed difference between Shakespeare’s lovers and these medieval ones is that Shakespeare never indicates that Romeo and Juliet will be together forever after their death. They never attain a holy, eternal oneness and ascend to a higher plane, intimating that love conquers all (Singer 222). Their love might influence the people they leave behind, but it only results in the bleakest kind of tragedy for the lovers. The tale of Romeo and Juliet both within the play and in its theatrical performance is inspiring to its audience, but no one wishes to be them in the end, their love proves itself to be incompatible with either happiness or real life.

We can see this same trend in Othello where Shakespeare even goes a step farther in suggesting not only that fin amour is incompatible with reality, that it is trampled by the unfavorable circumstances of life, but that in and of itself it can actually cause harm.
to those who practice it. The manner in which Desdemona falls in love with Othello is similar to fin amour because of its emphasis on distance and idealization. She listened to the stories Othello tells of his daring exploits and falls in love with the ideal image of a hero portrayed in story rather than having extensive conversation with Othello himself.

Othello has idealized Desdemona as well. Before he kills her, he famously laments that her appearance is that of a flawless statue made of “monumental alabaster” (5.2.3-5).

Before “discovering” her guilt his perception of her was as something pristine, unmoving, eternal, and literally put on a pedestal. It is because of the fact that he loves her because of her flawlessness, as troubadours did their ladies, that he is so easily led to suspect her on such scanty evidence. It is only when Iago points out that she is not only capable of dishonesty, but that she has already proven her skill in it by deceiving her father that Othello really begins to be suspicious of her. This dishonesty that Othello had previously benefited from, causes him to reevaluate his wife and see her no longer as an idealized lady, for she is always objectively perfect, but as a human being with flaws. If she has one flaw, who knows how many others she might have. If she is capable of dishonesty, why not other things? Why not adultery? (3.3.263-280). The problem with idealization in the play is the fact that the revelation of a single flaw requires a complete reevaluation of the formerly idealized person; If your identity is the ideal once you no longer fill that


role, everything about your identity comes into question. A broken idealization creates confusion and suspicion, which, in this particular case, snowballs into the tragedy. It is worth returning again here to the idea that Desdemona’s love began with an aesthetic appreciation, because her position at the beginning of the play is the same as the audience. She was enamoured with Othello’s stories, in which he played the role of fearless knight, and was inspired. It is only when she tries to make the stories real, to step into them in the role of ideal female counterpart to Othello’s knightly heroism, that she invites disaster. She is living proof of the maxim: courtly love belongs in art, not in life.

These two plays all encourage the aesthetic enshrinement of courtly love. They encourage a continued admiration for the beauty of the language that surrounds courtly love by using it in eloquent new ways to describe the nature of the lovers’ emotions and thus also glorify much of their behavior, driven as it is by ideals of devotion and worship, but they simultaneously demonstrate its incompatibility with reality and its tendency to lead to tragedy. From this one reasonably concludes that courtly love’s appropriate place is as an object of veneration and that Shakespeare uses it most appropriately when he uses it in works of art.

Following in the wake of this particular understanding of courtly love, Richard Barnfield’s sonnets dwell on courtly love’s beauty as an aesthetic object. Daphnis feels fin amour for Ganymede, but the reader’s attention is as often on the construction of the poem and it’s relation to other poetic masterworks as it is on the emotional torment of the lover. Barnfield’s rhetorical maneuvers paint courtly love as a vehicle for beautiful poetry, a conception of fin amour, which easily fits into lived experience. It implies that
even it’s own story is possibly a fiction, but one worth preserving because of its ability to inspire. Barnfield’s conception of courtly love thus anticipates Shakespeare’s depiction of fin amour as an inspiration, but not a practically applicable one, and may have even contributed to a pre-existing disposition in some of his audience members to continue to see fin amour as beautiful, in spite of its waning amount of influence among the social elite. Shakespeare’s stress on the aesthetic is much more subtle than Barnfield’s however. While Shakespeare’s tragedies may warn of the impracticality of courtly love, they are still escapist in nature and place courtly lovers into extraordinary, but plausible settings and situations. The audience can believe for the length of the play that the refined feelings of courtly love exist, or existed at some point in history. Barnfield does not even allow courtly love that much freedom. His lovers exist in a pastoral setting reminiscent of classical Greek poetry, which, even when it was first written, did not provide a reasonable approximation of shepherd’s lives. His depiction of love is thrice removed from actual society so that his audience is much less likely to sympathetically feel the emotions of his lovers than they are to feel for Romeo and Juliet. Barnfield’s appreciation of courtly love is much more like the appreciation for religion that was held by nineteenth century Romantics. It made a beautiful subject for art, but they didn’t necessarily believe in its precepts.

Shakespeare’s comedies do a different sort of work with courtly love. Many critics have noted that Shakespeare’s comedies play a role in changing the most admired version of love from a courtly one into a practical one with the end goal of marriage. Anthony Low specifically points out how Shakespeare’s comedies alter the focus of love from “the intricacies of endless aristocratic courtship to problem solving courtship, that
is, to incipiently middle-class courtship leading to marriage” (32); but Shakespeare’s comedies do more for love than just tie it up with a nuptial bow. Marriage does not necessarily mean that the kind of love described is fundamentally different from fin amour, especially when luck remains an integral part of nearly every happy, Shakespearean ending. Had Sebastian not looked so remarkably like Viola, and had he not happened upon the irate Sir Toby, everyone in *Twelfth Night* would look forward to years of miserable pining rather than a double wedding. Had Dogberry and his constables not happened to overhear the conversation between Borraccio and Conrad, *Much Ado about Nothing* would have ended tragically with broken friendships as well as broken hearts. Since fate plays such an extraordinary part in achieving a mutually desired marriage, lovers in Shakespeare’s comedies still experience their share of unrequited pining with no realistic hope for fulfillment. In Shakespeare’s comedies, what indicates a deliberate alteration of courtly love is often the fact that a more formal, rule-bound love that follows in the tradition of Andreas Capellanus is used as a foil for a more admirable type of love that is bound by friendship and usually requires both compromise and a tolerance for the beloved’s flaws. In *Twelfth Night*, for example, Orsino’s admiration for Olivia is represented as both courtly and shallow in comparison to Viola’s affection for Orsino (or even Olivia’s instant admiration for Cesario). Orsino rarely has any face to face conversation with Olivia, choosing instead to send emissaries, a tactic recommended by Capellanus (Hanning 148). He falls in love with her at first sight (1.1.20-23), making the basis for his affection entirely based upon her physical appearance and position in society, and dreams of how he will rule over her upon their marriage (1.1.32-40), a subordination that Olivia specifically tries to avoid by refusing to
“match above her degree” (1.3.90-91). He hardly knows her, yet idolizes her and pursues her. This is Shakespeare’s interpretation of courtly love. Viola’s affection for Orsino, on the other hand, is based on a close friendship. While she pretends to be Cesario, she and Orsino become close friends; she is his favorite of all of his courtiers, and shares intimate information with him about both her love interests and his. They partake in the ideal male-male friendship that was so admired during the English renaissance and considered so close a bond that that the friends involved were referred to as soul-mates (Moulton 144). This is not to imply that Viola’s love does not retain several aspects of fin amour. It is not a completely novel conception of love. She still pines for an unreachable (as long as she’s in the guise of Cesario) beloved, she fills the role of faithful servant who obeys rules of courtesy and respect, and the love between Orsino and Viola can be seen as having an ennobling effect on both of them. She is motivated to perform torturously selfless acts of service, winning the love of another woman for the man she loves, and he learns to value more than the superficial. There is, however, less emphasis on a holy oneness, and subsequently a greater emphasis upon the conjoining of two separate individuals. Even the priest who marries Olivia to Sebastian refers to the match as a “contract” a binding legal document between two parties rather than any romanticized notion of eternal union. By the definition established in the introduction of this


88 For more information on marriage as a contract, see: Trepanier, Lee. "Contract, Friendship, And Love In The Merchant Of Venice." Perspectives On Political Science 43.4 (2014): 204-212; Harmon, A. G. "'Lawful Deeds': The
dissertation, the fact that Viola and Orsino’s love still matches several of traits of courtly love still qualifies it to be considered a version of fin amour, but its novel emphasis on an intimate knowledge of the one you plan to marry certainly makes it a version of love that has rarely, up to this point in history, been glorified in literature as an ideal heterosexual relationship especially between members of the aristocracy. Shakespeare creates this version of love that retains some courtly aspects but insists upon familiarity between the lovers.  

This emphasis on friendship, a knowledge of one’s beloved before marriage, in opposition to an admiration from a distance too great to afford any actual familiarity is found again most obviously in Much Ado About Nothing. Claudio and Hero, like Orsino and Olivia, have barely spoken when he decides to pursue her in marriage. He admires her before leaving on his campaign with Don Pedro (1.1.243-251), and admired her beauty again when greeted at the gate by Leonato and his court (1.1.146), but there is no evidence that he has ever even spoken with the girl when he decides to pursue her as his future wife. Like Orsino, Claudio admires Hero for her beauty and her social position, and in his courtship of her, he similarly seeks out an emissary as per the rules of courtly love rather than speak to his lady in person (1.1.266-275). In contrast, Beatrice and Benedick know each other well. He asks if she is “yet living” implying that they have met in the past (1.1.97), and she “knows him of old” (1.1.118). They demonstrate a

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familiarity with each other’s sense of humor (1.1.118, 1.1.113) and Beatrice demonstrates a familiar knowledge with Benedick’s insecurities (2.1.119-123). Claudio’s more courtly love, with its accompanying distance and lack of any substantial knowledge of Hero’s character, leads to the ease with which he is fooled into believing in her lack of chastity. In the scene in which Claudio reveals Hero’s sins in front of the congregation expecting their wedding, his lines point specifically to the fact that his knowledge of her was only ever superficial, “Out on thee! Seeming! I will write against it:/ You seem to me as Dian in her orb,/ As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;/ But you are more intemperate in your blood/ Than Venus” (4.1.56-59). Even with the eye-witness evidence against her, however, the one who knows Hero most familiarly, her greatest friend Beatrice, does not believe the slanders against her. Claudio and his partial knowledge of Hero thus compares unfavorably with Beatrice’s devotion in friendship, and in terms of a dichotomy between the sets of lovers, Benedick accepts a commission to kill his friend, again in spite of Claudio’s “eye-witness” evidence against her based completely on Beatrice’s word. He trusts her completely, implying a familiarity with her character that Claudio pointedly lacks in his relationship with Hero. The same contrast as in Twelfth Night is set up between a ceremonious, if idealized love and one based in friendship that retains certain aspects of fin amour. Certainly the love between Beatrice and Benedick is never reduced to only a libidinal impulse; they love each other for their teasing banter more than any overwhelming lust, and it ennobles them both in the fact that they both give up a particularly cynical, biting perspective on life when they fall in love. This stance is an annoyance to Claudio in the first scene who considers it dishonest, and asks continually for Benedick’s real opinion instead of more biting commentary against the
institution of marriage. From this evidence we can also say that Benedick becomes more honest due to his love of Beatrice, and also like Twelfth Night, both acts of noble service and a degree of courtesy are involved in their courtship. While there are no kind of formalized rules that govern their behavior, they both comply with an unstated set of standards of politeness. For example, their repartee after falling in love is different from the biting war of insults in act 1. They no longer interrupt each other, and often provide remarks that prompt the other to invent a witty comment. There is both consideration and order in their banter. Once again, though Shakespeare has demonstrated that the distant idealization of courtly love is problematic, he saves these elements of the courtly to make a new version of love that is refined but integrally based on friendship.

This is very similar to the manner in which Francis Beaumont depicts love in Knight. As described in chapter 1, there are important elements of the courtly in the relationship between Jasper and Luce. Jasper has grown up an an apprentice in Luce’s father’s household, he is at the end of his apprenticeship which means that they have lived in the same house for seven years. Whether their romance began one year or five years into his apprenticeship, they must know each other very well. Their relationship is not just familiar but complementary since the lovers work together as a team to secure their elopement. Nevertheless, they have an idealistic type of commitment and Jasper envisions an afterlife where he and his beloved are inseparable. What Knight really adds to the evolution of courtly love is its insistence on the holy one-ness of the lovers that most of Shakespeare’s works leave out altogether. In this way, Beaumont’s middling class lovers are more mystically bound, closer to creating a religion of their love like medieval chivalric lovers than even the aristocratic lovers that fill Shakespeare’s plays.
The fact that Shakespeare had taken this idea of a mystical oneness out of nearly all of the love affairs in his works including the aristocratic matches, meant that in theater the audience was accustomed to the love in comedies being a friendly variety that did away with any supernatural intimations. When Beaumont reintroduced the idea of a courtly love with a divine assurance of togetherness and put it into the love between two lower class characters it therefore must have been particularly jarring. If many or most of the upper class characters in theater were no longer depicted as courtly lovers, this would have added to the impression that there was something special in the particular circumstances of these characters that merited the resurrection of this courtly ideals. It places an even greater emphasis upon their unusual social class.

Wroth’s work envisions the most original variant of courtly love. Though Pamphilia’s love is never depicted as an aesthetic object, its incompatibility with reality is hinted at quite often. Pamphilia feels a distinctly courtly type of affection for Amphilanthus, but she continually admits the necessary role of imagination to the creation and continuance of that love. Her sonnet sequence points to the fictional nature of a courtly ideal even as it highlights the benefits of sustaining such an affection, combining a realistic appraisal with a will to overlook its more farfetched conceits. Wroth’s portrayal of love is therefore most similar to Shakespeare’s sonnets to the dark lady, where the lady quite famously has many appreciable flaws, but the lover chooses deliberately to overlook them.\footnote{See especially sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth, I do believe her though I know she lies, That she might think me some untutored youth, Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.} Wroth never admits openly that her lover has any
defects, but, as her lover is at least partly a creation of her own fantasy, there are inevitable some aspects of him that she simply chooses to ignore. Wroth’s Pamphilia also maintains that love is worth experiencing; that it is ennobling even though it is, in some senses, like living a fiction. In this way Wroth’s adaptation of courtly love is remarkably like Romantic love from the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries. Romantic love distinguishes itself from the courtly variety in that it imbues the lover’s passionate adoration with the power to elevate the value of the beloved. It does not insist upon the objective excellence of the beloved, but instead emphasizes the power of the imagination to elevate the beloved to a higher state (Singer 287). While Wroth’s largely forgotten work almost certainly had no direct influence on long term philosophical changes, this unexpected similarity could indicate earlier beginnings to romantic love than are currently acknowledged.

The idealistic nature of fin amour that writers of this time period were invested in holding on to is also what gives fin amour lasting appeal and what explains why versions of it continually come in and out of popularity throughout modern history. While love has often been relegated to the edges of contemporary scholarship since it finds little place in structuralism, post structuralisms, or even New Historicism, its ubiquity to human experience and its intimate relationship with social class, gender, sexuality, etc, means that its historic variations reveal nuances of many kinds of social trends (Schalkwyk 99). This is true even in the twenty-first century. People find the possibility of discovering romantic perfection endlessly alluring, and the results of idealizing one’s


defects, but, as her lover is at least partly a creation of her own fantasy, there are inevitable some aspects of him that she simply chooses to ignore. Wroth’s Pamphilia also maintains that love is worth experiencing; that it is ennobling even though it is, in some senses, like living a fiction. In this way Wroth’s adaptation of courtly love is remarkably like Romantic love from the late eighteenth-early nineteenth centuries. Romantic love distinguishes itself from the courtly variety in that it imbues the lover’s passionate adoration with the power to elevate the value of the beloved. It does not insist upon the objective excellence of the beloved, but instead emphasizes the power of the imagination to elevate the beloved to a higher state (Singer 287). While Wroth’s largely forgotten work almost certainly had no direct influence on long term philosophical changes, this unexpected similarity could indicate earlier beginnings to romantic love than are currently acknowledged.

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Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed:
beloved, both good and bad, are still the subject of works of art and theater. Courtly
love’s inability to conquer all may be continuously illustrated in works from the early
modern period, but its undeniable ability to fascinate has ensured it a rare capacity to
transcend time.
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COURTLY LOVE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

AN ABSTRACT

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BY

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In Queen Elizabeth I’s court in the late fifteenth century there was a sharp decline in the popular use of the heavily stylized, aristocratic type of love known as fin amour, or courtly love. It therefore became less guarded by the elite and more accessible to its appropriation by socially disadvantaged groups who could capitalize upon the remaining respect/nostalgia that courtly love still evoked in literature. This dissertation examines three early modern works written by authors from socially disadvantaged groups that modify courtly love in specific ways that push its definition to be more socially inclusive, and thus push their audiences to reexamine the value of these groups. Francis Beaumont’s *The Knight if the Burning Pestle* examines honor and implies that genuine honor is encouraged by the middling sort and their distinguishing set of values; Mary Wroth’s *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* advocates a derivation of courtly love that emphasizes emotion and complexity to make the position of a courtly lover possible for women; Richard Barnfield’s homoerotic sonnets encourage an aesthetic perspective on love, distancing his work from moral judgement.
COURTLY LOVE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A DISSERTATION

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