The Expense of Spirit

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The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama.

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Introduction

The vitality of Renaissance drama in England is deeply enmeshed in the struggles that characterized every aspect of English culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As is well known, during the era that began with the Reformation and reached its crisis point with the Revolution, England experienced such shocks to its system as extraordinary demographic growth and price inflation, the opening of the land market that resulted from the dissolution of the monasteries, and significant increases in litigation, foreign trade, and other commercial activities, along with wide expansion in educational opportunities. The decades in which Renaissance drama proliferated strikingly (from c. 1580 to c. 1625 or, roughly, the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods) were not only decades of intense cultural conflict, but also a time when, in a hierarchical society, economic potential and definitions of gender, social class, and status were perceived as provocatively fluid. It is the assumption of this study that drama is a form dependent on conflict for its realization and that, in the English Renaissance, cultural conflict can be seen as its raison d'être.

A public and popular form, the drama was accessible for most of this period to both sexes and to a mixture of social classes, with the probable exclusion of the very poor. Another major assumption in my analysis is that the drama not only articulates and represents cultural change, but also participates in it; seeks not only to define, but actively to generate, and in some cases to contain, cultural conflict. Far from acting as a fictional reflection of an imagined external reality that can somehow be grasped as true, the drama is a
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constituent of that reality and inseparable from it. In sum, I have conceived of the dramatic text as a symbolic form that creates, represents, and contains cultural change.

What follows focuses on the dynamics of this process as it concerns the representation of love and sexuality. The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods witnessed major transformations in the social construction of gender, the conceptualization of the position of women, and the ideology of the family, meaning the dominant set of accepted assumptions—often unexamined—that defines the family and provides the foundation on which it is built. Debate about altering sexual values was prolonged and intense in the English Renaissance, and all the important, controversial issues were dramatized in the plays of the period. This analysis attempts to show a parallel development between discussions of women, eros, and marriage in moral and religious writing and changing representations of love and sexuality in the drama, and to relate these changes to alterations in dramatic forms. The purposes are first, to illuminate the ways in which dramatic and moral languages combine to create, interpret, and transform a dominant sexual discourse; and, second, to trace a process of artistic change in the English dramatic tradition by focusing on the parallel relationship between changing sexual values and altering dramatic forms.

The grandest and most provocative study of English Renaissance sexuality to date is Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977). Though some of Stone’s conclusions have been hotly debated, many of his arguments have withstood controversy, and I have relied on some of them in my account. For example, he demonstrates that in the conduct of marriage and the formation of the family during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was a gradual shift from the predominant emphasis of the medieval aristocracy on arranged marriages as property-based alliances between kin groups to a contrasting emphasis on the conjugal couple and the isolated nuclear family; and, second, that these shifts accompanied changes in the official idealization of sexual behavior from the praise of celibacy and virginity in the Middle Ages to the Protestant glorification of “holy matrimony” as the eminently desirable sexual status in the post-Reformation English Renaissance.

Objections to these arguments tend to focus on the complex
nature of medieval sexuality and to question the originality of Protestant sexual discourse, two issues that affect the location of change. For example, as discussed in the first chapter of this book, Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated convincingly that the modern scholarly stress on asceticism disregards the wide and varied range of thought, feeling, and representation constituting the late medieval construction of eros. Others have argued that the valorization of celibacy had little to do with the actual behavior or feelings of medieval men and women: there were, for instance, commonsense counteridealizations of marriage to which ordinary people naturally responded. Second, scholars have alleged that Stone and other social historians have attributed far too much to Protestantism: the emphasis on an individual’s consent to a marriage, to cite only one example, had always been encoded in Catholic canon law and was hardly an invention of the English Reformation; nor was the stress on a couple’s affection for one another particularly new.

To state what perhaps will seem an obvious point, these objections carry different weight depending on the phenomena that one is attempting to discover and explain. What I am primarily interested in are dominant modes of conceptualization and the representation of belief. Most germane to my analysis are the facts that no matter how men and women in the Middle Ages may have felt or acted, and despite (perhaps along with) the complex construction of eros, dominant medieval homiletic and theological formulations officially idealized asceticism and celibacy as the most prestigious forms of sexual behavior; and Protestant sexual discourse explicitly and repeatedly abjured this idealization and replaced it with the glorification of marriage. Second, it is crucial to assert at the outset that the importance of English Protestant sexual discourse in the Renaissance lies not in its originality, but in its proliferation, elaboration, and wide accessibility to a variety of social groups, as well as in its attempt to construct marriage as a concretized relationship enacted in social life. As we will see throughout this book, the account of changing sexual discourses in the English Renaissance is not a story of origins, but an analysis of significant shifts in prestige, and in emphasis and degree.

One of the major arguments in this analysis is that there are two dominant forms of sexual discourse in the English Renaissance.
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The first comprises a dualistic sensibility in which women and eros are perceived either as idealized beyond the realm of the physical (often they are viewed as leading to a consciousness of the divine, a transcendence of desire) or as degraded and sinful and, accompanying these assumptions, as frivolous, dangerous, and wasteful as well. I hope to show that these polarizations of women and sexuality inevitably coexist in the same discursive formation, one pole implying the other. The logic of this dualistic sensibility often construes marriage as at best a necessary evil, the means by which a fallen humanity reproduces itself and ensures the orderly succession of property. Second, and in contrast, there is the Protestant (largely Puritan) idealization of “holy matrimony,” which constitutes a coherent, elaborate, and self-conscious effort to construct a new ideology of the private life. Although Protestant sexual discourse retains much of the erotic skepticism of the dualistic sensibility, it nevertheless unites love with marriage and conceives of marriage with great respect as the foundation of an ordered society. Protestant discourse is not dualistic, but complex and multifaceted, and one of its most significant and far-reaching changes is a shift in the prestige and centrality granted to the institution of marriage. Specifically, this discourse compares marriage to the church and the state, drawing out the equation among spiritual, public, and private realms by analogizing the husband to God and the king and the wife to the church and the kingdom. Once again (as is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3), the analogy connecting the family, the state, and the cosmos is an ancient invention, not a Protestant one. But the Protestants’ elaborate deployment of this analogy, along with its wide dissemination in sermons and tracts in an age of printing, was a new development in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English life. As Chapters 3 and 4 show, the attempt to grant new significance to private life by equating it with public and spiritual existence in pragmatic terms breaks down from the retention of domestic and political hierarchies that, issuing in a host of contradictions, subvert the attempted analogies and eventually result in the creation of separate spheres.

During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I argue, there is a gradual shift from the dualistic mentality to the predominance of the Protestant idealization of marriage. Naturally, such a shift in sensibility is not clear-cut; there is an inevitable overlapping
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of values and attitudes. Nor does one sexual consciousness ever supersede another entirely; clearly the dualistic sensibility is still an option in our culture. Nevertheless, a study of moral, religious, and dramatic writing in the English Renaissance reveals that the Protestant idealization of marriage gained a distinct ascendancy as the predominant, authoritative sexual discourse.

This book attempts to demonstrate these changes as their constituent and particular elements manifest themselves both in specific plays and in nondramatic writings. In locating a consideration of dramatic texts within a variety of forms of writing, and in viewing the drama as both creating and responding to cultural change, the analysis is allied to the efforts of much recent scholarship, including feminism and the new historicism. Yet along with other contrasts to which I will return, my own approach differs from that of some new historicists both in its emphasis upon changing values and in its focus upon dramatic form. New historicism is, of course, concerned with cultural conflict; but (and there are significant exceptions) in this scholarship the emphasis tends to fall less on the processes of change over time and more on the way the interrelations between literature and power reveal themselves in given texts at selected moments. Second, many new historicists eschew a focus on specifically aesthetic characteristics as static and falsely universalizing: in short, as empty formalism. Yet as scholars like Fredric Jameson have shown, literary forms and artistic conventions do not constitute static rhetorical paradigms that are transmitted without alteration through history; they are themselves social and ideological constructs, whose varying patterns, sudden appearances at distinct historical moments, and shifting dominance serve as significant registers of cultural transformation.

Attempting to illuminate the variety and complexity of sexual and dramatic change in the English Renaissance as well as their interconnections, I have focused and expanded upon traditional aesthetic configurations of dramatic structure and form. Dramatic forms are viewed as ways of categorizing experience and making it meaningful to people, as vehicles of interpretation that are altered and affected by nondramatic conceptualizations even while they themselves affect the course of cultural history. This book attempts to trace a dynamic process in which four dominant dramatic forms—romantic comedy, satire or city comedy, tragedy, and
tragicomedy—may be seen from several perspectives. First, they can be viewed as contending simultaneously for adequacy of representation of changing sexual values within the particular structural demands of their distinctive genres. From this vantage point, certain formal conceptions of love and sexuality can be seen as more or less able to contain shifting views of women, eros, and marriage. Thus, developing in a cultural environment in which the prestige of marriage has increased significantly, Elizabethan romantic comedy attains formal coherence by idealizing marriage as a symbolic embodiment of social and spiritual harmony that reconciles sexual tensions. Yet as the conflicting implications of these tensions become more pressing, the contradictions that are generated themselves begin to contribute material for other forms. Jacobean satire severely scrutinizes traditional comic and social order by highlighting and exposing sexual tensions; and in Jacobean tragedy, the contradictions and paradoxes inscribed in the two dominant modes of Renaissance sexual discourse explode into destruction and protest. When these genres in turn confront conceptions to which their structural components cannot adapt (e.g., that illicit sexual desire need not result in fatal consequences), a less idealistic and demanding form, tragicomedy, becomes the vehicle for the articulation of newly shifting values.

Second, in the four chapters that follow, the four dramatic forms are viewed as variously capable of comprehending distinctive issues and problems in the changing representation of love and sexuality. How, precisely, do the conventional romantic comic preoccupations with eros and courtship, the satiric exposé of the collective delusions of social life, and the tragic focus on death and heroism interact with transforming sexual values in the Renaissance? Finally, given the options available in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture, should comic and tragic discourses be viewed as conservative, as radical, or as a complex mixture of both?

Chapter 1, “Moral Conceptions of Sexual Love in Elizabethan Comedy,” examines the shift in predominance from a dualistic sensibility to the Protestant idealization of marriage by contrasting the relevant writings of eminent European humanists, including Castiglione, Vives, Erasmus, and Montaigne, whose works were widely translated in Renaissance England, to the effusion of sermons on holy matrimony written by Protestant preachers in the
late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. By examining the growth of Elizabethan comedy from the early works of John Lyly through those of Robert Greene and Shakespeare, the chapter demonstrates a parallel development between this shift in sexual discourse and the changing representations of erotic love and marriage that characterize the development of the form. Lyly, whose comic structures embody the dualistic sensibility, rarely ended his plays with marriage and consequently was unable to experiment extensively with the genre; Greene developed romantic comedy to a limited extent; and Shakespeare realized its potential with *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* by creating more complex representations, in which sexual love and marriage have increased significantly in moral stature and prestige. This chapter also argues that despite its complexity, romantic comedy performed a predominantly conservative function in Elizabethan culture by evoking potentially disruptive sexual tensions only to represent them as harmoniously assimilated within the existing social structure.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the ways in which Jacobean satire constructs a more pointed critique of Renaissance sexual values than can penetrate the requisite wish-fulfillment structure of romantic comedy, precisely by transforming the conventions of that genre. Specifically, this chapter connects the phenomenon of social mobility with the struggle for sexual equality in Jacobean England by focusing on the figure of the disguised comic heroine as the symbolic composite of both. Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* and Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*, both plays that center on a transvestite title figure, are examined in relation to the popular literature that constitutes the lively controversy over the nature and place of women in Renaissance England. The contrast between the two plays and the social commentary reveals the range of conceptual options that were available in Jacobean culture. By directly and self-consciously inverting romantic comic conventions, Jonson depicts sexual and social mobility with unmitigated ridicule, mocking them both, I argue, from a conservative and aristocratic point of view. In contrast, parallel treatments of women in men’s clothing in *The Roaring Girl* and the satiric pamphlets *Hic Mulier* and *Haec-Vir* illuminate a deep, more comprehensive cultural ambivalence about social mobility, female independence, and equality between the sexes. Viewing the *Hic Mulier* debate in
In considering the development of English Renaissance tragedy, what is remarkable for the purposes of this analysis are the transforming conceptions of heroism from Elizabethan to Jacobean interpretations of the form. Although there was no extensive, well-developed body of tragic theory in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the theory that did exist viewed tragedy as intimately related to history, emphasizing the elevated stature of the characters and the importance of their individual destinies to the collective polity. Unlike comedy, which centered almost by definition on private, usually sexual, experience, tragedy focused on the concerns of public life. Elizabethan tragedy consequently represents a heroism of public action that highlights the protagonist’s will to power, treating women and eros either as potentially destructive or as subliminally idealized, but always as peripheral to the represented action of a play. In short, Elizabethan tragedy constructs the representation of women and sexuality from the context of contemporary moral and religious writing about women and fashion, the chapter demonstrates that a disjunction between content and form in the debate’s structure depicts female freedom and equality as desirable and just, but also as impossible for a hierarchical society to absorb without unacceptable disruption. Similar aesthetic dislocation between content and form characterizes the representation of the man-clothed, virginal title figure in *The Roaring Girl*, who is simultaneously admired and excluded by the traditional comic society of married couples that forms on the stage at the end of the play.

Whereas Elizabethan romantic comedy evokes but contains sexual tensions within an idealization of marriage, Jacobean city comedy, in contrast, underscores these tensions, insisting on them. Yet even the more pointed scrutiny of satire contains (if barely and with noted ambivalence) the social and sexual paradoxes it highlights within a triumphant, festive present tense. However uncomfortable an audience may be with the resolution of a comic play, that discomfort centers on an imagination of the future, and the future remains outside the discursive terrain of comedy. In tragedy, on the other hand, the generic focus on individual heroism and death invites the consideration of the passage of time, forcing a confrontation between the future and the past: the social and sexual contradictions and inequities that are contained in comedy succeed in subverting the existing structures of society.
dualistic sexual sensibility described above, a process demonstrated in Chapter 3 in an analysis of Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*. In contrast, Jacobean tragedy constructs a heroism of endurance, rather than action, centering on private life, exploring sexual experience in detail, and presenting a surprising number of women as the heroes of tragic plays. In Chapter 3, I relate this transforming conception of tragic heroism—the idea of what constitutes tragic experience—to the rising prestige of marriage in the English Renaissance. Specifically, examination of Protestant sermons and conduct books about holy matrimony reveals that marriage is constructed in explicitly heroic terms, as the most critical endeavor of one’s whole life, as a quest, or “a voyage on a dangerous sea,” as the arena in which one pursues salvation or damnation, as inevitable destiny. Furthermore, the heroism being constructed is one of patient suffering, rather than willful action; as such, I argue, it is a heroism particularly suited to women. Within the terms of the discourse that I have called the heroics of marriage, women begin to be represented in English Renaissance tragedy as powerful agents of cultural change.

In tracing the connections between altering sexual values and changing concepts of tragic heroism, I focus on *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* as particularly illuminating examples of this process. *Othello* can be seen to depict the decline of the heroism of action that is associated with the disappearing past, whereas in *The Duchess* that decline has already taken place, and the need to construct a future is imperative. In both plays the heroics of marriage is embodied in the female protagonists and associated with the future. Yet the heroics of marriage breaks down from external opposition and from internal contradictions that center on conflicting imperatives of gender, power, and social class. By examining the deaths of Desdemona and the Duchess of Malfi as symbolic foci of tragic experience, I argue that tragedy functions paradoxically as both a radical and a conservative discourse in the representation of sexual and cultural change.

Jacobean tragicomedy continues to dismantle traditional conceptions of heroism in the representation of love and sexuality. A transitional and unstable form, tragicomedy, despite its surface evasions and fantasy, is entirely dependent upon an awareness of Jacobean social processes and artistic traditions if it is to be understood. As a hybrid genre, tragicomedy combines old sexual dis-
courses in new ways, never quite transforming them but, at the same time, creating the conditions in which they can be transformed and thus constituting the critical link between Renaissance and Restoration drama. To explore this process, I have focused on chivalry as a metaphor and vehicle for cultural change, examining in particular the relation between heroism and sexuality in three plays: Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (probably a collaboration between Shakespeare and John Fletcher), and *The Knight of Malta* (probably a joint effort between Fletcher and a frequent collaborator, Philip Massinger), all ironic renditions of knightly heroes in love. Analyzing the ways in which issues that, treated bitterly by Shakespeare, are represented with increasing levity and parody in the Fletcher plays, I argue that Jacobean tragicomedy represents a final relinquishing of a treasured Renaissance vision of the past.

Although my method throughout this book involves detailed analyses of individual plays and documents, often isolating moments in time for purposes of comparison, broad patterns of change focusing on conceptions of public and private life are also suggested. As we have seen, the rising prestige of marriage in Renaissance England helps to account for the development of both comedy and tragedy. Elizabethan comedy attains formal coherence by idealizing marriage, whereas in tragedy the private life, after being treated as subordinate, destructive, and peripheral, is elevated in stature to the center of tragic significance. The heroics of marriage is, of course, constructed precisely by equating private experience with the political and spiritual realms: these are the analogies that give love and sexuality an added prestige. Yet when these analogies break down from the contradictory retention of hierarchies of age, rank, class, and, particularly, gender, private experience does not retreat to its former marginal status. As I have tried to show in the last chapter of this study, in tragicomedy private life begins to be represented as a once again separate, but newly equivalent, sphere. The continued representation of private experience as a serious center of significance in its own right constitutes the ongoing legacy of the heroics of marriage.

Recent historical studies of Renaissance literature have recognized the importance of understanding representations of love and
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sexuality. Yet these representations are considered significant primarily insofar as they illuminate the manipulations of Elizabethan and Jacobean political power and mechanisms of economic exchange. "Love is not love," asserts a recent critic, wittily playing on the famous Shakespearean line in a perceptive account of the political ploys embedded in Elizabethan sonnets. The dignity of eros and marriage was indeed enhanced when they were analogized to political and spiritual power. Yet to assume that political power is more real—more worthy of analysis—than sexual love and marriage is to ignore the equivalence given to the terms of an analogy and to overlook the mixed, complex, and overlapping nature of public and private experience. Ultimately, this emphasis distorts by depriving the private life of historical content. For whatever else it may be, love, definitely, is love. Giving each realm of experience its due can help to make visible new aspects of Renaissance drama and to create a new perspective on the course of cultural change.

Tracing the transforming dramatic representations of love and sexuality in Elizabethan and Jacobean England provides insight into the ways in which people conceived of their emotional experience and represented it not only to the world but to themselves. When the most intimate emotions are given popular, public expression in dramatic forms, we can perceive the paradoxes and contradictions that constituted the mental formulations of sexual love as England moved into the modern age. The drama not only illuminates the inner life of the surrounding culture but plays a significant part in creating it. An awareness of this reciprocal relation between sexual values and their symbolic representation in dramatic forms should become increasingly germane as scholars move more deeply into unearthing the history of the private life.