The Expense of Spirit

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Transforming Sexuality: Jacobean Tragicomedy and the Reconfiguration of Private Life

Jacobean tragicomedy is the last original formal creation of English Renaissance drama meant for a public audience. Despite many illuminating studies, no explanation has ever accounted for all of the oddities of this hybrid genre, the most prominent of which remains the striking discrepancy between the aesthetic inferiority of many of the plays and their undoubted historical importance, including their contemporary popularity and the crucial role they played in the long-term development of seventeenth-century drama.¹ Explanations that center on Shakespeare’s ro-

¹. See, e.g., Arthur C. Kirsch, Jacobean Dramatic Perspectives (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), pp. 3–4: “Though Jonson’s reputation may have been higher among the literati and Shakespeare’s influence may have been more profound and enduring, it was [Beaumont and Fletcher] who clearly dominated the repertory of the English stage for the better part of the seventeenth century. . . . It was only in the 1670s . . . that the authority of their dramaturgy began to be questioned, and even then it continued to exercise a considerable influence, especially upon Restoration comedy. No English dramatists before or since have had so extraordinary an influence.” In Dramatic Character in the English Romantic Age (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), Joseph W. Donohue, Jr., explores this long-ranging influence of Fletcherian characterization. For studies of the reputation of Beaumont and Fletcher, see Lawrence Wallis, Fletcher, Beaumont and Company: Entertainers to the Jacobean Gentry (New York: King’s Crown, 1947); and William W. Appleton, Beaumont and Fletcher: A Critical Study (London: Allen & Unwin, 1956).
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Romances are clearly inadequate to any historical inquiry into the form. Not only did Shakespeare retire over a decade before the end of James’s reign, when the majority of tragicomedies were produced; but analyses of his romances cannot fail to focus on the miraculous reconciliations, the overcoming of suffering and injustice, that illuminate his last plays but that pointedly contrast with the deflating, irreverent levity characterizing the bulk of late Jacobean tragicomedies. Known as “the Beaumont and Fletcher plays,” that bulk is largely the product of John Fletcher, who (though he had collaborators, primarily Francis Beaumont and Philip Massinger) became the chief playwright of the King’s Men and dominated the Jacobean stage from Shakespeare’s retirement in 1613 to his own death in 1625.2

Dryden himself tells us that it was Beaumont and Fletcher who provided the primary imaginative link between Renaissance and Restoration drama: “Their plays are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the stage; two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare’s or Johnson’s. . . . Their plots were generally more regular than Shakespeare’s, especially those which were made before Beaumont’s death; and they understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better; whose wild debaucheries, and quickness of wit in repartees, no

poet can ever paint as they have done. . . . I am apt to believe the English language in them arrived to its highest perfection: what words have since been taken in, are rather superfluous than ornamental.” Dryden, of course, later recognizes the superiority of Shakespeare. But acknowledging Shakespeare’s obvious greatness does not nullify the point that it is Fletcher, much more than Shakespeare, whose influence can be discerned in the most enduring and delightful of Restoration dramatic creations, the comedy of manners.3

Recognizing the extent of Fletcher’s influence, studies of the large Beaumont and Fletcher corpus tend to fall into the now outmoded opposition of “critical” versus “historical” analyses generated by the dominance of the new criticism. Concentrating on what is defined as “the text itself,” the former variety have helped greatly in underscoring thematic patterns and subtly unraveling the tone of the plays, but are ultimately defeated by the plays’ artistic mediocrity.4 The second version of this approach takes two forms. The first attempts to account for the blend of established conventions, novel techniques, and ingenious structural devices peculiar to tragicomedy by tracing their generic origins in classical and medieval drama, as well as in romantic story.5 Such analyses tend to stress the importance of the sixteenth-century Italian poet-


5. The most important of these studies is Eugene Waith, The Pattern of Tragicomedy in Beaumont and Fletcher (1952; rpt. Hamden, Conn.: Archon,
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playwright Guarini, whose pastoral tragicomedy *Il Pastor Fido* (1589, translated in 1601) and whose critical pronouncements defining the form directly influenced Fletcher, particularly in writing his own definition of tragicomedy. These influence studies are weakened by the fact that Fletcher's generic definition, though unique, is nevertheless notoriously inadequate and fails to account for his work.⁶ Indeed, Fletcher's pastoral tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608), the only one of his plays directly influenced by Guarini, was a drastic failure. His later work reveals that he largely abandoned the premises that he had pedantically tried to impose on a reluctant readership when the play was published sometime before the end of 1610.

A second, historical approach attempts to place the Beaumont and Fletcher plays in the Tudor-Stuart dramatic tradition, which they are viewed as concluding. Because it endeavors to account for the contemporary popularity and influence of the plays, this approach is more effective.⁷ Yet Fletcherian tragicomedy is too often dismissed as an inward-turning, decadent form, an exhausted re-

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⁶ See John Fletcher, *The Faithful Shepherdess*, in *Stuart Plays*, ed. Arthur H. Nethercot, Charles R. Baskervill, and Virgil B. Heltzel; rev. Arthur H. Nethercot (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 559: “A tragicomedy is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some near it, which is enough to make it no comedy, which must be a representation of familiar people, with such kind of trouble as no life be questioned, so that a god is as lawful in this as in a tragedy, and mean people as in a comedy.” The tragicomedy *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, however, concludes with the death of one of the heroes. Cf. Giambattista Guarini, “The Compendium of Tragicomic Poetry,” in *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, ed. Allan H. Gilbert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962), p. 511: “He who composes tragicomedy takes from tragedy its great persons but not its great action, its verisimilar plot but not its true one, its movement of the feelings but not its disturbance of them, its pleasure, but not its sadness, its danger but not its death; from comedy it takes laughter that is not excessive, modest amusement, feigned difficulty, happy reversal, and above all the comic order.”

view of a disappearing past; consequently this perspective over­looks the fresh impulses in the plays and so misconstrues their content and diminishes the curious fact of their lasting influence. This view also assigns Beaumont and Fletcher a major role in creating and pandering to what is conceived as the jaded, aristocratic, courtly half of an increasingly polarized seventeenth-century theater audience, the “rival traditions” outlined by Alfred Harbage. Recent scholarship has been refining Harbage’s oppositions between Puritans and cavaliers, middle-class and courtly aristocracy, and public and private theaters, largely by demonstrating that the social and cultural environment in which the drama participated was considerably more complex than he recognized.8 To date these revisionary studies have focused primarily on Jacobean tragedy and satire and on Caroline drama; the odd phenomenon of Fletcherian tragicomedy has yet to be viewed as a development of late Jacobean culture with a relation to the future as well as the past.

In this chapter I suggest that Jacobean tragicomedy can best be understood as participating in an ongoing process of cultural transformation. Specifically it can be seen as facilitating processes of artistic change by mediating between future and past dramatic forms, an accomplishment most discernible in the tragicomic representation of love and sexuality. When tragicomedy is viewed in this way, as “a form moving in time” (the phrase is Fredric Jameson’s),9 the logic behind its fantastic structural devices, puzzling levy, and discordant juxtaposition of conventions and values often thought to be mutually exclusive begins to become more clear.


Jameson’s fully developed theory of the relation between ideology and genre defines literary form as “a socio-symbolic message . . . [that is] immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right.” With its stress on perpetual struggle and conflict, Jameson’s conception of genre as endeavoring to contain the contradictions generated by social transformation is valuable for understanding all dramatic forms. But his “notion of the text as a synchronic unity of structurally contradictory or heterogeneous elements, generic patterns and discourses” becomes especially useful for conceptualizing the hybrid tragicomedy, which, I argue, is a form whose constituent elements themselves embody and articulate the processes of cultural change. In elaborating his theory Jameson discusses romance (with a particular mention of Shakespeare’s last plays) as a response to a critical moment of socioeconomic transition:

As for romance, it would seem that its ultimate condition of figuration . . . is to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony. Our principal experience of such transitional moments is evidently that of an organic social order in the process of penetration and subversion, reorganization and rationalization, by nascent capitalism, yet still, for another long moment, coexisting with the latter. So Shakespearean romance . . . opposes the phantasmagoria of “imagination” to the bustling commercial activity at work all around it.¹⁰

Whether or not we accept Jameson’s emphasis on the various phases of class struggle or the centrality of capitalism, the socioeconomic developments he describes are undeniably relevant to Jacobean England.¹¹ Fletcher’s plays, participating in the same

¹¹. It should be acknowledged that Jameson’s formulations are sometimes problematic for the Renaissance. Though Shakespeare’s romances do not yet recognizably articulate conflict “in terms of the struggle of social classes,” plays by many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries (e.g., Marlowe, Middleton, and Webster) certainly do. As we will see, Shakespeare tends to be a conservative in the representation of class conflict.
conditions that Jameson argues constitute Shakespeare’s romances, comprise a strikingly different response.

As I have tried to show throughout this book, various levels of cultural change combine and compete in the dramatic representation of sexuality and are particularly important to the shifting conception of the relation between public and private life. As is well known, English Renaissance drama is informed by an aristocratic vision of order that is conceived politically in terms of hierarchy and rank and rhetorically in terms of a system of analogies and correspondences that conjoin individual, society, and cosmos. Thus the landscape of love and sexuality becomes an arena where spiritual, social, and psychic energies meet, conflict, and/or unite. Fully articulated in Protestant moral literature, one dominant sexual ideology, which I have called the heroics of marriage, attempts to unite public and private life and, contrasted with a dualizing sensibility that idealizes or degrades women and eros, is enacted in Elizabethan comedy, where sexual tensions are evoked but contained within a harmonious, stable social structure symbolized in marriage. Jacobean satire severely scrutinizes orthodox comic and social order by highlighting and exposing these tensions. And, in Jacobean tragedy, the contradictions and paradoxes inscribed in the two dominant modes of Renaissance sexual discourse explode into destruction and protest. Whether it is evoked to be affirmed, scrutinized, or subverted, though, the politically orthodox "Elizabethan world picture" always provides the informing principle of order in English Renaissance comedy and tragedy. With its pronounced emphasis on archaic, fairy-tale material and its abstract projection of a Utopian future, Shakespearean romance also remains well within orthodox discursive terrain. In Fletcherian tragic-icomedies however, this situation no longer prevails. In these plays

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spiritual, sociopolitical, and psychological realities begin to be constructed by the dramatists without mourning or protest as separate and distinct levels of being. The effort to unite them is represented parodically as deluded, anachronistic, a little absurd: Fletcherian tragicomedy displays a new willingness to dismiss the cultural formations of the past.\(^\text{13}\)

The resulting differences in the representation of sexual change among the major dramatic genres can best be perceived in terms of contrasting formal/ideological conceptions of the past and future. The future is not problematic in either comedy or tragedy. In comedy the future is assured and deflected by the focus on the harmonious present and the symbolic affirmation of the status quo. In tragedy a diminished future recedes in significance before the overwhelming concern with the failures of the present and the past. When the heroics of marriage breaks down, for example, tragedy clarifies the need for constructing some new relation between private and public life, while only peripherally indicating its form or conditions; instead of envisioning a specific future, tragedy destroys the past and then contains its own contradictions by mourning the destruction. Like tragedy, tragicomedy depicts present conditions as inadequate and uncertain; however, a newly dismissive irreverence toward the past allows a workable, even a desirable, future to be more fully imagined and affirmed.

These processes become most clearly discernible in a revised conception of the relation between public and private life, the formation of which can be traced in the tragicomic representation of love and sexuality. The new and distinctive way in which Fletcherian tragicomedy treats these issues can best be viewed in contrast to Shakespeare. What follows focuses on three plays: Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613, probably a collaboration between Fletcher and Shakespeare), and *The Knight of Malta* (1618, probably a joint effort by Fletcher and Philip Massinger). These plays share a deflating, ironic view of human nature and destiny, conveyed through similar clusters of themes and motifs that gain their significance from the

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13. See Cohen, p. 391, for the idea that a Utopian view of the future as expressed in Shakespeare’s romances may actually prove the most historically accurate.
ways they combine to illuminate the protagonists’ encounters with erotic love. In each of the three plays, the figure of a bewildered knight pursues an idealized love in a courtly, chivalric setting, and in each instance the interplay of hero, quest, and setting dramatizes a destructive attachment to anachronistic sexual values. The analysis will demonstrate the ways in which these themes and motifs are differently arranged, weighted, and proportioned from play to play and from playwright to playwright. This kaleidoscopic view of matching and modulating motifs does not merely have the advantage of distinguishing Shakespeare’s imagination from Fletcher’s, but also of stressing the continuity that is present in the process of generic change. The move from Shakespeare’s bitter pessimism to Fletcher’s witty irreverence articulates the final relinquishing of a treasured Renaissance cultural vision of the past; and this shift in sensibility can best be viewed as a development that was gradual and continuous, rather than as a departure that was violent and abrupt.14

Before going on to examine these plays about questing knights, it will be useful to review some points about the originating cultural conditions of chivalry and to recall some defining themes of the incorporation of chivalry in literature. What follows is an extremely selective and synthetic sketch, meant to highlight issues concerning chivalry that remain relevant to the development of English Renaissance drama.

One distinguished historian of the topic, Maurice Keen, has recently defined chivalry as “a word that came to denote the code and culture of a martial estate which regarded war as its hereditary profession.” Flourishing between, roughly, 1100 and the begin-

14. Cf. Jameson, p. 97: “Just as overt revolution is no punctual event . . . but brings to the surface the innumerable daily struggles and forms of class polarization which are at work in the whole course of social life that precedes it, and which are therefore latent and implicit in ‘prer evolutionary’ social experience . . . so also the overtly ‘transitional’ moments of cultural revolution are themselves but the passage to the surface of a permanent process in human societies. . . .”
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ning of the sixteenth century, this medieval phenomenon, though related at various points in its development to Christianity and the church, derived its Christian tone primarily from the fact that chivalric groups arose and operated within a Christian society. Originating with the warrior groups of the early Middle Ages, chivalry evolved essentially as a mode of secular power that provided an alternative to the church. Knighthood comprised an estate of aristocratic, elect warriors in search of personal glory, “with a general commission to uphold justice and protect the weak”:

From its beginning to its close, men going forward in the hope of magnifying their names and fortune in knighthood is the basic theme of . . . [chivalric] history. . . . Religious priorities were not the driving force behind its ethic, which . . . [was often seen as confounding] the pursuit of spiritual merit with the pursuit of worldly honour. Even where the crusade was concerned, it was not the new approbation and the indulgences that the Church reformers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries had extended to the warrior estate that moved nine knights out of ten, but the glamour of martial glory and social esteem. Chivalry essentially was the secular code of honour of a martially oriented aristocracy.\(^\text{15}\)

Keen and other historians agree that the relative lack of concern with national boundaries in the medieval world allowed chivalry to become an international phenomenon. Consolidating and articulating its basic premises in twelfth-century France, the knightly ideal reached its height of influence and breadth of dissemination in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when, Georges Duby argues, “the ruling class needed to grow more rigid in defence of its threatened privileges, and when the king’s authority was struggling to base itself more firmly on intermediary bodies and made use of the categories of knightly morality to strengthen loyalties and foment military order. Chivalry . . . played a fundamental role in the great mise-en-scène of authority.” During this period, chivalric and political history were intertwined, as politically motivated princes began forming their own orders of chivalry. No

\(^{15}\) Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 239, 252, 243.
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matter how much the idealistic chivalric code was violated, Duby contends, it lay at the center of the system of education for the upper classes and became "the object of unanimous veneration."16

Recent historians, then, have stressed the crucial role chivalry played in the conduct of late medieval power relations. They have also agreed that no new developments in the formation of the chivalric code took place after the beginning of the sixteenth century. Keen attributes the decline of the military and political functions of chivalry in the Renaissance to the new and advanced military technology that enabled warfare to take place on a larger scale and brought about the appearance of permanent, national standing armies, which in turn required princes to evolve more efficient systems of taxation for their support. These alterations in the conduct of warfare caused the conception of the individual knight valiantly upholding justice and protecting the weak to attenuate to the concept of "the officer whose business it is to fight the King's enemies." Other Renaissance historians have stressed the humanist emphasis on classical education and distaste for the chivalric glorification of violence. Like Keen, they have described the increasing value placed on lawyers and administrators with professional, rather than military backgrounds in the formation of the secular nation state in the Renaissance.17

Keen contends that while the military and political functions of chivalry died in the sixteenth century, the enduring legacy of the chivalric ethic was located not in contemporary social and economic conditions, but in conceptions, such as ideals of honor and nobility, courtliness to women, and the emphasis placed on the individual quest for glory and adventure.18 Many of these points


are arguable. Keen’s separation of ideals and conceptions from socioeconomic conditions, an attempt to correct earlier historiography that emphasized the large quantity of fantasy material in the chivalric ethos, is based on a positivist distinction between fiction and fact that equates the former with illusion and the latter with reality. His arguments consequently do not account for certain complexities. For example, recent scholarship has demonstrated convincingly the very contemporary sociopolitical functions of the chivalric aesthetic in the late sixteenth-century cult of Queen Elizabeth, as well as the use of chivalric motifs as devices symbolic of monarchical power in the courts of the early Stuarts.19

These are points to which I will return; here it suffices to note that it is impossible, even inaccurate, rigorously to separate “ideals” from socioeconomic conditions in the analysis of cultural phenomena like chivalry or the drama. As Pierre Francastel puts it, “Each society founding an economic and political order also creates a figurative order and simultaneously generates its own institutions, ideas, imagery, and displays.”20

When combined with literary analysis of the characteristics of chivalric romance, Duby’s account of the social conditions generating the formation of knighthood in twelfth-century France suggests intriguing connections among the institutions, ideas, and images that combined to construct the phenomenon of chivalry. In the area around Cluny that Duby has studied, the title “knight” emerged noticeably as a description of the topmost layer of the


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aristocracy around 1100. Approximately one hundred years earlier, however, the knighthood (la chevalerie), composed primarily of descendants of the great lords of the Carolingian period, had been subordinate to the small group that owned fortified castles and dominated the aristocracy. Around 1100, Duby argues, the title “knight” had become “a noun emphasizing the military function and service and was preferred to adjectives indicating the varying lustre of birth.” Throughout the twelfth century the knights emulated the lives of socially superior castle owners, and gradually the lines segregating levels of the aristocracy began to blur. Duby cites several developments that occurred during this process of fusion and have interesting implications for the representation of chivalry in Renaissance drama. It was during this period, for example, that those who bore arms were separated from other men and became an exclusive, homogeneous group. The church hastened this process by spreading an ideology of peace (la paix de Dieu) that justified the knights’ violence and held up the miles Christi for the approval of the entire lay aristocracy. As greater nobles began to behave like knights and to assume the title, the value attached to noble birth increased, fusing with the existing military ethic. The popularization of the idea of noble birth brought a change in the attitude toward kinship in aristocratic society, a shift that strengthened family solidarity within the framework of the lineage. As knights began to leave their masters’ castles and settle their own estates, they adopted the idea of inheritance as a value, and the entire, newly unified aristocracy began to close itself off through the control of marriage.21

Thus, in tracing the origins of chivalry and attempting to account for its enduring prestige, Duby presents a picture of negotiation and reciprocity among levels of the upper classes. Upwardly mobile figures—the knights—provide the established elite—landowners—with a newly sanctioned conception and mode of power. The elite, in turn, expands to include and appropriate the knights, while preserving as well as transmitting its ideals of exclusivity and inherited privilege.

Duby amplifies this picture of an aristocracy redefining and consolidating itself with a more detailed analysis of the mobile mem-

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bers of the knightly class known as “youths.” The term “youth,” he contends, which is frequently found in narratives of the period, could apply to a churchman but was much more often used to designate a warrior at a well-defined stage in his career. No longer a child, the youth had passed through the educational process necessary for a military career and had been received into the company of warriors; specifically, he had taken up arms and been dubbed a knight. What the youth had not yet done was to form his own family and settle his own estate. “In the world of chivalry,” that is, a warrior ceased to be called “youth” when he had established himself, founded a family, and become head of a house: “the stages of ‘youth’ can therefore be defined as the period in a man’s life between his being dubbed knight and his becoming a father.” (As we will see, the heroes of the three plays under consideration in this chapter are all quite pointedly represented as being in precisely this transitional condition.) Duby stresses that, owing to techniques of aristocratic estate management in twelfth-century France, this condition of apprenticeship could last unduly long. Sons of the nobility often became knights between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, when their fathers commonly were about fifty and still firmly in control of their households and property. Regarded as potentially troublesome, sons were encouraged to leave home. Youth, consequently, became a time of impatience, turbulence, and instability. Without fixed positions knights became wanderers, joining together as roving bands of companions in quest of winning glory in tournaments and war.22

Duby and other historians have connected the shape of knightly activity with the fact of the distinct shortage of marriageable daughters. Although this condition can be attributed in part to the church’s complex prohibitions against incest, it also resulted from fears that early marriage would fragment and dissipate a family’s patrimony. Remarrying widowers were rewarded with the most acceptable brides. Sons, particularly younger sons, were often condemned to an indefinitely prolonged youth. Duby argues that knights’ adventures in fact were often quests for wives: “the desire

22. Duby, The Chivalrous Society, p. 113. This discussion of youth is from pp. 112–22. On p. 117 Duby points out that in France, as in England, the rules of primogeniture often left younger sons at sea.
to be married seems to have dominated the behaviour of a ‘youth,’ encouraging him to shine in combat and to parade at sporting events.” 23 This turbulent and unstable group, then, sustained the Crusades and was responsible for tournaments, as well as for some unruly behavior patterns of sexual luxury and concubinage. For the most part, however, the youths were kept in a suspended state of celibacy and danger.

The presence of this group at the heart of aristocratic society, Duby continues, helped to sustain certain chivalric ideas and myths. Youths, for example, constituted the main audience of chivalric epics and romances. Their special situation goes a long way toward explaining the complex of idealized emotions—a suitor seeking recognition and favor at the hands of a remote and (often socially) superior lady and usually meeting frustration—that constitutes courtly love. 24 The phenomenon of courtly love is of course much debated by literary historians. Did it actually exist? Did courtly lovers accept sublimation, rather than hoping to consummate their love? Or was this configuration of passions actually adulterous, as is often assumed? It is more important for this book that such a complex of emotions was projected in the first place and that, in combination with Neoplatonic and especially Petrarchan influences, it was eventually transmitted to Renaissance England. Whether courtly love affairs remained unconsummated, and therefore stressed idealization of women and transcendence of sexual passion, or were adulterous, and so allied with sin, the conception of courtly love dissociates eros from marriage and from the concrete enactment of social relationships as well. Furthermore, the English version is entirely masculine, focusing exclusively on male desire, removing woman from significant action, and limiting her to the static role of the inspirational object of that desire.

23. Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, p. 118; see also pp. 119 and 113, where Duby explains that youth could last as long as twenty-five to thirty years.

In his analysis of the chivalric romance, Eric Auerbach stresses a turning away from the representation of historical and political actuality in the "refinement of the laws of combat, courteous social intercourse, [and] service of women" that comprise the content of the genre. By insisting that in the romance "the feudal ethos serves no political function," Auerbach does not mean that no symbolic relation exists between the political conditions of feudal life and the content of romance. Rather, he views the romance's glorification of knightly adventure as the determined effort of a single class to render itself exclusive and to idealize its activities.\(^\text{25}\) That this imaginative endeavor should involve the extreme delicacy of the courtly romance and the pointed literary evasion of verisimilitude characterizing its construction of a mysterious world of adventure that seems to exist solely for the knight to prove himself worthy becomes more understandable when we recall Duby's picture of knights, particularly youths, as upwardly mobile, socially positionless, sexually frustrated, and perpetually imperiled: "Dedicated to violence, 'youth' was the instrument of aggression and tumult in knightly society, but in consequence it was always in danger: It was aggressive and brutal in habit and it was to have its ranks decimated."\(^\text{26}\) In attempting to refine and "civilize" its conduct, the knightly class that created and responded to courtly romance developed a notion of itself as "a community of the elect, a circle of solidarity . . . set apart from the common herd," whose adventures were distinguished by having an absolute value enhanced precisely by their removal from quotidian social and political concerns.\(^\text{27}\) The evolving notion of courtesy insisted that nobility of birth was not sufficient for the ideal knight, who must also possess valiance, sensitivity, and refined manners. As Auerbach contends, this emphasis on inner values expanded the potential of the ideal of nobility but did not render it less selective: "Courtly culture gives rise to the idea, which long remained a factor of considerable importance in Europe, that nobility, greatness, and intrinsic values have

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27. Auerbach, p. 137.
nothing in common with everyday reality." 28 Thus the chivalric ideal as developed in medieval France, with its stress on absolute merit, accommodated some social mobility while retaining an emphasis on aristocratic superiority, class solidarity, and exclusivity.

Along with other scholars, Auerbach points out that the role of sexual love and women in this process was that of inspiring males to valorous achievement, an idea that originated in the courtly romance. But Robert Hanning stresses the significance of the inclusion of love in the representation of chivalry as the beginning of a conception of struggle between public and private life. According to Hanning, twelfth-century narrative depended on the paradigm of love and prowess reinforcing each other; at the same time, plots were generated originally by construing this relationship as problematic. Defining the representation of chivalry in the romance as "the statement of idealized interaction between impulses toward love and aggression in courtly men and women," Hanning continues: "By investigating, and representing, the tensions between love and prowess, and by focusing on the manner in which knights and ladies become conscious of these tensions, the chivalric romance makes of its adventure plot the story, nay the celebration, of the necessity of men (and women) to face the fact of their private destiny, and to attempt to attain that vision which, born within the recesses of the self, makes of life a process of dynamic self-realization." According to Hanning, there was "an inherent conflict of aim" between the knight’s quest for personal happiness and his role in "a historical or pseudo-historical narrative action that transcends personal careers." Hanning argues that this problem eventually disappeared as the chivalric plot attained full autonomy and became a metaphor for the protagonist’s quest for individual fulfillment. In its fully developed, original literary form, then, the chivalric romance both introduced and resolved a view of the relation between public and private life as problematic. 29

How do the literary and historical formations of chivalry in twelfth-century, feudal France relate to the representation of chivalry and its accompanying sexual ideologies in Renaissance En-

28. Auerbach, p. 139.
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gland? The relationship proposed here is neither direct nor precise, but involves instead an interesting series of overtones and implications. In particular, understanding the originating conditions of the chivalric ethic in its combined sociopolitical and aesthetic manifestations can help to account for the enduring usefulness and prestige of chivalry in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century culture. Especially suggestive for Renaissance England is the coexistence of religious change and social mobility—an expanding and consolidating of the aristocracy—with a pronounced aesthetic effort at refinement and idealization accompanied by an evasion of verisimilitude, and with a significant attempt to resolve the relationship between public and private life that is perceived as problematic. All these are processes that chivalry was originally designed both to articulate and to conceal. This combination of conditions suggests that one of chivalry’s primary ideological functions was to facilitate violent processes of change by idealizing and—potentially—denying them, thus mediating between the shifting cultural formations of the present and the past.

As is well known, the Tudor monarchs encouraged the chivalric style and ethic to maintain unity and order after the religious upheavals of the Reformation and the turbulence created by social mobility in the sixteenth century. Roy Strong has demonstrated in exhaustive and elegant detail the ways in which Elizabeth I in particular brilliantly manipulated chivalry to create an elaborate symbolic code that, by suggesting uninterrupted tradition and (however speciously) lack of self-interested political involvement, invested her monarchy with an aura of stability and legitimacy.30 Splendid chivalric rituals, involving tournaments, tilts, and superb pageantry, were developed to celebrate the queen’s Accession Day and the Order of the Garter, a deliberate revival of a medieval chivalric order that was originally formed to unify and bind an aristocracy to its prince. As Strong shows, the “image of the age” was primarily feudal and medieval. The Elizabethan obsession with heraldry, the “ostentatious displays of coats of arms” that Strong views as “the pedigree mania of the new families,” has been well documented; in addition, major Elizabethan products in architecture and literature displayed a recognizably medieval aesthet-

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ic. Evoking the legends of King Arthur and the mythical origins of Britain in Troy, unprecedented public displays of the monarch employed chivalry as "a vehicle which enhanced the Crown with ancient feudal glory. It was the Queen as the fount of honour made visible to her people." 31

Much as it had in twelfth-century France, the celebration of the warrior-knight as the ideal figure at the center of aristocratic society contained a considerable amount of evasion in its Elizabethan development. Not only did this idealization deny the burgeoning influence of middle-class values and the impact of commercial urban life; its pageants, tilts, and tournaments, nostalgically glorifying individual valor, ignored the changing nature of warfare and the increasing value being placed on administrative and professional rather than military skill. Yet as the unproblematic retention of a Catholic saint (Saint George) at the center of a post-Reformation public ritual indicates, Elizabethan chivalry functioned eclectically, keeping alive a number of possible applications of its imagery. Far from being merely nostalgic, the relative indeterminacy of this "deliberate cult and reinvigoration of archaisms" helped to subdue the trauma of religious and social change. 32 With its focus on the monarch as the "Lord's Anointed," for example, the celebration of Elizabeth as a "sacred Virgin whose reign was ushering in a new golden age of peace and plenty" provided a new and crucial focus for pre-Reformation religious loyalties. 33 The medieval configuration of courtly love, transmitted to England in its Renaissance, Petrarchan version, offered a familiar symbolic structure in which a powerful, remote, chaste, socially superior woman conferred favor on, and withdrew it from, knights who fought to serve her. Elizabeth's brilliant political manipulation of this aesthetic structure facilitated the peoples' acceptance of a female (and unmarried) monarch; further, the entire chivalric configuration of Gloriana and her knights also gave upwardly mobile young men a tactful role in which to seek a position and a usable form in which aggressive ambitions could be delicately pursued. As recent scholarship

31. Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, pp. 164–74, 116, 185. See also Stone, p. 352; and Yates, pp. 90, 108–9, 175.
32. Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, p. 185.
33. Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, p. 114. See also Yates, pp. 29–120.
has demonstrated, the learned symbolic pageants that adorned the chivalric state festivals functioned jointly as entertainments, policy statements, and allegories of personal striving. Thus Elizabethan chivalry partly disguised and partly articulated the changing nature of courtiers, from feuding nobles seeking regional martial dominance to adept politicians functioning as cultural agents of the centralized nation-state.

Although this delicately balanced political aesthetic worked reasonably well until late in Elizabeth's reign, the alliance between art and power shifted noticeably after her death. It was not simply that the elaborate, eclectic, unifying mythology failed to survive the charismatic queen; James himself specifically rejected it. James regarded himself as (and was) a learned prince of peace, taking a dim view of military violence. "And although it be praise-worthy and necessarie in a Prince, to be patiens algoris and aedus, when he shall have adoe with warres upon the fieldes; yet I think it meeter that ye goe both clothed and armed then naked to the battell; except you would make you light for away-running," he advises Prince Henry in Bascilicon Daron. Throughout the sixteenth century the humanist distaste for chivalric violence that James shared had remained largely passive. Indeed, early English humanists managed to absorb and transform the military ideal of the warrior-knight to include the entire governing class; in this revised version, the knight became an educated, nonviolent figure who "should more effectively with his learning and wit assail vice and error." In the

34. See Strong, Cult of Elizabeth; Orgel; Yates; Montrose; and Marotti. See also Leah Marcus, "Shakespeare's Comic Heroines, Elizabeth I, and the Political Uses of Androgyny," in Women in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Literary and Historical Perspectives, ed. Mary Beth Rose (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), pp. 135–53.

35. The Basilicon Doron of King James VI, ed. James Craigie, Scottish Text Society (London: Blackwood, 1944), vol. 1, p. 175. See also Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, pp. 58, 187; and Orgel and Strong, p. 47.

36. Thomas Elyot, quoted in Ferguson, pp. 219–20. The entire quotation is as follows: "A knight hath received that honor not only to defend with the sword Christ's faith and his proper country, against them which impugneth the one or invadeth the other: but also, and that most chiefly, by the mean of his dignity (if that be employed where it should be and esteemed as it ought to be) he should more effectually with his learning and wit assail vice and error, most pernicious enemies to Christian men, having thereunto for his sword
early seventeenth century, however, historians such as Selden, Speed, and Camden began applying a less mythical, more scientific, approach to Tudor chivalric stories, maintaining in their accounts the chivalric ideal of an elect community of loyal nobles, but demythologizing the Tudor fabrications of its origins. Those who sought to revive the glories of Elizabethan chivalric symbolism and all it represented centered their hopes on Henry, Prince of Wales. Yet even in the celebrations created for and by this prince, the knightly ideal became increasingly revised and attenuated. The final blow to the attempted revival was delivered when Henry died in 1612. And James’s notorious sale of knighthoods further damaged the prestige attached to that rank.37

Chivalric symbolism did not, of course, disappear from Jacobean aesthetics and politics. “Everyone in the early seventeenth century was busy calling in the past to redress the balance of the present,” Lawrence Stone explains, in reference to the Renaissance affirmation of medieval ideals.38 But the once inclusive and flexible Elizabethan chivalric mythology increasingly associated itself with political absolutism and became the property of an ever more rigid and exclusive class of aristocrats. In Elizabethan England, for example, the elaborate chivalric festivals displaying the monarch had been designed as spectacles for the public, a unifying political function that was dispersed and augmented by the queen’s famous progresses around the country. In contrast, Jacobean chivalric imagery was increasingly absorbed and transformed by the masque, a creation designed solely for an exclusive courtly audience, seeking images of its own heroism that were more and more isolated from public values and sentiments. In tracing the transformation of Re-

and spear his tongue and pen.” For the humanist attack on chivalry, see Ferguson, pp. 169–73; Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, p. 180; and Norman Council, “Ben Jonson, Inigo Jones, and the Transformation of Tudor Chivalry,” ELH, 47 (1980), 259–75.


38. Stone, p. 751.
naissance chivalric representation, Stephen Orgel has revealed a narrowing, rigidifying process that reached its peak in the inflexible, destructive illusions of Charles I. Thus in Jacobean and Caroline England, the elements of evasion, fantasy, and nostalgia always latent in chivalric mythology became increasingly prominent and increasingly subject to articulate opposition.

These processes are represented in the drama as a transformation and critique of heroism. When the heroism of public action embodied in the figure of the warrior-knight and excluding women as active participants in public life begins to be severely scrutinized as corrupt, inadequate, and reactionary, the drama offers an alternative conception of a heroism that connects public and private life, is symbolized in marriage, and is associated with the future. In Elizabethan drama the heroics of marriage takes comic form as a collective affirmation that assures the future but also deflects it. In contrast, Jacobean drama grants to the heroics of marriage all the prestige of tragic expression by attempting to unite public and private life and to confer on them equal distinction; yet this effort breaks down, and the future recedes into collective mourning for the past, the consolation of tragedy. Although it does not represent a future, tragedy nevertheless demands one by destroying the past. What follows focuses on the ways in which the hybrid genre tragicomedy fulfills this demand; in redefining the relationship between chivalric heroism and sexuality, tragicomedy revises both comedy and tragedy and gives the future a form.

Ever since the publication of the First Shakespeare Folio, determining the genre of Troilus and Cressida (1602) has remained notoriously problematic. As Kenneth Palmer puts it in his recent introduction to the Arden edition, "Troilus is essentially a schematic play, an exercise in dramatic paradigms; it takes any man, or any situation, and looks at either in a variety of ways, each one valid for a specific kind of play. It is this which accounts for much of the diffi-

39. Orgel, passim. See also Strong, Cult of Elizabeth, pp. 16, 114, 185, and Van Dyck, pp. 20, 43, 224, 246; and Orgel and Strong, p. 47.
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culty which we find in characterizing the play: comedy, tragedy, satire, tragic farce and the rest have been propounded and justified; and all are right."  

It is the play's hybrid nature, particularly its unusual mixture of traditional elements, that gives it an interesting relationship to tragicomedy.

However Troilus and Cressida is classified, it comprises a piercing critique of the heroism of action and the chivalric ethos that defines and governs it. With its origins in one of the major myths of Western civilization, its population by the majority of the West's great epic heroes, and its inclusion of both ancient and medieval legends, the play manages to convey a wide-ranging indictment of the childish and willful falseness of human endeavor. It is well known that Troilus and Cressida can be viewed as Shakespeare's bleakest and most pessimistic play. In it he strips the ancient and medieval materials of their glamorous energy, exposing with unusual contempt the military and emotional conflicts involved in the Trojan War as petty, grandiose, and in every way needlessly destructive. The greater part of the play focuses on a hiatus in the fighting, a period of inaction when both the motives for battle and the preoccupations of the protagonists are examined and revealed as trivial, vicious, and deluded. The combined effect is frequently shocking or puzzling; often it is bitterly funny. Apt summary comments within the text range in tone from Agamemnon's pompous, wistful bewilderment—"The ample proposition that hope makes / In all designs begun on earth below / Fails in the promised largeness" (1.3.3-5)—to Thersites' caustic expression of the degraded extension of this logic of failure and disillusionment—"All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to draw emulous factions, and bleed to death upon" (2.3.74-76). The plot is amorphous, varied, and diffuse; it is often difficult to remember precisely what happened and when. 

40. Kenneth Palmer, ed., Troilus and Cressida (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 83, italics his. All quotations from the play, identified in the text by act, scene, and line numbers, are from this edition.


42. Cf. Palmer, pp. 53, 64, 69.
For example, no represented action or emotion escapes the bitter choric commentary either of Pandarus’s debased voyeurism or of Thersites’ devastating, scurrilous wit. One of the play’s other distancing devices is Shakespeare’s frequent insistence on the legendary nature of the characters and their story, a recurring motif that he uses to underscore the futility of their choices and actions, already predetermined and familiar to the audience. Although this self-conscious manipulation of legend adds to the play’s irony, it also gives the action a timeless, inclusive quality that implies a scrutiny of all of Western civilization. Along with the play’s inclusive and generalized preoccupation with the follies and emptiness of Western history, however, the significance of its action is augmented when it is considered as a peculiar product of English Renaissance culture. *Troilus and Cressida* is a very late (1602) Elizabethan play that—unusually, even exceptionally, for Shakespeare—centers entirely on the warrior aristocracy, a focus that is scrutinized from within the group, but is never varied by the representation of the activities or points of view of other classes. As we have seen, class exclusivity is one of the inherent features of the literary and historical formations of the knightly ideal. When we recall that the Elizabethan elite manipulated the aesthetics of chivalry as a means of defining and consolidating the upper (particularly the governing) classes, the attack on chivalric values in *Troilus and Cressida* comes into view as a biting critique of the aristocracy. Specifically, the play presents the Elizabethan aristocracy as a class without a future.

It is interesting, then, to consider *Troilus and Cressida* as a critique of chivalric heroism written at a belated stage in Elizabeth’s reign, when the cult she had inspired was wearing thin. The chivalric myth that Britain was founded by the Trojans, so important to the Tudor political aesthetics of display, becomes the starting point for the play’s attack, making the Trojans the more dedicated protagonists of chivalric values. During the scene (2.2) in which the Trojans debate the motives and purpose for their war against the Greeks, Troilus fully articulates the peculiar idealism of chivalry. In answer to Hector’s protest against the futility of the war, he insists on the absolutism of nobility and honor, which, he declares, exist in spite of reason, possessing an innate value precisely because they are divorced from practical, everyday concerns:
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"Reason and respect / Make livers pale, and lustihood deject / . . . . What's aught but as 'tis valued?" (2.2.49–53). To Hector's argument for upholding the "moral laws / Of nature and of nations" (2.2.185–86), which require the return of Helen to her husband, Troilus opposes what he regards as the greater good of the valorous individual's quest for glory; his opposition articulates the oddly self-absorbed conception of the world as designed especially to provide adventures for knights seeking to prove their worth that is characteristic of the chivalric romance:

Were it not glory that we more affected
Than the performance of our heaving spleens,
I would not wish a drop of Trojan blood
Spent more in her [i.e., Helen's] defence.

But, worthy Hector,
She is a theme of honour and renown,
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
And fame in time to come canonize us.

[2.2.196–203]

Although Trojan idealism (and hence Trojan self-destructiveness) is greater than that of the Greeks, the actions of both sides are defined and governed by the common language of chivalry. Throughout the play Shakespeare equates the absolutism of chivalry, its idealized emphasis on innate nobility and the quest for individual valor, with an evasion of brutal circumstance and a rigid attempt to stop time and arrest the flow of history. As John Bayley has demonstrated, in all of Shakespeare's other plays, time is at most restorative, at least an agent of significance. But the action of Troilus and Cressida, engulfed in an isolated present tense, renders time meaningless: "In the formal impact of Troilus there is neither past nor future: everything takes place in and ends in, the present . . . the absence of value is contained and revealed in the absence of time."43 The play is full of images of inertia (embodied, for example, in the "sleeping giant" Achilles), frustrated actions, and aborted growth. "Checks and disasters / Grow in the veins of

actions highest rear’d / As knots, by the conflux of meeting sap, / Infects the sound pine and diverts his grain / Tortive and errant from his course of growth” (1.3.5–9), Agamemnon ponderously explains.

The connection of military prowess and abstract idealism with narcissistic self-absorption and the rigid resistance of history that defines chivalry in the play is, of course, most fully embodied in Troilus; specifically, it is symbolized by his youth. The play abounds with references to Troilus’s youth, ranging from Pandaralus’s tedious description of his scanty beard (“you know he has not past three or four hairs on his chin . . . why, he is very young” [1.2.113–17]); to Hector’s conception of the dangerous irrationality of his brother’s youth (“Paris and Troilus, you have both said well, / And on the cause and question now in hand / Have gloz’d, but superficially—not much / Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought / Unfit to hear moral philosophy” [2.2.164–68]), as well as its tender vulnerability (“No, faith, young Troilus; doff thy harness, youth / . . . . Let grow thy sinews till their knots be strong / And tempt not yet the brushes of the war” [5.3.31–34]); to Ulysses’ perception of Troilus as “the youngest son of Priam, a true knight; / Not yet mature, yet matchless” (4.5.96–97); to Troilus’s characteristically self-conscious eulogy to his own love (“Never did young man fancy / With so eternal and so fix’d a soul” [5.2.164–65]). Indeed, the combined references to this subject are so insistent, reiterated from so many different points of view, that it is possible to recognize in the combination of idealism, violence, abstraction, self-absorption, and rigidity that constitutes youth a developmental stage in life that has been frozen into a static condition, the defining condition of chivalry in the play. At this point it is helpful to recall Duby’s description of the knightly class of youths as turbulent, transitional figures (“not yet mature yet matchless”) who, looking forward to marriage and fatherhood, were nevertheless often younger sons forced to live in a state of prolonged suspension. While the future remained at best a remote possibility, the knights immersed themselves in the present tense, seeking glory in tournaments and sustaining violent military activity.

In *Troilus and Cressida* the chivalric suspension of the future is clarified in the representation of love and sexuality. For the pur-
poses of this book, the most important characteristics of eros in the play are that it is private, abstract, destructive, static, and conceived entirely in terms of male desire. Secrecy, of course, was one of the main tenets of courtly love; it is a theme much emphasized in the play's main source, the Troilus and Criseyde of Chaucer (c. 1385), often considered the greatest story of courtly love to emerge from medieval Britain. Whereas in Chaucer's version the love story is the central focus of the poem, though, in Shakespeare's play it comes relatively infrequently into view. As Kenneth Palmer demonstrates, the "love plot," although related analogously to the representation of the war, itself occupies only 33 percent of the play. Until Act 4 no one but Pandarus deals with the lovers as lovers; and only after he is betrayed in Act 5 does Troilus publicly acknowledge himself to be Cressida's lover. As is often pointed out, though Troilus is willing to risk destruction to fight for the "theme of honour," he does nothing to save Cressida from the Greeks, immediately resigning himself to the "hateful truth" of her departure (4.4.29) and presenting "nightly visitations" (4.4.72) as the sole possible alternative for the lovers' future.

The divorce of Troilus and Cressida's love from public knowledge and activity—its completely private nature—does not enhance a sense of idealized, rarefied intimacy, as it is meant to do in Chaucer; instead it serves to emphasize the irresolvable conflict that love and sexuality present to the heroism of action. As noted above, the introduction of women and sexual love into the medieval courtly romance provided a motif in which it was possible to reconcile potentially conflicting impulses of eros and aggression, the endeavors of private and public life, by assigning to eros the crucial (if static) role of inspiration. In Chaucer, Troilus's wooing of Criseyde does act as a spur to valorous deeds. Similarly, in

45. See Palmer, p. 39.
Elizabethan drama we have seen the chivalric resolution of potentially conflicting public and private endeavors dramatized as successful in Tamburlaine. But in Troilus and Cressida sexual love is presented as purely destructive of military action and prowess. With the possible exception of Hector, the play’s lovers are notoriously inert. The action begins with Troilus simultaneously unarming, expressing melancholy in love, and conceiving of himself in consequence as effeminate and weak (1.1.9–12). At one point Helen’s role is defined as unarming Hector (3.2.145–50). Paris, “like one besotted on [his] sweet delights” (2.2.144), selfishly avoids going to the battle he created because “my Nell would not have it so” (3.2.133). And in one of the play’s surprising twists, it is revealed that Achilles is refraining from battle less out of petty pride, as the text deceptively reiterates, than out of love for one of Priam’s daughters. In the revelation of Achilles’ love, Ulysses makes firm and explicit the irreconcilable opposition between eros and action, private and public concerns, along with the allegedly greater value of the latter terms:

Achill. Of this my privacy
I have strong reasons.

Ulyss. But ’gainst your privacy
The reasons are more potent and heroical.

That women and eros are depicted as subversive of public action does not score a point for misogyny in the play, nor does it demonstrate the superiority of military heroism. Instead, these representations serve to underscore the delusions of chivalry by emphasizing the evasive emptiness of its predominant sexual ideology, in which women, idealized as themes of honor and renown, in fact play at best a peripheral and at worst an antagonistic role in the chivalric conception of glorious male action. Along with Troilus, two warriors, Aeneas and Agamemnon, explicitly define woman’s role as the inspiration and source of male action, but neither of them has anything to do with women in the play, and Agamemnon’s pompous pieties about the causal relation of love and war are formulaic and absurd: “We are soldiers, / And may that soldier a mere recreant prove / That means not, hath not, or is not in love” (1.3.285–87).
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What makes Agamemnon’s remarks absurd is their lack of relation to circumstantial reality. But Troilus, who is in fact in love, displays the same quality of evasive abstraction in his response to Cressida. As is often observed, he is much more interested in the subtle movements of his own will and desire than he is in the actual Cressida, whom he regards as an empty vessel waiting to contain his love. “Sleep kill those pretty eyes, / And give as soft attachment to thy senses / As infants empty of all thought” (4.2.4–6), he begs. Troilus responds to Cressida’s departure with entranced, self-pitying inertia, concentrating not on her welfare, but on the refinement of his own desire. “Cressid, I love thee in so strain’d a purity / That the blest gods, as angry with my fancy, / More bright in zeal than the devotion which / Cold lips blow to their deities, take thee from me” (4.4.23–26), he rhapsodizes, letting her go.

The brilliance of Shakespeare’s conception of Cressida is that she is construed, and construes herself, entirely in terms of male desire. Gradually she relinquishes any grasp of an existence separate from men’s need of her, which she correctly perceives to be hopeless. Her greatest bewilderment occurs when she attempts to declare the independence of her feelings for Troilus by separating them from his desire for her. As she recognizes in this scene of her confusion, she has at most “a kind of self,” and Troilus is not much interested in her feelings apart from their response to his.48 Accordingly, Cressida’s alienation is clarified when, attempting to adjust her actions to the subtle momentum of male desire, she considers herself abstractly, as a “thing”:

48. Cf. Ornstein; and Gayle Greene, “Shakespeare’s Cressida: ‘A Kind of Self,’” in The Woman’s Part, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 133–49. The most subtle and perceptive study of Cressida’s position in the play that I have come across is Janet Adelman, “‘This Is and Is Not Cressid’: The Characterization of Cressida,” in The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 119–41. About Cressida’s complete identification with male desire, Adelman comments (pp. 124, 136), “In the context created both by her own fears and by Troilus’ expectations, there is no true choice. She reestablishes her dignity both for herself and for Troilus by retreating from self-revelation and from love. . . . For ultimately the necessities of Troilus’ character, rather than of Cressida’s, require her betrayal of him. Cressida’s betrayal in effect allows
Yet hold I off. Women are angels, wooing:
Things won are done; joy’s soul lies in the doing.
That she below’d knows naught that knows not this:
Men prize the thing ungain’d more than it is. . . .
Therefore this maxim out of love I teach:
“Achievement is command; ungain’d, beseech.”

[1.2.291–98]

Whose joy does Cressida refer to? Certainly not her own: her knowing maxims articulate a determination to conceal and nullify her own desires. The process is successful; her definition of herself as a male achievement at the end of this speech is echoed by Troilus’s instantaneous response to the news that Cressida must leave Troy: “How my achievements mock me!” (4.2.71). The construction of Troilus and Cressida’s attachment, then, depends entirely upon the fact that Cressida and her love exist only in the terms generated by male desire. Given these conditions, Cressida’s surrender to another man’s needs when she is separated from Troilus is inevitable, a necessary preservation of her identity. That Troilus dimly recognizes and partially accepts these conditions from the start is indicated by his dread of being overwhelmed by love (“I do fear besides / that I shall lose distinction in my joys” [3.2.24–25]), by his association of love with death (3.2.20), and by his overriding fear—indeed, it could be argued, his assumption—that Cressida will betray him (4.4.5–95). As we have seen throughout this book, in its origins in male subjectivity and its divorce from circumstantial reality, the abstract idealization of women coexists inevitably with the possibility of their degradation. What’s aught but as ’tis valued? One man’s object of strain’d purity will be another’s daughter of the game. When Diomedes

Troilus to blench and still stand firm by honor; it serves to free him from a union ambivalently desired while allowing him to continue to think of himself as the embodiment of truth.” As Adelman makes clear (pp. 137, 140), Shakespeare is far from “exposing” these emotions, which are presented as sympathetic, “part of the play’s implicit identification with Troilus’ fantasy. . . . For the effort to keep Troilus pure seems to me finally evidence of Shakespeare’s failure to dissociate himself from the fantasies explored in the creation of Troilus; and insofar as the play consequently embodies Troilus’ fantasies, Cressida as a whole character must be sacrificed.”

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speaks of prizing Cressida at her own worth, as though she were an independent entity, he is, of course, describing an impossibility (4.5.131–32). Troilus makes this fact clear when he is finally unable to assign to Cressida a comprehensible identity separate from his own desire: “This is, and is not, Cressid” (5.2.145).49

In terms of dramatic structure, neither Troilus’s love nor Cressida’s betrayal generates actions or consequences: each is devoid of suspense, predictable. In choosing to represent this aspect of the Trojan story, Shakespeare is interested in redefining the origins and nature of the chivalric legend, not in refashioning its well-known outcome. Another way to say the same thing is that chivalric idealism and sexuality are depicted as static and, perceived as such, preclude dramatic development. As is often argued, the lovers’ interaction, epitomized in their oddly self-conscious vows (3.2), centers on an evasion of time and change. That Troilus does not die in the play denies the audience the unifying tragic consolation of witnessing a completed life cycle and underscores the state of suspension and inertia that characterizes the play and is symbolized in the hero’s perpetual youth. Specifically, the destructive quality of chivalric idealism is perceived as a willful resistance to history, an inability to envision alternatives, to imagine and pursue the future.

What are the unwisely rejected alternatives to chivalry suggested in the play? Ulysses seems at first to be the one dynamic character, willing to move, plan, and engage actively with a possible future. Yet Ulysses also proves to have an insufficient grasp of the real. His witty and observant policies are as ineffectual as Troilus’s love; and his eloquent remarks about time, despite their air of knowledge and experience, articulate not a committed acceptance of the processes of history, but a disillusioned exposé of human weakness, couched in a romantic and cynical portrayal of shallowness, fickleness, and disloyalty to the past.50

The only concept of a workable future in fact appears as a mere suggestion in the play’s brief representation of women and mar-


50. This tone characterizes both of Ulysses’ famous speeches, particularly his speech on time (3.3.145–90).
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riage. As we have seen, both Cressida and Helen are static, incapable of generating action; functioning solely as objects of the male quest for glory, they obediently fulfill the role predetermined for them by the dualistic, chivalric sexual system in which they are inscribed. In contrast, Cassandra, Andromache, and Hecuba do initiate independent action, pointedly opposing themselves to the chivalric ethic. Like Helen and Cressida, Andromache, Hecuba, and Cassandra are antagonistic to military action; they are clearly depicted not as depleting the men they love, however, but as trying to keep them alive. Though the prophet Cassandra's legendary doom is to be ignored, the Trojan queen Hecuba, who does not even appear in the play, manages to outwit Ulysses by keeping the greatest Greek hero, Achilles, from battle until chance (i.e., Patroclus's death) renders her scheme ineffectual.

Interestingly, whereas Helen is associated with rape and adultery and Cressida with extramarital liaison, both Hecuba and Andromache are loyal wives. Hector elaborates the association of marriage with the survival and perpetuation of society in the Trojan debate scene, when he opposes Troilus's chivalry as immoral and irrational:

Nature craves
All dues be render'd to their owners: now
What nearer debt in all humanity
Than wife is to the husband? If this law
Of nature be corrupted through affection,
And that great minds, of partial indulgence,
To their benumbed wills, resist the same,
There is a law in each well-order'd nation
To curb those ranging appetites that are
Most disobedient and refractory.
If Helen then be wife to Sparta's king,
As it is known she is, these moral laws
Of nature and of nations speak aloud
To have her back return'd: thus to persist
In doing wrong extenuates not wrong,
But makes it much more heavy.

[2.2.174–89]

Nevertheless, in the brief glimpses we are granted of Hector as a husband, his attitude toward marriage is dismissive and con-
temptuous. We learn at the beginning of the play that “he chid Andromache” (1.2.6), and although this action is clearly unusual, the one scene in which Hector appears with his wife shows him rudely rebuking her efforts to prevent his death (5.3). Furthermore, Hector almost instantaneously rejects the priority he himself places on marriage and survival in favor of the chivalric quest. His vision of marriage as the symbol of an ordered society is merely suggested, rather than developed: it is not the emotional focus of the play. The pervasive view of sexuality is instead articulated by Troilus in his argument to continue the war:

I take today a wife, and my election
Is led on in the conduct of my will:
My will enkindled by mine eyes and ears,
Two traded pilots ’twixt the dangerous shores
Of will and judgement—how may I avoid,
Although my will distaste what it elected,
The wife I choose? . . .
We turn not back the silks upon the merchant
When we have soil’d them, nor the remainder viands
We do not throw in unrespective sieve
Because we now are full.

[2.2.62–71]

As has been pointed out, Troilus’s reasoning here is self-contradictory and muddled. More important for these purposes, though, Troilus equates sexuality with soilure, and his conception of a surviving marriage is one of inevitable corruption, regret, and ennui. Insofar as the future in Troilus and Cressida is suggested, then, it is associated with marriage; but that future is belittled, rejected, and, like Andromache, shunted aside. The degraded extension of this logic of intransigence is given its most vivid expression by Thersites, who, defining Menelaus as the central figure of Greek identity, speculates on the Greek inability not only to enact, but even to imagine alternatives to the dishonored condition of the humiliated cuckold: “To what form but that he is, should wit larded with malice and malice forced with wit turn him to? To an ass were nothing: he is both ass and ox; to an ox were nothing: he is both ox and ass. To be a dog, a mule, a cat, a fitchook, a toad, a lizard, an owl, a puttock, or a herring without a roe, I would not
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care; but to be Menelaus I would conspire against destiny. Ask me not what I would be, if I were not Thersites” (5.1.56–64).

The resolute denial of the possibilities of metamorphosis or transformation expressed in Thersites’ speech makes explicit the play’s direct refutation of the Utopian values of romance. That chivalric ideals—Helen’s inspiration, Cressida’s fidelity, Troilus’s Hector’s, and Achilles’ honor—should be revealed as their opposites implies the lost value of those ideals and gives the play its special bitterness. Mark Rose has argued that “Shakespeare, who came to maturity in the 1580s at the height of the Elizabethan revival of chivalry, was not ready to write anti-romances like Don Quixote or The Knight of the Burning Pestle. He was . . . too deeply possessed by the absolute world of fidelity. He could write about the death of chivalry or the corruption of chivalry but he could not distance himself sufficiently from its imaginative claims to burlesque it.”51 As we have seen, the fundamental characteristic of the pessimism of Troilus and Cressida is depicted as the lack of a future. The legacy of the Trojans to their British descendants is disease: as Troilus puts it, “there is no more to say” (5.10.22). The implicit critique of Elizabethan society suggests that the existing aristocratic conceptions of heroism are bankrupt, leaving the elite without adequate models of behavior. Chivalry has lost its ability to mediate and to facilitate cultural change.

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Jacobean tragicomedy significantly revises these materials. In his discussion of the relation among ideology, genre, and cultural change, Jameson points out that “traditional generic systems—tragedy and comedy, for instance, or lyric/epic/drama—which in earlier social formations have their own objectivity and constitute something like a formal environment or historical situation into which the individual work must emerge and against which it must define itself, are for the contemporary critic the occasion for the

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stimulation of essentially differential perceptions. On such occasions, even if the critic ‘classes’ the text as a whole in this or that traditional genus . . . the thrust of such a decision is to define the specificity of this text and mode against the other genre, now grasped in dialectical opposition to it.” Thus even a text as difficult to classify as Troilus and Cressida can be grasped in terms of its direct and explicit rejection of the traditional materials of romance. But in tragicomedy the focus shifts, and the dialectical process Jameson describes occurs not only with the hindsight of critical analysis, but also, to a certain extent, within the play itself. Relying entirely on traditional materials, tragicomedy consciously revises their emphases so as to demystify, without necessarily rejecting, the terms of legitimate authority and recognized, shared cultural values that make these materials legible and articulate. Jameson describes the relationship between genre and what he calls the “historical moment” of a literary text as being “understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available before, and to open up determinate new ones, which may or may not ever be realized in artistic practice.”52 In this regard the unconventionality of Troilus and Cressida can be discerned as the play’s decisive shutting off of new possibilities, specifically, its insistence on portraying chivalry as an inescapable cultural dead end. Tragicomedy, which also deflates chivalry, represents it in contrast as decidedly less powerful; further, in attempting to negotiate the present and the past by focusing on the chivalric ethos, tragicomedy manages to suggest alternative modes of conduct and conceptualization for the future.

The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613) presents a particularly interesting example of this process. Like Troilus and Cressida, The Two Noble Kinsmen is taken from Chaucer; it is a dramatization of The Knight’s Tale. Something of the play’s peculiar combination of deference and irreverence toward its medieval and classical materials is immediately evident in the Prologue’s impertinent tribute to Chaucer:

Chaucer, of all admired, the story gives:  
There constant to eternity it lives.  
If we let fall the nobleness of this,

And the first sound this child hear be a hiss,
How will it shake the bones of that good man,
And make him cry from under ground, "O fan
From me the witless chaff of such a writer
That blasts my bays, and my famed work makes lighter
Than Robin Hood!"

[Prologue, ll. 13–21]53

The mixture of tones in the Prologue, with its barely concealed intent to deflate the past, could, of course, be attributed to the joint authorship of Shakespeare and Fletcher. Though evidence about the authorship of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* remains conflicting and inconclusive, scholars are nearly unanimous in discerning two distinct styles in the play, generally granting Fletcher the lion’s share and attributing the first act and large parts of the last, with a few scenes in the middle, to Shakespeare.54 Clifford Leech argues, for example, that the project was initiated by Shakespeare and brought to completion by Fletcher. Detecting the predominant presence of “Fletcher’s deflating hand,” Leech sees the younger playwright’s attitude toward the elder as one of distinct irreverence.55 Leech’s case is extremely convincing, yet the mixed, uncertain evidence about the play’s authorship renders relatively useless any effort to understand it in terms of authorial intent. If we view tragicomedy instead as both product and agent of an ongoing process of cultural transformation, we can better understand the odd juxtaposition of

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55. Leech, pp. xxiv, xxxii of his edition of the play.
generic discourses, mixture of tones, and unresolved sexual and moral issues that characterize *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, not only as a representation of the inadequacy of the past, but also as an attempt to find accurate terms in which the future can be defined and appropriated.

Once again this process is discernible in the play’s representation of love and sexuality. Like that of *Troilus and Cressida*, the action of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is constructed in the specifically chivalric terms of the heroism of action. The major authority figure, the Athenian duke Theseus, and the heroes of the play, the Theban cousins Palamon and Arcite, are presented as warrior-knights; and the trappings of chivalry—the duels, armor, courtesy, and tournaments, along with the absolutist code of honor—constitute the bulk of the play’s material and dominate its tone.

As I have tried to show, in the dramatization of chivalric stories, women and eros, though often symbolically important, play peripheral and static roles. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, although the love story is analogous to the war plot, it occupies the stage for only about one-third of the time. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, however, love and sexuality become not simply the predominant, but the exclusive focus of the play. The story centers on the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite, who, having been captured and jailed by Theseus after his triumph over the Theban ruler, Creon, fall in love simultaneously with Theseus’s sister-in-law, Emilia, whom they spot from the window of their prison cell. This event marks the beginning of the rivalry that divides the previously inseparable pair of loving cousins into jealous and hostile competitors, whose newly, and sexually, inspired hatred becomes the major issue needing resolution in the play.

When sexual love becomes the central subject of an English Renaissance comedy or tragedy, it is conceived in the complex terms of the heroics of marriage and is usually opposed to a dualistic mentality that either idealizes or degrades women and eros and, in chivalric stories, is often associated with some version of courtly (or Petrarchan) love. In the first act of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, these traditional oppositions immediately take shape. The play begins with an elaborate ceremonial, the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, which is quickly interrupted by three queens, begging Theseus temporarily to abandon his wedding and to wage a sur-
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prise attack against the evil Theban ruler, Creon, who refuses to bury their husbands, his defeated enemies. In protesting the urgency of their suit, the queens are particularly insistent that Theseus undertake his quest in their behalf before consummating his marriage. Why? Eros, they claim, will utterly overwhelm his capacity to reason and subvert his ability to act:

When her arms,
Able to lock Jove from a synod, shall
By warranting moonlight corslet thee, O when
Her twining cherries shall their sweetness fall
Upon thy tasteful lips, what wilt thou think
Of rotten kings or blubbered queens, what care
For what thou feel'st not, what thou feel'st being able
To make Mars spurn his drum? O if thou couch
But one night with her, every hour in't will
Take hostage of thee for a hundred, and
Thou shalt remember nothing more than what
That banquet bids thee to.

[1.1.174–85]

The queens equate marriage with sex and assume that consummated sexual love inevitably will subvert heroism. Theseus refuses to delay his wedding, couching his opposition to the queens' reasoning specifically in the epic, adventurous terms of the heroics of marriage. His wedding becomes "this grand act of our life, this daring deed / Of fate in wedlock"; marriage is "a service whereto I am going / Greater than any was; it more imports me / than all the actions that I have foregone / Or futurely can cope" (1.1.163–64, 170–73).

These traditionally competing views of sexuality dominate the first scene of the play and seem to indicate familiar terms in which the dramatic conflict will be constructed. As a pointed deviation from The Knight's Tale, in which a bevy of queens confronts Theseus after his marriage to Hippolyta has taken place, the interrupted wedding underscores the motif of sexual debate. Yet despite the explicitness, immediacy, and care with which the terms of erotic conflict are established, they are quickly and surprisingly dismantled. Having elegantly elaborated the heroics of marriage, Theseus promptly abandons it, suddenly agreeing after all to
postpone his wedding and rushing off to defend the queens by subduing the evil Creon. As a result, the heroics of marriage is reduced with startling immediacy to a tenuous suggestion that never recurs in the play. Still more surprisingly, the rationale for Theseus’s sudden change of heart proves elusive: the play provides no evidence to support the queens’ fears that eros will deplete the male potential for heroic action. Instead the queens’ insistence on an inevitable conflict between public and private life rapidly proves as irrelevant and unreal as the heroics of marriage. The queens disappear from the play at the end of the first act, when the central conflict is revealed as constructed instead between erotic love and friendship. As it turns out, then, the play will not center on an antagonism between public and private life or on an attempt to link the two; it will focus exclusively on the conflicts of private life, conceived as a separate domain.

Thus neither the heroics of marriage nor the dualistic sexual sensibility appropriately defines the situation of the leading protagonists of The Two Noble Kinsmen. Nonetheless, that situation is constructed entirely in the terms of these customary Renaissance sexual sensibilities; no new, more relevant terms are introduced. The effect is one of odd and pointed dislocation. Defined, on the one hand, in the chivalric terms of the heroism of action, the plot concentrates exclusively on private life, which usually receives at best peripheral attention in the representations of this mode; on the other hand, though a serious focus on private life is characteristic of the heroics of marriage, the attempt to construct marriage as an epic adventure and to confer on it equal distinction with public service, so crucial to that ideology, is reduced to virtual insignificance, adding little to the tone of the play.

56. If anything, the play proves the queens’ fears false. The only sexual relationship actually consummated in the main plot is that of Theseus and Hippolyta, and their marriage and love are shown to be happy (e.g., 3.6.200–201). Hippolyta’s response to the queens’ reasoning about her sexual powers is to tell Theseus she is “much unlike I You should be so transported” (1.1.185–86). If, however, the audience can be assumed to be aware of Theseus’s legendary sexual history, then an ironic light is cast on the “happiness” of the pair. For a fascinating discussion of Renaissance versions of Theseus’s many exploits, see D’Orsay W. Pearson, “‘Unkinde’ Theseus: A Study in Renaissance Mythography,” English Literary Renaissance, 4 (1974), 276–98.
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These conceptual dislocations take a variety of concrete forms. Particularly striking are the truncated or deflected ceremonies in the play. Eugene Waith has argued that although the depiction of spectacular ceremony, usually demonstrating “the awesome difference between human and divine intrigue,” characterizes the early staging of chivalric romance in Renaissance England, by the first decade of the seventeenth century “the material and techniques of the early dramatized romances had become old-fashioned if not downright ludicrous.”57 Shakespeare’s deliberate introduction of archaic ceremonies into his final romances constitutes a boldly self-conscious manipulation of anachronistic material designed to enhance the effects of wonder and miraculous restoration. The Two Noble Kinsmen similarly abounds with romantic and chivalric ceremonies: Theseus’s wedding, the pleading queens, the burial of the queens’ husbands, May Day games, a stylized duel between Palamon and Arcite, a series of three spectacular theophanies in Act 5, a climactic tournament. Yet the majority of these displays either are disrupted or their focus is deflected. Theseus and Hippolyta’s wedding, which begins the play with such splendor, is interrupted and, receiving no further attention, eventually takes place without comment offstage. While a series of May Day games and a banquet occur, once again, offstage, the attention of the audience is riveted instead on what is being defined by representation as the far more urgent private quarrel between the two kinsmen, who meet in the woods and resolve to determine their destinies once and for all in a duel. But the fatal duel is interrupted by Theseus, who, discovering that the banished Arcite has violated his decree by remaining in Athens and that Palamon has escaped jail, rashly orders that they shall both die. Theseus eventually gives way to the persuasion of his royal entourage and alters his decree to demand instead a decisive, climactic tournament: the winner will marry Emilia; the loser will be executed. In one of the play’s most pronounced dislocations, the tournament takes place offstage while the action focuses instead on the lonely figure of Emilia, who cannot bring herself to witness the determination of her fate. After

Arcite wins the tournament, Palamon and his brave company are taken, onstage, to their execution. But this solemn moment is interrupted when Arcite falls from a horse and dies, and Palamon is summoned to marry Emilia after all.

Far from creating a sense of wonder, the revelation of the capricious power or benevolence of the gods, these anachronistically represented, truncated ceremonies and deflected foci emphasize instead a confusion about the actual sources of conflict in the play, as well as the lack of appropriate terms to define what those conflicts might be. Very few of the characters can decide what is important to them. As we have seen, Theseus is immediately persuaded to alter his insistence that his wedding will go forward despite the pleading queens. While Theseus’s sudden abandonment of the heroics of marriage seems to reinforce the queens’ conception of an inevitable antagonism between public and private life, this conception, like Creon’s evil, is shortly revealed to have very little to do with the major conflicts in the play. A similar movement occurs when we first meet Palamon and Arcite in Thebes, agonizing over Creon’s evil and determining to escape its consequences (“How dangerous if we will keep our honors / It is for our residing, where every evil / Hath a good color, where every seeming good’s / A certain evil” [1.2.37–40]). Yet the kinsmen’s potential participation in public corruption also turns out to have no importance. This pattern of red herrings is reiterated when, jailed in Athens, the kinsmen staunchly espouse stoicism, only to be immediately drawn to the world outside their cell in the figure of Emilia picking flowers below them. These representations demonstrate not the arbitrariness of the gods, but the characters’ unwillingness or inability to commit themselves, the lack of firm ground on which decisions can be made and a future formulated. The emphasis is striking when perceived in contrast to Troilus and Cressida, where action is erroneously but firmly grounded, characterized by its rigid wrongness: Troilus and Hector adhere disastrously to past vows. In contrast, Palamon and Arcite, swearing to leave Thebes, in the next moment respond instantly, mechanically, to the battlecall to defend her. Later, swearing eternal friendship, they spot Emilia in mid oath and become enemies immediately. These ironies are too deliberately placed to allow any respect for their dignities. The authority of
Theseus is similarly undercut. Often his orders are simply ignored. He usually changes his mind anyway, and when he does make it up, his decisions appear pointlessly cruel. His command that one of the kinsmen must die in their struggle for Emilia, for example, is an invention of the playwrights'; the pointed deviation from Chaucer merely emphasizes the harsh, arbitrary, human irrationality of the monarch's decree.

The anachronistic representation of spectacular ceremonies that, failing to create or reveal wonder, are interrupted by more urgent actions; the juxtaposition of conflicting sexual ideologies that are introduced and then discarded; the depiction of antagonisms and resolutions that are defined and then dismissed as irrelevant—the play's restless, groping disruption of traditional associations is epitomized in its treatment of sexual love. As we have seen, the detailed concentration on sexual love in a dramatized chivalric story, where eros is usually assigned the symbolic, static, and largely invisible role of inspiration for heroic action, is itself a dislocation. Although subjecting it to irony, The Two Noble Kinsmen retains the courtly love configuration of the remote, superior lady and her frustrated suitors, along with the polarizing combination of sexual sublimation and sexual disgust that traditionally accompanies that syndrome. When Palamon first spots Emilia he declares, "Behold, and wonder. / By heaven, she is a goddess," adding, "Do reverence / She is a goddess, Arcite" (2.1.192-95); Arcite immediately points out an alternative approach: "I will not [love her] as you do, to worship her, / As she is heavenly and a blessed goddess: / I love her as a woman, to enjoy her" (2.1.222-24). Yet for Palamon the

58. The exchange between Theseus and Emilia in 5.3.28–34, when he commands her to view the tournament and she refuses to go, is typical:

_Hipp._ You must go.
_Emil._ In faith, I will not.
_Thes._ Why, the knights must kindle
Their valor at your eye. Know of this war
You are the treasure, and must needs be by
To give the service pay.

*Emil._ Sir, pardon me,
The title of a kingdom may be tried
Out of itself.
_Thes._ Well, well, then, at your pleasure.
only alternative to the idealization (i.e., sublimation) of sexual love is loathing and disgust. Recognizing himself as a soldier of Venus, he offers an invocation to the goddess that articulates a terrible tribute to the destructive power of eros, echoing that of the queens. But where the queens’ distrust of consummated sexual love involves a fear of its subversion of public action, Palamon’s erotic nausea is pristine, rooted in a straightforward aversion to what he perceives as the humiliating, persistent, anarchic power of the sexual act. Addressing Venus before his final combat with Arcite, he overlooks the great lovers of history and myth, dwelling instead on adulterers, boasters (“large confessors”), a “cripple [flourishing] with his crutch,” the “polléd bachelor,” and

A man

Of eighty winters . . . who
A lass of fourteen bridged. Twas thy power
To put life into dust: the aged cramp
Had screwed his square foot round,
The gout had knit his fingers into knots,
Torturing convulsions from his globy eyes
Had almost drawn their spheres, that what was life
In him seemed torture.

[5.1.107–15]

The intensity of Palamon’s aversion to eros would be extraordinary in any case, but its context makes it astonishing. Palamon is on the verge of risking his own life and the lives of his fellow knights in order to win the woman he loves. Interestingly, marrying Emilia is never an explicit concern of the kinsmen, who quarrel only over the right to love her.⁵⁹ This situation results partially from the kinsmens’ imprisonment and consequent lack of options; more to the point, however, is the irrelevance of marriage to courtly love. That marriage is never an issue in Troilus and Cressida has nothing to do with the desire or personality of either Troilus or Cressida; instead it is a condition of the chivalric sexual system in which they are inscribed.⁶⁰ In The Two Noble Kinsmen Theseus

⁵⁹. See, e.g., 2.1.215–79.
forces marriage on the cousins, who, entirely preoccupied with their own desires, clearly consider Emilia’s feelings irrelevant. After defeating Palamon in the competition for Emilia’s hand, Arcite shows little eagerness for victory, remarking bitterly, “Emily, / To buy you I have lost what’s dearest to me / Save what is bought” (5.3.111–13). When Arcite falls off a horse and dies, Palamon wins Emilia after all, but he takes small joy in his triumph. “That we should things desire which do cost us / The loss of our desire! That nought could buy / Dear love but loss of dear love!” (5.4.109–11), he exclaims.

That the kinsmen should risk their lives for Emilia while taking no notice whatsoever of her feelings, or, indeed, of her, recalls the fact that chivalric love is construed exclusively in the terms of male desire. Yet once again the play presents a dislocation, a disruption of traditional sexual logic. The chivalric ethos that inscribes the protagonists demands that the lady be superior, remote, and static, a treasured object of desire. Thus, on one level, Emilia occupies the same structural position as Cressida; she is passively swept up into the conflict engendered by male desire and forced to occupy a place within it. Indeed, she frequently underscores her own helplessness, which she tends to equate with innocence. “I am guiltless of election” (5.1.154), she assures herself, insisting, in one of the play’s finest lines, “I am bride-habited, / But maiden-hearted” (5.1.150–51). On the other hand, the play reveals that the state of Emilia’s mind and heart is considerably more complex than this elegant duality will allow. It is another false formulation. Emilia plays a frequent and decisive role in swaying Theseus; and, like the kinsmen, she expresses a sense of conflict between heterosexual love and same-sex friendship (see 1.3.55–66).

Emilia is also given several soliloquies, in which she reveals her struggle to define her own role in the kinsmen’s lethal courtship. While the climactic tournament between the cousins takes place offstage, audience attention is riveted on Emilia’s conflict between physical desire for either or both of the kinsmen and terror that she will be responsible for one of their deaths: “Arcite may win me /
And yet Palamon wound Arcite to / The spoiling of his figure. O what pity / Enough for such a chance? If I were by, / I might do hurt” (5.3.57–61). Unlike Cressida, then, Emilia plays a prominent role as an independent actor in the play and is more often the subject of representation. Is she merely a passive victim in regard to choosing a mate, or is she unwilling to assert her prerogative as a subject and make a choice? The play cannot decide; nor can it come up with satisfactorily flexible terms that would define Emilia as both subject and object. Most important for these purposes is the fact that the play inscribes her in a chivalric sexual system that denies her status as an independent actor and then subverts that system by insistently scrutinizing her choices and desires. The resulting effect is again one of The Two Noble Kinsmen groping for new terms in which to define conflicts—trying, in effect, to change the subject.

The dislocations of the traditional emphases of chivalric sexuality transform idealistic lovers and their treasured object of desire and source of inspiration into three ambivalent narcissists, for whom love becomes an isolated, compulsive experience. “I must love and will,” insists Palamon (3.6.262); Arcite remarks sadly, “And I could wish I had not said I loved her, / Though I had died. But loving such a lady / And justifying my love, I must not fly from’t” (3.6.40–42); and Emilia hopes at one point that “If well inspired, this battle shall confound / Both these brave knights, and I a virgin flow’r / Must grow alone, unplucked” (5.1.166–68). The play’s deflected focus on Emilia’s struggles, along with the representation of the kinsmens’ self-absorption, suggests that a newly conceived subject would center not on a conflict between public and private life, between society and the individual, or between marriage and virginity, but on desire in conflict with itself. Such a conception is, of course, individualistic and can be elaborated in psychological terms. Indeed, the best studies of the play have relied on the psychoanalytic conception of individual development to argue, as Philip Edwards does, that The Two Noble Kinsmen concerns the “movement from one state to the next, the unavoidable process of [i.e., individual] growth,” a process that the characters view with melancholy and alarm.61 Clifford Leech adds that “the

Fletcherian drama is a drama about men’s refusal to live as individuals.”62

There is much in the play to sustain these readings. In contrast to Troilus and Cressida, in which the attack on chivalry articulates a critique of an entire civilization, The Two Noble Kinsmen tests chivalric idealism against private (primarily sexual) experience alone. In Troilus the suspended condition of the hero’s youth comes to symbolize a society without a future, but in the later play the heroes’ insistence on their youth can be perceived in psychological terms as individuals’ unnatural recoil from experience and, specifically, from sexual love. “Dear Palamon, dearer in love than blood / And our prime cousin, yet unhardened in / The crimes of nature, let us leave the city / Thebes, and the temptings in’t, before we further / Sully our gloss of youth,” urges Arcite (1.2.1–5); when imprisoned later, he again expresses the desire to escape the corruption of adult life, this time explicitly associating his notion of inevitable contamination with sex: “Let’s think this prison holy sanctuary, / To keep us from corruption of worse men. / We are young and yet desire the ways of honor / That liberty and conversation, / The poison of pure spirits, might like women / Woo us to wander from” (2.1.130–35). When Emilia expresses a nostalgia for her childhood, whose innocence she sees as embodied in a girlhood friendship that she insists “may be / More than in sex individual” (1.3.81–82), Hippolyta points explicitly to an element of perversity in her sister’s response: “Now alack, weak sister, / I must no more believe thee in this point, / . . . than I will trust a sickly appetite / That loathes even as it longs” (1.3.86–90). As Hippolyta’s remark implies, Emilia’s negative view of heterosexuality tends to be dissociated, like Palamon’s, from any motivation or context but itself; what Theodore Spencer observes of the kinsmens’ attitude toward Thebes applies equally to all three of the protagonists’ attitudes toward eros: “Palamon and Arcite look back in disgust at Thebes before we have been given any satisfactory reason for their disgust.”63 Thus dissociated, their troubled equation of their youth with a sexual innocence they are reluctant to relinquish begins to seem less like the pathetic or awesome

suffering of the victims of Fate and more like anxiety, the claustrophobic suffering of neurosis. A feeling of confinement results from the refusal to grow.

There is, then, powerful evidence to support a view of the play and its protagonists as conceived in individualistic and psychological terms; to see the play, that is, as a representation of neurotic suffering. As we have seen, Palamon summarizes his experience with an eloquent emphasis on the mixed nature of desire: “That we should things desire which do cost us / The loss of our desire! / That nought could buy / Dear love but loss of dear love!” This conception of the play can be developed further by looking at the subplot of the Jailer’s Daughter. “Subplot” is actually a misleading term, for although this story serves the traditional function of commenting on, mocking, and amplifying the main plot, it also steals the show. As the production history of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* makes clear, the Jailer’s Daughter is the most compelling part in the play.  

Funny, affectionate, and courageous, this young woman, although already engaged to be married, falls in love with Palamon while he is in jail and, out of both pity and a desire to win his love, takes the huge risk of releasing him from prison. Following him into the woods and losing her way at night, she goes mad with a combination of frustrated desire and fear that her father will be punished for Palamon’s escape. Like the major protagonists, then, the Jailer’s Daughter is caught in an unresolved dilemma of desire (“Why should I love this gentleman? ’Tis odds / He never will affect me; I am base, / My father the mean keeper of his prison, / And he a prince; to marry him is hopeless, / To be his whore witless” [2.3.1–5]); and she attempts to abandon this dilemma by discounting rationality (“I love him, beyond love and beyond reason, / Or wit, or safety: I have made him know it. / I care not, I am desperate” [2.5.11–13]).

64. This fact was especially prominent in the summer 1986 RSC production in Stratford-upon-Avon at the Swan Theater.

65. Cf. the scene (1.2) in which Palamon and Arcite, despite their reiterated repugnance for their homeland, fight for Thebes in instantaneous violation of their principles. “Leave that unreasoned,” Palamon states in reference to the blatant moral contradiction, and Arcite expresses the same unwillingness rationally to attempt to determine the course of his own life: “Let th’event / That never erring arbitrator, tell us / When we know all ourselves, and let us follow / The becking of our chance” (1.2.113–16).
Thus the Jailer’s Daughter shares with the major protagonists an unbalancing anxiety and ambivalence about sexual love, and her story elaborates the play’s exclusive and intensive emphasis on the individual’s problems of private life. Her madness is treated by a doctor, who explicitly defines her problems as psychosexual in origin (“for this her mind beats upon” [4.3.79–80]), and who prescribes sexual intercourse with her (now reinstated) fiancé, pretending he is Palamon, as the solution. That the Jailer’s Daughter is subjected to a bedtrick recalls the play’s emphasis on the mechanical impersonality of sex; but rather than inspiring repugnance, as they do in the main plot, the mechanisms of desire are analyzed with apparently benevolent scientific detachment from traditional moral codes:

*Doct.* [to Wooer]. If she entreat again, do anything: Lie with her if she ask you.

*Jail.* Ho there, doctor!

*Doct.* Yes, in the way of cure.

*Jail.* But first, by your leave, I’ th’ way of honesty.

*Doct.* That’s but a niceness:
Ne’er cast your child away for honesty;
Cure her first this way, then if she will be honest,
She has the path before her.

*Jail.* Thank ye, doctor.

*Doct.* Pray bring her in and let’s see how she is.

*Jail.* I will, and tell her her Palamon stays for her.
But, doctor, methinks you are i’ th’ wrong still.

[5.2.17–26]

The Doctor, however, is not wrong; the bedtrick works. The Jailer’s Daughter moves happily, if obliviously, into a future of marriage to a man who loves her. So what if she imagines he is someone else? Her madness and cure are wholly encompassed in the comic mode, as becomes apparent earlier in the play when she joins a group of weavers rehearsing a morris dance for May Day celebrations. Like the androgynous hero, the Jailer’s Daughter follows eros into an uncharted terrain. As in Emilia’s case, in the story of the Jailer’s Daughter female desire is both granted centrality and presented as a problem to be managed and resolved by powerful men. But the transformation of the authority figure from reigning monarch to doctor changes both the meaning and
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the tone of the episode. While the Duke commands Emilia’s marriage by a harsh and arbitrary decree, the Doctor is presented instead as discovering what the Jailer’s Daughter “really” wants by releasing repression, ferreting out her desire. What do women want? asked Freud, and proceeded to reply. The answer provided in the Jailer’s Daughter plot of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is that what women want is the illusion of marrying a prince.

Thus several important points emerge from the episode of the Jailer’s Daughter. First, it presents a strikingly self-conscious early example of what Jameson describes as the constitution of the psychological subject, in which reality is construed individualistically, in and through the terms of an autonomous psyche. Second, the Doctor’s power to resolve the situation by defining its terms (“I will . . . / But doctor, methinks you are i’ th’ wrong still”) recalls Michel Foucault’s argument that precisely by granting the medical and helping professions the powers of definition, modern sexuality has subjected itself to their regulatory rhetorical control. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen* the Doctor is much more successful at regulating sexuality in the Jailer’s world than Theseus is in his court, a fact that distinguishes the conceptualization of the Jailer’s Daughter’s story as distinctively modern and associates it with the future.

Although the Jailer’s Daughter plot is the most appealing aspect of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, its terms and conceptions cannot be said to encompass the entire action. The future that is suggested and affirmed in the play’s subplot is in fact not available to the major protagonists. Like the Jailer’s Daughter, Emilia and Palamon move into a nonchivalric future symbolized in marriage, but unlike her, they move with no illusions and great reluctance: Arcite is left behind. The most telling contrasts between the stories are clearly discernible in the ideological terms that link gender, genre and class. The dilemma of the Jailer’s Daughter centers on her lower-class status and is constituted entirely in the comic mode. “I am base,” she announces the moment she comes onto the stage and, contrasting her wooer with Palamon, exclaims, “Lord,

the / diff’rence of men!” (2.1.58–59). But the sweet levity that sets the tone of her episode is strikingly absent from the combination of piquancy, bitterness, brutality, and absurdity that characterizes the interactions among the aristocrats, whose dilemmas are by no means entirely comic. In contrast, for example, to the Doctor’s cavalier dismissal of virginity, traditional sexual and moral configurations (in their chivalric form) receive greater deference in the main plot. Thus the scene in which Palamon and Arcite arm each other and discuss their former, heroic comradeship is one of the nicest in the play. The theophanies in Act 5 are neither mocking nor interrupted, but perform without parody their traditional romantic function of simultaneously suggesting and concealing the outcome of the action.

Although chivalry and its romance are continually deflated as inadequate, then, their devices still play a defining structural role. As we have seen, the continuing false conflicts and disruption of traditional associations oscillate between defining the world in human and/or divine terms. When Palamon declares, “I must love and will,” is he referring to the divine commands of Fate, the social demands of chivalric honor (“I saw her first”), or the private compulsions of the individual psyche? The play is unclear and, ending with the death of one kinsman and the marriage of another, settles for the characteristically tragicomic note of compromise. “Let us be thankful / For that which is, and with you leave dispute / That are above our question” (5.4.133–35), says Theseus, addressing the gods; but his final vision of inscrutability emphasizes the perversity of the human mind, unaccountably, irrationally, bringing unnecessary suffering upon itself:

For what we lack,
We laugh, for what we have, are sorry; still
Are children in some kind.68

[5.4.130–33]

The focus on love and sexuality in the plots of The Two Noble Kinsmen both links and distinguishes social classes in the play’s

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projected conception of the future. In both cases the future is attached to creating a realm of private experience that begins to be construed in individualistic terms and is increasingly divorced from public life or, in the vocabulary of dramatic representation, from traditional heroism. Yet there are crucial differences in tone. Although the Jailer’s Daughter is treated with poignant and affectionate condescension, the irony that encompasses the aristocrats is often bitter and demanding. The parody that highlights their indecisiveness is accompanied by a residual, elegiac lament that mourns their attenuated heroism and compromised authority. As the Doctor’s comic triumph in the subplot makes clear, the elegant, inadequate conception of chivalry has a future, but that future depends on the ease with which the fantasy component of the aristocratic ethos can be knowingly manipulated for the power of its illusion by an increasingly confident professional class.

Though *The Two Noble Kinsmen* does not abandon chivalry, then, it sets up the conditions in which chivalry can be abandoned. The restless realignment of discourses in the play renders it what one critic describes as an open-ended text, or a text devised to “unsettle the reader [or viewer] into becoming a critic of, rather than a complicit participant in,” its conventions: “refusing to lay issues to rest because irresolution is part of the meaning, the open-ended text passes its tension on to the reader, who must actively struggle with the unsettling questions raised but left unresolved by the prior narrative.”69 In Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Knight of Malta*, chivalric heroism and sexual love are again brought into conflict and realigned according to a newly established centrality of private experience; but when the constituent elements of these issues are distinguished and revised in the later play, a clearer resolution emerges, taking the shape of a distinctive split between public and private life.

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393: “The problem of anxiety is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solution would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence.”


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The Knights of Malta are a chivalrous order of Christian soldiers, zealously defending their faith, militantly chaste. In spite of the intimate association of celibacy and idealism required by their order, three of them—one an initiated knight, Mountferrat, and two, Gomera and Miranda, about to be invested into the order—are in love. This situation, already dramatic, is complicated by the fact that they all love the same woman, Oriana, sister of Valetta, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta. As in the former two plays, then, the conflict appears to be constructed between chivalric (public) heroism and private (sexual) life. *Troilus and Cressida*, however speciously, subordinates erotic experience to the more prestigious and exacting demands of public life; in contrast, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, however inadequately and reluctantly, begins to acknowledge the pressing importance of the private sphere. But *The Knight of Malta* represents the conflict between the two domains as impossible to reconcile; and in the polarization between the two, the weight of sympathy and value—and the opportunity for heroism—has switched decisively to favor the private life.

Far from exploring chivalry as an idealized mode of being flexible enough to command the emulation of an entire society, Fletcher and Massinger focus on the most extreme and remote manifestations of the chivalric code. As noted earlier, the associations of chivalry with religion were peripheral and accidental rather than central to its development; indeed, these were precisely the associations that dropped away in the Renaissance, while more powerful aspects of chivalric idealism, such as the glorification of individual valor and emphasis on an exclusively meritorious class of men, remained part of chivalry’s enduring appeal. Similarly, far from being central to chivalric idealizations, knightly chastity was an enforced condition of youth, often considered temporary and represented in literary expression with an accompanying yearning to escape. By defining the knight’s major function in *The Knight of Malta* as killing infidels, Fletcher and Massinger subtly recall the Catholic Crusades. Further, by conjoining military heroism with religion and permanent celibacy, they succeed not only in rendering the elitist appeal of chivalry remote and specialized, but also in surrounding it with an aura of anachronism and irrelevance. Thus *The Knight of Malta* augments the critique of chivalry by depriving it of centrality. In *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare bitterly identi-
fies chivalric idealism as the dominant form taken by the willful, evasive destructiveness of an entire civilization. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen* chivalry proves poignantly and reluctantly inadequate to what are depicted as the more urgent, if decidedly less glamorous, concerns of private life. But in *The Knight of Malta* chivalry loses its power to threaten, inspire, and destroy, and this attenuation is never associated with loss. Instead, the play consigns chivalry to the margins, deftly exposing it not only as irrelevant but also as absurd.

The reduction of the chivalric code to unmitigated parody is clarified in the portrayal of Miranda, the title’s “Knight of Malta” and the only one of the three protagonists destined to pursue the chivalric/religious ideals of the order. In considering the depiction of Miranda’s quest, which involves overcoming sexual desire in order to qualify for knighthood, it is helpful to recall Eric Auerbach’s argument that the medieval romance presented a world apparently designed for the sole purpose of providing the knight with a series of adventures in which he could demonstrate his valor; as a result, chivalric idealism tended to glamorize heroic endeavor precisely by dissociating it from the events of everyday life. But in *The Knight of Malta* the playwrights, like Cervantes, mock the unreal quality of the chivalric quest as a fantasy in the mind of the hero.

Miranda is among the most posturing of tragicomic heroes. More than Oriana, more than God, he loves the last-minute revelation, the dramatic rescue. How marvelous to appear—miraculously—at the very moment of disaster and deter its course through sheer force of personality and advantage of superior knowledge! Given the opportunity to save by the bell, Miranda rises to the height of his glory; lacking the opportunity, he quite literally makes a scene. When Oriana responds negatively to the clandestine sexual overtures of Mountferrat, that villain avenges himself by slandering her maliciously, accusing her of treason and endangering her life. The older and less agile Gomera challenges Mountferrat to a duel, which will determine Oriana’s fate. When Miranda, far away on a military adventure, hears of this potential catastrophe, he does not, like Gomera, come forward publicly as Oriana’s champion. Instead he persuades Mountferrat by subterfuge to let him (Miranda) take Mountferrat’s place in the duel,
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disguised. Miranda then allows Gomera to win, after which he dazzles everyone, first by revealing himself, then by stepping forward to claim Oriana as his own.

_Mir._ None has deserv'd her
If worth must carry it, and service seek her,
But he that saved her honor.

_Gom._ That's I _Miranda._

_Mir._ No, no, that's I _Gomera_, be not so forward,
In bargain for my love, ye cannot cozen me.

_Gom._ I fought it.

_Mir._ And I gave it: which is nobler? . . .

_Gom._ I undertook first, to preserve from hazard.

_Mir._ And I made sure no hazard should come near her.

Addressing Oriana, whose life has been hanging in the balance, Miranda continues:

_Such another fright_
I would not put ye in, to owne the Island,
Yet pardon me, 'twas but to shew a Soldier.

Miranda, though, does cause "such another fright," not only to Oriana, but to all the other characters, and this time he scares them even more. Oriana eventually marries Gomera and, when pregnant, is alienated from him by the machinations of the persistently evil Mountferrat. Through a triumph of miscommunication, Gomera thinks Oriana dead; meanwhile, she is not only alive, but she has given birth to his child. Miranda, unraveling these mishaps, prolongs everyone's misery for the sole purpose of dramatically restoring all the good to happiness and punishing the wicked with an amazing display of ingenuity. He even teases Oriana by posing as her enemy, pretending to threaten her with slander and her husband's death. He cannot resist. Wait until she realizes how

70. All quotations from _The Knight of Malta_, identified in the text by act and scene numbers, are from the Glover and Waller edition of the _Works of Beaumont and Fletcher_, vol. 7, pp. 78–163.

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he, busily working behind the scenes, has actually engineered for her perfect happiness!

Fletcher and Massinger have clearly deflated chivalric endeavor to the level of ridiculous egotism. Once again, Miranda’s bravado is associated with youth, a fact clarified by the contrast between his behavior and that of Gomera, the man who wins Oriana. Like Othello, Gomera is an older soldier who has fallen in love for the first time; unlike Othello, however, he recognizes marriage as his destiny, which he embraces with no trace of self-hatred or fear of the contradictory or psychologically subversive in his values or feelings:

I am in love; laugh not: though time hath set
Some wrinkles in this face, and these curl’d locks
Will shortly dye into an other hew
Yet, yet I am in love.

[1.3]

The striking contrast between Othello, unwilling and ashamed to acknowledge the importance of his marriage or to admit its power over him, and Gomera, equally heroic but willingly surrendering his military career in order to marry, can be seen as a register of sexual change. It is a direct acknowledgment of Gomera’s frankness and dignity that although Oriana’s brother has selected Gomera as her mate, she herself affirms the choice.

Like Cressida and Emilia, Oriana functions for much of the play as a victim and object of male desire. When she is neither silent nor in a stupor, she spends a considerable amount of time wavering in her affections between Gomera and Miranda. Like the Jailer’s Daughter, she needs male authority figures to regulate her sexuality by making up her mind. But at the end of the play she wakes up, asserts herself, and makes a choice of her own: “Thy eye was ever chaste, thy countenance too honest,” she tells Miranda, rejecting him, “And all thy wooings was like Maidens talk” (5.1). In the exchange in which she and Miranda agree to part, we can recognize the two predominant forms of English Renaissance sexual discourse asserting and distinguishing themselves:

Mir. Husband, Wife,
There is some holy mystery in those names
That sure the unmarried cannot understand.
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Ori. Now thou are strait, and dost enamour me,
   So far beyond a carnal earthly love;
   My very soul doats on thee, and my spirits
   Do embrace thine, my mind doth thy mind kiss,
   And in this pure conjunction we enjoy
   A heavenlier pleasure than if bodies met;
   This, this is perfect love.

[5.2]

Perfect love! For all her saying so, Oriana does not choose celibate, Neoplatonic contemplation for her future course. Instead she returns to her husband and newly born child. The play ends with Miranda’s investiture as a Knight of Malta, happily pledging himself to a career of celibate heroism. Thus The Knight of Malta represents public and private life as irreconcilably separate, but newly equivalent, spheres: Gomera gives up his vocation as a knight, but heroically embraces a private destiny instead. The wish-fulfillment resolution of tragicomedy can be seen in the parting exchange just quoted between Miranda and Oriana. Here Oriana insists that the two sexual ideologies that we have seen to be conflicting—a dualistic system that either idealizes and sublimates or rejects and degrades women and eros (“perfect love”) and the heroics of marriage (the “holy mystery . . . / That sure the unmarried cannot understand”)—will coexist peacefully in her mind. Furthermore, this resolution is achieved exclusively in the private sphere and defined in the terms of the individual psyche: specifically, it is located in female desire. Regarded once again as separate from public life, both women and eros nevertheless retain the discursive centrality granted them by the heroics of marriage. The fact that women are being conceived and represented by men locates the tragicomic wish-fulfillment in the nexus of potential contradictions that are left unexplored in the play.

The wished-for resolution of traditionally conflicting sexual sensibilities articulated in The Knight of Malta can be recognized as the same resolution pursued by Charles I and Henrietta Maria, the first English royal couple to idealize themselves domestically, as husband and wife. At the same time the queen was the center of a Neoplatonic cult that glorified chastity, and Charles represented himself as the solitary heroic knight of the Van Dyck portraits. As in the case of Queen Elizabeth, scholars have analyzed the self-
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presentations of these Stuarts in terms of political power. From the perspective of this book, the attempt of king and queen to idealize themselves in conflicting sexual representations becomes yet another sign of their political fragility and illusions. But the fact that these monarchs felt the need to idealize their marriage, along with their chastity and military heroism, also indicates the way in which private life had gained a new stature and prestige.

Throughout this book the changing stature of the private life in Renaissance England has been suggested by a conjoined examination of moral, religious, and dramatic texts. I have tried to show how moral and dramatic languages combine to create and transform dominant sexual sensibilities: that is, to underscore the ways in which traditionally literary and nonliterary discourses function similarly as well as reciprocally in the production and transmission of sexual values. Thus the increasing prestige of marriage helps to account for the development of comedy and tragedy, which in turn augment and perpetuate the enhanced dignity of private life through their representations.

In arguing that dramatic and moral texts function jointly to produce and transform dominant sexual sensibilities, I have attempted to show the ways in which focusing on aesthetic issues (e.g., dramatic structure and form) can illuminate the workings of cultural change in the English Renaissance. Thus the specific deployment of wish-fulfillment patterns in romantic comedy, including the containment of potential sexual conflict in the final marriage scenes, clarifies the new effort to idealize marriage in Elizabethan society; and the lineaments of the unresolved struggle for sexual equality can be traced as a disjunction between content and form in Jacobean satire.

These modes of analysis suggest that traditionally literary (in this case dramatic) texts can best be related to the rest of social history neither by comparing the arrangement of plots and the depiction of characters to actual human behavior, nor by relegating literature to the realm of escapism. Rather it is suggested that the

characteristic cultural logic of dramatic texts can be discerned by tracing the changing location of conflict and the shifting nature of subject matter, aesthetic processes that can serve as registers of social and sexual transformation. Recognizing that aesthetic categories as such have a sociohistorical logic also allows us to apply them fruitfully to texts that are usually considered “nonliterary.” Thus focusing on the construction of marriage as a heroic endeavor, the repeated, traditionally “literary” rhetoric that suffuses the Protestant tracts, helps to explain the emergence of the private life as a tragic subject in Jacobean England, while it also delineates a new ideology in the process of formation.

The increasing prestige of private life is defined and represented in Renaissance dramatic, moral, and religious writing in the heroics of marriage, a discourse that unites public and private life and attempts to confer on them equal distinction. When this discourse breaks down in tragedy, tragicomedy endeavors to change the terms of dramatic conflict, moving toward redefining the relation between public and private life as separate but equal spheres. That such a division would generate its own set of contradictions takes us out of the Renaissance and into the domain of modern discourses and problems. Born of the same inconsistencies that eventually undermine its coherence, the heroics of marriage articulates the sexual conflicts to which future generations will be heir.