Irregular Unions
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Similar to Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander*, Shakespeare’s *A Lover’s Complaint* depicts an easily overlooked fiction of clandestine marriage. Early modern readers, however, would have recognized the “fickle maid” (5) as a woman abandoned not just by a lover but by a man she could have considered her husband. As in Marlowe’s epyllion, the young man’s vows of faith, followed by a consummation, suggest that the couple entered into a private marital contract. The fact that the maid has no recourse but to lament her fate underscores the potential heartache associated with making a match via spousal vows. The exchange of love tokens, such as the ones the maid has received, could indicate a desire to enter into a marriage—or not. The young man clearly did not place the same meaning in his tokens or vows as did his numerous lovers. Participating in the sacred ceremonies of the public solemnization, such as the ones Spenser emphasizes in his *Epithalamion*, disambiguates the marital process. By neglecting these ceremonies, Shakespeare’s maid finds herself a victim of early modern marital hermeneutics.

With *A Lover’s Complaint*, Shakespeare participates in the tradition of including a female complaint after a sonnet sequence. Samuel Daniel’s *Complaint of Rosamond*, following his sonnet sequence *Delia* (1592), has long been recognized as a model for Shakespeare’s own complaint. Considering Shakespeare’s demonstrated interest in Spenser’s work, it is reasonable to assume that he would have studied the poem that follows Spenser’s sonnet sequence, *Amoretti*,
just as he studied Daniel’s when writing his own version of the form. Of course, he would have found that Spenser’s poem does not constitute a female complaint that admonishes illicit sexual desire, but rather a wedding poem that depicts desire’s consummation within the framework of Christian matrimony. For this reason, scholars tend to remark on the thematic differences between Epithalamion and A Lover’s Complaint rather than the similarities.

A Lover’s Complaint, however, has long been recognized as the most Spenserian of Shakespeare’s works. Edmond Malone first observed that “in this beautiful poem, in every part of which the hand of Shakespeare is visible, he perhaps meant to break a lance with Spenser.” Colin Burrow confirms Shakespeare’s indebtedness to the “elder poet.” Michael Schoenfeldt further acknowledges, “A Lover’s Complaint is Shakespeare sounding like Edmund Spenser on a good day.” Other critics, such as John Kerrigan and Patrick Cheney, have explored Spenser’s influence on the poem more fully. Brian Vickers even looks to what he calls a “slavish imitation” of Spenser as a basis for eliminating the poem from the Shakespeare canon. Shakespeare, however, does not simply imitate Spenser in A Lover’s Complaint as Vickers suggests. Instead, Shakespeare joins Spenser in providing not just “an extra meditation on sexual desire and its consequences” but an “extra meditation” on marriage after a sonnet sequence. In this way, Shakespeare does not so much imitate Spenser’s Epithalamion as he revises it for a different context. In A Lover’s Complaint, Shakespeare reveals that the problem Spenser had hoped to remedy in book I of The Faerie Queene has not been resolved. A Marlovian sense of male agency, which preys on female subjectivity within matters of love, continues even as the reign of the real-life Faery Queen is coming (or has come) to a close.

Most likely written either shortly before or after Queen Elizabeth’s death, Shakespeare’s A Lover’s Complaint engages with the public debates about clandestine marriage in a transitional time in English history. If Marlowe’s Hero and Leander enters the literary fray of the 1590s in direct opposition to the sonnet craze, Shakespeare’s formal participation in the trend feels almost outdated (his own unconventional sequence was not published until 1609). His focus on clandestine marriage when writing A Lover’s Complaint, however, is timely: Parliament members seized the transition between Queen Elizabeth’s and King James’s reigns as an opportunity to put the issue of irregular unions on the political agenda. In 1603, Puritan members of Parliament presented James I with the Millenary Petition, which included pleas for ending the seasonal restraints on weddings and requested “that licences for marriages without banns asked, be more cautiously granted.” In particular, they expressed concern about the growing number of untrustworthy clerics (like Shakespeare’s Sir Oliver Mar-Text) who made a trade in performing clandestine
marriages. The Parliament members elaborate on “the Hurt that comes by barring of askings in the Church, and granting of licences to marry. These marriages are made in places peculiar, which are desired to be annexed to the bishoprics, by vagrant, unlearned, dissolute, drunken, and idle stipendiaries, vicars, and curates: who are placed in the rooms of the rich men; who have divers livings, and are not resident. And they receive the profits; and instead of thankfulness to God, serve him by deputies.” In 1604, James I agreed to clarify the definition of marriage by revising certain canon laws. Canons 62 and 63, for instance, declared that marriage be preceded by the announcement of banns and that the service be performed by a duly licensed cleric in the parish church of one of the couple: “No minister upon pain of suspension per triennium ipso facto, shall celebrate Matrimonie betwixt any persons without a facultie or licence granted by some of the persons in these our constitutions expressed, except the Bannes of Matrimonie haue bene first published three seueral Sundaies or Holy dayes in the time of divine Service, in the Parish Churches and Chappels where the saide parties dwel, according to the booke of Common Prayer.” While these guidelines were already familiar, they did officially codify the existing regulations. Like any political compromise, however, these developments did not entirely please anyone. They did not satisfy Parliament members who wanted serious reform, and they disappointed those who viewed the canons as imposing on their traditional right to enter into a marriage without ecclesiastical authority.

The marital issues that occupy Spenser’s Epithalamion and Shakespeare’s A Lover’s Complaint, therefore, reflect the public debates about the benefits of the public surveillance of the marriage ritual, which (presumably) kept sexual predators at bay, and the disadvantages of that surveillance, which resulted in a lack of agency within the matchmaking process. These poems are just as concerned with how someone determines the identity of a prospective spouse as with which vows and rituals transform a couple into husband and wife. How does someone know that a potential spouse will make a good mate, or that a person is even eligible to be married in the first place? For Spenser, public rituals grant lovers access to each other’s interiorities, giving them assurance of their partner’s virtuous identity. The fickle maid’s failure to gain access to her lover’s interiority in A Lover’s Complaint means that she does not recognize her own lover’s less-than-virtuous identity until it is too late. Shakespeare thus cautions his readers that marriages that do not occur through “sacred ceremonies” (216) cannot result in the “endlesse matrimony” (217) that Spenser describes in Epithalamion.
Sacred Ceremonies in Spenser’s *Epithalamion*

In *Epithalamion*, Spenser returns to his poetic agenda in book I of *The Faerie Queene* that nuptial celebrations should be public affairs. Elizabeth Mazzolla observes that Spenser “construes public knowledge about intimacy as a form of approval.”\(^{15}\) I would go further: Spenser construes public approval as necessary for intimacy, or, at least, for matrimonial intimacy. While Spenser focuses on the creation of a national consciousness through public ritual in his *Legend of Holiness*, he reveals how public rituals fulfill promises of wedded love made in *Epithalamion*. Despite the increased emphasis on love and companionship within the marital bond, Protestant reformers expressed uncertainty concerning the nature of the marriage ritual: “Did the rite firmly unite lovers, or would it only console them now in the face of the isolation Protestantism described?”\(^{16}\) In an uncharacteristic deviation from Calvinist theology, Spenser offers the *Book of Common Prayer*’s public rituals as providing a comforting corrective to marriage’s mortal limitations in hardline Protestant doctrine.

Unexpectedly, perhaps, Spenser’s *Epithalamion* and Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* have origins in similar poetic frustrations. Both authors value the standards of Petrarchan beauty, but neither is satisfied with the outcomes of Petrarchan courtship. Like Marlowe’s Leander, Spenser’s bride has all of the physical attributes befitting a Petrarchan mistress:

> Her goodly eyes lyke Saphyres shining bright,
> Her forehead yuory white,
> Her cheekes lyke apples which the sun hath rudded,
> Her lips lyke cherryes charming men to byte,
> Her brest like to a bowle of creame vncrudded,
> Her paps lyke lyllies budded,
> Her snowie necke lyke to a marble towre,
> And all her body like a palace fayre,
> Ascending vppe with many a stately stayre.

\((171–179)\)

Considering the autobiographical nature of the poem, this unoriginal catalog might disappoint a reader looking for a more personal description of Spenser’s actual bride, Elizabeth Boyle.\(^{17}\) In his epyllion, Marlowe solves the problem of Petrarchism (or at least the sexual disappointments of Petrarchism) by moving quickly from Leander’s physical attributes to the sexual desire (and its fulfillment) that these attributes incite. Spenser, however, rejects this move.
He eschews the Marlovian paradigm by moving directly from his bride’s stereotypical physical attributes to her personal interiority. He explains his bride’s true allure:

But if ye saw that which no eyes can see,  
The inward beauty of her lively sprite,  
Garnisht with heavenly gifts of high degree,  
Much more then would ye wonder at that sight.  

(185–188)

His praise of Elizabeth Boyle’s “inward beauty” expresses the typical Platonic ideal of admiring a beloved’s soul. That “no eyes can see” this beauty, however, hints at its unique qualities that cannot be adequately described. Furthermore, Platonic spiritual transcendence is not Spenser’s goal. Holy matrimony is. Spenser's focus on his bride’s “inward beauty” also aligns with the intensifying Protestant rhetoric on the superiority and inwardness of the married state that binds a couple together. Heinrich Bullinger, for instance, claims that of “the riches of the mynde, of the bodye, & of temporall substance. The best and mooste precious are the riches of the mynde.”18 William Whately further waxes that “nuptiall loue . . . is a speciall and peculiar loue, farre more deare and inward than all.”19 The marital bond is not simply a bond of contract, exchange of property, or fulfillment of sexual desire (as Marlowe portrays it). For Spenser, the marital bond’s defining feature is not an intermingling of bodies to achieve “one flesh” but an achievement of intersubjectivity with the beloved.

By preceding *Epithalamion* with the *Amoretti* and the “Anacreontics,” Spenser demonstrates how a couple must move through a proper and recognizable courtship for this intersubjectivity to occur. The successive genres—sonnet sequence, anacreontic, and epithalamium—map out the prescribed stages of an early modern love affair: courtship, betrothal, and marriage.20 These stages give a couple the time needed to contemplate the worthiness of the match. Poetic declarations of love and courtship, however, were often accompanied by a kind of haziness. “It can . . . be difficult,” Ilona Bell admits, “to know whether a suitor is professing love and desire in order to marry wealth and status, or falsely proposing marriage in order to obtain sexual favors. Sometimes the participants themselves may not know whether their aim is social and material advancement, amorous courtship, or extra-marital seduction.”21 By stating early in the *Amoretti* that he hopes “to knit the knot, that euer shall remaine” (6.14), Spenser identifies that holy matrimony is the goal of his poetic
courtship. But how can he expect Elizabeth Boyle to know that his intentions are sincere?

By drawing her into the act of common prayer. As demonstrated in chapter 1, publicly acknowledged courtships and betrothals preferably serve as the Spenserian hallmark of legitimate unions. Bypassing these steps can literally result in no union at all, as seen in the dissolution of Redcrosse and Duessa’s clandestine contract. Spenser, therefore, encodes the language from the scriptural readings for the Book of Common Prayer’s morning and evening prayers throughout the Amoretti. In doing so, he promises not only marriage but also a socially sanctioned one that ensures his beloved that he will follow through. This is not the promise of a union that he could back out of later. When reading the sonnets, the couple further participates in the practice of common prayer that the English reformers hoped would result in the interior transformations of their congregants. Ramie Targoff explains: “Behind the introduction of a liturgy emphasizing the worshippers’ active participation and consent lies the establishment’s overarching desire to shape personal faith through public and standardized forms.” In the Amoretti, therefore, Spenser attempts to shape his beloved’s faith according to the proper rituals, preparing her for Christian matrimony. Public rituals intended to transform the interior self guide his approach to their private courtship.

Undergoing interior transformations through the act of common prayer thus makes the couple more susceptible to their marital roles. As all readers note, Spenser’s beloved seems rather reluctant to be fashioned (perhaps because her role as “submissive wife” is not as appealing as that of “loving and authoritative husband”), and the sequence’s vacillation between Petrarchan and anti-Petrarchan approaches underscores Spenser’s own difficulty in meeting his goal of self-transformation. Indeed, if the marriage bond is an interior state, as the Epithalamion reveals, it requires the couple to prepare their interior selves. In Sonnet 8, Spenser describes how his beloved fashions his interior self:

You frame my thoughts and fashion me within,
you stop my tongue, and teach my heart to speake,
you calme the storme that passion did begin,
strong throug thy cause, but by thy vertue weak.

(9–12)

Rather than inciting the sexual desire that could lead to a clandestine marriage, Elizabeth Boyle “calme[s]” his “passion” as they wait patiently for a proper ceremony. Their courtship does not fashion his public persona as a gentleman
(part of *The Faerie Queene*’s promised outcome) but rather his interior one. He further focuses on the need for lovers to gain access to each other’s interiorities in Sonnet 45:

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Leaue lady in your glasse of christall clene,
Your goodly selfe for euermore to vew:
and in my selfe, my inward selfe I meane,
most liuely lyke behold your semblant trew.
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(1–4)

In this first quatrain, Spenser does not blame his beloved for being narcissistic and gluttonous as Shakespeare blames the mirror-gazing young man in his procreation sonnets (*Sonnets* 1–17). Instead, Spenser claims that his beloved will find a better, more “trew” mirror within his “inward self.” This language goes the language of the body for the language of interiority. He frames this idea as a possibility: “if your selfe in me ye playne will see” (13). But this suggestion is rhetorical—he knows that his beloved will find herself in his interiority, causing her to love him. Seeing herself thus reflected will enable Elizabeth Boyle to realize that Spenser’s love (and his matrimonial promises) is genuine. Without granting his beloved this access through a poetic courtship guided by public ritual, he could not expect her to accept his sincere promises of matrimony.

The rarely mentioned “Anacreontics” reflect the proper brevity of a betrothal. The overtly sexual nature of these poems may appear to undermine the “chaste desires” that Spenser has attempted to cultivate in the preceding sonnets (and that he celebrates in *Epithalamion*). As discussed in relation to the Redcrosse Knight’s betrothal with Una, however, participating in a formal betrothal constituted an important step in the courtship process, allowing couples to finalize their nuptial preparations in terms of both material goods and emotional readiness. Although, not waiting too long between the betrothal and the ceremony meant that couples would not be tempted to make their betrothal a “very marriage” before the official solemnization. Spenser admits his impatience for the wedding day, but his inclusion of the “Anacreontics” demonstrates that he and his beloved have undergone a proper waiting period before the ceremony takes place. The brevity of the poems that symbolize the betrothal calls attention to the distressing length of the Redcrosse Knight’s betrothal with Una in *The Faerie Queene*. If the “Anacreontics” feel anticlimactic to some readers, the length of Redcrosse’s betrothal makes the ending to book I all the less satisfying—and the Faery Queen’s insistence that he continue to serve her for six years appears even more inappropriate.
After fostering a courtship based on public ritual in the Amoretti, Spenser focuses on the public nature of the solemnization in Epithalamion. The natural world—the woods—initiates the communal involvement through the varied refrain: “The woods shall to me answer and my Eccho ring” (18). The woods echo Spenser when he sings “vnto my selfe alone” in the first stanza, emphasizing how even the groom’s private early-morning hours have a witness (17). The echoing refrain then becomes increasingly communal until the day is finally over in stanza 17. As James S. Lambert observes, “The ritualized and public utterances that make up Epithalamion,” including the “call and response” of the echoing refrain, “mimic common prayer.”25 The refrain signals not only the natural world’s participation in the day’s events but also its consent. By reiterating how the woods “echo,” Spenser emphasizes that their response is both immediate and automatic, underscoring the lack of impediments to the marriage. The careful preparations in the preceding marriage poetry ensure that there is no need to hesitate on the wedding day. There are no previous contracts to consider, no unfortunate secrets (such as Redcrosse’s relationship with Duessa) to be brought to light. Furthermore, in the final stanzas, the woods cease to echo simply due to the lack of sound, signaling their silent observance rather than their retreat. In addition to the woods, birds constitute another one of the natural world’s major participants:26

The merry Larke hir mattins sings aloft,
The thrush replyes, the Mauis descant playes,
The Ouzell shrills, the Ruddock warbles soft,
So goodly all agree with sweet consent,
To this dayes merriment.

(80–84; emphasis mine)

Here Spenser openly uses the legal language of consent that Andrew Zurcher finds in The Faerie Queene, but not as a private contract between two people.27 In Epithalamion, the contract occurs between the couple and their community, since the community (here represented by the birds) must offer their “sweet consent.” If the birds do not consent to the marriage, the nuptials will not go forward. Within the epithalamium tradition, the lack of consent by the birds signals a deficiency in the match, turning a nuptial celebration into an anti-epithalamium.28

Having the participation and consent of the natural world, Spenser calls on the community’s human inhabitants, including “all the virgins” (111) and “fresh boyes” (112), to participate as well. These participants prepare both the bride and the groom for the ceremony (the bride is surrounded by her entou-
rage as soon as she opens her eyes), provide music, and accompany the couple to the church. Additionally, spectators simply show up to watch: "people [are] standing all about" (143). The inclusion of such casual observers reflects how public a wedding ceremony should be—one does not have to know the couple personally or receive an invitation as a modern reader might expect. A proper wedding, Spenser urges, should be public knowledge, an event that anyone can attend. The participation and approval of witnesses are not just components of the poem’s festive tone; they literally facilitate the consecration of the marriage. All participants—bride, groom, and community members—must be of one heart and mind. By using the language of consent within a communal context, Spenser advances the goal of the English reformers to eliminate the confusion surrounding the marriage ritual. To do so, he conflates marriage’s legal requirements (the mutual consent of the couple through de praesenti spousal vows) with the public solemnization.

By claiming that even classical religion had “sacred rites,” Spenser suggests that the public solemnization of the marriage trumps the actual nature of the rituals. Standing on classical precedent, Spenser participates in a marital bacchanalia on which many Protestant reformers would frown, commanding the guests to “poure out the wine without restraint or stay . . . / And sprinkle all the postes and wals with wine, / That they may sweat, and drunken be with-all” (250–254). In contrast, Bullinger cautions couples against an “excesse of eatinge [and] drinkynge” after the ceremony, complaining that such wastefulness constitutes an inappropriate use of funds. Within the fictional world of Spenser’s poem, however, such practical concerns are not relevant. Though, he does indicate that the bride herself does not necessarily participate in the day’s frivolities. In recognition of the seriousness of the occasion, her “sad eyes” remain “fastened on the ground” throughout the wedding ceremony (234). The public celebratory displays, Spenser insists, do not detract from the ceremony’s (or the bride’s) virtue. Spenser also legitimates the classical elements by emphasizing their religious aspects. He calls on the goddess Juno: “The lawes of wedlock still dost patronize, / And the religion of the faith first plight / With sacred rites hast taught to solemnize” (391–393). In this way, he claims that the public solemnization has precedent even in classical religion. Not adhering to the public rituals, therefore, violates the classical and Christian traditions, both of which are at play in the Christianized epithalamium. Here the public solemnization is what “eternally bind[s]” the “louely band” (396) of marriage. Public knowledge makes the rituals “sacred.”

Spenser also infuses the generic elements from classical epithalamia with rituals reminiscent of those in the Book of Common Prayer specifically. Melissa E. Sanchez claims that Spenser is “more interested in consummation than
ceremony,” but Spenser draws attention to the importance of the ceremony by placing it in the poem’s central stanza. The rituals take on a decidedly Anglican undertone as the bride proceeds down the aisle of the church:

Bring her vp to th’high altar that she may
The sacred ceremonies there partake,
The which do endlesse matrimony make,
And let the roring Organs loudly play
The praises of the Lord in liuely notes,
The whiles with hollow throates
The Choristers the ioyous Antheme sing,
That al the woods may answere and their eccho ring.

(215–222)

King observes that “the organ music and choral singing of ‘the joyous Antheme’ . . . indicate that Spenser sympathized with the ritualism retained by the Church of England.” The focus on the “sacred ceremonies” again suggests Spenser’s belief that there is more to making a marriage than a contract. Importantly, the priest plays a central role, providing both advice and blessings. The bride, Spenser relates, “before the altar stands / Hearing the holy priest that to her speakes / And blesseth her with his two happy hands” (223–225). By alluding to the language and “sacred ceremonies” of the common prayer book, Spenser uses his marriage poem as a vehicle to express the importance of the Elizabethan rituals.

Some scholars claim that Spenser’s emphasis on ritual in *Epithalamion* gives the marriage ceremony the aura of a sacrament. Spenser overgoes Catholic tradition, however, by claiming that the marriage ritual does not grant grace but rather allows the union to last into the afterlife. To do so, he asserts that the “sacred ceremonies” of the wedding service do “endlesse matrimony make” (217). The poem itself, in contrast, is a mere physical “moniment” (433) that will be “endlesse” only for a “short time.” Spenser places no such temporal restraints on matrimony itself. The spiritual nature of the marital bond will survive the Day of Judgment. In a wedding sermon, John Donne looks to the verse Hosea 2:19, “And I will mary thee unto me forever,” to make a similar claim. Donne first insists that marriage’s sacramental status cannot fulfill this decree, observing, “They are somewhat hard driven in the Roman Church, when making marriage a Sacrament” since Roman canon law allows a couple to perform the sacramental act privately between themselves. By insisting that the actual contracting of the marriage occurs during the ceremony itself, Spenser puts full focus on the religious ceremony, making no room for the
vestiges of Roman canon law that he dismisses in his *Legend of Holiness*. A simple contract would not make a marriage, much less the “endlesse matrimony” that he celebrates.

Most Protestant reformers, however, insisted that matrimonial bonds did not last into the afterlife. Calvin was particularly firm on this subject, proclaiming that “husband and wife will . . . be separated” in death. William Gouge confirms, “Death is an absolute diemption, and maketh an utter dissolution of the marriage bond.” In her work on posthumous love in Renaissance sonnet sequences, Ramie Targoff observes that Spenser moves from the idea of his poetry commemorating his beloved in a classical sense to suggesting it as “the agent of their mutual resurrection.” Targoff’s reading, however, is hesitant. She notes that Spenser’s sonnet sequence is primarily secular, stopping short of making any definite promises about the Christian afterlife. This reading can only be hesitant because it does not take the *Amoretti*’s conclusion—the *Epithalamion*—into account. As Roland Greene observes, “Nearly all editors acknowledge the inseparability of these works by keeping them together.”

While the love that drives courtship in the *Amoretti* might not make posthumous promises, the love that drives the public solemnization of Christian matrimony in the *Epithalamion* undoubtedly does.

In granting the reader unique access to the marital chamber, Spenser confirms the importance of the sexual consummation to the marriage ceremony, and assuages any doubts or fears concerning the nature of the action. In accordance with generic tradition, the public does accompany the couple to the bedroom. George Puttenham explains the purpose of a noisy celebratory procession: so that “there might no noise be h[e]ard out of the bed cha[m]ber by the shreiking & outcry of the young damosell feeling the first forces of her stiffe & rigorous young man, she being as all virgins tender & weake, and vnexpert in those maner of affaires.” Spenser’s description of returning home for the consummation, however, is quite different from Puttenham’s. Spenser does refer to a noisy procession when saying:

Harke how the Minstrels gin to shrill aloud
Their merry Musick that resounds from far,
The pipe, the tabor, and the trembling Croud,
That well agree withouten breach or iar.

(129–132)

This loud music, however, does not accompany the couple to the bedchamber but rather to the church. When night comes, Spenser declares that the time for noisy celebration is over and begs everyone to quiet down. “Now ceasse
"ye damsels," he commands, "your delights forepast" (296). He then asks the bride’s fellow virgins to help her to bed in a display of female camaraderie:

Now night is come, now soone her disaray,
And in her bed her lay;
Lay her in lillies and in violets,
And silken courteins ouer her display,
And odourd sheetes, and Arras couerlets.

(300–304)

Surrounded by her female attendants, the bride is comfortably settled before her friends disperse. Then Spenser and his bride are left completely alone with no noisy celebration outside designed to drown out any female trauma occurring within. In describing the “sacred peace” (354) of the chamber at the time of consummation, Spenser reveals that his own bride will not experience a traumatic sexual experience on her wedding night. Quite unlike Marlowe’s Hero. Instead, contradicting Puttenham’s description of a typical wedding night, Spenser proclaims, “Let no lamenting cryes, nor dolefull teares, / Be heard all night within nor yet without” (334–335). Spenser affirms that no noises need to occur without the bedchamber because no traumatic noises will occur within. According to Spenser, the marriage ritual reforms the woman’s experience of the wedding night from one of painful distress to one of calm assurance. The female community’s accompaniment of the couple to the bedchamber also means that everyone knows that their desires are indeed “chaste,” and that the bride’s “chast wombe” (386) will bring forth legitimate issue. No one will be able to question the legitimacy of their offspring—the exact fear that grips Chapman’s Hero after her own clandestine marriage. The public celebration, therefore, provides an important foundation for the couple’s private intimacy.

Strangely, however, Spenser does admit that the consummation has one witness: the goddess Cinthia, who “at [the] window peepes” (372). This odd voyeuristic detail, symbolizing Spenser’s desire to elicit Queen Elizabeth’s approval of the match, illustrates that no aspect of the marriage ceremony is completely private. Spenser’s plea that the “fayrest goddesse, do thou not enuy / My loue with me to spy” (376–377) also hints at the queen’s control over her courtiers’ love lives, which we saw in The Faerie Queene’s Belphoebe-Timias episode in chapter 1. Spenser thus gives his wedding a national and even cosmic significance that belies what was probably a relatively small and private event. By portraying his wedding in this way, he suggests that all public ceremonies that take place according to the reformed rituals receive the
sanction of the Virgin Queen (no matter how small or insignificant those ceremonies might actually be).

Spenser addresses the problems associated with not following these rituals in his pastoral elegy, Daphnaïda (1591). In the elegy, a shepherd, Alcyon, mourns the death of his lover, Daphne, the poem’s name for the recently deceased Douglas Howard. Alcyon stands in for her bereaved husband, Arthur Gorges. The elegy is unconventional in that Alcyon’s grief remains excessive to the end—the pastoral landscape does not bring him any kind of solace or respite. Not wanting to view Spenser as writing a failed elegy, most scholars read the poem as a warning against extravagant grief.\(^{39}\) Jonathan Gibson has suggested that Spenser’s poem inserts itself into legal disputes over the inheritance of Gorges and Howard’s only child, Ambrosia, on Gorges’s behalf.\(^{40}\) After her death, Douglas Howard’s father, Henry Howard, second Viscount Bindon, claimed that Ambrosia was a changeling and thus ineligible to inherit his daughter’s wealth. He probably would not have attempted to undermine Ambrosia’s legitimacy if she were not the product of a clandestine marriage. Indeed, Gorges and Howard married without his consent. The viscount initially contested the marriage by arguing that Gorges had “illicitly enticed Douglas away.”\(^{41}\) His suit was unsuccessful. His daughter’s death, however, gave him another opportunity to undermine the marriage.

The clandestine nature of Gorges’s marriage with Douglas Howard thus contributed to his woes. Upon learning that Alcyon intends to die alone from grief, Daphnaïda’s distressed poet-narrator urges Alcyon to let him “tell the cause” (81) of Alcyon’s despair. Otherwise, he reasons, the world may think that “thou for secret crime thy blood hast spilt” (84). As we have learned throughout this book, events shrouded in secrecy can be misinterpreted by the outside world. Whether or not we believe Spenser sympathized with Gorges, it is indisputable that Gorges’s irregular union with Douglas Howard created controversies concerning its legitimacy. In this way, the poem becomes a cautionary tale not just about excessive grief but also about clandestinity. Gorges’s grief may not have been so excessive if the clandestine nature of his marriage had not heaped legal difficulties on top of his personal tragedy.

In Epithalamion, Spenser does admit some discomfort with the public surveillance of the marriage ritual that might have mitigated Gorges’s woe. His desire to “let this day let this one day be myne” (125) reads like a plea for privacy amid the celebrating birds, nymphs, and virgins. His fear derives from the possibility that the day’s sovereign, Phoebus, might not allow the nuptial events to go forward, pleading, “Doe not thy seruants simple boone refuse” (124). The possibility that Phoebus could refuse the request adds to the troubling tone of uncertainty that many readers discern in the poem. In a strange moment,
Spenser resorts to bargaining. If Phoebus grants the wedding day, then he will sing the god’s “prayses loud” (127)—the implication being that if Phoebus does not consent, Spenser might not be such a willing subject. Just as he does in The Faerie Queene, Spenser hints at the problems associated with charging the marriage ceremony with political meaning—people, he seems to be acknowledging, do not really like to feel as though they are being watched all the time.

In his epithalamium, however, Spenser informs us that men do not have to reject Petrarchan courtship in favor of a more violent Ovidian framework that allows for clandestine marriage (as Marlowe suggests). Instead, the prayer book’s rituals can provide an everlasting bond that rids the wedding night of physical or psychological distress. The key to a mutually fulfilling relationship is to release oneself from the mastery that Petrarchism encourages by fashioning one’s interior self through public ritual. In Hero and Leander, Marlowe presents Leander’s eventual sexual mastery of Hero as a triumph of masculine sexual violence. In Epithalamion, Spenser reduces the threat of Ovidian desire to the Echo myth in the varied refrain. Through public nuptials that take place firmly within the approval of the community and nation, Spenser exorcises and dispels the social problems associated with clandestine marriage.

Private Contracts in Shakespeare’s A Lover’s Complaint

Despite Spenser’s best efforts, his poetic reformation does not turn all complaints into epithalamia, just as the English Reformation did not put a stop to the deceptive practice of clandestine marriage. A pastoral landscape serves as the site of the maid’s solitary confinement in A Lover’s Complaint rather than a site of matrimonial celebration. In his wedding poem, Spenser’s repeated reference to the Echo myth calls attention to how easily a song of love can turn back into a song of lament. In the first lines of his complaint, Shakespeare invokes Spenser’s haunting refrain as it reverberates through the distinctly Spenserian landscape. The eavesdropping narrator states that he becomes aware of the maid through her echoing voice:

From off a hill whose concave womb reworded
A plaintful story from a sist’ring vale,
My spirits t’attend this double voice accorded,
And down I laid to list the sad-tun’d tale.

(1–4)
The landscape does not celebrate the maid’s match (nor can it since the maid’s lover has abandoned her). Instead, it simply “reword[s] / [her] plaintful story.” The threat inside the Echo myth from Spenser’s *Epithalamion* has not been dispelled but rather unleashed.

*A Lover’s Complaint* also engages in a marital discourse with Spenser’s other beautiful marriage poem, *Prothalamion*. Spenser sets his poem, written to commemorate the betrothal of the Earl of Worcester’s two daughters, Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, in an idyllic pastoral landscape on the bank of the Thames. His creation of a new genre marking a betrothal coincides with his insistence that marriage should progress through prescribed stages to be legitimate. As in book I, canto xii, of *The Faerie Queene*, the betrothal takes on the significance of the actual wedding. MacDonald P. Jackson masterfully demonstrates how Shakespeare borrows words and phrases from Spenser’s “Spousall Verse” in *A Lover’s Complaint*. In particular, Shakespeare appropriates Spenser’s marital imagery for his own maid, who also wears her hair loose as she tosses love tokens from her own “maund” (36), or wicker basket, rather than gathering up flowers in celebration of a wedding (as do the nymphs). Jackson mainly uses these connections to date Shakespeare’s poem as being written after *Prothalamion*’s 1596 publication date. Brian Vickers further compares the fickle maid with the disappointed narrator of the betrothal poem. Neither considers how the theme of marriage connects the two poems. *Prothalamion*’s subjects, the two swans swimming majestically down the river to London and the brides’ nuptials, provide the closest analogue to Shakespeare’s maid, especially since both she and the swans are the unconscious subjects of a voyeuristic narrator. In this way, Shakespeare pointedly contrasts the differences between women who participate in clandestine marriages and those who participate in public solemnizations. In *Prothalamion*, the public nature of the nuptials brings order to the landscape, fostering the idea that public ritual orders the realm, and providing solace to the disconsolate narrator who had lost faith in the court. In *A Lover’s Complaint*, the maid’s lack of proper attention to marital ritual disrupts pastoral tranquility and isolates her from the court where she used to reside. The reason the maid finds herself in such a state is that she has failed to undergo a proper courtship and betrothal leading up to a public ceremony validating her marriage.

Unlike Spenser, Shakespeare does not use his own sonnet sequence to demonstrate the proper uses of courtship and marriage. Instead, his sequence is riddled with the tension between public matrimony and secret contracts. As Heather Dubrow observes, “The sonnets portray a world dominated by legal, social, and verbal bonds.” Previous chapters have demonstrated that legal
language often points to literary portrayals of clandestine marriage. The language of clandestine marriage infuses the dark lady sonnets in particular. In Sonnet 152, for instance, Shakespeare laments that his mistress has been unfaithful to him and to a third party:

In loving thee thou know’st I am forsworn,  
But thou art twice forsworn, to me love swearing;  
In act thy bed-vow broke, and new faith torn  
In vowing new hate after new love bearing.  

(1–4)

By stating that his mistress has broken a “bed-vow,” Shakespeare suggests that she has broken a clandestine marital contract sealed by a consummation. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms this reading by looking to Sonnet 152 to define “bed-vow” as “a promise of fidelity to the marriage bed.” Furthermore, since the act of consummation solidified a *de futuro* contract, a “bed-vow” could literally be the vow that constituted the dark lady’s clandestine marriage with another lover. The dark lady’s seeming participation in a previous clandestine marriage foreshadows the fickle maid’s own marital state in *A Lover’s Complaint*. Unlike in the *Amoretti*, which Spenser uses to transform his beloved into a loving wife, the maid does not glean any words of wisdom about the proper making of a match from the sonnets that most parallel her own biography.

Even the seemingly wholesome theme of the procreation sonnets does not steer the maid in the right direction. When Shakespeare chastises the young man in Sonnet 1 for being “contracted to thine own bright eyes” (5; emphasis mine), he uses marital language: the young man’s contractual commitment to his own image means that he believes himself unable to enter into a relationship with anyone else. The fickle maid admits that one reason she participated in a clandestine marriage is that she did not want to succumb to narcissism. She laments: “I might as yet have been a spreading flower, / Fresh to myself, if I had self-applied / Love to myself, and to no love beside” (75–77). If the maid had contracted herself to her “own bright eyes,” she suggests, she might still be a “spreading flower.” Instead, she observes that her focus on loving her own young man has aged her beyond her years: her beauty is now “spent and done” (11) even if it does “peep . . . through lettuce of sear’d age” (14). By participating in an ill-advised clandestine contract, the maid overly compensates for possible narcissistic behavior. She apparently misses Shakespeare’s insistence that the young man’s child must be the product of legitimate wedlock:
For having traffic with thyself alone,
Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive,
Then how when Nature calls thee to be gone,
What acceptable audit canst thou leave?

(4.9–12)

The legal language of this sonnet, comparing the young man’s future child to an “acceptable audit,” makes clear that the child must be legitimate. Of course, a clandestine marriage could call a child’s legitimacy into question. By claiming that the child must have the legal rights of an heir, Shakespeare insists that the young man must enter into marriage properly in order for his issue to inherit his looks (along with his property), placing an enormous amount of pressure on the transformative effects of the public solemnization.

If we consider the young man of the Sonnets to be a model for (or even the same as) the young man in A Lover’s Complaint, however, we find that he has chosen to interpret the procreation sonnets’ decree to marry and have children as loosely as possible. He agrees to marry, but only in a way that allows him to move quickly from one woman (or one wife) to another. A lack of witnesses to their unions means that the jilted women have no real case against him. Catherine Bates emphasizes that the fickle maid is not the only victim of the young man’s deception—she is simply one of many that the young man has left in the lurch. The young man of A Lover’s Complaint fully understands the consequences of his actions, causing him to resemble the purposely deceptive Duessa more than the hopelessly naive Leander. Indeed, the young man seduces his victims by taking advantage of the confusion surrounding the differences between the pre- and post-Reformation marriage ritual.

The young man capitalizes on the Reformation discourse on marriage in his seduction of a nun. He brags to the fickle maid that he “had pow’r to charm a sacred [nun], / Who disciplin’d, ay, dieted, in grace” (260–261), persuading her to leave her cloister. Like Marlowe’s Hero, the nun in the young man’s tale appears to follow the advice of the Protestant reformers by leaving her celibate life and taking (presumably) a husband. The nun’s willingness to leave behind her vows of celibacy certainly confirms the theologians’ belief that women cannot be expected to withstand the direct assault of sexual desire, especially after being cooped up in a convent. She falls victim, however, to a matrimonial loophole that the English reformers never bothered to resolve completely. After the young man leaves the nun in disgrace, one can only assume that she was probably better off in the convent.

The maid’s willingness to seek solace from a solitary priestly figure hints at the lingering sympathies for Catholic rituals that continued to permeate early
modern England, and that may have made her more susceptible to a clandestine marriage. In accordance with the underlying Reformation themes of the poem, critics associate the “reverend man” with the figure of a priest, who encourages the maid to participate in the sacrament of auricular confession. Drawn by the sounds of her lamentations, the old man approaches the maid to determine the “motives of her woe” (63), suggesting his desire to help her achieve spiritual reconciliation. The maid describes how the young man clothed himself “with the garment of a Grace” (316). Just as she participates in a confession reminiscent of a Catholic sacrament, she also apparently believed that her contract with the young man achieved sacramental status. As we have seen, any marriage, even a clandestine one, fulfilled the requirements of the marital sacrament. As Spenser explains in *Epithalamion*, however, only public solemnizations meet the proper requirements of marriage in Protestant England. The “maimed rites” (*Hamlet* 5.1.219) that Shakespeare depicts in *A Lover’s Complaint* do not refer to the degradation of Catholic ritual but rather to the maid’s failure to participate in the reformed rites of the *Book of Common Prayer*.

When explaining how the young man managed to seduce her, she confirms her confusion concerning the proper rituals. The young man’s insistence that his “vows” (179) are “holy” indicates that the maid believed she was participating in the “sacred rites” that Spenser describes in *Epithalamion*. Eschewing a Spenserian emphasis on publicity, the young man scorns the practice of declaring banns, claiming “How coldly those impediments stand forth / Of wealth, of filial fear, law, kindred, fame” (269–270). He declares a need for privacy for true love to come to fruition—giving people the chance to look for impediments corresponds to the equivalent of throwing cold water on the flames of marital desire. The young man’s proclamations anticipate the growing popularity of clandestine marriage by license in the Stuart era. Daniel Rogers laments the growing number of couples who marry by license, claiming that “people . . . itch . . . after private marryings” that allow them to “oppose publication.” The custom has become so common, he observes, that a person considers himself “but a peasant who declines not this lawful provision of the Church.” Rogers does not express this outrage until 1642, but licensed clandestinity was already on the rise during the Jacobean period. In a sense, licensed clandestinity was becoming fashionable, particularly among the wealthy who could better afford it, and the ease with which couples could obtain licenses facilitated the hiding of impediments. Of course, the young man does not seem to have concerned himself even with obtaining a license. The sentiment, however, remains the same—clandestine marriage in any of its forms, whether licensed or not, allowed couples to bypass some (or even all) of the typical impediments to a marriage contract. Doing so gave the
marriage an aura of romance to which young women in particular might be susceptible.

Without religious solemnization, however, the maid’s intimacy with the young man does not extend beyond the physical. She finds herself in an abandoned state because she allows herself to be fooled by the young man’s “tragic shows” (308). Instead of correcting Petrarchism, as Spenser suggests, by focusing on her beloved’s “inward beauty,” she succumbs to his false Petrarchan rhetoric. The young man deceives her through a disconnect between his interiority and his outward appearance. After describing how the young man’s “wat’ry eyes” (281) produced a “brinish current” (284) running down each cheek, the maid laments how she allowed her suitor’s histrionics to affect her:

O father, what a hell of witchcraft lies
In the small orb of one particular tear!
But with the inundation of the eyes
What rocky heart to water will not wear?

(288–291)

The young man seduces the maid by convincing her that his tears are an indicator of his love, causing her to believe that she has access to his interiority. Believing that they have achieved the intersubjectivity of the marital bond that Spenser describes with his own bride, the maid consents to the clandestine contract. Clearly, she believed that she was marrying for love, as the domestic manuals suggest, but, as she now realizes, “consents” (131) can be “bewitch’d.” A seducer is less likely to bewitch if he must persuade a whole community—not just one woman—that he has honorable intentions. Bypassing the proper rituals, including the public ceremony, therefore, becomes the source of the maid’s tragedy—just as Chapman identifies it as being the source of Hero’s tragedy in his continuation of Marlowe’s epyllion.

The young man’s ability to disguise his true identity, allowing him to contract himself to a series of women, also connects the theme of clandestine marriage to the concern over bigamous marriages early in James I’s reign. Tobias B. Hug observes that the “definition of marriage and the various ways it could be contracted present[ed] several problems” when determining whether couples had contracted a bigamous marriage. Hug elaborates on how the problem of bigamy is one of identity. A bigamist is a form of imposture, he informs, who often “changed important aspects of their identity, i.e. their marital status and personal circumstances such as wealth.” To combat these impostures, Parliament made bigamy a felony, punishable by the death penalty except in instances where a spouse had been absent for seven years (before 1604
bigamy was merely a spiritual offense). One reason Parliament put the act into place was to “stop the practice of ‘evil disposed’ people going into other counties and contracting new, clandestine marriages.” The preamble to the Bigamy Act states: “Forasmuch as divers evil disposed persons being married, run out of one county into another, or into places where they are not known, and there become to be married, having another husband or wife living, to the great dishonour of God, and utter undoing of divers honest mens children, and others.” In 1563, for instance, Anne Yate accused George Johnson of marrying another woman after having lived with her as man and wife. Depo-

nents testified that George and Anne contracted themselves to one another at Anne’s house in front of witnesses. After exchanging spousal vows, the couple may or may not have kissed (according to one witness who could not quite remember) and then ate a “cowple of wodcokes” together in front of the fireplace. George then lived with Anne for several years. As a way of underscor-

ing the relationship’s commitment, another witness emphasized that George even brought his “dogges, his horse, and his hawkes” to live with Anne. According to several eyewitness accounts, the couple had clearly entered into a legal marriage, but George was still able to sneak off and marry again clandestinely.

Understanding A Lover’s Complaint as about clandestine marriage further explains why the maid recounts her lover’s speech in such detail: she wishes to prove that she believed she was entering into a marriage. Upon first noticing the maid, the narrator describes her as though she is presenting evidence at a trial, making the old man her judge as much as her confessor. Her “plaintfull story” suggests that the narrator views her as a plaintiff in a legal trial. We can thus read the maid’s complaint not simply as a futile exercise in emotional expression but as a serious attempt to blame her husband for abandoning her—just as many women did in the early modern courts. She claims that, unlike his previous lovers, she initially withstood the young man’s pleas to doff her “white stole of chastity” (297). Instead, she waits until his promises become matrimonial ones. He laces his seduction with marital language when asking her to “lend . . . soft audience to my sweet design, / And credent soul to that strong-bonded oath / That shall prefer and undertake my troth” (278–280; em-

phases mine). The language of oaths and troths is the language of spousal vows. By consenting to his “soft audience,” the maid must have understood herself to be entering into a defuturo spousal vow. As we learned in Marlowe’s Hero and Leander, women may be more willing to give up their chastity if they do not actually believe that they are doing so. By claiming that the young man made solemn vows before sleeping with her, the maid insists that she believed they were entering into a marriage.
The maid’s superfluity of love tokens further exemplifies the kind of evidence that could be used in an ecclesiastical court trial. Houlbrooke explains that love tokens could carry so much significance during the early modern period that “the most prudent course . . . was to return immediately the gifts of unwelcome suitors” to avoid confusion concerning the seriousness of a relationship. The giving of a love token could express a willingness to marry in the mind of the recipient, or the giver could interpret the acceptance of a token as a sign of consent to a match. As Loreen Giese has shown, the London Consistory Court records from 1586 to 1611 are filled with such debates concerning the meaning of love tokens. In one case, Alexander Hollinworth v. Ann Hyde, Ann explains how a go-between, John Griffith, gave her love tokens from his friend Hollinworth. Her acceptance of the tokens caused Hollinworth to presume that they had entered into a contract: “She receyved . . . at several times bothe the ringes mentioned in this article that with the stone by Griffins wife and thother by Griffin himself, the one ring being . . . not worth . . . iii shillings . . . and thother is a Counterfitt stone as she hath byn synce towld and . . . it cannot be worth . . . above a noble . . . all which . . . she receyved at the great importunite of Griffin and his wife synce the time of the pretended Contract.” Ann’s unimpressed assessment of the tokens’ worth (not worth four shillings, or not worth “above a noble”) indicates that she believed marital tokens should be more costly. However, confusing matters, she sent Hollinworth tokens in return, which, in his mind, confirmed her consent to his marital overtures. The deposition records that “she did not send any of theis tokens uppon Confirmacon of any Contract of marriage . . . butt with what intencion he receyved them she sayethe she cannot tell.” Due to the ambiguities surrounding love tokens, it becomes very difficult to tell when—if ever—a couple achieves the intersubjectivity indicative of mutual consent.

Like the hapless Hollinworth, Shakespeare’s maid clearly has misinterpreted the significance of the love tokens that she has received from the young man. After she pulls “a thousand favours from a maund” (36), the eavesdropper describes the nature of the tokens:

Of folded schedules had she many a one,
Which she perus’d, sigh’d, tore, and gave the flood,
Crack’d many a ring of posied gold and bone,
Bidding them find their sepulchres in mud,
Found yet moe letters sadly penn’d in blood,
With sleided silk feat and affectedly
Enswath’d and seal’d to curious secrecy.

(43–49)
Especially since the ring plays a prominent role during the Solemnization of Matrimony in the *Book of Common Prayer*, rings appear most often in the London Consistory Court records as evidence that a wedding contract had taken place. Of course, the meaning of rings, and other love tokens, depended on the context in which they were given, which, naturally, is open to interpretation (as the Hollinworth vs. Hyde case reveals). The maid describes the tokens as bearing “unapproved witness” (53). She believed that the tokens served as “witness” to their contract, but, in the end, these tokens could not offer unequivocal proof of a match. The fact that the young man has merely recycled tokens from previous lovers when giving them to her further demonstrates how difficult it can be to determine intent behind a love token. The unknowable contents of the maid’s letters gesture toward these interpretative difficulties. By not allowing us access to the contents, Shakespeare demonstrates how difficult it could be to determine whether love objects, literary or otherwise, were imbued with marital import. Without witnesses to confirm that a spousal contract or ceremony had taken place, tokens rarely carried any weight in the courts, even though they were often used as evidence. The “ocular proof” of a courtship or marriage is meaningless if no one can attest to its meaning.

This suspicion of clandestine marriage aligns itself thematically with plays that Shakespeare was writing around the same time, such as *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Measure for Measure* (as well as *Othello*, which will be explored in chapter 5), signaling a shift in the Shakespeare canon that tends to view clandestine marriage sympathetically. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia’s father and brother warn her against a relationship with the melancholy prince. While scholars lament that these warnings indicate a disappointing lack of faith in the young woman’s own judgment, poems like *A Lover’s Complaint* suggest that their fears do have a basis. Alan Stewart demonstrates that the love letters Ophelia returns to Hamlet indicate that they already considered themselves to be contracted with one another. When Ophelia returns the letters, she breaks the contract, but since their contract had no witnesses, Hamlet has no option but to accept. During her mad scenes, Ophelia also refers to the hazy relationship between sex and marriage. “Before you tumbled me,” she sings, “You promis’d me to wed” (4.5.62–63). She thus refers to the way in which men pressured women into sleeping with them by suggesting that a marriage would result. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Pandarus invokes the language of the marriage ceremony from the *Book of Common Prayer* immediately before the consummation of the titular lovers:

Here she is now, swear the oaths now to her that you have sworn to me. . . . Here’s ‘In witness whereof the parties interchangeably’—Come
His language, which focuses on oaths and witnesses and is accompanied by the holding of hands, lends their consummation the weight of a marital contract. Troilus, however, decides to value his relationship with his fellow men above his marital bond when allowing Cressida to be traded to the Greek camp. Cressida and the fickle maid have much in common: each believes she is entering into a marriage when sleeping with an aristocratic young man who later abandons her.

In Measure for Measure, the ultimate treatment of marital contracts speaks to the ability of the sexual consummation to solidify a marriage no matter how long ago or ambiguously the original contract took place. Mistress Overdone, for instance, informs that Lucio “promis’d [Kate Keepdown] marriage” (3.2.200) but that Kate has been unable to hold him to the promise despite their child being almost “a year and a quarter old” (201). The play thus makes clear how young men could use the importance of the consummation to persuade women to sleep with them, thinking they would be married afterward. In the end, the duke holds Lucio to the promise by making him officially solemnize the marriage with Kate. Angelo’s unintentional consummation of his betrothal with Mariana also results in a legally binding marriage. Even though Mariana and Angelo made de futuro vows five years before, the lapse in time and lack of additional confirmation of the union does not prevent the marriage from becoming legally binding the moment the consummation takes place. The uncomfortable nature of these unions, since neither Lucio nor Angelo is happy to be a married man, also underscores how the practice of clandestine marriage could result in unhappy marriages if the schemes of the predatory men do not work out in their favor.

Both Shakespeare’s plays and poems are haunted by the fact that Spenser’s literary agenda—an increased emphasis on public ritual as necessary to the success of marriages and the nation—has failed to come to fruition. When the maid admits at the end of A Lover’s Complaint that the young man would (if given the chance) “yet again betray the fore-betray’d, / And new pervert a reconciled maid” (328–329), she indicates that the failure of the Catholic sacrament of auricular confession goes hand in hand with the misguided perception
that marriage continues to be a sacrament as well. *A Lover's Complaint* reveals that, even after the Elizabethan regime’s concerted efforts to institute widespread use of the *Book of Common Prayer*, confusion still existed concerning the proper formation of the marital bond. It emerges as a complaint not just about love and marriage but about the mismatch between the contemporary legal constitution and the social fabric.

As Spenser’s *Epithalamion* indicates, however, defusing the confusion over this mismatch comes with a price. The public surveillance of the marital bond to ensure that women do not endure the maid’s fate means that even the consummation has a witness. Spenser’s recalcitrant bride may be quite lovely, but scholars have puzzled over whether she seems truly “companionable.” She glides through the day’s events in a state of passive aloofness, remarked upon but never remarking herself. Her sexual encounter on her wedding night may not be traumatic or distressing, but it is also unclear whether she finds the experience enjoyable (as Spenser presumably does). Shakespeare leaves his own maid in a state of tortured subjectivity after allowing her to be fooled by a seducer. Indeed, in a moment of self-awareness, the maid admits that she “knew vows were ever brokers to defiling” (173). The maid, however, has made her own choices rather than allowing herself to be shaped by outside forces. She has not achieved intersubjectivity (or marriage) with her lover, but she has her own voice.