Making and Unmaking in Early Modern English Drama

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Conclusion: behind the screen

This book has suggested that early modern playwrights are preoccupied with processes of making, unmaking and remaking in light of the transgressive implications of ‘finish’. The resulting emphasis on unfinished processes of construction in plays speaks strongly to the notion of early modern drama as ‘an art of incompletion: a form of display that flaunts the limits of display’.1 The observation that playwrights are drawn to processes of ‘making’ partly because of the instability of notions of ending, ‘completeness’ and even erasure has raised questions about the terms of critical access to the decentred ‘patchiness’ of early modern culture. Throughout this study, I have alluded to early modern cultural investment in incompletion as having implications for our critical vocabulary and for historicised accounts of ‘finish’, ‘destruction’ and ‘under construction’ as aesthetic terms. This conclusion further opens up those possible implications, although, appropriately for a study concerned with ‘unfinished’ work, I offer no firm statements on what those full implications might be.

My aim in this conclusion is in part to emphasise the connection between aesthetic discourse and critical constructions of early modern materiality. At points in this study I have noted that critics are drawn to characterisations of early modern culture as the site of the celebration of aesthetic incoherence or uncertainty. Discussions of the ‘statue scene’ in The Winter’s Tale emphasise openness to Hermione’s ‘unknowable image’; early modern English spectators, meanwhile, revel in visual ‘varietie’.2 Moreover, as Harris suggests, early modern matter is ‘untimely’, palimpsestic and reworkable.3 This critical emphasis on the fractured nature of early modern culture chimes with and is informed by the legacy of postmodernist ‘decentring’, through which critical activity became a mode of unmaking, ‘reading against the grain’ in order to open up fissures, fracture and faultlines in the text.4 Indeed, Harris’s discussion of ‘untimely matter’ in early modern England in part aims to situate work on ‘objects’ within Marxist and post-structuralist frameworks.5 Harris’s work arguably reflects what has been identified as a new aesthetics of disunity that is specific to the historical contexts of the twenty-first century.6 Recognising that this aesthetics is made possible by ‘our Postmodernist present’, Hugh Grady explores ‘the
age of Shakespeare’ as a ‘transitional’ moment in the development of the idea of the aesthetic. For Grady, the pre-Enlightenment, pre-capitalist status of the early modern period means that plays from this era are receptive to readings informed by the fragmented aesthetic of modernity and postmodernity, summarised in Theodor Adorno’s dictum that ‘the whole is false’. Grady’s work, then, engages with early modern England as a time that pre-dates concepts of aesthetic unity shattered by modernist aesthetics.

To be pre-aesthetic unity, however, is also to be pre-aesthetic disunity, something that is acknowledged implicitly by Grady in that he writes from a presentist perspective that recognises that ‘the poetry of pre-modern cultures is aesthetic for us, but not for the members of the cultures which produced it’. At the same time, in considering the early modern period as a time of ‘impure aesthetics’, Grady suggests that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were familiar with notions of fragmentation, ‘differentiation’ and disunity that are a ‘crucial pre-condition for the concept of the aesthetic to emerge’. But what is fragmentation in a time before completeness as a realisable end? As I have suggested, this aspect of the pre-history of our current aesthetic discourse remains underexplored, even as important studies of early modern English culture draw attention to the mismatch between our critical language and the protean forms presented by early modern evidence. For example, commenting on Stephen Orgel’s assertion that ‘the idea of a book embodying the final, perfected text was not a Renaissance one’, Sonia Massai concludes that ‘the early modern printed text was understood and treated as perfectible, and therefore never definitive’. Referring to frequent prefatory invitations to readers to complete and amend early modern texts, Massai suggests that textual instability in this period is symptomatic of early modern investment in the assumption that the text could be perfected. ‘That ‘process of perfection’, moreover, is understood as spread between multiple agents, including ‘non-authorial agents and ... the reading public’. To a great extent, my argument continues the exploration of early modern materiality as highly unstable and ‘worked’ by multiple agents that is suggested by Massai’s study. At the same time, my exploration of early modern dramatists’ engagements with notions of completion demonstrates that the ‘perfectible’ cultural product was a contested, transgressive figure in this period. When this observation is coupled with the emphasis on the ‘never definitive’ status of early modern texts, the traces of what that ‘perfected’ endpoint might resemble appear increasingly distant. Similarly, for Grady, early modern culture appears in the twenty-first century as a fragmented world of aesthetic impurity, but what is disunity in a culture in which the production of a whole is discursively discouraged? And where fragmentation is a figure of incompleteness made in deference to divine wholeness, are politically progressive readings of early modern ‘disunity’ available?

To some extent, Harris’s work on the untimeliness of matter offers answers
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185 to these questions by lifting early modern material (including textual) culture out of the temporalising boundaries of form.\textsuperscript{14} Descriptions of formal objects are invested in historical moments and thus a ‘reified’ temporal singularity.\textsuperscript{15} Matter disrupts formal boundaries, being protean, malleable and ‘designating a play of multiple temporal traces’\textsuperscript{16}. My discussion of early modern investment in prolonged processes of making and unmaking echoes Harris’s account of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as theorists of ‘a tempo characterized by an untimely aggregation of matter, agents, and historical traces’.\textsuperscript{17} In chapter 3, describing the production of incompletion as a condition of early modern cultural production, I referred to representational activity as bound by an ‘impasse’. The implicit stasis of this ‘impasse’ might easily be reconsidered as redolent of the ‘polychronic alternative’ to the ‘diachronic movement from the past to the present’ that shapes conventional temporal narratives.\textsuperscript{18} In engaging with the making, unmaking and remaking of objects which resist stable, complete ‘finish’, in other words, playwrights disrupt notions of an endpoint and engage with the temporality of matter as ‘sensuous, workable potentiality that implies pasts, presents, and futures’.\textsuperscript{19} From this perspective, there is not necessarily a need to speculate about the nature of early modern aesthetic conceptualisations, as the untimeliness of matter offers a framework for the unstable formlessness suggested by the resistance of ‘finish’.

And yet playwrights’ engagements with representational activity as constantly in process demands that we consider what that formal ‘finish’ might have meant in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In the examples discussed in this book, the limitation to constant processes of making and unmaking is a source of frustration for image-makers, from Alexander the Great’s anxious failure to draw in \textit{Campaspe}, to Sidney’s allusions to indefinite ‘reaching unto perfection’ as characteristic of the production of ‘speaking pictures’ (p. 86, line 19). Consequently, examples in which dramatists grapple with the limitations of representational activity have been discussed here as a mode of problem-solving. This is the light in which I have viewed the deployment of defacement and erasure in \textit{Friar Bacon} and \textit{Friar Bungay} and \textit{The Two Merry Milkmaids}; in addition, the evocation of the unknowability of Hermione’s image has been discussed as a vehicle for ‘reaching unto perfection’. For dramatists, the gap between mimetic and divine modes of ‘making’ is not bridgeable, but it may be interrogated through the figure of incompleteness as a synecdoche for \textit{mimesis}. As noted in my second chapter, then, early modern playwrights’ preoccupation with a material reworkability is produced by investment in divine ‘wholeness’. Grady understands decentered, fragmented modernity as the perfect vantage point from which to explore the ‘impure aesthetics’ of early modern drama.\textsuperscript{20} It might be countered that what actually connects the ‘present’ with Shakespeare’s past is an investment in fragmentation that points constantly towards the possibility of the impossible ‘whole’. This view is suggested by Johnson’s claim
that the fragmented aesthetics of modernity draws attention to an unreachable wholeness while insisting on this as a fantasy.21

Even if we are alert to aesthetic ‘unity’ as a construct in the historicised present and the untimely past, then, there is no position within aesthetic discourse dissenting from this construct. Against this backdrop, Grady’s discussion of the age of Shakespeare as a transitional period in the development of aesthetics becomes particularly important. What is at stake here is dramatists’ engagement in the beginnings of a formalising aesthetic discourse that continues to shape critical attempts to account for the fluidity and instability of early modern materiality. Playwrights’ preoccupation with processes of visual construction and ‘unmaking’ can be considered part of a developing dialogue about the status of representations as aesthetic objects. The discourse of making and unmaking therefore also becomes part of a dialogue about commodification, about the process by which, in Marxist terms, visual objects are assigned a separate, aesthetic category distinct from items such as clothing, furniture, tools, ‘things’. In his Capital, Karl Marx argued that the process of commodification mystifies social relations of production.22 Accounts of individual artistic and literary activity contribute to the construction of the ideology of the aesthetic, effacing the status of the art object as commodity by obscuring the social relations of its production. This is the effect that is achieved, for example, by the focus in the plays discussed here on interactions between an individual patron and individual visual artist. When playwrights such as Shakespeare, Lyly and Greene make metatheatrical reference to the unending process of image-making, then, they contribute to the emergence of a discourse that will eventually produce post-eighteenth-century concepts of ‘fine art’ and literary authorship. In other words, dramatists are complicit in making the aesthetic values that have led many critics to characterise post-Reformation England as a kind of visual desert in which images are never of the same quality as literary works.23 A discourse of making and unmaking that describes the production of incompletion is in this view the source of the notion of the aesthetic ‘gap’ between word and image that informs so many studies in this area.

From this perspective, playwrights’ depictions of and allusions to incomplete objects that are ‘under construction’ contribute to the development of a mode of aesthetic formalism. This contribution to aesthetic discourse can be seen, for example, in the epilogue to Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s The Roaring Girl. This epilogue tells of a painter’s foolish reworking of a picture in response to consumer feedback:

A painter, having drawn with curious art  
The picture of a woman – every part  
Limned to the life – hung out the piece to sell.  
People who passed along, viewing it well,  
Gave several verdicts on it: some displeased
The hair, some said the brows too high were raised,
Some hit her o’er the lips, misliked their colour,
Some wished her nose were shorter, some the eyes fuller;
Others said roses on her cheeks should grow,
Swearing they looked too pale, others cried no.
The workman, still as fault was found, did mend it,
In hope to please all; but, this work being ended,
And hung open at stall, it was so vile,
So monstrous and so ugly, all men did smile
At the poor painter’s folly. Such we doubt
Is this our comedy. 24

Spectator interaction with an image is here unhelpful, as a cacophony of conflicting opinions produces a work that is ‘monstrous’ in appearance. At fault also in this anecdote is the painter, who, in attempting to ‘sell’ the work, is ready to alter it according to the pronouncements of potential customers, analogous here to the playhouse audience. The combination of multiple spectator comments and the painter’s attempts to answer them produces a chaotic reworking and a delayed, unsatisfactory ending. Significantly, this configuration echoes the prologue to The Roaring Girl, which laments that:

A play (expected long) makes the audience look
For wonders – that each scene should be a book,
Composed to all perfection; each one comes
And brings a play in’s head with him: up he sums,
What he would of a roaring girl have writ –
If that he finds not here, he mews at it. (Prologue, 1–6)

The playgoer expects ‘perfection’, but that perfection cannot be found where playgoer interactions are accounted for, given the diversity of expectations with which ‘each one comes’. Such a tone of regret at the function of spectators in the production of plays is also suggested by Middleton’s epistle in the 1612 quarto of the play to ‘the Comic Play-readers, Venery and Laughter’ (epistle, unilineated).25 Here, Middleton makes clear the connection between spectators and readers as consumers and the malleability of the representations that they consume, stating that ‘the fashion of play-making I can properly compare to nothing so naturally as the alteration in apparel’ (epistle, 1–2). Of course, this clothing analogy is highly appropriate for an epistle in The Roaring Girl, given that this comedy centres on the depiction of the cross-dressed Moll Cutpurse, the ‘Venus, being a woman’ that ‘passes through the play in doublet and breeches’ (epistle, 14–16). Similarly, the anecdote about the painting of a woman in the epilogue offers a fitting analogy for a drama in which the eroticisation of the central female character is founded on her disruption of signs of sexual difference. Significantly, the epilogue depicts audience members as complicit in the production of Moll’s image, as it is suggested that Moll will reappear onstage ‘some days hence’, and
that Moll will ‘woo’ the audience by requesting the ‘sign’ of their ‘hands’ in order to ‘beckon her’ to them (35–8). This figuring of audience applause as a mode of eroticised contact between viewers and that which they view deploys the conventional misogynistic discourse of women-as-objects to suggest that the faultiness of the current production may stimulate future ‘performances’. Where the painter fails to please his customers by attempting to reflect their multiple views, the writers and actors of The Roaring Girl offer up Moll’s body to multiple, eroticised future meetings with varying audience opinion. This figuring of the commercial viability of The Roaring Girl is dependent on the idea that female imperfection is beyond repair, the site of the permanent fracture of sexual difference that horrifies Leontes in the early stages of The Winter’s Tale.

In this epilogue, then, the fractured plurality of mimesis intersects with the distorting plurality of the commercial production and reception of a representation ‘limned to the life’. The brokenness of representation is presented as aggravated by commercial modes of interaction. The epilogue expresses ‘doubt’ that The Roaring Girl resembles the distorted, reworked painting, but does not suggest that the play is able to ‘pay full’ the audience’s desires for a work ‘composed to all perfection’ (epilogue, 15–34; prologue, 3). The story of the painter therefore discourages spectator interventions regarding the content of the play while encouraging the commercial input offered by playgoing. In other words, the painter anecdote recommends the roles of professional writers and players in producing drama and associates spectators’ function in this process with disastrous aesthetic results that bring out the most limiting aspects of representational activity. As a result, the epilogue hearkens after a world in which work attains value through reference to secluded, specialised modes of production unavailable to consumers, idealised as passive except in their enthusiastic consumption. Significantly, the importance of specialist knowledge in the formation of aesthetic judgement is evoked in a source for the painter anecdote that first appears in Pliny’s Natural History and is retold in Richard Taverner’s Proverbes or adagies (first published in 1539). The source is a story about Apelles in which the painter leaves his work out to view, while ‘lurkyng in a corner to heare mens judgementes what faultes were found in this worke’ so that ‘he might amende it’. A ‘shomaker’ views the work ‘well’ and observes a fault in Apelles’s depiction of a shoe, which ‘lacked a latchet’; Apelles amends this fault and once again puts the picture on display. The shoemaker, proud to have discovered a fault in ‘so kunynge a mans worke’, starts to identify errors in the portrayal of the ‘legge’, at which point Apelles objects, crying ‘let the shoemaker not passe the shoe’. This tale recommends spectatorship informed by specialist knowledge, since Apelles rejects the shoemaker’s advice only when the latter moves outside his field of expertise to comment on the painter’s skill in drawing legs. As Taverner comments, ‘every man ought to medle no further then he can skyll of’. Transferred to The Roaring Girl, the shoemaker merges into multiple
spectators whose anonymity further emphasises the expertise of the playwright and players who ‘make’ the play.

I noted in chapter 1 that the singular figure of the painter in the rhetoric of *ut pictura poesis* enables the metaphorical effacement of the collaborative networks that produced early modern English drama. This dynamic is certainly at work in the painter anecdote in The Roaring Girl. The individual ‘painter’ alludes to the concept of a lone author; yet the painter also stands for the ‘we’ that is the writers and theatre company members (epilogue, 29). The collapsing of theatrical collaboration into this painterly figure therefore stands as a mode of commodification that simultaneously expresses disdain for the aesthetic effects of commercial reception. In this example, processes of making and unmaking are associated with the plurality of commerce and *mimesis*, while the play is presented as the aesthetic property of its authors, whose judgement is detached from that of their audience. It would be too much, on the basis of this brief analysis, to suggest that the rhetoric of *ut pictura poesis* contributes to the development of a commodifying discourse that foreshadows later aesthetic notions of creativity and authorial agency. At the same time, it might be expected that a discourse which emphasises modes of production, as does the discourse of making and unmaking, would be expected to fade into the background at the point of the reification of ‘Art’ as a distinct category from artisanal crafts. Although this moment was far in the future in 1611–12 when The Roaring Girl was first performed and published, it is notable that the painter anecdote updates the story of Apelles and the shoemaker to suit the contexts of the seventeenth-century portrait market in London. As Robert Tittler explains, the retail industry in portraits that had grown up in indoor shops in London during the sixteenth century seems to have shifted by the early seventeenth century, ‘to what sounds like a virtual open air market for such works along the Strand’.

William Painter, in the prologue to his Chaucer Newly Painted (1623), for example, refers to ‘curious Painters’ and ‘Limners’ who ‘hang’ their wares ‘out on the wall’ from ‘Temple-barre / along to Charing-crosse’. This commercial context provides a very different setting for the depiction of processes of making and unmaking to that explored in the examples discussed throughout this study. Where processes of visual construction in Campaspe, The Winter’s Tale and Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay were produced by relations between a patron and a visual artist, in The Roaring Girl the commercial art market thrives on the anonymity of consumers. It does not seem a coincidence that this epilogue’s disdain for the impact of playgoer opinion echoes what David Hawkes identifies as antitheatrical objection to the ‘aesthetic effect’ of the ‘abuse’ of poetry in its transformation ‘into a commodity to be traded on the market’.

It is often suggested that enthusiasm for the visual arts increased in England during the seventeenth century, partly as a result of the pioneering collecting activities of figures such as Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. Work by
Hamling and others has challenged this dominant narrative, suggesting that late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England enjoyed a lively, changing visual culture. As our understanding of the development of early modern English visual culture expands, new opportunities to explore the place of visual discourses in the making of aesthetics ideas also emerge. The intertwining of metatheatrical self-reflection with explorations of processes of ‘making’ suggests to me that more needs to be done to understand historicised aesthetic experience in conjunction with materialist analysis. It may be profitable for materialist studies of early modern English drama to take greater notice of both the visuality of plays of this period and the status of visual representations as ‘matter’. This might enable the consideration of similarities and differences between processes of construction relating to visual representations, and processes of making relating to more conventional ‘objects’ such as clothing, furniture, even machines. At times, this study has skirted the boundaries of these connections, discussing, for example, fantastical contraptions in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay and magic jewellery in The Two Merry Milkmaids. There are plenty of processes of construction depicted in early modern English drama that might be considered in relation to aesthetic discourse, most especially depictions of the making of apparel. In what ways might concerns about the possibility of ‘finish’ inform depictions of and allusions to shoemaking in Thomas Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday, tailoring in Jonson’s Every Man Out of His Humour, or even alchemical practice in Jonson’s The Alchemist? Studies of ‘working subjects’ in early modern English drama have contributed significantly to our understanding of the place of artisanal labour on the stage in this period, but the place of the visual artist in this picture remains curiously un-sketched. This neglect is surprising, given the importance of visual experience and image-making in Marx’s account of commodity fetishism and in his later use of the camera obscura as a metaphor for ideology. W. J. T. Mitchell considers Marx’s allusion to the camera obscura as an example of an iconoclastic rhetoric that informs Marxist discourse more broadly. To an extent echoing this iconoclastic rhetoric, scholars of early modern studies have explored connections between commodity fetishism and idolatry. In light of art-historical debates over the meanings and implications of iconoclasm and idolatry, as well as research on the history of early modern visual regimes, now seems the perfect moment to embark on new, material-visual explorations of early modern ideas about cultural production.

Towards an end: Terminus

A problem with the above suggestion is that I approach the visual and material cultures of early modern England via the presumed-to-be-pivotal point of the development of an idea of aesthetic unity. This trajectory is implicit in my focus in chapter 3 on the mid-seventeenth-century development of a discourse
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of ‘completeness’ and ‘incompleteness’. The adoption of this moment of development as a vantage point from which to view early modern terminology for cultural production is invited by the tumultuous political changes of the seventeenth century. Given that early modern English playwrights’ investment in incompletion has been understood as an expression of deference to divine social hierarchy, it might be expected that the unreachable ‘wholeness’ invoked in The Winter’s Tale would come within conceptual reach as hierarchies of divine right are brought under iconoclastic pressure. Further exploration is required into the extent to which notions of ‘finish’ alter in accordance with political and social change in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Such explorations may tell us more about ideas of completion and finitude in the period directly prior to this; however, it is not on this note that I wish to end this book.

The preoccupation with indefinite processes of making and unmaking that I have suggested is a condition of early modern cultural production gestures towards the irrelevance of linear temporal models for the discussion of early modern culture. If ‘endings’ are transgressive within early modern social hierarchies, then this means that processes of ‘making’ cannot be associated with realisable timelines of activity that may be terminated at a recognised moment. To present representations as permanently ‘under construction’ is therefore to simultaneously engage and disengage with linear temporality, because the indefinite status of the process resists temporal boundaries while necessarily being defined by those boundaries. It is partly because of this disruption to linear temporality that I am reluctant to pursue playwrights’ preoccupations with incompletion as part of a trajectory towards cultural, social and political developments that postdate the mid seventeenth century. At the same time, however, the trajectory of many writers’ allusions to processes of visual construction is forward-facing, if not always linear. When Euphues describes his portrait of Elizabeth as ‘but begun for others to end’, he imagines a future moment of completion; when Shakespeare invites spectators to ‘piece out the imperfections’ of Henry V with their ‘thoughts’, he gestures towards multiple future moments of completion. Except that, as noted in my discussion of these examples, we cannot know what ‘completion’ is envisaged, since the possibility of ‘finish’ is discursively undone by social and political hierarchy. These examples present beginnings and therefore seem to look forward to endpoints, but exist in an indefinite state of deferral. Once again, Harris’s notion of ‘untimely matter’ might provide a useful lens through which to understand and explain the disrupted temporality of playwrights’ engagements with incompletion. Harris’s understanding of matter would enable us to read Euphues and Shakespeare’s invocations of incompletion as depictions of their works as reworkable matter that designates ‘a play of multiple traces’. And yet the untimeliness of Euphues and Shakespeare’s works is shaped by appeals to formal coherence and therefore linear temporality. Similarly, the brokenness of the brazen head and the
incompletion of the erased, ‘unseen’ character reveal the permanent fracture of earthly spectacle, but in so doing gesture towards inaccessible divine ‘wholeness’. As such, ‘unmaking’ is a mode of revelation that depends on untimely ‘reworking’, but is also an aesthetic, formal state that depends on a notion of unity.

Formal unity, however, is not necessarily a figure of temporal convention in early modern thought. Instead, playwrights gesture towards a divine form that is immaterial, invisible, infinite, out of time or, as discussed in chapter 2, ‘outrê-passe’.44 Playwrights’ deference to this unknowable divine wholeness produces the discourse that invokes what register in the twenty-first century as allusions to the desire to reach moments of aesthetic ‘perfection’ and hence formality. In this observation we are no nearer to understanding the way in which Shakespeare, Lyly, Greene or the anonymous Milkmaids playwright conceptualised ‘finish’ or ‘completion’. At this point it might seem sensible to suggest that in not understanding we are perhaps closer to the mindset of a discourse shaped by a divine unknown. Such a suggestion seems evasive and unsatisfactory as a conclusion, and, moreover, guilty of investment in patriarchal fantasies of wholeness.

The only way forward to a conclusion, then, may be through the historicisation of the impasse between earthly and divine makers that produces the discursive instability of ‘finish’ in early modern English drama. In referring to an ‘impasse’ I invoke a diachronic notion of time, but do not mean here to eschew the useful critique of such temporal frameworks provided by Harris’s discussion of ‘untimeliness’. It is important to refer to an ‘impasse’ in this context because that is how mortal limitations are understood in early modern thought. That death is an unmoveable imposition is, for example, suggested by Henry Peacham’s Terminus emblem in his Minerva Britanna (figure 28). Here, Jove is depicted in the process of failing to dislodge the ‘pillar high’ that is named ‘Terminus’ and ‘fram’d in the ‘upper part … like a woman’.45

Jove, ‘with sterne aspect’, orders that the pillar ‘remoove, and get him gone’, but is disturbed when the pillar ‘stoutly’ refuses to move, being ‘the bound of thinges, which God above / Hath fixt, and none is able to remoove’.46 In a startling twist on the miraculous making described in the legend of St Luke and the divine destruction presented in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, the Terminus statue resists pagan iconoclasm through divine permanence. In this emblem, classical statuary is mobilised to assert Christian notions of mortality as an aesthetic form, a ‘bound of thinges’. It does not seem a coincidence that the Terminus statue is presented as a female figure adjoined to a phallic ‘marble hard’ pillar.47 In this, the Terminus statue recalls the patriarchal function of the matriarch as the gatekeeper of unreachable original ‘wholeness’; here, a matriarchal figure is said to encompass, to ‘bound’ mortal limitations. In this way, mortality is figured as a kind of matriarchal talisman, ‘fixt’ by supernatural intervention and constantly encompassing and working on its subjects.
Peacham’s *Terminus* emblem presents mortality as a fixed boundary, but does not suggest an endpoint in the figure of death, although death is an unmoveable aspect of mortality. Significantly, early modern accounts of the afterlife emphasise the continuation of the incompletion attendant on mortality, as the bodies of the elect are imagined to be remade and repaired by God in anticipation of...
the resurrection. The importance of ‘remaking’ at the resurrection is visible in Trevilian’s *Great Book* (figure 10). Here, Trevilian depicts a body wrapped in a winding sheet emblazoned with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2.6, ‘The Lord kil-leth and maketh alive, bringeth downe to the grave, and rayseth up againe.’

The accompanying text anticipates that when the body is risen, God will ‘clothe our bones with wonted skin, and make us for his prayse’. Similarly, in Samuel Gardiner’s *Doones-Day Booke* (1606), God’s remaking of the body using the dust of the decomposed corpse is compared to artisanal practice:

> Goldsmiths, and such as worke in mettals, can dissolve confected substances, con-create of gold, silver, brasse, steele. And such are to be found, who can expresse Oyle and liquide matter out of anie drie bodie: Wherefore the illimited power of God, which made all things of nothing, shall reduce our bodies to their formes againe, howsoever formerly reduced to nothing. Lengthen out the matter so farre as conceit and imagination will let you, and put the case thus: That a man is eaten by a wolfe; that wolfe is eaten by a lion; that lion is devoured by the foules of the aire; the foules of the aire are eaten by men; one of those men eats up another as Canibals doe: yet shall his owne bodie be given him againe: everie man shall have so much matter of his owne, as will serve to make him a perfect bodie.50

As Gardiner invokes the inability of mortal imagination to comprehend the estate of the elect after death, so he evokes God’s creation of the bodies of the elect as ‘perfect’ as a mode of remaking. That these reformulated bodies are not made new is emphasised in Thomas Draxe’s sermon of 1612 (published 1613), where it is stated that ‘the same bodie that is sowen in corruption, in weakenesse, in dishonour, shall arise againe in incorruption, power, and honour’.51 In Lewis Bayly’s *The Practice of Piete*, the first-known edition of which is dated to 1612, meanwhile, the remaking of the bodies of the elect is figured as a mode of repair, since ‘howsoever Tyrants bemangled their bodies in pieces, or consumed them to ashes: yet shall the Elect finde it true at that day, that not an haire of their head is perished’.52 In these examples, death is not an endpoint, but, for the elect at least, a stage in the process of mortal existence that is marked by incompleteness until the moment of resurrection.

It has been pointed out before that early modern people understood death as a continuation of a ‘cultural process’, rather than as a ‘binary’ opposition to life.53 This well-established observation, coupled with Harris’s account of the ‘untimeliness’ of early modern matter, should encourage critique of the stability of concepts of linear temporality in early modern England. If we combine these observations with the suggestion that in this period finish is constantly deferred due to the impasse produced by the concept that the *Terminus* emblem represents, early modern concepts of temporality appear increasingly inscrutable. If finitude is constantly deferred, then how is the passage of events prior to that deferred ending understood in early modern thought? This is not to suggest that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England people did not fear death as an
ending of sorts, and that this did not impact at all on the literature of the period. Writing on ‘late style’ as a Romantic construct, Gordon McMullan notes that early modern attitudes to the ends of life were shaped by ‘downright negative’ portrayals of the elderly, as well as complex models of the seven ‘ages of man’.  

The most famous early modern English rendering of the ages of man is of course in Shakespeare’s As You Like It, where, having declared that ‘all the world’s a stage’, Jaques describes seven ages of man, concluding:

Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.  

Jaques’s metatheatrical allusion to old age as the ‘last scene’ of life as an ‘eventful history’ demonstrates an association between what we would think of as a narrative ‘ending’ reached by linear progression and the ending of life. At the same time, the ‘last’ scene is a moment of incompleteness, a degeneration to ‘mere oblivion’, a disembodied erasure that is still present on life’s stage. It is not that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had no sense of an ending, but what this ‘ending’ may have entailed in social, material and aesthetic terms is highly ambiguous. As Jaques’s speech suggests, the latter stages of life are associated with material loss, and there is reason to consider death as a point of material finitude that sits uncomfortably with cultural investment in incompleteness. For the living, death may be associated with finitude where material properties are concerned. This much is signalled by plays which comment on the remarriage of widowers, where the death of a wife is equated with a permanent loss of property. We might remember the instance in The Winter’s Tale in which Leontes and Paulina discuss the possibility of the king’s remarriage, and Paulina advises that this event may only take place if Leontes meets with ‘another / As like Hermione as is her picture’ (5.1.74–5). The loss of property occasioned by the death of the wife in this example is translated into the irreplaceable loss of an incomparable aesthetic object. As discussed in chapter 2, Paulina considers Hermione to be a ‘picture’ of unearthly perfection, but this allusion to the possibility of ‘another’ Hermione necessarily alludes to pictures as replaceable forms where a replacement is implicitly new. That formal newness arguably refers to the formal ‘ending’ of that which is replaced. The dynamics of this process of exchange are echoed in Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra, in which Enobarbus consoles and advises Antony following the death of the latter’s wife, Fulvia:

When it pleaseth their deities to take the wife of a man from him, it shows to man the tailors of the earth; comforting therein, that when old robes are worn out, there are members to make new. If there were no more women but Fulvia, then you had indeed a cut, and the cause to be lamented. This grief is crowned with consolation:
your old smock brings forth a new petticoat, and indeed the tears live in an onion that should water this sorrow.\textsuperscript{56}

Enobarbus envisages the death of a wife as an inevitable stage in a process of exogamy that is ‘made’ by the gods, figured here as ‘tailors’. Here, importantly, the ‘tailors of the earth’ are engaged in providing a ‘new’ wife, figured as a ‘petticoat’ that replaces a disused (and implicitly inferior) ‘smock’. Necessarily, Enobarbus speaks of replacement, rather than repair or ‘remaking’; a description of replacement requires the terminology of newness. Finitude is also implicit in the process Enobarbus describes. Significantly, as Jones and Stallybrass explain, ‘there were virtually no ready-made clothes in Renaissance England (except for certain forms of underwear, stockings and some loose gowns)’.\textsuperscript{57} Accounting for spousal succession as a mode of material exchange, Enobarbus misogynistically figures death as a moment of material finitude in which the value of the broken object does not justify its repair, but does justify its replacement. Material finitude and newness here remedy the idolatrous over-evaluation of the commodified, replaceable wife.

A final example is offered by Chapman’s \textit{Monsieur D’Olive}, in which the widowed Earl of St Anne is persuaded to fall in love with and marry Eurione, who is the ‘surviving image’ of the Earl’s ‘Dead Wife’ (IV.i.34–8). This remarriage enables the burial of St Anne’s deceased wife, whose body the Earl has had embalmed and displayed in his home. St Anne, we are told:

\begin{flushleft}
Retaines his wives dead Corse among the living, 
For with the rich sweetes of restoring Balmes, 
He keeps her lookes as fresh as if she liu’d, 
And in his chamber (as in life attirde) 
She in a Chaire sits leaning on her arme, 
As if she onely slept: and at her feete 
He like a mortified hermit clad, 
Sits weeping out his life, as hauing lost 
All his lifes comfort: And that, she being dead 
(Who was his greatest part) he must consume, 
As in an Apoplexy strooke with death. 
Nor can the Duke nor Dutchesse comfort him, 
Nor messengers with consolatory letters 
From the kind King of France, who is allyed 
To her and you. But to lift all his thoughts 
Vp to another world, where she expects him, 
He feedes his eares with soule-exciting musicke, 
Solemne and Tragicall, and so Resolves 
In those sadde accents to exhale his soule. (I.i.155–73)
\end{flushleft}

St Anne therefore creates a transgressive tableau that is notably Catholic in function and appearance, as the Earl worships at his dead wife’s feet ‘like a mortified hermit’. Where in \textit{The Winter’s Tale} music is deployed to ‘awaken’ the suppos-
edly stone Hermione, here St Anne ‘feedes’ on ‘soul-exciting musicke’ in an attempt to raise his own soul, quickening his own death in order to meet with his wife in ‘another world’. The embalmed body of the dead wife is the antithesis to the supposed statue of Hermione, which reflects the passage of time, showing Hermione ‘wrinkled’ as Romano’s ‘excellence’ as a sculptor ‘lets go by some sixteen years and makes her / As she lived now’ (5.3.28–32). Embalming prevents the natural decay of the dead wife’s corpse, fixing her in a moment of life, ‘fresh as if she liv’d’, asleep in a chair. The Earl’s intervention in natural processes of degeneration produces an inactive, sterile object which is complete and finished in that it is made so as to avoid decay. This sterile completion is simultaneously bound by spiritual incompleteness, since the corpse cannot ‘consume, that it may reassure / A forme incorruptible’ (III.i.43–4). The disturbing aesthetic ‘finish’ presented by the spectacle of the embalmed dead wife articulates the transgressive nature of St Anne’s attempt to preserve her image and to quicken his death.

While the story of St Anne’s dead wife pivots on the blasphemous idolatry of artificial ‘finish’, Chapman’s play follows Shakespeare’s treatment of remarriage by investing in notions of formal newness. As the ‘surviving image’ that replaces the dead wife, Eurione is both a mimetic copy, aesthetically connected to her predecessor, and necessarily separate, new; a replacement. As a replacement, Eurione is a ‘new’, although imitative, object. In this way, the discourse of wife-as-property in Monsieur D’Olive demonstrates that newness is permissible and even necessary within the boundaries of mortality, so long as this newness is prompted by the natural ‘ending’ of death. Newness, moreover, has a functional role in the mediation of divinely ordained processes of making and unmaking, since the replacement of the dead wife with Eurione allows the burial of the former and thus the remaking of her body in the grave. Importantly, the example of the displacement of the dead wife with her ‘surviving image’ is not an example of the exchange of one complete form for another. Instead, Chapman presents the exchange of a false representation of something that ‘does not exist’ for an image which is the ‘surviving’ copy and trace of the abused image which became the false representation.58 St Anne’s creation of an embalmed, sealed-off idol therefore demonstrates the transgressive associations of the ‘whole’ aesthetic form in a context in which deferral, incompleteness and the reworkability of matter are central functions of ‘natural’ process. Incompletion, fragmentation and material degeneracy are figures of social order, where aesthetic unity is a prohibited end that seriously disturbs the function of that order.

It is not surprising that attempts to ‘control’ death register as transgressive in early modern English drama, but the extent to which notions of formal completion are complicit in transgression disrupts our current critical framework. In light of the postmodern critique that exposed the oppressive patriarchal and colonial function of formal aesthetic ‘values’, we are not given to associate form with dissent. What is often considered the iconoclastic climate of post-Reformation
England meanwhile encourages us to connect the plays and literature of this period with dis-orderly fracture. My study suggests the extent to which dramatists negotiated images of destruction and brokenness within the immovable boundaries suggested by the contrast between man and God. In Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, and in The Two Merry Milkmaids, iconoclasm and erasure are means by which the brokenness of mortal, mimetic experience is deferentially displayed. In The Winter’s Tale, meanwhile, unreachable ‘wholeness’ is transgressively invoked through modes of passive spectatorship that opt out of the deferential production of incompleteness. The notion of a formal, aesthetic ‘endpoint’ hovers somewhere between the wholeness of divine creativity and the possibility of material completion, its deferral a matter of important social decorum. When Euphues writes that his portrait of Elizabeth is but ‘begun for others to end’, and when Sidney suggests that poets must continually ‘reach unto perfection’, both posit early modern image-making as a process predicated on the resistance to finish. This investment in the constant deferral of meaning resembles the twenty-first-century celebration of ‘disunity’, but early modern investment in incompleteness is not celebratory. Aesthetic unity, the notion of which is implicit in constant allusions to fragmentation, incompleteness and brokenness, is instead a radical, revolutionary position to which none ought to pretend.

This observation is not intended to contribute to the development of ‘new formalist’ studies or to suggest a recuperation of pre-modern aesthetic values. Instead, I hope to draw attention to the very great historical difference between twenty-first-century concepts of cultural production and the ends and aims of ‘making’ as experienced by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Allusions to processes of visual construction offered dramatists a means through which to reflect on representational practice at a time when aesthetic discourse is highly incomplete. While the discourse of making and unmaking offered a means through which to negotiate the politicised, idolatrous associations of ‘finish’, this discourse repeatedly gestured towards the possibility of formal ending. Depictions of plays as ‘incomplete’ and ‘reworkable matter’ therefore continually push towards the development of a notion of aesthetic ‘finish’. Early modern investment in the resistance of finish is conditioned to work towards its own end; and yet by the mid seventeenth century the language of completeness and incompleteness was still in the early stages of development. This study has suggested possible meanings invested in the terms of early modern aesthetic discourse, but I cannot say with certainty what Shakespeare, Greene or Lyly understood by a ‘finished product’ in a time before the aesthetic whole. Our understanding of the language of cultural production in this period remains tantalisingly incomplete, resembling Lyly’s Euphues, who is ‘drawn but to the waist’ and ‘peepeth as it were behind some screen’ (p. 159). We may not be able to gain a full picture of this discourse, but in recognising the significance of incompleteness in early modern culture we can begin to obtain a better view.
Notes

2 Wotton, The Elements of Architecture, p. 4.
3 Harris, Untimely Matter, pp. 16–20.
7 Grady, Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics, pp. 3–5.
9 Grady, Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics, p. 17.
10 Grady, Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics, p. 16.
12 Massai, Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor, p. 200.
13 Massai, Shakespeare and the Rise of the Editor, p. 200. The emphasis is in the text.
14 Harris, Untimely Matter, pp. 7–8.
15 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 8.
16 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 8.
17 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 20.
18 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 20.
19 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 7.
20 Grady, Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics, pp. 4–5, 16.
21 Johnson, Mother Tongues, p. 62.
23 See Gent, Picture and Poetry, pp. 1–4, Meek, Narrating the Visual, p. 15, and see. Hamling, Decorating the 'Godly' Household, p. 8.
24 Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, The Roaring Girl or Moll Cutpurse, ed.

25 The emphasis here is reproduced in Kahn’s edition of the play from the quarto.

26 This promise is thought to gesture towards the possible appearance of the ‘real’ Moll, Mary Frith, who is known to have sat on the stage at the Fortune theatre, wearing man’s apparel, playing a lute and singing; see Middleton and Dekker, *The Roaring Girl*, ed. Kahn, p. 721.


31 Taverner, *Proverbs*, sigs C1v–C2r.


34 Tittler adds that by the mid seventeenth century, ‘paintings were also sold in London bookshops’, *Portraits, Painters, and Publics*, p. 77.


38 See Hamling and Williams (eds), *Art Re-Formed; Hamling, Decorating the ‘Godly’ Household*, and Gent (ed.), *Albion’s Classicism*.


40 For example, the process of ‘substitution’ through which ‘the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things’ is compared to ‘the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve’ that is ‘perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye’, Marx, *Capital*, p. 165.


Conclusion: behind the screen


43 Harris, Untimely Matter, p. 8.
44 Cummings, The Literary Culture of the Reformation, p. 49.
45 Peacham, Minerva Britanna, p. 193.
46 Peacham, Minerva Britanna, p. 193.
47 Peacham, Minerva Britanna, p. 193.
48 Trevilian, Great Book, p. 371.
49 Trevilian, Great Book, p. 371.
54 McMullan, Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing, pp. 194–8.
57 Jones and Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing, p. 185.
58 Besançon, The Forbidden Image, p. 66.
59 Dollimore, ’Art in a Time of War’, p. 43. The emphasis is in the text.