

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



The 'Concaue Wombe': Echo, Love and Death in *A Louers Complaint*

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Introduction

No-one dies in *A Louers Complaint*. But the poem finds death in the heart of love itself. This essay suggests it does so by stressing and strengthening the complaint's traditional links between love, death, and echo. The most important contextual study of the poem – John Kerrigan's *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint': A Critical Anthology* – finds these triangulated motifs in plaintive genres as historically distant as Ovidian elegy, Virgilian pastoral, Biblical Psalm or Lamentation, medieval *chanson d'aventure*, broadside ballad, *de casibus* cautionary tale and Spenser's *Ruine* poems.¹ The use of echo is perhaps unsurprising in the literature of abandonment, as repeating a vanished word arguably seeks to retain or recoup a (happier) past in a (desolated) present. But echo often stresses in these texts enduring emptiness and lament. In Ovid's *Heroides* 10 the rocks' echoes of Ariadne's lost lover's name, 'Theseus', while offering some consolation, anticipate the excessively prolonged and repeated funeral ceremonies – breast-beating, hair-pulling, fainting – at the end of the piece.² Theseus is gone, but not dead. Echo figures the unsuccessful mourning which results: the mourning of

¹ The complaint mode links love, death and echo in various ways and to various degrees. The lady of medieval lyric, who in 'Als i me rode Pis endre dai' hopes her betrayer rots in his grave, laments her abandonment via *epimone*: repeated refrain or burden. The broadside ballad, a source of stories of murdering wives (see Craik 437-459) may also be set where 'lowd Ecchos are ringing' (*Loue without Lucke: Or, The Maidens Misfortune*) (Kerrigan 14). Metaphors linking (eroticised) women to ruined (thus lifelessly echoic) 'cities, temples, palaces' are common to Jeremiah's Lamentations (Jerusalem has 'filthiness' 'in her skirts' (1.9)), their Renaissance translations, adaptations and derivations, and the lamenting Verlame of Spenser's *Ruines of Time* (Kerrigan 31). The *De casibus* tradition depicts "'fallen' but sympathetic women' (27) while 'necromantic and prosopopeic devices' let the dead echo from the grave (33).

² In George Turberville's 1567 translation of the *Heroides* – republished five times by 1600 – Ariadne has 'a good' (enough) of 'fainting fittes' and 'beating of my breast' (65).

mourning. In the most famous and influential retelling of her tale, Echo herself dies unsuccessfully, melted into the rocks and stones of pastoral landscape, but still echoing, eternally continuing an undead state: ‘nought is left but voice and bones. The voice yet still remains’ (*Metamorphoses* trans. Golding 3.496). Samuel Daniel’s ‘Complaint of Rosamond’, narrated by a ghost, offers the narrator ‘Eternal matter for my Muse to mourne’ (line 738), reminding us that Echo and the *Fama* of poetic re-citation were often connected in the Renaissance.³ This essay traces, first, *A Louers Complaint*’s innovative variations upon these generic themes via Catherine Bates’ argument (174-215) that the poem depicts desire as a repeated circulation of violent urges within and between women, and thus implies love has murderous and suicidal tendencies. It then goes on to explore how this death-laced, often masochistic desire is connected to the poem’s distinctive structure, where a concentric set of speakers (maid, youth, narrator) each ‘echo’ a confessional speech of complaint, where sexually transgressive desire is uneasily paralleled and juxtaposed with the need for absolution and a good death. The ostensibly puzzling final stanza is then explored as the poem’s culminating combination of its erotic and confessional forms of masochistic repetition.

Femininity and desire in the ‘concaue wombe’

As the title suggests, *A Louers Complaint* is instantly aligned with the complaint mode. From the very first line we are invited to believe its rhyme royal stanzas, which rise ‘to a moment of fullness’ and fall with ‘a pointed conclusion’ (Kerrigan 46), roll and reverberate within a ‘concaue wombe’ (line 1).⁴ This echoic space, that ‘rewords’ the story to form a ‘doble voice’ (3), is soon juxtaposed with frustrated, death-like desire. The narrator spies an abandoned ‘fickle maid’ (5) whose lost love places her like Ariadne or Rosamond in the limbo-land between life and death: she is ‘full pale’ (4), almost a ‘carkas’ (11), much of her beauty is ‘sithed’ (12) and much ‘youth’ ‘quit’ (13): as she later admits, she has suffered ‘iniury of many a blasting houre’ (72). The ‘doble voice’ (3) echoes the maid’s ‘vndistinguisht wo’ (20), but any sympathy between the echoing landscape and the abandoned maid is tinged with danger. While the uterine image of the ‘wombe’ suggests sympathetic maternal benevolence, the countryside

³ The link is commonplace, dating at least back to Fama in *Metamorphoses* book 12 who ‘lives in a house of sounding brass which repeats and doubles (‘refert iteratque’) what it hears’ (Kerrigan 43). Louise Vinge notes this association was developed through the Middle Ages by Boccaccio and Arnulphe of Orléans (102-3).

⁴ I am quoting from John Kerrigan’s edition of the poem in *Motives of Woe* – a near-replication of the text as set in the 1609 Quarto (‘Q’) – because it retains typographical features that are important to this argument, such as the absence of quotation marks and the ‘archaizing impulse’ of its paradoxically neologistic language (Kerrigan, *Sonnets* 432). References to other Shakespeare texts are from the first edition of *The Norton Shakespeare*.

seems rather to seek to absorb or melt her away, as it does Echo. The river by which the maid lies down to complain threatens to become the site of her disappearance, death and burial:

A thousand fauours from a maund she drew,
Of amber, christall and of beaded Iet,
Which one by one she in a riuer threw,
Upon whose weeping margent she was set,
Like vsery applying wet to wet,
Or Monarches hands that lets not bounty fall
Where want cries some, but where excesse begs all. (36-42)

John Roe suggests here ‘possibilities of suicide by drowning are by no means remote’ (116). This is supported by sixteenth-century complaint’s social and literary contexts: ‘suicide was a real possibility’ for abandoned women (Kerrigan 48), and analogies have been suggested between the maid and the distracted Ophelia (Craik 445-6). The maid and river are after all threateningly close: she is on the ‘margent’, and the transferred epithet ‘weeping’ adds affective to physical proximity. In conjunction with the possessive imagery of ‘vsery’, swollen by a cryptic final line that symmetrically opposes just equality (‘where want cries some’) with exponential excess (‘where excesse begs all’), the stanza cumulatively suggests the river greedily draws the maiden towards it precisely because she endows it with jewels and swells it with tears. The psycho-geography of the ‘concaue wombe’ thus implies a distinctive kind of reciprocation ‘between the body and its social and material environment’ (Rowe 153). Some plaintive surroundings gently seek to ‘ayde and succour’ melancholy; here, however, the river’s murderously usurious thirst for tears and gems intensifies (and is intensified by) the maid’s repeated crying and throwing of them.⁵ The actions that suggest this covert suicidal impulse are consciously described in grammatical forms suggesting echo-like repetition, such as present participles or adverbs of frequency. For example, the maid cries over ‘many a’ ‘folded schedull’ or love letter (43), ‘often’ bathing them ‘in her fluxiue eyes’ (50), ‘laundring the silken figures’ and ‘conceited charecters’ of her ‘Napkin’ (16-7, order reversed).

The tokens and favours passed amongst lovers extend this sense of repeated activity and, by extension, its connection of love with suicide and unsuccessful mourning. In a

⁵ ‘Ayde and succour’ comes from Turberville’s translation of *Heroides* 10: ‘Thus whiles about the shore, / On Thesus name I crie, / The hollow rocks at e[v]rie call and cleaping [cleping = calling] did reply. /How oft I calld, the place so often Theseus namde:/ As though it would a wofull wight her *ayde and succour* framed’ (61, emphasis added).

groundbreaking reading, to which I am indebted throughout this section, Catherine Bates analyses the gifts' 'striking [...] quantity' (184): the maid throws a '*thousand* favours' in the river (line 36, emphasis added); quantifiers like 'many' (43, 45), 'yet mo' (47) apply to 'papers', 'rings' (6), favours of 'amber, cristall' and 'beaded Iet' (37), rings of 'Posied gold and bone' (45) 'letters' (47) and 'deepe brain'd sonnets' (209). These myriad objects symbolise not only the young man who gave them to the maid but also the abandoned women who previously gave them to him: 'Looke here what tributes wounded fancies *sent me*' (197, emphasis added). This recursive effect, which implies a resemblance between the maid's (suicidal, repetitious) love and that felt by the other women, is based on an echo-like repetition of signifiers. The letters and sonnets are texts, so are the jewels: pearls and rubies signify respectively their senders' pallor and blushing, itself an indicator of 'deare modesty' (202) or 'affections hot' (218). Emeralds and opals cure weak sight: an implicit plea to the youth to 'see' their love (Bates 185). Some rings also arguably represent 'an agreement of pre-contract' (Kerrigan 46). But, again like echo, these repetitions are haunted by a sense of futility, the 'felt pointlessness of complaint' (50): no conventionally happy consummation of love is witnessed or articulated anywhere in the poem. Indeed, the tokens' obscured origins – the poem neither specifies how old they are, nor who first made or sent them – invite speculation that at least some of the already 'wounded fancies' have since died from grief: the maid's suicidally repetitive acts are an echo of theirs.

While these text-like tokens have some signifying content, this content never seems expressive of any one creator or sender. Their circulations tend rather to represent desire as both repetitive and impersonal.⁶ For Bates, the poem sees erotic energy formed predominantly in and by the social group, not by or between individual persons. For example, the maid sees primarily the other 'maidens eyes' admiring the youth (81). 'She desires him not for himself but because he is desired of others' (Bates 188). And the poem's repeated stress on the admirers' sheer quantity – 'Many there were' (line 134), 'So many' (141), 'Among the many' (190), 'all these hearts' (274) – increasingly suggests this mimetic desire is widespread: everybody wants the youth because everybody else does. The youth is thus merely the superficial centre, a symbolic image, of a more powerful collective erotic force, based on rivalry and antagonism. It is, moreover, increasingly coded as feminine. The poem's setting, the '*concaue wombe*', gives the mode of love it articulates a certain feminine quality from the beginning: the men the maid describes start to resemble her in being enchanted by the youth. Even the

⁶ Colin Burrow notes that while 'objects have a high emotional charge to the characters [...] the meaning of those objects depends on prior stories to which readers of the poem are not fully party': they therefore 'remain darkly laden with hidden significance' (141).

youth's own masculine features are smoothed away. He is deemed beautiful for his feminine characteristics: he is 'maiden-tongu'd' (100), near-beardless ('Smal shew of man was yet vpon his chinne' (92)); even his manly anger (101-2) is 'authoriz'd' by 'youth' (i.e. not being yet a man) and attenuated by epithets like 'sweet' (103). The poem thus seems to develop the fundamental theme of complaint – a man's desertion – to explore and describe an 'exclusively female' desire (Bates 204) which could remain following the complete disappearance of masculinity itself.⁷

This 'female' desire is a paradoxical blend, mixing repetitive, murderous and masochistic violence with hidden tenderness. The maid attacks the women's tokens (and by implication the women themselves) over and over: 'breaking' (line 6) 'tearing' (6), 'Crackt many a ring' (45), 'gaue to teare' (50), 'the lines she rents' (55). But her outward aggression mirrors her internalised self-destructive erotic impulse. As she laments, dissuasive 'advise' concerning love's danger only 'makes our wits more keene' (160-1); 'feare of harmes that preach in our behoofe' (165) is overpowered by 'satisfaction to our blood' (162). The context that suggests that desire only really exists collectively, amongst feminine (or feminised) rivals, also implies this doubly-directed violence – to others and oneself – is likewise universal, common to all. The maid's 'drowning' the tokens in the river thus becomes not only a motif for her own suicidal impulse but also an act of murderous love, an altruistic indulgence of her rivals' desire to die, to 'find their sepulchres in mud' (46). Like the disappearing Echo's lament for the dying Narcissus, the scene juxtaposes a strange empathy for a dead or dying loved one with an urge towards self-destruction and motifs of bodily decomposition: the women shrink to tokens and then disappear into the landscape. This movement is also figured by more directly corporeal imagery. The maid throws in the river (or cries over) material parts of women's bodies. As well as giving to 'the flud' letters 'sadly pend' in actual 'blood' (44, 47), the poem suggests the tears the maid cries into the river were once those of other women.⁸ In the youth's later, strange conceit he bodily absorbs all

⁷ There is regrettably not enough space here to explore the theoretical ramifications of the poem's treatment of desire. Bates argues however its erasure of masculine or father figures 'plays havoc' with Freudian models of identification, desire, and the formation of gendered identity in the Oedipus complex (188). Correspondingly, the empathetic forms of violence I go on to locate in the poem arguably challenge Freud's association of sadism and masochism – 'two faces of the same perversion' – with emotional coldness: 'A sadistic child takes no account of whether or not he inflicts pain, nor does he intend to do so' ('Three Essays on Sexuality' qtd. in Laplanche and Pontalis 402).

⁸ The letters 'pend in blood' are sealed with 'sleided' silk (separated out into strands): 'the associations this rare word has when used elsewhere [e.g. *Pericles* 15.21, *Troilus and Cressida* 5.1.26] might suggest that these letters were written, wrapped, and sealed by female hands' (Bates 186). The letters would in this reading signify 'false blood' a 'register of lies' and 'unapproved witness' because they remind the maid of the women's deceptions by the youth, as well as the youth's deception of her (lines 52-3); and

the tears women have cried over him – they have ‘emptied all their fountaines in my well’ (255) – and should in turn ejaculate them into her (‘to physick your cold brest’ (258-9)). The youth’s logic and imagery, plausibly continuous with certain tenets of Galenic or Lucretian materialism, imply tears are purified sperm.⁹ The maid’s tears may thus be read as a kind of echo of and tribute to all the women who had been seduced by the youth before her, and who had therefore purified his sperm into the tears they had cried back into him. Crying them into the ‘weeping margent’ thus not only sublimates and ‘ex-presses’ the youth’s sperm in her, but also all the other women’s tears he had physiologically (and emotionally) corrupted.¹⁰ This purification of the ‘concaue wombe’ – transforming a duplicitous man’s sperm to women’s tears – exemplifies the poem’s gravitation towards feminisation; while ‘drowning’ these tears in the river exemplifies the maid’s murderous kindness to women as well as her own impulse towards suicide. *Pace* Kerrigan, the tears and tokens do not only symbolise the maid herself (‘to shed them is to throw part of oneself’ (50)): their circulations also represent the chain of echoic, femininised, masochistic yet loving desire of which the maid is but an illustrative link.

A Louers Complaint thus uses echoic motifs – repetitive gestures, cyclical structures, imagery of the ‘concaue wombe’ – to posit a kind of being-toward-death at the very core of the desire it traces within and between women, which remains central even as masculine figures are purified and systematically ebbed away. The desire that remains emerges as a curious kind of solidarity, a silent claim for a lovingly reciprocated feminine violence. This claim is, I argue in the next section, supported, developed and corroborated by the way the poem through echo ‘dramatizes the emotional difficulties of “confessioun”’ (Kerrigan 50). Bates’ otherwise excellent reading underplays somewhat the poem’s use of different voices and narrative perspectives. While Elizabeth Harvey claims ‘female complaint is “the paradigmatic ventriloquized text”’ (140, qtd. in Bates 181), Bates complains ‘cross-voicing’ – the narration of a woman’s tale by a man – silently reaffirms gendered norms, ‘still at some level presupposed even if as a cultural fiction there to be interrogated and undermined’ (181). But the poem’s varied use of repetition shows that it does not link radical change to the deconstruction

‘Inke’ would be a more appropriate writing medium – ‘blacke and damned’ (54) – for the deathly desire they symbolise and perpetuate.

⁹ Margaret Healy’s recent work comparably sets the poem in contexts of Renaissance alchemy and the attempt to ‘purify the soul of its drosses, cleansing its infected will and transmuting it into spiritual gold’ (par. 8).

¹⁰ Raffaele Pettazzoni notes confessional lament forms part of ‘eliminary practices in the proper sense of the Latin *exprimere*, to press out, to extract by pressure’ (49-50); Kerrigan connects this to bodily practices like ‘purging’ and ‘vomiting’ (49).

of gender distinctions, as Bates does; it seems rather radically to reconstruct such distinctions on new terms. Echo is at once a mythological influence and motif for articulating a distinctively feminine desire, and a narrative strategy for justifying this desire: it forms the basis of a new mode of confession for sexual transgression. The poem witnesses and extends early modern challenges to auricular confession, where absolution may only be granted by men. By progressively internalising (and thus feminising) this powerfully gendered process by echoing the words of her betrayer, the maid ultimately describes her deathly erotic excitement without false contrition.

Echo, confession, and ‘heauens fell rage’

The ‘concaue wombe’ is a figure not only for the poem’s secret circulations of a feminine-coded masochistic desire, but also for its use of narrative voice. The poem implicitly asks readers to read it in stereo: it is at one point ‘an echo of an echo of an echo of an echo’ (Whitworth 160). The youth’s seductive speech only comes to the reader via the maid’s recitation, its echo from the ‘concaue wombe’, and the narrator himself. This intermingling of voices is borne out typographically on the page by Q’s lack of quotation marks.¹¹ The very complexity of this multiply mediated voice radically complicates what has already been called ‘Shakespeare’s most sustained treatment of the trauma caused by the transformation of penance in Tudor England’ (Stegner 80). ‘Penance’, ‘penitence’, and (self-)‘punishment’ share with ‘plaint’ loose etymological connections with Latin *plangere* (beat the breast, lament) (Kerrigan 7), underlining the poem’s continuous exploration of such themes and the way they intertwine love with death. In yielding to the youth, the maid has lost outside marriage her ‘white stole of chastity’ (line 297), and committed a sexual sin. Her ‘Aye me I fell’ (321) has obvious postlapsarian resonance; the narrator suggests she is afflicted by ‘heauens fell rage’ (13). Talking to a ‘reuerend man’ (57) thus suggests penitence and by extension an urge to die well.¹² A *Louers Complaint*’s echoic structure, however, distances utterance from utterer, raising troubling questions about confession as a fully, authentically owned speech-act of contrition. In this, echo deconstructs dichotomies between the poem’s ‘spiritual density’ (Kerrigan 39) and exploration of eroticism.¹³ In

¹¹ The way the complaint mingles echoing voices elicits by the late sixteenth century a felt need for typographical ordering: ‘It is no accident that John Higgins, adding episodes to the *Myrroure for Magistrates*, should have pioneered the use of inverted commas for direct speech, distinguishing the plainant’s discourse from that of narrator and compiler’ (Kerrigan 26). But this need is not reflected in the Q publication of *A Louers Complaint*.

¹² In a 1609 sermon (*Loue’s Complaint*) William Holbrook declares ‘Without repentance, damnation’ (qtd. in Kerrigan 49).

¹³ The dichotomy is Kerrigan’s: ‘Whatever the importance of ‘confession’ and repentance elsewhere, this poem is about love’ (41).

an historical moment, and a plaintive space, where the conventionally masculine mode of accusation and expiation are noticeably weakened, the maid's echoing of her betrayer works towards a new, feminised, confessional speech which may redeem – on its own self-absolvingly masochistic terms – the cyclical, murderously loving desire of the 'concaue wombe'.

This transformation of confessional modes may be illustrated by the 'reuerend man' (line 57) who approaches the maid to hear more of her story, and whom Bates uses to substantiate her argument that in *A Louers Complaint* 'nothing is masculinised': he is 'present so tenuously as soon to vanish into thin air' (204). The weakness of this putative 'confessor' is historicised by Paul Stegner's account of theological controversies in Tudor England. Reformers reinterpreted Christ's handing the keys of heaven to St Peter (Matt. 16:19) as the power of all Christians (i.e. not only male priests) to grant absolution. Private confession ultimately 'all but disappeared in the religious life of the Established Church' (83), and, as Keith Thomas points out, clergy and parishioners felt wistful and nostalgic for the confessional (Thomas 148, 154-59).¹⁴ These historical uncertainties indirectly inform the dubious portrayal of this 'reuerend man' whom the maid seeks as a 'father', her very first word to him (line 71). His past life is associated not with the church but the 'ruffle' (business, ostentation) of 'court' and 'city' (59); his (albeit observant) disengagement from both ('let go by / The swiftest houres obserued as they flew' (59-60)) sits well with the passive silence he sustains throughout. The description 'Sometime a blusterer' (58), glossed by editors as 'former braggart' (Burrow 699) may add to this ineffectuality an airy element. In this poem 'sometime' can also mean 'often' or 'continually' as well as 'formerly', as when the narrator describes the maid's eyes rolling: 'Sometime diuerted their poore balls are tide / To th'orbed earth' (24-5); 'bluster' may denote mere wind (OED dates this sense back to Stanyhurst's 1582 translation of the *Aeneid*). The suggestion is that this airy, ineffectual 'blusterer', whose own speech is always reduced to indirect discourse, and who replies to neither call of 'father' (71, 288), is less the maid's embodied and authoritative priestly (i.e. male) confessor, than an echo which can allow a distinctively feminine mode of confessional speech to take form.¹⁵ This is supported by the poem's near-unique use of 'diuide' as synonym for 'listen' ('He again desires [...] Her greeuance with his hearing to diuide' (66-7)) which cleverly signals and anticipates the

¹⁴ Luther's 'Sacrament of Penance 1519' 'pressed for a simpler rite, one that could be conducted by laymen' (Kerrigan 24). The confessional's abolition transforms 'auricular confession' into 'occasional clerical counselling' (Craik 440), and reduces 'regular obligation to be shiven'; in the case of execution this often leads to hurried 'gallows confession' (Craik 446; Thomas 187).

¹⁵ Echo's voice retains feminine pronouns even after her body disappears: 'Yet is she heard of every man; it is her only sound' (*Metamorphoses* trans. Golding 3.499).

grievance's variously divided vocalisation.¹⁶ It is first 'diuided' when the narrator echoes the maid alone (71-177), secondly sub-'diuided' as maid and narrator jointly echo her betrayer (177-280), and thirdly 'diuided' again as the young man's speech ceases, and the narrator ostensibly echoes the maid alone again, even if this is admittedly complicated by his disappearance from the final stanzas (281-329). Despite the original text's lack of quotation marks, the speech's shifts in vocalisation outline a tripartite sequence, during which takes shape an eroticised confession of ever-repeated self-murder, and the ethic of self-absolution that justifies it.

The first part of this sequence establishes many of this confessional mode's central contradictions. It is as if the absence of a male confessor compels the penitent to find a mode of confession she herself finds convincing.¹⁷ The strategies she adopts for this, however, are largely unsuccessful. She fantasises a sinless, 'fresh' personal, internalised erotic economy against which her own transgression might be measured: 'I might as yet haue bene a spreading flower, / Fresh to my selfe, if I had selfe applyed / Love to myself and to no love beside' (76-7). But any such isolation is ultimately blurred by the hysterical frenzy of circuitous rivalries traced by Bates. She attacks other seduced lovers as 'fooles' (136), but these descriptions of course reflect back on her, too. In this context, rhetorical patterns like epizeuxis ('Whats sweet to do, to do wil aptly find' (88)) chiasmus (the youth can 'make the weeper laugh, the laughter weepe' (124)) and alliteration (his face 'bare out-brag'd the web it seem'd to were' (95)), embedded in and among her keen observations of the youth's face (92-8) and abilities (106-12) together imply a determinedly repeated attempt to gauge her own fault: the difference between the temptation and her ability to resist it. But she ultimately calls desire a 'destin'd ill' (156) that overpowers any such comparison with 'examples' (157): 'precedent' (155) and 'by-past perrils' (158) offer no clear framework, ethical or otherwise, to guide behaviour and thus repentance. Indeed, the maid appears as just one more victim of an eternal, ancient force, as suggested by the subtle use of 'coined archaisms', e.g. unusual verb forms like 'forbod' (164) 'introduced into the language to look old' (Kerrigan, *Sonnets* 432). These rhetorical, lexical, and thematic suggestions of repetition

¹⁶ Shakespeare predominantly uses the word in its primary sense OED I.1.a 'to separate (a thing) into parts', as in *Othello* 'I do perceive here a divided duty' (1.3.180) or *King Lear* 'Know we have divided / In three our kingdom' (1.1.35-6). Referring to Martin Spevack's statistical study, Stegner notes 'of the twenty six uses of 'divide' in Shakespeare's works, the majority denote separation rather than sharing' (90).

¹⁷ In this, the maid navigates uneasily between Catechism of Trent's proscription that the confessor must 'decide before offering absolution whether the penitent has inwardly earned it' (Kerrigan 49), and the very impossibility of this interiorised understanding, as lamented in Psalms 19:12 ('Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults') and cited in Calvin's *Institution of Christian Religion* 3.4.18 (24-5).

complement the rolling rhyme-royal and an outwardly spiralling narrative structure that echoes from maid, to 'wombe', to narrator, and to every reader who reads the tale anew. This amplifies the poem's depiction of desire as continuous and collective, clouding the limits of personal accountability that any narrative of absolution needs to define. The repetitious fatalism or 'destin'd ill' the maid invokes to justify her pleas for forgiveness thus resembles, accompanies, even necessitates, the repetitive, suicidal or masochistic gestures of the poem's opening. Nobody else can absolve her: to forgive herself for love she must make it a living suicide.

This clouded responsibility and near-suicidal expiation develops as the maid 'diuides' to the 'reverend man' the 'diuided' speech that seduced her, famously condemned by Kerrigan as 'moral Doublespeak of the worst, most complacent kind' (*Sonnets* 16). The young man says he is blameless because his victims 'sought' their own 'shame':

All my offences that abroad you see
Are error of the blood none of the mind:
Loue made them not, with acture they may be,
Where neither Party is nor trew nor kind;
They sought their shame and so their shame did find,
And so much less of shame in me remaines,
By how much of me their reproach containes. (183-9)

The maid's re-citation of this astonishing disavowal of personal responsibility in part criticises her: the cruel illogic that hoodwinked her is evident. But, from her mouth, it also continues this form of masochistic self-absolution. The youth's differentiation of 'blood' and 'shame' (impersonal desire) from 'Loue' (conscious decision of the 'mind') echoes the maid's attempts to identify and delineate the sinfulness of her own decisions. The recursive, looping chiasmus of 'sought their shame and so their shame did find' interlaces yet more tightly the youth's seduction with the maid's masochism; the echoing final couplet radically blurs together the utterer(s) of 'me', 'offences' and 'reproach': do these words ultimately pertain to the youth, the maid, the narrator, or some combination of the three? Echo troublingly overlaps confession and seduction. The maid echoes the young man in part because she seeks to demonstrate the credibility of his seductive words; but the ultimate proof of such credibility would, of course, be seducing her confessor, either the 'reuerend man', or (as seems increasingly likely) herself. In this concentric circle of echoes, confession exacerbates rather than expiates masochistic desire: the maid merely seduces herself all over again. Perhaps this explains why the maid then echoes the youth's story of a 'Sister sanctified' (l.233): a bid to escape this closed loop, to find a source or example of a more conclusive kind of

confession. For Bates, the nun is little more than another victim of the collective hysterical ‘frenzy’ surrounding the youth (191) – Lacanian critics likewise hear a pun on ‘none’ – but I suggest the narration of the nun strengthens the maid’s increasingly feminine understanding of confession, which explodes masochistically in the poem’s final stanza.¹⁸

The nun’s story can be seen as an extension of the poem’s interweaving of confessional with seductive discourses, and its quasi-parodic approach to confession and other theologically-charged concepts. The youth deems his (false) ‘vowes’ ‘holy’ (179), calls the maid (like God) his ‘origin and ender’ (222), and himself the ‘minster’ (229) or ‘Aulter’ (224) on which ‘oblations’ should be made (223). This interfusion of religious with sexual realms is replicated by the nun’s indecisive movements in and out of the ‘caged cloister’ (249).¹⁹ It also anticipates how the maid’s echo confers upon the youth’s sexual bragging a new, unexpectedly spiritual significance:

My parts had power to charme a sacred Nunne,
Who disciplin’d I dieted in grace,
Beleeu’d her eies, when they t’assaile begun,
All vowes and consecrations giuing place:
O most potentiall loue, vowe, bond, nor space
In thee hath neither sting, knot, nor confine
For thou art all and all things els are thine. (260-6)

Twisted by the maid’s echo, the youth’s tawdry seduction attempt becomes a guide to the stakes and challenges of a new, feminised mode of confession. ‘All vowes and consecrations’ give ‘place’ to a most ‘potentiall loue’, praised in prayer-like vocative, which echoes the *pater omnipotens* of the *Gloria*. The stanza sees a powerful association between the ‘loue’ being thus hypostasised and the maid herself. The maid is, after all, the specific addressee of the young man’s original utterance, the implicit focus of his hyperbole. In a context, moreover, which has seen channelled through the maid tears and tokens symbolising a collective feminine desire, her echo of his ‘thou art all and all things els are thine’ takes on new meaning: the maid herself now personifies this universalised ‘loue’ which engulfs the ‘vowe’ and ‘bond’ that conventionally underpin connections between women, priests and God (such as the nun’s vow, or the sacrament of confession). The maid thus radically transforms in ‘rewording’ the young

¹⁸ Stephen Whitworth for example sees the ‘Nun/none’ as ‘the lost object or hole of the real as cause of desire’ (Sharon-Zisser 52; Whitworth 171).

¹⁹ ‘Not to be tempted would she be *emur’d*, / And now to tempt all *liberty* procur’d’ (251-2, emphasis added).

man's tiresome conceits. She emerges as an eroticised, feminised Christ: self-sacrificing embodiment of collective sin and pain.

The poem's progressively important intertwining (via echo) of erotic with confessional strands works towards and helps explain its anaphoric and exclamatory final stanza, called by Patrick Cheney 'the most baffling denouement in the canon' (Cheney 73), and usefully read by Shirley Sharon-Zisser as 'masochistic feminine *jouissance*' (Sharon-Zisser 188):

O that infected moisture of his eye,
O that false fire which in his cheeke so glowd:
O that forc'd thunder from his heart did flye,
O that sad breath his spungie lungs bestowed,
O all that borrowed motion seeming owed,
Would yet againe betray the fore-betrayed,
And new peruert a reconciled Maide. (323-9)

Kerrigan is wary here of 'potentially ludicrous overtones of orgasmic excess' – 'O' this, and 'O' that' (51) – but the intensified repetition here is part of the point. The final stanza's orgasmic release is inseparable from the expiatory release that results when the maid confesses she may once more have sex with the youth: 'and yet do question make/ What I should doe againe for such a sake' (321-2). Speaking in such a forthright, even unrepentant tone – indeed, speaking in the first place – implicitly attacks male discourses which link 'true penitence' with 'silence' (Kerrigan 50). Indeed, it signals conventional male dynamics of sin and absolution have all but disappeared.²⁰ The male narrator – infamously – offers no closing summary of the action, unlike, say, Daniel's 'Complaint of Rosamond'. Here, the maid has the last word.²¹ The 'disappearance' of the male-frame narrative is in many ways the logical outcome and structural equivalent of the poem's sustained and gradual erasure of masculinity: the maid's echo of the youth becomes progressively, almost imperceptibly, much more important than the narrator's echo of the maid. The feminine confessional mode that remains upholds the poem's portrayal of desire as cyclical and masochistic. If the maid gives unrepentant voice to her desire, she is no less explicit about its contradictions: she knows (and *says* she

²⁰ In this, the poem amplifies and woundingly internalises the 'stubborne vnrepententnesse' Katharine Craik finds in contemporary ballads of female criminal confession (453).

²¹ Ilona Bell argues this 'open-ended narrative structure' is 'unusual', and that it exposes as inadequate 'the apparatus used by conventional male-authored female complaints', helping enable 'an unabashed and unexpected defence of female passion, female speech, and women's lawful liberty' (104).

knows) the young man's 'fire' is 'false', his 'motion' 'borrowed'.²² The truth of her contrition – and thus the value of her confession – thus seems based on her hard-won discoveries that nobody else can forgive her (especially not the 'reverend man') for a desire that overpoweringly acts through, even despite her. This self-forgiveness is therefore conditioned on a desire that will plunge her again and again into suffering *jouissance* ('die' over and over, as Elizabethan slang would have it). The poem is thus 'misogynistic' only superficially (Vickers i): the 'fickle' maid's entrapment within self-destructive desire commands sympathy, and her honest articulation of this desire, despite and against masculine trajectories of sin and forgiveness, deserves admiration.

Conclusion and post-scriptum

A Lover's Complaint unsettlingly envisages and portrays feminine desire as defiantly self-destructive. Echo tropes a cyclical masochistic eroticism within and between women, which explains the maid's violence to the tokens not only as a rejection of the youth who received them, but also as an altruistic appeasement of their senders' repeated desire for abjection. According to a related, if strange, cyclical logic of bodily humours, where women's tears are transformable in and by the young man's body into sperm, the maid's crying in the river is not only a sign of sorrow but also a murderously loving attempt to drown those who had cried them, via him, into her. Echo links such desires to the maid's increasingly solitary and feminised search for absolution. By thinking through a kind of speech that is full of repetitious rhetorical patterns, and by echoing the young man's seductive patter and tale of the nun, the maid conceptualises a progressively clear and feminised sense of self-forgiveness based on repeated self-punishment. By the final stanza, therefore, the maid absolves herself in the name of a self-destructive desire that overpowers her personal accountability. I would like to suggest as a kind of 'post-scriptum' two directions of study that may arise from this reading. First, *A Louers Complaint* may nuance, stimulate, or even challenge, an already rich critical discussion of Echo as an articulation of a distinctively feminine speech and subjectivity, which includes texts by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, Judith Greenberg, Jane Hiddleston, Claire Nouvet and Gayatri Spivak. Secondly, in the way it rearranges a central triad of themes (love, death, echo) to probe so fully the libidinal potential of masculine absence, the poem explodes the complaint in much the same way as, for the

²² Stylistically the stanza is full of contradictory or cyclical features, suggesting stasis: its subjunctive mood ('O that... [it] would...') suggests throughout two opposing but co-existent possibilities. Shirley Sharon-Zisser spots a palindromic acrostic – 'A-W-O-O-O-O-W-A' – running down the first letters of the poem's final lines (187).

late Joel Fineman, the dark lady sonnets explode Petrarchism.²³ The texts published together in Q would thus share not only lexical echoes but a kind of parallel ambition. If developed, this hypothesis could support the integrity of Q, help support *A Louers Complaint*'s vexed canonical status and, perhaps, help give 'the most abjected part of the Shakespeare canon' the critical attention it deserves (Bates 174).

²³ For Fineman, the young man sonnets continue the Petrarchist tradition of 'the poetry of praise' but the dark lady sonnets introduce a wholly new 'poetry of praise paradox' which invents the poetic subjectivity of 'the modernist self' (47).

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