

BURNING BLUSHES, WEeping WATER:
THE PERVERSION OF NATURE AND ITS RELATION TO FEMALE AGENCY
IN SHAKESPEARE'S *A LOVER'S COMPLAINT*

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on Shakespeare's enigmatic, female-voiced narrative poem *A Lover's Complaint*, which first appeared in the 1609 edition of the *Sonnets*, often revolves around attempting to definitively determine the poem's authenticity. Besides Shakespeare, numerous alternative candidates have been put forward as the author of the poem, the most recent suggestion being John Davies of Hereford by Brian Vickers. By focusing on the issue of authorship, however, many critics have dismissed the immense complexity of *A Lover's Complaint*, labeling it difficult, confusing, and even poorly written. Despite this, *A Lover's Complaint* is in actuality a highly ingenious work which merits further examination, particularly in its utilization of natural elements to frame the shifting gender dynamics of the poem. Often written from the perspective of a male author, female-voiced complaints relating the story of a fallen woman experienced popularity in the early modern period and beyond. *A Lover's Complaint* follows this model, recounting a young woman's seduction and fall in her own voice. Focusing particularly on the moment of seduction, this essay will locate the influence of nature in the youth's attempt to seduce the maid, examining how the youth is particularly framed as a consumer of nature. This paper looks at the possibility for female agency in male-voiced-female-complaint as the maid begins to experience the influences of seduction through her retelling. Ultimately, the maid's intense passion and desire allow her to navigate a space of agency separated from the natural world that has been corrupted by the youth.

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Scholarship on Shakespeare's short, enigmatic female-voiced narrative poem *A Lover's Complaint*, which first appeared in the 1609 edition of the *Sonnets*, often revolves around definitively attempting to determine the poem's authenticity. Besides Shakespeare, numerous alternative candidates have been put forward as the author of the poem, the most recent suggestion being John Davies of Hereford by Sir Brian Vickers. By focusing on the issue of authorship, however, many critics have dismissed the immense complexity of *A Lover's Complaint*, labeling it difficult, confusing, and even poorly written. However, *A Lover's Complaint* is in actuality a highly ingenious work that merits further examination particularly in its complex articulation of female desire and its structured portrayal of woman's relationship to nature. Often written by male authors, female-voiced complaints relating the story of a fallen woman experienced popularity in the early modern period and beyond. *A Lover's Complaint* follows this model, recounting a young woman's seduction and fall in her own voice.

Focusing primarily on *A Lover's Complaint*, this paper will attempt to make sense of conflicting agencies and how they are influenced by nature's presence within the poem, specifically during the moment of seduction. Using an ecocritical perspective, I argue that the youth's manipulation of the maid is reflected in his manipulation and perversion of natural elements, rendering him *unnatural* in his consumption of nature. By the end of *A Lover's Complaint*, however, the maid's re-desire for the youth, which she experiences again through her

re-telling, may provide her with agency and the opportunity to navigate a new space for female desire outside of nature and the poem. By focusing on several characters' use of and interaction with nature, we see that Shakespeare's poem challenges the conventional gender dynamics found within popular early modern female complaints wherein women are considered subservient to men based on a prevailing master/subject binary. However, it is only through examining the role of nature in the poem that this radical shift in understanding female desire and agency can be revealed. In analyzing *A Lover's Complaint*, I hope to enter a discussion regarding the depiction of the female voice in lyric poems and drama from the early modern period in order to foster a dialogue that encourages us to rethink what I will suggest are the net-positive values of the male-authored female voice. By exploring how this elusive voice evades classification and allows for women to reclaim a sense of identity as desiring subjects, I argue that female desire *is* present in early modern poetry despite claims that suggest female complaints, specifically male-authored ones, can only work to reinforce patriarchal confines, not subvert them.

CRITICAL HISTORY OF *A LOVER'S COMPLAINT*

To say that "*A Lover's Complaint*" has long baffled academics, would be to understate the tradition of confusion and trepidation this enigmatic poem has evoked in scholars for centuries of criticism. A frame narrator who disappears from the story, difficult language quirks, and an evocative yet baffling conclusion are but some of the features this short poem boasts which continue to puzzle and elude both readers and academics. In her study of *A Lover's Complaint*, Catherine Bates finds that the poem is repeatedly mentioned with scorn for its difficulty. She cites "'perplexing', 'complex', 'contorted', 'tortive', 'errant', 'obscure', 'dense', 'compressed', 'unfamiliar', 'curious', and 'odd' being just a few of the words used to describe

it.”¹ Due to the overwhelming distaste for the poem, many scholars have since questioned whether the work can even be confidently identified as part of the Shakespeare canon. In his book *Shakespeare, A Lover’s Complaint, and John Davies of Hereford*, Sir Brian Vickers argues that the text should *not* be included as part of the Shakespeare canon, putting forward John Davies as the real author of the piece. Vickers argues that *A Lover’s Complaint* is “an extremely mediocre poem which differs in every respect from Shakespeare’s normal clarity and economy of composition.”² Citing mainly language issues such as syntax, rhyme, and the use of archaic diction, Vickers condemns the poem as clumsy and un-imaginative, and argues strongly for removing (or, demoting) the poem from the cannon.

However, in his book *Determining the Shakespeare Canon: Arden of Faversham and A Lover’s Complaint*, MacDonald Jackson suggests that the poem is authentically Shakespeare’s. Responding to the work of Vickers, Jackson suggests that Vickers is blinded by his distaste for the poem, arguing “Vickers’ conviction that *A Lover’s Complaint* is not Shakespeare’s derives in large measure from his critical judgement upon it. He considers it marred by ‘clumsiness and lack of invention,’ often vague, muddled in its imagery and grammar, and lumbered with too many strange words and banal metrical fillers.”³ To support his argument that *A Lover’s Complaint* was in fact authored by Shakespeare, Jackson makes use of the searchable database *Literature Online (LION)* and stylometric techniques to compare lines from *A Lover’s Complaint* with other playwrights from the early modern period. He ultimately finds that *A Lover’s*

1. Catherine Bates, *Masculinity, Gender and Identity in the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174.

2. Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, A Lover’s Complaint, and John Davies of Hereford* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-2.

3. MacDonald P. Jackson, *Determining the Shakespeare Canon: Arden of Faversham and A Lover’s Complaint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 214.

Complaint shares more connections with Shakespeare's works than any other author from the period.

Beyond this use of metadata, however, there are other reasons to conclude that *A Lover's Complaint* is Shakespeare's work. As Katherine Duncan-Jones suggests in her introduction to the Arden Shakespeare edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, it was common for a sonnet sequence to be accompanied by a female complaint. Duncan-Jones argues that "some contrast and/or complementarity between a male-voiced sonnet sequence and an appended female voiced 'complaint' was a normal feature of the two-part form."⁴ Citing examples such as Samuel Daniel's sonnet collection *Delia* which contains the *Complaint of Rosamond*, Duncan-Jones argues that pairing a sonnet sequence with an appended female complaint was a tradition "thoroughly established" by the time of publication of *A Lover's Complaint*.⁵ In her introduction, Duncan-Jones is also interested in exploring the connections between *A Lover's Complaint* and the sonnets. She sees *A Lover's Complaint* as an evocative, yet troubling poem which works to undermine the veracity of the preceding 154 sonnets Shakespeare has written: "If we take sonnets and 'complaint' together, we can see that this book of sonnets turns out to be a book of lies and lying. It explores the negative equation according to which love is blind and poets are liars: love poets, therefore, can tell nothing but lies. Yet there is not escape from these lies."⁶ And yet again, so long as *A Lover's Complaint* remains neglected by a majority of critics, the sonnets are allowed the greater voice, unperturbed by the female voice of the complaint.

4. Katherine Duncan-Jones, introduction to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 89.

5. Duncan-Jones, introduction to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 91.

6. Duncan-Jones, 95.

Scholarship regarding this poem until very recently (within the last few years) has been predominantly concerned with issues of authorship. For the purposes of my argument, and based on the work put forth by Jackson and Duncan-Jones, I will operate under the assumption that this text is authentically Shakespearean. However, while the question of the authorship is of obvious importance, it should not dictate the reader's relationship with this piece. Rather, as I will argue, *A Lover's Complaint* merits study regardless of its authorial origins, particularly when considering its complex articulation of female desire and sexual frustration.

HISTORY OF COMPLAINT

At the time of Shakespeare's sonnets estimated composition, the genre of female complaint was familiar to the literate, public audience.⁷ However, as John Kerrigan suggests in his book *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint'* that although female complaint poetry experienced popularity in the sixteenth century, "it is difficult to determine how long that 'vogue' lasted and still harder to judge where it began."⁸ The reason a specific start date is difficult to identify is due to the fact that female complaint poetry has a complex history that can be traced as far back as Ovid's *Heroides*. "Heroides" or "The Heroines" is a collection of twenty-one poems written as letters from mythological figures such as Medea, Dido, and Phaedra. The first fourteen letters in the collection are voiced by women, and addressed to their absent male lovers. The remaining letters are composed as pairs, containing a letter from a lover

7. For more on the history of complaint poetry, see Rosalind Smith, Michelle O'Callaghan and Sarah C.E. Ross, "Chapter 25: Complaint" in *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Catherine Bates (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), 339-352.

8. John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint': A Critical Anthology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 1.

to his beloved and her reply. Interest in the female complaint genre continued beyond Ovid, however, appearing again in medieval poetry as well, with the most familiar English example perhaps being Geoffrey Chaucer. Female complaint not only appears in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, such as "The Franklin's Tale," but is also present in other poetry by Chaucer such as *The Legend of Good Women*.⁹ According to Kerrigan, Chaucer's importance to the development of the genre cannot be underestimated: "not until the fourteenth century do English writers use 'complaint' to classify and affiliate laments. Chaucer is the first major poet freely to employ the term."¹⁰

Afterwards, the vogue for female complaint was established in the sixteenth century through popular poetry anthologies. *Songes and Sonnettes*, colloquially known as *Tottel's Miscellany*, is one example of an extremely popular and widely circulated anthology that contained female complaint poetry.¹¹ Named for its printer, Richard Tottel, *Tottel's Miscellany* is certainly a collection Shakespeare likely would have been familiar with.¹² In their Penguin edition of *Tottel's Miscellany*, editors Amanda Holton and Tom MacFaul identified six of the 280 poems in the anthology as female complaints. Two of the poems were written by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, while the remaining four are from "uncertain" authors, which could

9. For more examples of complaint in Chaucer, refer to W.A. Davenport's *Chaucer: Complaint and Narrative* (New Hampshire: D.S. Brewer, 1988) and Catherine S. Cox's *Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Florida: The University Press of Florida, 1997).

10. Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe*, 5.

11. In her chapter "Chaucer's Presence in *Songes and Sonnettes*" from *Tottel's Songes and Sonnettes in Context* (Vermont: Ashgate, 2013), Amanda Houlton argues Chaucer served as a direct influence for the complaint poetry in *Tottel's Miscellany*: "the poetry of the *Miscellany* interacts with Chaucer's work in a conscious and purposeful way; it does not simply echo Chaucer," 89.

12. Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2001), 487-91.

raise interesting questions about the potential for female authorship.¹³ The anonymous poem “The complaint of a woman rauished, and also mortally wounded,” offers perhaps the most violent and unsettling scenario in the entire collection:

A Cruell Tiger all with teeth bebled,
A bloody tirantes hand in eche degree,
A lecher that by wretched lust was led,
(Alas) deflowered my virginitee.
And not contented with his villanie,
Nor with thoutragious terror of the dede,
With bloody thirst of greater crueltie:
Fearing his haynous gilt should be bewrayed,
By crying death and vengeance openly,
His violent hand forthwith alas he layed
Vpon my guiltles sely childe and me.¹⁴

In this female complaint, a woman and her child are murdered by her lover to hide his unsettling crime. There are indications that this violent encounter was specifically a rape, and not another

13. For a discussion of women’s involvement in the production and circulation of poetry manuscripts, see Arthur F. Marroti’s *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995). Marotti suggests “as producers of writing, women were much more active in the system of manuscript transmission than in print,” 49.

14. Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *Tottel’s Miscellany (1557-1587)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 247, 1-10.

form of assault, since the title describes the woman as “ravished,” which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “carried or dragged away by force; raped, violated; ravaged.”¹⁵ The man is predatory, characterized in the opening lines as a tiger with blood dripping from his teeth, completing a horrific and threatening image. The anonymous maid of this complaint experiences the excesses of human depravity, and this short, iambic poem is drastically different in tone from other female complaints in the collection, including those by Henry Howard, earl of Surrey. In “The Complaint of a woman rauished, and also mortally wounded,” the narrative of the courtly lover, an ethos manufactured by Tottel in much of the poetry of the anthology, is pushed to its extreme, and displays the terrifying, un-romanticized consequences of courtly love turned violent. In this way, “A woman rauished,” begins to challenge the courtly narrative of the harmless, spurned coutier, and exposes the uglier, hidden truths within this history.

To flesh out this review of complaint poetry, it is useful to examine a popular example of complaint from one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries: Samuel Daniel. In 1592, Samuel Daniel was the first to publish a sonnet collection which included an appended female complaint. His collection *Delia . . . with the Complaint of Rosamond* would come to set the blueprints against which Shakespeare and other authors, such as Thomas lodge, would model their own sonnet collections. However, Shakespeare’s *A Lover’s Complaint* differs in compelling ways from Daniel’s complaint. To begin, *the Complaint of Rosamond*, much like “The complaint of a woman rauished,” is narrated by a spirit, recounting her death from the vantage point of the afterlife. This is made immediately clear from the opening lines of the poem:

Out from the horror of infernall deepes,

15. “ravished, adj,” Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed January 2019, <http://www.oed.com.libdata.lib.ua.edu/view/Entry/158685?rskey=q2QXtI&result=2&isAdvanced=false>.

My poor afflicted ghost comes heere to plaine it:
Attended with my shame that neuer sleepes,
The spot wherewith my kinde, and youth did staine it:
My body found a graue where to containe it,
A sheete could hide my face, but not my sin,
For Fame finds neuer tombe t'inclose it in.¹⁶

Here, in the first stanza of the poem, the ghost of Rosamond is introduced to the reader through her recount of the shame she experienced in her death. Immediately, any chance at redemption or growth is stripped from the poem as Rosamond is presented to the reader in a state that is completely stagnate. However, this poem was seen as radical by many of Daniel's peers, simply due to the fact that it was voiced and introduced by a woman. Kerrigan suggests that this is what made Daniel's poem popular and inventive: "his greatest innovation was the simple complicating one of describing events from Rosamond's point of view."¹⁷ If, in 1592, the idea of a woman voicing a poem was considered unconventional, by 1609 when *A Lover's Complaint* is published, Shakespeare offers radical possibility by allowing his female character a space in which to express desire and a subversive mode of agency.

ANALYSIS OF *A LOVER'S COMPLAINT*: VOICE

A Lover's Complaint seems to simply rehearse the expected model of a typical female complaint of the early modern period. An anonymous narrator overhears the lamenting of a young woman recounting her seduction and fall to a sage-like figure, all within a compact 329

16. Samuel Daniel, *The Complaint of Rosamond*, ed. John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 165, 1-7.

17. Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe*, 164.

lines. However, although *A Lover's Complaint* may initially appear indistinguishable from other complaints at a surface-level reading, I argue this poem presents a highly nuanced examination of female desire in which the female voice is brought to the forefront of the poem through a complex, continuously shifting engagement with the natural world that troubles conventional notions of subjectivity and mastery within the text, offering a subversive potential for female agency.

Shakespeare's poem offers a provoking example of what I will term the male-authored-female-voice. Though the anonymous observer narrates the opening action of the poem, the maid is largely able to speak for herself and narrate her own tale from start to finish. Beginning at line 71, the maid takes over the narrative entirely, and never returns to the framing device of the anonymous narrator (unlike Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*, discussed above). The tight focus and attention paid to the maid's storytelling is intriguing in that Shakespeare allows the maid a space to develop her voice, uninterrupted by male commentary or gaze. In fact, one could argue that it is rather the female gaze that is actually encouraged as the young man becomes an open symbol of desire in the poem. The maid argues at one point that the youth was so beautiful, he attracted the gaze of all the women around him: "O, one by nature's outwards so commended/ That maidens' eyes stuck over all his face" (80-81).¹⁸ Generally, scholars have been perplexed by what to make of this line. Kerrigan suggests this is "a grotesque but entirely Shakespearian way of describing the youth's sexual magnetism, with women gazing at his features, 'glued to' him,"¹⁹ while Duncan-Jones explains the line in relation to sonnets 3 and 16

18. All quotations of *A Lover's Complaint* are taken from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Katherine Duncan-Jones, ed., (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010).

19. John Kerrigan, ed., *The Sonnets* by William Shakespeare (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 405n81.

as demonstrating “the numbers of young women longing to be made pregnant by the youth [of the sonnets].”²⁰ Metaphorically, and as both Kerrigan and Duncan-Jones suggest, it is clear that this line is attempting to convey the attractiveness of the youth. However, the literal image, of the eyes of others being ‘stuck’ to someone’s face, operates in a way that is both unique and puzzling. Here I would like to suggest that this reversal of the typical male gaze is one such moment in which the female gaze (and ultimately, the female voice) is allowed to surface to the forefront of the poem.

In understanding the mechanics of ‘voice’ in the poem, I am using the definition, in part, provided by Elizabeth Harvey in her book *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts*. Harvey’s use of the word ‘voice’ takes on a multiplicity of meaning in the Renaissance period where the metonyms of tongue, silence, allusion, or the author can stand in for a physical voice.²¹ Balancing her argument using post-structuralism and Roland Barthes’ theory of the death of the author, Harvey understands ‘voice’ operating in early modern texts as separated from the author, bringing focus back to voice and body of the text itself.²² However, addressing the issue of men writing as women, Harvey argues that “. . . ventriloquism is an appropriation of the feminine voice, and . . . it reflects and contributes to a larger cultural silencing of women . . . It is not whether male poets *can* adequately represent the female voice, but the ethics and politics of doing so.”²³ Here, I would like to push back against this reading of

20. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 94n81.

21. Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 1.

22. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices*, 4.

23. Harvey, 12.

male-authored-female-voice (or ‘ventriloquism’, as Harvey terms the phenomenon). Though it would be problematic to point to a male authored text and suggest that it in some way speaks to an idea of womanhood or accurately presents being a woman, I want to suggest that Shakespeare’s *A Lover’s Complaint* is unusual in the attention it pays to women and the focus it allows the piece to have, while simultaneously disrupting traditional notions of mastery in which women are featured as subordinate to men.

TITUS ANDRONICUS AND FEMALE COMPLAINT

Though I am interested in primarily discussing *A Lover’s Complaint*, it is useful to consider other examples of female complaint in Shakespeare’s collected works, in order to provide a frame for considering how *A Lover’s Complaint* handles the conventions of female complaint in a way that is entirely unique. While there are several examples that could be analyzed from his drama and poetry, the most apt comparison comes from his early, roman tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*.²⁴

In his bloody, revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, the character of Lavinia has long attracted the imagination and horror of audiences. In fact, in large part thanks to director Julie Taymor’s film adaptation of the play (1999), *Titus* is experiencing a particular resurgence with audiences today. However, critics, directors, actors and scholars have struggled with what to

24. I am not the only one interested in tracing other areas where female complaint appears in Shakespeare’s works. In *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and ‘Female Complaint’: A Critical Anthology* (2002), Kerrigan cites several instances in which the circumstances of Shakespeare’s female characters reflect the plot or features of a typical female complaint. Kerrigan argues that Desdemona, Ophelia, and Julia from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* have the potential to reflect some form of female complaint. However, of these examples, Kerrigan spends the most time discussing Lavinia and how her circumstances not only reflect those of female complaint, but the severity of her situation separates her from Shakespeare’s other examples (see p.56 especially).

make of Lavinia. Is she only a victim, or does she have the possibility to maintain a degree of agency? How are we to view Lavinia? In particular, how are we to view Lavinia after she has been horrifically assaulted and mutilated by Chiron and Demetrius? Here, I would like to suggest that Lavinia represents a dramatic mode of female complaint, acted out on stage, which works to enhance the consequences of her voice, or lack thereof, after she is silenced by her attackers. In Lavinia's case, the horrific potential of courtly love gone awry is brought to grotesque and disturbing fruition, and is completely stripped of any thought of romantic idealization. The extremity of Lavinia's rape and mutilation not only disrupts romanticized notions of female complaint, but demonstrates the ways in which violence is enacted against sexualized women. However, it is the aftermath in which Lavinia not only survives her attack, but is embraced by her family, that offers a radical contrast to popular works such as the anonymous "A women rauished" or *The Complaint of Rosamund* cited above. In this way, *Titus Andronicus* makes a useful comparison for examining *A Lover's Complaint* since both works are interested in thinking about what becomes of a woman after she has experienced inappropriate sexual intercourse and subsequent abandonment, and how she may continue to live in and make sense of the world afterwards.

Though written at separate periods and written as different literary modes, when brought together, *Titus Andronicus* and *A Lover's Complaint* nonetheless work to highlight each other in compelling ways, particularly as regards the genre of female complaint.²⁵ One such connection these works share is a strong Ovidian influence.²⁶ Of course, there are numerous direct

25. According to Jonathan Bate in his edition of the play, *Titus* is believed to have been written about the early 1590s (*Titus Andronicus*, 2018, 77). Meanwhile, Katherine Duncan-Jones gives *A Lover's Complaint* a later composition date, closer to when the sonnets were published in 1609 (*Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 2010, 91).

comparisons made in *Titus* between Lavinia and Ovid's Philomel, with Ovid being a clear source text for the play. When Lavinia is discovered by Marcus, he speculates "But sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee/ And lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue" (2.3.26-27).²⁷ Lavinia later attempts to convey to her family what has happened to her using Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, specifically. Titus asks, "Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,/ Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,/ Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods?" (4.1.51-53). Lavinia is purposefully situated into the tragedy as the Philomel figure, tongue-less and, perhaps what is worse, unable to communicate for herself, in which case, Titus takes it upon himself to "translate" for her:

Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought.

In thy dumb action will I be as perfect

As begging hermits in their holy prayers.

Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,

Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,

But I of these will wrest an alphabet

And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (3.2.39-45)

26. Studies of Ovid's influence on Shakespeare's works include *The Ovidian Vogue: Literary Fashion and Imitative Practice in Late Elizabethan England* by Daniel D. Moss (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity* by Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), and *Shakespeare and the Classics* by Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

27. All quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are taken from Jonathan Bate, ed., (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2018).

Of most interest to my argument is the way that Titus specifically frames Lavinia as a “complainer,” purposefully situating her within the tradition of female complaint. This reference to Lavinia as a “complainer” suggests that Shakespeare is intentionally engaging with popular female complaint from the period, such as those in *Tottel’s Miscellany*. However, unlike common complaint narratives, and perhaps counterintuitive to the very notion of complaint poetry, Lavinia has lost her voice, and thus her ability to complain.²⁸ This idea profoundly disrupts any traditional understanding of complaint poetry.

A Lover’s Complaint can also trace an important connection to Ovid and Roman tragedy. As I have discussed earlier, the genre of female complaint has roots in Ovid’s *Heroides*. In large part, *A Lover’s Complaint* and other complaint poems from the early modern period are indebted to Ovid. In his important examination of Ovid’s influence over Shakespeare in *Shakespeare and Ovid*, Jonathan Bate offers a brief reading of *A Lover’s Complaint* that highlights the ways in which the opening of the poem is similar to an Ovidian work. Bate suggests that beyond similarities of letter writing in the *Heroides*, the opening of the poem works to establish a relationship between the maid and the mythic Echo: “The echo effect here creates a sister for the deserted woman who is voicing the complaint: that sister is Echo, herself a despairing lover.”²⁹

28. Recent examinations of the female voice in *Titus Andronicus* include “Is It Really Ecocritical If It Isn’t Feminist?: The Dangers of Speaking for in Ecological Studies and Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*.” In *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching*, edited by Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt, Lynne Bruckner, Carla Freccero, and Karen Raber (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2015), 34-47, Bethany Packard’s “Lavinia as Coauthor of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 50, no.2 (2010): 281-300, and Emily Detmer-Goebel’s “The Need for Lavinia’s Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape,” *Shakespeare Studies*, 29 (2001): 75-92.

29. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, reprinted 2001), 79.

Furthermore, Bate views the maid tearing the letters as a “revision” of the *Heroides* history, and an opportunity for the maid to foster a uniquely female voice through her location in relation to the figure of Echo, established in the opening lines of the poem.³⁰

This shared Ovidian influence is important to understand in order to foster a strong connection between these texts, which makes for a more apt comparison than with Shakespeare’s other possible examples of female complaint. Furthermore, in both *A Lover’s Complaint* and *Titus Andronicus*, the tradition of female compliant that endorses neither female sexuality nor woman’s subjectivity is radically challenged by Shakespeare. So, while other works in the canon may also situate women in moments that are similar to those of early modern female compliant, it is only *Titus* and *A Lover’s Complaint* which work to challenge the conventional narrative of complaint in any significant way. In both cases, these women are allowed the space to develop their unique voices and reclaim a story from the hands of what is otherwise often portrayed as an unforgiving male-authored narrative.³¹

Frequently viewed in a critical light, scholars have repeatedly argued that early modern female complaints can only work to uphold patriarchal ideals. Catherine Bates best summarizes this view in her chapter, “Feminine Identifications in *A Lover’s Complaint*.” Here, Bates succinctly outlines the common misconception that suggests female-voiced complaints work only to reinforce and maintain gender inequalities:

30. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 79.

31. For a discussion of the subversive potential of Lavinia’s silence, see Christina Luckyj *‘A moving Rhetoricke’: Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 91-94. Luckyj suggests “while, as a form of eloquence, her silence invites reading, as an inscrutable, overdetermined space, it resists being read. And while, as a sign of female closure, it should guarantee subjection, as a potential sign of disobedience and unchaste behavior it confounds all assurances,” 93.

It is easy to see how female complaint, far from subverting the dominant fiction, can actually be seen to uphold if not reinforce it. It is from this perspective, indeed, that female complaint can come to be read as a vehicle for ‘patriarchal didacticism’, as a calculated ploy on the part of men to oppress women. . . colonizing their authentic voice and speaking on their behalf.³²

In spite of this popular assumption regarding gender relations in this poem, Bates argues that the maid’s apparent submission to the youth in *A Lover’s Complaint* is actually a form of masochism in which she willingly participates in order to form a uniquely *female* homosocial bond with the youth’s previous lovers.³³ Thus, in her desire for the youth, Bates argues the maid formulates a sense of identity which ultimately allows her to more forcibly assert her subject position. Bates suggests that “instead of seeing the girl as a tragic victim. . . the poem invites us rather to see her as someone who has exactly what she desires – which is to *be* someone who desires.”³⁴ I agree with Bates’ conclusion that this poem works to challenge the typical construction of the abandoned woman. Though I question Bates’ analysis of the female homosocial bond and the degree of success to which the maid achieves a bond with these other women, - and to what degree she is at all invested in developing a similarity with them - there is none the less an important sense that the maid is *purposefully* situated in such a way that she is uniquely separated from other female complaint subjects of the period. However, I suggest that an analysis of nature’s presence in the poem offers the best example of the maid’s subject-position within *A Lover’s Complaint*. Here, it is not only that the maid is situated as a desiring subject, but rather

32. Bates, *Masculinity*, 182-183.

33. Bates, 187.

34. Bates, 192.

that the economy of desire within the poem itself becomes complicated through the several characters' use of and engagement with nature. While the maid is immediately connected to her surrounding environment, as I will describe below, both the reader and the maid slowly come to realize that this relationship is threatened as the youth reveals himself to be a consumer of nature.

A LOVER'S COMPLAINT ANALYSIS: ECOCRITICISM

From repeated imagery involving nature or natural elements, to specific mentions of 'nature' itself, *A Lover's Complaint* seems to be hyper-conscious of nature's presence throughout its entirety. However, beyond merely mentioning or cataloguing natural elements, the poem suggests that nature plays an important role in understanding desire and agency as it relates to the characters of the text, particularly the maid and the youth. Ultimately, I argue that an ecocritical reading is essential to fully understanding the politics of sexuality, desire and agency and how these elements contribute to the disruption of the generic conventions of female complaint in Shakespeare's late poem.

The first lines of *A Lover's Complaint* immediately introduce the reader to a world heavily steeped in the feminine. The effect of this serves to establish a strong and intimate connection between the maid and the natural environment that surrounds her. The anonymous narrator recounts overhearing the lamentations of a woman as she weeps beside a riverbank: "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-tuned tale" (1-4). The "concave womb" of the hillside most obviously grounds the reader in an association with the feminine, as does the "sist'ring vale." In his edition of the sonnets, John Kerrigan suggests that the reference to a womb has "fertile potential" for the poet to whom "the concavity yields the

poet the complaint which his poem entails.”³⁵ However, for the maid, this empty womb does not signify fertile potential, but rather points to a glaring lack thereof as the poem continues.

Kerrigan suggests this may hint “obliquely, to the sexual nature of the maid’s predicament.”³⁶

However, I argue that this interpretation is not oblique, but rather so potent it becomes impossible to ignore, and that the hill is purposefully described in this way as to establish an intimate connection between nature and the maid herself. It is important to develop a strong connection between the maid and nature in the opening of the poem because this relationship will drastically change and deteriorate after the youth’s seduction of the maid as he consumes and perverts natural elements, forcing the maid to either abandon or distance herself from nature.

Additional moments in the poem work to draw connections between the maid and nature. The maid compares herself to a blasted bud, or unripened flower, to describe her state of physical deterioration: “Not age, but sorrow, over me hath power./ I might as yet have been a spreading flower” (74-75). While this moment links the maid with nature, it also foreshadows the disruption or perversion of this connection which the maid will experience after her seduction by the youth. However, another example in the opening of the poem offers a more explicit connection of the maid’s relationship to the environment. As the maid sits on the bank of the stream throwing away love tokens from the youth, the poet describes her as “upon whose weeping margent she was set” (39). Kerrigan offers a possible reading of this scene which he deems “imaginatively elliptical.” He suggests that the weeping maid on the bank’s edge is symbolic of a weeping willow tree and “the maid is *set* among *weeping* willows, *weeping*, or, like a metamorphosed figure in Ovid, is *set* beside the stream, like, a *weeping* willow.”³⁷ Though

35. Kerrigan, *The Sonnets*, 394.

36. Kerrigan, *The Sonnets*, 394.

Kerrigan is hesitant to push on this possibility, I argue that the image of the maid as a tree serves to cement a further connection between her and nature, situating her both metaphorically and literally as *part* of the surrounding environment, as opposed to merely occupying the space. In fact, the body of the maid reflects what Duncan-Jones terms a “microcosm” of the world at large.³⁸ The narrator first spies the maid “tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain,/ Storming her world with sorrow’s wind and rain” (6-7). Here, the maid is prescribed as a natural environment onto herself, capable of creating storms restricted to the ecosystem of her body. She is obviously meant to reflect her environment, the “weeping margent” of the river. The love tokens the maid throws into the stream (“A thousand favors from a maund she drew,/ Of amber, crystal and of beaded jet,/ Which one by one, she in a river threw” (36-38)) are first bathed with her tears before she tosses them into the river, as though the river weeps with the maid for what has befallen her. This intimate relationship between the maid and her environment, however, will fall under scrutiny after her encounter with the youth.

Though the opening of the poem works to strongly foster a connection between the maid and her setting, supporting an argument that she is purposefully figured as part of her surrounding environment, the poem is also invested in pointing out other characters’ connections with nature, specifically, the youth of the poem. *A Lover’s Complaint* is rife with imagery that establishes a connection between the youth and nature, presenting him as someone who is remarkably attuned with the natural world. However, after the youth seduces the maid, a shift occurs that works to render the youth as a consumer of nature, rather than someone intimately connected with natural elements. As part of the moment of seduction, it becomes apparent that though the maid tries to make sense of the youth in natural terms, these descriptions ultimately

37. Kerrigan, *The Sonnets*, 400.

38. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 431n7.

fail her due to a disrupted connection between her and nature that occurs after she is seduced by the youth.

In the youth's attempt to seduce the maid, the maid perceives him as intimately connected with nature. In fact, the maid makes sense of his supplication entirely in natural terms. As he breaks off his speech, consumed with emotion, the maid describes him as:

“Each cheek a river running from a fount

With brinish current downward flowed apace.

O how the channel to the stream gave grace,

Who glazed the crystal gate the glowing roses

That flame through water which their hue encloses!” (283-287)

The youth's passion connects him to nature. His tears are a streaming fountain of salty water that obscures the hidden rosy hue of his flaming cheeks. From the maid's perspective, the youth is subsumed by his tears, and his tears interest her sympathy. She wonders “But with the inundation of the eyes/ What rocky heart to water will not wear?” (291-292). Her heart, which is so closely associated with nature, certainly will not withstand an entreaty of this kind. Additionally, this passage of the youth's manufactured “passion” seems to eerily recall the description of the maid from the opening of the poem. The youth, like the maid, becomes a microcosm of the environment, creating his own river out of “brinish” tears which drown the glowing passion of his cheeks. The maid also washes signifiers of passion with brinish tears before drowning them in the river (“Oft did she heave her napkin to her eyne,/Which on it had conceited characters,/ Laund'ring the silken figures in the brine/ That seasoned woe had pelleted in tears” (15-18)).

Here is an example of the youth's ability to utilize nature, bending its' will to serve his own means as his features become enhanced by an artificiality induced by natural elements.

Previous to this moment of the youth's perversion of nature, he has ostensibly shared numerous connections with the natural environment that surrounds him, perhaps even more so than the maid herself. Like the youth of Sonnet 20, the youth of *A Lover's Complaint* is described by the maid as an androgynous figure: "His qualities were beauteous as his form:/ For maiden-tongued he was, and thereof free;" (99-100). More specifically, his androgyny, like the youth of Sonnet 20, is constructed in naturalistic terms. He is "one by nature's outwards so commended," (80) and often he is associated with wind or air. The wind likes to play with the curls of his hair ("His browny locks did hang in crooked curls,/ And every light occasion of the wind/ Upon his lips their silken parcels hurls" (85-87), while he himself is a stormy figure, provoked to fight as often as the occurrence of rain showers in spring: "Yet if men moved him, was he such a storm/ As oft 'twixt May and April is to see, / When winds breathe sweet, unruly though they be" (101-103). These descriptions work to enhance the youth's connection to nature, while also inviting the reader to consider how the youth's performance of gender contributes to this relationship, and ultimately, his ability to control the natural environment around him, that suggests an unnatural relationship with nature.

Comparing the representation of the fair youth in Sonnet 20 is useful for conceptualizing how androgyny is featured in similar ways in *A Lover's Complaint*. The fair youth of the sonnets, the "master mistress" of the narrator's adoration is described as possessing *both* masculine and feminine qualities. He is described as having "A woman's face" (1), and "A woman's gentle heart," (3), and yet he is not without masculine attributes. The speaker describes him as "A man in hue" (7), or a man in physical appearance who is able to attract all sexes: "all hues in his

controlling, /Which steal men's eyes and women's souls amazeth" (7-8).³⁹ This ability to control others through their desires is not only paralleled almost exactly in *A Lover's Complaint*, but is pushed even farther:

‘That he did in the general bosom reign
Of young, of old, and sexes both enchanted
To dwell with him in thoughts, or to remain
In personal duty, following where he haunted;
Consent's bewitched, ere he desire have granted,
And dialogued for him what he would say,
Asked their own wills, and made their wills obey. (127-133)

The youth of *A Lover's Complaint*, much like the youth of the sonnets, attracts everyone who looks on him: man, woman, young, old. However, and intriguingly, the youth's ability to attract others in this passage is framed as witchcraft or enchantment. The youth "enchants" and "bewitches" others, and, as the maid suggests, manipulates the wills of his admirers to obeying him, though perhaps unwittingly. Here, the maid strives to articulate the youth's unnaturalness through the emphasis of his having supernatural abilities. Whether the youth has some otherworldly charisma, however, is besides the point. What is most important in this passage are the ways in which the poem purposefully attempts to separate out the youth out as something "other." However, I am not the first to notice the use of enchantment in *A Lover's Complaint*. In her book *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination*, Margaret Healey examines the

39. William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 20", in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016). 151, 1-8.

poem utilizing early modern understandings of alchemy. Of the youth, Healey writes “But more troublingly, he ‘enchants’, ‘haunts’, ‘betwitches’, possessing ‘charmed power’ in the manner of a demonic spirit.”⁴⁰ Be it demon, witch, or what have you, what is most important to this reading of *A Lover’s Complaint* is how the youth is undeniably situated as an unnatural other, something which needs to be exorcised from the natural world of the poem.

Though Healey engages in a discussion of literal monstrosity (an understanding of differences rooted in superstition and mythology), I suggest that it would be useful to consider the ways in which the youth of *A Lover’s Complaint* is a figurative monster, not only utilizing enchantment to enslave his attendants, but also in his cruel abandonment of the maid and his other love objects. In an unsettling revelation, the youth uncovers that he carries with him the love tokens he has received from former lovers, the “pallid pearls and rubies red as blood” (199), “talons of their hair” (204) and “deep-brained sonnets” (209), in addition to diamonds, emeralds and other precious gems (211-216). He suggests that he is ordered to carry these tokens around, signifiers of passions won and abandoned, in order to offer them to the maid as a symbol of his own desire for her:

‘Lo, all these trophies of affections hot,
Of pensived and subdued desires the tender,
Nature hath charged me that I hoard them not,
But yield them up where I myself must render,
That is, to you, my origin and ender. (218-222).

40. Margaret Healey, *Shakespeare, Alchemy and the Creative Imagination: the Sonnets and A Lover’s Complaint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 143.

Here, the youth is utilizing the tokens of affection he has received from others in order to advanced his suit with the maid: a substitution that suggests that these personalized love items can somehow signify passion beyond their prescribed original significance, taking on meaning as an independent signifier to show the youth's love for the maid by his re-inscription of them as love objects. His ability to redefine what the tokens represent is rooted in Nature, which commands him to ascribe new meaning to the objects in order to offer them to the maid. Essentially, these signifiers are stripped of their original, highly personalized and intimate meaning. How can a lock of someone else's hair, someone whom the maid has never met, an extremely personal and intimate symbol, work to advance the youth's suit? Catherine Bates suggests that these objects, originating from women, work to foster a specifically female homosocial bond between the maid and the youth's previous lovers through her participation in the seduction.⁴¹ However, I find this argument not as compelling as other moments in Bates' chapter, and I am more interested in the ways in which Nature participates in this moment and in which the maid, ultimately, asserts herself against a desire to be identified with these women who came before her.

The maid attempts to assert her agency against the youth, subverting his ability to exert complete mastery over her. She acknowledges that she desired the youth, despite her knowledge of his reputation: 'For further, I could say, "This man's untrue",/ And knew the patterns of his foul beguiling;/ Heard where his plants in others' orchards grew" (169-171). The maid's description of the youth's affairs with women he has impregnated and abandoned (the seed in others' orchards) is constructed in natural terms. I argue that this demonstrates the ways in which the youth's corrupting influence is advanced through his relationship to nature. His "seed"

41. Bates, *Masculinity*, 190-191.

contaminates others' environments, resulting in the broken promises which the maid knowingly frames as the "bastards of his foul adulterate heart," (175), removing any doubt of the youth's infidelities. However, though the maid is aware of the youth's dangerous reputation, she does not seek to have the youth reciprocate desire for her, as the countless others who "sweetly supposed them mistress of his heart" (142). It is important to understand that the maid is never under any false delusions when it comes to her desire of the youth. She argues that she went into this relationship knowingly, fully aware of the possible outcomes:

'Yet did I not, as some, my equals, did,
Demand of him; nor, being desired, yielded,
Finding myself in honour so forbid:
With safest distance I mine honour shielded.
Experience for me many bulwarks builded
Of proofs new-bleeding, which remained the foil
Of this false jewel, and his amorous spoil. (148-154)

This passage in which the maid articulates her ability to distinguish herself from the youth's other lovers is fraught with violence. Duncan-Jones glosses "proofs new bleeding" as "elliptical for 'instances of newly wounded (perhaps = deflowered) girls who have been less careful to protect themselves.'"⁴² Whether or not the other women successfully or unsuccessfully protected themselves from the youth is not of the same interest, to me, as the violence depicted here. The youth's seductions are figuratively framed by the maid as bloody and aggressive, wounding (and

42. Duncan-Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 441n153.

perhaps killing) the subjects of his unmitigated desires. Additionally, “his amorous spoil” reframes his seductions as a particularly graphic battle in which violence is inflicted on his lovers. The maid uses the horror of these examples to protect herself from becoming another casualty of the youth’s aggressive pursuit, suggesting that she is always aware of the youth’s contrary behavior since she recognizes the duality of his enchantment and its consequences. The maid’s violent conceptualization of the youth’s behavior both reflects and foreshadows the youth’s ultimate betrayal of not only the maid, but also his former lovers.

The youth’s relationship with nature is markedly different from the maid’s. As previously discussed, *A Lover’s Complaint* is rife with imagery that establishes a connection between the youth and nature, presenting him as someone who is connected to the natural world. However, after the youth seduces the maid (“There my white stole of chastity I daffed” (297)), a shift occurs which works to render the youth as a consumer of nature, rather than someone simply intimately connected with natural elements. During this moment of seduction, the maid accuses the youth of artifice in an attempt to separate him from nature. She angrily exclaims: “O father, what a hell of witchcraft lies/ In the small orb of one particular tear!” (288-289). The youth’s tears are not connected with nature, but rather a machination used to seduce the maid. By accusing the youth of witchcraft, the maid attempts to separate him from nature, and in fact, works to paint him as *un-natural*. This is emphasized when, in the following stanza, the maid describes the youth’s emotional outburst and its effects: “For lo, his passion, but an art of craft,/ Even there resolved my reason into tears” (295-296). It is compelling that the maid identifies his passionate appeal as “craft.” Duncan-Jones glosses this line as “(the product of) an art of crafty deception.”⁴³ However, since this appears just after the stanza in which the maid has seemed to

43. Duncan-Jones, 450n295.

denounce the youth for his unnatural romantic suit, I argue that craft should be associated with the idea of witchcraft that she presents in the proceeding stanza, strengthening the suggestion that the youth consumes and renders nature unnatural or corrupted in his pursuit of the maid.

After establishing the youth as unnatural, the maid then continues to deploy natural imagery in her description of their consummation: “All melting, though our drops this difference bore:/ His poisoned me, and mine did him” (300-301). While the maid’s passion has restored the youth, he has ultimately poisoned her, thus perverting nature itself and attempting to exert his supremacy over the maid through his manipulation of nature. His manipulation involves being able to take on the guise of nature, “Showing fair nature is both kind and tame” (311), while employing “burning blushes” or “weeping water” (304) as he sees fit. Thus, by the end of *A Lover’s Complaint*, the youth has in effect subsumed nature, effectively contaminating the intimate feminine imagery of the natural world established in the first lines of the poem. In the moment of seduction (300-301), it becomes apparent that while the maid tries to make sense of the youth in natural terms, these descriptions ultimately fail her due to a disrupted connection between her and nature which occurs after their sexual encounter.

Despite the youth’s manipulation of nature, I do not believe that the maid’s agency is consumed by the youth’s seduction. An important moment to examine in considering how (and if) the maid maintains her subject position is located within the final stanza of the poem. Here, the maid must locate agency outside of nature, and the unique structure of the poem allows her the opportunity to do so. Intriguingly, *A Lover’s Complaint* concludes with the maid’s story and does not return to the original frame narrative of the anonymous speaker. This allows the maid’s words to carry more authority. She closes her tale by revealing an ongoing interest in the youth which she experiences again through her retelling of his seduction. She argues:

'O, that infected moisture of his eye!
O, that false fire which in his cheek so glowed!
O, that forced thunder from his heart did fly!
O, that sad breath his spongy lungs bestowed!
O, all that borrowed motion, seeming owed,
Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed,
And new pervert a reconciled maid.' (323-329)

The maid continues to describe the seduction using natural imagery, reinforcing the youth's consumption of nature. Here, the "borrowed motion" is the natural effects he steals from nature, to which his is indebted, reinforcing the idea that the youth is able to (and does) manipulate natural elements in his repeated seductions. However, his perversion of the natural, feminine state is simultaneously emphasized by words such as "infected," "false," and "forced." This contamination results in the maid can no longer define herself in natural terms since they have been borrowed and poisoned by the youth. The "reconciled" maid is, in fact, far from reconciled.

If agency is still in conflict at the end of this poem, it is because the maid is not consumed by the youth, but rather rejects his subjugation of her through her experience as a desiring subject. Consider the anaphora of the beginning five lines of the last stanza (323 -329). These serve to add force to the idea that the maid's subject position has transformed from the opening of the text in which she is seated, weeping, on the riverbank. The 'O's' are not, as Melissa Sanchez argues the "result of [the maid's] own naïve impulse to assuage the youth's

agency.”⁴⁴ Rather, I argue, the use of anaphora here functions as an intensely powerful expression of the desire the maid is again experiencing through the retelling of her seduction. Of course, “O” is also suggestive of climax or orgasm. By pushing this meaning further, I would like to suggest that this works to strengthen the maid’s separation from the youth. Here, in perhaps what is the most sensual moment of the poem, the maid creates a moment of sexual pleasure that is independent of the youth, and instead of rendering her vulnerable, works to articulate the maid’s autonomy and (literal) self-reliance. Analyzing the final moments of *A Lover’s Complaint*, Kerrigan suggests that Shakespeare is attempting to construct the poem in terms of penitence: “In *A Lover’s Complaint*, the opening cannot close the text . . . and the heroine grows beyond the conventions which enclose her, developing an intense and human inconsistency which might be called dramatic. If the poem starts in the territory of Spenser and Daniel, it ends, like the problem plays, with the incorrigibility of passion”⁴⁵ However, instead of thinking of the maid’s desire as “incorrigible,” I suggest we think about the ways in which her intense passion and desire allow her to ultimately navigate a space of agency separated from the natural world that has been corrupted by the youth, and how powerful this moment actually is in the poem, rather than framing the poem as a woman’s inability to curtail her passions or failure to become penitent.

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the role of nature in *A Lover’s Complaint*, it becomes evident that Shakespeare’s poem is not simply another iteration of female complaint poetry; rather, it is a

44. Melissa E. Sanchez, "The Poetics of Feminine Subjectivity in Shakespeare’s Sonnets and ‘A Lover’s Complaint’," in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare’s Poetry*, ed. Jonathan F. S. Post, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 513.

45. Kerrigan, *The Sonnets*, 425n329.

radical reimagining of women's participation in the act of desiring. By the end of poem, the maid's renewed feelings of passion and desire point towards a potential space outside of the familiar and condemning narrative that suggests women's sexual pleasure can only result in regret, intense mortification, or death. Through the youth's consumption and subsequent perversion of nature, the maid is forced into a space outside of nature after this shared connection has been corrupted. The poem itself points towards the possibility of this new space in its conclusion that suggests a complete narratorial undoing through its rejection of the anonymous frame narrator. Possibly, the reason for this is found in the maid's ability to articulate her own desire, which she achieves at the end of the poem, thus resulting in narrative collapse. In other words, there is no need to return to the narrator of the poem since the maid has created a space for her desire outside of nature and complaint poetry itself. I suggest that this new space offers fertile potential for examining female desire and its function in early modern lyric poetry, and complicates conventional understandings of the binary relationship between master and subject. If other male-authored-female-voiced poems seem to condemn female desire, perhaps it is due to the fact that this othered, potential space can be neither contained nor identified by the traditional narrative of female complaint.

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