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“Pen, paper, inke, you feeble
instruments”:
The Precarity of Lyric Ontology in
Elizabethan Sonnets

Elizabethan sonnets have been frequently recruited to substantiate claims about early modern English literature, culture, and society which transcend the notion of Petrarchan language as a conventional idiom of heterosexual love. Protean and elastic, Petrarchan metaphors provided a vehicle for many forms of ideological labour across Renaissance Europe and the Americas. In early modern England, the lexicon of frustrated love has been shown to resonate with a panoply of sociocultural discourses: the politics of courtliness under Elizabeth I;¹ the emergence of class as a category of social distinction;² the vicissitudes of early modern gender;³ the articulation of nationhood;⁴ the pursuit of acquisitive desires;⁵ the legal imaginary;⁶ and the project of colonial expansion.⁷

But Petrarch’s *Rime sparse*, which insistently thematises its own textuality, also furnished Renaissance poets with a nuanced vocabulary for theorizing broader questions of *ars poetica*, especially lyric.

1 Marotti, “Love Is Not Love;” Villeponteaux, *Queen’s Mercy*, 67–106.

2 Warley, *Sonnet Sequences*.

3 Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire*; Estrin, *Laura*; R. Smith, *Sonnets*.

4 Kennedy, *Site of Petrarchism*.

5 Correll, “Terms of ‘Indearment;” Kennedy, *Petrarchism at Work*.

6 Cormack, “Strange Love;” Zurcher, *Shakespeare and Law*, 57–102; Sokolov, *Renaissance Texts*, 175–219.

7 R. Greene, *Unrequited Conquests*.

Petrarch's sequence articulated a complex, in many ways unprecedented, form of lyric subjectivity emerging at a nexus of desire and writing.⁸ His lyric cycle engages in a constant play of textual, corporeal, emotional, and psychic fragmentation.⁹ The poet's tortuous relationship with the classical past, the impossibility of its recuperation and the belatedness of his own verse injected a form of temporal dislocation into his lyric project.¹⁰ The close association of the work and the material book that developed in the Renaissance, although not unknown in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, can be traced to Petrarch's obsession with controlling his manuscripts.¹¹ Inversely, the dissemination of Petrarch's texts, accompanied by commentary and multiple imitations of his verse, diluted the authority and stability of Petrarchan textuality.¹² Turning to the *Rime sparse*, in other words, post-Petrarchan poets discovered a sophisticated apparatus for probing the parameters of literary imagination, the problems of authorship, the pressures of poetic influence, the sources of inspiration, the instability of language, and the afterlives of textual production.

This essay traces how Elizabethan sonneteers adapted the signatures of Petrarchan desire to attend to the question of lyric ontology. Considering sonnets from Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Samuel Daniel's *Delia*, Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, and other collections written in England in the 1590s, I suggest that they offer microanalyses of the existential traits of lyric in its historical situation. Specifically, they imagine a precarious form of material existence. The affective work of Petrarchism in these sonnets tropes the uncertainties inherent in the contemporary conditions of lyric production; and intense erotic longing and the impossibility of its fulfilment allegorize a thwarted desire for a lyric poem that remains perennially elusive and unrealizable.

The preceding paragraph juggles some potentially contestable terms. Lyric, for example, is not an easily definable category. If used

8 Freccero, "Fig Tree;" Regan, *Love Words*, 184–222.

9 Mazzotta, "Canzoniere;" Braden, *Petrarchan Love*, 1–60; Enterline, *Rhetoric of the Body*, 91–124.

10 T. Greene, *Light in Troy*, esp. 4–53.

11 Chartier, *Order of Books*, 55–57; Holmes, *Assembling the Lyric Self*, 170–79.

12 Kennedy, "Petrarchan Textuality."

transhistorically, it invites charges of anachronistic lyricization, when the Romantic idea of lyric is projected onto texts composed in different cultural environments.¹³ Even universalizing theories of lyric trace the historically shifting concepts of the genre in the Western tradition.¹⁴ But even period-specific concepts of lyric are debatable. As Heather Dubrow suggests, “discussions of lyric during the English Renaissance... are typically inconsistent in their definitions of the mode... [and] profoundly ambivalent in their valuations of it.”¹⁵ Early modern lyric is a tentative institution fraught with instability and self-doubt.

The notion of lyric ontology—the material mode of existence of lyric *poiesis*—is also open to questioning. On the one hand, materiality is perhaps the least contentious dimension of lyric theory in the period. According to Kimberly Johnson, in post-Reformation England poetry was “a formal practice fundamentally invested in the substantiality of its own medium.”¹⁶ In his *Defence of Poesy* (c. 1580), Sidney locates the origins of poetry in a Platonic idea: “the skill of each artificer standeth in that idea or fore-conceit of the work, and not in the work itself.” But he also stresses the importance of material form, writing that the poet “doth not learn a conceit out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceit,” where *matter* is deliberately ambiguous.¹⁷ Puttenham, in *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), includes poetry with “those other mechanical arts” and compares rhetorical ornament to the effect produced by “these polishers of marble or porphyrite, who, after it is rough hewn and reduced to that fashion they will, do set upon it a goodly glass;” and William Scott’s *Model of Poesy* (c. 1599) compares a poet’s linguistic material to “the brass or marble in the carver’s work.”¹⁸ A Renaissance poet is “a Maker in a very literal and mundane sense.”¹⁹

At the same time, the materiality of language, although central

13 See Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*.

14 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, esp. 10–33, 49–77; Brewster, *Lyric*.

15 Dubrow, *Challenges of Orpheus*, 41.

16 Johnson, *Made Flesh*, 22.

17 Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 9, 30.

18 Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 222, 333; Scott, *Model of Poesy*, 11.

19 Dubrow, *Challenges of Orpheus*, 30. See also Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse*, 55–81; Hyman, *Impossible Desires*, 32–36.

to poetic ontology, is not its only dimension. As Amie Thomasson points out, literary texts are "neither (purely) mental nor (purely) material; nor are they either concrete physical objects or timeless, changeless abstracta."²⁰ Rather, they constantly renegotiate the relationship between the two domains, mental and material. Willed into existence by human imagination (itself corporeal), literary texts assume a concrete physical shape as written, printed, vocalized, or digitized objects subject to replication, corruption, and destruction. Early modern poetic theory realized the dual importance of poems as imaginative constructs and material things. Puttenham's discussion of shape poems identifies in them a special kind of "proportion" (i.e. harmony) that "yields an ocular representation" when lyric poems are "by good symmetry reduced into certain geometrical figures."²¹ His examples of lozenge- and diamond-shaped poems reveal a close co-dependence of imagination and matter in poetic ontology. Scott, in his remarks on the genre of emblems, writes that it "admitteth some material object to the discovering the conceit." In this hybrid form, "the artisan brings his portraiture as the body, the poet the speech and word as the soul, neither being of use without the other, the body or picture as a lifeless carcase if it be not informed and actuated by the word as the spirit, the word as an idle, fantastical air that hath no sensible existence."²² Poetic imagination and manual labour meet as emblems traverse the territory between mental processes ("conceit") and the physical shape in which imagination manifests itself ("sensible existence").

But all poetry—not just the marginal forms discussed by Puttenham and Scott—depends on linkage of conceit and objecthood, with every act of poetic imagination contingent upon some sort of material support beyond language. Moreover, the non-linguistic substrate of poetry is always historically embedded, for every period endorses "instantiation templates"—the culturally sanctioned prototypes of material support which determine the physical shape a poetic event will assume to be recognized as such,

20 Thomasson, "Debates", 247.

21 Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 179.

22 Scott, *Model of Poesy*, 81.

be it an oral recitation before an audience, an inscription on stone voiced by passers-by, or a printed sonnet read silently in solitude.²³ Each “instantiation template” involves a dense assemblage of technologies, agents, institutions, situations, materials, and ideologies which determine its affordances and limitations; in many, perhaps all, cultures several templates operate concurrently.

The issue of poetic ontology acquired special poignancy in the context of the rapid technological, economic, philosophical, and aesthetic change that engulfed sixteenth-century England. New and old poetic forms clashed, coexisted, and cross-pollinated with new and old forms of instantiation, creating a multilayered and volatile ecology of textual potentialities. The past three decades have yielded vast scholarship on the social, cultural, economic, and political history of the technologies of literary production, dissemination, and consumption in Renaissance England. But more recently critics have been interested in “the relationship between the materiality of the text (including the processes of book making) and the workings of the literary imagination.”²⁴ Similarly, my aim is to examine the reverberations between the Petrarchan rhetoric of unfulfilled desire, the density of poetic language, and the material practices of Elizabethan poetry in the sonnets of Sidney, Daniel, Spenser, and others. Petrarchism, Cynthia Marshall writes, “undoes the constructed self, dissolving symbolic certainty and creating a challenge for linguistic utterance.”²⁵ Triangulating the fragmentation of selfhood and language in Petrarchan poetry, the troubled vicissitudes of textuality in early modern England, and the fragility of the idea of lyric in the period, I investigate how sonnets imagine a precarious form of poetic ontology.

The word “precarious” also calls for brief commentary. It was first recorded in English as a legal term for a tenancy “held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person,” although it soon acquired metaphorical meanings of “dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable” and “subject to or fraught with

23 Soy Ribeiro, “Spoken and Written.”

24 Smyth, *Material Texts*, 8.

25 Marshall, *Shattering of the Self*, 68.

physical danger or insecurity."²⁶ It is in these latter senses that I wish to adopt it here. To an extent, I follow Judith Butler's use of precarity to think through the ontological vulnerability of the subject in the face of the Other.²⁷ But my interest is aesthetic rather than ethical, material rather than political. I propose that the term can be usefully applied to thinking about the problematic being of early modern lyric poems which, put under pressure by conflicting demands of technology and culture, thematise the unviability of their existence as textual entities.

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Elizabethan lyric unfolded at an intersection of several modalities of material existence. Most obviously, it dwelt on the threshold of two systems of textual production and transmission—manuscript and print.²⁸ The former was characterized by social embeddedness of authorship driven by exchange and collaboration, occasional composition, restricted audience, and contingent, malleable textuality. Written in various social contexts and disseminated in single sheets, manuscript collections, and commonplace books, these lyrics were often the product of several amateur co-authors or scribes. Despite at times wide networks of circulation for these lyrics, manuscript publication retained the aura of privacy and exclusivity.²⁹

The advent of print, conversely, not only opened lyric poetry to a wider readership and a book market,³⁰ but also promoted a new form of textuality characterized by "a sense of closure, a sense that what is found in a text has been finalized, has reached a state of completion."³¹ The commodification of literary culture also prompted difficult questions about property, ownership, and alienation of

26 OED "precarious, n," 1a, 2b, 2c.

27 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 128–52.

28 On the relationship of manuscript and print in early modern England, see Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 23–110; Marotti, *Manuscript*; McKitterick, *Print*; Eckhardt, *Manuscript Verse Collectors*; and Zarnowiecki, *Fair Copies*.

29 See Marotti, *Circulation of Poetry*, 1–34.

30 See Da Costa, *Marketing English Books*.

31 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 129. On print's standardizing influence, see also Eisenstein, *Printing Revolution*, 56–101.

works of poetry in the age of mechanical reproduction. On the one hand, to some early modern readers, books “resisted permanent appropriation” because the ideas they contained could not be anyone’s possession.³² On the other hand, as curses aimed at thieves found among marginalia testify, many thought of their books as inalienable property.³³ The fact of multiple, near-identical copies of the same text emphasized the rift between the work of the poet and the labour of dissemination. William Kuskin remarks that Elizabethan England was gradually realizing that books “layer discrete page after page to create an entity that is ultimately only a conduit” of “the ideal work of the artistic imagination.”³⁴ Book production often involved struggle for authority between printers and writers. When it comes to amorous poetry, authorial protestations blaming publication on theft, betrayal, or oversight (usually with the printer’s complicity) are especially common.³⁵ Not accidentally, the period developed rudimentary legal mechanisms of safeguarding intellectual property.³⁶

It would be a mistake, however, to represent the relationship of manuscript and print in oppositional terms. Not only did manuscript publication remain robust long after the advent of print, but the two systems overlapped and infused each other. Manuscript poems were diverted into print, but printed texts, conversely, were frequently copied into manuscript collections.³⁷ Gathering texts from across genres, forms, and styles was a feature of both manuscript and print cultures.³⁸ The culture of reading did not differentiate between manuscript and print the way we do, either. Partly due to the high cost of binding, a significant number of books from the period are “transitional” or “hybrid” in the sense that they combine handwritten and printed material.³⁹ Besides, associating print

32 Zeemon Davis, “Beyond the Market,” 87. See also Scott-Warren, *Sir John Harington*, 1–24.

33 See Sherman, *Used Books*, 8.

34 Kuskin, *Recursive Origins*, 35.

35 See Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 173–88.

36 Loewenstein, *Author’s Due*.

37 See Love, *Scribal Publication*; Marotti, *Circulation of Poetry*, 23–24.

38 Respectively, Vine, *Miscellaneous Order* and O’Callaghan, *Crafting Poetry Anthologies*.

39 See McKitterick, *Print*, 65–66; Sherman and Wolfe, “Department of Hybrid Books;” and J.T. Knight, *Bound to Read*.

with fixity calls for qualification. Preparing a volume for publication involves a rearrangement of lines, reversing the sides of a page, cutting paper, and assembling separate pages. In other words, disintegration forms the basis upon which the totality of a print book becomes possible. Whatever fixity the invention of printing introduced was achieved through the uses of *movable* type. Human and mechanical errors and corrections were frequent accompaniments of the printing process, which often produced "changed, mutated, imperfect copies."⁴⁰ Smyth aptly describes print technology as "a combination of the permanent and the transient."⁴¹

A host of additional factors shaped poetic ontology in early modern England. An intellectual and affective process, reading is as much a physical, material activity—oral, visual, manual—that brings human bodies into close contact with books. Readers' hands, Roger Stoddard notes, "stain and wear away ink and colour, fraying paper thin, breaking fibres, and loosening leaves from bindings. Rough hands sunder books, and over time even gentle hands will pull books apart."⁴² Even as a purposeful intellectual pursuit, reading often involved intentional material alteration—marking, separating, splicing, supplementing, rearranging, collaging—that destroyed some texts but created new ones.⁴³ Writing in the margins was likewise both creative and destructive. Amalgamating manuscript and print and text and annotation, marginalia took place "at the intersection of generic norms and technological affordances."⁴⁴ But what it also did was invade the space of the page, violate the text, collapse the distinction between reading and writing, and challenge the finality of the book.⁴⁵

If print regularized such aspects of the book as typography and layout, it hardly made books any more enduring. Like in any other age, books in the Renaissance were frequently damaged, both by accident and design: fires, floods, wars, censorship, neglect, book-

40 Zarnowiecki, *Fair Copies*, 18.

41 Smyth, *Material Texts*, 7; on errors in printing, see esp. 75–137 and McKitterick, *Print*, 97–138; and (from a different perspective) Fleming, *Cultural Graphology*, 31–50.

42 Stoddard, "Looking at Marks," 32.

43 See Fleming, "Renaissance Collage."

44 Acheson, "Marginalia," 4.

45 See Orgel, "Margins;" Sherman, *Used Books*; Scott-Warren, "Reading Graffiti."

worms, and a host of other incidents destroyed books.⁴⁶ The large-scale destruction of books in the wake of the Reformation left significant scars on the cultural imagination of early modern England.⁴⁷ Repurposing of books was another frequent occurrence: the ever-growing need for paper led those in the waste trade to turn manuscripts and unwanted print volumes into anything from endpaper and pastedowns for new books to wrappers for groceries and privy paper.⁴⁸ “Pen, paper, inke, you feeble instruments,” admits the anonymous poet in his 1595 sonnet collection *Emaricdulfe*.⁴⁹ At the same time, Juliet Fleming remarks, “paper was not necessarily the most obvious, or suitable, medium for writing in early modern England (nor, for that matter, was paper as ‘immaterial’ as it has since become).”⁵⁰ A surprising amount of writing from the period is on glass, wood, fabric, or metal. Moreover, early modern paper made from rags of flax cloth frequently contained flecks of plant and textile matter, producing an uneven, challenging surface, where “knots of organic matter ... can interrupt typography.”⁵¹ This textual ecology dislocated poetry from the predictable site of a written page, enmeshing it into a wider aggregation of entities and things.

The scriptive ontology of early modern lyric is further complicated by connections of poetry, especially lyric, with vocal performance and music. Jennifer Richards challenges the widespread association of print (and writing in general) with silent reading and insists instead that early modern texts should be read as scripts of vocal performance. As she argues, “the oral-aural context of reading in this period produced voice- or performance-aware silent readers as well as readers who literally animated the page with their breath.”⁵² Moreover, in Renaissance England lyric’s “grounding in sung performance was still intact” and “song was a vital aspect of

46 Smyth, *Material Texts*, 55–74; Pearson, *Book Ownership*, 10–13.

47 For example, see Ramsay, “Manuscripts.”

48 On uses of wastepaper in binding, see Smyth, *Material Texts*, 137–74; on book pages as privy paper, see Yates, *Error*, 107–108.

49 *Emaricdulfe*, sonnet XXII.

50 Fleming, *Graffiti*, 10.

51 Calhoun, *Nature of the Page*, 52.

52 Richards, *Voices and Books*, 16.

lyric circulation."⁵³ The musical dimension of early modern lyric exploded its system of circulation, involving "a mixture of human and not humans ... the composers, performance, and song books."⁵⁴ At the same time, voice was repeatedly theorized as unstable, brittle, and elusive.⁵⁵

Early modern England, in other words, "may not be accurately defined as exclusively an oral, manuscript, or print culture."⁵⁶ Rather, it was a pluralistic ecosystem where "the three media of speech, script, and print infused and interacted with each other in a myriad ways."⁵⁷ My argument is that Elizabethan sonnets responded to these frictions between reading and writing, fixity and fluidity, fragment and whole, idea and matter, voice and inscription, destruction and making, works and books, by injecting irresolvable contradictions into the way they thematised their own existence. Richards presents a harmonious vision of media polyvalence in early modern England, suggesting, for example, that "print ... aligned eye, tongue, and ear."⁵⁸ My interest, by contrast, is focused on the crises of lyric ontology in the sonnets, which I read as symptomatic of the tensions between different instantiation templates and modes of poetic being.⁵⁹ These Petrarchan lyrics offer what Adorno calls "a philosophical sundial telling the time of history"—in this case, history of book production, of writing, reading, and speaking, of textual making and unmaking.⁶⁰

These crises haunt the liminal zone between mental conception and physical objecthood. As I have suggested, regardless of the specific technologies of production, poetic imagination needs to be realized as a material object—an ink-stained page, a carved inscription, or a series of air waves. The sonnets I consider below use their imaginative resources to problematize their actualization as physi-

53 Larson, *Matter of Song* 35, 38.

54 Trudell, *Unwritten Poetry*, 13, 19.

55 Bloom, *Voice in Motion*.

56 Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material*, 27.

57 Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 5.

58 Richards, *Voices and Books*, 10.

59 For a similar approach that focuses on misalignments and incommensurabilities between forms of ontology in connection with Petrarchism, see Hart, "Bracket and Voice."

60 Adorno, "Lyric Poetry," 345.

cal phenomena. Although all of them undeniably have a material existence, the way they conceive of themselves as poetic artefacts undermines the certainty of their ontology. Each poem, drawing on the historical realities of early modern writing, publishing, and reading, dramatizes the uncertainties of the material practices of poetic production in early modern culture.

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In many ways, the history of Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* emblemizes the ontological precarity of Renaissance lyric. Written sometime in the early 1580s, the collection of sonnets and songs initially existed in manuscripts not intended for circulation outside the Sidney-Herbert circle.⁶¹ In 1591, however, Sidney's verse was printed by Thomas Newman in an apparently unauthorized quarto.⁶² The book was quickly suppressed, and Newman forced to issue another edition the same year.⁶³ The publication, Arthur Marotti notes, "fundamentally changed the culture's attitudes towards the printing of secular lyrics of individual writers, lessening the social disapproval of such texts and helping to incorporate what had essentially been regarded as literary ephemera into the body of durable canonical texts."⁶⁴ In 1598, the complete sequence appeared in the lavish 292-leaf folio, cementing Sidney's poetic status and fixing his canon.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, some of the poems enjoyed a wider circulation outside of those editions before and after Sidney's death. In addition to manuscript and print miscellanies in which they are found, excerpts from what we know as *Astrophil and Stella* were given musical settings in William Byrd's *Psalmes, Sonets, & songs* (1588), Thomas Morley's *First Booke of Ayres* (1600), John Dowland's *Second Book of Songs or Aires* (1600), Robert Jones' *Muses garden for delights* (1610) and others.⁶⁶ And thanks to Smyth's research, we

61 See Woudhuysen. *Sir Philip Sidney*.

62 *Syr P.S. His Astrophel and Stella*.

63 *Sir P.S. his Astrophel and Stella*.

64 Marotti, *Manuscript*, 230.

65 *Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*. For the significance of this edition to Renaissance poetry, see Davis, *Invention*.

66 See Alexander, "Musical Sidneys."

know that at least one copy of the 1591 *Astrophel and Stella* supplied the front and rear endpaper for Edward Lively's *A true chronologie of the times of the Persian monarchie* (1597), the binder using Sidney's sonnets as wastepaper.⁶⁷ Scattered across manuscript and print, sung and read, authorized and pirated, private and public, preserved and damaged, Sidney's sonnets were caught in the chaos of early modern textuality.

Although Sidney could not have possibly predicted the future instantiations of his verse across a range of forms, media, and sensory regimes (nor forms of its destruction), *Astrophil and Stella* harbours an unease about the precarity of its lyric existence. Witness sonnet 15:

You that do search for euerie purling spring,
Which from the ribs of old *Parnassus* flowes,
And euerie floure not sweete perhaps, which growes
Neare thereabouts, into your Poesie wring.
Ye that do Dictionaries methode bring
Into your rimes, running in ratling rowes:
You that poore *Petrarchs* long deceased woes,
With new-borne sighes and denisend wit do sing.
You take wrong waies those far-fet helpes be such,
As do bewray a want of inward tuch:
And sure at length stolne goods do come to light.
But if (both for your loue and skill) you name,
You seeke to nurse at fullest breasts of Fame,
Stella behold and then begin to indite.⁶⁸

The obvious thrust of the sonnet is to distinguish the speaker from other imitators of Petrarch and assert his aesthetic and national independence.⁶⁹ But the sonnet also offers a more general *ars poetica*, and Sidney's particular attention is focused on lyric ontology. On the surface, the poets he attacks overprivilege vocality. Not only do they "sing" their "woes" with "sighes;" they are fond of alliteration

67 Smyth, *Material Texts*, 163–74.

68 *Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, 524.

69 Kennedy, *Site*, 176–77.

(“rimes, running in ratling rowes”), a figure dependent on the human voice for its effect. Puttenham, for instance, writes that alliteration “notably affect[s] the ear.”⁷⁰ Although their “Dictionaries methode” may suggest the silence of a study or library, the word’s etymology (from the Latin *dicere*) links it to speech. At the same time, Sidney accuses his antagonists of gathering (rhetorical) flowers into (a) “Poesie.” The allusion is perhaps to *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* by George Gascoigne (1573), reissued as *Poesies* (1575), with sections entitled “Flowers,” “Hearbes,” and “Weedes.” But “wring[ing]” poetic flowers into “Poesie[s]” also invokes the genre of posy—short poems inscribed upon objects such as “fruit trenchers of wood” or “rings, jewels and the like.”⁷¹ In other words, Sidney equally objects to inscriptions, and the portmanteau word “w/ring” suggests both artisanal production and acoustic reverberation. Sung, sighed, or inscribed, the verse of his predecessors leaves Sidney unsatisfied.

His solution, however, articulates an idea of lyric that is startlingly self-emasculating. According to Sidney, poets should forsake their search for “purling spring[s]” in the “ribs of old *Parnassus*” and instead place their thirsty mouths at “fullest breasts of Fame” by beholding Stella’s beauty. However, the transition from optic pleasure to poetic utterance—which also involves a gendered shift from father (Parnassus, Petrarch) to mother (Fame, Stella)—is less unproblematic than Sidney’s celebratory tone suggests. “The principle of intelligibility, in lyric poetry,” Paul de Man argues, “depends on the phenomenalization of the poetic voice.”⁷² A lyric poem is contingent on our ability to imagine a speaking *I* behind the text. But Sidney’s sonnet demands that lyric poets reconcile two physiologically antithetical impulses: speaking (“indite”) and feeding (“nurse at fullest breasts”). Granted, in the temporality imagined by the poem, feeding at Fame’s swollen breasts should follow speech as a kind of gratification, but in the reading chronology, oral consumption in fact precedes and legitimizes poetry. With his mouth full of milk, Sidney’s lyric poet is unlikely to perform an

70 Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 258.

71 Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, 146; Scott, *Model of Poesy*, 29.

72 de Man, “Lyrical Voice,” 55.

intelligible speech act ("indite"), launching a momentary crisis of enunciation so that the sonnet—presumably, an example of good lyric—is lost between gulp and speech.

The last word of the poem, "indite," which could mean both "to speak" and "to write" in Renaissance England, may offer a partial relief to this rhetorical cul-de-sac.⁷³ Read as a command to inscription, it seemingly restores the authority of mimesis (although that would contradict Sidney's scepticism about writing). But the infantilizing scenes of oral nourishment that haunt the sonnet suggest that Sidney's strategy for successful lyric is premised on a regression to early childhood.⁷⁴ Even if imagined as scriptive activity, linking poetry with a pre-linguistic stage prevents its realization into a meaningful text. Besides, reading "indite" as writing exposes the sonnet to a confluence of two liquids, the white milk of Fame and the black ink of poetry, the colours replicating the appearance of sonnet 15 on the page. And if we persist with reading Fame's milk as reward for poetic activity, the former's whiteness threatens to blur the characters inscribed on the page and erode the meaning they carry. In short, sonnet 15 links the emergence of lyric to a moment of ontological impossibility. As a good lyric, the sonnet is at risk of being either subsumed in an act of sucking or of turning into a degraded smear of milk and ink on the page; as a bad poem, it takes "wrong waies" and has no place in the world.

Sonnet 3 from Samuel Daniel's *Delia* (1592–1623) also explores the precarity of lyric ontology dissolving between voice and writing, hearing and sight:

If so it hap this of-spring of my care,
 These fatall Antheames, sad and mornefull Songes:
 Come to their view, who like afflicted are;
 Let them yet sigh their owne, and mone my wrongs.
 But vntouch'd harts, with vnaffected eye,
 Approch not to behold so great distresse:
 Cleer-sighted you, soone note what is awry,
 Whilst blinded ones mine errors neuer gesse.

73 OED "indite, v," 1, 3a, 4.

74 See Loewenstein, "Truant Pen," 136.

You blinded soules whom youth and errors lead,
 You outcast Eglets, dazled with your sunne:
 Ah you, and none but you my sorrowes read,
 You best can judge the wrong that she hath dunne.
 That she hath doone, the motiue of my paine;
 Who whilst I loue, doth kill me with disdain.⁷⁵

One of the first things the reader notices is the complex striation of ontological forms the poet envisions for his alienated “of-spring.” The opening lines insist on their acoustic, song-like qualities (“Antheames,” “sad and mornefull Songes”), although by the closing of the quatrain these poems in distinct genres (hymns, songs) disintegrate into rhythmic respiratory noises, as the fellow lovers are invited to emulate the poet with their “sigh[s],” then into inarticulate collective “mone[s],” pure vocality of pain and pleasure. Given the sonnet’s concern with paternity and reproduction, this presumably exclusively male network of readers and lovers is an extension of what Tom MacFaul calls “masculine parthenogenesis” applied to poetic circulation.⁷⁶ In this sense, the lyric “mone[s]” amplified by Daniel’s audience also imply “the climactic groan of the father” at the moment of conception, when “the *logos* that underpins patriarchal law can dissolve into a strange, pathetic glossolalia.”⁷⁷

But the first quatrain already contains a germ of the abrupt shift in sensory regime, for the poet expects his “songs” and “mone[s]” to come “to their view, who like afflicted are.” These sounds are, then, to appear before lovers as something they see, not hear. The second quatrain develops this motif, reiterating that the sonic qualities of Daniel’s “wailing verse” should be grasped optically, as a visual object or, more likely, written text, as the emphasis on his listeners’ “eye[s]” makes clear. Those unable to feel passion should not “behold” the poet’s “distresse:” if they are “cleer-sighted” they will notice too many poetic defects; if they are blind, they will not be able to feel his pain. In the second quatrain, voice becomes silent

75 Daniel, *Delia*, B2r.

76 MacFaul, *Poetry and Paternity*, 27.

77 Pettman, *Sonic Intimacy*, 24.

writing as the fleeting, ephemeral song ossifies into a more concrete, lasting object. The line "Ah you, and none but you my sorrowes read," bookended by antithetical references to pure sonority ("Ah") and (silent) "read[ing]," encapsulates the sonnet's movement between modes of existence, although its placement deep in the third quatrain still suggests that the sonnet's ontology remains jumbled, at once acoustic and inscribed, transient and permanent.

Built into these leaps of imagery is a crucial self-reflexive turn. As the sounds and moans of love are recast as inscriptions, the sonnet realizes in its form—that of a written text—the imaginative trajectory of the poem. What the true lovers apostrophized by the text will read *is* sonnet 3 of Daniel's volume. But having proscribed non-lovers from his audience, Daniel (somewhat confusingly) identifies those admitted to this circle as "blinded soules" who are "dazzled" with the "sunne[s]" of their ladies' beauty. He calls on them to "read" his "sorrowes" and judge the wrong committed by his mistress. Yet what makes them qualified to appreciate his suffering—their blindness—would disqualify them from reading the text. This puts the reader in an aporetic bind: if we wish to read the sonnet, we must claim the status of lovers (otherwise we are denied access); but in order to do so we must assume blindness as our characteristic and thus interrupt our reading. Either way, the poem cancels itself in the process of reading. Just as the lady kills the lover, so the text of the sonnet erases its own ontology. But paradoxically, the rhetorical dissolution also highlights the text's ineluctable materiality. Drained of its signification, the sonnet becomes an inanimate object in the reader's hands, an effect amplified by the poem's position on the recto page of the 1594 edition. Proceeding to the next poem is contingent upon turning the page, which conflates the abandonment of sonnet 3 as unreadable with the tactile experience of the book as a material object.

Sonnet XXXIII from Giles Fletcher the Elder's *Licia* (1593) links the precarity of lyric ontology more explicitly to the familiar Petrarchan framework of frustrated desire:

I wrote my sighs, and sent them to my love,
I prais'd that faire, that none ynough could praise:

But plaintes, nor praises, could faire Lycia moove,
 Above my reach, she did her virtues raise.
 And thus reply'd: False Scrawle, untrue thou art,
 To faine those sighes, that no where can be found;
 For half those praises came not from his heart:
 Whose faith and love, as yet was never found.
 Thy maisters lyfe, (false Scrawle) shall be thy doom:
 Because he burns, I judge thee to the flame:
 Both your attempts, deserve no better roome,
 Thus at her word, we ashes both became.
 Beleeve me (faire) and let my paper live:
 Or be not faire, and so me freedome give.⁷⁸

Fletcher's unmovable, pyromaniac mistress not only spurns his affections; she also seeks to destroy the vehicle of his desire by setting the poem itself ablaze, a witty if not uncommon play on the motif of erotic burning. What makes the sonnet important to my argument is not its destruction, nor is it the Petrarchan idea of the poet's being tied up with the existence of his fragile text. Rather, Fletcher's sonnet brings to view the unreliability, uncertainty of its own material practice. Licia burns his sonnet because, to her, it represents a "false Scrawle:" the lover's attempts to record his "sighs" are dismissed as "untrue." On the one hand, her doubts tap into the reservations about poetic feigning derived from Plato's admonition against poets' lies and the broader distrust of writing in the West. The legal strain in the sonnet's language, on the other hand, may invoke the widespread anxiety about scribal forgeries haunting Elizabethan culture.⁷⁹ But Licia's response also takes to task, as a viable form of lyric existence, the capture of breath by scriptive labour. For her, that the lover's sighs are "fain[ed]" because they "came not from his heart" is only part of the problem. His "sighs" are too ephemeral, too transient to be preserved by ink and paper: their elusive and uncontrollable nature resists crude reification in writing, which puts pressure on Fletcher's lyric project, given the frequent association of lyric voice with sighing in early

78 Fletcher, *Licia*, F2v.

79 Gordon, "Material Fictions."

modern culture.⁸⁰ Writing is a form of forging the poet's (true) breath. But in accusing Fletcher of "fain[ing] those sighes, that no where can be found," Licia not only insists that they lack a definable location. She also frames their destruction as a comparable denial of space: "Both your attempts, deserve no better roome, / Thus at her word, we ashes both became." A deterritorialized phenomenon, sighs have no right to a place and can only be represented by emptiness. The obvious pun on stanza (Italian, "room"), moreover, implicates Fletcher's own sonnet in the process of disappearance.⁸¹ To be actualized as a sigh-based lyric poem, the sonnet must forfeit its spatial position on the page.

Echoing these concerns, sonnet LI from Barnabe Barnes's *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* (1593) examines them through the lens of print technology:

Lame consonants, of member-vowells robbed
What perfect-sounding wordes can you compose
Wherein you might my sorrowes flame disclose?
Can you frame mamed wordes as you had throbbd?
Can you with sighes make signes of passions sobbd?
Or can your characters make sorrowes showes?
Can liquids make them? I with tears make those,
But for my teares with taunts and frumps are bobbd:
Could mutes procure good wordes mute would I bee,
But then who should my sorrowes image paint?
No consonants or mutes or liquids will
Set out my sorrowes, tho with grief I faint:
If with no letter but one vowell should bee,
An A. with H. my Sonnet would fulfill.⁸²

The sonnet stages an experiment in which the lover tests the affordances of different kinds of consonant as he searches for the "perfect-sounding wordes." None, however, pleases Parthenophil, for

80 See L. Knight, *Reading Green*, 53.

81 Samuel Daniel describes stanzaic organization, specifically the sonnet form, as "much excellently ordered in a small room" (*Defence of Rhyme*, 216).

82 Barnes, *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, Eiiijr-v

vowelless words are “lame” and “mamed.” Fricative “sighes” make poor “signes,” his “liquids” are snubbed like the liquid substance of his tears, and his “mutes” would require painting (with a possible allusion to Simonides’ “painting is mute poetry” aphorism)—a different art form altogether—to supplement the absence of sound.

In the end, he dismisses them all in favour of “one vowell” he associates with the Petrarchan interjection “Ah.” But as we have seen with other sonnets, the theory of lyric Barnes develops collapses under its own weight. The obvious paradox is that Barnes posits sound—the emotionally charged interjection “Ah”—as the perfect expression of his sorrow and ultimate solution to his erotic and poetic troubles precisely when the imagery of writing and visuality (“characters ... image ... paint ... letters”) takes over the poem. Yet the rift Barnes discloses between his theory and practice is further exacerbated by the material form which his acoustic activity is experienced by the reader—print. More so than writing, Bruce Smith argues, print in early modern culture “stands at the farthest remove from the speaking body.”⁸³ Print, however, not only mutes speech; it breaks down acoustic segments into individual, highly technologized, elements. In Barnes’s sonnet, the plentitude of the groan “Ah” is reduced to a disjunctive combination of the mechanically processed letters, “A. with H.” In place of a persuasively vocal manifestation of “sorrowe,” we are left with “the indigestible materiality of the medium.”⁸⁴ More so than writing, print technology depends on the white spaces between letters on the page that inscribe spatial and temporal difference. Barnes’s “Ah” is then not only silent, but non-identical with itself. And if the blank space between its letters is the final actualization of the sonnet itself, the readers are left with emptiness flooding the space of the page, with the sonnet self-effacing before our eyes in order to fulfil its ambition. The perfect-sounding word is the empty space between two letters of the printer’s movable type.

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83 B. Smith, *Acoustic World*, 125.

84 Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 175.

If my previous discussion concerned individual sonnets, in this section I consider how in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595) the precarity of lyric ontology manifests itself at the level of the book.⁸⁵ The 89-sonnet record of Spenser's courtship of Elizabeth Boyle not only examines its status as a work of verbal art and alludes to early modern textual practices,⁸⁶ it also inscribes its existence at the limits of the totality of the book *qua* book. By conditioning a reading protocol based on corporeal engagement with the book's materiality and simultaneously deconstructing the book's architectonic, Spenser's sequence foregrounds the misalignment between the energies of lyric and the material conduit of poetic labour. *Amoretti* may be "remarkable for its time in leading not to despair, irresolution or spiritual sublimation but to the fulfilment and legitimation of sexual desire in matrimony."⁸⁷ But it displays the same anxieties about textual fragmentation and ontological instability of lyric found in other Petrarchan sonnets from the period.

A poetic collection—such as Spenser's 1595 volume *AMORETTI and Epithalamion*, which includes 89 sonnets, a handful of Anacreontics, and an epithalamium—already presupposes a degree of interplay between its poems and the material facts of their organization. For many readers, *Amoretti and Epithalamion* is a single unit that follows the trajectory of the poet's love from courtship to marriage. The liturgical, calendrical, and biographical forces operating in the sequence appear to codify its unidirectional narrative and structural coherence, with the lovers' union celebrated in the *Epithalamion* providing the ultimate point of reference for all other texts in the volume.⁸⁸ But several elements of the book's poetics and typographic design suggest a degree of independence enjoyed by the *Amoretti*. Perhaps J. W. Lever's claim that Spenser's book was crippled by "haste and botching" is extreme.⁸⁹ However, as I discuss below, the volume does send "mixed messages" about the relationship between its texts.⁹⁰ Spenser's control over the shape of the

85 Spenser, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*. I quote this edition.

86 See Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 46–47; Gold, "Trembling Leaves."

87 McCabe, "Shorter Verse," 179.

88 For example, Dunlope, "Unity;" Kaske, "Spenser's *Amoretti*."

89 Lever, *Elizabethan Love Sonnet*, 101.

90 Dubrow, "Dressing," 94.

volume is also a matter of conjecture. The poet was intimately involved in the production of his books throughout the 1590s.⁹¹ Yet Ponsonby's dedication of the *Amoretti* volume to Sir Robart Needham explicitly acknowledges that Spenser's "sweete conceited Sonets" will appear "in [the poet's] absence."⁹² I thus consider the *Amoretti* as a work pursuing its own lyric agenda, even though it undoubtedly plays off the other texts in the 1595 volume, both imaginatively and materially.

Spenser's sequence is bracketed by striking images of books. Sonnet I stages an encounter between the poems and their ideal reader, the lady:

Happy ye leaues when as those lilly hands,
 which hold my life in their dead doing might
 shall handle you and hold in loues soft bands,
 lyke captiues trembling at the victors sight.
 And happy lines, on which with starry light,
 those lamping eyes will deigne sometimes to look
 and reade the sorrowes of my dying spright,
 written with teares in harts close bleeding book.
 And happy rymes bath'd in the sacred brooke,
 of Helicon whence she deriued is,
 when ye behold the Angels blessed looke,
 my souls long lacked foode, my heauens bliss.
 Leaues, lines, and rymes, seeke her to please alone,
 whom if ye please, I care for other none.

This apostrophic sonnet outlines a markedly corporeal procedure for reading the *Amoretti*: not just the lady's mind, but her whole body (hands, fingers, eyes), her various senses (touch, sight, hearing), the book's verbal and non-verbal elements are involved in the process of reading. To read the *Amoretti* is not only to grasp the meaning of the words and respond to its sensuous cues; it is also to hold the book in your hands before your eyes (given its octavo size that would have been the default method of reading), turning its

91 See Weiss, "Watermark Evidence and Inference."

92 Spenser, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, n.p.

pages and clutching its spine. The inaugural image of the collection is unmistakably that of a physical book.

The book re-appears in the *Amoretti* shortly before the end, in sonnet LXXXV:

Deepe in the closet of my parts entyre,
her worth is written with a golden quill:
that me with heauenly fury doth inspire,
and my glad mouth with her sweet prayes fill.
Which when as fame in her shrill trump shal thunder,
let the world chose to enuy or to wonder.

This poem explicates the mechanics of poetic genesis: divine inspiration ("heauenly fury"), rising from the poet's bowels ("[d]eepe in the closet of my parts entyre"), is moulded into articulate utterances in his throat and mouth ("glad mouth with her sweet prayes fill[ed]"). Poetry then enters the world where its perlocutionary power is enhanced by public reception (the "shrill trump" of "fame"), bringing recognition to the poet and his lady.

This vision draws parallels with the opening sonnet. In both texts, the book simultaneously occupies two positions, inside and outside the subject: in sonnet I, the lover's inward "harts close bleeding book" prefigures the "leaues, lines, and rymes" of the volume the lady reads; in LXXXV the internal lines written "with a golden quill" anticipate the "sweet prayes" of the *Amoretti*. However, the differences in the way this conceit is inflected are illuminating. On the one hand, the internal book displays a dramatic shift from suffering and anguish to tranquillity and certainty, a move in line with a tone of happiness that becomes dominant as the sequence progresses. But on the other hand, in contrast to the "leaues, lines, and rymes" of sonnet I, in sonnet LXXXV any reference to a physical book is poignantly missing. Orality and aurality implied by the Ovidian image of "shril trump" signal a reluctance to imagine the material form of poetry as anything beyond human voice. Inwardly, in sonnet LXXXV Spenser continues to write a metaphorical book, one, moreover, that rehabilitates the earlier

rhetorical violence. But its external counterpart, the physical book, has vanished from the text.

Of course, the ineluctable materiality of the volume the reader holds in his or her hands is ample reminder that it is not possible for Spenser's poetry *not to be* a book. But its integrity as a physical object is put under pressure by a discernible impulse to subvert the totality of the book through a series of imaginative and typographic decisions. In particular, the beginning and ending in Spenser's volume are marked by an acute crisis of identity. Speaking of itself as part of a complete book, the opening sonnet functions as an "*envoi*, a poem presenting the sequence as a *fait accompli*, a completed series of artistic products."⁹³ It offers a kind of postscript that perhaps should conclude the sequence rather than anticipate it. Only in the previous poem, the prefatory sonnet by G.W.Jr. refers to the *Amoretti* as a work yet to be written: "*O therefore let that happy muse proceede / to climb the height of vertues sacred hill.*" And in sonnet II, Spenser (imitating Sidney) admits that he still carries the burden of "[v]quiet thought" grown "greater then my womb," a text still undelivered. According to Edward Said, "the production of a text is an event, physically and spiritually, which has its own genealogy that cannot begin with its reading."⁹⁴ In the *Amoretti*, however, reading becomes the point of origin, suggesting that the sequence is finished before it has begun, even though this impression is contradicted by the sonnet's number (I) and the tactile evidence that only several pages have so far been turned.⁹⁵

A comparable uncertainty haunts the opposite terminal point of the *Amoretti*. Sonnet LXXXV, with its vision of the sequence issuing forth from the poet's mouth, contains what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls a closural allusion signifying completion.⁹⁶ That the sonnet is printed on the recto page contributes to a sense of termination, the catchword "When" the only indicator that we have not

93 Brown, "Metapoetry," 403.

94 Said, *Beginning*, 202.

95 With codex "you have an immediate visual idea of how much you have read and how much you have left to go by the amount of pages remaining to the left or right of where you are" (Small, *Wax Tablets*, 11). This idea is tactile as well.

96 Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure*.

yet reached the end. Since reading cannot continue until the page is turned and the following sonnet is revealed, this unknowable futurity reinforces the notion of LXXXV as potentially the last poem. (The volume's full title also suggests that the sonnet collection—*Amoretti*—does not exhaust its contents.) Yet this attempt at finalization is quickly revealed to be a faux ending: four more sonnets separate it from the final word of the sequence. In turn, the actual *explicit* to the sequence—the three final sonnets—defy their status as the book's ultimate closure. The last page of the *Amoretti* is devoid of any terminal paratext—a 'The End,' a '*FINIS*,' an envoy, a colophon, or a visual device—which would signal the end of a textual unit. Such verbal and visual tools were becoming increasingly common in the late sixteenth century, so their absence can give the reader reason to expect more.⁹⁷ In fact, the catchword "In" promises continuation beyond the page, and the "Anacreontics" section that follows begins on the next verso page so their different stanzaic organization cannot yet optically confirm the formal shift after sonnet LXXXIX. The word *FINIS* appears eight pages later, when it separates the "Anacreontics" from the *Epithalamion* (which boasts its own title page and its own *FINIS* propping the poem's last stanza).

Moreover, the last sonnets (LXXXVII–LXXXIX), unexpectedly lamenting the speaker's separation from the lady, belie their status as closure. Erotic frustration and pangs of absence are textbook Petrarchism, but their redeployment toward the end of a work that articulates a vision of conjugal love is surprising. This carefully choreographed separation of the lovers, in suspending post-betrothal mutuality, disturbs the teleology of the sequence. Instead, the final poems subtly reprise the opening images of the *Amoretti*: the lover hoping to feed his "loue-afamished hart" with the "light" of "th'Idaea playne" (LXXXVIII) and wanting "liuely bliss" (LXXXIX) echoes the descriptions of his beloved as his "soules long lacked foode, [his] heauens bliss" in the opening sonnet. When LXXXVII has the lover "time with expectation spend," the *Amoretti* effectively formulates a new Petrarchan *incipit*.

97 On "terminal paratexts," see Sherman, "Beginning."

By disguising the beginning of the *Amoretti* as its ending and by injecting the latter with a rhetorical germ of commencement, Spenser's sequence disconnects the material limits of the book from the imaginative points of origin and conclusion. But the *Amoretti* also scatters across its text "phantom" beginnings and endings unmoored from the nominal terminal points of the collection. Through images of poetic interruption, the *Amoretti* develops situations of termination and re-commencement that are distinctly at odds with their positions in the structure of the sequence. In sonnet XXIII, the poet complains that the beloved "doth conceaue, / th'importune suit of my desire to shone," which he compares to Penelope undoing her weaving: "with one looke she spills that long I sponne." While the sonnet ostensibly decries the lover's failure at erotic persuasion, in the metapoetic world of the *Amoretti* weaving figures textual production. The lover's courtship—an allegory of his writerly goal—becomes "fruitelesse worke . . . broken with least wynde." We witness the fabric of Spenser's poetry being rent, in a way bringing the sequence to a close, only to be "revived and resumed."⁹⁸ But the book itself can be imagined as provisionally ending with this sonnet and beginning again on the next page, indeed separating into two books, the weaving imagery offering a suture over the tear. The sequence stands on the brink of being "broken with least wynd"—the lightest movement of air produced by the turning of the page. A similar event occurs in sonnet XLVIII, where (like Licia) Spenser's beloved burns his poem: "Innocent paper whom too cruell hand . . . did sacrificize vnto the greedy fyre." This signifies another moment of destruction of the *Amoretti*, and thus a ghost ending and a new point of origin, since the poet vows to persist: "Yet liue for euer, though against her will." Just like the actual beginning and ending of the *Amoretti* resist fixity, the proliferation of their internal counterparts accentuates the uncertainty surrounding the sequence's identity as a stable book.

The redrawing of the conceptual boundaries of the *Amoretti* is reinforced by certain aspects of the volume's typography. Like most Elizabethan sonnet sequences, Spenser's prints one sonnet per page,

98 Miller, "Writing and Wooing," 551.

each decorated with a floral border. This type of visual organization, with pages and sonnets uniformly designed and sequentially numbered, created "a more stable and fixed artefact than any of its individual poems."⁹⁹ But cordoning off the spaces of individual sonnets also opened possibilities for detachment and fragmentation. This becomes more pronounced if we consider sequences that run poetry through from page to page, occasionally breaking the sonnets midway (quartos of *Astrophil and Stella*, Barnes' *Partbenophil*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets*). There, while rifts *within* individual poems become possible, the continuity *among* the sonnets increases.¹⁰⁰ By the same token, the borders of floral design at the top and at the bottom of each page dispatch confusing messages. Such flowers were often used to "articulate the composition and identity of the entire printed volume as something more than the sum of its parts."¹⁰¹ But in the *Amoretti* the upper borders are unstable. Curiously, the ones sitting on top of sonnets XXIII and XXIV (unweaving) do not have identical designs, nor do those of sonnets XLVIII and XLIX (burning). A purported mechanism of totality, these flowers sow seeds of disintegration. We may also recall the re-appearance, almost verbatim, of sonnet XXXV ("My hungry eyes with greedy couetize"), in which the lover compares himself to Narcissus, as sonnet LXXXIII. From a technological point of view, the repetition may suggest that the leaves of the book have been stitched together erroneously, asking the reader to re-arrange the volume. But this possible printing error is grafted onto the sonnet's Ovidian language of insatiable desire ("so plenty makes me poore"), producing an allegory of an imperfect poetic object.

In all these instances, the *Amoretti* strives to bring the indisputable facticity of its book-ness in conflict with the imaginative, numerical, and typographic signals it transmits: it suggests, among other things, that its material and conceptual thresholds may not coincide, that the order and numbering of the sonnets may be unreliable, and that the book may harbour additional endings and beginnings. This in turn increases the care its readers invest in the

99 Wall, *Imprint of Gender*, 70–71.

100 See Hutchison, "Breaking the Book."

101 Fleming, "Changed Opinion," 56.

material object in their hands, similar to what Martin Heidegger calls “the conspicuousness of the unusable,” when malfunctioning objects “permit the entities with which we concern ourselves to be encountered in such a way that the worldly character of what is within-the-world comes to the fore.”¹⁰² Reading the *Amoretti*, in addition to grasping the linguistic contents of the poems and experiencing the lover’s sorrows and joys, entails clutching the book tightly to avoid any further slippages of the imaginative openings and conclusions from their spatial positions, thumbing the pages to see the sequence has not been interrupted, and feeling the paper body of the book to make sure that it has not dissolved. Constantly reminding its readers that they are holding a material book in their hand, the *Amoretti* works toward undermining the ontology of this object. The courtship-to-marriage narrative may retroactively cancel these disruptive impulses, but read in real time, without the benefit of biographical knowledge, Spenser’s Petrarchan sequence calls into question its stability as a material artefact.

What the *Amoretti* is preoccupied with, then, is the incommensurability between the work of lyric imagination and the material conditions of the book. When the *Amoretti* refuses to imagine itself as a book, when it dislocates and deconstructs its beginning and ending, when it interrupts the fabric of the sequence with superfluous points of commencement and termination, when it implies that its sequential and visual orders may be wrong—Spenser’s Petrarchan collection resists cohering into a fixed volume. The material certainty of the *Amoretti* as a printed book is undermined by a spate of disagreements between its physical features and its imaginative strategies. The *Amoretti* becomes a book that accentuates the irreducible distance between its physical pages and its work of imagination. Highlighting the elusiveness of material stability, the *Amoretti* exposes the limitations of the book even as it insists upon the limitless promise of the work of lyric.

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102 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 104, 102.

Each of the examples of the Elizabethan sonnet tradition considered here transmits a sense of lyric ontology in a state of crisis. Sidney, Fletcher, Daniel, Barnes, and Spenser compose sonnets that exist at the point of vanishing, whose identity as speech acts and integrity as material objects are put under pressure. With Petrarchan longing allegorizing textual unattainability, these poems are trapped in a cycle of self-assertion and self-effacement. Written in the historically specific language of literary production and circulation (print, song, paper, ink), they pry open the discrepancy between the affordances of technology and the poetic imagination as the representational subversion pushes against the certainty of their objectified presence as palpable artefacts. Sensing the contemporary crises of textuality, Elizabethan sonnets make audible, legible, and visible the precarious ontology of lyric.

ÚTDRÁTTUR

“Penni, pappír, blek, þið aumu tól”:
Ótrygg verufræði lýríkur í sonnettum frá tíma Elísabetar

Í þessari grein er kannað hvernig einkennum ástríðna er beitt að hætti Petrarcha í sonnettum frá síðari hluta 16. aldar til þess að fást við spurningar um verufræði lýríkur – hina efnislegu tilveru lýrísks kveðskapar. Málið varð brýnt síðla á valdatíma Elísabetar I á Englandi, í miðri hringiðu tæknilegra, efnahagslegra, heimspeki-legra og fagurfræðilegra breytinga sem höfðu áhrif á efnisleg skilyrði fyrir tilurð og dreifingu kveðskapar. Stírið sambúð handrita og prenttækni, lesvenjur sem fólu í sér ýmiss konar tilfæringar (s.s. úrklippur, spássíuskrif, samklipp o.fl.), pappírsskortur, bókabrennur, notkun lýríkur í tónlist, ásamt ýmsu öðru, skóp umhverfi sem var óstöðugt og lagskipt, þar sem kvæði voru sett fram á ólíku formi og í ólíkum miðlum. Nálestur á völdum sonnettum eftir Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, Edmund Spenser, Giles Fletcher og Barnabe Barnes er hér nýttur til að færa rök fyrir því að í kveðskap þeirra endurspegli vísanir í tilfinningaþrungin verk af meiði petrarchisma þá óvissu og þann óstöðugleika sem verufræðileg skilyrði kveðskapar fólu í sér. Þessar sonnettur gera erótíska löngun sem aldrei getur gengið í uppfyllingu vona að táknsögu um dauðadæmda þrá eftir lýrískum texta sem eilíflega rennur úr greipum; þær hrærast í hvarfpunkti og það reynir mjög á þær sem málgjörðir og sem óbrotna efnislega hluti. Í þessum sonnettum frá síðari hluta 16. aldar má greina hvernig kreppir að textanum sem verður til þess að hin viðkvæma verufræði skáldskaparins verður sýnileg, heyrnleg og auðlesin.

Keywords: lýrískur kveðskapur; elísabetískar sonnettur; verufræði skáldskapar; saga bókarinnar; petrarchismi; skáldlegt ímyndunarafi

ABSTRACT

**"Pen, paper, inke, you feeble instruments":
The Precarity of Lyric Ontology in Elizabethan Sonnets**

This essay investigates how Elizabethan sonnet sequences deploy the signatures of Petrarchan desire to attend to the question of lyric ontology—the material mode of existence of lyric poetry. The issue acquired special urgency in late Elizabethan England, in the context of rapid technological, economic, philosophical, and aesthetic change that affected the material conditions of production and circulation of poetry. The uneasy coexistence of manuscript and print technologies, the practices of reading that included various forms of material alteration (cutting, marginalia, collage etc.), paper shortage, destruction of books, musical appropriations of lyric as well as a host of other factors, created a volatile and multi-layered environment in which lyric poems were instantiated across forms and media. Through a close reading of selected sonnets by Philip Sidney, Samuel Daniel, Edmund Spenser, Giles Fletcher, and Barnabe Barnes, this essay argues that in their poetry the affective work of Petrarchism tropes the uncertainties and instabilities inherent in the contemporary conditions of poetic ontology. Allegorizing erotic longing for the beloved and the impossibility of its fulfilment as a thwarted desire for a perennially elusive lyric text, these sonnets exist at the point of vanishing, which puts under pressure—to a point of unviability—their identity as speech acts and integrity as material objects. Sensing the contemporary crises of textuality, these Elizabethan sonnets make audible, legible, and visible the precarious ontology of lyric poetry.

Keywords: lyric; Elizabethan sonnets; poetic ontology; book history; Petrarchism; poetic imagination

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