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Impregnable Towers and Pregnable Maidens in Early Modern English Drama

Lindsay Ann Reid

In William Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (c. 1589-93), the foolhardy Duke of Milan boasts that he has devised a fail-proof method for preserving the chastity of his daughter. “Knowing” all too well, as he puts it, “that tender youth is soon suggested,” her overprotective father “nightly lodge[s]” Silvia “in an upper tower, / The key whereof” he keeps in his own personal possession.¹ On the one hand, the Milanese duke’s confidence that this treatment will prevent his scion from being unlawfully “conveyed away” by an amorous intruder is not entirely false (3.1.37). Tipped off by Proteus, he catches the love-struck Valentine—who had boldly planned to access the duke’s daughter using a “ladder made of cords”—and thwarts any such attempt (2.4.175).² And yet, on the other hand, Silvia’s paternally imposed enclosure proves to be ultimately feeble. Its locked door does not preclude the plucky Shakespearean maiden from herself leaving: accordingly, she escapes the confines of her immured nocturnal existence and sets forth in search of her banished paramour in the comedy’s final act.

A young, marriageable, and problematically sexualized woman’s imprisonment in (and liberation from) a locked tower à la Shakespeare’s Silvia is a recurrent motif in early modern English drama, roughly constituting what Louise George Clubb might call a

¹ I cite from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2008), 3.1.34-36. Subsequent references to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* are parenthetical and refer to this edition.

² Explicit discussions of maidens in towers continue in Shakespeare’s comedy when Valentine’s loyalty is tested by the duke. Attempting to entrap Silvia’s suitor, her father concocts a tale about his own purported infatuation with lady who is—in an exact parallel to his daughter—said to be “kept severely from resort of men,” locked in a “chamber…aloft, far from the ground, / and built so shelving that one cannot climb it / Without apparent hazard of his life” (3.1.108, 114-16). When Valentine too helpfully suggests that the duke might employ “a ladder quaintly made of cords” and “a pair of anchoring hooks” to access this women, he inadvertently gives away the details of his own ill-fated plan to breach Silvia’s tower in just such a manner (31.1.117-18).
theatergram, or transposable dramatic unit. As this article details, analogous plotlines—typically set, like The Two Gentlemen of Verona, in Italy—can be found in The Golden Age (c. 1611) by Thomas Heywood, Women Pleas’d (c. 1619-23) by John Fletcher, The Bird in a Cage (1633) by James Shirley, and The Cunning Lovers (c. 1638) by Alexander Brome (an authorial figure not to be confused with his better-known contemporary Richard Brome).

Taking my initial cue from William N. West’s provocative suggestion that the play itself might not be “the basic unit of early modern theatricality,” I approach this group of dramatic works as something of “a horizontally organized repertoire” that simultaneously “looks forward and sideways,” as well as (contra West) backward at earlier, non-dramatic literary traditions.

Central to my argument is the fact that this corpus of dramatic works featuring implicitly pregnable women housed in purportedly impregnable towers collectively activates what Jean-Marie Kauth has described as a “metonymy, pervasive in European literature…between a woman’s body and the castle, tower, or anchorhold that encloses her.” Kauth elaborates that the “women in these architectural strongholds are seen as both contained and containing, as fragile vessels easily broken, as both closed off from the world and inviting it in by the attractiveness of the obstacles placed in the way.” My subsequent analysis of this interrelated group of early modern works arrives at complementary conclusions, for one peculiarity of towers in these plays is that they always come to symbolize inefficacy. To build a tower—any tower—would seem a conspicuously phallic

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3 With particular reference to English-Italian interchanges, Louise George Clubb has used the terminology of the “theatergram” to describe those “units, figures, relationships, actions, topoi, and framing patterns” in early modern theatre that came, though repetition, to serve “at once [as] streamlined structures for svelte play making and elements of high specific density”: Italian Drama in Shakespeare’s Time (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), 6.


display of power, yet the grand purpose for which such a stronghold is constructed (that is, to magisterially keep the outside world at bay) is consistently undermined in early modern theatrical representations of forcible gendered seclusion. The superficially enclosed space in which a woman has been embowered to restrict her access to the wider sexual economy is never simply a microcosmic world unto itself, hermetically sealed from commerce with beyond. Rather, from the moment of its on-stage introduction, we are primed to recognize the maiden-containing tower as a permeable space that can accommodate or even generate interaction with the outer, macrocosmic sphere. It is thus that, in the early modern English theater, both people and objects were habitually depicted slipping in and out of such imperfectly sealed towers.

The inherently penetrable towers in the plays here under consideration share other key qualities, as well: they are decidedly intertheatrical, as well as metaliterary and, indeed, hypertextual. Meditating upon the concept of early modern English intertheatricality, West has suggested this concept as a novel “model for understanding plays: as networks of traceable elements of action, the form and pressures of which have left their mark in more fixed media like scripts and texts.” As this study will delineate, we can reconstruct, at times, something of the intertheatrical, horizontal relations linking these early modern maiden-in-tower plays, which arguably gesture “towards future recollections, repetitions, and re-actions” while also relying on “shared memories…to thicken present performances.”

However, whereas West sees performatively attuned approaches to early modern drama that

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6 I use “hypertext” in the general sense of Gérard Genette, who defines hypertextuality at its most basic level as “any relationship uniting a text B (…the hypertext) to an earlier text A (…the hypotext), upon which it is grafted.” Genette posits such hypertextuality as “a universal feature of literarity”: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 5, 9.
7 West, “Intertheatricality,” 154.
attend to such sideways- and forward-looking analogues (resounding with “theatrical possibility, familiarity, and difference”) as being largely antithetical to traditional literary concerns about drama’s backward-looking allusions, I here take a rather different and perhaps more complicated stance. After all, a striking commonality cutting across The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Golden Age, Women Pleas’d, The Bird in a Cage, and The Cunning Lovers is their heightened sense of their own literariness and shared tendency to invoke anterior texts or narremes.9 Put otherwise, one of the defining features of this intertheatrical set of sideways- and forward-looking tower plays is that they persistently signal their backward-looking literary affiliations by adapting or explicitly alluding to antecedents found in medieval romance and/or classical mythological tradition.

It is of the utmost relevance that when Silva escapes her sequestered space in The Two Gentlemen of Verona she does so in the company of (the strikingly medieval sounding) Sir Eglamour. What is more, she quickly joins a (similarly medieval sounding) merry band of forest-dwelling outlaws who curse “By the bare scalp of Robin Hood’s fat friar” and are valiantly led by Silvia’s own (yet again overtly medieval sounding) beau Valentine (4.1.34).10 According to Joyce Boro’s estimates, “about a third of all early modern plays produced or published after 1570 were based on romance materials,” and, as she notes, “the genre continued to provide playwrights with inspiration well into the seventeenth century”11 “By the 1610s,” Cyrus Mulready concurs, “the dramatic romance had developed into one of the

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10 While Sir Eglamour’s name is drawn from the medieval romance Sir Eglamour of Artois, Valentine’s evokes one of the title characters in Valentine and Orson. For a more detailed discussion of these medievalisms in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, see Velma Bourgeois Richmond, Shakespeare, Catholicism, and Romance (London: Continuum, 2000), 107-9. It is also worth noting that the main plot of The Two Gentlemen of Verona seems to have been indirectly based upon the tale of Tito and Gisippo from Boccaccio’s Decameron—likely mediated via Thomas Elyot’s Tudor Boke Named the Governour.
staple genres of the thriving commercial theater in England.”12 While the majority of the embowered women plays here examined—including Women Pleas’d and The Cunning Lovers—participated in this larger cultural movement by flagging their appropriations of medieval romance material, another—The Golden Age—instead pursues similar themes with reference to classical tradition by reworking the tale of Danaë, a legendary character whose “pervasive presence” has been remarked “in the literatures of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, particularly in dramatic texts.”13 And one amongst this group—The Bird in a Cage—constellates an array of allusions to both medieval and classical precedents. As I ultimately argue, Shirley’s play, in particular, develops the violable tower at its center into a hypertextual site of aestheticized mimesis and literary polysemy, a supposedly impregnable structure that is itself pregnant with endlessly proliferating stories.

Faulty Towers

As in Shakespeare’s earlier Two Gentlemen of Verona, in Fletcher’s Women Pleas’d a locked tower is presented as both conceptually and physically leaky, a space from which a determined maiden can all too readily extricate herself. And, again like The Two Gentlemen of Verona, this Jacobean play invests its Italian-set tower plot with a perceptible veneer of medievalism. The main action of Women Pleas’d is substantially based upon the Loathly Lady narrative found not only, as George McGill Vogt remarked nearly a century ago, in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale from The Canterbury Tales, but also in a number of additional medieval sources, including the anonymously written Wedding of Sir Gawain and

Dame Ragnelle and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis.\textsuperscript{14} As a number of Vogt’s scholarly successors have demonstrated, however, the plot of Women Pleas’d might be better described as a hybridization of this Loathly Lady narrative with Juan de Flores’s late fifteenth-century Spanish sentimental romance La historia de Grisel y Mirabella, which supplies the action of its opening scenes.\textsuperscript{15} In lieu of the Chaucerian rape that sets events into motion in The Wife of Bath’s Tale, Fletcher’s play alternatively begins with the “truly vertuous, faire, and noble” princess Belvidere being placed by her mother, the Duchess of Florence, into a “Cittadell to secure her.”\textsuperscript{16} The duchess’s motivation is the familiar belief (as phrased by another character within this play) that “when [women] grow ripe for marriage / They must be slipt like Hawkes” (2.2.7-8). Having been promised to the Duke of Sienna, Belvidere is therefore prudently “lock’d” away and “confin’d” as a means of fending off other potential suitors (1.1.51, 81). To breach her fortified space would expose a potential offender to “much hazard,” particularly given the duchess’s foreboding edict that: “If any man of what condition soever, and a subject...shall without the special Licence from the great Duchesse, attempt to


\textsuperscript{15} For the intertextual connections between Women Pleas’d and Grisel y Mirabella, see: Barbara Matulka, The Novels of Juan de Flores and their European Diffusion: A Study in Comparative Literature (New York: Institute of French Studies, 1931), 230-36; and Joyce Boro, “John Fletcher’s Women Pleased and the Pedagogy of Reading Romance,” in Staging Early Modern Romance: Prose Fiction, Dramatic Romance, and Shakespeare, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb and Valerie Wayne (London: Routledge, 2009), 188-202. For the wider reception of Grisel y Mirabella, see Joyce Boro, “Reading Juan de Flores’s Grisel y Mirabella in Early Modern England,” in Translation, Print and Culture in Britain, 1473-1640, ed. Brenda Hosington (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 35-59. It is also worth mentioning that the subplot in Women Pleas’d also has romance resonances. It has been variously identified as an admixture of “at least three tales of Boccaccio’s Decameron” or perhaps the anonymously written late Elizabethan Cobbler of Canterbury: Matulka, Novels of Juan de Flores, 236n1 and Boro, “John Fletcher’s Women Pleased,” 201n2.

\textsuperscript{16} I cite from The Dramatic Works in the Beaumont and Fletcher Canon, vol. 5, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.1.18, 33. Subsequent references to Women Pleas’d are parenthetical and refer to this edition.
buy, offer, or make an attempt, to solicite the love of the Princesse Belvidere, the person so offending shall forfeit his life” (1.1.92-93, 2.5.2-6).

When Fletcher’s Silvio is apprehended covertly communicating with the imprisoned princess early in Women Pleas’d, he is brought before the Florentine duchess for punishment. With her “Mothers heart” softened by this traitor’s obvious passion for Belvidere, however, the Duchess of Florence grants Silvio a year in which to prove himself by “absolv[ing] a question” that she poses (2.5.72, 112):

Tell me what is that onely thing,

For which all women long;

Yet having what they most desire,

To have it do’s them wrong.

(5.1.127-30)

If Silvio returns to the Florentine court with the correct answer, he is promised Belvidere’s hand in marriage. Should he prove not up to the task, he agrees to be beheaded. Accordingly, Silvio sets forth. He travels far and wide and consults an array of “Diviners, Dreamers, Schoolmen, deep Magitians” and the like in his attempt to “undo this knotty question” and “absolve this Riddle” set for him by the duchess (4.1.3, 16, 2). Meanwhile, illustrating the precept that “women are now like old Knights adventures, / Full of enchanted flames and dangerous,” Belvidere pointedly demonstrates the permeability of her enclosure’s walls when she disappears mid-play (3.2.64-65). Her puzzled mother is left to conjecture that she must have been “stolne away,” perhaps even by Silvio himself (3.3.33). But it is not so. Having solved the familiar riddle of medieval romance tradition, the vanished Belvidere re-emerges dressed as an old woman with “a crooked carkasse” to aid her unwitting lover, in exchange for which assistance she demands of him “a poore Boon” (4.2.27, 5.43). While Silvio is
therefore able, when he returns to Florence, to supply its ruler with the correct answer—that women desire “to have their will”—he delivers this response only to discover that the formerly incarcerated Belvidere has “long since wandred” away (5.1.139, 146).17

Elsewhere in the early modern English dramatic corpus, we find examples in which the security of faulty, maiden-containing towers is ruptured from outside rather than inside. The Greco-Roman myth of Perseus’ mother Danaë—a woman ineffectually placed by her father in a bronze stronghold to prevent her from ever conceiving a child—was twice reworked for the stage by the prolific Heywood, an author who once claimed that he had had “an entire hand, or at least a maine finger” in the making of “two hundred and twenty” plays.18 Danaë’s story first appeared in Heywood’s Golden Age, a Jacobean work that draws copiously upon Ovidian mythology, and it was subsequently revised a decade-and-a-half or so later by the same author for inclusion in Calisto; or the Escapes of Jupiter (the latter of which now exists only in manuscript form and may never have been performed).19 The first in a series of Heywood’s so-called Age-plays, The Golden Age is an episodic drama of expansive mythological scope: it commences with the birth of Jupiter and narrates both his battles against the Titans and his serial sexual victimization of women, including a long segment on Callisto’s mythological rape by Jupiter as well as Danaë’s seduction by that same oversexed deity.

As we learn in Act 4 of The Golden Age, Danaë’s father Acrisius has designs to lock her “in the Darreine Tower, / Guirt with a triple Mure of shining brasse,” a structure rumored to be as “impregnable / Both for the feat and guard” as it is “beautifull / As is the gorgeous

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17 Despite Belvidere’s disappearance, all ends well for Fletcher’s lovers. Predictably enough, the old hag trades in her boon for a promise of marriage to Silvio, to which he grudgingly acquiesces only to discover that she has been Belvidere all along.
18 Thomas Heywood, The English Traveller (STC 13315; London, 1633), sig. A3r.
palace of the Sunne.” Believing that if he keeps his daughter thus “immur’d, and clos’d / From all society and sight of man” he will prevent the fulfilment of an undesirable prophesy, the king hopes to force Danaë into “liu[ing] an Ankresse / And changelesse virgin” (sigs. G4v, H2r). Heywood’s drama carefully portrays how Acrisius has angled to make the tower as appealing as he knows how: “The architectur’s sumptuous, and the building / Of cost invaluable” with its internal “chambers faire, and richly hung” and filled with amusements “Fetch’t to content” its occupant. Yet, as Heywood’s Danaë makes clear when Acrisus solicits her thoughts on the matter, she finds this luxurious tower objectionably “Like a prison.” She has, as she advises her unbending father, merely been “giue[n]…golden fetters, / As if their value could [her] bondage lessen” (sig. H1r).

Julie Sanders has observed that, throughout The Golden Age, “Jupiter is seen performing acts of invasion, intrusion and usurpation: the space of the stage is usually the site of his literal penetration.” Recurrently appearing in various disguises, he is confident in his abilities to pass with “free entrance” through any “Iron bar’d dores” or “Barricadoed gates” that might stand in the way of his amorous escapades (sig. D2r). “What marble wall, or Adamantine gate,” he wonders, “What force of stele, or Castle forg’d from brasse,” could keep him from fulfilling his sexual desires (sig. F4v)? It is thus that he exploits the invisible weaknesses of Acrisius’ tower when he appears disguised as an itinerant peddler. It is only to be expected, then, that Jupiter passes through its purportedly “impregnable” walls and gains access to the king’s dangerously pregnable daughter with ease: he effortlessly bribes her guards with “speciall Jewels” and “tokens” and thus fathers the sequestered virgin’s prophesied son (sigs. F4v, H3v-H3r).

20 Thomas Heywood, The Golden Age (London, 1611), sig. G4v. Subsequent references to The Golden Age are parenthetical and refer (by signature) to this edition.
The Cunning Lovers, a Caroline piece that represents Brome’s sole work for the stage, provides yet another relevant exemplar—one in which the traffic goes both ways, with people and objects repeatedly passing both out and in of a supposedly secure tower. Its plot is closely based on a tale from an often-reprinted and endurably popular story collection of Eastern origins, The Seven Wise Masters of Rome (known alternatively as The Book of Sindibād). In that text, a matron replaces the more typical maiden in the tower when an overbearing husband unsuccessfully aims to keep his beloved wife “closed & kept in a strong Castle.” Motivated by a portentous dream of the imprisoned queen, however, an enterprising knight travels “through diuers Regions and Landes” to seek her out; he then gains access to the queen’s locked enclosure by ingratiating himself to her husband. Impressed by “ye fame of him,” the king gives the foreign knight “a place nigh vnto the wall of the Castle” and eventually makes this interloper “Steward, and Gouernour of all his Region and land.” For his part, the resourceful stranger makes “a couenant with a workman for to make out of his house a secret way into the Court” and begins clandestinely visiting the imprisoned queen, with whom he strikes up a romantic relationship.

The adulterous lady’s husband in The Seven Wise Masters of Rome is, as we repeatedly learn, “deceiued” and “failed” by the misplaced stock that he puts into “the strength of the Tower,” to which he—much like Shakespeare’s Duke of Milan—has “the keyes…[him]selfe in keeping.” On more than one occasion this king has reason to be

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23 The Hystorie of the Seven Wise Maisters of Rome (STC 21299.7; London, 1602), sig. K8v.
24 Seven Wise Maisters, sig. K8r.
25 Seven Wise Maisters, sigs. L1r-L2r.
26 Seven Wise Maisters, sig. L1r.
27 Seven Wise Maisters, sigs. L4r-L4v.
suspicious. Firstly, he recognizes the duplicitous foreigner wearing a re-gifted “Ring, the which the king had giuen to [his wife] at her wedding.” When the knight perceives that the monarch has “marked it and seene it on his finger,” he manages to smuggle the tell-tale token back into the locked tower before the king can arrive and demand that his wife “shewe…where the Ring is.” Secondly, when the king is presented with the knight’s “Lady and Loue” who has allegedly followed him “out of [his] Countrey” (actually the queen, who has briefly exited the locked tower and donned a disguise), he is astonished at her strong resemblance to his own wife. Nevertheless, the monarch is foolishly willing to accept the queen’s later reassurances that he ought to “know well that this Tower is fast, strong eough, and that no bodie can come in nor out.” It is thus that the king is eventually further deceived into giving his own queen in marriage to the crafty foreign knight.

Brome’s *Cunning Lovers* reproduces this narrative with a few minor changes in plot. The king in the *The Seven Wise Masters of Rome* story is recast in this seventeenth-century play as the Duke of Mantua, who jealously commissions a “Tower /… impregnable / And full of dores” within which to keep not a cherished wife, but instead a beloved daughter in “strict bondage.” Any attempts to “issue out” or “enter in” to the nubile Valentia’s stronghold would be, or so her father mistakenly believes, “in vaine” (6). In Brome’s dramatic recreation the wily foreign knight of *The Seven Wise Masters of Rome* becomes the rather Shakespearean sounding Prospero, the son of the Duke of Verona to whom Valentia was previously promised in marriage (before the two Italian dukes fell out over the financial

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28 *Seven Wise Maisters*, sig. L2r.
29 *Seven Wise Maisters*, sigs. L2v-L3r.
30 *Seven Wise Maisters*, sigs. L3v, L5v.
31 Brome was not the first English dramatist to mine this story collection. *The Seven Wise Masters*, a now-lost play of c. 1600 associated with Henry Chettle, John Day, Thomas Dekker, and William Haughton and known to have been performed by the Admiral’s Men, presumably drew upon the same source. On this play, see “Seven Wise Masters, The” in *Lost Plays Database* (online), ed. Roslyn L. Knutson, David McInnis, and Matthew Steggle (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2009).
details of their children’s proposed union). Like his model in *The Seven Wise Masters of Rome*, Brome’s Prospero ventures abroad and angles, under an assumed identity, to make his way into the Duke of Mantua’s “soveraigne grace” (8). And, again like his predecessor, this “faire stranger” gains access to the “inclos’d and shut” woman “in the inmost rome” of a tower with a dozen doors “double-barr’d with Iron” and secured by “twelve locks” and “twelve keyes” by means of a purposefully constructed “Unlawfull passage” that runs “streight / Unto the Ladies Chamber” (10, 14, 29, 57, 56). Much attention is given in *The Cunning Lovers* to the supposed security of the “rich building” within which Valentia is (in)securely lodged (7). It is, we learn, allegedly as hard to pass through as the mythological “gates that *Cerberus* keeps” (11). Indeed, Act 1 concludes with a smith, mason, bricklayer, and carpenter onstage discussing how it is to be engineered. And yet, once built, objects and people rapidly filter in and out of the Mantuan duke’s “new Turret” (22): the plot of *The Cunning Lovers* reproduces both the ring exchange sequence and the escaped maiden in disguise passing herself off outside the tower as a foreigner (here masquerading as a “Spanish Lady”) from its earlier source.

**Inside and Outside in *A Bird in a Cage***

My prior examples notwithstanding, I would argue that the motif of the maiden in the permeable, microcosmic tower is given its most sustained and self-reflexive early modern dramatic treatment in Shirley’s *Bird in a Cage*. Jeremy Lopez has recently characterized Shirley as “simultaneously very contemporary…and very old-fashioned,” a dramatist “preoccupied with the relation between present and past, often quite evidently exerting himself in an attempt both to acknowledge his indebtedness to, and to move beyond, the
dramatic tradition of which he was a belated part.” It is no coincidence that, in *The Bird in a Cage*—written with “neo-Elizabethan flair” at a historical moment in which a “consolidating sense of tradition” was prompting “increasingly self-aware modes of innovation and repetition in most facets of theatrical production”—we find Shirley recycling a theatergram “weighty with significance from previous incarnations” to thematize the categorical blurring not only of apparent binaries between outside and inside, but also between art and life, mimesis and reality. It is thus that I turn my attention primarily to Shirley’s work in the remainder of this article.

*The Bird in a Cage* follows both *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Women Pleas’d* by setting its action in Italy. Like its English theatrical analogues, Shirley’s play therefore activates what Michelle Marrapodi calls “Italy’s ambivalent iconology” in the early modern theatrical imagination, whereby this continental culture habitually figured “both as an inexhaustible font of borrowing, imitation, and adaptation, in line with the classical principles of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*, and as an English projection, a repulsive territory of vices where domestic anxieties could be easily stored and exorcised.” In the pattern of both Shakespeare’s roughly equivalent Duke of Milan and Fletcher’s corresponding Duchess of Florence (and onomastically anticipating a rather similar Duke of Mantua who would appear in Brome’s *Cunning Lovers* later that decade), the Duke of Mantua in *The Bird in a Cage* arranges to architecturally enclose a cherished daughter in the hope of better preserving her for marriage.

Fittingly, Shirley’s play begins by introducing the semantic cipher of the tower itself. In the dialogue that opens Act 1, two Mantuan noblemen, Orpiano and Fulvio, are found in mid-conversation. “He does not mean this building for a college, I hope?” Orpiano remarks with some alarm as the duo try to “conjecture why” the duke has erected this mysterious edifice in their midst. It is not long before the duke emerges onstage, his “ever…obedient” daughter by his side, to clarify his intentions for the looming structure (1.1.38). “[T]hat building / I late erected, then, shall be thy palace,” the Duke of Mantua imperiously informs Eugenia, offering her his further assurances that being housed within its walls will hardly feel like “restraint” to the princess since “free to all delights, [her] mind shall be / Its own commander” (1.1.40-41, 45-47).

The Act 1, scene 1 conversation between Eugenia and her father in *The Bird in a Cage* clearly echoes a similar exchange between the legendary Acrisius and Danaë in Heywood’s *Golden Age*: like her theatrical predecessor, Eugenia clearly thinks little of the confined “pleasures” and amusing “rarities” promised by her father (1.1.49, 63, 48). His proposed “palace” and explicitly Adam-less “paradise” in which “man…finds no being” is her idea of a “prison” in which she will be unfairly “caged up” like a rare bird (1.1.41, 93-95, 42, 61, 51). Shirley’s Italian duke may conceive of the new-built tower as an efficient, safe container “wherein to lock so rich a jewel” as a beloved daughter (1.1.92), yet it is clear that the princess is far from the only other character in the play to see something far more sinister in its design. Eugenia’s ladies Donella, Katherina, and Mardona are aggrieved to learn that they, too, have been sentenced to inhabit this gender-segregated enclosure, and the three women emphatically agree that living in the tower will likewise render them hapless “Prisoners” (1.1.117). Moreover, as much as Eugenia, Donella, Katherina, and Mardona

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lament that they “must lose the sweet society / Of men” (1.1.121-22), so too are gentlemen of Mantua are equally distraught to have had their female counterparts “committed to New Prison,” as Morello echoingly puts it (1.1.174).

As in the range of English maiden-and-tower plays previously mentioned, this initial plot setup in *The Bird in a Cage*, of course, necessitates a jail-break. And, as in both Heywood’s *Golden Age* and Brome’s *Cunning Lovers*, this will involve infiltration of the tower from outside. Moreover, in the vein of *Women Pleas’d*, Shirley’s play combines the inaccessible maiden in the tower with another common medieval romance motif: the assignment of a seemingly unmanageable task. When Eugenia’s previously banished lover Philenzo daringly returns to Mantua in the guise of a “blustering fellow” named Rolliardo, the overconfident duke dares—even encourages—his daughter’s undetected suitor to breach the confines of her locked tower (1.1.260). “Get but access to her; a month we limit” challenges the duke (1.1.325). Believing that no “anchorite lives…prisoned in a wall / With more security” than his own daughter, Eugenia’s father even recklessly pledges to provide the bold new arrival with “money enough” for the undertaking (5.1.156-57, 1.1.237, 241, 332, 356, 359, 2.1.46). Moreover, clearly anticipating a bit of sadistic amusement for himself, the duke couples this offer of funding with a demand for Philenzo-as-Rolliardo’s life should the “impudent” stranger in his city fail to complete this apparently impossible mission (1.1.315).

Philenzo is not the only man motivated to penetrate the inner confines of the tower in Shirley’s play. Rather, Morello, who serves as something of a foil to Eugenia’s disguised lover, is similarly bent on rescuing his own similarly sequestered lady. Correctly diagnosing that it will be by trickery rather than force that the tower is breached, he romantically muses at the close of Act 1: “Like errant knights, our valiant wits must wrestle / To free our ladies from the enchanted castle” (1.1.368-69). Taking his cue not only from the knights of medieval romance, but also from the classical tale of the cross-dressed “Hercules when he
turned spinster” for love of Iole, Morello goes on to pursue a far-fetched and ill-fated plan that involves impersonating a woman (3.1.7). What is more, we catch an early glimpse of the play’s metaliterary self-awareness when we learn that the Duke of Mantua seems to have foreseen just such a ploy. It is as though the clichéd plot of Morello’s cross-dressed rescue mission is already known to him: “suspecting some lord might come disguised o’this fashion,” Eugenia’s overbearing father has preemptively set a notorious “wencher” and “abominable lecher” to guard the tower’s female inhabitants (3.1.74-75, 77, 64). Following this guard’s unsubtle request for a “private favour” from the apparent “Madam Thorn,” Morello narrowly escapes sexual violation before being forced to reveal his true male identity and abandon the overplayed ruse altogether (3.1.67, 3.1.20). In his separate bid to gain entrance to the tower, the “daring madman” Philenzo, of course, is destined for greater success than Morello, who ultimately is condemned—on threat of “perpetual exile from court”—to “wear the petticoat for a month” as punishment for his attempted deception (2.1.480, 4.1.23-24). But it takes enlisting the wiles of the well-remunerated mountebank Bonamico, whose own “knowledge of the theater” will be “crucial to Philenzo’s survival,” before Eugenia’s disguised lover is able to secure the “enlargement” of the impounded ladies as well as the preservation of his own wagered mortality (3.3.5).37

Meanwhile, locked up in the looming tower, Shirley’s Eugenia and her ladies Donella, Katherina, and Mardona —whose feminine ranks are further enlarged by the addition of Cassiana in Act 3—are quick to turn the enclosed space of their gynaeceum and veritable “cage” into a less determinate sphere of artistic production and recursive reproduction. For Eugenia and her companions, radical confinement seems to inspire mimetic art. Shirley’s imprisoned ladies quickly resolve to play the world beyond in a self-referentially theatrical

form. Electing to enact “some pretty comic story” as a means of passing the long hours of their confinement in “mirth,” Eugenia’s ladies decide that they will cheer their mistress by “not present[ing] it to the princess, but engag[ing] her person in the action” of their dramatic diversion or “pretty interlude” (3.3.32-33, 29, 39-40). After apparently debating the virtues of various themes and potential plots amongst themselves, the women affirm that their spectatorless performance, fancifully titled The New Prison, will retell the story of “Danae, that is shut up in the brazen tower” with the princess herself playing the mythological daughter of Acrisius (4.2.10-11). Kim Walker has characterized the resultant dynamic in terms of “Aristotelian mimesis,” suggesting that the mythological “interlude is not just an imitation of life,” but “an imitation of the characters’ own lives” that “virtually dissolve[s]” the “boundary between nature and art.”

To wit, Shirley’s Eugenia affirms that she “like[s] this story best” since it “comes near [her] own” and “suit[s] with [her] present fortune,” and Donella agrees that the ladies “are all perfect in the plot” due to their recent life experiences (4.2.1-2, 12, 3).

I am far from the first critic to perceive that the imprisoned women’s resulting play-within-Shirley’s-play is both metaliterary in nature and functions as a “densely woven tapestry of intertheatrical references.” In particular, allusions to the classical figure of Danaë—seemingly filtered through Heywood’s earlier treatment of this same mythological episode in The Golden Age—function on multiple levels in Shirley’s drama, in which “social performance extends…far beyond the confines of Eugenia’s apartment and the parameters of th[is]…playlet.” It is not only the sequestered ladies in the tower who vigorously pursue their sense of self-identification with this classical tale through their private theatrical re-

enactment of its plot, however. Rather, Philenzo independently remarks upon the similarity of Eugenia and himself to the parents of the legendary Perseus. Upon first being set his task by the duke, Eugenia’s disguised lover boldly proclaims that he will penetrate the stronghold and “fall upon” the princess “as Jupiter upon Danaë” (1.1.275). “Let me have a shower of gold,” he boasts, and “Acrisus’ brazen tower shall melt again” (1.1.275-76). Morello, too, seems to have the same classical precedent in mind when he similarly calls upon Danaë’s divine paramour “Great Jupiter, the patron of scapes,” requesting that this mythological shape-shifter and seducer par excellence “assist” in securing the success of his own Herculean ploy (3.1.8). Even Shirley’s Mantuan duke seems to register a sense of parallelism between Acrisus and himself—though he is unable to extrapolate that the imprisoned Danaë’s ultimate impregnation by Jupiter in the guise of a golden shower may foreshadow a weakness in his own plan to keep the virginal Eugenia “defenced from all men’s eyes” (5.1.155). It is thus that, speaking of the task he has assigned to Philenzo-as-Rolliardo, the obtuse duke bemusedly remarks:

This is the piece made up of all performance,
The man of any thing, without exception.
Give him but gold, kings’ daughters, and their heirs,
Though locked in towers of brass, are not safe from him.41

(2.1.460-63)

41 We find a direct parallel in The Cunning Lovers. Brome’s Mantuan duke is likewise warned about his similarity to Acrisius “that shut up his Daughter Danae in a brazen Tower”—and also how that story ended with Jupiter bursting “through those brazen gates” to make “the maid a mother” (14). However, like Shirley’s Duke of Mantua, Brome’s naïvely insists that “Were [Valentia] faire Danae, [he] not Jove would feare” (29). Valentia’s father is, as it turns out, all too willing to believe Prospero’s assurances that his own “Tower is stronger” than the one that housed the mythological Danaë (29).
Establishing a sense of recursivity whereby the contours of the world are reflected, or perhaps even created, in miniature within the tower’s confines via mimetic artistry—*The Bird in a Cage* uses the embowered women’s creative pursuits as they “laugh, tell tales, sing, dance,” and the like as a means of blurring the categories of out and in, imitation and reality (3.3.6-7). Within the superficially closed, microcosmic confines of the tower, Eugenia and her women self-consciously perform a piece that is both based on a well-known literary precedent and that also directly informs their own situation as they understand it. Yet the drama being performed within the tower equally speaks to events that, beyond the ladies’ immediate knowledge, are simultaneously occurring on a macrocosmic level as their various lovers (themselves consciously evoking and emulating Jupiter of mythological tradition) attempt to gain access to these women. What is more, the metatheatrical turn to performance that features so prominently *inside*—where Eugenia and her ladies privately “speak but to the people in the hangings,” a “mixed audience of silk and cruel gentlemen” adorning their chamber walls—also replicates the conspicuous role-playing concurrently being undertaken *outside* the tower by these women’s would-be rescuers (3.3.45-46, 4.2.31-32). Operating under the expert theatrical direction of Bonamico (who, Allison K. Deutermann saliently argues, is both “an artist associated with the playhouse” and an entertainer who “essentially turn[s] the streets of Mantua into a stage, performing a play for the benefit of the city’s gallants”), Philenzo is, after all, masquerading as Rolliardo, and Morello, albeit less successfully, draws on the precedents of both Hercules’ and Jupiter’s legendary “scapes” to play the part of Madam Thorn.42 This eddy of metonymic recursion means that Eugenia and her cloistered ladies are unknowingly both mirroring and independently (re)creating might be described as a theatrical portrait of the world beyond from within their embowered artistic

42 Deutermann, “Literary Celebrity,” 59. For a similar argument that Bonamico is a “theatrical artist” and “figure for the playwright himself,” see Lopez, “Time for James Shirley,” 29.
sphere. This mimetic replication also, as Valerie Traub highlights, takes on decidedly homoerotic overtones: the imprisoned women’s interlude, “which replicates in miniature the themes of the main plot”, involves Donella-as-Jupiter “discover[ing] and articulat[ing] her own desire” as she threatens (not unlike Philenzo) to sexually violate Eugenia-as-Danaë.43

The carefully cultivated dynamic in The Bird in a Cage, wherein life imitates art imitating life imitating art, underscores a broader sense of indeterminacy between inside and outside, as well as between material and metaphoric space. The physically sealed walls of the Mantuan tower seem incapable of limiting these recursive replications, and stories, in particular, have a way of transgressively revealing the porosity of this ostensibly closed yet decidedly hypertextual space. Sanders has called the tale of Danaë “a facilitating myth for [Philenzo’s] own intent to fulfil the wager with the avaricious Duke of Mantua,” but it is far from the only “facilitating” intertext activated in his rescue mission.44 Indeed, we might say that it is by means of other well-known stories that Philenzo eventually gains access to Eugenia. The trick that enables Philenzo to successfully enter the locked tower is essentially a Trojan horse-like deception. Acting upon Bonamico’s advice, Philenzo hides himself in the inner pillar of a cage. This massive construct is filled with a variety of exotic fowl and is thus presented as a gift by the mountebank to the Mantuan duke. Fortunately for the concealed Philenzo, Bonamico has correctly calculated that the doting father will send this lavish “present” on to Eugenia to “reward [his] daughter’s patience, / Love, and obedience” such that “she may shift each solitary hour / With a fresh object” (4.1.100-4).

Shirley’s Hypertextual Tower

44 Julie Sanders, Caroline Drama: The Plays of Massinger, Ford, Shirley and Brome (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1999), 39.
In twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship, there has been a longstanding tradition of reading *The Bird in a Cage* as a more-or-less straightforward reworking of *Women Pleas’d*. In a work of 1914, Robert Stanley Forsythe influentially posited that Shirley’s play, though “much simpler,” is nevertheless “based apparently upon the main plot” of Fletcher’s. Elaborating that “[c]ertain incidents are omitted, and others are altered, but enough similarity remains to indicate pretty clearly a use of Fletcher’s play,” he proposed the following set of direct equations: “Shirley’s Eugenia = Fletcher’s Belvidere; Rolliardo (Philenzo) = Silvio; the Duke of Mantua = the Duchess of Florence; Perenetto = Bartello; Morello, Dondolo, and Grutti = Claudio and Soto (not in characterization, as to Claudio); Bonamico = Penurio.”

Similar claims about the close relationship of these two plays have been reiterated in subsequent criticism. In 1961, Marvin Morillo, for instance, reaffirmed that “*The Bird in a Cage* is pure Fletcherian romance, based upon *Women Pleased,*” while the introduction to Francis Frazier Senescu’s 1980 edition of Shirley’s play went so far as to provide a “brief resumé in parallel columns of the treatment of common elements” between *Women Pleas’d* and *The Bird in a Cage*. And, indeed, the editors of the most recent, post-millennial edition of Shirley’s drama have continued to repeat this claim that “*The Bird in a Cage* involves extensive reworking of Fletcher’s earlier play of wagers and incarceration.”

While not aiming to diminish the resonances that prior critics and editors have remarked between *Women Pleas’d* and *The Bird in a Cage*, I would nonetheless suggest that this rather myopic tendency to read Shirley’s drama primarily against Fletcher’s downplays the Caroline work’s web of equally salient intertheatrical connections with the other early modern embowered maiden dramas here under consideration. What is more, such

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assessments tend to obscure the fact that, in constructing his metaliterary, hypertextual tower, Shirley, like the authors of the other stage plays treated in this article, was also drawing upon a much wider set of non-dramatic classical and medieval hypotexts and narremes. Consider the relevant fact that, along with the more detailed analysis of Shirley’s Fletcherian debts in *The Relations of Shirley’s Plays to the Elizabethan Drama*, Forsythe passingly observed that “Rolliardo’s method of entering the castle suggests the way in which Flores penetrates into the palace of the Admiral of Babylon” in *Floris and Blancheflour*—a medieval romance (likely of Spanish origin) that appeared in various vernacular translations throughout medieval Europe, including Middle English versions.48 While Forsythe himself pursued this particular transtextual connection no further and it seems to have remained similarly unexplored in the relatively modest body of prior scholarship on *The Bird in a Cage* that has emerged in the past century, I want to here revive his suggestion and probe its implications.

*Floris and Blancheflour* was “undoubtedly,” as a recent editor describes it, “one of the most popular stories of the Middle Ages.”49 It tells of two childhood sweethearts, “a ryche kynes soon” Floris and his beloved Blancheflour, a pair who are deliberately separated by the former’s father, with the latter being sold to a Babylonian emir and sent to live “Amang other maidenes in his tour.”50 This tower, home to twenty-four women, is described as virtually impossible to enter:

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50 *Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 100, 513.
A thousand taisen he his heigh,
Woso it bihalt, wid, fer, and neghe.
And an hondred taises he is wid,
And imaked with mochel prid
Of lim and of marbelston;
In Cristienté nis swich non.
And the morter is maked so wel,
Ne mai no man hit breke with no stel.  

Undeterred by these apparent obstacles, the disguised Floris sets out to “biwinne” and retrieve his lady.  

With the help of some newly acquired Babylonian acquaintances, the hero arranges to breach the tower’s security by hiding in a coupe, or basket, of flowers. Following the highly specific advice that he is given by his cunning friend Daire, the “ful fair flour” Floris is thus successfully conveyed into the tower by this subterfuge.  

Once inside its walls—in a sequence that, it has been suggested, plays out like “a Marx Brothers comedy”—his basket is misdelivered: Floris is apprehended first not by the intended Blancheflour but her friend Clarice, who then generously assists in reuniting the couple.  

In addition to the various Middle English and French texts or oral traditions through which Shirley may have had access to this medieval narrative, it is alternatively—or

51 *Floris and Blancheflour*, ll. 607-14.  
52 *Floris and Blancheflour*, l. 576.  
53 *Floris and Blancheflour*, l. 843.  
additionally—plausible that he may have learned its plot via the lengthy adaptation of *Floris and Blancheflour* that appears in Boccaccio’s mid-fourteenth-century prose work *Il Filocolo* (“a long rambling romance…of epic dimensions” which an early modern English reader might have come across either in its original Italian or via Adrien Sevin’s sixteenth-century French translation). Hailed as “the most ambitious prose narrative to its day in any European vernacular,” this Boccaccian work drew upon “various accounts of the story of Floire and Blancheflor, both written and oral versions.” In this text, Blancheflour is transmogrified into the more Italianate Biancofiore, and Florio—Boccaccio’s Floris equivalent—manages to access his lady-love via a recognizable variant of the same flower basket trick found in other versions of the tale. However, in *Il Filocolo* some minor details are altered. It is, for instance, specifically a basket of roses in which Florio hides, and it is Biancofiore’s loyal maid Glorizia (rather than Clarice) who first discovers the male interloper in their midst.

The jail-break of *The Bird in a Cage* mixes plot elements familiar from *Floris and Blancheflour* together with another variation of the maiden in the tower motif, one that is perhaps best known via Marie de France’s twelfth-century *Lais*: a tale alternatively known as The Prince as Bird or The Bird-Lover. De France’s “Yonec” tells the story of an imprisoned, unhappily married woman who embarks upon an affair with a supernatural lover named Muldumarec. In this Anglo-Norman lai, Muldumarec is repeatedly able to enter the

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lady’s sealed chamber by assuming the form of a bird and flying to the window of her otherwise inaccessible bower.58 Yet another prominent variant on this tale type can be found in the seventeenth-century French *Contes des Fées* of Marie-Catherine d’Aulnoy. Her “L’oiseau bleu,” [“The Blue Bird”] tells of a young woman, Florine, who is similarly confined. Like the lady in de France’s “Yonec,” Florine is nonetheless visited by a clandestine lover who is capable of reaching her tower in avian form.59 Though no literal bird flutters onstage in *The Bird in a Cage*, the plot in the latter half of Shirley’s early modern play nonetheless reads like a clever rationalization of this intertextual lover-as-bird motif.

Directed by the shrewd Bonamico (here playing a role similar to that of Daire in *Floris and Blancheflour*), Eugenia’s paramour is ultimately able to enter her chamber. He does so not as a shape-shifting bird capable of freely flying to her window, however. Rather, it is via a bird cage that Philenzo is successfully “admitted into the castle of comfort” and gains access to Eugenia’s forbidden “virgin zone” (3.4.106, 108). What is more, Shirley’s blending of the Bird-Lover motif with the infiltration-by-trick plot of *Floris and Blancheflour* may well have been suggested by a small but vital detail in Boccaccio’s *Filocolo*, in which we learn that Glorizia let out a shriek of surprise upon discovering a man hidden amongst the roses. Recognizing Florio, however, and seeking to protect her mistress’s lover, Glorizia nimbly covers her outburst with a convenient fib: that is, she claims to have been startled by a bird that flew out of the basket and struck her in the face.60

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60 Glorizia’s precise words in *Il Filocolo* are “Io non ebbi, care compagne, già mai tale paura, però che volendo io prendere la cesta de’ fiori, e in essi sicuramente mirando, subitamente uno uccello usci di quelli e nel viso mi fèi volando: per ch’io, temendo d’altro, così gridai” [My dear companions, I have never had such a fright; for when I was about to receive this chest of flowers, and was calmly looking into it, suddenly a bird came out of them and struck me in the face as it flew away; and so I cried out in fear that another one might be in there]; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Opere Minori in Volgare*, ed. Mario Marti, vol. 1 (Milan: Rizzoli Editore, 1969), 591; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Filocolo*, trans. Donald Cheney with Thomas G. Bergin (New York: Garland, 1985), 329-330. This avian imagery here used
As has long been acknowledged by medievalists, *Floris and Blancheflour* exhibits “a pervasive, significant, willed pattern of flower imagery” that begins with the lovers’ own arrestingly similar, botanically inspired names.\(^{61}\) What is more, scholarship on *Floris and Blancheflour* has often drawn attention to the related linguistic and semantic play that informs Floris’s entry into the tower. Patricia E. Grieve, for example, notes that “to place a lover named Floire in a basket of flowers conflates the man and the flower so that the significance of the flower—springtime, renewal, sexuality, beauty—finds its human representation,” and Peter Haidu similarly remarks that “Floire’s relationship to the flowers is simultaneously metonymic—since Floire and the flowers are in a relationship of contiguity—and metaphorical—since Floire is a ‘flower’ by substitution in the basket.”\(^{62}\) We find a parallel replication of such metonymy and metaphor in *The Bird in a Cage*, for Philenzo’s very means of entry into Eugenia’s tower likewise speaks to both his own identity and that of his beloved—though here the floral associations of the medieval romance are swapped by Shirley for avian ones. It is worth noting that Philenzo accesses Eugenia’s figurative “cage” in a miniaturized and literalized cage of his own. As he later comments, this seeming prison was counterintuitively also his “conveyance,” and the fact that both lovers are veritable captive birds escapes neither (5.1.217). “So many partners in captivity?” Shirley’s princess

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asks in an act of blatant self-identification upon first being presented with the bird cage, and she further laments to her “fellow prisoners”:

‘twas a cruel art,  
The first invention to restrain the wing,  
To keep th’inhabitants o’ th’ air close captive  
That were created to sky-freedom.  

(4.2.191-95)

In a plot twist that plays out like an unfolding nest of Chinese boxes, when Philenzo bursts forth from the confines of his false pillar just moments later, it is with the announcement that he—now teasingly testing Eugenia by pretending to be her as-yet-unseen future husband, the Prince of Florence, rather than Rolliardo—is “the truest prisoner” of all (4.2.207).

Arguing that the cage at the center of The Bird in a Cage “is something made, or fashioned, but it is also an elaborate ‘conceit,’ or a piece of theatrical artifice,” Deutermann persuasively submits that it “is a synedochic stand-in” for Shirley’s play itself. Pushing such lines of reasoning further, it would seem that the cage within the cage functions also as a metaphorical tower within the tower: it replicates at a new microcosmic level those same conditions experienced by the princess and her sequestered women. What is more, its intrusive onstage presence also underscores the chronic inefficacy of gendered segregation seen also in The Bird in a Cage’s many medievally and classically inflected theatrical analogues, including The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Women Pleas’d, The Golden Age, and The Cunning Lovers.

By way of conclusion, I want to briefly point to the relevant, heightened sense of literariness tangible in what has been called the “rococo ending” of Shirley’s play. When, amidst a dizzying maelstrom of reversals, revelations, and recognitions, Eugenia finally comes to identify her “dear banished Philenzo” as himself, she demands “to hear / The circumstance of this wonder” that has brought them back together (4.2.331, 344). Conscious of the place of their own tale of romantic separation and reunification in a much larger, self-replicating literary and theatrical system of embowered maiden narremes and theatergrams, Philenzo replies by boasting that the plot of their “pleasing” narrative will supplement other such exemplars (4.2.341). Theirs is, after all, a metaliterary story to “drown all story” (5.1.75). It is thus that (simultaneously looking forward, sideways, and back and invoking traditions both theatrical and non-) Philenzo eloquently predicts:

Poets shall
With this make proud their muses, and apparel it
In ravishing numbers, which the soft-haired virgins,
Forgetting all their legends, and love tales
Of Venus, Cupid, and the scapes of Jove,
Shall make their only song and in full choir
Chant it at Hymen’s feast.

(5.1.79-85)

“[P]osterity,” as Shirley’s hero presciently avows, “When it shall find in her large chronicle / My glorious undertaking, shall admire it / …and lose itself / In wonder of the action” (5.1.76-79).

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