

Preface

In the preface to the 1561 edition of Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton's play *Gorboduc*, the printer John Daye describes how an unscrupulous rival had issued an unauthorized version of the work, "even as if by meanes of a broker for hire, he should have entised into his house a faire maide and done her villanie ... and then thrust her out of dores dishonested." Although "the authors" of this raped text have now "for common honestie and shamefastnesse new apparelled, trimmed, and attired her in such forme as she was before," the printer fears that even in this state she will not be "gently entertained" by readers; if so, he worries, he "shall wishe that she had taried still at home" with him. Daye's preface begins with an "as if," an analogical comparison between unauthorized publication and rape; but by the end of his description it seems the text has *become* a "poore gentlewoman" whose chastity, restored through the editorial interventions of her "frendes," the authors, must now be guaranteed by the generous reception she receives from readers (A2r). Even more strongly, the 1604 prologue to John Marston's play *The Malcontent* equates writing with sexual vulnerability:

To wrest each hurtless thought to private sense
Is the foul use of ill-bred Impudence;
Immodest censure now grows wild,
All over-running.
Let Innocence be ne'er so chaste,
Yet at the last
She is defiled
With too nice-brained cunning.
O you of fairer soul,
Control
With an Herculean arm
This harm;
And once teach all old freedom of a pen,
Which still must write of fools, whiles't writes of men. (Prologus.1-14)

Like *Gorboduc*'s printer, Marston compares ill reception of the work to the sexual violation of a woman. But in this case, it is the author's "hurtless thought," rather than the physical text itself, whose "chaste" innocence is under threat.

While these may seem especially distasteful instances of Renaissance writers' propensity to create far-fetched and shocking analogies, they are not isolated: over the course of this period many literary writers began to compare their authorial position with that of the chaste woman threatened with rape. The works I discuss

in the following chapters—Philip Sidney’s *Old Arcadia* (ca. 1580), William Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), John Milton’s *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* (or *Comus*, 1637), and Margaret Cavendish’s *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* (1656)—all narrate stories of sexual violence that also function as allegories for their writers’ attempts to project their intentions. While Sidney’s romance centers on a cross-dressed hero who seems to offer an alternative to the misogynist impulses behind rape, the other three works feature chaste women who master the arts of verbal persuasion to protect themselves from or prove accusations of sexual violence. Through such representations, I argue, these writers dramatized their own efforts to embody their intentions in their texts.

That sexual and textual intention could be conflated so easily may appear less strange when we consider that the concepts of rape and authorship, which first took their recognizably modern shape during the Renaissance, both centered on questions of intention. Whereas in medieval law sexual violence was treated as a version of theft or woman-stealing in which the woman’s consent was considered largely irrelevant, beginning almost simultaneously with England’s Reformation in 1534, law books began including a new definition of *rape* as “carnal knowledge of a woman’s body against her will”—a formulation that had become standard by the end of the seventeenth century. At the same time, the writer’s name and unique identity increasingly authorized literary works, and uncovering the author’s aesthetic and moral aims was becoming more important to readers, book publishers, and writers themselves. From this history it might appear that a generic idea of personal intention developed during the Renaissance—a period widely identified with the emergence of a modern concept of the individual—and simultaneously transformed understandings of both sexual violence (a crime centering on female volition) and authorship (quintessentially associated, in turn, with male authority). I claim, however, that the notion of the female “will” we find so powerfully articulated in Renaissance rape law influenced developing ideas of literary intention. Thus while critics generally view the Author that emerged in this period as inherently masculine, this figure—and by extension ideas of the modern individual—was in fact partly based on a paradigm of female virtue and vulnerability.

To understand why this occurred we must first note that during the Renaissance sexual violence was defined largely in opposition to the ideal of chastity. Today we think of rape as a crime in which someone is forced to perform a sexual act either at a moment when or with a person with whom they do not want to. However, early modern literary, legal, and theological sources typically explain such resistance as a defense of chastity. In numerous fictional works we find female characters who refuse to engage in sexual activity because it is morally wrong. They are either virgins or married women who must preserve their bodies for prospective or actual husbands by refusing all other men. While English law did not explicitly define rape in these terms, its intrinsic logic paralleled that found in the fictional literature. And increasingly underlying both legal and literary descriptions of sexual violence was a theological view of intention that Saint Augustine first articulated in his major treatise *The City of God against the Pagans* (ca. 427). Augustine argued

that an act of rape did not necessarily destroy a woman's chastity because sexual purity was a condition of the will rather than the body—a formulation echoed in the law's definition of this crime as a violation of the woman's *body* against her *will*. While English law manuals began adopting this phrase, Sir Philip Sidney was claiming in his *Apology for Poetry* that “the skil of the artificer standeth in that *Idea* or fore-conceite of the work, and not in the work itself” (88–9). The notion that the writer's idea preexists and is independent of the physical text in which it is expressed closely parallels Augustine's account of the separation between the chaste woman's spiritual “will” and her physical body.

This capacity for personal transcendence was crucial to ideas of not only literary intention but also the modern individual, of which the Author is one important iteration. Variouslly termed the Cartesian, “contractarian,” “liberal,” “autonomous,” or “sovereign” subject, the individual is defined as possessing a will that may be impinged upon by external forces but that operates independently of these influences. The will occupies the private space of the human mind, and this mental isolation renders the individual capable of entering voluntarily into personal, economic, and political relationships. In these ways the modern individual resembles the chaste woman who, according to Augustine, can suffer rape without losing her sexual purity because throughout the experience her will continues to resist. In my introduction I examine the growing influence of Augustine's concept of chastity in the areas of rape law, political theory, and literary authorship. The chapters that follow trace how a series of early modern literary writers drew upon the Augustinian model as they laid claim to a transcendent intention or “will” that originated in the private, enclosed space of the author's mind. Through these individual studies I address the larger question of why it was a *female* ideal, defined in opposition to the threat of rape, that helped shape this period's emerging vision of authorship and with it broader ideas of personal intention, autonomy, and transcendence.

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