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Desire, a Crooked Yearning, and the Plants of *Endymion*

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Two print forms that located desire in the disabled body began to appear onstage with far different consequences in Renaissance England. The first of these was the *contreblason*, satiric verse in praise of a deformed beloved. Developed by Francesco Berni (1497–1535), Pietro Aretino (1492–1556), and Clément Marot (1496–1544) as a form of anti-Petrarchanism, the *contreblason* was popularized through a schoolroom exercise known as paradoxical praise, rhetoric that elevated seemingly undesirable states such as the plague, poverty, or ugliness. In the theater, Sir Tophas praises his mistress Dipsas for her coral eyes, silver lips, blue teeth, and carbuncle nose in John Lyly’s *Endymion* (1588); Horatio seeks physical deformities (“lips of honest hide . . . teeth of a Moor’s complexion . . . a witch’s beard”) in Fiametta, his ideal woman, in James Shirley’s *The Duke’s Mistress* (1638); and Dromio of Syracuse performs a global anatomy of Nell, his “swart” kitchen wench in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* (1589–93).¹ For literary critics, lyric mock encomia are seen as hostile, mocking, and misogynistic—pathologizing the women the male poets claim to admire—and twice as problematic as the blazon, which figuratively dismembers the beloved. In the lyric tradition, women are objectified by the male speaker and wholly contained within language. But in the playhouse, actors could undermine these rules in many different ways, especially given that an audience sees the beloved (a real person), whose reaction to his or her verbal portrait may generate sympathy, attention, or intimacy. Rather than list parts

1. John Lyly, *Endymion*, ed. David M. Bevington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); James Shirley, *The Duke’s Mistress*, in *Dramatic Works and Poems* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 4:208; William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*, in *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 7th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 3.2.102. All subsequent references to Shakespeare’s works are quoted by act, scene, and line number according to this edition.

that negate beauty, the stage *contreblason* embodies the unbeautiful, which instantly becomes something else—a player whose performance has the potential to generate real audience cathexis. An assumption that a rhetorical tradition with roots in the male-dominated schoolroom signifies in exactly the same ways onstage discourages a revisionist history of eroticism, desire, and atypical literary types.

The second print form to eroticize disability was published in the essays of Erasmus, Montaigne, and Francis Bacon in the form of a proverb that hypersexualized disabled men, *claudus optime virum agit*: a cripple best plays the man's part.² This belief appears on stage in plays that magnify the sex lives of disfigured men: Crookback Richard efficiently seduces Lady Anne in act 1 of *The Tragedy of King Richard the Third* (1593); the Cripple of Fanchurch, in Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607), wins the love of Phyllis, who accepts another man only when he goes in drag as her true love, a "huge deformitie" named Cripple; and Stump, the ex-soldier with a prosthetic leg in *A Larum for London* (1602), saves Antwerp and rescues from rape the governor's wife, who once would "stop her nose with her sweette gloves / for feare my smell should have infected her" but who now gratefully offers him an erotic signifier, a jewel worth a "thousand crownes."³ Both forms of eroticizing nonableist bodies stage moments when disability or deformity suddenly emerges as either sexual ability or a marker of hidden, ineffable erotic potential. Unlike the presentation of the lame man's sexuality on the page, the theater offers spectators the chance to stare at extraordinary bodies and, as voyeurs, imagine touching or being touched by men and women who are dissimilar to those who traditionally inhabit the categories of beloved or heroic lover but perhaps similar to those with whom they are involved in daily life. Both cases of desiring disability create an opportunity for spectators to witness erotic encounters that do not privilege ableist hegemony but consider bodies figured as other in a wide range of period terms—"deformed, crooked, old and sere"—as completely fit for sexual desire.⁴

2. The Latin phrase is discussed by Michel de Montaigne, "Of cripples," in *Complete Essays*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), 784–92; Francis Bacon, "Of Deformity," in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 426–27; and Desiderius Erasmus, "Claudus optime virum agit," in *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, II.ix.46, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 108–9. They rationalize the sexual cripple in different ways, but for Erasmus, the phenomena was medical: "those who have deformed legs or lack some other limb are often sexually more effective than the rest of men, presumably by way of some natural compensation" (109).

3. *Dramatic Works of Thomas Heywood*, ed. Barron Field (London: Shakespeare Society, 1846); Thomas Lodge, *A Larum for London*, 1602 (London: Oxford University Press, 1893), 761–62.

4. Shakespeare, *Comedy of Errors*, 4.2.19.

One of the earliest examples of how *contreblason* transitions to the stage occurs in John Lyly's *Endymion* (1588). The occasion of its first performance sheds light on the flexibility inherent in adapting a print form for the stage: lines that partialize the female body through jumbled analogies were delivered by the fresh-faced children of Paul's before an aging Elizabeth and her "increasingly geriatric" court, as Sir Christopher Hatton was about forty-nine, the Earl of Leicester was fifty-five, Sir Francis Walsingham was fifty-six, and Lord Burghley was sixty-nine.⁵ Furthermore, the play's performance at Greenwich was on Candlemas, the evening of February 2, a day that traditionally honored the ritual purification of the Virgin Mary and inspired the churching ceremonies (when a mother reenters church after childbirth) experienced by mothers in local parishes across the state. In 1588, the queen was fifty-five, postmenopausal, unmarried, and allegorized as Diana or Cynthia, the goddess of chastity. What made this particular Candlemas a significant date to stage *Endymion*'s rapid aging, or Tophas's *contreblason* of Dipsas for court, prince, and players? If the entire purpose of attending a play staged by the boy companies was to be in the presence of beauty, defacing them with the costume of ugliness might dash the hopes of an audience that anticipated "erotic carnival" and the display of "physically adventuresome" behavior, such as kissing.⁶ Even if we acknowledge that the court permitted itself to be mocked on special occasions, *Endymion* hardly resembles "a token of esteem, a gift-offering to be laid at the feet of the royal patron," as Michael Shapiro describes normal court entertainment.⁷ Critics who tend toward this view draw evidence from the fact that Lyly fell out of favor with the queen during the Marprelate controversy (1590/91) and that the boys of Paul's were disbanded sometime between January 6, 1589/90, and October 4, 1591, until their revival nearly ten years later, in 1599.⁸

Even so, I argue that these details of the late Elizabethan court made Greenwich an ideal space to unhinge *contreblason* from its lyric background, perform mock encomia as sincere praise, and elevate disabled masculinity, especially once we consider how *Endymion*'s pastoral setting reinforces both crooked bodies and aberrant yearning: Lyly plants *Endymion* in a lunar bank for forty years to stress his devotion to the moon, and he transforms Bagoa into an aspen tree—

5. Jacqueline Vanhoutte, "Age in Lust: Lyly's *Endymion* and the Court of Elizabeth I," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 37, no. 1 (2011): 54 and 59.

6. Mary Bly, "The Boy Companies, 1599–1613," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142.

7. Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 38.

8. Reavley Gair, *The Children of Paul's: The Story of a Theatre Company, 1553–1608* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 112. There are two popular theories of who *Endymion* represents—Oxford or Leicester. For Oxford, see Josephine Waters Bennett, "Oxford and 'Endymion,'" *PMLA* 57 (1942): 354–69; and for Leicester, see Vanhoutte, "Age in Lust."

a classic symbol of female loquacity—yet insists that Sir Tophas still desires her. We are meant to press further for analogies between individual bodies, vectors of desire, and the cosmic homologies seen in the shape, color, texture, posture, and taste of trees, plants, and leaves as one form of justification for the assorted crooked yearning(s) deemed normal by the late Elizabethan court. As with other Renaissance playwrights, Lyly mentions a wide variety of specific plants in his plays. But it is no coincidence that the two plants Lyly physically brings on stage in *Endymion* contribute to the play's investigation of *contreblason* in distinct and meaningful ways. Lyly calls on lunary and aspen to perform their crooked yearning before a live audience, just as he calls on the play's heroes, Endymion and Sir Tophas, to flaunt Petrarchan convention, boldly announcing their steadfast desire for atypical literary types. These two plants emulate the desire of men through "crooked's" figurative sense as "awry, perverted, out of order," or "deviating from rectitude and uprightness," and through their cosmic signatures: lunary's crescent leaves or disc-shaped seed pods reveal and display more so than other plants an active ability to perceive, grow, move, and respond to moonlight, while the aspen tree's tongue-shaped leaves speak back to human creatures with a language that parodies human exceptionalism and the literary trope of prosopopoeia. But it is also true that early modern gardening manuals offer advice for straightening crooked vegetal bodies, calling to mind obvious parallels between the aesthetics of human and plant posture as explored by Rebecca Bushnell's 1996 monograph, *A Culture of Teaching*. It makes sense that staging desire for crooked and aged human bodies might entail a similar embrace of wayward vegetation, since as Jean Feerick notes, "differences in plant life helped in large part to model differences in the human world" in the early modern period.⁹

As with the stage *contreblason*, lunary and aspen disrupt the flow of human desire, resulting in a cross-kind human vegetal twinship showcased when both Endymion and Sir Tophas voice their desire to "bed" with or within the specific plants. Drawing from herbals, gardening manuals, and material culture, I suggest that the protagonists' urge to join these plants should be read as more than devotion to a human beloved. As Michel Foucault describes the sixteenth-century episteme, magnetic draw or sympathy can be an instance of the "same so strong and so insistent that . . . it has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear."¹⁰ Usually we find sympathy strongest in tropes concerning Renaissance friendship, where similarities in gender,

9. Jean Feerick, "Botanical Shakespeares: The Racial Logic of Plant Life in *Titus Andronicus*," *South Central Review* 26 (2009): 85.

10. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 23.

class, rank, and age were highly visible. But Foucault also says that sympathy “excites the things of the world to movement and can draw even the most distant of them together,” including the sunflower, whose yellow disk will “follow the curving path of the sun.”¹¹ There are moments when *Endymion* stages human-plant sympathy to show how a shared humoral physiology outweighs heterocomic desire, gesturing toward an unanticipated and mysterious eros among plants.

I. STAGING THE CROOKED BODY

First, to explore how *contreblazon*'s assumptions about the human body operate differently in the theater, we can turn to an archetypal staging of the blazon. In act 1 scene 5 of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (1601), Olivia lifts her mourning veil to display her face to Cesario and playhouse spectators. The jokes that follow destabilize nearly all aspects of the print tradition. First, Olivia anticipates Cesario's use of Petrarchan clichés, perhaps already exhausted by Orsino's romantic suit, and tells him she will “draw the curtain and show you the picture” (1.5.228–29) before he begins to speak. Olivia objectifies herself, returns Cesario's gaze, and most important gives the audience the realization that, in the presence of the Lady, the verbal portrait is obsolete. Not to be undone, Cesario turns to the subject of cosmetics, “excellently done, if God did all” (1.5.231), implying that, despite what his eyes see, she could have concealed deformities beneath paint. When Cesario reverts once more to the language of red-and-white beauty found in the blazon, Olivia interrupts him again: “I will give out divers schedules of my beauty. It shall be inventoried, and every particle and utensil labeled to my will: as, item, two lips, indifferent red; item, two gray eyes, with lids to them; item, one neck, one chin, and so forth” (1.5.239–44). Pushing objectivity to its limits, Olivia insists that while her facial features are distinct, they are not extraordinary and that any attempt to partialize her composite body with verse presents uncomfortable resemblance to accounting, her death, and probate inventory. On the stage, the verbal portrait is unwarranted: there is a player for all to see, including the poet, whose accuracy of seeing and describing is immediately subject to our judgment. Visualizing the sonnet's unbeauty, at the very least, provides us with an opportunity to desire it. And even minimalist theatrical conventions—costume, face paint, prosthetic wigs and beards—allow an audience to doubt with Cesario that “God did all” as it pertains to Olivia's appearance. Finally, Cesario is a young man playing a woman cross-dressed as a young man, so the audience understands the rhetorical play onstage as between two young men playing two young women, while Cesario (the go-between who delivers the Petrarchan lines of his master)

11. Ibid.

occupies liminal status, “not yet old enough for a man, nor young enough for a boy” (1.5.153–54). In theater, where local concerns from the scent of the Hope to the concessions at the Rose or the age of the players also bear weight on individual performances, there are simply too many moving variables for either blazon or *contreblazon* to replicate the formulaic and oppressive dichotomies of a lyric tradition with consistency. On the contrary, theater is ideally suited to demystify the Renaissance notion of fairness as a performance contingent on wealth rather than known, quantifiable aesthetic standards.¹²

Given the Petrarchan blazon’s critical history, it is unsurprising that no one has contemplated a possibility in which the speaker of a *contreblazon* meant what he said, for even if a male speaker articulated a defense of unconventional female beauty, the result would be to silence her through the type of praise by fragmentation she once had escaped. In her landmark study of Petrarch, Nancy J. Vickers describes the blazon’s sinister intent: the male poet, split by desire, constructs a unified self through lyric that figuratively dismembers the beloved’s body.¹³ The blazon’s true purpose is to stabilize the male poet and allow him to avoid Actaeon’s fate by silencing the beloved who has presumably led to his self-destructive desire.

The stage *contreblazon*’s implicit critique of nonnormative bodies is typically read as an extension of the print form as insincere praise. However, if we treat the many forms of female unbeauty listed in the stage *contreblazon*—old age, physical defects, dark skin, disproportionate body features—from a historically oriented disability-studies perspective, we find a separate framework to understand the ugly, old, or sick woman on the English stage.¹⁴ The field of

12. See Kim Hall, “Fair Texts/Dark Ladies,” in *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 85.

13. Nancy J. Vickers, “Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981): 265–79. See also Vickers, “The blazon of sweet beauty’s best: Shakespeare’s *Lucrece*,” in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 95–115, and “Members Only: Marot’s Anatomical Blazons,” in *The Body in Parts*, ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio (New York: Routledge, 1997), 2–21. For another form of anti-Petrarchan blazon, see Hannah Betts, “‘The Image of this Queene so quaynt’: The Pornographic Blazon, 1588–1603,” in *Dissing Elizabeth: Negative Representations of Gloriana*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 153–84.

14. For work on disability and the early modern, see Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, eds., *Disabling the Renaissance: Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), and “Disabled Shakespeares,” special issue, *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2009); and Joshua R. Eyler, ed., *Disability in the Middle Ages* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010). For work on sexuality and disability in the medieval and early modern period, see Edward Wheatley, “A River Runs through It: Disability, Homosexuality, Queer/Disabled Discourse, and the Isle of Blandie in *Berinus*,” *Exemplaria* 19 (2007): 386–401; Julie Orlemanski, “How to Kiss a Leper,” *Postmedieval* 3 (2012): 142–47; and Robert McRuer, “Fuck the Disabled: The Prequel,” in *Shakespeareer*, ed. Madhavi Menon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 294–301. The intro-

disability studies exposes a world of “compulsory able-bodiedness that insidiously excludes, stigmatizes, and devalues difference.”¹⁵ Because they treat blazon as burlesque, Renaissance mock encomia reinforce this precept. But disability scholars are quick to distinguish between is and ought. In their introduction to a 2003 special issue of *GLQ*, “Desiring Disability,” Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson define the “ableist norm of perfect bodies and minds” as that which “construes goodness in terms of health, constancy, energy, wholeness, and strength at the expense of actual bodies that do not conform to these specifications.”¹⁶ Not only does ableism demand straight sex, it also declares that one must meet certain criteria of physical and mental ability for one’s desire to be considered legitimate and socially legible. Contrary to these precepts, McRuer and Wilkerson argue that we live in a “world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways.”¹⁷ When we desire disabled or deformed bodies, as Julie Orlemanski explains, it reflects a desire across a wide spectrum: the longing to be close and intimate with disabled persons, the wish to be disabled oneself, and finally “the desires expressed and experienced by individuals occupying the position of ‘extraordinary embodiment.’”¹⁸ All forms of desiring nonableist bodies, whether they are disabled, deformed, or ugly, “disturb common-sense assumptions about what is attractive.”¹⁹

The ease with which Montaigne undermines ableism in his two essays “Of cripples” and “Of physiognomy,” by emphasizing the appeal of flawed bodies, exposes a deep vein of opposition to compulsory able-bodiedness in Renaissance patterns of thought. In the first essay, he focuses on eroticism and deformity through *claudus optime virum agit*, an Italian proverb (“he does not know Venus in her perfect sweetness who has not lain with a cripple”), and the history of the Amazons, who tell the Scythians that “the lame man does it best.”²⁰ And when he ponders beauty’s merit in the second essay, Montaigne

duction to the edited collection *Sex and Disability*, ed. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), presents a good initiation to the history of disability activism and sexuality (see, esp. 2–7).

15. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, “Ethical Staring: Disabling the English Renaissance,” in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, ed. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 3.

16. Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson, “Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, nos. 1–2 (2003): 8.

17. *Ibid.*, 14.

18. Orlemanski, “How to Kiss a Leper,” 143.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Montaigne, “Of cripples,” 791. For a good introduction to disability and Renaissance physiognomy, see Michael Torrey, “‘The plain devil and dissembling looks’: Ambivalent Physiognomy and Shakespeare’s *Richard III*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 30, no. 2 (2000): 123–53;

tends to focus on counterexamples that stress desire's mystery and complexity. He thinks of Socrates, an able-bodied man whose soul was a "perfect model in all qualities" but who appeared ugly to others, and then he recalls the "very beautiful soul in La Boétie," which was cloaked in distinct "unattractiveness at first glance."²¹ Montaigne chooses two very important people in his life to show exceptions to prevailing views on desire and beauty. He admires the principle of deformity so much that he names his own mistakes, faults, and errors as lapses in mental acuity and then confesses, "I once made myself believe that I had received more pleasure from a woman because she was not straight, and credited that to the account of her charms."²² The statement is intentionally equivocal—does he validate his infirmity of mind ("I once *made* myself believe" something that was untrue), or does his encounter validate the preceding account of hypersexuality among cripples? For Montaigne, the proverb hints at the possible existence of entirely unknown sex acts.

Montaigne does not specify how this woman was "not straight," nor does he indicate in what ways she, her desire, or their mutual sex act(s) strayed from normativity, but his use of "not straight" as a classifying mechanism calls to mind an original definition of "queer." As Laurie Shannon explains, "The Oxford English Dictionary describes the origin of 'queer' as uncertain but suggests the 'German *quer*[:] transverse, oblique, crosswise, at right angles, obstructive, . . . going wrong . . . peculiar . . . directed sideways . . . at odds with others (see *thwart adv.*).'"²³ Any of these cognates reinforces "queer" as a relational term involving comparison with something or someone else also moving through time but described as straight, parallel, on course, normal, or forward. Shannon goes on to explain that nature's curved course, or swerve, was an unproblematic way to accept errant vectors of desire or revulsion in Renaissance natural philosophy and to distinguish these courses from the resemblances and homologies that otherwise governed attraction.

The English body of writing devoted to Marot's *contreblason* and Montaigne's nonstraight woman is known as the crooked mistress tradition, a translation that exploits historical kinship between "queer" (nonstraight) and "crippled"

and Ian Moulton, "'A Monster Great Deformed': The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1996): 251–68. For essays on Montaigne, see Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Representing the Monster: Cognition, Cripples, and Other Limp Parts in Montaigne's 'Des Boyteux,'" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 168–82; and Adriana Bontea, "Montaigne's *On Physiognomy*," *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 1 (2007): 41–62.

21. Michel de Montaigne, "Of physiognomy," 809–10.

22. Montaigne, "Of cripples," 791.

23. Laurie Shannon, "Lear's Queer Cosmos," in Menon, *Shakesqueer*, 176.

(disabled or deformed).²⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the adjective “crooked” referred to “the reverse of straight in figurative senses (*esp.* with reference to moral character and conduct); deviating from rectitude or uprightness; not straightforward; dishonest, wrong, perverse; perverted, out of order, awry.” The crooked mistress might be perverse, or she may be a person who has a “body or limbs bent out of shape; deformed; bent or bowed with age.”²⁵ That the same word might be used to describe a person who is perverse and a person who is deformed or crippled confirms Robert McRuer’s work on a shared history of oppression throughout queer/crip existence in “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence.” Disabled people, McRuer argues, are consistently understood as somehow queer, and often stereotyped as either asexual or oversexual, while queers are figured as disabled and medicalized.²⁶ In early modern England, “crooked” denotes a wide range of transgressions: deformed, perverted, criminal, or simply old and bent with age. Hence, Lord Clifford sends Richard of York away with, “hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump, / as crooked in thy manners as thy shape,” to stress his deviant conduct by an analogy with his body.²⁷ But just as it is possible to stress or minimize Richard’s crooked body (as seen throughout *Richard the Third*’s long production history), each performance of Shirley’s Fiametta, Shakespeare’s Nell, or Lyly’s Dipsas must decide what deformity represents.

Although we cannot know exactly how early moderns approached these staging decisions through costume, player, or scenery, we immediately sense the form’s plasticity in *Endymion*’s script and narrative arc. There are at least three

24. For an introduction to the English crooked mistress tradition, see Naomi Baker, “‘To Make Love to a Deformity’: Praising Ugliness in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Studies* 22, no. 1 (2008): 86–109; and Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchanism and Its Counterdiscourses* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Jan Ziolkowski, “Avatars of Ugliness in Medieval Literature,” *Modern Language Review* 79, no. 1 (1984): 1–20, examines medieval examples of ugliness, while Patrizia Bettella, *The Ugly Woman: Transgressive Aesthetic Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), provides a comprehensive overview of the Italian tradition of ugly women. For French *contreblason*, see Alison Saunders, *The Sixteenth-Century Blason Poétique* (Bern: Lang, 1981).

25. OED Online, s.v., “crooked,” adj. 3, fig. a, 2.a.

26. Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Sharon L. Snyder (New York: MLA, 2002), 94.

27. William Shakespeare, *II Henry VI*, 5.1.157–58. Most work on queer theory and disability studies focuses on Shakespeare’s King Richard III, such as Jessica Walker’s research on Richard Loncraine’s 1995 film adaptation: “‘As Crooked in Thy Manners as Thy Shape’: Reshaping Deformity in Loncraine’s *Richard III*,” *Journal of the Wooden O* 11 (2011): 155–71. For an essay that examines aesthetics, desire, and disability as they pertain to Kate’s limp in *The Taming of the Shrew*, see Rachel E. Hile, “Disability and the Characterization of Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2009).

ways to undermine the *contreblason's* misogynistic past in the new setting of theater in Lyly's *Endymion*. First, it is possible to undermine the claim of inauthenticity, where critics insist that the speaker does not mean what he says and, by extension, that all crooked yearning must be illegitimate. The easiest way to undermine the claim for inauthenticity is to build the speaker's credibility and sincerity, which is precisely how Lyly crafts Endymion (who loves the inconstant moon of "riper years") and Tophas, who loves "older matrons" (5.2.101). Tophas is recognizable as a comic *miles gloriosus*, tracing his lineage through Chaucer and anticipating Falstaff, one of the most beloved characters in English stage history. Elizabeth's court was composed of several amorous, old-aged men such as Falstaff, who introduces himself as one of "Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon," calling attention to his status as an older queen's erotic plaything and the ongoing problem of senescent male sexuality.²⁸ Audience empathy for Tophas does not endorse his affection for Dipsas, but the next way of undermining lyric *contreblason's* past does: spectators may question the accuracy of Tophas's verbal portrait and the overall principles associated with desire and older, dominant women in the late Elizabethan court, especially since young boys performed these roles. One of the reasons that child (and later, youth) companies thrived was the ability of playwrights and owners to exploit the dissonance between language and the body of the actor; scholars even suggest that the audience was not asked to suspend disbelief but rather to enjoy the erotics of inversion when a boy voiced a dirty joke, played a cross-dressed woman, or expressed the complaints of age. The very fact that youthful choristers, who hardly disguised their age with false beards, performed these roles had to destabilize anti-Petrarchanism's critique of deformity. Finally, the third way to undermine the *contreblason* on stage is to assess its results: Does the form silence and figuratively dismember women? Here, Lyly is ambivalent. Because Dipsas never hears Tophas's words, she is unaffected by his cruel analogies. She continues to enjoy her freedom for forty years, until Cynthia punishes her by requiring her to recommit to her husband, Geron, and cease to conjure. Dipsas's fate is equivocal, but Tophas's mock encomia do not diminish her, presenting further evidence that the genre ultimately escapes its stable lyric background.

II. A CROOKED YOUTH IN THE LUNARY BANK

Lyly is not content to stage authentic and sincere desire for the conventionally aged, ugly, or deformed body. As Feerick argues, "qualities that we have come

28. William Shakespeare, *I Henry IV*, 1.2.25–29. On royal *mignonnerie* and sovereignty, see Laurie Shannon, *Sovereign Amity: Figures of Friendship in Shakespearean Contexts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), esp. 141–47.

to think of as attributes of the social realm emerge unabashedly as defining principles for plants” for Renaissance naturalists; for Feerick, these human-plant correspondences are “self-evident” for dramatists too.²⁹ Lyly recognizes that we regard vegetal life with similar principles of judgment, envies plants as agents and generators of unrepentant desire, and allows the play’s eponymous hero to find a satisfying relationship sleeping and dreaming with plants. However, this vegetal eros has been overshadowed by Endymion’s love for the moon, which the shepherd justifies through false praise. Because Endymion desires a planet whose size, shape, brightness, and distance to earth appear to change, he must disregard received wisdom that privileges self-sameness through paradoxical praise, the same tool of *contreblason*. Although inconstancy (“waving, waxing, and waning”) is usually seen as disloyalty or sexual infidelity, Endymion transforms the fault into a virtue. He does so by praising the moon’s larger pattern of constant change over time as its abiding principle and “settled course” (I.I.39–40), a description that resonates with Elizabeth Tudor’s motto, *semper eadem*, always the same. Eumenides insists that his friend is bewitched to sincerely feel this way, drawn into “a dotage no less miserable than monstrous” (I.I.30). For Susan D. Thomas, this makes *Endymion* Lyly’s “saddest” play since “Elizabeth, England’s Cynthia, mortal queen and moon, is ultimately unapproachable,” suggesting “that the truly loving courtier has no function and no future.”³⁰ But there are positive ways to see Endymion’s gravitation toward Cynthia. Gillian Knoll argues that the moon’s vast spatial and ontological distance motivates erotic desire since, for some, unrequited love is pleasurable and fulfilling. As Knoll writes, “desire for something infinite and immense, for someone perfect and unattainable, can only ever take the form of imaginative pleasure. Lyly’s *Endymion* insists that this pleasure is profoundly erotic.”³¹ In the play, Floscula too understands Endymion’s desire as rooted in the impossibility of attainment, as she advises Tellus to “suffer then Endymion to follow his affections, though to obtain her be impossible” (I.2.35–37). Lyly describes erotic desire as at once magnetic and socially unacceptable for men: to admire a woman whose “authority commandeth all creatures” (I.2.34) and to slavishly submit to her.³² Female spectators, in turn, may be aroused by Cynthia or Dipsas’s display of dominance

29. Feerick, “Botanical Shakespeares,” 85, 86.

30. Susan D. Thomas, “*Endymion* and Its Sources,” *Comparative Literature* 30, no. 1 (1978): 51.

31. Gillian Knoll, “How to Make Love to the Moon: Intimacy and Erotic Distance in John Lyly’s *Endymion*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2014): 179.

32. For an essay that suggests medieval and Renaissance courtly love has been intentionally masochistic across time, see Slavoj Žižek’s Lacanian reading, “Courtly Love; or, Woman as Thing,” first published in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), 89–112.

over “diminutive male erotic objects in the theater” and be driven to “assert their advantage of size in order to attain a sexually, socially, or physically powerful position to which they might not otherwise have access.”³³

Although Endymion’s relationship with a distant, changing mistress has been the subject of critical inquiry, we also need to acknowledge the significance of Endymion’s forty-year nap in close proximity to a plant named in the moon’s honor, lunary. Lyly insists that the shepherd—by his own admission—prefers to live among this plant species rather than with his male friends, Tellus, or his pastoral flock. In the second act, Endymion, wandering alone, declares, “on yonder bank never grew anything but lunary, and hereafter I will never have any bed but that bank” (2.3.10–12). Lyly wants us to know that Endymion plants himself in a raised bed of *lunaria* and spends the next forty years growing in this environment next to a sapling (in act 2) that becomes a tree (in act 4). I count six times *Endymion* refers to lunary. As David Bevington notes, “the lunary bank and its occupant are referred to often, implicitly and explicitly, during Endymion’s sleep,” to ensure that the youth’s presence is “strongly felt” although occasionally curtained off.³⁴ Lunary appears in no source text but in three other artistic works by Lyly: in *Gallathea*, to describe how quickly inexperienced virgins succumb to love (“thoughts like the leaves of Lunary, which the further they growe from the Sunne, the sooner they are scorched with his beams”); in *Euphues*, to state a fact (“Lunaris hearbe, as long as the Moone waxeth, bringeth forth leaves, and in the waining shaketh them off”); and in *Sapho and Phao*, as a medical remedy for a sick friend (“I have heard of an herbe called Lunary, that being bound to the pulses of the sick, causeth nothinge but dreames of weddings and daunces”).³⁵ In Bevington’s theory for the play’s production, the actor playing Endymion sleeps in the lunary bank to the side of the stage for the duration of the entire performance as an emblem. If we cannot say that the plant/human relationship takes center stage, it occupies the side of the stage long enough to accomplish the important work described by Vin Nardizzi as “compel[ing] audiences to perceive and to speculate on the elemental indistinction of human and nonhuman bodies within the compass of the theater.”³⁶ And, for the early modern audience, lunary’s complex powers acted on men.

33. Valerie Billings, “Female Spectators and the Erotics of the Diminutive in *Epicoeone* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*,” *Renaissance Drama* 42, no. 1 (2014): 2.

34. Bevington in Lyly, *Endymion*, 53, 54.

35. *Gallathea*, 3.1.20; John Lyly, *Euphues and his England* (London: Cawood, 1580), 98. Early English Books Online, STC (2nd ed.), 17069; *Sapho and Phao*, 3.3.43–45.

36. Vin Nardizzi, “The Wooden Matter of Human Bodies: Prosthesis and Stump in *A Larum for London*,” in *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi (New York: Macmillan, 2012), 122.

John Gerard mentions four types of lunary, two of which have significance for the play: (1) small moonwort (*lunaria minor*), which has crescent-shaped leaves and magical properties, and (2) white satin, or “honesty” (*viola lunarus* or *lunaria annua*), a flowering plant known for its translucent, coin-shaped seed casings that appear “in the fashion of the Moone.”³⁷ All plants in the lunaria family share an affinity for the moon, just as other species—heliotrope, sunflower, or marigold—bend toward the sun’s rays. The moonwort fern was both valuable for healing “greene and fresh wounds” and somewhat dangerous, since it “hath beene used among the Alychmistes and witches to doe wonders withal,” including opening locks and shedding the shoes of horses who trample it, although for Gerard, these beliefs are “but drowsie dreames and illusions.”³⁸ This species flourishes in the wild, bends toward its desire at night, affects other life forms (including horses and metal), and enjoys a claim to property, the bank where no other species of plant has grown in Endymion’s memory. With its reputed use in alchemy and witchcraft, lunary was a dangerous herb, a fact reinforced by its proximity to Dipsas’s simples and Bagoa’s poisonous hemlock fan.

The second species Gerard identifies as lunary—“white satin,” or the “honesty” plant—had disc-shaped seedpods resembling the moon’s color and shape. Unlike wild moonwort, this species was popular to cultivate in winter gardens. Of this plant, Gerard notes that “most of the later Herbarists doe call it *Lunaria*; Others, *Lunaria Græca*, either in the fashion of the seed, or of the silver brightnesse that it hath.”³⁹ These wide, translucent discs remained on the plant throughout autumn, adding unique color and texture to the garden and dried floral arrangements. A second name for the honesty or white satin is moonwort, and it is tempting to think that branches of its seedpods (rather than the crescent-shaped green leaves of small moonwort) may have been illuminated onstage during an indoor candlelit performance at Greenwich in February. If lunary seedpods were on stage with Endymion in either a “canvas covered box where the actor reclined” or a recessed booth, the effects would be spectacular: the disc-shaped seedpods would have mirrored the shape, light, and color of the moon and reflected the hall’s candles, which John H. Astington describes as a “blaze of light” designed to glorify the magnificence of the monarch.⁴⁰ Astington emphasizes how the Revels Office “jealously guarded the prerogative

37. John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Islip, Norton, & Whitakers, 1633), 464.

38. *Ibid.*, 407.

39. *Ibid.*, 464.

40. John H. Astington, *English Court Theatre, 1558–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 197, 96.

of producing this delight” with “lines rigged across the room, each bearing decorated chandeliers, suspended on pulleys, raised and lowered to trim wick and replace candles.”⁴¹ Although Astington speculates that *Endymion* was “modestly staged” in the Great Chamber (a second-story room with wood flooring, a ceiling of geometrical battens, and a fireplace), the smaller room may have reflected the candles and seedpods with more intensity. This picture of Endymion’s lunar bank as an Elizabethan winter garden tableau suggests that Cynthia and her court willingly cultivate the boy’s crooked yearning in service to botanical diversity.

Although we cannot know with certitude which species of lunar Lyly imagines, we understand that the shepherd ages in this exact bank for many years, where we eventually witness him disabled through catatonic sleep and deformed through age. Nonetheless, these changes make him more attractive. To stress his bodily disfigurement, three women comment on it: Dipsas predicts how Endymion will awake with golden locks transformed to “silver hairs” and naked chin to a face with “bristles hard as broom” (2.3.35, 37), while Bagoa adds that his fair face will turn to “withered skin” (2.3.56). Cynthia even becomes a *blasonneur* as she gazes on the sleeping Endymion and manages her astonishment with an inventory of his parts: “Hollow eyes? Grey hairs? Wrinkled cheeks? And decayed limbs?” (4.3.77–80). Age and witchcraft temporarily transform Endymion into an ideal crooked mistress: feminized, passive, silent, and figuratively dismembered. Yet, the worse he appears, the more action he gets. His erotic fantasy materializes in Cynthia’s kiss, a moment so important that Bevington names it the “play’s climactic gesture.”⁴² I agree and wish to stress that Lyly could have used another plot device to rescue Endymion. For example, leopard-spotted Corsites refreshes his skin with the lunar plant. The kiss is essential for us to see, for it generates erotic frisson. As Orlemanski describes the leprous kiss, she notes that the pious *osculans* performs charity by first overcoming deep revulsion, which she speculates might be necessary to generate “certain intensities of sympathy and certain types of desire” in the history of an emotion that has yet to be written.⁴³ A surge of revulsion, then, may have helped a gray-bearded man with decayed limbs receive the kiss from Cynthia, who has never kissed another man and never will. Comedy follows: Cynthia commands Endymion to stand but then sit since his limbs are too stiff, and when she exits, she leaves explicit instructions (diet and moderate exercise) to care for the feeble, disoriented man. Disabled masculinity has extraordinary benefits in the court of Cynthia.

41. *Ibid.*, 96.

42. Bevington in Lyly, *Endymion*, 55.

43. Orlemanski, “How to Kiss a Leper,” 151.

But we are meant to see Endymion as more than a person whose beauty (but not attractiveness) lessens as he ages: in his youth, he was already a crooked tree, as Tellus insists: “But timely, madam, crooks the tree that will be a cammock, and young it pricks that will be a thorn; and therefore he that began without care to settle his life, it is a sign without amendment he will end it” (3.1.37–40). For Tellus, the shape of a young plant provides a glimpse of its future self in an emergent signature or postural stance. As Rebecca Bushnell’s study of analogies between young trees and students’ minds and bodies reveals, early modern pedagogical literature drew from arborist manuals to offer advice on reforming bent posture and wayward habits of the mind. To yield the most profit, the arborist should prune, clip, or lop branches, conceding a paradigm wherein the disciplined “vegetable body should be curbed and made uniform,” just as the human body required purging superfluity to attain humoral balance.⁴⁴ Crooked vegetal bodies, from the arborist’s perspective, must be shaped to conform to normative illustrations of trees with ideal forms, which were available to readers of printed horticulture manuals. As Bushnell argues, to reform the flexible bodies of plants and the minds of children was thought to have lasting salutary consequences in early modern pedagogical literature. As Erasmus writes, “As so they that for sloth draweth to a custom to crook their body causeth them to be crouch-backed, which nature never brought . . . young bodies be like unto tender plants which in what fashion you bend them, like a fork or written like a cord so they grew and were stiff.”⁴⁵

But Erasmus gives contradictory evidence to support Tellus’s position that crooked vegetal bodies would never straighten. In Richard Taverner’s 1552 English edition of *Erasmus*, he declares, “a crooked bough of a tree, be it never so much driven an other way with a forke, or crotch, yet as soon as one takes awaye the forke anone it returneth to its owne.”⁴⁶ As the crooked bough returns to its native state, a tame lion will grow wild, and a fox will remember “her natural wylynes.” In this theory, an inclination guides creatures back to a native state or prior ontology regardless of personal will, fear or shame, or external pressure of staff and sword. This same drive refuses to alter over time; it is at once ripe and mature, unbreakable and irreversible. It is this conviction that crookedness cannot be reformed in either tree or youth that leads Tellus to argue mistakenly that an essential capacity for deceit defines Endymion, whose one vice (she believes) will generate a life of mature criminal acts.

44. Rebecca Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching: Early Modern Humanism in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 92.

45. Quoted in *ibid.*, 93.

46. Richard Taverner, *Proverbes, or adagies* (1552), fol. xlv.

When Tellus sees Endymion again, she describes him as a youth who once pulled a “smooth shoe upon a crooked foot” (5.4.100–101). However, Lyly does not address Tellus’s betrayal, and she spends most of the play isolated from others under house arrest.

Unsurprisingly, several characters in the play imagine the boy as a growing plant. To express how his lowly status differs from that of Cynthia, Endymion draws from botanical hierarchies: the stately cedar, whose top “reacheth unto the clouds,” cannot bow to shrubs, and the ivy that climbs the elm will never reach the sun (2.2.105). Dipsas vows in the next scene to force him to sleep out his “youth and flowering time and become hay,” while Bagoa dares not sympathize with him, “lest she make me pine, and rock me into such a deep sleep that I shall not awake to my marriage,” prefiguring her metamorphosis into a tree and suggesting how an inert, slumbering Endymion retains his vegetal soul (2.3.37–38, 59–60). When Corsites tries to transfer Endymion to Tellus’s cave forty years later, he cannot lift him, as he has “turned to earth, with lying so long on the earth” (4.3.14). In disbelief, Corsites recalls a day when he “pull[ed] up a tree that forty years was fastened with roots and wreathed in knots to the ground,” further identifying Endymion as a crooked tree that has fulfilled its destiny (4.3.15–17). By claiming the bank as the shepherd’s “bed,” Lyly punningly captures the indistinctness of human and plant bodies. In early modernity, a variety of creatures were said to have beds—nonhuman animals, plants, and minerals: the roe was said to “bed” for the night, oysters grew in beds, vegetal life could be “bedded” if planted deeply in a garden, and minerals “bedded” were said “to sink or bury in a matrix of any kind . . . to fix firmly in any substance.”⁴⁷ But because Sir Tophas echoes Endymion’s wish in act 5’s heterocomic marital resolution by wishing to “bed” Bagoa (an aspen tree), the act of cohabitating an earthen bed in *Endymion* is erotic, if not shrouded in the same mystery Montaigne associates with the nonstraight woman. By staging the tableau of a crooked youth who ages, mysteriously satisfied, in and among a magical plant (as described elsewhere in print form) and emerges only to be described as a crooked mistress, Lyly again uses theater to undermine ableist precepts of desirable bodies and queer normative understandings of sex acts.

III. THE PHILODENTRIST AND THE TREE OF TONGUES

Lyly’s play exemplifies a larger pattern of thought in early modernity wherein “aware, communicative, perceptive, and autonomous” plants participate fully in a cosmos that “was folded in upon itself: the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems

47. *OED Online*, s.v., “bed,” v., II.9, trans., II.10.a.

the secrets that were of use to man.”⁴⁸ In this universe, the aspen tree’s cosmic signature normally repelled men. Only Sir Tophas, who seeks a replacement for his first beloved, Dipsas, named after Ovid’s guardian bawd in *Amores* 1:8, desires such a tree. In Christopher Marlowe’s translation of Ovid (1600), the narrator introduces Dipsas as a powerful sorcerer who can reverse water’s course, darken the sky or fill it with sunlight, open ancient graves, fly in the night sky, and split the solid earth, adding as an afterthought, “she draws chaste women to incontinence / nor doth her tongue want harmful eloquence” (19–20).⁴⁹ Although her enemy, Dipsas shares certain qualities with Cynthia—both exercise power over nature, and both receive paradoxical praise, as the men who desire these women must rationalize their passion through mock encomia. Lyly’s Dipsas evokes a number of ugly lady traditions—the medieval sorcerer-crone and the crooked mistress of anti-Petrarchan *contreblason*—while for Christine M. Neufeld, Dipsas is “the crude embodiment of the typical English village-level witch.”⁵⁰ Astington speculates that Dipsas was a grotesque who “required suitably exaggerated dress.”⁵¹ To further cue audience distaste, “dipsas” is name for a poisonous viper; according to Edward Topsell, “a man or beast wounded with this serpent is afflicted with intolerable thirst.”⁵²

Yet Sir Tophas loves her, a woman who is remarkable to Samias and other saucy pageboys, for her lack of beauty: “That ugly creature? Why, she is a fool, a scold, fat, without fashion, and quite without favour” (3.3.96–97). Sir Tophas finds joy in the imaginative possibility of being scolded and praises her “low forehead,” “little hollow eyes,” “toothless” mouth, fat and short fingers, sagging face and sagging breasts, short height, and large feet (3.3.55–62). He also asks whether Dipsas will “stoop . . . yield . . . bend” to his marriage proposal, while Epiton reverts to her physical stature to assure his master “she is bent” (5.2.61), another way to signal her age and the crooked mistress tradition.

48. Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 63; Foucault, *Order of Things*, 17. For a discussion of plant yearning that inspires my reading of *Endymion*, see Jane Bennett, “Of Material Sympathies, Paracelsus, and Whitman,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, ed. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 239–52.

49. Christopher Marlowe, *Complete Poems and Plays*, ed. E. D. Pendry (London: Dent, 1990), 431–32.

50. Christine M. Neufeld, “Lyly’s Chimerical Vision: Witchcraft in *Endymion*,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 43 (2007): 355.

51. Astington, *English Court Theatre*, 197.

52. Edward Topsell, *The Historie of Serpents; or, The Second Booke of Living Creatures* (London: Jaggard, 1608), 141.

It would be easy to dismiss Tophas as completely irrational if he offered no evidence for his crooked yearning, but in the play he excels at explaining himself. When he meets younger women, he states that he despises milk, which is too sweet for his interest in war, hunting, and combat. When Samias offers to find him a “young lady,” Sir Tophas replies,

I love no Grissels; they are so brittle they will crack
like glass, or so dainty that if they be touched they are
straight of the fashion of wax. *Animus maioribus instat*; I
desire old matrons. What a sight would it be to embrace
one whose hair were as orient as the pearl, whose teeth
shall be so pure a watchet that they shall stain the truest
turquoise, whose nose shall throw more beams from it
than the fiery carbuncle, whose eyes shall be environed
about with redness exceeding the deepest coral, and
whose lips might compare with silver for the paleness!
(5.3.98–107)

Tophas acknowledges that these traits are Dipsas’s virtues, “over whom no man can be jealous” (3.3.64). Sir Tophas and Dipsas do not experience a traditional courtship: they never address one another, and they do not share the stage until act 5, when Tophas has shifted his gaze to her maid, Bagoa, but there is no doubt that his feelings for her are sincere. We know this since he respects her marriage to Geron and becomes enamored with the plant version of the crone, claiming he cannot “go handsomely to bed” (5.4.287) without it. His yearning resembles Lucio’s description of the absent Duke’s peculiar sexual appetite for “your beggar of fifty” in *Measure for Measure*. According to Lucio, the Duke “had crotchets in him” (3.2.124), which meant both “buds or branches” and a peculiar or perverse conceit.

In *Endymion*, Cynthia agrees to Sir Tophas’s request, and, although we expect him to praise his new bride’s transformation, he curses her: “Bagoa? A bots upon thee!” (5.4.298). As Bevington observes, “Tophas remains an absurd caricature to the very end.”⁵³ To understand why Tophas rejects Bagoa, it helps to think through his action onstage during the 285 lines in the play’s final scene before he addresses Cynthia and the choreographed stage business of tree metamorphosis. Lyly announces Bagoa’s transformation twice, in succeeding scenes (5.3.15–16 and 5.4.54), to ensure that we know she is an aspen;

53. Bevington in Lyly, *Endymion*, 194 nn. 287–88.

the second time, Tophas is onstage, although he stays silent until Dipsas embraces Geron (5.4.282), which seems to cue his latent desire. Tophas must develop a relationship with the aspen as a philodentrist, or tree lover, for his character to be consistent. He falls in love with a tree of tongues because it multiplies his queer object of choice, the crone-sorceress, and her incantatory power over language.

Bagoa is “turned to a tree for revealing a truth” (5.4.296) about Endymion’s spell, but as a tree she is anything but silent. Bagoa is an aspen, one of the noisiest trees in England. In Gerard’s *Herball*, an aspen is a type of poplar tree with smooth white bark, “garnished with many brittle and tender branches, set full of leaves . . . hanging upon long and slender stems.” The aspen is known for its wavering branches, which create noise even when the weather is calm, hence its Latin name, *populus tremula*. As Gerard records, the trembling leaves signify women full of empty chatter: “the Aspentrete may also be called Tremble, after the French name, considering it is the matter whereof womens tongues were made, (as the Poets and some others report) which seldom cease wagging.”⁵⁴ The tree’s Latin name must have been known by Shakespeare, too, who thinks of it when the Hostess trembles like an “aspen leaf” (2.4.108) as Pistol arrives at the Boar’s Head tavern in *II Henry IV*, and when Marcus finds Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and speculates that her rapist, a “craftier Tereus,” would not have cut out her tongue and hands if he had “seen those lily hands / tremble like aspen leaves upon a lute” (2.4.44–45).

A reference to the aspen tongue was a popular way to criticize women’s speech in prose libel, ballads, and folktales. Edward Gosynhyll’s satirical tract explains that at first all women “had no tongs” (for God created them mute intentionally) but that one day, as a husband put leaves down as his wife’s dinner plate, the devil substituted an aspen leaf, “for it moveth with every wynde / they say womens tongues be of lyke kynde.”⁵⁵ Henceforth, women’s voices mimicked the nonstop sound of the tree. For precedent, Gosynhyll could have read one of Sir Thomas More’s clerical satires, where a friar refuses to allow women to speak in church since “those aspen leaves of theirs would never leave wagging.” The joke continued unabated in the seventeenth century. In an anonymous broadside ballad, “The Wanton Wife of Bath” (1665?), a shrewish wife dies but refuses to go to hell, arguing instead with St. Thomas at the gates of St. Peter:

54. Gerard, *Herball*, 1488.

55. Edward Gosynhyll, *The prayse of all woman, called Mulieru[m]pean* (London: Myddylton, 1542?). Early English Books Online, STC (2nd ed.), 12102.

I never heard, quoth Tomas then, So vile a scold as this:
 Thou whoreson run-away, quoth she Thou diddest most amisse.
 I think, quoth Thomas, womens tongues, Of Aspen leaves be made.⁵⁶

In these examples, women are not simply punished for seditious speech acts—they are criticized for articulating a position on doctrinal matters, for finding their voices, and for the act of speaking itself. One concludes that all female speech is diabolical and that since all women have aspen tongues, all women are hybrid tree creatures. Bagoa's punishment through tree captivity is equivocal: as an aspen she cannot be silenced, but her language is reduced to unintelligible sound.

In *Endymion*, the aspen is important because the play uses a stage tree to bring the plant into the space of the theater. Bevington and G. K. Hunter note that Lyly received a stage tree "at some point in his career, which he became rather devoted to."⁵⁷ Particular kinds of single, dominant stage trees, built of both real tree branches and constructed materials, appeared in many Elizabethan plays. G. F. Reynolds notes that single trees might be supplemented with a painted curtain to create an entire forest, but he explains that only the single trees could be proved to exist: the Revels accounts mention payment for "armes of okes for the hollo tree" and "Lathes for the Hollo tree."⁵⁸ While single dominant trees could be diseased and or leafy, dry or flowering, straight or bent, the tree's species depended on the play. Lyly recycles his tree through three other plays: in *Gallathea* (1588), the pastoral community appeases Neptune by sacrificing virgins tied to a stage tree; in *Love's Metamorphosis* (1586), Erisichthon attacks the tree creature Fidelia with an ax until the tree is destroyed; in *The Woman in the Moon* (1593), Gunophilus transforms into a tree upon his exit. In each of these works the tree takes on the leafy costume of a different plant species—oak (tall, strong, and straight), cypress (a coniferous tree with aromatic branches), hawthorn (a bush-type tree with long spines or thorns), and in *Endymion*, aspen, a type of poplar tree—possibly with real branches and cloth leaves fashioned with botanical accuracy. As the young boys of St. Paul's shift costumes to dictate the passage of forty years, so too does the tree, which may appear as a young sapling before the shepherd falls asleep and a full, leafy tree when he awakes. Although it did not speak, the tree was an

56. "The Wanton Wife of Bath" (London, 1665?). Early English Books Online, C.20.f.8[487], Wing (2nd ed.), W719B variant.

57. G. K. Hunter, *John Lyly: The Humanist as Courtier* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 110. For Bevington's discussion of the tree, see Lyly, *Endymion*, 194 n. 292.

58. G. F. Reynolds, "Trees on the Stage of Shakespeare," *Modern Philology* 5, no. 2 (1907): 160.

actor in the sense that it delivered specific information about the play, which capitalized off of cultural understandings of the aspen's cosmic signature and relentless criticism of female speech.

The talking tree was not an unusual feature in other court entertainment. During the queen's visit to the Earl of Leicester's home at Kenilworth Castle in 1575, George Gascoigne—dressed as a Sylvanus, a hermit—had planned to greet the queen in the forest as she and her train prepared to depart, explaining that “sundry of these plants” surrounding her were once people, victims of one of Diana's nymphs, Zabetta (shorthand for “Elizabeth”), who fled to Juno's company. Although bad weather prevented the forest trees from entertaining the queen, Leicester arranged for Gascoigne's copy of the script to be published. In the text, each species of tree emblemized a specific virtue or vice found at court: an older servant named Constancy became “this old oak”; his contrary, Inconstancy, became “yonder poplar, whose leaves move and shake with the least breath or blast”; Vain Glory became an ash tree; the “busy elf, *Contention*,” became “this bramble-brier”; Ambition became a branch of clinging ivy; and Due-desert became “yonder same laurel-tree.”⁵⁹ In an arbor of holly bushes, one began to “tremble at your presence,” signifying Deep-desire, who “spake out of the holly-bush” on behalf of the entire ecological chorus surrounding him, voicing nature's dismay that the queen must depart.⁶⁰ When her progress took her to Woodstock a few weeks later, the queen was addressed in verse by an oak tree, which may have held Edward Dyer, Sir Philip Sidney's close friend, complaining of his despair.⁶¹ As Todd Andrew Borlik explains, Elizabethans valued lyric and performative occasions of “tongues in trees,” or “prosopopoeia,” wherein human qualities (voice, reason, sympathy) are found in plants, stones, and animals.⁶² Incidentally, in 1573 Dyer's first ploy to gain Elizabeth's favor was to simply become sick. As George Talbot wrote, “Dyer lately was sick of a consumption, in great danger, and as your Lordship knoweth, he hath been in displeasure these two years. It was made the Queen believe that his sickness came because of the continuance of her displeasure toward him, so that unless she would forgive him, he was like

59. George Gascoigne, *Gascoigne's Princely Pleasures with the Masque, Kenilworth Castle* (London: Burns, 1821), 63–65.

60. *Ibid.*, 67.

61. Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 101–4. The printed account of the Woodstock entertainment is dated 1585, but the Royal Progress it describes happened late in the summer of 1575.

62. Todd Andrew Borlik, “Mute Timber? Fiscal Forestry and Environmental Stichomythia in the *Old Arcadia*,” in *Early Modern Ecocriticism: From the Florentine Codex to Shakespeare*, ed. Thomas Hallock, Ivo Kamps, and Karen Raber (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 43.

not to recover; and hereupon her Majesty hath forgiven him."⁶³ Tree captivity allows these men to gain the queen's sympathy.

However, Lyly uses the tree far differently from more typical examples of Renaissance prosopopoeia when he chooses the aspen, a perverse (possibly also erotic) sign of an overabundance of female tongue(s), yet reappropriates it in the service of desire for deformity. As I have argued, men such as Sir Tophas, with his queer yearning for the crone-sorceress, would have found the tree's cosmic signature—hundreds of crone tongues scolding him—instantly attractive. Sir Tophas might express this desire for the tree across a wide spectrum of actions, from embracing it, standing near it inexplicably, kissing it, carving his name in it, and climbing it to falling asleep underneath it. The stage tree's wooden trunk may have been recognizable to an early modern audience as a chest, which when turned horizontally may have functioned as a space from which an audience would have expected a hidden actor to emerge. In *Cymbeline*, Iachimo exits from a trunk to observe Imogen in her bedchamber and then returns to the trunk when the clock strikes. A chest or trunk was also a space to conceal illicit lovemaking. When the shepherd finds the infant Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, he identifies her as the product of "some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work" (3.3.72–73). At the scene's conclusion, the crooked tree bears fruit when Bagoa regains human shape by emerging from the tree trunk, which had been temporarily pregnant with a young actor.

How did the actor playing Bagoa emerge, and what happened to the tree when he left it? Did it fall aside? There is no way for the boy playing this part to spring from a stage tree without the uncanny appearance of the tree giving birth, which happens in the case of another beautiful boy, Adonis, and his incestuous tree mother, Myrrha. In Lyly's later play *Love's Metamorphosis*, Fidelity (speaking as the hawthorn tree) compares her case to that of Myrrha:

Phoebus, that pursued *Daphne* till shee was turned to a Bay tree,
Ceased then to trouble her; I, the gods are pittifull: and *Cinyras*,
That with furie followed his daughter *Mirrha*, till shee was changed
To a Mirre tree, left then to prosecute her.⁶⁴

Myrrha is pregnant when she becomes a tree, and as a tree she gives birth to Adonis, which Arthur Golding describes in his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as

63. Quoted in Hunter, *John Lyly*, 151.

64. John Lyly, *Love's Metamorphosis*, 1.1.99–106.

The tree did cranny, and the bark, dividing made a way,
And yielded out the child alive, which cried and wailed straightway.⁶⁵

The beautiful young boy actor who springs from the tree visualizes the type of tree-creature birth found in Ovid's tale of Adonis's birth, since a hollow stage tree gives birth to the actors inside. It is important, then, to know also what Bagoa looks like when she emerges. Although there is no evidence, Hunter states that "the tree is changed back into the crone," which implies that Bagoa recovers human form but not youth.⁶⁶ Here Tophas's plague curse would be absurd, since he finds the crone erotic. However, if she is fair and young, Sir Tophas will despise her given his antipathy to the Petrarchan ideal. As Sara Deats argues, "Sir Tophas craves deformity in the service of love."⁶⁷ Sir Tophas could be a consistent character, and the play's last joke would hold, if one of Elizabeth's minions, as the boys of St. Paul's were frequently called by antitheatrical polemicists, burst from the tree. For Sir Tophas and the Greenwich audience, a beautiful boy dissolves the mystery of vegetal eroticism and nonstraight women.

IV. CONCLUSION

Both lyric and stage *contreblason* praise deformity and, by doing so, invent queer desire for deformity. While the print form attempts to identify, mock, and shame women whose bodies differ from Petrarch's Laura and promote the myth of compulsory able-bodiedness over lived experience, its success cannot be replicated onstage. Moreover, the stage *contreblason*'s weakness as a tool of oppression is its capacity to be misunderstood by the idiot savant, an uncultured person, or the average English playgoer, especially if the cast shapes audience (mis)perception by playing it straight (as Sir Tophas and Endymion do), casting against type (as Lyly does with the boys of St. Paul's), or naturalizing crooked desire and inviting the possibility of unpredictable sex acts (as the plants do). While Lyly invites us to compare humans and plants as a way to justify crooked yearning, his humans are also treated as plants whose crooked yearnings cannot be straightened. Just as human bodies and desires are culturally constructed as straight, queer, or crooked, so too are the bodies and desires of lunny and aspen, whose mysterious erotic potential floods the Greenwich stage in *Endymion*.

65. Arthur Golding, *Ovid's "Metamorphoses,"* ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 10.587–88.

66. Hunter, *John Lyly*, 110.

67. Sara Deats, "The Disarming of the Knight: Comic Parody in Lyly's *Endymion*," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 40, no. 4 (1975): 73.