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Liminal Agency: Texts, Textiles, and Gendered Performance in the Courtship Narrative
of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

In early modern England, women's roles were dictated by their positions within a patriarchal society. Their public identities were defined by relationships with men: young women, for example, would be identified first as their fathers' daughters then, after marriage, as their husbands' wives. In between such major normative social identities, however, women entered a transitional period. In such a period, women positioned themselves in the liminal space between two stable social identities. Women would undergo a process of transition in the liminal space in order to be able to assume new roles in society. From the point of view of the Renaissance patriarchy, the ideal power transfer would position a woman's father as her lord and master up until the moment that she married her husband. The woman would thus be constantly under the authority of a powerful male figure. Yet in many of his plays, Shakespeare dramatizes a process of transition in which a woman must move outside the space of fatherly authority before she can move into her new normative role as a wife.¹ In this transitional space, no man has direct control over her actions, and normative values have less control over her social

¹ In addition to using this structure as one of the plot formulae in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare dramatizes the transitional period in many of his plays, including but not limited to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

Each of these plays involves a young woman who defies her father for the sake of her suitor, moving beyond the bounds of paternal authority before she moves into the realm of marriage and proper wifely duty. The plots of these plays, as well as their genres, mean that the scenes and character arcs develop differently. Yet in each of these plays, a woman disregards her responsibility to be obedient to her father in order to enter into a courtship narrative with a man who is not yet her husband. Specifically, in the plays mentioned above, a woman moves into the liminal space when she asserts herself as a sexual agent despite her father's disapproval of the match. Thus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia defies her father, Egeus, because she would rather marry Lysander than Demetrius. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica robs from her father in order to elope with Lorenzo. In *Othello*, Desdemona runs off with Othello in spite of her father's opinion. Finally, in *Romeo and Juliet*, in the balcony scene, Juliet tells Romeo that she loves him, in direct defiance of her father's feud with the Montagues.

behavior. She is in the fluid space in between stable roles. In this liminal space in the courtship narrative, a woman might find an opportunity to assert her own agency.

Because their primary plots center on the development of the courtship narrative, romantic comedies such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* are able to explore this liminal period in the midst of a woman's social life. Romantic comedies follow their heroines' gradual departures from their fathers' houses, ending just as these women accept their suitors and move toward wifely social identities. In the historical reality of early modern England, women would have varied considerably in the extent to which they embraced and exercised agency in the trajectory of the courtship process. Yet in the genre of the romantic comedy, playwrights such as Shakespeare can explore the possibilities for female agency in a liminal space. A liminal space is necessarily temporary, and by the end of the courtship narrative, the female character is promised to be reincorporated into normative social structures as a wife. Yet because of the transitional nature of the woman's role in the courtship plot, the heroine of such a play can find power to voice her desires and act as an agent when she falls in love and makes plans to marry her suitor. She can develop a sense of feminine agency as she interacts within the liminal space.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona is, in this way, a fairly typical example of the romantic comedy genre. It is one of Shakespeare's first romantic comedies and, indeed, one of his earliest extant plays.² The basic plot follows the formulaic unions and separations which define the genre. Two couples fall in love but, as the play progresses,

² While the exact writing- and production-order of the plays is uncertain, it is generally accepted that the play is amongst the earliest of Shakespeare's extant works. In her introduction to the play in the Norton edition of the Collected Works, Jean E. Howard writes, "*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is, after all, one of his earliest plays, perhaps *the* earliest. It bears marks of its early date of composition" (103).

they are shuffled around by chance, parental disapproval, and the fickleness of sexual attraction. So, at the beginning of the play, Proteus loves Julia. Shortly after Julia agrees to enter into a relationship with him, however, Proteus departs for Milan and loses interest in her. He instead starts courting Silvia, who is in love with his friend Valentine. As the plot develops, Proteus and Valentine both contend for Silvia's love while Julia tries to win Proteus back. The play ends when the couples are finally rearranged in their proper pairings of Proteus and Julia, and Valentine and Silvia. Because of the confusions and entanglements which complicate the plot, Julia spends most of the play in a liminal space in which she no longer identifies herself primarily as her father's maiden daughter but she has not yet managed to win back Proteus and become his wife. In this space, although she faces many obstacles and setbacks, Julia is able to assert herself as an agent and to gradually see this agency as a feminine characteristic.

Critics of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, however, rarely look for signs of development in any of the female characters of the play. Instead, taking their cues from the play's title, scholars often write about how Proteus and Valentine relate to each other, and how their relationship is complicated by their growing romantic entanglements with the two women. These critical studies frequently address the female characters in the context of the courtship narratives, but in doing so, they often see the women as instruments that merely serve to define and complicate the bond between the two men. To that end, Jeffrey Masten comments on how "texts and women circulate among gentlemen" (37) in the play, while Janet Adelman claims that the women in the play serve as distractions over which the male bond must triumph: she writes, "male identity is

achieved by merger with a mirror self [the bond with another man] and then threatened by women” (76). The relationship between Valentine and Proteus seems to dominate both the play itself and critical responses to it, and critics rarely focus character studies upon either Silvia or Julia.³

Although critics are more likely to write about Julia than about Silvia, they still react skeptically to suggestions of Julia’s agency, often regarding her as little more than a poor prototype for Shakespeare’s later cross-dressing heroines. Thus, even though Lori Schroeder Haslem centers her argument on Julia, she argues that although Julia may have agency in the opening scenes, she is fully contained as a passive sexual object by the play’s end. Describing the play’s conclusion, Haslem writes: “The young lady must learn that playing at unconventionality is acceptable only insofar as she agrees that there will be an eventual return to patriarchal norms. Within such design, female autonomy becomes but a temporarily granted frivolity” (129). Of course, liminal agency is defined by its temporal nature. Moreover, the end of the play does seem constructed to contain female agency: in V.iv, Proteus tries to rape Silvia; Valentine seemingly tries to gift Silvia to Proteus; Julia accepts a would-be rapist back as her lover; and, upon reuniting with Proteus, Julia falls silent. Given the series of containing mechanisms that the end of the play presents, Haslem may be right to look to Shakespeare’s later comedies for stronger examples of cross-dressing female agents. Yet she is too quick to dismiss Julia’s actions as a shallow “frivolity.” Instead, Julia’s assertion of agency is a meaningful voicing of

³ It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to deal in any depth with Silvia’s character development over the course of the play, although Silvia does seem to have the same basic character arc which Julia experiences in the liminal space. Silvia similarly presents herself as a romantic agent in the course of her courtship narrative, openly defying her father when she runs away with Valentine: like Julia, she seems to have found agency in the liminal space of the courtship narrative.

female power and sexual desire in the midst of a patriarchal power system. It takes her time to fully develop a sense of agency that works in combination with her femininity, but by the middle of Act V, Julia is able to assert herself as a sexual subject and a female agent. Haslem and related critics are too eager to dismiss Julia's potential to develop as a character and to grow into a role as an assertive romantic agent.

In their attempts to critique Julia and move on to the later, more popular romantic comedies, these critics overlook crucial developments in Julia's characterization.

Haslem's argument seems particularly problematic, because, when she attributes an overabundance of agency to Julia in her opening scene, she minimizes Julia's ability to develop meaningfully over the course of the play. I hope to present a more nuanced argument regarding Julia's trajectory, proposing that although, in the opening scenes, Julia demonstrates intense anxiety about female agency, she later negotiates her identity so that she can, by the end of the play, assert herself as a strong, active woman. She first finds space to assert agency when she accepts Proteus's suit and moves into the liminal space of the courtship narrative. In this liminality, Julia is less confined by normative social expectations, and she is able to voice her desires and to act autonomously. Even though her trajectory through the liminal space is predicated on the idea that she will eventually move into the role of the wife and will again be defined by normative values and social expectations, Julia is able to take advantage of the opportunities for agency within the courtship narrative. In this liminal space, she begins to express herself as an agent, and she gradually starts to associate her agency with her femininity. Any

interpretation of the end of the play must be colored by the power of Julia's actions in the transitional space.

Working in parallel with the reading of Elizabeth Rivlin, who finds that Julia's experiences with class politics allow her to enter into a space in which she may interact with performative identities and non-normative forms of agency,⁴ I will argue that Julia's interactions with texts and textiles facilitate her gendered expressions of agency within the liminal space between maid and wife. Once Julia's complex interpretive working-through of a letter gives her a chance to accept Proteus's suit, she is able to move into a transitional space and find agency. Julia is able to exercise agency by voicing her desires, by writing and interpreting texts, and by cross-dressing to give an extended performance as a male youth. As Julia interacts with texts and with costuming over the course of the play, she develops a more inclusive sense of agency, which she is gradually able to associate with femininity. A liminal space is not a stable foundation for social identity, and so Julia's actions inevitably move her further through the courtship narrative and toward a normative social role as a wife. Yet Julia's development toward positive self-assertion as a female agent remains the major thrust of her character arc in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. At the end of the play, Julia is able to assert herself as an independent female subject, because her self-perception and self-performance change when she interacts with texts and clothing in the liminal position between maid and wife.

⁴ Rivlin argues that the servants in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* often imitate and parody their elite masters. When Julia, then, takes on a performative role as a servant, her persona becomes "an evolving product of multiple performances and spectators" (119). Rivlin explains, "I have pointed out places in the play where servant/master mimesis opens the elite subject [such as Julia is] to heterogenous social positions and undercuts its naturalized claims to authority and dominance" (121).

Julia as maiden: passive love-object and reluctant reader

When the play opens, Julia is firmly confined within a maidenly social role. Proteus defines her as his beloved, conceptualizing their courtship in a manner which denies her any space to exercise romantic agency. When Julia appears on stage, she seems to confirm Proteus's assumption of her passivity, and she refuses to voice any awareness of sexual desire. She evidently feels attracted to Proteus, but she will neither admit nor act upon her love. Instead, she conforms herself to a socially normative role of maidenhood which is necessarily disconnected from her inner emotional reality. Although Julia wants to read the love letter that Proteus has sent her, and she wants to move into the courtship narrative, Julia remains invested in her performance of maidenhood. She tears up Proteus's devotions in an attempt to prove her purity. In the opening scenes, Julia seems to accept a view of socially mandated feminine passivity and sexual inviolability.

Although Julia does not appear on stage until the second scene of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the opening of the play focuses on her: when Valentine and Proteus first appear, Proteus walks onto the stage discussing how his adoration of Julia has affected him. Proteus employs the traditional tropes of Ovidian and Petrarchan love discourses to suggest that his beloved has wrought a negative, though not altogether unpleasant, change upon him. Yet, despite his protestations of Julia's agency, Proteus makes no mention of any act that she has performed: any change in Proteus is a function of his adoration of her, not of her action upon him. Proteus composes an apostrophe to the absent Julia: "Thou, Julia, thou hast metamorphosed me, / Made me neglect my studies, lose my time, / War with good counsel, set the world at naught; / Made wit with

musings weak, heart sick with thought” (I.i.66-69).⁵ Proteus emphasizes the transformative power of love, imagining that Julia has changed him into something new. He projects romantic agency onto her in order to excuse his own behavior, blaming her for the negative effects of love. Yet he does not call attention to anything that Julia has actually done: Proteus simply highlights the idea of female agency to explain away his own failings. Moreover, Proteus’s language does not confirm that Julia is mutually interested in him. He talks about his adoration of her but has no interest in suggesting that she possesses any sexual agency to adore him in return. Instead, Proteus presents Julia as a maidenly love object.

When Julia first enters the play in the next scene, she presents a persona which seems to confirm Proteus’s opinion of her as a passive maiden. Instead of asserting herself as a decisive romantic agent, Julia walks onto the stage asking her lady’s maid, Lucetta, for advice about her love life. The situation forces Julia to the limits of her maidenly identity, because she is considering suitors and imagining her future marriage. Yet although she is considering a decision which will change her position in society and affect the rest of her life, Julia does not want to claim agency. Such decisiveness would be foreign to her current maidenly identity, especially since any preference she might suggest would imply that she feels sexual attraction.

Although she will be the person most affected by the decision, Julia will not assert her own opinion in choosing a good husband. Instead, she asks Lucetta: “Of all the fair resort of gentlemen / That everyday with parle encounter me, / In thy opinion which is

⁵ All citations of Shakespeare will be from the Norton edition of the Collected Works unless otherwise noted.

worthiest love?” (I.ii.4-6). She asks Lucetta to make a decision about which of the men would be the most deserving: she seems to be trying to find an objective answer, and her question ignores the importance of her own interactions with, or opinions of, the respective men. Even after Lucetta announces that she prefers Proteus, Julia asks Lucetta to rationalize her decision and demonstrates that she needs further direction in how to proceed: “Your reason? [...] / And wouldst thou have me cast my love on him?” (I.ii.22, 25). Lori Schroeder Haslem centers her analysis of the play on this scene, arguing that the two women engage in some positive act of communication which gives Julia the power to transcend her social role and become active in the courtship narrative. Pointing out that the conversation between women about potential suitors is one of the tropes of romantic comedy as a genre, Haslem argues that this act allows women to assert their sexual desires and find agency: “the scene involving catechetical ritual [the question-and-answer formula by which women in many romantic comedies evaluate the relative worth of the female protagonist’s respective suitors] has empowered Julia not only to choose her lover but also to respond to him in the way that she deems suitable” (128). Yet Julia’s later self-assertion seems completely absent from this exchange.

Julia is as reticent and passive at the end of the conversation as she is when it begins. She refuses to admit to a romantic desire for Proteus or any other of her suitors, because she will not voice sexual agency. Her maidenly social identity prevents it. Although the two women are trying to categorize and verbally exchange the suitors between themselves, Julia refuses to admit that she has an emotional attachment to any of the men. Instead, she firmly associates her gendered social role with passivity.

Moreover, though the play sets up the scene of female bonding as a potential space in which women can voice sexual agency outside the bounds of patriarchal mandate, Julia's awareness of her need to perform a role as a sexually pure maiden immediately thwarts this opportunity. When Lucetta needles her to talk about Proteus, commenting, "Yet he of all the rest I think best loves ye" (I.ii.28), Julia dissembles and will not admit that she feels any attraction toward Proteus. Because she is inhibited by her maidenly role in the patriarchal society and by the sexual purity and passivity that such a role requires, Julia refuses to admit her desires.

As she avoids responding to Lucetta's insinuations, Julia laments that she wants to be certain about Proteus's feelings toward her. When Lucetta hints that Proteus loves her, Julia says, "I would I knew his mind" (I.ii.33). Julia evades answering Lucetta's questions by instead wishing to know Proteus's thoughts, implying that she is avoiding the question because she does not understand Proteus's motivations. In doing so, Julia suggests that if she were to know his mind, she might be able to voice her own desire. Just as she previously asked Lucetta for her opinion on the potential match, she now needs to know what Proteus thinks about their possible relationship. Julia is committed to finding guidance from others instead of asserting her own sexual preference.

Julia's desire to know Proteus's thoughts, however, is more essential to her conception of romantic agency than is her desire to know Lucetta's. She will not voice any preference for Proteus until she knows if the attachment is mutual. So, when Lucetta makes insinuations about Julia's relationship with Proteus, Julia rejects her assurances because Proteus has never given her any proof of his affections. In fact, he is the only one

of her suitors who has not proposed to her: “Why, he of all the rest hath never moved me” (I.ii.27), she says. Because Proteus has not declared himself to her, Julia worries that he does not love her. She says “They do not love that do not show their love” (I.ii.31), and she is not certain that his suit is in earnest. Before she voices her own sexual or romantic desire, Julia needs to be sure that Proteus loves her in return. Once she knows that Proteus is genuinely trying to woo her, she can move into the courtship narrative and enter into the liminal space in which she can voice sexual agency. Yet until then, she has no way to move outside her maidenly identity. Julia remains silent and will not tell Lucetta that she loves Proteus. Christina Luckyj has argued that many feminine silences on the early modern stage are more active and subversive than critics traditionally acknowledge,⁶ but Julia’s silence here is passive and negative. She remains silent because she cannot find a way to express agency, and her social role prescribes female passivity. Julia needs to learn how Proteus feels about her before she can enter into the courtship narrative.

In answer to Julia’s need for proof about Proteus’s feelings, Lucetta presents a letter that Proteus has sent to Julia.⁷ Lucetta seems to think that the letter will confirm that Proteus loves Julia. With this confirmation, Julia ought to be able to conceptualize herself within the courtship narrative, leaving behind the strictures of her maidenly

⁶ Luckyj writes in *‘A moving Rhetoricke’: Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* that “once feminine silence is constructed as subjective rather than subjected space, it can no longer be read in only one way. Current monolithic notions of patriarchal speech enforcing feminine silence may in fact replicate the most extreme misogyny of the period, without taking into account the shifting multivalency of silence and its potential advantages for women” (56).

⁷ In I.i, Speed announces that he delivered Proteus’s letter to Julia herself, but it is unlikely that Julia has already accepted one of Proteus’s letters, given her visceral reaction to the letter Lucetta proffers. It thus seems logical to assume that Lucetta is offering the letter that Proteus and Speed discuss in I.i. What remains unclear is whether there is a textual inconsistency between I.i and I.ii or if Speed is simply mistaken, thinking that he delivered the letter to Julia when he actually gave it to Lucetta.

identity. She will enter into a transitional space in which she can assert sexual agency without being completely muffled by normative social prescriptions. Yet Julia refuses to read the letter, because it still poses too great a challenge to her social performance of maidenly identity. In order to be in a normative maidenly social role, Julia should not imply sexual interest in a man by accepting a love letter that he has sent.

Moreover, expressing an unauthorized romantic interest in Proteus would directly undermine her father's role in determining her marriage. Indeed, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that Julia's potential relationship with Proteus does not have her father's sanction. In the next scene, Proteus wishes "O that our fathers would applaud our loves / To seal our happiness with their consents" (I.iii.48-49). Proteus's language is a bit unclear, but their fathers either disapprove of or are unaware of the match: in any case Julia does not have her father's approval. If Julia were to express unmaidenly desire for Proteus, she would subvert her father's authority over her actions and her romantic life. Julia's performance of maidenly identity requires that she not read the letter, because doing so would undermine both her sexual purity and her daughterly submission.

Julia is aware of the subversive power of this letter, explicitly identifying it as a threat to her maidenly social identity. She accuses Lucetta, "Dare you presume to harbour wanton lines? / To whisper, and conspire against my youth?" (I.ii.42-43). Although Julia secretly wants the letter, she accuses Lucetta of trying to corrupt her. Calling the lines "wanton," Julia suggests that the words themselves are sexually lascivious and that the text could violate her. The words have a sexual power over her body, because if she were to accept the letter, Julia would implicitly admit to unmaidenly desires and would violate

her social identity. As a result, Julia rejects the letter, commanding Lucetta to return it to its sender (I.ii.46-47). Michael Shapiro writes of this scene: “The comedy is achieved *at* Julia’s expense by mocking her childish refusal to admit her affection for Proteus” (71). Yet Julia’s refusal is not the laughable reaction of a contrary child: instead, her dismissal of the letter is tied to her deep awareness of the necessity of performing a normative ideal of maidenhood.

She performs a social persona which contrasts with her inner desires. Later in the scene, Julia looks back on the moment when she refused the letter: “How angerly I taught my brow to frown / When inward joy enforced my heart to smile” (I.ii.62-63). Her heart smiles while her face frowns because she presents a rehearsed and “taught” outside. Julia is aware of her actions as part of a performance that is antithetical to her inner desires. Thus, when she rejects the letter, Julia explains that “maids in modesty say ‘No’ to that / Which they would have the profferer construe ‘Ay’” (I.ii.55-56). In order to maintain her social identity, she must say the opposite of what she feels. Although she has the performative agency to maintain her social role, Julia’s performance denies her the positive sexual agency necessary to express her own desires. Julia cannot say “Ay” when Lucetta offers her the letter: her performance of maidenhood requires sexual purity and passivity at the expense of all else.

Julia wants the letter, but she cannot take it because she must present herself in public as a sexually pure maiden. Julia sees Lucetta as an audience to her actions. Julia is very conscious of Lucetta’s role as messenger and her knowledge of both the existence of the letter and of the identity of its sender. Although Lucetta is not privy to the actual

contents of the letter, Julia knows that Lucetta has inferred something about what it says. Because Lucetta offered the letter when Julia lamented that she wanted to know Proteus's feelings, Julia knows that Lucetta has discerned the overarching meaning of the letter: Lucetta had guessed enough of the situation to be able to present the letter as a remedy for Julia's worries. Because Lucetta is joking around onstage and watching Julia, Julia feels the need to maintain her public performance at the expense of her inner desire to read the letter. So, Julia must flatly deny any interest in a relationship with Proteus, and she must do so in a manner which prevents Lucetta from making further innuendos and comments about it. Julia tears up the love letter.

As she tears the letter, Julia turns Proteus's linear, meaningful text into a jumble of words on scraps of paper. She announces, "This babble shall not henceforth trouble me. / Here is a coil with protestation" (I.ii.105-106).⁸ Although the "babble" may be Lucetta's teasing, Julia's words also gesture toward the letter that she is destroying. She turns Proteus's letter into a meaningless "babble." Julia now presents, in place of the letter, a "coil," and her language here suggests a "noisy disturbance" or "confused noise of inanimate things."⁹ Julia has destroyed Proteus's letter and denied any chance that she might have to read the text. In her attempt to maintain a performance of socially acceptable maidenhood, Julia ruined her chance to read Proteus's letter and receive

⁸ Here I quote from the Folger edition of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The Folger, Pelican, Riverside, and Arden editions agree on the line reading, while the Norton edition says "This bauble shall not henceforth trouble me. / Here is a coil with protestation" (I.ii.99-100) and likely takes its reading from the Oxford edition. I use the reading "babble" because it seems to be the more popular reading of the line and is supported by multiple authoritative editions of the text. Moreover, the Norton Facsimile edition of the of the First Folio supports this reading. It says: "This babble shall not henceforth trouble me; / Here is a coile with protestation" (lines 258-259).

⁹ OED. coil, n.2

confirmation of his affections. Her performance of maidenly passivity seems self-perpetuating, because she is no longer able to read his love letter and, by doing so, move into the courtship narrative.

Julia enters a liminal space: reader and interpreter

As soon as Lucetta leaves her alone with the ripped papers, Julia begins to pick up the scraps and read the now-contextless fragments of words and phrases which are all that remains of Proteus's letter. By destroying the linear meaning of Proteus's text, Julia has opened up a space for interpretation. As the scene continues, Julia will begin to exercise positive agency by interpreting parts of the letter and thus giving new meaning to the text that she has destroyed. There is no coherent text for her to passively accept: instead, she must make her own meaning out of these scraps of paper. As she reads, she attempts to reconstruct a meaning out of these words, projecting her own interpretation, desires, and subjectivity onto the letter, and she has to voice her desires if she is to find some meaning in the text. Thus, in the act of interpretation, Julia begins to assert romantic agency and to move into the liminal space of the courtship narrative. When she reads the letter, she is alone on stage, and therefore her actions are not strongly contained by her maidenly social performance. Yet in this private space, Julia begins to find a way to express sexual agency. Julia is able to find agency as she positions herself in the courtship narrative. She takes a situation which seems to confirm her own passivity and helplessness, and in it, she finds a space for agency.

Shakespeare first alludes to the possibility for female agency earlier in the play, when Proteus and Valentine discuss Proteus's feelings for Julia in I.i. In this scene,

Proteus has identified himself as a Petrarchan lover pursuing his passive beloved. Valentine responds to Proteus's comments by alluding to a classical myth which illustrates the assumptions about romantic agency under which he and Proteus are both working. As the two men pun about love stories, Valentine references "some shallow story of deep love - / How young Leander crossed the Hellespont" (I.i.21-22). In the story that Valentine mentions, Leander falls in love with a woman, Hero, who lives in a tower across the strait of the Hellespont. At night, Leander swims across the Hellespont to be with his love, guided by a light from her window. One fateful night, however, Leander drowns when he cannot see her light to guide him. Valentine here refers to a story which associates romantic agency with masculinity. Although Hero may provide a guiding light in the figure of the beloved, she passively remains in a tower: Leander is the active lover. Soon after his initial reference to the myth, Valentine explicitly compares Proteus to Leander: "'Tis true, for you are over-boots in love, / And yet you never swam the Hellespont" (I.i.25-26). Valentine draws a parallel between Proteus and Leander, alluding to the part of the myth which highlights both Leander's agency and Hero's passivity. By comparing Proteus with Leander, Valentine seemingly holds his friend up to an ideal of masculine romantic agency.

Valentine does not, however, suggest that Proteus has realized this masculine agency. As Valentine teases his melodramatic friend, suggesting either that Proteus loves superficial, "shallow," markers of adoration or that Proteus is shallow in his love, Valentine reminds Proteus that "you never swam the Hellespont" (I.i.26). Proteus is no Leander. Valentine disassociates Proteus from masculine agency, undermining the

connection of masculinity to action and thus potentially problematizing the other half of such a gendered binary: femininity's connection to submission. In his attempt to undermine Proteus's self-aggrandizement, Valentine has inadvertently opened up a discursive space in which Julia might find agency. Since Proteus is no Leander, Julia is not relegated to being Hero, trapped in a tower and waiting for her lover to arrive.

Valentine avoids positioning Julia as a subversive heroine, swimming to Leander herself. Yet his allusion suggests that the dichotomy of male agency and female passivity is not as fixed as the audience might otherwise assume. Here, the play presents an opening for a less polarized view of gendered behavior. As Julia attempts to reassemble and to read the letter, she is able to enter into this discursive space which Valentine's allusion first gestures to: she is able to find agency within the pattern of the courtship narrative.

Julia does not begin asserting her love and sexual desire for Proteus as soon as she picks up the pieces of letter, however. Instead, she undergoes an interpretive process as she works through her own issues with her performance and slowly begins to find a way to move into a less constrained, liminal role. When she first starts collecting the scraps of paper, Julia is upset and ashamed that she has torn up the letter. Rather than using the opportunity to distance herself from her maidenly performance and condemn the way that society defines normative gender roles, however, Julia takes full responsibility for her actions and accuses herself of being overtly cruel. Julia says "O hateful hands, to tear such loving words; / Injurious wasps, to feed on such sweet honey / And kill the bees that yield it with your stings" (I.ii.106-108). Her hands are "wasps" which have needlessly destroyed the "sweet honey" of the letter which nurtured her and which posed no genuine

danger. Now that she has moved outside the public eye, Julia forgets that she had explicitly figured the letter as a sexual threat and instead sees it as a defenseless creature that she killed without provocation. Julia reviles her body for role it played in her betrayal of her inner desires.

Julia then begins reading the pieces of paper, intending to use the opportunity to punish herself for destroying letter in the first place. Although tearing up the letter did not hurt Proteus or their potential relationship in any meaningful way, Julia wants to exact vengeance upon herself. Fueled by her frustration and disappointment, she decides to alter the text itself. As she starts gathering up the pieces of paper strewn around the stage, Julia plans to censor her name out of the fragmented pieces of paper, tearing herself out of the love letter. She seems to have some idea that she will tear herself out of the role of Proteus's beloved, because she is not worthy of that position. She says, "Look, here is writ 'Kind Julia' - unkind Julia, / As in revenge of thy ingratitude / I throw thy name against the bruising stones, / Trampling contemptuously on thy disdain" (I.ii.110-113). In her interaction with the text here, Julia rewrites Proteus's meaning: where he called her "kind," she will call herself "unkind." Moreover, as she gathers up the pieces of letter, Julia decides to isolate out her name instead of collecting it with the rest of the papers. She will cast away her name "as in revenge" of her "ingratitude" because she believes that her act of tearing up the letter has made her unworthy of being in relationship with Proteus. Because she did not act graciously and thankfully toward the man she loves, she will punish herself. So Julia throws the physical inscription of her name onto the "bruising stones." Here, Julia imagines the written word as an organic substance which

can be bruised. The word is more than just a scratching on a page, and by abusing the physical inscription of her name, Julia can discipline herself in a meaningful way.

As she continues to collect the scraps, Julia addresses the wind: “Be calm, good wind, blow not a word away / Till I have found each letter in the letter / Except mine own name. That, some whirlwind bear / Unto a ragged, fearful, hanging rock / And throw it thence into the raging sea” (I.ii.119-123). Julia thus punishes herself by imagining a connection between the written text of her name and her own self: when she censors or damages her name, she inflicts some retribution against herself. Julia’s anger and disappointment with her own actions gives her a way to act as an interpreter and give new meaning to this text. Yet as she continues to pick up and read the scraps of Proteus’s letter, Julia is able to harness this interpretive energy and turn it to more positive expressions.

Although she continues to revile her own name, she is able to express her desire for Proteus when she comes upon his name in the letter. In order to make loving remarks about Proteus, she uses the same rhetorical technique that she has been using to punish herself: she displaces her emotions onto the letter by becoming invested in the metonymic dimensions of words to act as stand-ins for the people they signify. When she finds a part of the letter which reads “Love-wounded Proteus,” Julia offers: “Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed / Shall lodge thee till thy wound be throughly healed; / And thus I search it with a sovereign kiss” (I.ii.114-117). Just as love has wounded the man, her violence against the text has wounded the name, and she parallels Proteus’s emotional pain with the physical tearing of the letter. Now, just as she punishes

herself by reviling the written inscription of her name, Julia imagines that she can make amends by soothing the material text of Proteus's name. Julia kisses his name and holds it to her breast. She is able to conceptualize physical intimacy with Proteus through her interaction with the letter. For the first time in the play, Julia is able to voice sexual agency, because of her interpretive intervention in Proteus's text.

This letter, which began as a messenger for Proteus's erotic desire for her, now becomes the literal recipient of Julia's displaced erotic desire for him. Yet, in being the recipient of Julia's kisses and caresses, the letter is also an erotic object itself. She is able to use her interaction with the letter as a way to express romantic desire without directly connecting this desire to Proteus's actual body. Because Julia has not yet fully accepted a liminal position of sexual agency, she is better able to interact erotically with a text than with another person.

Julia is able express sexual desire through her interpretation of the letter. She finds a space to imagine a sexual relationship with Proteus as a natural progression into the courtship narrative, instead of it being an entirely threatening subversion of her social identity. As Julia continues to see the inscribed names as metonyms for herself and Proteus respectively, she eventually finds a way to transition toward a more positive way of thinking about her relationship with Proteus. Thus, she reads out parts of his letter: "“Poor forlorn Proteus’, ‘passionate Proteus’, / ‘To the sweet Julia’ - that I’ll tear away. / And yet I will not, sith so prettily / He couples it to his complaining names” (I.ii. 125-128). She wants to tear away her name because she has been censoring herself out of the text. But then she decides that she likes the idea of her name being near his: she

thinks that he put their names together “prettily.” Interestingly, Julia says that Proteus “couples” their names. Here Julia gives a strong interpretive reading of Proteus’s fragmented text. Although he has put their names together in a love letter, she is the one who understands their names as being coupled. In this coupling, she imagines that they are paired together, and her word choice implies a sexual interaction between their names. In this implication of physical intimacy, Julia is returning to her association of the inscribed text with the people it references. As she interprets Proteus’s letter, Julia finds the confirmation of his affections which allows her to move into the liminal space of the courtship narrative and to assert agency.

Julia displaces her sexual agency here, because an explicit announcement of sexual desire would clash with the feminine reticence that she still conceptualizes as the center of her performative role, but she also is beginning to move outside of her maidenly persona. Through her interpretive power over the text, Julia is able to envision and articulate the idea of a romantic relationship. The letter allows her both to receive confirmation of Proteus’s interest in her and to begin voicing sexual agency by displacing the erotic potential of the match onto the letter itself. Her interpretation of Proteus’s letter allows Julia to begin identifying herself within the liminal space between maid and wife and thus to begin asserting agency.

As she finishes collecting the pieces of paper, Julia becomes very invested in her erotic interpretation of the text. Although she has started with Proteus’s own writing, which is itself a love letter, her understanding of the text is her own: the only parts of the letter that she reads out are names, and there is no longer any linear text from which she

might absorb meaning. Her interpretation and treatment of the text is based on her own reading, and it gives her a way to imagine erotic agency and move into a more liminal social position. So, immediately after seeing how the names are coupled, she folds their names together: “Thus will I fold them, one upon another. / Now kiss, embrace, contend, do what you will” (I.ii.129-130). Julia realizes the erotic potential of the love letter, imagining a romantic union within the text. She thus suggests that names should do what they “will,” giving the text a power of sexual self-determination. The use of the word “will” here, which is an Elizabethan term for sexual desire, signals the sexual dimensions of this imagined interaction within the text. By displacing her desire onto a text, Julia can begin admitting that she wants Proteus. The displacement gives her the distance necessary for her to slowly move into a position as a sexual subject. Julia is now voicing sexual desire, asserting agency in the romance plot, and moving into a liminal space in which her social interactions are less confined by normative values. Because, however, she is only beginning to express sexual agency, and because she has spent so long connecting her maidenly feminine identity with passivity, she makes no explicit reference to how sexual agency is gendered. Julia begins to assert herself as a sexual agent, although she does not tie this agency to her feminine identity.

As she moves away from one socially normative identity, but has not yet reached the other, she is in a gray area in which more possibilities are open to her. Liminal spaces are dangerous because they are, by nature, not controlled, defined or confined. Yet they are also places of possibility and opportunity, because the lack of constraint allows for a greater display of agency. In her liminal identity, Julia will develop ways to express

agency. As a maiden, she has defined her identity by a socially expected performance of passivity. But as she moves into a liminal space, she will find agency, and will eventually even be able to associate her agency with her feminine identity. In I.ii, she associates her gendered identity with the passivity of maidenhood and only acts as an agent when she does not have to conform to a socially normative idea of gender identity. Yet in a liminal space, Julia is moving outside of a stable, normative social role as a maiden, but she has not yet entered into a position as a wife. This space is temporal: liminality implies a forward motion, and Julia cannot have a stable identity in a transitional space. However, in this unregulated space, possibilities open up to Julia, and she becomes an agent.

Julia in a liminal space: writer and lover

In the next scenes of the play, Julia writes a love letter to Proteus and places herself in the position of a wooer trying to court her lover. When Proteus walks on stage in I.iii, he is holding a letter that Julia has written and has had delivered to him. Whereas only a scene earlier Julia refused to admit her love in the relatively safe and private space of the female homosocial bond, she now expresses her love to Proteus himself: although Proteus does not read the letter aloud, he says that she has given him “her oath for love” (I.iii.47). Julia confirms that his affections are requited and thus gives both of them a way to imagine themselves in a relationship.

Julia asserts her romantic agency and expresses her love by writing a letter: writing can be safer than direct speech, because it is much easier to limit the audience of a letter than that of a conversation. Yet in writing, Julia will leave a lasting physical record of her love. Additionally, she has created a physical object which must be transferred

between herself and Proteus. In I.ii, Julia refused to even accept Proteus's letter because Lucetta was witness to the interaction. Now Julia seems to have employed her own messenger to carry the letter to Proteus. In a later scene, Speed suggests that it makes sense that a woman would not want to write a love letter, "fearing else some messenger that might her mind discover" (II.i.150). Yet Julia has conquered her fear of the outside messenger. Either Lucetta or one of Proteus's servants likely carried this letter and thus had some understanding of what sort of text would pass between Julia and Proteus. This outside audience has not prevented Julia from expressing romantic agency, because in her liminal space Julia is not as invested in performing her role of sexually inviolable maidenhood.

Julia is now in a liminal space in which she can voice sexual agency for an audience, albeit a very contained audience. In I.ii, she was able to voice sexual agency, but only when alone on stage: in the gap between when she exited the stage and when Proteus walks on with her letter, Julia has become more assured in her liminal identity and her acceptance of sexual agency. Haslem attributes Julia's newfound sense of self-assertion to her conversation with Lucetta, saying that her experience of female bonding gave her a sense of empowerment which she is then able to project onto her romantic interactions (128). Yet it seems equally plausible to suggest that Julia's agency is a result of her experience interpreting Proteus's letter, since she does not demonstrate positive agency until she is halfway through reading the letter. Her interpretation of the letter allowed her to become less invested in her social performance as a maid, so Julia is now more comfortable with the possibility of sexual agency. Julia has found agency through

interacting with a text, and she now writes Proteus a letter in which she is direct about her emotional investment in their relationship.

Just as Shakespeare only presented Proteus's letter through Julia's interpretation of it, the content of Julia's letter is only presented through Proteus's reflections upon what she has said. Now Proteus, who had before placed himself firmly in the Petrarchan binary of male courtship of a distant female beloved, recognizes Julia as a romantic agent in her own right. Proteus reads the letter and extolls: "Sweet love, sweet lines, sweet life! / Here is her hand, the agent of her heart" (I.iii.45-46). Proteus calls her "hand," or handwriting, an agent. Referring to this "hand" as the "agent of her heart," Proteus continues the play's discourse about texts' potential to carry strong erotic messages. Proteus's language, however, is multivalent: Julia's "hand" is not just her writing but also the appendage that wrote it. Where Julia reviled her hand for the part it played in destroying Proteus's love letter, Proteus now praises it for its role in allowing Julia to assert herself. Proteus associates Julia's romantic agency with her physical body and thus implicitly, though inadvertently, with her femaleness.

When she read his letter, Julia displaced her sexual desire, so that she viewed the text as an erotic object in and of itself, instead of voicing an interest in Proteus's physical body. Proteus, however, ties his reading of the letter to his awareness of Julia's body, thus implicitly tying her assertion of sexual agency to her sexually female body. Julia does not appear in this scene, and Shakespeare does not give her a space to voice her opinion on the gendered nature of writing, but Proteus's understanding of Julia's writing-act is tied to her physical, female, body. As he enters the courtship narrative with her, Proteus

implicitly gestures toward the female sexual agency which Julia finds when she accepts his suit.

As he continues to exclaim over her letter, Proteus calls Julia's text her "honour's pawn" (I.iii.47). Here Proteus uses a phrase that Shakespeare later used in I.i of *Richard II*, when Bolingbroke and Mowbray make plans to fight a "knightly trial" (I.i.81) to determine which of them has been traitorous. Bolingbroke throws a glove to the ground as a promise to meet Mowbray in battle, then challenges Mowbray to pick it up: "If guilty dread have left thee so much strength / As to take up mine honour's pawn, then stoop" (I.i.73-74). Bolingbroke's honor's pawn is his pledge that he will meet Mowbray in a fight to prove his innocence: it is a physical marker of his commitment to defend his reputation against slander. For men, this pledge will be fulfilled when they display their martial valor in trial by combat: they must take part in a public, violent exhibition of masculine virtue. When Proteus calls Julia's love letter her honor's pawn, he seems to figure it as a physical sign of her commitment to be faithful in a relationship with him. Here, her honor or virtue is explicitly gendered feminine: it is her chastity or sexual fidelity that will prove her worth. Yet such an assurance of fidelity is not a marker of a passive maidenly chastity. As Julia shows throughout the rest of the play, maintaining fidelity is an active process, and retaining her purity requires action rather than stasis.

Strengthened by her interactions with interpreting and writing letters, Julia now fully takes on the role of wooer. When she meets Proteus just before his father sends him away, she initiates a conversation in which she leads him to formalize their relationship. First, she gives him a ring as a token of remembrance: "Keep this remembrance for thy

Julia's sake" (II.ii.5). In response to her gift, Proteus decides that "we'll make exchange" (II.ii.6). The couple exchange rings, and Julia suggests that they "seal the bargain with a holy kiss" (II.ii.7), giving the exchange a ritual or sacred significance reminiscent of a *de praesenti* marriage. Though Julia is positioning herself within the patriarchal structure of marriage, which will eventually limit her agency by bringing her into a normative space of conventional gender roles, she is able to initiate her own quasi-marriage with her lover. Moreover, in this pseudo-marriage, Julia gives herself away, performing a role which would conventionally be filled by a maiden's father. Julia actualizes a role as wooer and romantic agent. Even though Julia falls silent after these exchanges, and seemingly, as Michael Shapiro notes, "obeys his [Proteus's] command to 'answer not' by leaving the stage in silence" (71), the reader should not lose sight of the fact that it was Julia who first initiated the process of formalizing the romantic relationship.

Julia in a liminal space: active lover and cross-dresser

As soon as Julia and Proteus pledge their commitment and exchange rings, Proteus leaves for Milan and the couple is forced apart by geographical distance. Such distance gives Julia more opportunity to display her agency because she must now plot to seek out her lover in Milan. Turning again to Lucetta, Julia more easily finds emotional intimacy with her and is able to actively assert control at moments within their conversation. Because of her earlier interactions with texts, as interpreter and writer, Julia is now able to give voice to her sexual desires in conversation with Lucetta. In a variation on the conversation of I.ii, Julia is now able to tell Lucetta that she loves Proteus, and, in

doing so, she positions herself as the primary wooer in this romantic relationship. Julia then begins developing a plan to cross-dress so that she can follow Proteus to Milan: she will actively pursue the resolution of her marriage plot.

Julia opens her conversation with Lucetta in II.vii in much the same way as she did in I.ii, but in this later scene, she is able to assert her agency more strongly. Whereas earlier, in I.ii, she asked, “But say, Lucetta, now we are alone - / Wouldst thou then counsel me to fall in love?” (I.ii.1-2), she now more assertively asks, “Counsel, Lucetta. Gentle girl, assist me, / [...] and tell me some good mean / How with my honour I may undertake / A journey to my loving Proteus” (II.vii.1, 5-7). In both scenes, Julia opens a conversation by asking for advice about being in a romantic relationship. Crucially, however, in this reprise of the conversation between women, Julia tells Lucetta that she loves Proteus and that she wants to travel to Milan to be with him. Julia is now able to voice sexual agency, because her interpretation of his letter, her writing of her own letter, and her conversation with Proteus have all allowed her to move into the less constrained liminal space in the middle of the courtship narrative. In the liminal space, Julia is able to be frank and open about her desires. Shapiro is interested in Julia’s agency in this scene, but he traces the start of her agency to the moment when cross-dressing is first mentioned: he writes, “Julia begins to change [...] as soon as the idea of male disguise is broached. By reflexively alluding to the play-boy [the boy player], the prospect of male disguise added a dimension of boldness and vivacity to the characterization, enabling Julia to take control of the conversation with her maid” (71). Shapiro, however, ignores

the agency which Julia asserts when she opens her conversation with Lucetta by admitting that she loves Proteus.

Julia imagines her act of voicing sexual desire to Lucetta as a moment of writing. In I.ii, Julia voiced her desires by displacing them onto her interpretation of Proteus's letter; in I.iii, Julia declared herself to Proteus by writing him a letter in return. Julia has begun to assert her sexual agency as a result of her interactions with material texts, and now, when she admits that she loves Proteus, she imagines writing her thoughts upon Lucetta. Julia calls Lucetta "thee, / Who art the table wherein all my thoughts / Are visibly charactered and engraved" (II.vii.2-4). Julia's metaphor positions her as the writer who has engraved her thoughts upon Lucetta by confiding in Lucetta about her love of Proteus. When she positions her voicing of sexual desire as a writing act, Julia alludes back to her previous moments of interacting with texts, in which writing and interpreting letters allowed her to be more open about her own desires. Now, she specifically imagines physically imprinting her words into a surface. The words of a writer are typically more lasting than are those of a speaker, especially if these words have been physically engraved onto the surface on which they are written. By figuring her speech as a writing-act, Julia gestures to the importance of what she is saying when she voices her love for Proteus and her desire to become an active subject in the courtship narrative.

At first, she genders her active romantic desires as masculine, explaining to Lucetta about her need to seek out Proteus in Milan. She says, "The current [of desire] that with gentle murmur glides, / Thou know'st, being stopped, impatiently doth rage, / But when his fair course is not hindered / He makes sweet music with th'enamelled

stones, / Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge / He overtaketh in his pilgrimage” (II.vii. 25-30). Julia employs the Petrarchan paradigm of the love-sick male agent moving toward the unattainable beloved. She still adheres to the traditional gendered stereotype of masculine agency and feminine passivity within the courtship narrative, and her understanding of this paradigm causes her to gender her actions as masculine.

So too, Julia’s decision to cross-dress to travel to Milan seems indebted to her understanding that romantic agency is gendered masculine. She will put on a costume so that she can perform the role of wooer and safely travel to Milan. Yet as Julia discusses the details of her cross-dressed costuming with Lucetta, she seems invested in not taking on an uncomplicated and opaque performance of masculinity. To that end, she tries to avoid wearing either second-hand men’s clothing or a codpiece. As she explains the particular elements that she wants as part of her costuming, Julia separates her performed, cross-gendered role from an uncomplicated realization of masculinity. She opens up an ambiguously gendered space in which her actions as a cross-dresser cannot be immediately associated with normative masculinity and can in part be associated with femininity.

First, when she announces that she wants to cross-dress, Julia explains that she does not want to look “like a woman, for I would prevent / The loose encounters of lascivious men” (II.vii.40-41). She will change her appearance and take on a new social persona in order to actively maintain her sexual purity: Julia will work to maintain the virtuous honor that she promised to Proteus in I.iii.

In order to realize her plan to preserve her chastity, Julia asks Lucetta to make a costume for her. She says, “Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds / As may befit some

well-reputed page” (II.vii.42-43). In this costume, Julia will avoid wearing second-hand men’s clothing: she will cross-dress without dressing in men’s clothes. None of Shakespeare’s other cross-dressing heroines voice preferences about the provenance of their disguises, and Julia’s request here seems to fit with her understanding of gendered performance and gendered behaviors. In their *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones argue that, in the early modern period, clothing could both imprint its wearers with certain social identities and could retain the memory of previous wearers. They write about

the notion that ‘Fashion’ can be ‘*deeply* put on’ or, in other words, that clothes permeate the wearer, fashioning him or her within. This notion undoes the opposition of inside and outside, surface and depth. Clothes, like sorrow, inscribe themselves upon a person who comes into being through that inscription. (2)¹⁰

If Julia were to wear second-hand men’s clothing, then this clothing would have been imprinted with an idea of “maleness” which would then write itself onto Julia’s own body. When Julia asks to not wear men’s clothing, she tries to avoid having maleness etched into her non-performative gender identity as a woman. While she may perceive her sexual agency as masculine, she does not want to undermine her sense of her own female identity. One can thus argue that the agency she asserts will not be entirely masculine, but also, in part, feminine.

Some of Julia’s desire to avoid men’s clothing can be traced to early modern medical discourses about sexual difference. In Renaissance Europe, the general model for

¹⁰ The italics here are in the original quotation, and Stallybrass and Jones here allude to a passage from Act V of Henry IV Part 2.

understanding gendered bodies was Galen's "one-sex model."¹¹ Stephen Greenblatt summarizes this view: "since Galen it had been believed that the male and female sexual organs were altogether comparable, indeed mirror images of each other" (79). The male and female genitalia were understood to be homologous structures, with the vagina as an inverted penis and the ovaries as internal testes. In such a system, there was less of a physiological boundary to separate male and female bodies than is assumed today, so behavior and clothing took on more importance as ways of marking sexual difference.¹² Thomas Laqueur explains: "Sex before the seventeenth century [...] was still a sociological and not an ontological reality" (8).¹³ Julia seems to be looking to wear masculine clothing in order to more safely and confidently travel to Milan: she does not, however, want to problematize her perception of her own femininity and thus her role in a heterosexual romance narrative.

In this context, Julia's resistance to wearing a codpiece becomes more understandable. Lucetta believes that if Julia is going to successfully and realistically impersonate a male youth, then she must wear one: "You must needs have them [breeches] with a codpiece, madam" (II.vii.53). She later adds, "A round hose, madam, now's not worth a pin / Unless you have a codpiece to stick pins on" (II.vii.55-56).

¹¹ Here I use the term that Thomas Laqueur uses to describe pre-Enlightenment conceptions of the gendered body. Laqueur explains the term: "Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes are linked by a common one. Women, in other words, are inverted, and hence less perfect, men. They have exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places" (26).

¹² Behavior was understood to not only mark the way that sexual difference was perceived, but to actually have power to change the person's physiological sexual appearance. Greenblatt writes that "One consequence of this belief in differential homology is a fascination with the possibility of sex-change" (81) and he spends much of his chapter "Fiction and Friction" chronicling different medical case-studies from the period in which the doctor recorded that someone's sex changed, usually with a woman's sex organs becoming externalized as a penis and testes as a result of heat, friction, or physical exertion.

¹³ Here I make use of Thomas Laqueur's study in *Making Sex* of the ways in which people's understanding of sexual difference and of sexual relationships evolved over the centuries.

Lucetta argues that a codpiece is a necessary part of a realistic disguise and that there is little point to cross-dressing if Julia is not invested in presenting a believably masculine appearance. Julia, however, protests “That will be ill-favoured” (II.vii.54). When Julia demonstrates that she is concerned about presenting herself in a masculine light, she seems to be trying to avoid deeply putting on masculinity. Julia wants to cross-dress without wearing a codpiece: this decision would allow her to assert herself as an agent in a costume that is not opaquely masculine. In the end, Julia does defer to Lucetta’s judgement, saying “Lucetta, as thou lov’st me let me have / What thou think’st meet and is most mannerly” (II.vii.57-58), so she may in fact go out into the world wearing a codpiece, as the pun on “mannerly” suggests. Yet despite her quick surrender to Lucetta’s argument, Julia’s comments in this passage demonstrate that she understands her performance as an ambiguously gendered act. In such an act, any sexual agency that Julia displays should not be immediately tied to masculinity.¹⁴

Julia in a liminal space: page-boy

When Julia assumes her cross-dressed disguise and travels to Milan, she performs the character of a page-boy called “Sebastian.” Because this character is associated with passivity, not with the agency that she had originally conceptualized as a masculine trait,

¹⁴ Julia wants to find a persona which will allow her to express agency, but she does not want her agency to be incontrovertibly associated with masculinity. Shapiro writes about this passage in the context of self-reflexive comments on the early modern theater: he writes, “Any stress that Julia places on the first syllable of ‘mannerly’ would have had particular resonance on the Elizabethan stage, where both girls were played by boy actors. This passage is the first of those moments when the boy actor emerges from the mimetic surface of the play - even before Julia dons her disguise - and it begins, indirectly, to add an illusion of depth to Julia’s character. In modern productions, actresses find more direct ways to deepen Julia’s character, suggesting greater psychological complexity than the text itself indicates” (72). Shapiro suggests that Julia’s concern about the codpiece is engineered to draw attention to the fact that she is being played by a boy actor, who has a penis. Yet his argument is too quick to dismiss the play’s interest in Julia’s inner life, which has, as I have argued, been a focus of her characterization ever since she first refused Proteus’s letter. Julia wants to take on a costume which is recognizably artificial. Julia’s resistance to a fully masculine costume opens a space for her to assert an agency which she does not entirely tie to masculinity.

Julia is free to understand that any agency she does find is something which is outside her masculine performance, instead of it being a result of her impersonation of a male role. In her persona as a page-boy, Julia opens up a space to see her agency as feminine as well as masculine.

First, as a page, Julia-as-Sebastian is boyish. In the early modern worldview, boyhood is not a fully masculine state. Instead, it exists in a transitional space between femininity and masculinity. Stephen Orgel writes about the one-sex model: “In this version of anatomical history, we all begin as female, and masculinity is a development out of and away from femininity” (20). As a male youth, “Sebastian” is transitioning toward adult manhood, but he has not yet reached this mature state. As such, he does not have the agency of an adult man. Instead, Julia’s male persona is confined within a passive and submissive role.¹⁵ The agency that Julia asserts in the character of “Sebastian,” then, is not necessarily only associated with her assumed masculinity. Instead, it may also reflect back upon the liminal feminine identity of Julia herself: the agency that Julia-as-Sebastian demonstrates in this part of the play may be largely gendered feminine.

As “Sebastian,” Julia is tied to a submissive role which mirrors her earlier understanding of maidenly sexual passivity. In the early modern era, male youths and female maidens were both understood as erotic objects of the sexualized male gaze. Lisa Jardine writes, “in the early modern period, erotic attention - attention bound up with sexual availability and historical specific forms of economic dependency - is focused

¹⁵ Some of the passivity of the male youth is tied up on the Galenic assumption that the youth is partially feminine in conjunction with the general patriarchal understanding of female submissiveness. Yet the text of the play presents Sebastian in passive positions which are never connected with his partially feminine identity as a youth. Thus, it seems relevant to connect his socially mandated passivity with his masculinity instead of extending it to the possible femininity of his role.

upon boys and upon women in the *same way*" (28).¹⁶ Because women and male youths (especially servants) were in positions that marked them as being socially dependent and sexually passive, they were both objects of male sexual attention and were expected to fill passive roles as the recipients of male erotic interest.

In her role as Sebastian, Julia is positioned within this conception of sexualized gender roles. The very name of her masculine alter-ego gestures to the assumption that she will perform a role which is associated with sexual passivity. St. Sebastian, in Renaissance texts, is often coded as a figure of passive male sensuality. Because his iconography often shows a semi-nude young man languishing while being pierced by arrows, he becomes a symbol of penetrated body of the male beloved.¹⁷ It is not clear whether, within the world of the play, Julia is aware of the sexualized behaviors associated with the name "Sebastian." Yet, as Sebastian, Julia does encounter the homoerotic desire of the adult man for the passive male youth. Thus, when Proteus first encounters Julia-as-Sebastian, he comments, "I like thee well, / And will employ thee in some service presently" (IV.iv.34-35). On one level, he is promising to commission her to carry letters between himself and Silvia. Yet his words also carry a sexual undertone, and he later comments, when "Sebastian" promises to aid him, "I hope thou wilt" (IV.iv.37).

¹⁶ Italics in original

¹⁷ Sebastian's martyrology centers around an event in which the Roman emperor orders him to be tied to a post and shot with arrows until dead. Although Sebastian miraculously survives the ordeal and is later martyred by being beaten to death, Renaissance iconography tends to display a semi-nude young man being pierced by arrows, and this image gets associated with homoerotic desire. The Italian artist Guido Reni (1575-1642) paints a series of images of St. Sebastian which depict a sensually languishing, semi-nude youth.

Their conversation is informed by the sexual allure of a male youth who becomes an object of male erotic desire because he is both young and a servant.¹⁸

Additionally, as a page, Julia-as-Sebastian takes on the passive role of servanthood. She takes on a masculine role which is associated with obedience and the lack of autonomy. As a servant, “Sebastian” is dependent on the economic interests of his employers for support. He can make witty asides, as many lower class characters in the comedies do, but he is not supposed to assert his own opinions or autonomy because he is dependent upon the generosity and favor of others.¹⁹ Julia has taken on a male role which is associated with a lack of self-determination or autonomy, a dependence upon others, and a sexual passivity. Any agency that she finds in this space should not, thus, be understood strictly as a factor of her performance of masculinity.

Instead, when Julia asserts agency in her role as Sebastian, her agency should also be understood in the context of the feminine valences of her performance. Julia sought to wear a costume that was not fully masculine; she then performs a role in which her character is masculine, but does not have the agency of an adult male. Since the masculine persona that she adopts is strongly tied to passivity, any agency that she finds ought to also be understood as an assertion of femininity.

¹⁸ The passive sexual allure of the male youth is more explicitly realized in *Twelfth Night*, where Orsino comments on the sensual appearance of “Cesario”: “Diana’s lip / Is not more smooth and rubious; thy small pipe / Is as the maiden’s organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman’s part” (I.v.30-33).

¹⁹ Shapiro suggests that servants do make subversive comments and enter into the play’s discourse in the figure of the Lylian page. Lylian pages, he says, “typically offer cynical commentaries or ironic perspectives on the main action by parodying their masters and discomfiting figures of authority through asides, parody, punning, choplogic, and song” (66). Yet, whatever power Lylian pages may possess in other plays, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, “Sebastian” can make subversive comments, but his comments are never heard by other characters. Thus, although Julia-as-Sebastian can make asides, her commentary does not affect the actions or opinions of other characters and does not alter the primary plot in a meaningful way.

Julia does begin asserting vocal agency soon after assuming her cross-dressed disguise. Although she seems to have planned to adopt the disguise only for the journey to Milan, when she arrives in Milan, she finds that Proteus has lost his interest in her and is instead courting Silvia. Proteus approaches her and hires her to serve as a messenger for his love letters and gifts to Silvia: he unknowingly asks her to undermine her own romance plot by courting another woman. Julia, however, is able to take agency when she reproves Proteus and shows him his failings. Thus, soon after she meets Proteus in her disguise as “Sebastian,” she laments that he has been unfaithful to his first love: “methinks that she [Julia] loved you as well / As you do love your lady Silvia. / She [Julia] dreams on him [Proteus] that has forgot her love; / You dote on her [Silvia] that cares not for your love. / ‘Tis pity love should be so contrary, / And thinking on it makes me cry ‘Alas’” (IV.iv.72-77). Proteus did not ask for her opinion, and in her role as a page-boy, Julia ought to be silent and subservient. Yet Julia asserts her opinions and her agency to move forward through the courtship narrative because she still is able to harness the power of the liminal space to express her own desires and act as a sexual agent. This voicing is seemingly rooted in her feminine liminal identity, not her masculine performative role.

Julia in a liminal space: messenger

Julia is initially worried that her position as a messenger for Proteus will force her to undermine her own romantic plot and to work against her sexual agency, as she helps her lover woo another woman. Yet in the role of the messenger, Julia finds a new way to interact with texts and to encourage the progression of her own romance plot. Julia intervenes in Silvia’s reception of Proteus’s love letter so as to add context and thus alter

Silvia's interpretation of Proteus's suit. Julia asserts agency over the text to define how Silvia interprets Proteus's writing, and in her assertion of agency, Julia is able to ensure that Silvia will not be taken in by Proteus's suit. More importantly, Julia-as-Sebastian's intervention in the letter causes Silvia to feel a deep sense of empathy for Julia, and thus sets the scene for Julia's subsequent conversation with Silvia in which she voices her anxieties about female passivity in the courtship narrative and asserts the need for feminine agency.

When Proteus employs Julia-as-Sebastian, he places her as a substitute for the bungling Lance. Lance, who is a farcical figure, has failed to carry out Proteus's assignments once too often, and Proteus wants to replace him. Lance is a low comedy figure whose actions have limited impact upon the courtship narratives of the two gentlemen: when Proteus hires "Sebastian," he presumably expects to get a similar sort of messenger, one who may not be entirely competent but who will not lastingly intervene in or alter the courtship narratives. Messengers up to this point in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* have served as the vehicles through which love letters are passed. They may have commented upon the relationships between lovers and may have positioned themselves as audience to these interactions, as Lucetta, Speed, and Lance each do, but these messengers are confined to comic subplots, and they have no real affect upon the events in the primary romance plot. Yet when "Sebastian" becomes a messenger, Julia finds agency to intervene in Proteus's romantic communication. She forces upon Silvia an awareness of the larger context of Proteus's suit.

When Proteus first hires Julia-as-Sebastian, she despairs that her new role will situate her in a passive position in which she cannot intervene in the courtship narrative

but must instead sit by and watch her love court a new woman. At first, she constructs a metaphor in which she positions herself as a predator stalking Proteus's new relationship: "Alas, poor Proteus, thou hast entertained / A fox to be the shepherd of thy lambs" (IV.v. 84-85). Yet as she continues speaking, she is unable to figure out how to actively intervene in his courtship. Her metaphor thus appears to gesture toward the irony of a situation in which Proteus has employed her, a sort of "wolf in sheep's clothing," to court his new beloved. Instead of plotting action, Julia worries: "And now am I, unhappy messenger, / To plead for that which I would not obtain; / To carry that which I would have refused; / To praise his faith, which I would have dispraised" (IV.iv.92-95). Julia worries that she will be compelled to follow Proteus's wishes even when these wishes contrast with her own hopes and desires. She worries that the passivity of her performative role, as well as her love for Proteus, will give her no way to deny his wishes: that she will simply be a vessel through which Proteus's desires pass. Just as her performance of maidenhood compelled her to rip up Proteus's letter, Julia now worries that her performance as a page-boy will force her to work against her own desires: she is again performing a position which is normatively associated with passivity, and this role threatens to contain her agency.

Yet as she continues to meditate on her new position as Proteus's messenger, Julia suggests that neither her love of Proteus nor her subservient position ought to prevent her from intervening in his courtship and undermining his potential relationship with Silvia. She announces, "I am my master's true-confirmed love, / But cannot be true servant to my master / Unless I prove false traitor to myself" (IV.iv.96-98). At this point, Julia decides that her first priority must be her own goals, not Proteus's. She distances herself

from the boy servant role and the passivity and subservience associated with this social position. She asserts an agency which she explicitly distances from her social performance of masculinity as a servant. Julia asserts herself as an agent who will work to resolve her own courtship narrative and realize her own sexual desires. She resolves: “Yet will I woo for him, but yet so coldly / As, heaven it knows, I would not have him speed” (IV.iv.99-100). Julia decides to assert her sexual desires above her unquestioning devotion to Proteus. When she breaks from her performance as an obedient page-boy, Julia asserts an agency which is not connected to her masculine persona, but instead implicitly gestures toward her femininity.

So, when Julia goes to Silvia, she delivers a letter from Proteus but then immediately takes it back, saying that she has delivered the wrong letter. She says, “Madam, please you peruse this letter. / Pardon me, madam, I have unadvised / Delivered you a paper that I should not” (IV.iv.114-116). By suggesting that there is another letter, Julia presents an outside context. Moreover, Julia implies that this is a secret context that Silvia was not meant to see. To that end, when Silvia asks to see the letter which “Sebastian” accidentally delivered to her, Julia protests: “It may not be. Good madam, pardon me” (IV.iv.119). Julia implies that Silvia is being intentionally kept in the dark about a series of letters which Proteus has employed “Sebastian” to deliver. Julia is obviously manipulating Silvia’s opinion here, because she is implying the existence of an illicit secret that does not actually exist. Yet Julia works to confirm Silvia’s bad opinion of Proteus so that Silvia will not become an active rival for Proteus’s love.

Of course, Silvia has been very aware throughout of the falsity of Proteus’s courtship, and she has already pledged her love to Valentine: Julia’s intervention in the

text might thus seem unnecessary. Yet in her letter swap, Julia implies that Proteus employed “Sebastian” to deliver love letters to different women.²⁰ Julia tacitly suggests that Proteus is being unfaithful to Silvia, reminding Silvia of her knowledge of Julia’s own plight as a betrayed woman. Because it looks like Proteus is betraying her in the same way that he once betrayed Julia, the letter swap positions Silvia in a space to feel a deep sense of empathy for Julia. Haslem minimizes the importance of Julia’s actions here, writing, “As involved in the plot as Julia is throughout the rest of the play, she can in fact do little more than wait and hope to be chosen - indeed, rechosen - by Proteus in the end” (128). Yet Julia takes on a very active role here: she uses her position as messenger to confirm Silvia’s distrust of Proteus and to begin building a sense of empathy between Silvia and herself.

Silvia begins to act according to the empathy that she feels for Julia. Thus, when Julia later offers the ring that Proteus has sent, Silvia declines: “Mine [finger] shall not do his Julia so much wrong” (IV.iv.129). Silvia becomes very aware of how Proteus’s relationship with her must be affecting the betrayed, abandoned Julia, and Silvia becomes more active and vehement in her rejection of Proteus’s suit. Thus, while at the beginning of the scene she procured a copy of her portrait for “Sebastian” to deliver to Proteus, she now completely rejects Proteus’s love letter and decides to hold him accountable for his falseness to Julia. Silvia says, “I will not look upon your master’s lines. / I know they are stuffed with protestations, / And full of new-found oaths, which he will break / As easily

²⁰ It is entirely possible that Julia has offered the letter that she received from Proteus in I.ii, but there is no reason to believe that Silvia realizes the actual addressee of that letter. There is no reason for Silvia to think that “Sebastian” has a letter that Proteus has directed to Julia. It seems more likely that Julia wants to imply that Proteus is sending out multiple love letters to different women now, and Silvia would have no reason to think that Proteus had gone back to Julia.

as I do tear his letter” (IV.iv.120-123).²¹ Like Julia, she tears up a Proteus’s words and recontextualizes them. Because Julia has provided Silvia an outside context, Silvia feels a deeper sense of empathy for Julia herself. Julia thwarts Proteus’s courtship of Silvia and instead constructs a space of female bonding in which women have the opportunity to express erotic agency in a relatively safe space.

Julia in a liminal space: story-teller and friend

When Julia-as-Sebastian gets Silvia to feel empathy for “Julia,” Julia is able to construct a space of female bonding in which she can express herself, voice her desires, and assert agency in spite of the passivity of her performative role and the inevitable gap between her performance and her inherent sense of self. This scene echoes I.ii and II.vii, the conversations in which Julia and Lucetta attempt to use the space of female bonding to transcend the expectations associated with their social personas in order to find some sense of intimacy. Now, Silvia asks Julia-as-Sebastian a series of questions about “Julia” which are rooted in Silvia’s newfound sense of empathy for the other woman. In answer to these questions, Julia starts telling a story about a time when “Sebastian” played the part of Ariadne in a play. Ostensibly this story is set up to provide Silvia with a way of imagining Julia’s appearance and her suffering. Yet in this story, Julia is able to voice her anxieties about female passivity while implicitly distancing herself from such passivity and demonstrating her own sexual agency.

Julia tells a story about an occasion when “Sebastian” played the character of “Ariadne, passioning / For Theseus’ perjury and unjust flight” (IV.iv.159-160). Shapiro sees this story as a major moment in which the play engages with a meta-textual

²¹ Silvia isn’t aware of this parallel, but it’s interesting that when Silvia begins to strongly empathize with Julia, she rips up Proteus’s letter, echoing Julia’s action in I.ii, although she does so for different reasons.

awareness of the boy player: “Shakespeare heightens the theatrical vibrancy by encouraging the performer to shift between layers of gender identity, rather than remain confined in the role of the female character” (74). Shapiro suggests that Shakespeare includes this story of a cross-dressed performance in order to draw attention to the layers of gendered performance that the boy player takes on in this scene: the story draws attention to the boy player’s talent as an actor and, in this layering, gives Julia’s character “theatrical power” by endowing her with the illusion of depth. Yet the scene may not only draw attention to the boy actor: it may also present a vision of female agency by coupling cross-dressing with a story about a betrayed woman.

Julia tells a story about a woman who entered into the courtship narrative but was abandoned before she was able to marry her lover. Ariadne, according to classical heroic legend, was the daughter of King Minos of Crete, and she defied her father to help Theseus defeat the Minotaur and escape from the Labyrinth. She ignored paternal authority and asserted agency in order to aid the man she loved. Yet, soon after Theseus escaped from Crete, he abandoned her on the island of Naxos: she was there physically separated from both her father’s household on Crete and her lover’s in Athens. Ariadne was geographically as well as ideologically trapped in the liminal space, and in this position, she lost her sexual agency because she could no longer expect self-assertion to push her through the courtship narrative and into marriage. Thus, in Julia’s story, Ariadne “passions,” but she has no means by which to resolve her courtship narrative. In this allusion, Julia seems to voice her own anxieties about feminine passivity and about the rootlessness of a woman who has entered the courtship narrative then lost her lover. Crucially, though, when Julia tells this story about static female lamentation, she is cross-

dressing and working to undermine her lover's relationship with his new beloved: she is taking an active role to resolve her courtship narrative. Julia's story about Ariadne allows her to voice her anxieties about female passivity. Instead, however, of realizing these anxieties, Julia sets up Ariadne in contrast to her own performance.

Julia positions herself as an answer to Ariadne: she is a woman who has the ability to assert sexual agency in the liminal space and to push toward the courtship narrative, and she has done so even though her lover has lost interest in her. In I.ii, Julia refused to voice sexual agency until she knew how Proteus felt. Now, however, she continues to assert herself as an autonomous agent even though she knows that Proteus has lost interest in her. His involvement in the courtship narrative is no longer the primary factor in determining her expression of agency. By setting herself up in contrast to Ariadne, Julia emphasizes the agency that she continues to assert in the courtship narrative. At the end of the story, Silvia reasserts her empathetic attachment to Julia, lamenting, "Alas, poor lady, desolate and left. / I weep myself to think upon thy words" (IV.iv.166-67). Silvia, however, is wrong to think of Julia as a desolate Ariadne, unable to realize her own desires in the absence of her lover. Instead, Julia has found a space to assert herself as an agent and to author her own romance plot.

At the end of the scene, Julia returns to her position as messenger, when she contemplates the portrait that Silvia has left for her to carry to Proteus. Because the portrait is a visible representation of Proteus's ideal love object, Julia sees it as her rival (IV.iv.190). In her powerful position as messenger, a role which allows her to alter texts as they travel from giver to recipient, she has the chance to change the portrait and hopefully convince Proteus to change his behavior. She believes that altering the portrait

would effect a change in Proteus and make him fall out of love with Silvia: she considers that she “should have scratched out your [the portrait’s] unseeing eyes, / To make my master out of love with thee” (IV.iv.196-197). Yet Julia will not intervene in this visual text the way that she intervened in Proteus’s letter. Instead, she addresses the picture: “I’ll use thee kindly, for thy mistress’ sake, / That used me so” (IV.iv,194-195). For the sake of Silvia, who reached out compassionately toward Julia, Julia will refrain from harming the portrait. Julia asserts her power to determine her own course of action and to maintain relationships of female bonding over and above the rivalry between women that the patriarchal pressures of the courtship narrative encourage. In this sense of community with Silvia, Julia is able to rightly place all the blame for the complications of the love plot upon Proteus himself.

Julia in a liminal space: wronged woman and triumphant lover

In Act V.iv, Julia is finally able to realize her feminine sexual agency when she directs the action surrounding the courtship narrative so that she can finally reunite with Proteus. Asserting herself as an autonomous, self-determining woman in love, Julia is able to shame Proteus and hold him responsible for his betrayal of their relationship. Her love for Proteus does not force her into a passive position: instead it motivates her to assert herself and bring the courtship narratives to their proper resolutions. In order to present herself as a triumphant lover, however, Julia must face a series of tremendous obstacles which threaten to quench all possibility of female agency and to leave the marriage plots unconsummated. Julia is finally able to assert herself as a female agent when she triumphs over these obstacles and reunites herself with Proteus.

In Act V, all four major characters of the romance plot journey into the forest outside Milan. Valentine has been in the forest ever since he was exiled from the Duke's court in Act III; now, however, each of the other main characters enters the forest. This forest is near the civilized space of the city of Milan, but it is fundamentally outside of it. When the Duke describes this space as being "toward Mantua" (V.ii.45), the play positions the forest as the wild space between two social centers. It is both geographically and figuratively a liminal space in which outlaws roam and social mores are fluid. In this physical space, the liminality of the courtship narrative is actualized, and the couples are able to work through this uncertainty to resolve the marriage plots. In this space outside the normative constraints of regular social life, characters are able to both challenge and enforce gender roles, according to their own priorities. These characters act according to their more primal urges: the men's actions thus often threaten to completely contain female agency. Yet in this liminal space, Julia will finally be able to publicly assert herself as a sexual agent, and she will resolve her courtship narrative.

In V.iv, the tensions of the courtship narratives come to a head when Proteus attempts to forcibly establish the primacy of his love for Silvia. It seems that he has rescued Silvia from a group of outlaws, and Proteus now claims that she owes him something for the trouble that he has taken at her expense. Proteus positions his actions as part of an exchange, suggesting that Silvia must now act in accordance with his wishes. "Vouchsafe me for my meed but one fair look. / A smaller boon than this I cannot beg, / And less than this I am sure you cannot give" (V.iv.23-25). Proteus attempts to compel Silvia to reciprocate his love by suggesting that such a move would be nothing more than

common courtesy. Asserting his dominance over the romantic tensions in the scene, Proteus attempts to deny female sexual agency.

When Silvia reproves him for his betrayal of Julia and continues to deflect his advances, Proteus loses his patience with courtly words: “Nay, if the gentle spirit of moving words / Can no way change you to a milder form / I’ll woo you like a soldier, at arm’s end, / And love you ‘gainst the nature of love: force ye” (V.iv.55-58). Proteus attempts to rape Silvia in order to write his own romantic desires onto her body. Female sexual agency in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* heavily associated with communicative ability, and here Proteus decides that he will no longer bother trying to communicate. He will instead rely on the physical power of his male body to overpower Silvia, and he will rape her to consummate his sexual desire for her. In a rape, the male assailant wrests all agency and sexual self-determination from his female victim-object and denies her physical control over her own body. Rape is a realization of female vulnerability which, in turn, forces passivity.

In this moment of attempted rape, the play seriously queries whether a woman can assert agency to define her sexual life when her body remains constantly vulnerable to physical attack, and the action does not immediately present a positive solution to this threat. Silvia cries out “O heaven!” (V.iv.59) but does not seem to make any attempt to stop his advances, and Julia is silent. It takes Valentine’s intervention to stop Proteus. Valentine seems to have been silently watching the characters’ interactions to this point, but now he enters the action, saying “Ruffian, let go that rude uncivil touch” (V.iv.60) as he presumably pulls Proteus off of Silvia. In this exchange, Proteus’s masculine

aggression is able to overpower Silvia's sexual self-determination, and only the intervention of another man can stop the rape. Here, Shakespeare positions the four lovers within the gendered binary of male agency and female passivity.²²

As this scene continues, Valentine and Proteus talk together, reconciling, rebuilding their friendship, and completely ignoring the subjectivity of their loves. The two women, who have not spoken since Proteus first threatened rape, are positioned as silent spectators of this scene of male homosocial bonding. Valentine easily forgives Proteus for the attempted rape and then suggests that Proteus take from him a peace offering: he announces, "that my love may appear plain and free, / All that was mine in Silvia I give thee" (V.iv.82-83). Valentine's offer is vague, but he is either giving the love which previously he had bestowed upon Silvia to Proteus, or he is giving Silvia herself to his rival and friend. In either case, when Valentine quickly forgives and reconciles with Proteus, the play focuses upon the revitalization of the male homosocial relationship. Having reunited, Valentine and Proteus are far more interested in repairing their relationship than they are in realizing the conclusions of their respective marriage plots. In this moment, men talk together and determine the futures of their beloveds, without paying any attention to the desires or priorities of these women. This part of the scene too reads as a deeply conservative assertion of the power of male aggression to overcome female self-determination.

²² William C. Carroll traces the source of the rape scene to the love plots in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "Shakespeare is heavily loading, perhaps overloading, this otherwise genial romantic comedy with a dark, essentially Ovidian view of masculine desire, figured by the possession of the female body through rape" (62). Carroll gestures to the implicit connection between Ovidian depictions of rape and the Ovidian-Petrarchan paradigm of the ideal male lover wooing the female love-object. Proteus's attempt to rape Silvia is tied to his figuration of heterosexual romance within the gendered binary of female passivity and male agency.

Yet Julia, finally, interrupts the conversation between Valentine and Proteus, and she paradoxically takes control of the scene when she faints. Just when Valentine offers his love in Silvia to Proteus, Julia cries out “O me unhappy!” (V.iv.84) and swoons.²³ She cuts through the male homosocial dialogue between Valentine and Proteus and thus implies the primacy of her love for Proteus. Her love has the rhetorical power to interrupt the conversation between men. As she shouts out and falls to the ground, she becomes the performative center of the stage, drawing the attention of the characters as well as the play’s audience. The focus of the scene shifts dramatically away from the interaction between Valentine and Proteus, and all attention comes to rest on Julia. Thus, as soon as she cries out, Proteus says “Look to the boy” and Valentine replies by calling out “Why, boy!” (V.iv.84).²⁴ It is common for critics to see her emotional outburst and subsequent fall as a realization of female passivity. Haslem, for example, writes: “Thus disempowered, Julia swoons. And it is only at this significant moment, when Julia’s very body emblemizes the degree to which her earlier insistence of self-assertiveness has collapsed, that the love relationship with Proteus becomes possible” (129). Yet Julia’s swoon is not a realization of disempowerment. Rather, it gives her the power to take over the narrative thrust of the scene. She interrupts the homosocial discourse between men and finds the space to assert her agency.

Julia’s swoon is a positive action rooted in the same romantic feeling which first empowered Julia to enter into the liminal space. As Judith Weiss writes, “The swoon [...]

²³ The stage direction of her swoon does not actually appear in the authorized text. She does, however, have some emotional reaction which corresponds to her exclamation. This reaction draws the attention of the other characters and causes Valentine to tell her to “Look up” (V.iv.85). Editors, directors, and critics of the text thus tend to assume that Julia swoons, and I follow this traditional reading.

²⁴ They are, of course, referring to Julia in these quotations, because she is still disguised as Sebastian.

often has the function of both exhibiting and inspiring fine feeling. It is not associated with passivity, subjection, and surrender” (129). Weiss is discussing a series of texts which predate Shakespeare’s play by a few centuries, yet her formulation of the active, emotional swoon is relevant to the formulations of literary tropes in the late sixteenth century. In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Rosalind, a cross-dressing woman, swoons in distress. When she tries to convince the other characters on stage that she faked her swoon, Oliver says she must be lying because “There is too great testimony in your complexion that it was a passion of earnest” (IV.iii.168-169). In this play, which postdates *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare associates swooning with emotional depth rather than passivity. Julia swoons because she cannot passively stand by and watch Proteus receive Silvia as his own. When she swoons, she manifests upon her body her romantic agency and her continuing love for Proteus.

Julia’s swoon, additionally, is a particularly feminine sort of action: when Julia swoons and exhibits romantic agency, her agency also associates itself with femininity. Although Weiss writes that the swoon in medieval romance is not gendered, fainting seems to have acquired a gendered significance sometime before Shakespeare began writing his comedies at the end of the sixteenth century. Thus, when Rosalind swoons in *As You Like It*, Oliver comments, “You lack a man’s heart” (IV.iii.163-164). Swooning is not a masculine action: Oliver considers Rosalind-as-Ganymede effeminate because “he” fainted. When Julia swoons, her action is a particularly feminine interruption of a male discourse.

This action is not, however, associated with maidenly sexual purity. Rather, when Julia swoons, the sexual agency which Julia accepted in the liminal space is emblemized upon her body. Since Galenic physiology argued that women could also produce semen, and associated too much semen with a humoral imbalance that could lead, according to Weiss, to fainting,²⁵ one could argue that Julia's faint is a feminine action associated with her identity as a sexually mature agent. Her agency is now being strongly associated with her body, her femininity, and her desires.

Additionally, it is possible that Julia has simply faked her swoon. In doing so, she asserts even more control over the situation, because she consciously manipulates the reactions of the other characters in order to claim discursive control of the scene and thus assert her own priorities. Whether or not the swoon was calculated, however, Julia takes control of the scene, asserting herself as a female agent and interrupting the male homosocial dialogue.

Having attracted everyone's attention and taken rhetorical control of the scene, Julia immediately positions herself as a messenger, explaining her faint as a result of her failure to perform her duties in IV.iv. She laments to Valentine, "O good sir, my master charged me to deliver a ring to Madam Silvia, which out of my neglect was never done" (V.iv.86-87). In IV.iv, Proteus gave her both a letter and a ring to give to Silvia. She

²⁵ First, as Laqueur writes, in the one-sex model, "the male and female seed cannot be imagined as sexually specific, morphologically distinct, entities" (38). Moreover, an overabundance of semen, caused by the lack of ejaculation, creates a humoral imbalance and one characterized by an irritating sexual "itch." Laqueur writes, "it is a serious, irritating humor that produces a most demanding itch in precisely that part of the body contrived by Nature to be hypersensitive to it" (44).

Weiss continues: "It is not unexpected that medieval medical texts should consider the causes of fainting in both men and women to be due [...] to strong emotional disturbance [...] and to the deprivation of a good sex life [...] there is no reason to suppose the writers and audiences of medieval fictions were unaware that intense emotion could frequently go hand in hand with acute privation" (133)

forgot, however, to pass the ring along, and now she proposes to rectify the situation.²⁶

Yet in act IV, Julia showed that she was not willing to be a passive conduit through which the message passed between writer and reader. Instead, she added context by swapping the letters, thus undermining the intent of the writer and convincing Silvia to not even bother reading Proteus's letter. Here, again, Julia positions herself as a messenger in order to assert a role of authority. She rewrites Proteus's intended meaning and asserts herself as an agent although she is in a position conventionally associated with passive non-intervention and servitude. Now, however, Julia's swap seems like a calculated action designed to catalyze her reveal of herself to Proteus. She intentionally engineers a series of interactions which will allow her to identify herself and resolve her courtship narrative.

Julia now echoes her letter swap from IV.iv by presenting Silvia with the wrong ring. Whereas before she offered Silvia a letter, presumably one that Proteus had sent her in I.ii, she now offers up the ring that Proteus gave her in II.ii. Julia presents the ring and waits for Proteus to recognize it: instead of suggesting a hidden context as she did in IV.iv, she now presents all the contextual evidence and challenges Proteus to recognize it. She gestures toward her own presence as Julia, because the only way she could have swapped out the two rings was if the ring that Proteus gave to Julia was in her possession. Thus, when she presents the ring, Proteus recognizes it: "How, let me see! / Why, this is the ring I gave to Julia" (V.iv.90-91). When Proteus tries to puzzle out how and why "Sebastian" has this ring, Julia is able to fully voice her agency.

²⁶ Of course, Julia is lying here: she did present the ring in IV.iv, but Silvia refused to accept it because she was feeling deeply empathetic toward Julia.

Julia asserts agency as a power that she associates with her feminine self. When Proteus asks how she came by the ring that he gave Julia, she says, “And Julia herself did give it me, / And Julia herself hath brought it hither” (V.iv.96-97). By repeating a gendered reflexive pronoun in the subjects of her clauses, Julia associates her agency with her femininity. Julia is here finally able to explicitly connect agency with her female gender identity. Through the course of the play, Julia has worked through her liminal space and has finally found a way to talk about agency and femininity as one. Here, she identifies herself in a roundabout way, slowly losing her disguise and thus moving into the final resolution of the marriage plot. As she does so, she is finally able to voice her role as a female agent and an active player in the courtship narrative. Even Michael Shapiro, who reads Julia’s cross-dressing as a means of drawing attention to the boy player’s virtuosity as opposed to understanding it as a signal of the character’s own agency, acknowledges that “Julia could take control of the world of the play at a climactic moment” (91). She takes control of the play, and it is her liminal agency which allows the courtship narrative to finally resolve. The agency that she has found is a result of her liminal place in between social roles. Because, however, she has no solid foundation for her social identity while she is in this liminal space, Julia needs to use her agency to push through the liminal space and find a solid social identity in the conclusion of the marriage plot.

As Julia rhetorically un.masks,²⁷ she identifies herself in relation to her courtship with Proteus. She announces, “Behold her that gave aim to all thy oaths / And entertained ‘em deeply in her heart “(V.iv.99-100). Julia defines herself in relation to the narrative structure which allowed her to find agency in the liminal space in the first place. By identifying herself by her role in the courtship narrative, Julia reemphasizes the importance of that relationship and looks toward the marriage conclusion. Yet in defining herself by the courtship narrative, Julia does not reinsert herself as the passive ideal Petrarchan love object. Instead, she identifies herself as the woman who “gave aim” to his protestations of love: in this image, his oaths were like an arrow and she provided direction for its flight. Although, as an arrow, his oaths may have penetrated her and effected some action upon her, she guided his words to their destination and had an active role in their relationship.

Of course, this is not to say that the final scenes are not problematic. Just as Valentine immediately forgave Proteus for his attack upon Silvia, Julia never refers to the fact that she just watched Proteus try to rape another woman. Adelman writes, “In order for the play to enact this fantasy [of male bonding quickly resolved], the autonomy of both Silvia and Julia as fully realized figures has to be sacrificed: Silvia stands by silently [...] and Julia is not permitted to notice, or to care, that her man is a would-be rapist” (79). Because Julia is so invested in the courtship narrative, and because the resolution of the play happens surprisingly quickly and happily, there is no rhetorical space for Julia to

²⁷ I say that she “rhetorically” un.masks because, unlike some of the other cross-dressing heroines in Shakespeare, Julia never seems to actually take off her male disguise. Thus, in the last exchange between Valentine and the Duke, the Duke clearly thinks that Julia is a page boy, saying “I think the boy hath grace in him” (V.iv.162). I will address this more explicitly below.

back away from a relationship with her erstwhile lover. Yet Julia does find a way to address Proteus's failings.

Even though she never explicitly comments upon Proteus's attempted rape, she does hold him responsible for his betrayals and failings. Immediately after she identifies herself by her positive role in the courtship narrative, she accuses: "How oft hast thou with perjury cleft the root? / O Proteus, let this habit make thee blush" (V.iv.101-102). She reminds him of how his wooing of Silvia made his entire relationship with Julia a lie, and she wants him to blush, physically displaying shame for what his actions have caused her to do. She continues, "Be thou ashamed that I have took upon me / Such an immodest raiment, if shame live / In a disguise of love" (V.iv.103-105). Here, she acknowledges the socially subversive and non-normative aspects of cross-dressing. Yet she does so to suggest that Proteus, not herself, should feel shame for what she has had to do to win back her lover.²⁸

Julia concludes: "It is the lesser blot, modesty finds, / Women to change their shapes than men their minds" (V.iv.106-107). Julia reminds Proteus of everything that she has done in the cross-dressing plot to positively resolve their relationship while his actions are associated with shame and guilt. She asserts her agency in resolving the courtship narrative, while condemning Proteus for his "Protean" fickleness and falseness. Thus, while Proteus could not even remain strong enough to continue to love Julia, Julia was able to "change her shape," cross-dress, and remain successfully performing a male

²⁸ Interestingly, though, she adds a caveat that she is not sure whether shame can live "in a disguise of love." She suggests that because her motivation for cross-dressing was her love for Proteus, there may be no shame in her disguise. Yet her language is vague, and she might also imply that Proteus's love was nothing but a disguise and thus she is not sure that he can feel genuine shame for his actions. However the actor might gesture to one meaning over another in his line reading, it is clear that Julia is invested in blaming Proteus while setting herself up as a strong, moral woman.

role in order to make their relationship work. She emphasizes her own actions here and shames Proteus. Here, Julia's active female constancy is presented as superior to the active fickleness which Proteus has displayed. Even though Julia has spent the majority of the play working toward the proper resolution of the courtship narrative, she does not immediately fall into his arms. Rather, she asserts her positive sexual agency and criticizes Proteus for his moral and emotional failing.²⁹

Julia leaves the liminal space: moving toward marriage

At the end of the play, Valentine brokers a reconciliation between Julia and Proteus and confirms their relationship. After Julia publicly shames Proteus and Proteus repents, Valentine interjects: "Come, come, a hand from either. / Let me be blessed to make this happy close. / 'Twere pity two such friends should be long foes" (V.iv. 114-116). Valentine here claims the agency to bring the couple finally together. He both stops Julia from further condemning Proteus's actions and takes credit for finally reuniting the pair. Whether or not Valentine is intentionally repressing a subversive female voice, he draws the couple into the marriage plot and begins muffling Julia's agency so that she can reenter the normative role of wife. At the end of the courtship narrative, the woman must reenter a stable, normative social position, and Valentine encourages Julia to leave off her expressions of agency and simply reunite with her love.

Valentine's plea is successful, and Proteus and Julia quickly change the thrust of their conversation. Instead of engaging in a cycle of female disapproval and male

²⁹ Moreover, the play seems to take Julia's side here. She's not irrationally calling for Proteus's contrition when she should be happy that she won him back. Rather, Proteus ends up having to publicly repent for his failings. As soon as Julia is done shaming him, he replies: "Than men their minds! 'Tis true. O heaven, were man / But constant, he were perfect. That one error / Fills him with faults, makes him run through all th' sins" (V.iv.108-110). He acknowledges his own sinfulness and his inability to properly act morally.

repentance, the couple now confirm the strength of their bond. Proteus announces: “Bear witness, heaven, I have my wish for ever” (V.iv.117). Here Proteus calls on heaven to bless his future relationship with Julia and seems to be moving toward the sacramental recognition of holy matrimony. Julia then echoes his sentiment: “And I mine” (V.iv.188), she says. Here Julia does not use a verb and instead only speaks in parallel with her lover. Moreover neither she nor Proteus speaks again for the rest of the play. The ending of this plot can feel very conservative and confining: Julia is no longer the story-teller of Act IV or even the shy lover of Act I: she stops speaking when the marriage plot concludes. Adelman is very concerned about the way that the end of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* represses the female voice: “The sacrifice of the autonomy of these hitherto sensible characters [Silvia and Julia] suggests the extent to which the deepest concern of the play is with the male bond” (79). Adelman suggests that, because Shakespeare is interested in finishing the play with a long conversation about male bonding between Valentine and the Duke, the play quickly and conservatively wraps up the romantic plot between Proteus and Julia. Yet, although marriage involves a full reabsorption into a normative patriarchal social order, the play ends before Julia is actually fully reabsorbed into this system.

At the end of the play, Julia is reunited with her lover, but she is not married. Moreover, she is not even dressed like a woman: she is still dressed like a male youth. Thus, the Duke seems to think that she is a page-boy (V.iv.162). Shakespeare leaves Julia still in a liminal position: she is left in a position in which she still has agency and is not confined within the normative strictures of marriage. The end of the play does look

forward to a double marriage and a closure of the courtship narratives when Valentine announces, “our [Valentine and Silvia’s] day of marriage shall be yours [Proteus and Julia’s], / One feast, one house, one mutual happiness” (V.iv.169-170). Yet Julia’s agency is not completely contained at the end of the play because she has not yet entered the normative sphere of marriage.

In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Julia finds agency within the liminal space at the center of the courtship narrative, and she is able to assert herself as a self-determining woman. Because the liminal space is necessarily temporal and unstable, and because she wants to be reunited with her love and to realize the marriage plot, Julia looks to be reabsorbed into a normative social position at the end of the play. This return to normativity, however, does not discount the action of the play as a whole. Catherine Belsey writes: “Closure depends on closing off the glimpsed transgression and reinstating a clearly defined sexual difference. But the plays are more than their endings, and the heroines become wives only after they have been shown to be something altogether more singular - because more plural” (187-188). Over the course of the action of the play, Julia has been able to assert herself as a female agent, and her development cannot be completely contained by the last few lines of the play. Julia’s period of liminality is not a carnivalesque space in which subversive elements are contained within the boundaries of normative society. Instead, Julia finds agency in an implicit sort of liminal rite of passage as her social identity changes. In this liminal space in the courtship narrative, young female characters are able to voice and act on a sexual agency which is not completely contained by normative gender values.

Julia's liminality is preserved: protagonist of her own story

The play ends with a reunion between Valentine and the Duke, with all the male relationships finally repaired. The homosocial male bond is asserted once more as the primary relationship of the play, and the Duke's presence reasserts the presence of a social hierarchy over the characters. The Duke leads the pairs of lovers out of the forest, and the couples look toward their return to civilized society and marriage. Yet in the last lines of the play, Valentine turns to the Duke and promises to tell him a story about Julia's actions as a cross-dresser. Gesturing to Julia-as-Sebastian, he says that he will tell the Duke the story "as we pass along / That you will wonder what hath fortun'd" (V.iv. 165-166). In telling the story of Julia's pursuit of Proteus, Valentine preserves the memory of her liminal agency. Julia herself will move into the normative space of marriage, but her story, and the memory of her liminal power as a female sexual agent, will live on. In her story, her experiences with texts and with textiles interweave to show how a woman can assert herself as a sexual agent in a patriarchal society.

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