

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘Virtue perforce is vice’: Ceremonial and Infernal Nuptials in John Marston’s *Sophonisba*

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John Marston’s *The Wonder of Women, or The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1605-6) is one of the most neglected and least understood major dramatic works of its era. With its exotic locations, love rivalry, political machinations, battles, supernatural thrills, lustful villain, compromised hero, and brave, beautiful heroine, *Sophonisba* would appear to have everything. Yet many regard the play as dull and forbidding, a foursquare, bombastic, high-minded dud. Most critics emphasise its formal austerity, locating *Sophonisba* securely in the neoclassical tradition. T.S. Eliot calls the play ‘Senecal rather than Shakespearean’, and Philip Finkelpearl suggests it has ‘more affinities with *Gorbuduc* than with the nearly simultaneous *King Lear*’.¹ For Irving Ribner it is an ‘exercise in Senecan imitation’ that does not ‘reflect [an] agonized struggle with the realities of the dramatist’s own age’.² Some regard Marston’s claim not to have laboured ‘to relate anything as an historian, but to enlarge everything as a poet’ as artistic hubris.³ Craving validation from ‘worthier minds’, the poet-dramatist presents the play as produced for ‘such as may merit oil / And holy dew stilled from diviner heat’ (Prologue, 19, 23-4).⁴ But far from being considered a lofty, vatic masterpiece, his paean to the perfection of *Sophonisba* has been found tediously sententious, a work of ‘patent artificiality of subject

¹ T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1951, 3rd edition), p. 233; Philip J. Finkelpearl, *John Marston of the Middle Temple: An Elizabethan Dramatist in his Social Setting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 251.

² Irving Ribner, *Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order* (London: Methuen, 1962), pp. 13-14.

³ From the address ‘To the General Reader’, which is usually seen as a swipe at Jonson’s overly scholastic approach in *Sejanus*.

⁴ Quotations are from *The Selected Plays of John Marston*, ed. MacDonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) unless otherwise noted.

and moral assumptions'.⁵ Marston adapts his historical sources to foreground a contest between 'virtue' and 'vice' in marriage formation. My contention in this essay is that this does in fact reflect an 'agonized struggle' with early modern realities, one in which 'moral assumptions' are by no means as clear-cut as many commentators have themselves assumed.

Most of the play's detractors do at least note its theatricality in comparison with other neoclassical works, if only to decry an intrusive sensationalism. Ironically, such complaints often make the play sound more exciting than some of its defenders manage, many of whom stress the starkness of its playworld. As editors of *Sophonisba*, MacDonald Jackson and Michael Neill, suggest, somewhat optimistically, that the play's 'austerely monumental character... need prove no bar to its theatrical resurrection'.⁶ Another editor, William Kemp, praises Marston's 'simple' archetypes, 'unadulterated by... psychological and symbolic complexity' – which hardly makes the characters sound involving.⁷ To be fair, Kemp highlights the resourcefulness of Marston's staging, describing the play as no mere academic exercise, unlike the 'dead plays... flat, unactable things' produced for university stages; Marston's blend of neoclassicism and populist melodrama is, he suggests, 'probably better in production than in reading'.⁸ For Kemp, writing in 1979, behind that 'probably' lay four hundred years of (to my knowledge) non-performance. There has since been one attempt to stage *Sophonisba*, but no full-scale production.⁹ Few have called for a revival, yet T. F. Wharton, who maintains that 'theatricality is the core of [Marston's] talent', sees the play as his masterpiece.¹⁰ I agree, and this essay is a piece of advocacy for what is, I suggest, a taut, rich and highly performable play. I hope to question its reputation as 'a formal, austere tragedy', to probe what I see as its 'psychological and symbolic complexity', and to make a case for its power to move an audience. This is not to suggest that it offers no pleasures for a *reader*

⁵ David A. Blostein, Introduction to *The Fawn* by John Marston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), pp. 11-12.

⁶ Jackson and Neill, Introductory Note to *Sophonisba*, p. 400.

⁷ William Kemp, Introduction to *John Marston's 'The Wonder of Women or the Tragedy of Sophonisba'*: *A Critical Edition*, ed. by William Kemp (New York and London: Garland, 1979), pp. 22-3.

⁸ Kemp, pp. 23, 32.

⁹ Headfirst Theatre performed a shortened version at the White Bear Theatre, London, 1991, with a cast of five actors (dir. Nigel Ward). I thank Charles Cathcart for this information; he saw the production and felt that the cuts and doubling resulted in a lack of clarity, an impression confirmed in a brief *City Limits* review (Ian Shuttleworth, 1991, viewed 14 June 2017 <<http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/reviews/91066.htm> >)

¹⁰ T. F. Wharton, *The Critical Fall and Rise of John Marston* (Columbia: Camden House, 1994), p. 105.

– the verse, for all its knotty or starchy moments, is better than some critics allow.¹¹ Eliot detected poetic strength, though his praise – ‘the most nearly adequate expression of [Marston’s] distorted and obstructed genius’ – is amusingly qualified.¹² An appreciation of the play needs, however, to take full account of its dramaturgy, where Marston ignores many classical conventions, whilst drawing unabashedly on populist approaches and experimenting with a variety of visual and aural effects.

Recent commentary on the play has acknowledged its ‘totality of dramatic experience’,¹³ though the appreciation of localised effects has not always shed light on *Sophonisba* as a whole. My own interpretive focus in this essay stems from an ongoing wider investigation into tragic weddings on the Renaissance stage. Humanist and Protestant rhetoric placed marriage at the heart of civil society, as many commentators have noted. The high ideals concerning ‘This grand act of our life, this daring deed / Of fate in wedlock’ did not go uncontested,¹⁴ however, whether by those who held to ancient misogynous or misogamous principles, those who espoused an emergent libertine ideology, or those who mistrusted the control exercised by Church and state in matrimonial matters. Such concerns often dictate the choice and adaptation of source material for early modern plays across a range of genres. Marston structures his drama of the Punic wars around a series of ‘broken nuptials’ and in this, at least, it is decidedly Shakespearean.¹⁵ *Sophonisba* owes much to *Othello*, in particular, as a pacy drama centred on the bridal chamber; indeed Stanley Cavell’s proposal that we consider *Othello* a tragedy ‘not merely generally of marriage but specifically of the wedding night’ could stand equally for *Sophonisba*.¹⁶ In both plays the delayed consummation or wedded-yet-unbedded structure of romance is put to innovative tragic use. My focus on the ‘tragic wedding’ plot will not, of course, illuminate all aspects of the play – the best overview is still probably Peter Ure’s 1949

¹¹ Finkelppearl calls the language ‘undramatic’ ‘absurd’ ‘frigid’ and ‘sententious’ (pp. 249-53). Charles Osborne McDonald deplores its ‘rhetorical overttness and unpoetic mechanicalness’; see *The Rhetoric of Tragedy: Form in Stuart Drama* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966), p. 159.

¹² Eliot, p. 230.

¹³ Michael Scott, ‘Ill-mannered Marston’, in *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-visions* ed. by T.F. Wharton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 212-230 (p. 225).

¹⁴ Fletcher and Shakespeare, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1.1.164-5), ed. by Lois Potter (London: Arden, 1997).

¹⁵ See Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 131.

‘reconsideration’¹⁷ – but I hope to draw out the variety and vitality in Marston’s distinctive blend of romantic tragedy and Roman history play.

Marston often directly addressed those he termed his ‘Select and most respected auditors’, playgoers who attended boy company performances at London’s indoor theatres.¹⁸ Many were young unmarried gentlemen of the Inns of Court, a group to which Marston himself belonged until his marriage in 1605. The literary output associated with the Inns explores a range of romantic and sexual codes and orientations – libertinism, Petrarchism, homoeroticism – and Marston’s own theatrical roots are in the ‘provocative libertinism’ and ‘learned play’ of the Middle Temple revels.¹⁹ For all this, marriage was considered ‘the gateway to manhood’ and ‘central to patriarchal privilege’,²⁰ and all of Marston’s plays, whatever their setting, address the matrimonial hopes and fears of his social circle. His comedies offer dialectical explorations of romantic idealism and scepticism, courtship and debauchery, ultimately promoting marriage based on the principle of ‘modest amorousness’ (3.520).²¹ This oxymoron from *The Fawn* is Marston’s attempt to synthesise doctrines of erotic indulgence and restraint, passion and reason.²² A strain often shows, particularly in those works in which libertinism is most prominent, such as *The Dutch Courtesan* and *The Insatiate Countess*. In both cases a chaste didactic lesson is easily drawn, yet illicit threats to a licit consummation are dramatised in ways that complicate simple moral binaries – as we shall see in *Sophonisba* as well. Marston’s comedies often contain a serious threat to marriage, but tragic consequences are averted or magically undone. Where the threat is stronger, however, where tyranny or treachery is faced, both familial and political, Marston chooses the wedding itself as the occasion for tragedy to strike, as in *Antonio’s Revenge* and *Sophonisba*. The fear of a failed transition into stable and fulfilling adulthood looms large, as does the fear of never knowing ‘nuptial sweetes’ or finding the ‘long wish’d celestial place’ at the erotic heart of the companionate ideal.²³

¹⁷ Peter Ure, ‘John Marston’s *Sophonisba*: a reconsideration’, in *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: Critical Essays* by Peter Ure ed. by J. C. Maxwell (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1974), pp. 75-92.

¹⁸ *Antonio and Mellida* Prologue, 3.

¹⁹ Michelle O’Callaghan, *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 23, 27. See also Finkelpearl, Chap. IV.

²⁰ Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 74.

²¹ Blostein edition (see note 5).

²² According to Paul Zall, Marston wrestled with ‘the problem of the normality of concupiscence’ at a time when many ‘saw in the unruly passions sure signs of the depravity of man or of his weakness’. ‘John Marston, Moraliser’ in *ELH* 20, 1953, 186-193 (pp. 186-7).

²³ *Jack Drum’s Entertainment* in *The Plays of John Marston* ed. by H. Harvey Wood, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1934-1939), III pp. 199, 215.

Sophonisba was written for the Children of the Queen's Revels, a boy company which performed at the Blackfriars and which, by 1605-6, would have included some fairly mature adolescents, able to handle speeches that 'demand real virtuosity from individual performers'.²⁴ Marston appended a note to the Quarto edition: 'let me entreat my reader not to tax me for the fashion of the entrances and music of this tragedy, for know, it is printed only as it was presented by youths, and after the fashion of the private stage'. His instinct told him to retain his stage directions, even if they might be deemed intrusive or unworthy in a printed tragic poem. Marston does not necessarily, in my view, apologise for the manner in which his tragedy was staged, as some have suggested.²⁵ Rather, as Lucy Munro puts it, 'Marston actively negotiates with the fact of his performance, and with the specifics of that performance'.²⁶ Genevieve Love's detailed analysis of *Sophonisba*'s stage directions focuses on erotic representation in its three bedchamber scenes.²⁷ My discussion follows suit, though with more emphasis on how theatrical effects serve characterisation and the narrative arc.

H. Harvey Wood describes one of the bedchamber scenes, the Erictho episode, as 'of the same character as those bedroom deceptions in which the Restoration audiences delighted. It belongs in spirit to the London of Aphra Behn, not the Carthage of Hannibal'.²⁸ Marston's tragedies are disfigured, Wood suggests, by his crass populist instincts, his appeals to the 'baser' as opposed to the 'graver' sort.²⁹ It is precisely this blend of *base* and *grave*, of bedroom farce and elevated tragedy, which we might rather value in Marston's drama of the wedding night. Renaissance stagings of the *Sophonisba* story tend to fall short because the noble Carthaginian protagonist, so wily and passionate in the historical sources, is made a bland, if undeniably brave, pattern of virtue.³⁰ Marston's alternative title, *The Wonder of Women*, presents his heroine as a cynosure, but the playwright energises the narrative in crucial ways. He brilliantly synthesises the two

²⁴ Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 143.

²⁵ E.g. Jackson and Neill p. 481; Peter Corbin and Douglas Sedge, Introduction to *Three Jacobean Witchcraft Plays* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 4-5.

²⁶ Munro, p. 145.

²⁷ Genevieve Love, "'As from the Waste of Sophonisba"; or, What's Sexy about Stage Directions' in *Renaissance Drama* 32 (2003), 3-31.

²⁸ H. Harvey Wood, Introduction to *The Plays of John Marston* ed. H. Harvey Wood, 3 vols (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), III, p. x.

²⁹ Wood, III, pp. x-xi, xxvi. Marston himself declares a conventional indifference to 'popular' judgement in the *Sophonisba* prologue.

³⁰ See Lynette R. Muir, *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and their Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 185-90.

main sources (Livy and Appian), blending affairs of the heart with those of the state, ‘broken nuptials’ with political treachery;³¹ he makes youthful figures of the rival kings, Massinissa and Syphax,³² who represent opposing modes of masculinity in their contention over Sophonisba; he introduces the witch, Erictho, to the story, for one of the era’s most sensational scenes of the uncanny; and he avoids strict adherence to dramatic unities, liberating the action in a range of settings from the bedroom to the battlefield. Above all, in a major change from the sources, he makes Sophonisba a virgin bride within a ‘delayed consummation’ structure, separating the lovers, and thus turning them into romance figures in a world of realpolitik.

Sophonisba opens with a formally balanced dumb-show that demonstrates the play’s romantic oppositions, whilst suggesting its love-versus-duty and ‘maimed rites’ themes. Two ‘troops’ enter from opposite doors and ‘stand still’ as the Prologue is spoken. One is a Carthaginian wedding party, including Sophonisba in bridal attire. The other is a Numidian troop led by Syphax, ‘armed from top to toe’. Marston adapts Appian’s narrative so that Sophonisba and Massinissa are married, not merely betrothed, though, crucially, the marriage is not yet consummated. (Shakespeare’s adaptation of Cinthio for *Othello* places the newlyweds in a similar situation.) Syphax, the rejected suitor

grows black; for now the night
 Yields loud resoundings of the nuptial pomp:
 Apollo strikes his harp, Hymen his torch,
 Whilst louting Juno, with ill-boding eye,
 Sits envious at too forward Venus. Lo,
 The instant night
 (Prologus 14-19).

The gods of marriage seek to protect the bride and groom from Venus, the champion of Syphax’s concupiscent cause. The word ‘instant’, meaning pressing or urgent, conjures the nuptial here-and-now, as love and war converge. The wedding party departs to a military march, leaving Syphax to deliver expository speeches which show him driven (at this stage at least) as much by wounded pride as lust. His rage is rooted in rejection:³³ Carthage has ‘slighted Syphax’ love’ by choosing ‘one less great than we’ (1.1.57, 68). He feels compelled, as a king, to take revenge, perhaps against his better judgement.

³¹ For Marston’s use of sources see Corbin and Sedge, pp. 5-6, and George L. Geckle, *John Marston’s Drama: Themes, Images, Sources* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1980), 177-201.

³² Syphax is an older man in the sources.

³³ Cf. Piero in *Antonio’s Revenge*, whose murderous hatred of Andrugio stems from being rejected by Maria. Sexual revenge is also key to *The Dutch Courtesan*.

Shoring himself up with amoral maxims – ‘Passion is reason when it speaks from might’; ‘that’s lawful which doth please’ (1.1.76; 4.1.190) – Syphax embodies unbridled tyranny and a twisted Epicureanism.

The bridal chamber scene that follows repays close attention; its subtleties have not always been appreciated, with the result that interpretations of the love story often get off on the wrong foot. Sophonisba enters the bedchamber ‘*in her night attire*’, accompanied by waiting-women. Her opening commands – ‘Watch at the doors; and till we be reposed / Let no one enter. Zanthia, undo me’ (1.2.1-2) – afford the audience a sense of privileged access. The Blackfriars, as a candlelit indoor theatre, would have added to the sense of domestic intimacy as the royal bride is readied for bed. The playgoers become like the personified candles of *Antonio and Mellida*, able to spy into ‘nocturnal court delights’.³⁴ A voyeuristic impulse runs through Marston’s work – ‘O, if that candlelight were made a poet’ – but here the tone is delicately comic rather than prurient or titillating. Sophonisba protests over delays ‘forced by ceremony’, creating ‘Long expectations, all against known wishes’ (1.2.10, 12).³⁵ She boldly acknowledges her desire, disdaining the role of coy bride: ‘We must still seem to fly what we most seek’ (13). Yet as soon as music announces Massinissa’s approach, she insists on ceremony: laid ‘*in a fair bed*’, with curtains drawn, she calls (‘help, keep yet the doors!’) for a customary mock-barring of the groom (34). A mix of anticipation and apprehension is touchingly conveyed. Her maid, Zanthia, pitches in with some fescennine innuendo, joking about her girdle (‘*You had been undone if you had not been undone*’) and the height of her shoes (‘’Tis wonder, madam, you tread not awry’) (4, 30).³⁶ Zanthia admits the bridegroom with a blessing on her mistress: ‘Fair fall you lady’ (35). But amidst the good humour ominous notes are struck. Whilst Zanthia argues *for* ceremony, suggesting that without ‘civil fashion’ women ‘fall to all contempt’ (25-6), each of her jests unwittingly foreshadows a tragic ‘fall’, a going ‘awry’, or being ‘undone’ – as well as Zanthia’s own treacherous role in the attempt to ‘undo’ Sophonisba.

The ceremonial aspects of the nuptial occasion are richly drawn. Massinissa enters ‘*in his night-gown*’ accompanied by Carthaginian nobles and captains, including Asdrubal, Sophonisba’s father, along with four boy-cupids who dance to a ‘*fantastic measure*’ and ‘*draw the curtains, discovering SOPHONISBA to whom MASSINISSA speaks*’ (35sd).

³⁴ See the soliloquy that opens *Antonio and Mellida* Act 3, Scene 2, esp. 4-16.

³⁵ Cf. Dekker’s *Satiromastix*: ‘what a miserable thing tis to be a noble Bride, there’s such delays... keeping Mistris Bride so long up from sweeter Revels’ (1.1.46-50). *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. by Fredson Bowers, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), vol. 1.

³⁶ Heels were associated with wantonness; tread was a slang term for sex. See Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature* (Cambridge: The Athlone Press, 1994).

The last phrase is significant, given that the bridegroom's words actually address Juno (goddess of marriage) and Apollo (Carthage's patron): 'You powers of joy, gods of a happy bed', who 'give modest heat / And temperate graces!' (36, 39-40). This signals sexual restraint, but before we assign, as some have done, a romantic coolness to Massinissa, we should remember that he is at this point on public show in the bridal chamber. The groom's *attention* is certainly directed toward his bride, upon whom he advances; the actor playing Massinissa must reach the bed by the phrase 'temperate graces', for here he '*draws a white ribbon forth of the bed, as from the waist of SOPHONISBA*', calling out 'Lo, I unloose thy waist. / She that is just in love is godlike chaste. / *Io to Hymen!*' (40-2). The maiden girdle is, with a flourish, 'undone'. A chorus of '*cornets, organ, and voices*' ensues. Each of these features has an affective impact: utilising the collective skills of the Children of the Queen's Revels, Marston generates an impressive 'informational polyphony'.³⁷ As Love notes, the scene's 'striking visual and aural effects... heighten playgoers' anticipation of the consummation'.³⁸ Again, the ceremonials serve to further delay the actual union. Sophonisba retains her maidenhead despite the symbolic untying of her virgin-knot. Given what follows, this might be a stage-emblem for which T.S. Eliot, an admirer of the play, could supply the motto: 'Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow'.³⁹

Marston presents a tension between decorum and desire throughout the scene. The suddenly coy or fearful princess had withdrawn behind the bed-curtains, but once she is 'discovered' and under public scrutiny she dismisses again the 'modest silence' and 'bashful feignings' (42, 45) expected of a bride:

What I dare think I boldly speak:
 After my word my well-bold action rusheth.
 In open flame then passion break!
 Where virtue prompts, thought, word, act never blusheth.
 (1.2.47-50)

This is in line (albeit in more serious vein) with the healthy concupiscence, or 'modest amorousness', asserted by some of Marston's comic heroines.⁴⁰ The sense of outspokenness is reminiscent of Desdemona too, proclaiming her desires before the

³⁷ Barthes's notion of theatricality: Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays* trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 262.

³⁸ Love, p. 3.

³⁹ 'The Hollow Men', section V.

⁴⁰ E.g. Dulcimel in *The Fawn* and Crispinella in *The Dutch Courtesan*.

senate. Further choruses to Hymen follow, but the ‘gods of a happy bed’ do not prove propitious. Just as the ceremony reaches its climax, the bridal chamber is entered – penetrated – by a senator, Carthalon, ‘*his sword drawn, his body wounded, his shield struck full of darts; MASSINISSA being ready for bed*’ (62sd). The ‘broken nuptials’ staging has great immediacy. Some might consider the long Nuntius-style report that follows, telling of an attack launched by the Romans and Syphax, a neoclassical yawn, but it is a vivid account (and no longer than comparable passages in Marlowe and Shakespeare). According to Love, the intrusion does not make this a tale of ‘unfulfilled desire’ since Sophonisba and Massinissa ‘react to this news less with disappointment about their deferred wedding night than with excitement about defending Carthage’.⁴¹ Leonora Brodwin believes that neither lover ‘shows the slightest displeasure’, since they ‘seem threatened by their own physical desires’ and ‘would seem to really prefer a completely chaste love devoted exclusively to the “godlike gaine” of honorable death’.⁴² If we take the lovers’ closing speeches in the scene at face value, we might well agree. Sophonisba, a fiercely patriotic figure in the sources, urges her husband to ‘Fight for our country; vent thy youthful heat / In fields, not beds’; Massinissa calls her ‘Wondrous creature... a pattern / Of what can be in woman!’ before marching off in search of glory (216-17, 227-30). As the sun rises and triumphal music swells – twin Apollonian blessings – the pair’s reputation as figures of epic restraint seems fully justified.

Such a reading ignores, however, Sophonisba’s earlier expressions of desire. And what of Massinissa? Love’s claim that he ‘departs for war without another word to his bride’ is incorrect,⁴³ though he certainly considers himself ‘prest to satisfaction’ first and foremost as a soldier (190), and swaps night-gown for armour with alacrity. Sukanya Senapati sees Marston as dramatising ‘the patriarchal privileging of the public, homo-social bond above the private heterosexual bond’; this is certainly a major theme of the play, but it is problematic when applied here, especially when Senapati goes on to claim that ‘Massinissa’s eager abandonment of his nuptials in favour of the battlefield’ demonstrates a ‘deep terror of female sexuality and heterosexual relationships’.⁴⁴ The psychoanalytical assumptions that lie behind this chime with what some have identified in Othello. There are significant parallels between their situations, with both called upon

⁴¹ Love, p. 3.

⁴² Leonora Leet Brodwin, *Elizabethan Love Tragedy 1587-1625* (New York and London: University Press, 1971), p. 75.

⁴³ Love, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Sukanya B. Senapati, ‘“Two parts in one”: Marston and Masculinity’, in *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-visions*, ed. by T. F. Wharton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 124-44 (p. 134).

to put military duty first on their wedding night. Like Othello before the senate, Massinissa stoically reassures the assembled lords of his libidinous restraint:

What you with sober haste have well decreed
We'll put to sudden arms; no, not this night,
These dainties, this first-fruits of nuptials,
That well might give excuse for feeble ling'rings,
Shall hinder Massinissa. Appetite,
Kisses, loves, dalliance, and what softer joys
The Venus of the pleasing'st ease can minister,
I quit you all. Virtue perforce is vice;
But he that may, yet holds, is manly wise.
(1.2.196-204)

'Manly' honour takes precedence over 'feeble' effeminate dalliance,⁴⁵ but, again as with Othello, the public role of Massinissa needs to be taken into account. Could what Senapati calls his 'scornful abjurations of sexual pleasures' be seen in a different light?⁴⁶ 'Virtue perforce is vice' suggests an ambiguity at least. Might there not be a sense of regret here, as Massinissa dwells upon the wedding night he actually desired, one that was not, after all, to be passed in 'modest heat', but in lingering sensual indulgence? Did he truly wish the temperate Juno for a presiding deity – or was he privately hoping for an Ovidian Venus?

I favour this reading. Marston follows Shakespeare in showing how the wider social world impinges on love's rites, and Massinissa's avowal of masculine self-control is, to a large degree, political. This is how the speech concludes:

Lo then, ye lords of Carthage, to your trust
I leave all Massinissa's treasure. By the oath
Of right good men stand to my fortune just.
Most hard it is for great hearts to mistrust.
(1.2.205-9)

⁴⁵ Cf. the merry but remiss king in Heywood's *Edward IV Pt.1* who does not let news of rebellion disturb his nuptials, and Theseus in Fletcher and Shakespeare's *The Two Noble Kinsmen* who departs for war on his wedding day, but only after significant hesitation.

⁴⁶ Senapati, p. 134.

Sophonisba is his ‘treasure’, but will she remain so? The insistence on ‘sudden arms’ which leaves the marriage unconsummated also leaves it vulnerable. Both Massinissa and Sophonisba acknowledge that her ‘choice of love’ has endangered Carthage (167, 189), and neither has doubts over what they must do, but an underlying ‘mistrust’ is implied, despite Massinissa’s professed faith in Carthage. His political instincts tell him that he is being outflanked. Sensing the weakness of his position, he calls on the homosocial ‘oath / Of right good men’. Carthalon reassures him of loyal support – ‘We vow by all high powers’ (209) – yet it is he who argues for Carthage to ‘break all faith / With Massinissa’ in the next scene: ‘Let’s gain back Syphax, making him our own / By giving Sophonisba to his bed’ (2.1.7-10). This is no monolithic patriarchy; treacherous undercurrents should be felt in the bedchamber scene. For all their dutiful compliance, the lovers are wary. Massinissa is not ‘eager’ to abandon the bridal bed through sexual timidity or insecurity – though he may fear, like Othello, an overmastering passion that will hinder ‘manly’ duty. His attempt to distance himself from Sophonisba arises not from aversion but *desire*: ‘Peace, my ears are steel; / I must not hear thy much-enticing voice’ (1.2.211-12).

Marston handles the public-private tensions of the bedroom scene with great subtlety. There is opportunity, when Massinissa and Asdrubal go offstage to change, for another touch of comedy as Sophonisba addresses the remaining lords. They are silent and no doubt awkward as she runs on in a ‘loose-formed speech’, delivered ‘From the most ill-graced hymeneal bed / That ever Juno frowned at’ (175-7). Her speech is at once submissive and defiant, a mix of patriotic fervour and thwarted passion: the princess is willing for Massinissa to ‘leave his wife a very maid, / Even this night’ for the sake of Carthage, but she also regrets that ‘sudden horror should intrude ’mong beds / Of soft and private loves’ (158-9, 161-2). Sophonisba declares to the departing Massinissa, ‘By thee I have no lust / But of thy glory’, yet she too is politic, sensing that loyalties are about to be tested. Why else does she remark that should her husband abandon the cause of Carthage she ‘will not love him, yet must honour him, / As still good subjects must bad princes’ (173-4)? Divided loyalties come to the fore in the senate scene that follows, where, learning of the plot to murder Massinissa and give her to Syphax, Sophonisba scorns the machiavellian senators but is powerless to alter their decree: ‘Carthage owes [i.e. owns] my body; / It is their servant’ (2.1.140-1). She declares herself a tragic paradox, ‘a miracle of life, / A maid, a widow, yet a hapless wife’,⁴⁷ and later envies ‘poor maids, that are not forced / To wed for state, nor are for state divorced’ (2.1.152-3; 4.1.35-6). Premonitions of betrayal should inform the lovers’ brave-faced parting in the nuptial chamber.

⁴⁷ A common paradox, with Mariana in *Measure for Measure* (5.1.171ff.) the best known example.

The loosening of Sophonisba's girdle, then, concerns more than her private being. She remains in a liminal state, a 'virgin wife'. Massinissa hails her as his guarantor on the battlefield: 'He's sure unconquered in whom thou dost dwell, / Carthage'[s] Palladium' (1.2.231-2). He identifies himself with the city, and his bride with the totem that protected Troy – until it was removed and the city fell. There may also be an implied sense of her virginity having a protective importance too, given the *Roman* Palladium and its association with vestal virgins. In the classical world generally, 'The maidenhead of city goddesses seems to have been in some magical sympathy with the unbroken defence of a city'.⁴⁸ Massinissa and Sophonisba are often deemed uncomplicated emblems of virtue, but Marston shows them to have a sceptical side. Massinissa addresses Sophonisba, but his message is to the senators too, warning them to keep his wife within the city, her virginity intact, or pay the price. But the message goes unheeded: the curtained bride-bed, that here seems a temple, with Sophonisba its idol, is to reappear in Cirta, in the chamber of Syphax.

The second wedding night scene, Act 3, Scene 1, opens with a visceral physicality that belies the play's reputation for static neoclassical reserve: 'SYPHAX, *his dagger twon about her hair, drags in SOPHONISBA in her nightgown petticoat*'. Despite her agreement to the senate, Sophonisba has made her loathing perfectly clear to her new husband, who rages: 'Must we entreat, sue to such squeamish ears?' (3.1.1). In Act 2, Syphax, recklessly confident of victory, leaves the battlefield early, impatient to enjoy Sophonisba. He has nothing of Massinissa's duty-first principle. Threatening rape in lurid terms – 'Look, I'll tack thy head / To the low earth, whilst strength of two black knaves / Thy limbs all wide shall strain' (3.1.9-11) – Syphax forces a tearful Sophonisba to the floor and pins her there. The contrast with the earlier ceremonial decorum could not be starker: here is the warned-of lack of 'civil fashion'. Sophonisba is defiant: 'Thou mayst enforce my body, but not me' (15). But when Syphax proclaims Massinissa dead, Sophonisba changes tack, playing for time, a dissembling, resourceful heroine. She flatters Syphax, suggesting – 'O, my sex, forgive!' – that women do not respond to effeminate 'timorous modesty' but to assertive masculine force (29, 31). Marston has her delineate what we might now call the Byronic hero of masochistic romantic fantasy:

Know, fair prince,
 Love's strongest arm's not rude; for we still prove
 Without some fury there's no ardent love.

⁴⁸ W.F. Jackson Knight, *Vergil: Epic and Anthropology* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 237. Jackson Knight notes that a woman's 'girdle of maidenhead' is released before the wooden horse is admitted in myths of Troy's fall (the same Greek word is used for both girdle and wall).

We love our love's impatience of delay;
Our noble sex was only born t'obey
To him that dares command
(3.1.33-8).

This sails close to the wind, as it could seem an authentic preference, making Massinissa seem 'timorous' by comparison. Sophonisba coyly keeps Syphax at bay as he attempts to kiss her; she inveigles the chance to fulfil her vow to make a 'most, most private sacrifice, before / I touched a second spouse' (55-6). Does she intend suicide? Quite possibly, though I do not consider her wedded to the idea of a noble death in an 'untainted grave' (129), as has been argued.⁴⁹ Her desire to survive is apparent when, having learned privately of Massinissa's victory, she restates her 'for ever vows' to 'That honest valiant man!' (93, 95).

Throughout the play, Marston balances true and maimed rites, civil restraint and anarchic passions. The scene takes on a studied neoclassical solemnity when an altar is furnished onstage, before which Sophonisba prays to 'Celestial powers' for a miracle (139). What follows, however, can best be described as tragic farce. Sophonisba carouses Syphax's servant, Vangue, with opiate-laced wine. He reveals that a secret passage, a vault of 'hideous darkness and much length', leads to a grove outside the city (150). Sophonisba marks how the cave-mouth 'opens so familiarly, / Even in the king's bedchamber' (148-9). This opportune discovery is again the stuff of romance, unsupported by anything in the sources. The phrase 'so familiarly' is unusual. Is there some erotic connotation? Caves and passages in romance narratives are often sexually symbolic, as in Boccaccio's story of Ghismonda of Salerno – adapted for the Inner Temple stage as *Tancred and Gismond* – with its passageway used for illicit bedchamber meetings.⁵⁰ Marston eroticises the stage space in works such as *The Insatiate Countess*, which opens with the title character discovered in a vaginal 'dark hole'. There is nothing so overt here, but there may be a subliminal sense in which Sophonisba escapes, miraculously, via her own intact body. This is an idea to which I will return, but more immediately we see that, like the best heroines of romance, Sophonisba escapes using her wits.

⁴⁹ See Brodwin, pp. 74-85.

⁵⁰ *Decameron* IV.i. Such passageways appear in various plays of the era eg. Middleton and Dekker's *The Bloody Banquet* and Suckling's *Aglaure*.

Marston utilises two bed-tricks in *Sophonisba*, bringing an apparently new *onstage* immediacy to the device.⁵¹ Sophonisba places the sleeping Vangue in bed and draws the curtains: ‘There lie Syphax’ bride; a naked man / Is soon undressed’ (162). Her tone is wry, recalling the ceremonial divesture that delayed her own consummation. The sense of bedroom farce is strong as she ‘*descends*’ through the trap just as the bridegroom arrives. Syphax peremptorily commands his attendants to ‘stand without ear-reach/ Of the soft cries nice shrinking brides do yield’, but comic suspense is raised when he pauses, telling himself to ‘take thy delight by steps’ (172-4). The Act 1 nuptial night is parodied as he approaches the bed in erotic anticipation, invoking Venus, Mercury and Cupid – gods of seduction rather than the marriage-gods favoured by Massinissa – and calls on the spirit of Hercules, the famed sexual athlete: ‘Let not thy back be wanting’ (181). But instead of ‘*discovering SOPHONISBA*’, Syphax, ‘*Offering to leap into bed... discovers VANGUE*’ (182sd). The latter comes to, and for a befuddled moment, both poignant and laughable, wonders, ‘is my state advanced? / O Jove, how pleasant is it but to sleep / In a king’s bed’ (191-3) before he is killed by Syphax. The original union of Sophonisba and Massinissa is displaced ever further, supplanted by perverse alternatives, here a perhaps homoeroticised murder.⁵² The tester-bed is turned into a grandiose Renaissance tomb: ‘Die pleased, a king’s couch is thy too-proud grave’ (195).⁵³

Marston contrasts the bridegrooms not only in their treatment of Sophonisba, but also in their treatment of social inferiors: Syphax’s murder of Vangue is the antithesis of Massinissa’s magnanimity towards Gisco, the poor man hired to kill him: ‘The god-like part of kings is to forgive’ (2.2.55). Marston invents both scenes to furnish the play’s ‘antilogy of passion-reason’.⁵⁴ Massinissa is not simply a stolid, rational archetype, however, as various commentators have assumed. We next see him in league with the Roman general, Scipio – a political scene, yet one that has a crucial bearing on the love plot and the rites of passage theme. Massinissa and Scipio have vowed a mutual ‘endless love’ (2.3.90), but Marston deftly exposes the balance of power. When Scipio professes amazement at Massinissa’s restraint in the face of Carthaginian treachery – ‘Where is thy passion?... Statue, not man!’ (3.2.21-2) – it is a *test* of the Numidian’s purported Stoicism. Massinissa, his grief provoked, verges on a collapse similar to those suffered by the boyish protagonist of Marston’s Antonio plays, but he steadies himself by looking to

⁵¹ See Marliss C. Desens, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994).

⁵² Senapati suggests a stabbing is likely, the penetration suggestive of ‘homosexual congress’, p. 136.

⁵³ In their edition, Jackson and Neill point out use of bed/tomb symbolism here and in the Antonio plays (see especially the Additional Note to *Antonio’s Revenge*, p. 509). Cf. the similar analogies in the tomb and bedchamber scenes of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*.

⁵⁴ McDonald, p. 155.

Scipio's 'god-like' example: 'Thy face makes Massinissa more than man' (34). It is at this point that he makes his fateful 'vow / As firm as fate' to be commanded by Scipio, giving 'Of passion and of faith my heart' (35-6, 40). As in the compact that crowns the 'temptation scene' in *Othello*, a homosocial pledge sounds ominously like a usurpatory marriage vow. There is even a hint of Iago in Scipio's moulding of Massinissa's passion to Roman ends, especially when he plants bedchamber pictures in his mind, counselling an attack on Cirta 'whilst Syphax snores / With his, late thine – ' (44-5). Massinissa angrily interrupts, 'With mine?', stung by the indeterminacy of the unspoken word, *wife*. He argues that Sophonisba would sooner take her life than succumb to Syphax, only to face Roman cynicism over female constancy. Massinissa responds with an encomium on 'steady virtue': humans who resist worldly temptation are on a higher moral plane than otiose gods who indulge in 'never-ending pleasures' (55, 57). This anti-Epicurean stance appears to put Massinissa firmly in the Stoic camp.⁵⁵ He looks to join his wife 'Above the gods', a 'faint man' transcending human weakness (55, 62). The word 'faint' is telling, however. This is, I suggest, where Massinissa suffers the unmanly 'faintings' Scipio will later remind him of (5.4.48). His Stoic pose should be recognised as hubris. As the Romans look on, coolly sceptical, Massinissa crumbles; he deludes himself to think he can abide by their creed.

Perhaps the lack of a stage direction (in a play more detailed than most in this respect) has led many commentators to take Massinissa's self-government at face value. But as Finkelpearl correctly observes, the view that 'Man will break out, despite philosophy' applies here too.⁵⁶ Massinissa suffers a physical collapse, not as extreme as Othello's fit, but similarly brought on by imagining his wife in bed with a rival. The idea that either man lacks desire for his wife is misconceived. Massinissa is an example of what Bridget Escolme calls 'a reasoning self that seeks continually to control the somatic excesses of the passions'; his struggle to exert such control is a vital part of his characterisation, since 'The man who is not passion's slave does not make a very successful dramatic hero'.⁵⁷ As in the Antonio plays, we see instability at the threshold of marriage and manhood. Marston prepares the ground for the tragic denouement here; it has been suggested that

⁵⁵ The ancient philosophical debate flared anew in the seventeenth century: see Reid Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

⁵⁶ Finkelpearl, pp. 245-7; Marston's line is from *Antonio's Revenge* 4.2.69. Stoic doctrine is considered from various angles in *Sophonisba*.

⁵⁷ Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion's Slaves* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. xxxi, xv.

Scipio is won over by Massinissa,⁵⁸ but this assessment should be reversed. Scipio masters Massinissa. Having seen the latter's greatest point of vulnerability, the Roman general again insinuates Sophonisba's loss of virginity: he commands a pre-dawn attack before Syphax can awake from an erotic stupor and 'unwind / His tangled sense' (3.2.72-3). This time the thought of disturbing his rival's wedding night – paying Syphax back in kind – brings Massinissa to his knees, literally embracing Scipio's iron-willed, imperial authority. He allies himself to a 'god-like' *earthly* power.

The generic features of romance come to the fore in Act 4, which returns us to the wedding night escapades of Sophonisba. She and Zanthia – the latter, bribed with offers of sexual and monetary favour, has betrayed her mistress – emerge in a dark forest '*as out of a cave's mouth*'. When Syphax enters '*Through the vault's mouth, in his nightgown, torch in hand*' (4.1.42sd), he grips Sophonisba forcefully from behind and again threatens rape: 'I'll thread thy richest pearl. This forest's deaf / As is my lust' (46-7) – the pearl signifying Sophonisba's virginity. The fact that both characters are attired for bed adds to the sense of intimate danger. When Sophonisba produces a knife, vowing to kill herself if he touches her, Syphax responds with a macabre necrophilic threat:

know, being dead, I'll use
With highest lust of sense thy senseless flesh,
And even then thy vexed soul shall see,
Without resistance, thy trunk prostitute
Unto our appetite.
(4.1.57-61)

As so often on the post-*Othello* stage, the audience is held in a prurient web. Syphax is a caricature libertine here, a proto-Sadeian connoisseur of depravity, though there is perhaps an unwillingness to entirely divorce Sophonisba's soul from her body. The more Syphax threatens, the more Sophonisba defies him, declaring her love for Massinissa. Marston makes her fearlessness and code of honour abundantly clear, yet the exchange that follows hints at possible reversals. Appearing to reject rape, Syphax turns conciliatory:

Creature of most astonishing virtue,

⁵⁸ Thomas Rist, 'The Wonder of Women: Virginity, Sexuality and Religio-Politics in Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba*' in *Marian Moments in Early Modern British Drama*, ed. by Regina Buccola and Lisa Hopkins (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), pp.111-26 (p. 119).

If with fair usage, love, and passionate courtings,
We may obtain the heaven of thy bed,
We cease no suit; from other force be free.
We dote not on thy body, but love thee.
(4.1.74-8)

Brodwin considers this a moment of genuine wonder,⁵⁹ but an aside, ‘Think, Syphax’ (72), suggests otherwise. Syphax uses the rhetoric of civil matrimonial idealism as a ploy. That Sophonisba appears to take him at his word can also be seen as strategic; she buys time, as in Act 3: ‘Syphax, be recompensed, I hate thee not’ (89). As Reid Barbour notes, ‘the triumph of [Sophonisba’s] unyielding virtue depends on some dissimulation’.⁶⁰ Marston creates a more multi-faceted ‘wonder of women’ than is usually acknowledged; Sophonisba is indeed modest, pious and patriotic, but she is also amorous, outspoken, astute and resourceful. She can be tough-minded too, as when she icily demands that Zanthia be killed over her betrayal: ‘Let her not be’ (86). Arguably, this is closer in spirit to Syphax’s murder of Vangue than to Massinissa’s forgiveness of Gisco, though it is not, I think, at odds with Marston’s view of royal virtue, which might require ruthlessness. Sophonisba remains, then, a pattern of virtue, but her apparent reconciliation with Syphax keeps the playgoers – including those who know the sources – guessing about the romantic outcome.

The ensuing third wedding night scene is original and distinctive in its stagecraft. Syphax has his supposed bride back in his power, but does not trust to having won her over. He turns to Erictho as a supernatural procuress. Their encounter bears no direct relation to anything in Livy or Appian, though Marston’s interpolated witch has a classical origin in Book VI of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*. This episode has attracted more comment than any other in the play, with opinion divided over its merits. As noted earlier, Wood felt that a combination of *base* farce and loathsome spectacle disfigures Marston’s *grave* tragic conception, though he acknowledges its likely popular appeal.⁶¹ Finkelpearl perceives the incident’s symbolic resonance, yet calls the language and action ‘totally unrelated to anything else in the play’ in artistic terms.⁶² Much the harshest assessment is that of Robert Reed, who deplores Marston’s ‘grotesque habit of embellishment’ and ‘unconstrained theatricality’, considering Erictho ‘a monster shaped and exaggerated by the distorted brain of the author’ and ‘a puppet twisted to satisfy the author’s immediate

⁵⁹ Brodwin, p. 76.

⁶⁰ Barbour, p. 189.

⁶¹ Wood, pp. x-xi.

⁶² Finkelpearl, p. 244.

whim'.⁶³ Eliot, however, defends the scene against charges of 'gratuitous horror, introduced merely to make our flesh creep',⁶⁴ and Marston's bravura staging tends to be praised by more recent critics. Martin White, for example, acclaims the utilisation of stage space and music.⁶⁵ Corbin and Sedge discuss the use of the bed and of musical effects as means of integrating theme and action, calling the episode 'central to Marston's moral scheme'.⁶⁶ And Love notes the significance of the overarching nuptial structure: 'The wedding night scene is again inverted and mirrored'.⁶⁷ I build on this notion in what follows, exploring Marston's unique staging of a marriage made in hell.

Syphax dedicates himself to the devil, or 'Infernal Jove', before summoning Erictho (4.1.93). Again, he could be seen as a caricature Epicurean, a sacrilegious libertine who reveres sensory perception alone, calls for pleasures 'more desired than heaven', and holds that 'Blood's appetite/ Is Syphax's god' (183, 186-7). Marston takes a seemingly broad-brush approach to characterisation, but again subtleties appear on closer inspection. Syphax does not indulge in goatish gloating, brooding rather on his own libidinous thralldom: 'A wasting flame feeds on my amorous blood, / Which we must cool, or die' (90-1). Why, despite 'full opportunity' (92), does Syphax not enact his violent threats and perverse fancies, twice allowing Sophonisba to talk him round? In turning to Erictho for aid, he implicitly acknowledges his powerlessness, his inability to 'enforce love' (5.1.6). He still plots rape, but would reconfigure it as mutual fulfilment: 'Sophonisba, thy flame / But equal mine, and we'll joy such delight, / That gods shall not admire, but even spite' (4.1.216-18). Where Massinissa aimed to be above the gods in virtue, Syphax wants to outdo their pleasures, tasting an erotic paradise in defiance of religion: 'Let heaven be unformed with mighty charms' (184). Such strength of passion, however overweening, might draw an audience into identifying with him as an anti-hero, a *fleur du mal*, especially when set against the less dramatic 'civil fashion' of Massinissa. And just as we saw a hint of the sensualist beneath the latter's temperance, we might detect in the seemingly amoral Syphax an underlying need for ceremony. His fervent hopes for the wedding night are not dissimilar to those found in much nuptial verse of the era. He requests epithalamic music in Act 3, and the musical conjurations of Erictho appear to

⁶³ Robert Rentoul Reed, Jr, *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage* (Boston: Christopher, 1965), pp. 161-3.

⁶⁴ Eliot, p. 230.

⁶⁵ Martin White, *Renaissance Drama in Action: An Introduction to Aspects of Theatre Practice and Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 152-4.

⁶⁶ Corbin and Sedge, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Love, p. 24.

exploit a covert desire for legitimacy. The witch, in her blackly comic bed-trick, makes her bridal chamber entrance to the ethereal sound of ‘nuptial hymns’ (4.1.211).⁶⁸

The Erictho scenes employ numerous musical effects, both eerie and seductive.⁶⁹ Erictho’s ‘mighty charms’ are accompanied by ‘*infernal music*’ (184, 190sd), quite possibly played by musicians under the stage. Syphax’s erotic anticipation is stoked when ‘*A treble viol and a bass lute play softly within the canopy*’ (200sd); ‘canopy’ either refers to the bed-curtains or to a covering that hides the bed from view at this point.⁷⁰ Treble and bass instruments suggest feminine and masculine motive powers. The ‘nuptial hymns’ are then performed ‘*to soft music above*’ (210sd) – on the upper stage, that is. These three tiers of music symbolise Syphax’s intent, moving from diabolic urging to earthly congress to celestial fulfilment. His comment, ‘Now hell and heaven rings / With music spite of Phoebus’ (212-13), suggests that even Phoebus-Apollo, the temperate god of reason and harmony to whom Massinissa appeals, is powerless against Erictho’s spell. Syphax believes that his wedding night will supersede that of his rival, proving his greater sexual prowess, though the conspicuous phallic innuendo – ‘make proud thy raised delight’, ‘Raise active Venus’, ‘Let all flesh bend’ (179, 209, 216) – might betray a measure of masculine anxiety. Marston employs a form of continuous staging to accentuate the strange powers at work, magicking Syphax from forest to bedchamber. The witch enters ‘*in the shape of SOPHONISBA, her face veiled, and hasteth in the bed of SYPHAX*’, then the king ‘*hasteneth within the canopy, as to SOPHONISBA’s bed*’ (213sd; 218sd). The ‘*as to*’ formulation might suggest a liminal onstage/offstage space that functions ‘more in service of concealment than revelation’.⁷¹ Nevertheless, Marston ensures that demonic consummation feels close at hand, particularly as the sensual music continues between the Acts (‘*A bass lute and a treble viol play for the Act*’).

By Act 5 the marriage bed is certainly on display, with Marston once more using it as a discovery space to create a theatrical coup.⁷² When Syphax ‘*draws the curtains and*

⁶⁸ Cf. the maleficent use of nuptial music in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* II.48.

⁶⁹ See R. W. Ingram, ‘The Use of Music in the Plays of Marston’, in *Music and Letters* 37 (1956), 154-64. Matthew Steggle notes that Marston’s use of music to comment on action is ‘seen at its most developed in the almost operatic *Sophonisba*’; see ‘Varieties of fantasy in “What You Will”’ in *The Drama of John Marston: Critical Re-visions* ed. by T.F. Wharton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 45-59 (p. 45).

⁷⁰ See Love pp. 23-5, especially n. 63. See also the entry on ‘canopy’ in Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁷¹ Love, p. 24.

⁷² As in the earlier bedchamber scenes here, and in *Antonio’s Revenge* Act 3, Scene 2.

discovers ERICTHO *lying with him*', he responds with horror, both to the cackling witch and his own culpability: 'O my abhorred heat! O, loathed delusion!' (5.1.3). The witchcraft episode, seen by Finkelppearl as 'a small morality play',⁷³ exposes the folly of unrestrained concupiscence, a message underlined by Erictho's sententious mocking: 'Know he that would force love, thus seeks his hell' (5.1.20-1). Poetic justice is served, with one evil trumping another: the lustful tyrant becomes erotic victim, the libertine learns that love has its laws, the rapist is, in effect, raped. Syphax wakes as a laughing stock, an abject gull, having, in a sense, *married* Erictho. The point is underscored in visual terms, with his post-coital 'discovery' of her an inverse of Massinissa's 'discovery' of the virginal Sophonisba. Another visual echo occurs when Syphax kneels before an 'altar sacred to black powers' (27), probably the shrine at which Sophonisba prayed to 'celestial powers'. Such reversals are part of an elaborate symbolic pattern, centred on the nuptial night. But is Erictho herself anything more than a gratuitous classical fiend served up to a thrill-seeking educated audience? And does the interlude add up to anything more than a 'small morality play'?

On the Renaissance stage, wedding night scenarios often serve as crucibles for the testing of desire. In the finest of them, such as *Othello* and *The Changeling*, characters undergo profound transformations, with natures destroyed or re-wrought in the tragic heat. At first glance, *Sophonisba* appears to fall short in this regard, despite the immediacy Marston brings to the genre, with three extended bedchamber scenes. The main figures of virtue or vice seem, in essence, little changed by their experiences. For all his humiliation, Syphax departs the stage in Act 5, Scene 1 bent on war and vengeance much as he did in Act 1, Scene 1. A change *has* been effected, though. Finkelppearl puts it thus: 'Through his contact with Erictho, Syphax becomes a gigantically magnified and distorted symbol of the overpowering, destructive evil of this world, because of which the purely good cannot survive'.⁷⁴ This could serve to describe Milton's Satan, an impression strengthened if we consider Syphax's entreaty to 'You resolute angels that delight in flames' (4.1.94). Marston's over-reaching tyrant bids for god-like fulfilment – 'Jove we'll not envy thee' (186) – but is cast into a hell of sexual shame. After his fall, he is at once a figure of despair and courageous defiance, who 'curse[s] / His very being' yet dares the Olympian gods to heap further punishment on his head (5.1.25-38). As with Satan, Syphax's refusal to be cowed complicates our response to his megalomaniac cruelty. Ignoring the didactic warning of Asdrubal's ghost – 'Mortals, O fear to slight / Your gods and vows' (61-2) – Syphax rises, energised, sustained by his atheistic resistance to the very idea of omnipotent rule. Massinissa and Scipio await, but the supernatural action and

⁷³ Finkelppearl, p. 244.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 244.

cosmic iconography bring a Manichean sense to the conflict, beyond the immediate love rivalry and imperial struggle.

Syphax's approach to 'Infernal Jove' in winning over Sophonisba – 'Since heaven helps not, deepest hell we'll try' (4.1.96) – has a Faustian dimension. He shares with Marlowe's Faustus a desire ('make me immortal with a kiss') for sensory pleasure that transcends its own materialist limits.⁷⁵ Comparing Syphax to the anti-heroes of Marlowe and Milton is likely, I must admit, to expose Marston's meagre lyrical gifts; I would not deny that he often strains for effect as a tragedian, leading at times to an 'unpoetic mechanicalness'.⁷⁶ That said, there is a good deal in the Syphax role for a skilful actor to work with. For one thing, the richly atmospheric 'informational polyphony' supplies some of the inwardness that the verse struggles to communicate; furthermore, as suggested earlier, Marston's treatment of 'lust in action' is always conflicted and highly pertinent to his primary audience of young gentlemen. His early satires display a fascination with the sexual depravity he mocks, and the temptations of a libertine path are felt even as its perils are exposed in plays such as *The Dutch Courtesan* and *The Insatiate Countess*. Like Isabella, the protagonist of the latter play, Syphax is an ideological libertine determined to 'hold firm' to his principles – he fantasises about the 'young beds' of other women, for example, as he awaits the conjuration of his bride (4.1.189-90). There is, I suggest, an authentically tragic aspect to Syphax here, as one seduced more by his own doctrine than by Erictho's supernatural powers.

Erictho demands our attention too, since these are her infernal nuptial rites. The other characters in the erotic drama face delay and displacement, but the witch's mock-wedding is consummated to her own satisfaction. Whilst much of the gruesome detail derives from Lucan, Marston heightens the carnal element, drawing on (largely Continental) Renaissance notions of 'a succubus, a devil in female form, who seduces and betrays men'.⁷⁷ As a character, Erictho has far more at stake than most stage witches of the era. She seeks a king's 'proud heat' as an elixir to make her 'limbs grow young'; her 'thirsty womb' has 'coveted full threescore suns for blood of kings' (5.1. 8-9, 19-20). Impregnation might be implied here,⁷⁸ a fitting irony given the 'fruition' sought by Syphax (4.1.209). Unhallowed sexuality suffuses the description of Erictho's cell (143-67). She dwells in a desecrated temple, where harsh calls of carrion birds replace 'sweet

⁷⁵ *Doctor Faustus* (5.1.91) in Christopher Marlowe, *The Complete Plays*, ed. by Mark Thornton Burnett (London: J. M. Dent, 1999).

⁷⁶ McDonald, p. 159.

⁷⁷ Corbin and Sedge, p. 6. The introduction of supernatural figures is firmly in the neoclassical tradition, though Marston gives Erictho an unusual prominence.

⁷⁸ Geckle reads the scene in this way (p. 186).

hymns to heaven', where 'the shepherd now / Unloads his belly' amongst 'tombs and beauteous urns', and where pornographic graffiti replaces classical erotica:

Where statues and Jove's acts were vively limned
Boys with black coals draw the veiled parts of nature,
And lecherous actions of imagined lust
(4.1.153-5).

The setting is Libya but 'the wealth of concrete detail here draws on Marston's own experience of England's ruined monastic churches'.⁷⁹ Henry VIII comes to mind with the line 'Hurl'd down by the wrath and lust of impious kings' (148). Given that sacred ruins were sometimes associated with fertility rituals – Alexandra Walsham surmises that young people resorted to them in the hope of 'discovering the secrets of love and marriage by occult means'⁸⁰ – these contemporary resonances might support the notion of demoniac conception. Erictho's cell is both tomb and womb:

There was once a charnel-house, now a vast cave,
Over whose brow a pale and untrod grove
Throws out her heavy shade, the mouth thick arms
Of darksome yew, sun-proof, for ever choke;
Within rests barren darkness; fruitless drought
Pines in eternal night; the steam of hell
Yields not so lazy air: there, that's my cell
(4.1.161-7).

Tree-fringed caves, pits or bowers have vaginal connotations in other works of the era, such as Peele and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. The latter's 'fruitfull' Mount of Venus, a fecund 'pleasant arbour', is the antithesis of Erictho's 'fruitless' womb.⁸¹ 'Untrod grove' might denote the witch a virgin.⁸² Does her perversity stem from lifelong frustration? Retained seed or menses were thought to produce noxious vapours – hence the cave's smothering, torpid air.⁸³ Only the potency of an 'impious

⁷⁹ Jackson and Neill, note to 4.1.143. Cf. 'I ha' seen oxen plough up altars', *The Malcontent* (2.5.135).

⁸⁰ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 71.

⁸¹ Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* III.VI.43-44.

⁸² In human terms, though her coupling with demonic 'labouring spirits' is implied (4.1.193).

⁸³ Early modern medical opinion held that the womb dictated female health; see Lauren Kassell, 'Medical Understandings of the Body c.1500-1750' in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body: 1500 to the*

king', it seems, can reanimate this crypt. Erictho's triumphant descent, as she '*slips into the ground*' via the trap, is not so much to hell as to her own newly fertile cell.

Some critics have defended the witchcraft scenes as an integral part of the play on thematic grounds. Corbin and Sedge contend that 'Sophonisba's essential opponent in the play is Erictho';⁸⁴ the pair are in dialectical opposition as sexual beings, with Marston setting sordid ungovernable appetite against noble control of the passions. If Sophonisba is a temple of civic virtue, 'Carthage'[s] Palladium', Erictho's cell offers a powerful image of civic collapse: the temple fallen, the gods neglected or challenged, the land open to invasion, saintly intercession replaced with diabolism, healthy concupiscence turned to disease and profanity. Sophonisba is associated with the sun's 'lifelike presence', dispersing 'fancies, fogs, fears', whereas 'the king of flames grows pale' at the fumes raised by Erictho (1.2.233-4; 4.1.135-6). The sorceress engages in an elemental struggle, earth against sky. She is the 'mother of all high / Mysterious science' (4.1.139-40), challenging Apollonian reason with her dark arts. Again, a sense of cosmic scale attends the mock-wedding of Syphax and Erictho. Marston offers a contest of extravagant sexual personae, in which chthonian female magic subverts masculine will-to-power.⁸⁵ Erictho manages her own fertility treatment, whilst accomplishing a female revenge on male tyranny. Put this way, moral binaries start to look less straightforward. Witches were believed to 'disrupt the course of benign sexual relationships and fruitful reproduction',⁸⁶ but Erictho, in her quest for fruition, disrupts a potential rape. A histrionic horror, feeding salaciously on corpses, she nevertheless drives home the same point as Sophonisba about 'he that would force love'. Here it seems that *vice* perforce is *virtue*. Should we view Sophonisba and Erictho as opposites, or is there a psychic affinity between them, though they never meet? In Livy, the defeated Syphax blames a sexually powerful and politically engaged Sophonisba for his downfall, castigating 'that fiend of hell, and lime of the devil', the 'pestilent dame, that by all kind of pleasant alluring baits, and flattering enticements possessed my mind'.⁸⁷ The historian, whilst acknowledging Syphax's malice, himself presents the queen as a manipulative charmer. This aspect is largely ignored or suppressed

Present ed. by Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 55-74 (pp. 66-9).

⁸⁴ Corbin and Sedge, p. 12. See also Rist.

⁸⁵ Cf. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991), Chap. 1. Paglia turns sex in general into a B-movie horror-show but her ideas are highly relevant to the Erictho episode.

⁸⁶ Hans Peter Broedel, *The 'Malleus Maleficarum' and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 26.

⁸⁷ Livy, *Romane Historie*, trans. by Philemon Holland (1600), quoted in Geckle, p. 183.

by Renaissance dramatists, who turn Sophonisba into a chaste ‘wonder’.⁸⁸ Marston is no exception, but in his readiness to ‘enlarge everything as a poet’, he allows the split-off illicit eroticism to re-enter the story in monstrous form.

In a brief note on the play, Marta Straznicky calls the sorceress a ‘dark double’ to Sophonisba.⁸⁹ The proto-Gothic aspects of the Erictho scenes might seem to invite psychoanalytical readings in which a diabolic Other acts out disorderly unconscious desires, but, to my knowledge, there has been little such discourse on the play. Perhaps the idea, noted earlier, that Sophonisba is an archetype ‘unadulterated’ by psychological depth stands in the way. Yet both women are ‘discovered’ in the bridal bed, one pre-, one post-consummation; both dissemble in order to play bed-tricks on Syphax, one to elude, one to ensnare him; and the escapes of both can be read, symbolically, as via their own bodies, if we allow the trap as part of Marston’s gynocentric design. Is Erictho a carnal alter ego, enjoying the wedding night of the heroine’s taboo romantic fantasy? Such a notion risks denying Erictho her own agency, and making Sophonisba’s love for Massinissa seem less than passionate, when the denouement depends, as we shall see, on genuine strength of feeling between the pair. But Marston’s decision to incorporate Erictho is a teasing one. Romance heroines, caught in the transitional space between vow and consummation, often pass through a spectrum of alternative roles or identities, a generic feature suggestive of uncertainty at the threshold to married life. Perhaps there is a sense of such instability even in Sophonisba, the idealised bride upon whose virtue civil order rests, which is played out subconsciously in the Erictho episode. Reed suggests that the witch is a product of Marston’s ‘distorted brain’. If that is so, the distortion is a creative one. Unlike Reed, I welcome Erictho’s outré appearance as a ghoulish shadow-bride, the stuff of conjugal nightmare for playgoing gallants.⁹⁰ Marston’s poetic and dramaturgical instincts told him that in an age of matrimonial idealism – the play is contemporaneous with a burst of epithalamic verse and masques at the early Stuart court – Erictho’s cell, haunted by English religious and sexual shame, was still part of the psychic landscape.

Masculine rites of passage are foregrounded in the battle scene that follows. Massinissa calls on his (one-sided) bond of ‘eternal love’ with Scipio, pleading to lead the war against Syphax (5.2.3). When the rivals meet in single combat, Marston underlines the conflict’s

⁸⁸ See Gillian Sharman, Introduction to *Sophonisba*, in *Trissino’s ‘Sophonisba’ and Aretino’s ‘Horatia’: Two Italian Renaissance Tragedies* ed. by Michael Lettieri and Michael Ukas (Lewiston: Edward Mellen, 1997).

⁸⁹ Marta Straznicky, “‘Profane Stoical Paradoxes’: *The Tragedie of Mariam* and Sidnean Closet Drama”, *English Literary Renaissance* 24.1 (1994), 104-134 (p. 121 n. 49).

⁹⁰ Cf. Marston’s comic litany of ghoulish potential wives in *The Fawn* 4.290-301.

dialectical significance. Each had looked to outdo the gods, in the name of either virtue or pleasure; here, Massinissa seeks divine aid to be god-like in battle, to strike ‘Fire worth Jove’, whilst Syphax sticks defiantly to an egoistic atheism: ‘My god’s my arm, my life my heaven’ (15, 40). Both ringingly declare themselves Sophonisba’s champion. Massinissa, exhorted earlier to ‘vent... youthful heat / In fields, not beds’, steels himself in phallic terms: ‘Stand blood!’ (1.2.216-17; 5.2.30).⁹¹ The sense of erotic displacement is felt in his first breathless question after victory: ‘Lives Sophonisba yet unstained – speak just – / Yet ours unforced?’ (45-6). That Syphax, his life riding on the answer, can truthfully vouch for her virginity is thanks, ironically, to Erictho. Massinissa shows magnanimity once more, sparing Syphax before swiftly departing to reclaim his bride, passionately declaring: ‘In honour and in love all mean [ie. moderation] is sin’ (54). The axiom sounds heroic, but Marston exposes its political naivety. Massinissa was required to put honour before love on his wedding night, yet still does not realise that an equal devotion to both is not always possible. His understandable haste, having been parted so terribly from his wife, leaves Syphax (more cunning now) to work his spite, even with Scipio’s foot pressed, quite literally, to his neck. As in Livy, Syphax presents Sophonisba to the Romans as a dangerous patriot who swayed him to the Carthaginian cause with her wanton charms.⁹² He dates her malign influence to their nuptials: ‘Her hymeneal torch burnt down my house’ (79).⁹³ Syphax implies that Massinissa will likewise break with Rome for his wife’s sake, a slander that carries more force in Marston’s adaptation since the purported *femme fatale* – a ‘woman of so moving art’ as Scipio imagines her (91) – remains a virgin bride.

Should Sophonisba be in bridal dress as she attempts to escape a besieged Cirta? No costume is specified but the use of torch-bearing pages and train-bearing women echoes the prologue, where nuptial and martial emblems were first juxtaposed. Encountering a Libyan soldier with his visor down, she implores him to preserve her freedom or, failing that, to ensure her ‘unshamed death’ (5.3.27). Massinissa reveals himself with another fateful promise: ‘By thee and this right hand thou shalt live free’ (29). Suddenly the lovers are alone together on stage for the first time. A brief romantic spell is cast with rhyme and ‘*Soft music*’, the latter fantastically conjured in the war-torn city, a heavenly counterbalance to Erictho’s infernal soundtrack. The lovers have been considered devoid

⁹¹ Cf. the punning on ‘blood’ and ‘stand’ in *Antonio and Mellida* 1.1.163-4.

⁹² Scipio already has his own reasons for wanting Sophonisba for his triumph, his father having been killed by Asdrubal. Marston keeps back this information until 5.3.50.

⁹³ The line derives from Livy, where Syphax and Sophonisba are in an established marriage. The action is drastically foreshortened in the play.

of desire, but the groom's nuptial anticipation is clear: 'Let slaughter cease; sounds soft as Leda's breast/ Slide through all ears. This night be love's high feast' (31-2).

What of the Sophonisba though? Is it the case that she fears excessive pleasure, since 'the physical consummation of her marriage would dissipate the power of her lust for spiritual glory', or that, in a Marian decision to forego carnality, she 'sublimates her sexuality to an ideal of female constancy'?⁹⁴ Consider her response to Massinissa:

SOPHONISBA O'erwhelm me not with sweets; let me not drink

Till my breast burst, O Jove, thy nectar, think –

She sinks into MASSINISSA's arms.

MASSINISSA She is o'ercome with joy.

SOPHONISBA Help – help to bear

Some happiness, ye powers! I have joy to spare,

Enough to make a god. O Massinissa!

(5.1.33-7).

There is trepidation here, to be sure: like Shakespeare's Troilus, and Othello too perhaps,⁹⁵ Sophonisba doubts her physical ability to cope with rapture. Far from renouncing desire, however, she embraces it with a 'god-like' aspiration. Her conflation of man and god (Massinissa as Jove) is telling, conveyed through a series of orgasmic 'O's: 'O'erwhelm', 'O Jove', 'o'ercome', 'O Massinissa!'. Her husband simultaneously causes her to swoon and stops her from falling. He offers an erotic promise she finds too much to bear *and* the celestial support that allows her to handle the surge of delight. She will 'make a god' – become a god herself, or fashion her husband as one, or perhaps conceive a god through their hierogamous union. For Sophonisba, this is a consummation devoutly to be wished, the companionate apotheosis, divine sensual fulfilment within a civil framework.

There is a desire for spiritual glory here, but it is to be achieved through physical congress. The 'delayed consummation' structure is seemingly fulfilled. Kate Cooper, writing on Hellenic romance, discusses the figure of 'the desired and desiring bride' who, sundered from her lover, suffers a 'long-deferred wedding night', overcoming sexual misadventures to be reunited with her bridegroom; it is a process of 'dislocation and

⁹⁴ Brodwin, p. 79; Rist, p. 114.

⁹⁵ *Troilus and Cressida* (3.2.18-29); *Othello* (2.1.187-95).

renewal' that replenishes the social order.⁹⁶ This is precisely the narrative design of Marston's play – until the moment of renewal itself, which is simultaneously the moment of tragic hubris. Massinissa's call for 'sounds soft as Leda's breast' strikes an uneasy note, if we pause to consider Jove's sexual violence. Syphax looked to be god-like when it came to pleasure, and Massinissa, in his moment of triumph, is similarly deluded. He falls for his own kingly publicity – as does his enraptured wife. Like Desdemona on her bridal day, Sophonisba is about to find that 'men are not gods'; this fact is abruptly exposed as the political world to which the lovers are answerable intrudes on their nuptial embrace.

Having created a new narrative framework, Marston returns to his sources for the famous love-versus-honour crisis. Reminded of his 'vow of faith' to an implacable Scipio (40), Massinissa is called on to deliver up his wife. He goes to pieces, caught between vows, though the male bond clearly holds greater sway. Told to 'make fit thyself for bondage' (78), Sophonisba makes instead her renowned decision to commit suicide. Her sacrifice resolves her husband's double-bind, allowing him to give her to the Romans *and* to keep her from slavery. In the sources, the latter is her primary concern, but Marston places equal, if not greater, weight on saving her husband from dishonour. Her will, she tells him, is 'To keep thy faith upright', 'To save you – you' (84, 97). She expresses a momentary bridal regret – 'How like was I yet once to have been glad!' – but shows unhesitating fortitude in ending an 'abhorred life' (90, 100). Her death scene is remarkably swift, with none of the protracted pathos found in, say, Trissino's neoclassical version. Massinissa supplies the poison for his sacrificial bride:

She drinks.

You have been good to me,
And I do thank thee, heaven. O my stars,
I bless your goodness, that with breast unstained,
Faith pure, a virgin wife, tried to my glory,
I die, of female faith the long-lived story;
Secure from bondage and all servile harms,
But more – most happy in my husband's arms.

She sinks.

(5.3.100-6).

⁹⁶ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 27-8, 35.

There is an ambiguity as to whether ‘You have been good to me’ relates to Massinissa, whom Sophonisba has just been addressing in the second person, or to ‘heaven’. Either way, the simplicity of the phrase is as affecting as it is questionable.⁹⁷ Did Massinissa not promise that she would ‘*live free*’ (29, my italics)? Can her trials so readily be reframed as heavenly blessings? She has been betrayed by her city, her father, her maid, denied the husband of her choice, threatened with rape and enslavement. In their dealings with Rome, her two potential husbands, one benign, one malign, create the conditions for her marriage-to-death. Finkelpearl contends that there is nothing to lament in her serene end: ‘It is not tragedy, but a positive and triumphant act to leave such a world’.⁹⁸ Sophonisba has lost her sustaining hope: she placed faith in Massinissa, only to find their ‘for ever vows’ trumped. Her ‘well-famed death’ takes the form of a sublimated consummation, one that preserves her, like Desdemona,⁹⁹ as a ‘virgin wife’. Here there is indeed a Mariological aspect to the heroine’s intercession,¹⁰⁰ making her an icon deserving adoration, a ‘glory ripe for heaven’ (113). Transcendence should not, however, blind us to tragedy.

From the moment their nuptials are abandoned in Act 1, the lovers (to adapt Seamus Heaney) lose more of themselves than they redeem in doing the decent thing.¹⁰¹ Massinissa’s ‘Virtue perforce is vice’ is perhaps the essence of his *particular* tragedy. He was a problematic figure for dramatists, outliving his wife in unheroic fashion. One solution was to have him follow her example and join her in a mutual *liebestod*.¹⁰² Marston, however, tackles his shame head-on. His Massinissa has been deemed Sophonisba’s ‘moral inferior’, a man ‘unworthy of her pure sacrifice’,¹⁰³ and he does indeed seem utterly craven, furnishing her with poison even as he exclaims ‘thou darest not die!’ (88). Yet Marston had earlier emphasised his ‘civil fashion’, showing him as loving, principled and magnanimous (more so than Sophonisba on the last count). He is heroic too, defeating his rival to rescue his wife. But where Syphax falls, farcically, into sexual shame, Massinissa suffers a tragic fall on moral grounds, undone, like Syphax, by his own doctrine. The pursuit of honour leads to shame, a shame which is, ironically,

⁹⁷ Some have found in Sophonisba’s final lines the play’s best, or *only*, poetry e.g. Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation* (London: Methuen, 1965, 5th edition), p. 89.

⁹⁸ Finkelpearl, p. 244.

⁹⁹ I agree with those who regard Othello and Desdemona’s marriage as unconsummated. See, for example, Graham Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 163-90.

¹⁰⁰ See Finkelpearl, p. 239 and Rist, p. 111-12.

¹⁰¹ See ‘Station Island’, section XII.

¹⁰² E.g. in versions by Jean Mairet and Nathaniel Lee.

¹⁰³ Finkelpearl, p. 245; Brodwin, p. 82.

forced home by the wife who looks to save him from dishonour. Massinissa is summarily reduced from a figure of prowess and virtue to an abject vassal, weeping and effeminate, politically outmanoeuvred and sexually subverted. For all the tenderness of Sophonisba's tone – 'Dear, do not weep' – we might hear an implied reproach as she reminds him of, and indeed steps into, the traditional masculine role: 'Behold me, Massinissa, like thyself / A king and soldier' (93-5). His praise as she dies in his arms – 'Covetous, / Fame-greedy lady' (107-8) – is double-edged, conscious of his own comparative ignominy. Sophonisba's insistence on the male bond's primacy brings a large reward when Massinissa ceremonially delivers her body to the Romans. Scipio lauds his virtue and (before a chained and envious Syphax) crowns him king of Numidia. His abject status as 'Rome's very minion' is, however, made all too clear (5.4.47). Massinissa's final act is to adorn Sophonisba, transferring his honours to 'Women's right wonder, and just shame of men' (59). Dressed in black, Massinissa stands as an emblem of collective male guilt, his worldly power a spiritual stain.

This is a restrained tragic denouement: no bodies are savagely mutilated, no *danse macabre* leaves the stage strewn with corpses. But Marston's final tableau has an affective power, offering the spousal pair as figures of death-in-life and life-in-death. Sophonisba has earned a 'deathless fame' (5.4.53). Her story never achieved the prominence in Renaissance England that it did on the continent, though chaste female martyrs were about to emerge as a major type on the London stage. Such patterns of virtue, often presented in arch or cloying fashion, rarely appeal to sceptical modern tastes. Marston animates his icon, however. His Sophonisba may not display the overt sexual and political drive of Livy's queen, but she is nuanced and credible in both her public and private dealings. Her turbulent nuptials are played out on an epic canvas, yet Marston creates a sense of intimacy, foregrounding the bridal chamber on the Blackfriars stage. The blend of solemnity and farce is (in these scenes at least) more Shakespearean than Senecal, to reverse Eliot's assessment. Eliot was right, however, to sense 'poetic genius' at work in the play, to detect a 'double reality', a 'pattern behind the pattern'.¹⁰⁴ This is less to do with the rather stiff-jointed verse than the 'accumulation of a series of juxtaposed stage images and semiotic set pieces'.¹⁰⁵ Through a command of structure and symbol, of parallels and polarities both visual and aural, Marston engages, as I hope to have demonstrated, in an 'agonized struggle' with the realities of his age, particularly those concerning matrimonial transition rites. There is indeed a double pattern to his 'tragic wedding' design, in which, like Shakespeare, he 'interrogates the binaries of reason and

¹⁰⁴ Eliot, pp. 230-2.

¹⁰⁵ Scott, p. 225.

passion',¹⁰⁶ of 'virtue' and 'vice'. *Sophonisba* is not a forbidding moral monolith, nor a neoclassical temple from which the gods have fled. It is high time that the play – a work, I venture, of *theatrical* genius – was staged anew.

¹⁰⁶ Escolme, p. 198.