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Opening the Casket: Transcending Boundaries of Interpretation in Mary Stuart's Casket Sonnets

Abstract

The Casket Sonnets, allegedly written by Mary Queen of Scots, were used by Marian detractors to justify her deposition and imprisonment on the grounds of her adultery and purported murder of her second husband, Lord Darnley. Their public presentation alongside George Buchanan's diatribe against Mary in the 1571 edition of *Ane Detectioun...of Marie Quene of Scottes* sealed their meaning as expressions of an inordinate female passion. These readings remain unchallenged in literary analysis of the sonnets, as Sarah Dunnigan notes in *Eros and Poetry* (2002): 'possibilities of interpretations other than the one in which contemporaries encased them is rarely explored.'

In *Seuils* (1987) (published in English as *Paratexts* [1997]) Gerard Genette explores how authors and publishers use the material surrounding a text as a way of influencing its reception. Genette is distinct in describing paratexts as a threshold rather than a sealed border; a point of entry which offers possibilities of meaning to a literary text and reader. Yet, in the Casket Sonnets their paratextual material has instead imposed a boundary on meaning: one inflicted without the consent of their apparent author.

This paper utilises Genette's work to explore the potential for alternative readings of the Casket Sonnets when removed from their unauthorised prefatory material and presentation. By reading the sonnets out of sequence and alongside works of other contemporary female writers in Scotland, such as Elizabeth Melville, I analyse several of the poems as displaying religious themes, questioning studies which frame the sonnets only in terms of feminine secular lyrics, yet do not acknowledge their explicitly anti-Marian, anti-feminist publication.

Keywords: Scottish Literature; early modern; women's writing

'Paratext is the term used to refer to the additional material which surrounds a literary text to present it to a reading public. It was coined and brought into widespread critical use by Gérard Genette, whose influential 1987 *Seuils* (translated into English as Paratexts [1997]) studied the myriad forms of these materials and how they influence a reader's approach to the text they surround:

> For us, accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or - a word Borges used apropos of a preface - a "vestibule" that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. (1997, p.1-2)

If a paratext is a threshold as Genette states, then it is an open door through which the reader enters a text – one which can ultimately influence their reading of the text. Indeed, Genette argues that the paratext:

> constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that - whether well or poorly understood and achieved - is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (p.2)

> This focus on authorial agency carries throughout Genette's theory; he openly declares that 'something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it' (p.9). Though Genette concedes that 'the ways and means of the paratext change continually, depending on period, culture, genre, author, work, and edition' (p.3), his study almost exclusively refers to the modern book and a modern notion of authorial agency. If we agree with his contention that 'a text without a paratext does not exist and has never existed' (p.3), this single-minded attention to modern conventions is problematic, as it defines adaptive textual features by a very narrow, concrete definition. More recent critics acknowledge that *Seuils* pays insufficient attention to changing print conventions throughout history (Smith & Wilson 2011, p.2), and have extended Genette's work in reference to different historical periods. Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, for example, argue that rather than constituting a 'vestibule', renaissance paratexts can be described as:
>
> an ever-expanding labyrinth, as likely to lead to a frustrating dead-end as to a carefully built pathway, or to deposit the reader back outside the building rather than guide him or her into the text. (2011, p.6)

This article utilises this notion of the threshold to argue that the paratexts surrounding the print presentation of the Casket Sonnets, attributed to Mary Queen of Scots, have historically acted as a boundary to their interpretation – a closed door, in place of an open one. As literary texts in which their alleged author cannot be considered present in their publication, the Casket Sonnets contain the potential for alternative readings to those which their paratexts assigned them. Namely, considering that the paratextual material which attempts to prescribe only an amatory reading to the sonnets were not authorised by the sequence's alleged author,

I promote the possibility of re-reading the sequence's desiring voice as devotional, rather than amatory. By understanding their complex publication history but removing them from their unauthorised prefatory material and reading them anew, the sonnets can stand as literary texts in themselves, free from the confines of their historical-political context.

The Casket Sonnets are a sequence of eleven sonnets and a sestain, in which an unnamed female speaker declares her constant love and desire for an unnamed male beloved who is married to another woman. In this, the sequence notably reverses the conventional gendered relationship between male desiring subject, and female desired object of early modern erotic verse. Unlike the typical speaker of Petrarchan love, she has already physically and intimately known the beloved, yet he, in the tradition of the beloveds of Petrarchan desire and Ovid's *Heroides*, remains distant from her, inconstant and unfaithful.[1] They are also, as noted by John Durkan, the first sonnet sequence uncovered in Scotland (1987, p.79). Discovered in 1567 in 'one small gilt cofer nat fully ane foote lang' (Buchanan & Wilson 1571), they and the letters they were discovered alongside apparently implicated Mary Queen of Scots in the murder of her second husband, Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, and an adulterous relationship with James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell, the man who had become her third husband. She had allegedly written them to Bothwell 'quhile hir husband [Darnley] lyuit' (Buchanan & Wilson 1571). Mary neither accepted nor refuted the claims of her authorship of any of the casket documents, though she was never allowed to examine them (Giles 2004, p.19). This, alongside the disappearance of the original documents in 1584, apparently at the hands of Mary's son James VI (Wormald 1988, p.176), has led to centuries of conjecture and debate as to whether either the letters or sonnets were authentically hers. As inverted Petrarchan sonnets, their content is tantalisingly close to the details of the Marian sexual controversy of 1567, whereby Mary had been accused of having had relations with Bothwell before Darnley's murder, and before Bothwell's divorce from his wife. This apparent convergence of real-life and poetic content has fed both sides of the debate surrounding these sonnets. On one hand their closeness to that real historical controversy has lent credence to the reading of them as simplistically autobiographical declarations of desire. The Duke of Norfolk certainly thought them genuinely by Mary, in 1568 describing them as 'divers fonde ballades of her owne hand', which alongside the letters 'do discover suche inordinate love betwene her and Bothaill, her loothsomnes and abhorringe of her husband that was murdered, in suche sorte, as every good and godlie man cannot but detest and abhorre the same' (cited in Smith 2012, p.154). On the other, the perception of the sonnets and letters as a readily-packaged assertion of Mary's guilt in adultery – and potentially murder – has led many to question their authenticity. Prominent supporters of Mary in her day thought she could not have written them, including her close friend the French poet Pierre de Ronsard, and biographer Pierre de Bourdeille, Sieur de Brantôme, who stated they were 'too coarse and too ill-polished to have come from her beautiful making' (Brantôme 2013). Additionally, historians like Antonia Fraser take issue with the elements of the sequence which do not align with Mary's biography – for example, she never gave her son into Bothwell's care, as sonnet ii seems to suggest (1985, p.478). In this school of thought, the sonnets may instead be considered forgeries by the Scottish Lords, meant to discredit Mary and offer crucial justification for her deposition from the throne.

Among the major reasons for their uncertain attribution is their initial publication and circulation. Although the manuscripts were allegedly discovered in 1567, they were not printed until 1571 when they appeared in *Ane Detectioun of the duinges of Marie Quene of Scottes*

1. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Petrarchan love, The Cambridge Companion to Petrarch (Ascoli, 2015) offers a holistic study of Petrarch's work and his literary afterlife, whilst Petrarch in Britain: Interpreters, Imitators, and Translators over 700 years (McLaughlin et al, 2007) offers an intriguing set of essays reflecting on Petrarch's influence in Italy, England and Scotland across centuries.

thouchand the murder of hir husband, and hir conspiracie, adulterie, and pretensed mariage with the Erle Bothwell. And ane defence of the trew Lordis, mainteineris of the Kingis graces actioun and authoritie. Translatit out of the Latine quhilke was written by G.B. The volume had been printed covertly in London by John Day, a well-known Protestant press and the official printer to the city authorities (McElroy 2012, p.52; Pettegree 2008). As the title suggests, the volume in its entirety was constructed as a case against Mary, with prose tracts entitled the 'detectioun' and 'oratioun' outrightly accusing her of collusion in the murder of Darnley and her adultery with Bothwell. The sonnets were included within this volume as supporting evidence for Mary's guilt, as outlined in the preceding tracts, of 'mad loue, infamous adulterie and vile parricide' (Buchanan & Wilson 1571).

The 'detectioun' had originally been written in Latin by Scottish classicist, historian and Marian supporter-turned-detractor George Buchanan as a 'covering letter' (Phillips 1964, p.62; McElroy 2012, p.51) for the Casket Letters and Sonnets when they were presented as evidence against Mary at the conferences at York and Westminster in 1568, ordered by Elizabeth I to ascertain whether Mary's removal from her throne had been legitimate (Wormald 1988, p.175).[2] Buchanan, however, had likely never intended the tract for print, at least initially, and neither had he authored the 'oratioun' (Phillips 1964, p.68). When the conference ended with Elizabeth's refusal to render a verdict on Mary's guilt, Buchanan's 'detectioun' and copies of the casket material remained in London, whilst the original documents returned to Scotland, where they would disappear in 1584. Buchanan's tract had only been sanctioned for print three years after it had initially been presented to the Elizabethan government, at the moment that the Ridolfi conspiracy had been discovered and put to rest (McElroy 2012, p.51-2). The 'oratioun' had been written, apparently on the direction of William Cecil, Elizabeth's chief minister, by Thomas Wilson, an English scholar who was later to become Elizabeth's secretary of state (Phillips 1964, p.62). Wilson too had been responsible for translating both his and Buchanan's Latin tracts into what he referred to as 'handsome Scottish' (cited in Phillips 1964) for publication as *Ane Detectioun*. This pseudo-Scots presentation was meant to authenticate the volume as the work of Mary's former Scottish subjects rather than the Elizabethan government who had actually sanctioned its printing yet allow it to still be widely understood in England where it was circulated. (McElroy 2012, p.52-53). The inclusion of the sonnets within this politically and historically contentious printed volume has served to solidify their status as historical-political, biographical texts, as opposed to purely literary artefacts. Rather than being published by Mary, their alleged author, on her terms, the sonnets were explicitly weaponised against her, used to discredit her public reputation, first in England, then also in Scotland and France.[3]

Despite this absence of authorial control in their actual publication, the presentation of the sonnets within *Ane Detectioun* by their paratexts works tirelessly to assert their Marian authorship unquestioningly. In doing so, they argue unambiguously the status of the sonnets as biographical documents relating to the queen's amorous relationship with Bothwell. The sonnets and letters are first introduced as items 'auowit to be written with the Scottishe Quenis awne hand' (Buchanan & Wilson 1571). This unequivocal connection to Mary is only strengthened by the printing of the sequence in first the apparently 'original' French, and then in Wilson's Anglo-Scots translations; even after her return to Scotland in 1561 Mary continued to be strongly associated with her upbringing at the French court and status as dowager Queen of France. Furthermore, the volume explicitly links Mary's guilt in the crimes of which she is accused in the prose tracts with her status as author of the sonnets, introducing the sequence as:

2. The matter being discussed was whether or not she was guilty of Darnley's murder, as that was considered straightforward grounds for her deposition from, or restoration to, the Scottish throne.

3. A more authentic Scots version of Ane Detectioun was published by Robert Lekpreuik at St Andrews in 1572, alongside a French edition published at La Rochelle the same year - both printed the Casket Sonnets and Letters in full (Phillips 1964, p.62-63). I will be referring to the 1571 London edition unless otherwise stated.

> Certaine French Sonnettes written by the quene of Scottes to Bothwell, befoir hir mariage with him, and (as it is sayd) quhile hir husband lyuit, But certainly befoir his diuorce from hys wife as the wordes tham selues shew, befoir quhom she here preferreth hir selfe in deseruing to be beloued of Bothwell. (Buchanan & Wilson 1571)

Not only does this tell the reader that they should read Mary as poetic speaker and Bothwell as beloved before they have a chance to read the texts for themselves, but it also introduces the desire housed within the sonnets as adulterous before the sonnets themselves ever announce it as so. By tying the language of the sonnets to Mary's alleged adultery with Bothwell, this paratext explicitly links her status as author with the prose section's character study of her immorality, tied to her gender:

> Sic are the natures of some wemen, specially sic as can nat bruike the greatnesse of thair awne gud fortune: thay haue vehement affections baith wayes, thay loue with excesse, and hait without measure, and to quhat side sa euer thay bend, thay are not gouerned by aduised reason, but carried by violent motion. (Buchanan & Wilson 1571)

This connection corroborates the charge of adultery, but also suggests Mary as a woman capable of displaying 'uvnnaturalnesse, hatreit, barbarous fiercenesse, or outragious crueltie' (Buchanan & Wilson 1571), and thus one who could have been capable of plotting murder as the prose tract asserts.

This biographical reading ascribed to the sonnets is perhaps the single most significant achievement of their paratexts. Although modern literary scholarship takes the view that Mary's authorship of the sonnets does not necessitate her guild in Darnley's murder, and thus her deposition from the throne, the reading of Mary as speaker alleging her adulterous desire for Bothwell as beloved remains a primary reading of the text, even in studies which privilege their literary status over historical.[4]

Peter Herman's study of the subject/object relationship in the sequence consistently references Mary instead of poetic speaker and Bothwell instead of beloved throughout (2002), and where *The Mercat Anthology of Early Scottish Literature* presents sonnet viii it footnotes the first mention of the beloved as 'James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell' (Jack & Rozendaal 1997, p.348). There is no room for nuance or an opposing critical interpretation. Thus, whilst Genette claimed that paratexts were always thresholds to a text, opening up their authorial interpretation to the reader, the paratexts of the Casket Sonnets instead created a boundary between the text and alternative meanings. As Sarah Dunnigan has noted, the casket not only represents the initial concealment of the poems, but also 'the symbolic "enclosure" put

4. Sarah Dunnigan's chapter on the Casket Sonnets in Eros and Poetry at the Courts of Mary Queen of Scots and James VI (2002) set the tone for future literary attention to the sonnets by asserting that reading them as Marian literary artefacts need not align them precisely with the details of her personal life or render her guilty of murder. Other scholars writing at the same time do read the sonnets as relating to Mary's personal circumstances, but still reject their status as evidencing her 'crimes'. Mary Burke's chapter in Women, Writing, and the Reproduction of Culture in Tudor and Stuart Britain (2000) is concerned with how the sonnets attempt to balance the disparate aspects of Mary's selfhood - her sex and her status as monarch - within the power dynamic of a romantic relationship, referring to Mary's subjectivity in the sonnets as an act of 'poetic cross-dressing' (p.102). This concern with the speaker's monarchical status is one shared by Peter Herman (2002), who reads the transformation of the speaker into Petrarchan desiring subject as highly problematic, because it contradicts Mary's own status as monarch. Danila Sokolov's chapter on the sequence in Renaissance Texts, Medieval Subjectivities (2017) shows that a focus on sovereign marriage and Petrarchan submission still preoccupies many literary critics of these sonnets. Though Rosalind Smith's early chapter on the sonnets in her monograph Sonnets and the English Woman Writer, 1560-1621 (2005) aligned with Dunnigan's work in not pushing a biographical reading onto the sonnets, and acknowledging the difficulties over authorship whilst still alleging the sonnets exist as Marian literary artefacts, her tack has changed in recent years. Her 2020 article views the sonnets as prosopopoeia - poems written in the abstracted voice of Mary as pertaining to specific events, but having not actually been authored by her. Other recent writers who have discussed the Casket Sonnets, such as Marianne Micros (2009) and Jessica Devos (2017) both also view the sonnets in amatory contexts - though Micros believes them as having been written by Mary to a man she loved (p.54), and Devos takes a less personal view, reading them as French imitations of Ovid's Heroides.

upon their meaning' (2002, p.16). An awareness of the context in which they were published is undoubtedly necessary in the case of the Casket Sonnets; without it, a reader may remain unaware of the ulterior motives behind their printing, and thus come to them ill-equipped to deal with their complex authorial, historical, and political status. Equally though, these poems are owed the chance to be studied as fictive literary artefacts, free from the Marian-biographical reading which plague them – an approach their complex printed presentation refuses to allow.

Though critics like Sarah Dunnigan (2002) and Rosalind Smith (2005) initially did foundational work in advocating for study of the Casket Sonnets as fictive literary artefacts, continued revision of their literary status can yet go further. Each, for various reasons, continued to read the sonnets within the amatory, sequential format printed in *Ane Detectioun*. The task of fully transcending the boundaries their paratexts placed around these sonnets requires further, more radical, revision and rereading. The one indisputable fact that *Ane Detectioun* reminds of, even if Mary did indeed write these sonnets, is that she was completely powerless as to their printing and presentation to a reading public. Therefore, even if we disregard the charge of outright forgery, the potential for their having been subject to non-authorial additions, redactions and tampering within the sequential order are high. Scholars of early modern publishing have acknowledged that sonnet sequences can conceivably be considered one cohesive poetic work or several individual ones, and that presenting poems in sequence versus alone can drastically change their meanings (McCarthy 2020, p.39-40). Dunnigan herself also recognises that the sequential order of the Casket Sonnets is unverifiable, and that there may be other interpretations yet to be explored (2002, p.18; p.16). This invites a more open interpretation of the desire housed within individual sonnets. In particular, as the rest of this article will argue, when removed from their unauthorised paratexts and sequential order, these sonnets can be reimagined as devoutly religious poems.

In *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature*, Cary Howie writes:

> Indeed, not only do fear and fascination go hand in hand when enclosures are at stake; fear is often alloyed with desire. Claustrophobia is, at bottom, in part a denied love of confinement: that is to say, it is always alloyed with claustrophilia. The Middle Ages had a particularly sensitive, and sensory, understanding of this. In the devotional texts discussed below, it will become clear that enclosure was unavoidable for high-medieval religious culture; it was not only secretly desired (through repression) but openly courted, constructed, lived in. (2007, p.14)

In his all-encompassing study of English, French and Italian medieval texts which also pairs with contemporary theoretical and pop culture references, Howie views enclosure as a mode that actually intensifies desire, rather than hiding it. This contention is a particularly interesting one to explore in the Casket Sonnets, where enclosure has been configured in both literal and literary ways. The sonnets have always been associated with enclosure – both in their metonymic association with the physical casket in which they were discovered, and in the non-authorial paratexts which accompanied their printed form and enclosed their meaning to the reader. It is this enclosure of meaning by their paratexts which has amplified the vocalisation of erotic desire within the Casket Sonnets. Mary's later poetry demonstrates that she was a writer concerned with religious subject matter, and this religious poetry is distinctly Catholic in its devotions – concerned at varying points with proving her devotion to God through works and not just faith alone. In Protestant Scotland Mary was the only person legally allowed to

hear mass (Walton 2007, p.12), rendering her effectively a religious outcast in her own country. Simon Ditchfield and Helen Smith have pointed out that religious difference in this era was often imagined in gendered, sexualised terms, and that 'sexual "deviancy" was tied to ideas of erring or heretical religion' (2017, p.4). Given the suspect publication history of the Casket Sonnets, it is highly possible that, if written by Mary, they displayed the devotional Catholic verve of her later poetry but were tampered with in their publication by the Protestant lords who deposed her. It presumably would not have been difficult to imagine Catholic devotion in the same sexually deviant terms later ascribed the Casket Sonnets, given the numerous Knoxian references in his *History of the Reformation in Scotland* to the papacy not only as the Antichrist, but explicitly as the Whore of Babylon (ed. Dickinson 1949, p.83-84). To reverse Howie's contention: by removing the Casket Sonnets from that physical and literary enclosure, erotic desire can quite easily be diminished in favour of more overtly religious devotional poetics.

Sonnet ii is considered the most controversial of the Casket Sonnets as, when read in sequence, it appears as the sovereign renouncing herself, her kingdom and her heir to the male beloved:

> In his handis and in his full power,
> I put my sonne, my honour, and my lyif,
> My contry, my subiects, my soule al subdewit,
> To him, and has none vther will
> For my scope, quhilk without deceit,
> I will folow in spite of all enuie
> That may ensue: for I haif na vther desire,
> But to make him perceiue my faythfulnes,
> For storme or fayre wedder that may come,
> Neuer will it chainge dwelling, or place.
> Schortly I sall geif of my trueth sic profe,
> That he sall know my constancie wtout fiction,
> Not by my weping, or faynit obedience,
> As other haue done: but by vther experience. (ii, l.1-14).[5]

This is a damning political act if made by Mary verbatim, subjugating herself and her country for the love of the beloved. Yet, when taken out of sequence, the sonnet can instead be read as a declaration of religious devotion rather than a politically controversial act of submission to a sexual lover. The opening line particularly displays these religious undertones, 'In his handis' for instance, linking to numerous biblical references to humanity as held in the palm of God's hands, as Jesus says in John 10:28-29:

> And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand.

And in Isaiah 41:10:

> Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right

5. All references to the sonnets are to the translations as they appear in the 1571 edition of Ane Detectioun. Sonnet number and line numbers are given in parenthesis.

hand of my righteousness.

The speaker's giving over of all that she has in both the material and physical worlds also evokes the bible as well as Mary's later poetry. Placing the soul in God's hands is a common motif in prayer and religious poetry, and the speaker's willingness to place her son into God's hands can be compared to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to prove his faith in the almighty (Genesis 22). This is substantiated further by the speaker's assertion that she has no desire 'But to make him perceiue my faythfulnes' (ii, l.8); like Abraham she seems willing to give anything to God to prove herself faithful and worthy of his love. Her claim in lines 9-10 can also be read in this way, as the speaker telling God that no matter the obstacles and trials he places before her, her devotion and faith in him will never cease. In renouncing her country and her subjects she can be seen to offer up all her material worldly wealth, which compares directly to Mary's later poem 'Méditation sur l'inconstance et vanité di monde', where she writes:

> In short, all worldly goods in human life
> Are quickly lost, and gained by bitter strife:
> How doth it serve our purpose to believe
> In vanities that flatter to deceive.
> We must attempt to seek a higher place
> For true repose, for pleasure and for grace.
> Where those who, pure of heart, find their reward
> When they return to the true Saviour Lord; (ed. Bell 1992, p.67-77, l.39-46).

The speaker renounces a life of luxury in favour of seeking a higher reward in heaven for her suffering and penitence on earth, directly comparable to God's testing of Abraham's faith and sonnet ii's insistence that the speaker will remain faithful despite the ways God tests her. Mary wrote the 'Méditation' in response to a tract from her close friend and fellow Catholic John Leslie, Bishop of Ross, who then published it and the accompanying sonnet 'L'ire de Dieu' in his *Libri duo: Quorum uno, Piae afflicti animi consolationes remedia: altero, Animi tranquilli munimentum et conservatio Continentur* (1574). This gives an added significance to the comparison of this poem with the Casket Sonnets: if she were capable of writing similar assertions in a devotional context in the 'Méditation', it seems likely she could also have done so earlier in the Casket Sonnets. A devotional reading of the Casket Sonnets seems less unlikely when that same devotional fervour can be traced in her other writings. Moreover, if reading the voice in this sonnet as authentically Mary's, placing her subjects in the hands of the God she prays to could be seen as a political as well as religious act. Mary was a Catholic queen of a Protestant country, so the sonnet could be construed as praying for the immortal souls of her subjects who no longer worship in the way she believes correct. Similarly, in saying that she will give her son over to the beloved, Mary could be construed as hoping that her country will retain a Catholic monarch even after she is gone, in raising her son – the future James VI – as a Catholic, against the wishes of Protestants in Scotland. That her son's religion was a real concern of Mary's is clear in the fact that she had James baptised by Catholic rites (Walton 2007, p.134), which suggestively gives this sonnet a very real religio-political significance. The closing lines of the sonnet, stating that she shows her devotion to God by her actions rather than tears or performative words can be read as explicit reference to one of the major theological differences between Catholics and Protestants during the reformation, faith alone versus good works. These lines seemingly demonstrate Mary's own Catholic stance, that good works are necessary alongside faith for individuals to achieve salvation, against the Protestant conception of *sola fide* (by faith alone). It

would not be radical to assert that Mary referenced these reformation doctrinal debates in the Casket Sonnets, as she also alludes to them in her later published devotional poetry. The sonnet 'L'ire de Dieu', a paraphrase of Psalm 51, makes a similar assertion about the efficacy of good works, with the speaker alleging:

> Those who seek to please you must maintain,
> O Lord, their faith in immortality
> And to mankind bear hope and charity
> And do good works, nor take thy laws in vain. (ed. Bell 1992, p.78-79, l.5-8).

Additionally, in the middle of the 'Méditation', the speaker reflects on whether salvation is earned through acts of penitence, as Catholics believed, or if it is preordained in the faithful, as Scottish Calvinists believed:

> For our eternal lot awaits in heaven,
> Preordained, a birthright to us given.
> But which of us, O kindest Father, still
> Can claim this fortune, save it be thy will
> That he abandon sin and all offence
> By having made a worthy penitence?
> Who can renounce the world upon his own
> To honour, love and cleave to thee alone? (l.47-54).

When considering the Casket Sonnets as authentically Marian poems within this wider corpus of Mary's poetry, their potential as explicitly Catholic devotional texts seems more likely, offering a completely different poetic context than the one *Ane Detectioun* ascribed them and arguably offering a more fitting thematic reading of their desiring voice.

In sonnet viii the speaker similarly renounces her worldly wealth for the beloved:

> My loue increaseth and more and more wil increase,
> So lang as I shall lief, and I shall holde for ane greit felicitie
> To haue onely pairt in that hart,
> To the quhilk at length my loue sall appeare,
> So clearely, that he sall neuer doubt.
> For him I will striue against wan weard,
> For him I will recerse greitnes,
> And sall do so mikle that he shall know
> That I haif no wealth, hap, nor contentation,
> But to obay, and serue him truely.
> For him I attend all gude fortune.
> For him I will conserue health and life,
> For him I desire to ensew courage,
> And he shall euer finde me vnchangeable. (viii, l.1-14).

In her assertion in lines 9-10 that she has no happiness or desire for anything other than to serve the beloved she again constructs herself in biblical terms as a loyal servant. The closing line of the sonnet ends with another pronouncement of the speaker's unwavering faith in the addressee, promoting a similar devotional reading to sonnet ii. This sonnet also demonstrates

distinctly erotic undertones in its opening line, displaying a desirous tension mounting almost as if to reach climax. Much early modern feminine spiritual poetry expressed religious love through the intimacy of erotic relationships (Dunnigan 2012, p.14). This has its roots in the biblical Song of Songs, which figured the relationship between the human soul and God in sensual terms since even before the beginning of Christianity (Flinker 2000, p.12-13). In this tradition Dante and Cavalcanti rooted their trope of the *donna angelicata*, which would later also be established in Petrarch's Laura, inspiring generations of western writers:

> Together these biblical passages provided inspiration for later western poets interested in women as a spiritual force with clear erotic desirability... The echoes of the biblical passage allude to a tradition that moves back and forth between carnal and spiritual, even as it plays oral against written in terms of the intertextual echoes of biblical texts that resound without being literally present. (Flinker 2000, p.22)

In *Claustrophilia*, when writing about medieval French hagiography, the writing of saints' lives, Howie also states that 'sex perpetually threatens to disclose itself together with, or in the place of, sanctity' (2007, p.38). Particularly in lyric poetry are the lines between sacred and profane love blurred. David Fuller argues that modern divisions between the categories of 'sacred' and 'secular' are misleading when considered in a medieval, or early modern, context, as for contemporary readers and writers 'there was no entirely secular realm':

> Religious feeling was often touched with feeling that might now be regarded as secular, and vice-versa: love had a religious aspect, because human and divine love were seen as ultimately having some relationship (whether of continuity or contradiction), or because certain sorts of love, or love in certain contexts, were sinful. (2010, p.14).

In her study of Scottish women's spiritual writing, Sarah Dunnigan has stated that Mary Stuart rarely eroticises her relationship with God, perhaps due to her self-censorship after the controversy of the Casket Sonnets (2012, p.14-15). However, when studying the Casket Sonnets themselves as devotional works, their interplay of spiritual and profane is given new weight. When read as addressed to a secular beloved, the speaker seems to sacralise her love for the beloved; her desire is, unlike male Petrarchan desire, never described as moral error, but is almost equated with the divine. In sonnet i, for example, when she prays to God to cease her pain by making the beloved believe her faithfulness, she equates submitting herself to the beloved as submitting herself to God – suggesting she sees them as one and the same. It therefore does not seem radical to assert that this sacralising of her connection with a secular beloved could be inverted to instead constitute an eroticisation of the sacred. This is present not only in the eroticised language of the speaker's increasing love in sonnet viii, but also in sonnet xi which openly evokes God at the end in a reverse prayer-like format, asserting her fear of others undermining her faith:

> My hart, my bloud, my soule, my care,
> Helas you had promisit that I should haue that pleasure.
> To deuise wyth you at leysure.
> All the night quhair I lye and languishe here,
> My hart beyng ouerset wyth extreme feare

Seing absent the butte of my desire.
Feare of forgetting sometyme taketh me,
And vther tymes I feare that louesum hart,
Be not hardenit agaynst me
By sum saying of ane wickit reporter,
Uther tymes I feare sum auenture,
That by the way should turne abacke my loue
By sum troublous and new accident.
O God turne abacke all vnhappy augure. (xi, l.1-14).

The speaker's opening depiction of the addressee as her body and blood evokes the imagery of the eucharist, in which bread and wine becomes the symbolic body and blood of Christ received by participants at mass. The 'hart' allusion also has a particular significance in the Catholic church, where the sacred heart references the literal sacred heart of Jesus. The speaker thus lays claim to Christ's heart as her own beloved. Furthermore, in dividing herself into parts, she again depicts the addressee in divine terms as the upholder of her life – he is her blood, her beating heart, without him she will die. She creates an erotically charged image of the divine literally being inside of her, the two merge into one entity, intertwining as if in the act of love. The speaker thus fuses religious rituals with implicit erotic undertones, creating an intense intimacy of desire for the divine. In lines 4-6 the speaker evokes a Petrarchan lover in the languishing pain she feels for the absent beloved, but the absence of God as the object of desire is also a trope used in other spiritual poetry. In Elizabeth Melville's 'Love's lament for Christ's absence', for example, the speaker states of her beloved Christ:

My martyred mynd doth turn and tosse
Oh if I could lament my losse
...
What wonder though I ever mourne
My sweetest sun will not returne
Who once did shyne so clear
Since he alace did first depart
Who can inflame this frozen heart?' (ed. Reid-Baxter 2010, p.43-60, l.32-48).

Though Melville was operating within a very different religious and cultural tradition from Mary in her radically reformed Presbyterianism, there are fascinating parallels in the way each writes in relation to God here. Melville's speaker's mind tosses and turns in the same way that sonnet xi's speaker literally tosses and turns in bed. Although the speaker in sonnet xi does not explicitly refer to the beloved Christ as the light or sun, setting her tormented waiting for him in the night has a similar effect to Melville's lines, constructing the beloved as the light of her life in Petrarchan terms. Each mourns and fears the absence of this light, rendering themselves martyr-like (explicitly in Melville's speaker's case) in the suffering they have endured for the almighty. These parallels to Melville's expression of her own passionate faith add another dimension to the Casket Sonnets as existing within a tradition of women's spiritual poetry in Scotland, yet due to the political and religious circumstances of their apparent author, they were not allowed to exist as such.

Although depicted in a less erotic way, this notion of suffering for love of God is also present at the opening of Mary's 'Méditation' in the same languishing Petrarchan terms: 'A memory of my bitter life doth creep | And robs me of all desire to sleep' (l.3-4). Again, the

speaker is left sleepless and fearful in the night worrying for the fate of her immortal soul. Going on to plead with God to understand and believe her faithfulness, the speaker in the 'Méditation' is constructed with many of the same fears as sonnet xi's speaker:

> Remember me and grant to me, I pray,
> Thy mercy's power and trust in it always,
> My love for you engraved upon my heart,
> An offering to replace my just desert.
> Therefore, my God, do not forsake me now,
> And when I reach my final end also,
> Following in thy paths, grant that it be my due
> That at the last I draw near unto you. (l.93-100).

Here, the speaker is anxious to ensure that God will not forget her love and faithfulness, she begs him not to leave her or to forget her love, which parallels sonnet xi's fatigue at the absence of God. Her declaration that her love for God is etched upon her heart also compares directly to the opening invocation of sonnet xi, but with a double meaning. On one hand the knowledge, and love, of God is literally inside her on her heart, and therefore loss of that love and faith would end her life; on the other, her love for God is imagined as being etched directly onto the sacred heart of Christ – her love for God is both close to her heart, and close to that of Christ. Similarly, in sonnet x the speaker states 'Of you I say onely upholder of my lyfe | I onely seke to be assuerit' (x, l.1), mirroring the anxiety of the 'Méditation' in the speaker's need to have her faithfulness and love validated by the almighty. The reference to the addressee as the upholder of her life again has distinctly religious undertones, mimicking the opening to sonnet ii with the biblical references to being held up by God's hand – God is her rock, and she needs him and his approval to be able to go on living. Furthermore, the speaker of sonnet x also asserts that she will follow the addressee with all her heart as the speaker in the 'Méditation' does:

> For that is the onely desire of your deir loue,
> To serue and loue you truly,
> And to esteme all wan hap lesse than nathing,
> and to follow your wyll with myne, (x, l.5-8).

Here, the speaker paints herself as a devout believer, promising to follow God's will with her own and to hold his word above that of all others. She again channels the same idea from sonnet ii, depicting herself as Abraham in promising that she is faithful enough that she will do all God asks, no matter what he asks her. Like in the 'Méditation', in openly declaring her faith she hopes to gain reassurance from the almighty that he recognises her adoration of him. Finally, the ending of sonnet x solidifies the speaker's faith and her martyr-like status, stating of the addressee:

> Louying nothyng but you, in the subjectioun
> Of quhome I wyll, without any fiction,
> Liue and die, and this I consent (x, l.12-14).

The speaker again shows that it is this divine love for the almighty which keeps her alive, and in order to prove this declares that she will literally live and die according to God's will. In renouncing her heart, soul and all her worldly desires for the almighty she depicts herself in

religious martyrdom or Christ-like abnegation. Once again the religious nature of this desire can be substantiated through the similar claims the speaker makes in the 'Méditation', where she states that her heart is no longer with earthly possessions, but with the divine in order to assert her true faith in God: 'In taking my heart from a world like this, | I'll seek to make it win eternal bliss' (l.65-66). Desire in Marian poetics can thus always be configured as ethereally spiritual.

Studies which conform to the biographical reading given to the sequence by its publication in *Ane Detectioun* are reductive to their status as fictive literary artefacts. However, readings which simplistically study the sonnets as an amatory sequence, without acknowledging their publication history, are equally complicit in constricting their interpretative possibilities. By refusing to recognise their material history, in which their supposed author had no part, the reading which their paratexts attempted to promote is allowed to continue unchallenged. In the introduction to *Writing Women's Literary History*, Margaret Ezell takes the view that 'critical studies should enable and enhance future studies, should enlarge opportunities for discovery and interpretation, not negate or erase possibilities' (1993, p.11-12); in the case of the Casket Sonnets this is only possible by acknowledging the boundaries placed around them and which much previous criticism has operated within. Knowing where these boundaries are and why they were placed in turn equips us with the knowledge to transcend them: to open the casket and shed new light on these complex historical, yet nonetheless literary, artefacts.

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