

CHAPTER 8

THE SIGNIFYING SERPENT: SEDUCTION BY CULTURAL STEREOTYPE IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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This is a later addendum to the main part of the thesis, and forms part of an extended discussion among lute scholars regarding the reasons behind the steady decline in popularity and use of the lute during the 17th century

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OUR CURRENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE symbolic meaning of the lute in the seventeenth century is as part of the general musical metonym: it conveys some message about romance, can be a metaphor for a courtship, or is simply one of the dishes in the banquet of love. This nebulous image is commonplace and is one familiar to any scholar of art or literature from this period.¹ Although most authors recognise that the lute is not simply a prop but also holds a symbolic place, few attempt to define its specific meaning without treating it as simply another part of the language of music. The emblematic use of the lute is much more complex than it appears at first glance: it represented very specific sub-texts, depending on the way in which it was employed.

In England, the lute enjoyed a period of immense popularity between about 1570 and 1630, after which it declined continuously until, by 1700, it had almost fallen out of use altogether. The lute's decline in Italy a century earlier has been linked by Victor Coelho to the rise of humanism,² but the impact of that philosophy in England was not so dramatic, and in particular the decline of the lute in England seems to owe more to the symbolism that had grown up around it. By the middle of the seventeenth century it had become both an instrument of immense expressive power, and a metaphor for sex. This paper examines images that had grown up specifically around the lute in early modern England, and the way in which they were used by writers and artists (obviously, this ignores the use of the instrument in religious contexts, and concentrates only on secular representations). Despite the fact that none of the contemporary sources discusses this symbolism directly, it is possible to understand its connotations by extrapolating the meaning back from the images themselves. The picture that emerges is one of increasing power—both natural and supernatural—wielded by an inanimate object, an object that progresses from being a simple emblem meaning 'sex' to a living, breathing, feeling, entity in its own right.

From its origins, the lute had been allegorically associated with fertility; its rounded back minding the observer of the pregnant belly of a woman, an image used by Francesco del Cossa in the detail of *April* (c1465), that shows the triumph of Venus, where the lute is held pendant before the womb. In Baldung's *Ages of Womankind* (1540), the lute signals the fertile part of the woman's life, [See also: *The Four Ages of Man* (c1625), Moise Valentin (c1591/4-1632)] and Valentin's *Four Ages of Man* conveys a similar message, where the lute symbolises the age of love and sexual dalliance. It is a short step from fertility and pregnancy to an association with sex, and in particular with women's sexuality. Giovanni Serodine's *Allegoria della Scienze*

¹ See (for example) John Hollander: *The Untuning of the Sky* (Princeton NJ, 1961); Lawrence J Ross: 'Shakespeare's "Dull Clown" and Symbolic Music', *Shakespeare Quarterly* xvii (1966); and Gretchen L Finney: 'A world of Instruments' *ELH* xx (1953).

² Victor Coelho: 'L'ultima parte: Some Perspectives on the Decline of the Lute in Seventeenth-Century Italy' in *Music and Science in the Age of Galileo* (London, 1992)

(c1630), comes from a tradition in which lacteal baptism was a sign of the blessing of the gods or the muses. In his representation, though, the muse is unable to baptise the lute, which symbolises the fertile and creative aspect of science as opposed to its theoretical and non-creative side. Between this and the other symbols in the picture the message is clear: science is dying, and the world order is only precariously balanced.³

The association with sex was not an isolated one either: Thomas Coryat's *Crudities* (London, 1611) describes the practice of Venetian courtesans carrying the lute as a badge of their trade, and also comment that the courtesans were often independently famous for their skill as players. In the Low Countries, painters had begun to employ an emblematic technique using objects descriptively in portraits from the early sixteenth century, to describe the sitter and his or her attributes as vividly as if fully verbalized. This is a hallmark of the Dutch style that was popular all over Europe and which had become an art form in itself by the end of the sixteenth century. Dutch genre painting, with its increasingly naturalistic style, was immensely influential in England: it draws on a code of imagery that was far more widespread than simply the Low Countries, and related to the popular, often crude and simplistic, metaphorical interpretation of the world. What did the lute mean in this language of images? The initial answer is very simple: the Flemish for lute, *Luit*, was also the word for vagina. This gives rise to a whole host of pictures involving prostitutes: *The Procuress* (1625), Honthorst (1590-1656) [plate 1], *The Procuress* (c1635), Baburen (owned by Vermeer), *The Procuress* (1656), Vermeer (1632-75), *Brothel Scene* (1658), Van Mieris the Elder

The three paintings entitled (by the artists) *The Procuress* show negotiations between a procuress and a prospective client for the favours of a courtesan. In the first, all the characters are gesturing at the lute, and appear to be bargaining over *it*, rather than the courtesan; the message is less explicit in the Baburen, a painting owned by Vermeer, though the lute is still very prominent. Vermeer's own *Procuress* hides the lute (in this case a cittern) but suggestively uses the position of the neck and the way it is held. Vermeer's apparently chaste *Young Lady seated at the Virginals* (1673-5) is paradoxically accompanied not only by the phallic viol, but also by Baburen's *Procuress*, unmistakably hung behind her.

There are literally hundreds of paintings from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries on subjects such as Van Mieris's *Brothel Scene*, which is signposted by the lute hung on the wall. However, the image extends beyond the genre study to allegories on themes like *The Five Senses*, in which the lute represents hearing, but transforms the whole picture to lust and vanity as the results of indulging the senses.

In Metsu's *Tête-à-tête: Lady Lute Player and Cavalier* (c1655), even the pretence of playing the instrument is abandoned, and it lies suggestively in the lap of the player. Although scenes in which *men* play the lute publicly are more ambiguous, the lute could hold sway in the hands of either sex. There are often pointers to the intent of the characters, such as can be seen in Vermeer's *Concert* (1665-6), where the viol and Baburen's *Procuress* are again in evidence.

There are less obvious images that nevertheless draw on the genre tradition to reinforce ideas stated in the title of the work. Isaac Oliver's Love theme: *Allegory of Virtuous and Vicious Love* (c1595) places the lute among the 'vicious' and unchaste participants; Buytewech's *Tavern Scene* (c1617-20) implies something of the conversation of the men without actually giving a lute to the man whose hands are held as if playing, while

³ See Victor Coelho, above.

Steen's *Life of Man* (1665) employs a wealth of devices to depict man's lust and vanity, including the suggestion that the old woman with the fiddle is a procuress, since she is holding it sideways as if it is a lute.

On the whole, placing the lute with people conveys an unmistakable message and infuses the protagonists with specific tensions. *The Love Letter* (c1666) [plate 2], a classic of Vermeer's mature style, that catches the subjects apparently unaware in a simple domestic situation, shows a servant and her mistress who seem to be conversing about an unopened letter in the mistress's hand. The picture hanging behind them shows a ship in full sail, suggesting that the letter has come some distance. That the trappings of everyday life, such as the broom and basket of washing, are scattered around what is clearly a public chamber suggests some sort of disarray—perhaps the household is in the process of arrival or departure?—the shoes were a symbol of domestic virtue, but the most important 'prop' is the cittern, apparently a more chaste form of the lute, which announces unequivocally that this is a love letter. It is a prop that sits well in the hands of a lone woman because of the reflective and thoughtful connotations of private music-making. The woman is expected to think only of the man, even when he is absent. Placing the man in the picture though, as in *Woman playing a lute* (c1655), Gerhard Terborch (1617-81), conveys an even stronger message: one that is usually confirmed by the expressions and gestures of the subjects.

The obvious corollary for all this symbolism is a picture like *The Morning Toilet* (1663), Jan Steen (1632-75) [plate 3]. This is a comment on venal love: the still life of the arch showing conventional symbols of vanity introduces the moral content, but the erotic matter is defined both by the emblems and in reference to linguistic usage. The woman's state of undress and the setting of a bedchamber is more than suggestive; the carelessly abandoned lute implies both a recent sexual encounter and venal love; while the shoes, usually a symbol of domestic harmony, are kicked aside. The woman is conspicuously pulling on a stocking—the Dutch word (*kous*) was slang for vagina; the un-lighted candle usually referred to ephemerality, but in this case it accompanies an open jewel box on the side table: they refer to a popular saying: 'Neither does one buy pearls in the dark, nor does one look for love at night.' To those who saw it the message of this picture would have been unmistakable.

All these images are ones in which the lute appears almost crudely as a sexual metaphor from the fifteenth century right through to the late seventeenth. There is another and more subtle use of the lute emblem though, one that made it not only possible but appropriate for gentlewomen to play the instrument: the lute was a vehicle for the expression of subtle emotions and feelings in a way that was socially acceptable.

Music had held a unique position as the bridge between the natural and the magical since the middle ages (and probably before) since it was so difficult to articulate the effects of organised sound on the passions and emotions. The very fact that music could affect the passions led to its association with the supernatural and with medical theory that relied on the balance of 'vapours' or 'humours' to explain physical states. That music could affect these humours in many different ways was ultimately beyond the scope of medical theory to explain. Thus the most powerful passion, love, and the one most difficult to understand and codify in terms of the humours had become most closely associated with something that ultimately defied all attempts to rationalise it: music.

Of all musical instruments, the lute in particular seemed capable of curing any ill: decreasing or increasing terrestrial vapours, opening or closing the heart and generally setting aright the faculties of the soul.

Why should the lute have been so spectacularly effective? The sixteenth century had seen the rise of the lute and the keyboard as two instruments that could produce a 'consort of music' by themselves. Harmony dramatically increased the emotive and therefore curative power of simple melody, and these instruments allowed a single player control of all aspects of the music, thereby intensifying its powers of communication.

'... we doubt not of that truth, that will help us to believe that the lute is fit to assuage the passions as choler sorrow and the pains that we suffer from distastes and hurts[,] impatience and hunger itself when the bilious humour pricketh the stomach and causeth its peevishness and displeasure.

This heavenly harmony, rising unto the brain as an intellectual dew, does moisten gently the heat and dryness of it and if there be too much moisture and terrestrial vapours it dissipates and dries them by the melodious activity that produces a subtle fire[.] So that rarifying the spirits in purging them of these fuliginous vapours and fixing their extraordinary motion it followeth that this harmony set aright the faculties of the soul and perfect them.

If the heart be closed it openeth it and if it be too much opened, it gently shutteth it to embrace and keep in the sweetness that the lute inspires into its sensible concavities. ... it is fed there with so favourable a nourishment that it loseth all bitterness and casts out all her venom.

This harmony softens stony hearts and banishes the cruelty from it to give room to compassion[;] it turneth out hatred to lodge in love.'

The Burwell Lute Tutor (1668-71), ff.43-43v.

The lute became pre-eminent as it was the only instrument capable of considerable dynamic range as well as harmonic subtlety. Given its power as a communicator, it became an ideal tool for the expression of feelings and sensibilities that might otherwise be beyond the power of the player to express, and this aspect is one that is explored widely in early modern European literature, though not ignored in the genre painting.

In France, Louise Labé, a Lyonnais poetess writing in about 1555, uses the lute in several of her sonnets, always inspired by the absence of a lover.⁴ The content of Labé's poetry is unashamedly erotic: she was a lady, not a courtesan, but she is not discussing chaste, appropriate love within marriage: she is eulogising lust and the power of sex. However, there is more to Labé's imagery than straightforward lust. By 1550, the image of the lute in France and Italy had progressed further: in her Sonnet XII, she endows the lute with an anthropomorphic existence: not only does it express the subject's feelings, being transformed by the writer's mood, but it also fulfils the role of both a compassionate friend and a protagonist in the argument.

⁴ Labé's dialogue with her lute is discussed in Line Pouchard: 'Louise Labé in dialogue with her lute: Silence Constructs a Poetic Subject' *History of European Ideas* 792 (1993), 126, where the author constructs an entirely phallic and erotic framework for the poetry. This seems a rather narrow view, given the wealth of imagery that Labé is using. Her poetry is taken from Enzo Giudici, ed.: *Œuvres Complètes de Louise Labé* (Geneva, 1981). English translations are available in versified form in Edith Farrell: *Louise Labé's Complete Works* (New York, 1986), those used in this paper were made by Louise Locock.

SONNET XII

Lut, compagnon de ma calamité, De mes soupirs témoin irréprochable, De mes ennuis contrôleur véritable, Tu as souvent avec moy lamenté:	<i>Lute, my companion in adversity, Blameless witness of my sighs, Moderator of my troubles, How often have you lamented with me:</i>
Et tant le pleur piteus t'a molesté, Que commençant quelque son délectable, Tu le rendois tout soudein lamentable, Feignant le ton que plein avoit chanté.	<i>My piteous tears have vexed you so much, That starting some delightful air, You changed your tone at once to a lament, As though it were a plaint you had begun.</i>
Et si te veus efforcer au contraire, Tu te destens et si me contreins taire: Mais me voyant tendrement soupirer,	<i>And if I force you to a different vein, Your strings relax, force me to be silent; But seeing that I sigh so tenderly,</i>
Donnant faveur à ma tant triste plainte: En mes ennuis me plaire suis contreinte, Et d'un dous mal douce fin espérer.	<i>Giving preference to my sad lament; I am forced to find my pleasure in grief, And hope for sweet endings to so sweet a pain.</i>

Labé endows the lute with the power to make decisions, to offer comfort in its own right as well as to act as a vehicle for the expression of the players' anguish. In her works, the lute is always melancholy and an outlet for pent emotion. For her, the lute represents and expresses the inexpressible: the passions and sensibilities. In Sonnet XII she uses the idea of singing to the lute to express the conflict between expression of the private and internal (the lute) and the public externalised convention verbally or vocally expressed (singing).

The lute is divorced from the body, but is able to express the body's inner conflicts, while the voice as an instrument betrays the emotions by refusing to perform under stress. The distance of the lute from the lover enables it to express passion freely. In Labé's Sonnet XII the lute refuses to play when asked to express false emotions: thus forcing the lover to be silent rather than lie. In contrast, Sonnet II progresses through physical and emotional description of the loved one, until finally his lute is introduced in the same breath as a whole host of body parts. Labé blames the lover's lute just as much as his looks and moods for her state, while, significantly, as the lute player, he remains unmoved.

SONNET II

Ô beaux yeus bruns, ô regards destournez, Ô chaus soupirs, ô larmes espandues, Ô noires nuits vainement atendues, Ô jours luisans vainement retournez:	<i>O beautiful brown eyes, O averted looks, O warm sighs, O spilt tears, O blackest nights for which I vainly wait, O shining days that vainly return.</i>
Ô tristes pleins, ô desirs obstinez, Ô tems perdu, ô peines despendues, Ô mile morts en mile rets tendues, Ô pires maus contre moi destinez.	<i>O sad laments, O persistent desires, O time that's lost, O cares I have suffered, O thousand deaths in a thousand snares, O worse ills destined to be against me.</i>
Ô ris, ô front, cheveux, bras, mains et doigts: Ô lut pleintif, viole, archet et vois: Tant de flambeaus pour ardre une femmelle!	<i>O smile, O brow, hair, arms, hands and fingers, O plaintive lute, viol, bow, and voice: So many torches, one woman to enflame!</i>
De toy me plein, que tant de feus portant, En tant d'endroits d'iceus mon cœur tatant, N'en est sur toy volé quelque estincelle.	<i>I complain of you that, carrying so many fires, And touching my heart in so many places with them; Not one spark of them has flown onto you.</i>

Labé also refers to the tuning of the lute, though in terms that involve playing in minor keys when she would rather be trying to cheer herself up with a major tonality. The lute is thus truthful in its expression of

the player's feelings, unable to take part in any artificiality. The corollary is that the truth of a lover's feelings can only be heard if he (or she) plays the lute, as words alone are untrustworthy.

This is not an isolated image, as it also appears in Shakespeare and the Dutch genre painting,⁵ and is famously evident in Holbein's *Ambassadors* where the lute is prominently displayed while the lute case is hidden beneath the table, reinforcing the message that the ambassadors' intent is one of open and honest discourse, having set aside their superficial ambassadorial rhetoric. Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) had been using this sort of imagery for the lute for nearly a quarter of a century before Labé was writing. It appears in a number of his courtly poems ('My lute awake'; 'Blame not my lute' (see below); 'Since you will needs'; 'All heavy minds') and 'Blame not my lute' in particular anticipates Labé's problem of the lute betraying feelings that the poet would rather remain hidden. It is a complex exploration of the lute that begins with a statement that the lute lacks the wit to express anything other than that which it is told to, and so what it speaks of must come from the poet's heart. Wyatt is denying the independent will of the instrument, but not its power to express his torment, and constructs the lute as a figure for the poet himself.

BLAME NOT MY LUTE

Blame not my lute for he must sound
Of these or that as liketh me;
For lack of wit the lute is bound
To give such tunes as pleaseth me:
Though my songs be somewhat strange,
And speaks such words as touch thy change,
Blame not my lute.

My lute, alas, doth not offend,
Though that perforce he must agree
To sound such tunes as I intend
To sing to thee that hearest me;
Then though my songs be somewhat plain,
And toucheth some that use to feign,
Blame not my lute.

My lute and strings may not deny,
But as I strike they must obey;
Break not them then so wrongfully,
But wreck thy self some wiser way:
And though the songs which I indite
Do quit thy change with rightful spite,
Blame not my lute.

Spite asketh spite and changing change,
And falsèd faith must needs be known;
Thy fault so great, the case so strange,
O right it must abroad be blown:
Then since that by thine own desert
My songs do tell how true thou art,
Blame not my lute.

Blame but the self that hast misdone
And well deservèd to have blame;
Change thou thy way, so evil begun,
And then my lute shall sound the same:
But if till then my fingers play
By thy desert their wonted way,
Blame not my lute.

⁵ In Vermeer's so-called *Music Lesson* and his *Young man and woman drinking wine* the cittern is laid to one side but facing the subjects as if it is an interested observer.

Farewell, unknown, for though thou break
 My strings in spite with great disdain,
 Yet have I found out for thy sake
 Strings for to string my lute again;
 And if perchance this foolish Rhyme
 Do make thee blush at any time
 Blame not my lute.

The development of the imagery employed by Wyatt and Labé is seen in Shakespeare's works around the turn of the century. In *Much Ado About Nothing* (II:i) Shakespeare employs the lute and its case to express the conflict between the inner person and the public image, as is the case with Labé, Wyatt and Holbein:

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING
 ACT II, SCENE I: A hall in LEONATO'S house.

 {Enter LEONATO, ANTONIO, HERO, BEATRICE, and others.}
 {Enter DON PEDRO, CLAUDIO, BENEDICK, BALTHASAR,
 DON JOHN, BORACHIO, MARGARET, URSULA and others, masked.}

DON PEDRO: Lady, will you walk about with your friend?
 HERO: So you walk softly and look sweetly and say nothing,
 I am yours for the walk; and especially when I walk 80
 away.
 DON PEDRO: With me in your company?
 HERO: I may say so, when I please.
 DON PEDRO: And when please you to say so?
 HERO: When I like your favour; for God defend the LUTE
 should be like the case!

Among Shakespeare's many references to 'music' in general, he makes a number specifically to the lute, usually referring to the capabilities of the instrument to alter mood or arouse passion. There are definite signs, however, that this power was dangerous, and even frightening because its effects were too profound to be natural. In *Richard III* (I:i), the King is seduced by a lady playing a lute (he 'capers nimbly in a lady's chamber / To the lascivious pleasing of a lute')—though as we have seen this may simply be a metaphor for sex:

KING RICHARD III
 ACT I, SCENE I: London. A street.

.....
 {Enter GLOUCESTER, solus.}

GLOUCESTER: Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
 And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
 In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.
 Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
 Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
 Our stern alarums changed to merry meetings,
 Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
 Grim-visaged war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front;
 And now, instead of mounting barded steeds 10
 To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
 He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
 To the lascivious pleasing of a LUTE.

The implication, however, is that the playing ensnares and bewitches him more than the lady herself: he is dancing to her tune, literally. The sexually manipulative interpretation is a direct descendant of the teaching of the church that women were evil and dangerous, that they could ensnare men and force them perform sinful acts (of which sex was one) against their will. In *Titus Andronicus* (II:iv) the lute tames the beast and bewitches the man to love the player, particularly if 'she' also sings:

TITUS ANDRONICUS

ACT II, SCENE IV: Another part of the forest.

{Enter DEMETRIUS and CHIRON with LAVINIA, ravished;
her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out.}

MARCUS: Who is this? my niece, that flies away so fast!

...
Fair Philomela, she but lost her tongue,
And in a tedious sampler sew'd her mind:
But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee; 40
A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off,
That could have better sew'd than Philomel.
O, had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble, like aspen-leaves, upon a LUTE,
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touch'd them for his life!
Or, had he heard the heavenly harmony
Which that sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropp'd his knife, and fell asleep 50
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet. ...

while in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (IV) nature itself is silenced by the lady's playing, and there is also the suggestion of pain in hearing her play, as she pierces to the heart.

PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE

ACT IV

{Enter GOWER.}

GOWER: Imagine Pericles arrived at Tyre,
Welcomed and settled to his own desire.
His woeful queen we leave at Ephesus,
Unto Diana there a votaress.
Now to Marina bend your mind,
Whom our fast-growing scene must find
At Tarsus, and by Cleon train'd
In music, letters; who hath gain'd
Of education all the grace,
Which makes her both the heart and place 10
Of general wonder.
...
Be't when she weaved the sleided silk 21
With fingers long, small, white as milk;
Or when she would with sharp needle wound
The cambric, which she made more sound
By hurting it; or when to the LUTE
She sung, and made the night-bird mute,
That still records with moan; or when
She would with rich and constant pen
Vail to her mistress Dian; still
This Philoten contends in skill 30
With absolute Marina: so
With the dove of Paphos might the crow
Vie feathers white. ...

This dangerous image of the lute did not disappear as the century progressed, and is still present in works like the frontispiece of Adrianus Poirter's 1670 *Lady World*, an allegorical depiction of women's deceit and manipulation of the physical world in which the lute is the dominant symbol.

The implications are obvious, but a subtler message is conveyed in *The Taming of the Shrew*: Hortensio enters disguised as a music teacher and bearing a lute. His encounter with Katherine is disastrous: Katherine breaks the lute over his head, thus breaking the symbol of love and lovers over the disguised suitor's seat of reason.

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW
ACT II, SCENE I: Padua. A room in BAPTISTA'S house.

.
{Enter KATHARINA and BIANCA.}

{Enter GREMIO, LUCENTIO in the habit of a mean man;
PETRUCHIO, with HORTENSIO as a musician; and TRANIO,
with BIONDELLO bearing a LUTE and books.}

PETRUCHIO: ... [Presenting HORTENSIO.]
Cunning in music and the mathematics,
To instruct her fully in those sciences,
Whereof I know she is not ignorant:
Accept of him, or else you do me wrong: 60
His name is Licio, born in Mantua.

...

BAPTISTA: A mighty man of Pisa; by report
I know him well: you are very welcome, sir,
Take you the LUTE, and you the set of books;
You shall go see your pupils presently.
Holla, within!

...

{Re-enter HORTENSIO, with his head broke.}

BAPTISTA: How now, my friend! why dost thou look so pale?

HORTENSIO: For fear, I promise you, if I look pale.

BAPTISTA: What, will my daughter prove a good musician?

HORTENSIO: I think she'll sooner prove a soldier
Iron may hold with her, but never LUTES.

BAPTISTA: Why, then thou canst not break her to the LUTE?

HORTENSIO: Why, no; for she hath broke the LUTE to me. 150
I did but tell her she mistook her frets,
And bow'd her hand to teach her fingering;
When, with a most impatient devilish spirit,
'Frets, call you these?' quoth she; 'I'll fume
with them:'
And, with that word, she struck me on the head,
And through the instrument my pate made way;
And there I stood amazed for a while,
As on a pillory, looking through the LUTE;
While she did call me rascal fiddler
And twangling Jack; with twenty such vile terms,
As had she studied to misuse me so. 160

PETRUCHIO: Now, by the world, it is a lusty wench;
I love her ten times more than e'er I did:
O, how I long to have some chat with her!

Hortensio chose the lute because of its associations with love and marriage, and the unavoidable conclusion arising from her actions is that his suit is rejected—before he has even had a chance to put it. Katherine's wilful nature was known, so Hortensio made a serious mistake by trying to insinuate himself by *teaching* her the lute ('I did but tell her she mistook her frets' 150). In so doing he was telling her how and what to *feel*, since the lute is the window on the heart. He fails because he is trying to manipulate her emotions instead of expressing his own, or even just attending to her feelings. He could have done with the advice given in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (III:ii): Proteus refers to Orpheus's lute, which could melt hard hearts and tame wildness, making the vicious gentle. It can be employed therefore to turn the heart of a woman to look well upon a man, which is what Hortensio had hoped to achieve by teaching it. He should simply have played to her.

THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA
ACT III, SCENE II: The same. The DUKE's palace.

.....
{Enter DUKE and THURIO.}

PROTEUS: Say that upon the altar of her beauty
You sacrifice your tears, your sighs, your heart:
Write till your ink be dry, and with your tears
Moist it again, and frame some feeling line
That may discover such integrity:
For Orpheus' LUTE was strung with poets' sinews,
Whose golden touch could soften steel and stones,
Make tigers tame and huge leviathans 80
Forsake unsounded deeps to dance on sands.
After your dire-lamenting elegies,
Visit by night your lady's chamber-window
With some sweet concert; to their instruments
Tune a deploring dump: the night's dead silence
Will well become such sweet-complaining grievance.
This, or else nothing, will inherit her.

DUKE: This discipline shows thou hast been in love.

Clearly, the lute has a special association with and for women in England. All that is lacking is an account of the lute by a woman. Such a source does exist, but by the standards of European courtly poetry of the preceding century, it is decidedly restrained. Mary Burwell's lute tutor⁶ was written in the late 1660s, when the lute was a long way down the slope of its decline. Rather than simply copying the words of her teacher, she goes beyond a simple description of playing technique into the magical and affective properties of the instrument. Her words recall the lost golden age of the lute and expound its qualities with an almost desperate intensity. Her terminology and subject matter show an attitude to the instrument that was evident in earlier literature, and is clearly still immediate for her. She describes it as:

... the king of instruments. It maketh alone a consort of music[,] it speaks without any origin and out of dead and dumb things it draws a soul that seems reasonable by the several thoughts and expression that the skilful master makes of his lute upon all kinds of matters and subjects. It is a faithful & commodious companion that watcheth amidst darkness[,] and when the whole nature is in silence it banisheth from it horror and unquietness by pleasing sounds.⁷

The symbolism of her lute as a noble companion, endowed with an emotional life of its own, pervades Mary Burwell's language. It is always gendered as male, often praised as a Prince or King and at times seems to hold the importance of a lover in her life.⁸ Quite apart from these qualities, there were also physical aspects to lute-playing that Mary Burwell is quick to advance:

All the actions that one does in playing of the lute are handsome, the posture is modest free and gallant ... The shape of the lute ... sets [the body] in an advantageous posture.
The beauty of the arm, of the hands and of the neck are advantageously displayed in playing of the lute. The eyes are employed only in looking upon the company. ... Nothing represents so well the consort of angelical choirs and give[s] more foretastes of heavenly joys and of everlasting happiness. For the advantages of marriage how many bachelors and maids have we seen advanced by this agreeing harmony. When persons of both sexes have neither considered wealth nor beauty of the person, but suffering themselves to be drawn by the charms of this sweet melody.
Some hath believed that they should possess an angel incarnate, if they could unite themselves by a marriage to a person that enjoys this rare quality.

⁶In the private collection of Robert Spencer, Woodford Green, Essex, England.

⁷The Burwell Lute Tutor, f.43. Spelling, punctuation and capitalization are standardized. Commas are only added to the original text where essential, as their placing can alter the intended meaning. Those that have been added are enclosed in square brackets to differentiate from original punctuation.

⁸'As the lute is the king of instruments so hath it few things that are common with other instruments. Its music and its manner of composing is special to itself[,] and as the human body[,] is like a little microcosm that gathereth and comprehends in itself all that is[,] and all that is fine and rare in music.' The Burwell Lute Tutor (1668-71), f.68v.

... Of all the arts that I know there is none that engages more the inclination of men than the lute. For ravishing the soul by the ear and the eyes by the swiftness and neatness of all the fingers.⁹

This is the crux of the matter for Mary Burwell: the lute was an ideal tool for the seduction of men. Since the lute was associated with sensibility and sex, the obvious corollary is that it came to symbolise marriageability, since musically it represented harmony. Theodor van Thulden's allegory, *Harmony and Marriage* gives the lute pride of place in the hands of 'harmony'. It is easy to view early modern woman's life as one of silence, humility, and passive acceptance of her lot. On the other hand, it is abundantly clear that women were not only far from passive, but actively manipulated their silence to further their needs. Marriage was essential if a comfortable life was to be assured, and those whose lot was uncertain could take steps to provide themselves with a voice to inform their listeners that they could offer something more enduring than physical beauty. Mary Burwell's praise of the lute constantly returns to the ability of the instrument to express feelings, and her paean is emphatic about the importance of playing well to exploit that faculty.

What message is being conveyed then, by men or women *tuning* the lute? Obviously the instrument is out of tune, and the message may lie not so much in the effort to re-tune it as in the implication of discord. The images that involve tuning the lute seem to refer not simply to sex, but also to adultery, if not in deed at least in thought; or perhaps more broadly, disharmony in love, informing us of the subject's state of mind. In Thomas Heywood's play, *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603),¹⁰ Anne Frankford, the principal female character, is renowned as a fine lutenist (one whose sensibilities are finely communicated and appreciated). When she refers to her fall from grace after her adultery, she calls on that image of the woman with her lute, describing her predicament thus: "We are both out of tune, both out of time" (XVI, 19). When she is banished from her husband's house, she leaves her lute behind—itsself a symbolic act, suggesting that although finer feelings are betrayed with the marital breakdown, she leaves the body of those feelings within her marriage. Her husband, however, discovering the lute 'flung in a corner' declares,

Her lute! O God, upon this instrument
Her fingers have run quick division,
Sweeter than that which now divides our hearts.
These frets have made me pleasant, that have now
Frets of my heartstrings made. O Master Cranwell,
Oft hath she made this melancholy wood,
Now mute and dumb for her disastrous chance,
Speak sweetly many a note, sound many a strain
To her own ravishing voice, which being well strung,
What pleasant, strange airs have they jointly sung.—
Post with it after her.—Now nothing's left;
Of her and hers I am at once bereft.

(XV, 13-24)

He requires his servant to remove even the representation of her feelings from his home (and heart): The next scene shows the lute being returned: Anne takes it up to play once again, "My lute shall groan; / It cannot weep, but shall lament my moan." and even the rude servants are moved to pity and compassion by her playing. But then she hands it back to the servant, and directs him:

⁹ The Burwell Lute Tutor (1668-71), ff.43v-45.

¹⁰ I am indebted to Leslie Dunn for bringing this source to my notice, and for her discussion of it at a seminar of the *Shakespeare Association of America*, Chicago, 25 March 1995.

Go break this lute upon my coach's wheel,
As the last music that I e'er shall make—
Not as my husband's gift, but my farewell
To all earth's joy; and so your master tell.

(XVI, 72-5)

Her words are straightforward enough: she cannot enjoy music any longer without the honour of her marriage, and her statement is intended to emphasize her abject regret. The subtext introduced by the lute, though, raises this act to a far more significant level: if a woman could only express her deeper feelings through the instrument, then the destruction of the instrument effectively silenced her forever ("My inward grief / No tongue can utter"); the destruction of the 'body' of the lute also destroys the power of the woman to seduce, so Anne is submitting herself to her husband's domination and making an offering of atonement in so doing ("...and so your master tell"), destroying the cause of her infidelity. The lute becomes the receptacle for Anne's wrongdoing, and is blamed for her actions, relieving Anne of that responsibility.

A broken lute string is a lesser image that can also represent the destruction of marital harmony (it may appear in a brothel scene to suggest that the man is married), but is also used to indicate a state of unease between two parties who may not necessarily be amorously involved.¹¹ In Holbein's *Ambassadors*, for instance, the broken string of the lute may simply represent the uncomfortable relations between England and France, but there may be a subtler message conveyed by the artist's choice of a lute to convey this message: the lute would instantly remind the viewer of love, and Henry VIII's notorious behaviour with Anne Boleyn—the root of one of many bones of contention between the two countries. All the images in this picture speak of the willingness of the two ambassadors to reconcile the differences between neighbours, but none so eloquently as the open lute case, dimly visible on the floor beneath the shelves that hold the other objects.

Just as the lute was the symbol of feelings and inner sensibilities, so the lute-case symbolised the outward appearance or superficial presentation of emotions. In *Much Ado About Nothing* (II:i) Shakespeare employs the lute and its case to symbolise the conflict between the inner person and the public image. The open lute-case in Holbein's painting refers to the willingness of the ambassadors to treat honestly and openly with the English monarch.

The richness and variety of lute emblems must have made it a volatile symbol for the private and chaste player, but one with enormous power. Mary Burwell is too coy when she tells us that any man beholding a woman playing the lute will be instantly captivated by the grace of her body and hands. The message conveyed, even privately, must have been an unmistakable promise of passion, deliberately reinforced by the emotive affect of the music being played. To play the lute to a potential suitor was many things: a form of self-expression, a semi-magical exercise of power, and a deliberate and outspoken erotic invitation: a woman playing a lute is promising sex. Add to this Mary Burwell's assertion of the elegance of the body and the simple beauty of the sound and you have a catch-22: if you remained unmoved you were coarse, if you were moved you were lost. Many men clearly took up the invitation; the ladies, however, often abandoned the lute once they were married and had achieved their goal which was clearly seen by some as entrapment through emotional manipulation.

¹¹ This image is explored in Mary Rasmussen: 'The case of the flutes in Holbein's *The ambassadors*', *Early Music* xxiii (February 1995), 114

There is something unexpected in such consciously manipulative behaviour of an overtly sexual nature. Why should this be surprising? Our experience of early modern poetry and the madrigal should lead us to expect an open attitude to eroticism. That this is being expressed by women is no more surprising than that it is being expressed at all. Women were clearly far from passive or impotent in expressing both their feelings and their desires, and the lute performed the specific social function in this context of advertising their willingness to have sex, and therefore bear children: it was worn as a badge of fertility.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, society was increasingly coming to recognise the worth of a woman who could provide intelligent conversation as well as heirs, and perform useful functions in the household.¹² How then, could a woman demonstrate that she possessed higher sensibilities and emotions in an environment where it would have been immodest to take any lead in these matters? The answer lay in the lute, and as women's exploitation of the corpus of expressive and emotive music grew, so also did their ability to communicate their feelings in an appropriate and acceptable way. A woman could attract attention to herself by surrounding herself with silence while she played, and into that silence she could 'speak' volumes.

Playing the lute was recognised as one of the great accomplishments of the young lady, and many seventeenth-century noblewomen were painted in close association with their instruments.¹³ According to Aubrey's memoir of him, old Dr. Kettle, the President of Balliol College, was utterly captivated by Lady Isabella Rich [plate 4] who wandered about Balliol gardens twangling in full view of the desiccated dons.¹⁴ She was renowned for her skill at the lute, and her portrait reeks of seductive desirability. Edmund Waller's poem about her betrays another helplessly enraptured listener. He also recognises the power and danger of the woman playing the lute. His picture of Lady Isabella is of a Siren, and among his images of power and danger listeners become no more than animals:

OF MY LADY ISABELLA PLAYING ON THE LUTE

Edmund Waller

Such moving sounds, from such a careless touch!
 So un-concern'd her self, and we so much!
 What art is this, that with so little pains
 Transports us thus, and o'er our spirits reigns?
 The trembling strings about her fingers crowd,
 And tell their joy for ev'ry kiss aloud:
 Small force there needs to make them tremble so:
 Touched by that hand, who would not tremble too?
 Here LOVE takes stand, and while she charms the ear,
 Empties his quiver on the list'ning deer:
 Music so softens, and disarms, the mind,
 That not an arrow does resistance find.
 Thus the fair tyrant celebrates the prize,
 And acts herself the triumph of her eyes:
 So NERO once, with harp in hand, survey'd
 His flaming ROME, and as it burn'd he play'd.¹⁵

¹² Castiglione's *Courtyer* states that women are only useful for child-bearing: "the world hath no profit by women, but for getting children". This attitude and the other ideas of the worthlessness of women unless they could bear children is discussed by Nanette Salomon in 'Positioning Women in Visual Convention: The Case of Elizabeth I' *Attending to Women in Early Modern England* ed. Betty S. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff (Cranbury NJ, 1994).

¹³ The Countess of Pembroke, Lady Anne Clifford and Lady Margaret Hoby are also depicted with a lute.

¹⁴ Daughter of the Earl of Holland, b1623, who married Sir James Thynne some time in the late 1630s. Aubrey states that "Our Grove was the Daphne for the Ladies and their gallants to walke in, and many times my Lady Isabella Thynne (who lay at Balliol College) would make her entry with a Theorbo or Lute played before her. I have heard her play on it in the Grove myself, which she did rarely [i.e. unusually well]; for which Mr. Edmund Waller hath in his Poems for ever made her famous." Quoted from Oliver Lawson Dick, ed.: *Aubrey's Brief Lives* (London, 1949), 186.

¹⁵ *The Works of Edmund Waller...published by Mr. Fenton* (London, 1729), 105-106.

Lady Mary Wroth (niece of Sir Philip Sidney) was fêted for her intelligence and subtlety: she was known among her contemporaries as a poetess, but is depicted in her portrait with a more powerful instrument than the pen. Nor is the archlute leaning negligently to one side, or turned coyly away from the viewer as in the naturalistic view of Lady Isabella. Lady Mary's lute is as prominently posed as she is herself, and undoubtedly significant. Its presence tells us that this is a woman of great sensibility and expressive emotional power, just as clearly as her clothing and stance advertise her station, confidence and nobility. Lady Anne Clifford similarly poses with her lute, holding it like a lance, troping one of Hilliard's miniatures of a nobleman. This is a public recognition of the symbolic role of the lute that is just as direct as Mary Burwell's text or Labé's sonnets. None of these depictions are of Ladies *playing* the lute, but all are portraits that feature the lute prominently as a symbol of the personality and sensitivity of the subject. Clearly the emphasis of the message depends on whether the lute is being played or is only a prop, which explains why portraits of noblewomen never show them in the act of playing the instrument, although Lady Isabella's pose is highly suggestive even so.

The two stereotypes seem to be clearly defined: the lute as a metaphor for sex and sensuality or as a metonymic substitution for the expression of complex feelings that could not be adequately or appropriately verbalised. However, these stereotypes merge seamlessly in the majority of situations: the basic erotically-charged image overlaps with the artful manipulation and expression of emotions seen in Labé's poetry and pictures such as *Lady World*, created over a century apart.

That stereotype of female manipulation and sexuality was hardly new, nor was the idea of a woman's power unusual: what is surprising is that such a charged and complex image should have survived so long attached to the lute. The steady rationalisation of the early modern world tried to devolve magical influence from persons to objects, so within a framework of humanistic rejection of superstition it would be natural to try to divorce supernatural control from a person and instead look to some external mechanism for explanation.

The keyboard lacked emotive strength, had no overt sexual imagery, and required the player to turn modestly away from any audience while performing. Its ascendancy during the seventeenth century may have had a great deal to do with its safety as a symbol, and it was increasingly associated with images like Vermeer's *Young Lady standing at the Virginals* (1673-5), where Cupid holding the single playing card of fidelity dominates the scene both spatially and symmetrically. The lute was already 'set up' as a scapegoat for the 'dangerous' woman by the sixteenth century, but by the middle of the seventeenth, because magic was still the only explanation for many events, the metaphorical transfer of power was so complete that the lute had become invested with a life of its own. The logical outcome of that progression was that the lute should decline and eventually become obsolete, its place in domestic life being taken by the keyboard.