Robert Herrick wrote hundreds of poems about real or imagined women. It is generally conceded that his “many fresh and fragrant mistresses” were purely imaginary, but understanding how he constructs gender is vital in developing an accurate view of his poetic art. Modern criticism often depicts Herrick as a propagandist for the received standards of his day, yet close examination of his texts reveals that he recognized the ambiguities of gender and the inconsistencies of his era’s beliefs pertaining to women, disrupted and interrogated them, and often engaged in outright parodic critique of accepted seventeenth-century gender mores.

The stance Herrick takes in relation to gender issues is rooted in the double-coding of female presence that already existed in the English Renaissance. On one hand stood the traditional Christian idea that women should be subordinate to men—an idea accepted by Protestants and Catholics alike. In Herrick’s society, women were viewed “regardless of social rank, as wives and mothers . . . and were considered morally evil, intellectually inferior,” and “framed by God only for domestic duties” (Dunn, 15). Female submission was considered essential to an ordered, stable society, so that “as wives were subject to their husbands, so women were subject to men, whose authority was sustained informally through culture, custom and differences in education, and more formally through the law” (Amussen, 3).

Yet within this universally held set of notions about the nature and role of women, hinges, flaws, and contradictions abounded. Neoplatonic thought exalted woman. The cult of the Virgin, Petrarchan love conventions, and the cult of Elizabeth all grew out of this belief in the transcendence of womanhood. And the stringencies of patriarchy, though generally accepted in English society at the time, were qualified by the popular idea of “companionate marriage,” which recognized God’s grace as operative in women as well as in men and saw this grace as a check against unbridled notions of male superiority and the domination of wives by husbands (McDonald, 260–61).

This contradictory state of affairs was further complicated by the fact that, in contrast to continental Europe, early English society seems to have...
been exceptional in affording freedoms to women. Many English women were educated and prominent in the period when Herrick wrote his poems, especially at the court of Charles I, where Henrietta Maria "enhanced the status of women by demanding that her courtiers adopt the platonizing attitudes popular at the time in France" (Latt, 40). Herrick would have known the effects of Henrietta Maria's progressive attitude through his contact with the Carolinian court as a chaplain and lyricist before he took up pastoral duties in Devonshire.

Herrick's progressive attitude can be seen in the compositions he addressed not to imaginary mistresses but to real, flesh-and-blood women. His ambiguous attitude, reflecting the uncertainties of his own day, often crops up in these poems. To be sure, women exist as wives and maidens for Herrick, and his attention to them takes the form of sexual attraction in its modified and acceptable version of visual attraction to outward beauty. Yet one often detects an undercurrent of contradictory darkness flowing beneath safe conventions. The women Herrick addresses in his verses are beautiful and fragrant; the poet compares them to goddesses and flowers and lauds them for their good looks and virtue; the imagery he uses suggests the softness and passivity that was also seen as a proper social role for women. But lurking just underneath all of these conventions are the same sorts of "counterplots" that Claude Summers said work to disrupt and undermine Herrick's political poetry (167). While convention operates on the surface of Herrick's poems on women, a great deal of parodic revisionism is simultaneously taking place.

This revisionism is often seen in Herrick's epithalamia. In one he wrote to celebrate the marriage of his friend Clipsby Crew, for example; the title is "A Nuptiall Song, or Epithalamie, on Sir Clipseby Crew and his Lady." The woman is mentioned in the title (and in Herrick's epithalamium to Sir Thomas Southwell) and the poem tends to revolve around her, hardly even mentioning the bridegroom. Epithalamia did tend to emphasize the bride more than the groom, but the almost total exclusion of the bridegroom in these two poems illustrates Herrick's imaginative fixation on women. Herrick has been called prurient, and his propensity to gaze on women and notice the details of their dress and what lay beneath has made many critics uncomfortable. Still, the figuration of a woman in the epithalamium for Clipsby Crew's wedding suggests that Herrick is attracted to writing about women in such a way that the conventions of male dominance and female subservience are at least questioned, if not disrupted entirely.

"A Nuptiall Song, or Epithalamie, on Sir Clipseby Crew and his Lady" mentions the bride in more than half of the stanzas, the groom in only one. Herrick, who does not name the bride in the poem (she was Jane Pulteney), makes her the center of the work. The bridegroom, when he does appear,
Herrick and Gender

does not come across particularly well. He shows up in stanza 4 when he first meets the bride, and his reaction is not ideal. Hymen is told to

let thy Torch
Display the Bridegroom in the porch
In his desires
More towring, more disparkling then thy fires:
Shew her how his eyes do turne
And roule about, and in their motions burne
Their balls to Cindars: haste
Or else to ashes he will waste.

The bridegroom then suitably disappears until he is tucked between the sheets of the "plumpe bed" with the bride and can put an end to the paroxysm that earlier caused his eyes to roll. The language attending this consummation is violent. The bridegroom is compared to Zeus, who managed to do his will on Danae despite her inaccessibility, and there is no stopping him: "Bold bolt of thunder he will make his way / And rend the cloud, and throw / The sheet about, like flakes of snow." After the long description of the bride in all her delicacy and semi-divinity, this language of rape, seduction, penetration, and violence is a harsh contrast. The bride is compared to Venus rising from the sea, he to Zeus descending upon the unwilling Danae. His "towering" desires and the "balls" of his gaze are unmistakably phallic.

Marjorie Swann has suggested that Herrick’s marriage poems reinforce his society’s subjugation of women, and to a certain extent they do, but her observation on the language that surrounds his marriage poetry is intriguing. The reluctant bride is separated from her female friends, enclosed in a prison-like chamber, and then the marriage is consummated:

The repetition of the monosyllabic imperative “strip” adds to the uneasy atmosphere of brutality and humiliation which haunts this stanza. Herrick presents the disrobing of Jane Pulteney as the removal of the woman’s floral garments, a literal de-flowering. He thus instructs the “whimpering” bridesmaids to rehearse the role of the bridegroom, to inflict a sexualized physical loss upon their friend. Terms like “co-opted” or “coerced” may seem too heavy-handed to describe Herrick’s treatment of the bridesmaids here, yet in the next stanza, the group of deflowering women is replaced by “a thousand Cupids” who hover about the bride’s eyes to fan the flames of love.

Swann notes the “disquieting images of fear and intimidation— and female resistance to male authority” present in the poem (25).
But does the inclusion of such language indicate complicity, or does the tone of it perhaps hint at Herrick's own disquietude? It may be that the harsh language and the contrasts of the bride and groom are a censure of accepted custom and that Herrick is subjecting one of the major social structures of his day to a subtle literary interrogation.

Throughout the nuptial song, the bride is presented in terms reminiscent of the Neoplatonic idea that women are more spiritual and closer to the divine. The first two stanzas of the poem are interlaced with religious language whose referent is the woman about to married. She emerges from the "East," the traditional seat of spiritual wisdom and religion, and appears as a "New—/ Star fill’d with glory" that reaches up to heaven. She is compared to a "Goddesse," to "Venus" from the sea. In the next stanza she is called "Divine / Enlightened Substance," and it is remarked that she has only just come from devotions at a "Shrine / Of Holy Saints." She is compared to a "Paradise." Then Herrick provides the reader with one of his unusual appropriations of biblical text in noting that there comes from the bride "A savor like unto a blessed field, / When the bedabled Morne / Washes the golden eares of corne." The intertextual connection here is Genesis 27:27, a passage in which Isaac blesses his son Jacob with the words, "the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed." In the biblical story, Isaac receives a generous blessing in which he is granted abundant crops, nations to serve him, lordship over his brothers, curses to those who curse him, blessings to those who bless him (Genesis 27:28-29). But to those familiar with the passage, these words would bring in a note of discord because in the Genesis account Isaac thinks he is blessing Esau, not Jacob. Jacob has tricked his blind father into giving him his brother’s blessing. The scene is a scene of deception, deceit, and out-and-out lying on the part of the disguised Jacob. This rather incongruous reference dampens the otherwise glorious depiction of the supernal bride. Herrick suggests the blessing the bride is about to receive may not be a very good one.

Stanza 3 three discusses the fragrance the bride gives off as she comes down the street, and its imagery is vaguely suggestive of the Song of Songs:

See where she comes; and smell how all the street
Breathes Vine-yards and Pomgranats: O how sweet
As a fir’d Altar is each stone,
Perspiring pounded Cynamon.

In the Song of Songs, the woman’s temples are likened to slices of pomegranate and her virginity to an unharvested vineyard, and spices are used as erotic symbols. But for all this language of religious sensuality, the response of those who see her is one of lust. Men who smell the perfume would want to jump in the fire and burn themselves to ashes, and the terms
Herrick uses to express this contain disturbing suggestions of crudity: "Bestroaking Fate the while / He burns to Embers on the Pile." Does the sight of the bride incite the fires of lust and initiate "stroking"? This is followed up by the stanza where the bridegroom rolls his eyes in lust at his bride-to-be. A little further on, one encounters more male heat when the "Codled [parboiled] Cook / Runs from his Torrid Zone" (we assume the kitchen, but double entendres abound) to get a glimpse of the passing beauty.

Into the literary conventions of epithalamium, Herrick slips verbal markers that suggest lust, deception, crudity, and bad manners, placing them so that they lurk just below the placid surface of the poem and take it in unexpected directions. Even if Herrick's persona is functioning as a spokesman for patriarchy, as Swann suggests, and using his poetry to bolster the structures that enforce an existing social order, the manner with which he represents male authority, the way he depicts male behavior, and the literary association he pulls up to characterize the blessed event of marriage, all undercut the validity and rightness of the institution he is supposedly bolstering with praise.

Herrick grew up in a home parented by the mother, and he seemed to have felt the absence of his father, who died shortly after he was born, most acutely. Roger Rollin noted that Herrick's search for a father during his life can be seen in several of his poems (46), but little, if anything, has been said of the shaping influence his mother, Julia Herrick, née Stone, had upon him. But the ambiguities of gender we do find in Herrick's poetry suggest that his mother had a great deal to do with how Herrick thought of women and how he presented them in his poetical works. The sociological anomalies of his day did work to shape Herrick's depiction of women, but the influence of his mother, and her existence as an icon of femininity in his mind, shaped his attitude toward gender even more profoundly.

Julia Stone came from a wealthy family. Many of her relatives were in positions of influence in the London city government. She received a payment of 1300 £ from her husband's estate when he died but signed it over to her children, suggesting that she had monies and property of her own, enough that she was assured of an income and maintenance without depending on payment from her husband's will. Though some biographers (e.g., Marchette Chute) have suggested Herrick might have been raised by his Uncle William after the death of his father, this is pure speculation resulting from lack of biographical information. There is no reason to believe Julia Herrick failed to establish a home after her husband's death or to believe her son Robert did not reside there.

The dynamic of such an environment strongly shaped Robert Herrick's psychological and social development, and especially his attitudes about gender. In a female-centered home, he would become more aware of, and sensitive to, the concerns of women and also to the injustices and social
limitations to which women were subjected in Renaissance England. In the social scheme of the day, widows were something of a problem. Esther S. Cope noted that

The church viewed a woman as a virgin, wife, or widow, and the law regarded her as either a *feme sole* (alone) or a *feme covert* (under the cover or protection of her husband or father). The seemingly disparate characteristics of widowhood fit uneasily into these categories. A widow, though she was a *feme sole*, had been married; in her widowhood, she might have some property and thus some economic independence; through her experience, she might also have gained self-assurance. (189)

Julia Herrick’s position within English society was ambiguous and anomalous. This uncertainty in regard to social position would have increased young Robert’s sensitivity to the cracks and lapses in the gender ideologies of his day. His mother would have been a living reminder of the limitations to which women were subjected. The incongruity of Julia Herrick as head of a household but devoid of legal status and barred from entrance into commercial venture made a profound impression on Robert Herrick in his childhood. Herrick expresses this sensitivity to the injustices heaped upon women in his poetry. His fascination with women is a manifestation not of prurience but of concern.

This openness and empathy can be seen in the simple fact that Herrick wrote so many poems about women. Rollin has pointed out that Herrick’s habit of addressing poems to common women was most unusual for a poet of his day. His verses about real-life women “make Herrick’s collection unique among those of his important contemporaries,” who hardly spoke of women at all, and when they did almost never included names. Herrick writes poems about relatives, women he knew in his parish, and several poems about his housekeeper, Prudence Baldwin (Rollin, “Herrick’s Housekeeper,” 201–09). His social and familial background, however, and the uniqueness of his female-centered childhood, impelled him to do this. His remoteness from the usual patriarchal configurations of English social life enabled a perspective in his verse that rejects the exclusion of women from the realm of art, just as he probably felt some uneasiness or even genuine outrage that women were excluded from full participation in the legal and cultural institutions that ruled in his time.

The very notion that Julia Herrick might have been deprived of Nicholas’s estate had his death been proved a suicide burned Herrick’s mind as an example of patriarchal government’s lack of evenhanded treatment for women, since in the case of a husband’s suicide the woman suffers for the husband’s breach of accepted law. Rollin speculates that Herrick did not
know circumstances surrounding his father's death, or even know where he was buried, until later in life (Rollin, "Fathers," 42-43). But at whatever age Herrick came to them, he knew of his mother's status in society all his life and would have felt his chagrin over this exacerbated by the discovery later in life that she might have been deprived of his estate had things gone otherwise in the courts. Herrick was forced outside the circle of patriarchal figurations by the circumstances of his childhood, and, however much he rhetorically supported the ideological apparatus of that system, his exclusion from it compelled him to frequently introduce notes of ambiguity and interdiction when approaching the subject of gender.

We have observed this tendency in the epithalamium poetry, and it is strongly present in other poems about male-female relationships. In a poem composed probably around 1630 according to Patrick (287), the bride is urged to hurry to her wedding, to not delay, to hurry up and get in bed, then to have intercourse. Sexual intercourse, however, is characterized in terms of warfare:

... this busie night
Is yours, in which you challeng'd are to fight
With such an arm'd but such an easy Foe,
As will if you yeeld, lye down conquer'd too.
The field is pitcht; but such must be your warres,
As that your kisses but out-vie the Starres.
Fall down together vanquisht both, and lye
Drown'd in the bloud of Rubies there, not die.

The metaphor of sexuality as war has unpleasant connotations and casts the male in the aggressive role, the female as the vanquished; though by her passivity she does conquer in a way. Of particular interest, however, is the final couplet. The meaning is obscure, turning on the ambiguity of the last word in the poem. All the same, what is clear is the comparison of the bride and groom to casualties on the field of battle when they lie "Drown'd in blood." This suggests the blood accompanying loss of virginity and rupture of the hymen in a first sexual experience, but the last part of the couplet is difficult to interpret. What imports the meaning of "Rubies," and what does "die" signify? The well-worn pun on "die" as orgasm is certainly operating, but also the double meaning of "die" and dye is a possibility. Herrick seems to compare hymeneal blood with the richness of jewels and insinuates that the couple should settle for nothing less—they should enable the blood of consummation and not settle for an artificial dye. But how could they do this if they do not "die"? The confusing ambiguity of this passage and the rather gauche language the poet
uses undermine the decorous designs of a poem in this tradition. Once again, we see a lapse of simple propriety.

Critics have often interpreted such off-putting sections of Herrick’s work biographically. When this method is followed, the image of Herrick that is created is off-putting as well. Heather Dubrow, for example, notes that in the epithalamia “the tension between the brides who wish to delay their marriage and the speaker who urges them on externalizes a debate within the poet himself,” (239), and sees indications of “Herrick’s own fears” in the language of the wedding poems (240), noting that “the attraction to celibacy [in the epithalamia] . . . is intensified by certain characteristics of Herrick’s own temperament” (243). She then goes on to speculate how

he often deflects eroticism from human bodies and human being onto such inanimate objects as petticoats. That deflection might signal an enthusiasm about sexuality that fantasizes its extension to the whole world or, alternatively, a nervousness about sexuality that fantasizes its deflection from human beings—but the ambivalences and ironies that so often characterize Herrick’s vision make it likely that he is pulled between those two poles. (247)

Dubrow’s comments demonstrate what is wrong with a great deal of contemporary Herrick scholarship. Like Swann, she reads biography into the poetry and makes authoritative statements about the personality and psychological disposition of a man of whom we know very little. Critics today construct the space from which Herrick wrote out the scant biographical facts at our disposal and then expand this through biographical readings of his poetry.

Yet it seems far-fetched that Herrick—if he were the voyeuristic, effeminate pervert that many critics have suggested—could have maintained friendship with such influential and well-placed persons as Clipsby Crewe, John Weekes, John Fletcher, Bishop Crobet, William Browne, John Selden, Mildmay Fane, and Adrian Porter. Fifty-year-old virgins who write poems of sexual fantasy and peek around the corner at country lasses and wights usually do not make very good companions to sophisticated gentlemen and ladies. I propose a Herrick educated, at home and at ease with men and women of intellect and culture, politically astute, able to participate in a society that he never succeeded in penetrating completely, detached enough to be ironic and witty, from a home-life of sturdy, wealthy upper-class people, cultivated through education and reading, and above all a capable poet. This is the space from
which he wrote. The persona he creates is ironic and should not be confused with Herrick himself or with sketchy creations of his person drawn from an overly literal interpretation of his poetry. This parodic, ironic, and subversive persona gives voice to things Herrick himself could not utter so freely in the circles he traveled.

These criticisms are often related to gender. Another place we see Herrick’s tendency toward open parody, and his use of persona to engage in criticism of society, is in the numerous poems Hesperides contains to his imaginary mistresses and to his Muse.

First, the challenge to convention can be detected in his poems to his Muse. While other poets might be solemn about their Muses, and see them as symbols of the ethereal nature of art, modified goddesses carried over from the classical era, Herrick disrupts such ideas by comic interaction with his Muse, as seen in “To His Muse,” the second poem of Hesperides. His muse is a mad maiden who is given to roaming the countryside. He warns her to stay at home and not go abroad, and then lists the proper subjects to which she might address herself. These are the familiar tropes of pastoral poetry:

... with thy Reed, though mayst expresse  
The Shepherds Fleecie happinesse:  
And with thy Eclogues intermixe  
Some smooth, and harlesse Beucolicks.  
There on a Hillock thou mayst sing  
Unto a handsome Shephardling;  
Or to a Girle (that keeps the Neat)  
With breath more sweet then Violet.

While the poem has locked down into pastoral mode, the reader will later encounter Doll, who has been a whore so long she cannot even remember when she was a virgin; Coone, who has icicles of mucus hanging from his nose; Craw, who farts and then jocosely dismisses his crudities by saying “Who can hold that (my friends) that will away?”, and a host of other perverse, repulsive people. But these incongruities will be lost on his Muse, since she is insane anyway.

Similar parody is found in H-142, “The Vision.” This familiar poem depicts Herrick’s vision of Venus, a different character from his muse but one that nonetheless preserves the parodic interaction noted in H-2. Herrick’s persona, here identified as Herrick himself, is lovelorn and alone, prays to Love, falls asleep, and receives a vision. Patrick connects the language of “The Vision” with a section from Book I of the Aeneid where Aeneas receives a visitation from the goddess Venus (72 note). She appears to him as
... a girl, it seemed
From Thrace or Sparta, trim as any huntress
Who rides her horses hard, or outspeeds rivers
In her swift going. A bow hung over her
shoulder,
Her hair blew free, her knees were bare, her
garments
Tucked at the waist and knotted. (Humphries, 12)

This is a disguise so that Aeneas will not recognize his mother, Venus. Later, when she reveals herself to him as the goddess of love, “her shoulders / Shone with a radiant light; her hair shed fragrance / Her robes slipped to her feet, and the true goddess / Walked in divinity” (14). Once the disguise is cast aside, the Spartan-like quality of the goddess is gone and she is her radiant, erotic self. Aeneas immediately knows in whose presence he has found himself.

Herrick draws an intertextual connection here between the depiction in The Aeneid and his own poem, and he does so with parodic implications. In this particular number, Venus remains disguised and never doffs her Diana-like, Camilla-like trappings. She maintains an appearance of militant, athletic virginity. Though Herrick’s persona has prayed to the goddess of Love, he is denied an epiphany. And yet the vision is at the same time a revelation to him. The sight of her bare thigh makes Herrick’s speaker sneak up to kiss that part of her anatomy in a mildly erotic gesture. In a mildly masochistic rebuke, Venus passes judgment on Herrick: “But she forebade me, with a wand / Of Mirtle she had in her hand: / And chiding me, said, Hence, Remove, / Herrick, thou art too coorse to love.” His prayer is answered and he receives divine knowledge of why he has been forsaken in the first place. Naming “Herrick” as one who is too coarse and crude to love, who is interdicted by the goddess of love herself, is an odd posture for one who had earlier proclaimed he would “write of Youth, of Love, and have Accesse / By these, to sing of cleanly-Wantommesse” (H-1). Herrick, the author-identified persona, is hors combat as far as love goes.

As with the Muse, the vision of Venus uses gender as an entry point for parody and for the evacuation of one of the very tasks to which the poet sets himself and from one of the stated themes of his book. Female authority proclaims that Herrick is disqualified from love. The goddess of virginity will never change her garments and reveal herself as the goddess of love. The poet-persona deals with Diana, who is in fact Venus, but will never be anything to him but the chaste queen and huntress. Against his role as a love poet who idealizes and characterizes women as objects of male gaze, his narrator interposes his own ineptitude at the very task of love. Set against the authority of a woman, he is neutered and disqualified.
The usual practices of seventeenth-century English poets involved figurations of women that went against the kind of image Herrick creates in these two poems. Poets of Herrick’s day represented the Muse as a figure of sexual interest to the poet. Cecilia Infante has outlined the sexual terms with which many poets of the English Renaissance metaphorically depicted the relationship of poet and muse:

In his verse letters to his friends Donne characteristically conflates the sexual with the textual act in a poetic fantasy that renegotiates the terms of poetic production and control in favor of the poet. According to this trope, poetry is the offspring produced from the sexual union of the male poet and his “indifferent” muse. Although gendered female, the muse can only inspire poetry but not give it birth; that is the privilege of the male poet. (95)

What Donne specifically articulates in his letters was only a commonplace in Renaissance England. Herrick’s poet, however, is doubly unsuited for this task. For one, his muse is a mad virgin who seems to pay little attention to him. Second, he is forbidden to love and to have intercourse by the goddess of love, who appears rather muse-like herself.

Herrick carries his campaign of ambiguity and disruption into many of the two hundred and fifty verses in *Hesperides* (close to one quarter of them) written to or about women, real and imaginary. Whether the verses are compositions to Julia or other imaginary mistresses, addresses to goddesses, muses, graces, wives, poems about virgins and gentlewomen, or “foul epigraphs,” the wide range of gender-related writing in Herrick’s text subverts received ideas of the place of women, their nature, and their role in society. Gender becomes a tool Herrick appropriates for the purposes of parody and for the dismantling of conventional ideas on male and female. Patricia Waugh has noted that metafiction works to “explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text” (2), and Herrick’s text often called attention to this disparity as it relates to gender in order to ridicule the existing codes and receive social prescriptions in Carolinian England.

The reality of how women were treated by society as opposed to how they were represented in literature of all sorts (not only poetry but also sermons and other philosophical or theological treatises) constituted a glaring anomaly to which Herrick often drew attention. The notion of women as a paragon found expression with many poets, and became a commonplace that Herrick includes in his own verse. Sidney had lauded not only the beauty but virtue of a woman in *Astrophel and Stella* (Sonnet LXXI):

> Who will in fairest book of Nature know  
> How virtue may best lodged in beauty be,
Let him but learn of love to read in three,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.

Spenser, in *Amoretti*, gave the convention what is probably its most eloquent expression in English (Sonnet XV):

For loe my love doth in her selfe containe
all this worlds riches that may farre be found,
if Saphyres, loe her eies be Saphyres plaine,
if Rubies, loe hir lips be Rubies sound:
If Pearles, hir teeth be pearles both pure and round;
if Yvorie, her forhead yvory weene . . .

Other poets followed suit. Of course, the genre did lend itself to mockery. Shakespeare’s Sonnet CXXX, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” and the speech of Corin to Touchstone in Act III of *As You Like It*, gives ample evidence of this. Herrick may not have been the first to parody and interdict such literature, but his project is by far the most ambitious and thorough attempt at turning the genre in upon itself.

Herrick, like a good practitioner of historiographic metafiction, can idealize women with the best of them. A random dive into *Hesperides* will in a very short time uncover a poem such as this, H-263, “Mistresse Elizabeth Wheeler, under the name of the lost Shepardesse”:

Among the *Mirtles*, as I walkt,
Love and my sighs thus intertalkt:
Tell me, said I, in deep distresse,
Where I may find my Shepardesse.
Thou foole, said Love, know’st thou not this?
In everything that’s sweet, she is.
In yond’ *Carnation* goe and seek,
There thou shalt find her lip and cheek:
In that ennameled *Pansie* by,
There thou shalt have her curious eye:
In bloom of *Peach* and *Roses* bud,
There waves the Streamer of her blood.

This goes on for longer. The deification of the woman, the use of metaphors drawn from nature or from things considered beautiful or valuable, the pastoral idealization, the presence of Cupid, the abject lover—all of
these items show that Herrick knew the genre and the conventional tropes readers expected to lodge in the love poetry of that day. He is competent and can play the conventions with the best of them.

Yet there are many types of women represented in Hesperides, not all of them as ethereal as his cousin Elizabeth Wheeler. First of all, as Roger Rollin pointed out, many of the women in Hesperides are actual women, relatives of Herrick or local women he knew at Dean Prior. And some are common women, not women of the nobility. Herrick’s relatives and his maid, Prudence Baldwin, have poems addressed to them. And, at least with Pru, Herrick does not embellish her character or attempt a Petrarchan apotheosis in regard to her. He writes, for example, of her sickness in H-302:

Prue, my dearest Maid, is sick,  
Almost to be Lunatick:  
Aesculapius! Come and bring  
Means from her recovering;  
And a gallant Cock shall be  
Offer’d up by Her, to Thee.

Herrick often wrote about the quotidian aspects of life, and Prudence is included in this. She is also mentioned as an item in H-724, “His Grange, or private wealth,” where he lists “A maid (my Prew) by good luck sent,” as part of what he has, along with domestic animals and his cat and dog. Several other poems are concerned with Pru. The one about her sickness, however, is unique in that its subject matter falls outside the veil of typical seventeenth-century conventions. To depict a woman as sick is to move into unpleasant realism. Herrick even gives details that are suggestive of the nature of her sickness. She is almost “lunatick,” delirious, we would assume due to a fever. Describing Prudence as ill, sick and raving with a fever, adds a disturbing touch of reality to Herrick’s poems about women, connecting the poetry with the world where women, as Shakespeare puts it, “tread on the ground.” Rollin speculates upon the ambiguities of the poem, and notes the reference to Aesculapius rather than Jehovah, and the reference to her offering a cock (since beheading chickens would have been a frequent duty for her), as ironic suggestions that perhaps her illness is not as serious as the reader might imagine (Rollin, “Herrick’s Housekeeper,” 203). Yet a fever that would make one delirious and mentally incapacitated would be quite serious in days when medicine was primitive. Herrick’s evocation of the god of healing might sound glib in this regard, or it might suggest impracticality on the part of the poet/persona. Rather than praying to the Christian God or taking any substantive action to heal her, he retreats to the realm of classical rhetoric. The suggestion is that poetry cannot approach reality in any fashion. It can only project fanciful tropes not
connected to real life. When a real situation is imported into the sacred
grove of poetry, sickness becomes an occasion for joking and pompous,
absurd resolutions. The poem could thus be read as a critique of the in-
tersection of poetic language with real life. Further, as with the reference
to Isaac and Jacob in the Epithalamium for Sir Clipsby Crew, a disturbing
intertextual connection lodges in this poem. In the Phaedo, Socrates's last
words instruct Crito to offer a cock to Aesculapius, the god of healing. This
is usually interpreted as a bitter remark from Socrates indicating death to be
a cure for the sickness of life. As a university-educated clergyman, Herrick
would probably have known this text, and its inclusion here would alter our
perception of Herrick's disposition to Prudence and her place in society.
Is he a doting older man with an indulgent, paternalistic attitude toward
her, or is his perception of her place in the social workings a bit more dark
and pessimistic?

Readers of Hesperides also encounter female characters who disallow
idealization. Juxtaposed to his goddesses who smell of flowers and are
known to Cupid and Venus are women like Blanch, Pusse, and Prouse:

Blanch swears her Husband's lovely; when a scald
Has blear'd his eyes: Besides, his head is bald.
Next, his wilde ears, like Lethern wings full
spread,
Flutter to flie, and bear away his head.
"Upon Blanch,“ H-99
Pusse and her Prentice both at Draw-gloves play;
That done, they kisse, and so draw out the day:
At night they draw to Supper; then well fed,
They draw their clothes off both, so draw to bed.
"Upon Pusse and her Prentice.
An Epigram,“ H-773
Old widdow Prouse to do her neighbours evill
Wo'd give (some say) her soule unto the Devill.
Well, when sh'as kild, that Pig, Goose, Cock or
Hen,
What wo'd she give to get that soule agen?
"Upon an old Woman,“ H-801

Women who are foolish, slatternly, sluttish, vindictive, smelly, or physically
gross, are also to be found in the pages of Hesperides. The inclusion of such epi-
graphs in Hesperides has been noted by critics (see Dauber, Halli, Kimmey).

Within the sequence of Hesperides, Herrick places poems that rupture
the smooth surface of the Petrarchan image of women. His unpleasant
epigrams that deal with women can be seen as an overt challenge to the
gender poetics of the day. And the same thing can be said in some sense about his poetry addressed to imaginary mistresses. On the surface, it would seem that these works toe the line on the issue of how women should be presented in poetry. But these poems are no less subversive than the numbers concerning Pusse and Blanche.

The subversive quality of Herrick's imaginary mistresses derives from their existence in a space imaginatively removed from the conventional restraints that limited women's freedom power. Julia and all the other of Herrick's *femme* creations are lodged within protective space of the Hesperidian garden, safe in the realm of the imagination. As such, they are unrestricted and disencumbered as far as societal prohibitions go. This device of creating imaginary women who exist outside social reality enables Herrick so he may be innovative, disruptive, even subversive in his depictions of gender roles. The relationship of his persona to Julia, Corinna, and all the others, opens new territory and extends possibilities as far as gender is concerned.

The poet gives a list of mistresses' names in "Upon the losse of his Mistresses," H-39. The poem mentions Julia, Sapho, Anthea, Electra, Myrha, Corinna, Perilla, but there are others as well. Biancha, Dianeme, Lucia, Oenone, Perenna, and Silvia, also appear in the pages of *Hesperides*. This list tells nothing of the importance of the various names, if we grade their importance on how many poems are dedicated to them (Corinna, who appears in H-39, only has five poems in which she is mentioned, but Dianeme, who does not, has six; Myrrha only has one verse written to her in contrast to Biancha, who has four, and Silvia, who has five). Julia, of course, is the hands-down winner with more poems dedicated to her than all the others combined.

The women listed on this roster defy the restrictions of the day in several ways. Herrick uses them to parody convention. In the style of historiographic metafiction, he locates himself within the genre, representing Julia, Corinna, and all the others in a manner that would be recognized as typical of the poetics of his own day. At the same time, however, he transgresses the boundaries of the very poetics in which he embeds himself. The mistresses are vehicles of this type of transgression in at least three ways.

First, their existence in a purely poetical realm puts them beyond seventeenth-century gender expectations. As imaginative creations, they roam free in an Arcadia where they encounter Herrick's persona. No expectations may be laid upon them here except those of the speaker. The images created are unrestrained and beyond the limits of conventional-ity. This was true of poetic creations like Petrarch's Laura, Sidney's Stella, or Shakespeare's dark lady, but in *Hesperides* the imaginative status of Herrick's mistresses is highlighted by the inclusion of real women in the text. *Hesperides* is filled with women upon whom the stricures and
conventions of English society at the time would be operative. Readers encountering the names of Julia Herrick, Thomasin Parsons, Prudence Baldwin, Lady Mary Villars, and Grace and Amy Potter, would contrast them to Sapho and Lucia. Herrick’s women who exist only in the realm of art are free agents. Their parentage, marital status, familial identity, means of sustenance, sexual morality—all the things that had such bearing on women in English society at that time, and on many of the actual women to whom Herrick dedicated poems—are irrelevant as far as his mistresses go. They exist in a space that suspends gender restrictions. Herrick’s poetic garden is carnivalesque in its inversions of custom. Gender exists within it as potential, beyond reach of patriarchal restrictions.

Second, the mistresses can exist as sexual creatures. Their chastity and their obedience to male rule is not an issue. They are not restricted to the roles of daughter, wife, or widow. Their sexuality is not subjected to limitations and under their own control: they often rebuff the persona when he approaches them with seductive intentions (H-103, H-132, H-836, H-599). Herrick operates within genre, so that his mistresses are subject to the male speaker’s gaze, and hence often reduced to objects of desire. Yet at the same time, their sexuality, their self-determined jouissance, makes them anomalous in relation to the patriarchal structures against which Herrick directs his parodies, so that as artistic creations they have both a conventional and a subversive aspect. Herrick uses convention for parody so that even his creation of these imaginary women who are seen as sexual objects does not completely diminish and relegate them to a prescribed role but also opens possibilities by the very recognition of its existence. The mistresses are transformed to sexual icons by the gaze of the persona—but the same sexuality that turns them to objects also recognizes their sexuality as an unrestricted and unbounded characteristic. A great deal of critical debate has been generated about the sexuality of the speaker in Hesperides, and his sexual experience or lack of it, and on Herrick’s attitude toward women, but the point should not be lost that the sexuality of the mistresses is something that they own, and this marks them off from the requirement of virginity if they were unmarried, obedience and modesty if they were wives, and continence if they were widows (e.g., John Donne’s “and call chaste widowhood virginity,” A Litany, “XII, The Virgins”). Female sexuality is the possession of the fresh and fragrant mistresses.

Third, the mistresses are not subject to social restriction. Class and its elaborate divisions do not apply to them. Readers could discern the social status of Prudence Baldwin, since she is identified as his maid, a domestic worker. The social position of Lady Mary Villars, Governess to Princess Henrietta, is indicated by her title and her occupation. But the imaginary mistresses are devoid of rank, title, and range freely in the Hesperidian garden. They defy the social regimentation to which women in English society
were subjected. They are without a specific stratum or station in life. As imaginative creations of the poet, they militate against convention.

All these characteristics, all of these artistic interrogations of current gender convention, can be seen in the character of Julia, the imaginary mistress to whom Herrick addressed the most poems.

The verses dedicated to, or dealing with, Julia have been numbered at seventy-seven (Coiro, “Herrick’s ‘Julia’ Poems,” 67). One of the Herrick poems frequently anthologized, “Upon Julia’s Clothes,” is among these numbers. The predominance of poems about her led Gosse to conclude that, while all the other mistresses of Hesperides were imaginary, Julia was a real person in Herrick’s life, probably a lover in his youth before he went to Devonshire. Gosse picks up on the fact that Julia is the only one of the mistresses for whom we have a physical description:

Black and rowling is her eye,
Double chinn’d, and forehead high:
Lips she has all Rubie red,
Cheeks like Creame Enclarited:
And a nose that is the grace
And Proscenium of her face. (“Upon his Julia,” H-342)

He goes on to project an image of her personality gleaned from references to her in Herrick’s poetry. His construction of her is worth quoting at length. She is

an easy, kindly woman . . . ready to submit to the fancies of her lyric lover; pleased to have roses on her head, still more pleased to perfume herself with storax, spikenard, galbanum, and all the other rich gums he loved to smell; dowered with so much refinement of mind as was required to play fairly on the lute, and to govern a wayward poet with tact; not so modest or so sensitive as to resent the grossness of his fancy, yet respectable enough and determined enough to curb his license at times. She bore him one daughter, it seems, to whom he addressed of his latest poems one of his tamest. (Gosse, 137)

The poem to which he refers is “My Daughter’s Dowry.” His remarks suggest Julia is somewhat of a male fantasy to Gosse, a combination of the call girl who willingly acts out Herrick’s sexual games and the prudish governess who reigns him in when he gets too bizarre (and here perhaps we have an image of what Victorian men really wanted when they let their minds roam free).

While most critics reject Gosse’s position that she was a real woman with whom Herrick was romantically and sexually involved in his younger
days, her position as a literary creation and as symbolic presence in the poetry has been noted and speculated upon. Her name has been associated with Jove. John T. Shawcross notes the connection of her name with both Juno and Venus, and also notes that it is “the feminine form of Julius, the name of a Romans gens, probably resulting from a contraction of Jovilios, meaning pertaining to or descending from Jupiter (as father-god)” (96). This leads him to note the many times religious language is connected with her and to attach salvational significance to her presence in Hesperides. This idea of something redemptive or divine in the figure of Julia was taken further by Heather Asals, who connected Julia with Christ through the language of Proverbs. Asals pointed out that Julia is connected with the language found in the Old Testament books generally associated with Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs—and that the allegorical figure of Wisdom found in Proverbs was feminine. Asals draws the link between Julia and Jesus Christ, who Paul had called the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:24), finding a redemptive element in the persona’s relationship to her (368-70).

The connection of Julia to Wisdom should not be overlooked. In a patriarchal society, the embodiment of wisdom as female would be anomalous, and yet the interpretative tradition that saw female Wisdom in the Old Testament as a prefiguration of Christ was well-established. Asals notes that the connection to Julia is forged through intertextual reference and language in the Julia poems that reflects the language of the wisdom literature attributed to Solomon (374).

The most comprehensive study of Julia is by Anne Baynes Coiro. She notes the evolution of Julia’s character throughout Hesperides from the early poems where Julia is apparently a virgin who is venerated and worshiped by Herrick’s persona to a woman who participates in “churching,” an Anglican ceremony to be performed after childbirth. As Hesperides progresses, Julia assumes much more the role of mother. And Coiro alone notes the connection of Julia with Julia Herrick, Robert Herrick’s mother, so named in the poem, “His Tears to Thamasis,” H-1028. In extant records she is usually referred to as Julian or Juliana, but is “called simply Julia here in the only surviving mention that Herrick made of her” (Coiro, “Julia,” 83). Coiro makes the following observations:

That Julia, “prime of all,” should bear the same name as Herrick’s mother seems, at the least, worth noting. Yet the name has never been recognized by any critic of Herrick. The closest acknowledgement of the identical names is elliptical and framed as a warning; F. W. Moorman cautions, “of the poet’s relations with [his mother] we know nothing, and speculation on such a matter is particularly undesirable. “ The reluctance of critics to cite such an obvious fact as the poet’s choice of

his mother’s name for his most important mistress demonstrates the curious resistance of readers to question or expand the traditional interpretations of Herrick’s poetry. (83)

Critics are fastidious about entering the perilous realms of psychosexual speculation. The difficulty with speculating on how Herrick regarded his mother is the same difficulty all critics have felt due to lack of supporting documentation about his life. Reconstructing a psychological profile of Herrick is a perilous venture.

But I would like to suggest a connection between Julia of the mistresses and Julia Herrick. It is not psychological, not a manifestation of oedipal desire projected by the son on to the mother through the creative medium of poetry. Rather, the intent is parodic. Herrick’s Julia connects the enterprise of the persona in Hesperides with the female-centered environment over which Julia Herrick presided in the days of Robert’s childhood. Hesperides is authorized by a female muse (mad though she may be) but also given unity by a feminine figure, Julia, whose presence creates unity and whose evolution as a character shapes the dramatic development found throughout the volume. Behind the character of Julia is Julia Herrick, Robert’s touchstone, the figure most responsible for his social and psychological development, to whom his loyalty was due, and for whom he would feel a great deal of sympathy and a substantive desire to come to her defense, especially with regard to her place in society. Julia Herrick was restricted and restrained in English society, limited due to her gender, but her namesake knows no such boundaries in Hesperides.

An intertextual connection suggests the influence of Julia Herrick in the aesthetic vision of Hesperides. “When he would have his verses read,” H-8, the last of the eight framing poems found at the beginning of the volume, sets the following conditions for reading Herrick’s poetry:

IN sober morning, doe not thou rehearse
The holy incantation of a verse;
But when that men have both well drunk, and fed,
Let my enchantments then be sung, or read.

The third line contains the phrase, “when that men have both well drunk, and fed,” is highly suggestive of a line in the gospel of John. The passage reads as follows:

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, Woman,
what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. And there were set there six waterpots of stone . . . Jesus saith unto them, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And he saith unto them, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bare it. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine . . . the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, And saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse; but thou has kept the good wine until now. (John 2:1–10)

This was an account of Jesus's first miracle. What is notable about the passage is the prominence of his mother in it. The text contains four distinct references to Mary. Also, it is Mary who supervises and authorizes the first miracle Christ did. She instructs the servants, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it." When her instructions are followed, the miraculous occurs. Mary's presence at the feast seems to have some bearing upon the beginning of Jesus's ministry, as St. John states, "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him" (11). Through the phrase Herrick lifts from the biblical text, he draws a direct connection between this incident told in the scriptures and the beginning of his own poetic endeavor. Mary the mother of Jesus figures in the biblical passage, and Julia Herrick in Hesperides. The atmosphere of Hesperides is not solemn; it is like a party, a feast, a celebration. In the biblical account of the wedding at Cana, it took the female intervention of Mary to keep the party going, and in Hesperides Julia is the one who lends a gender impetus to the creative project.

The connection between Julia and Julia Herrick is not so much psychological as it is literary and social. It is not fantasy or incest wish fulfillment, it is wish fulfillment projected into the social realm and related to how women should be treated and regarded. Julia Herrick's memory lurks in the questioning of gender roles frequently found in Hesperides. Herrick's mother was an exemplar for him in this regard. While we have no direct references to what she might have gone through as a single mother in the time, we know the legal and social status of women then. No doubt some of the less generous terms society dealt to women in early modern England had an impact on Julia Herrick, a thing of which her youngest son would have taken note. In the disruptive landscape of Hesperides, Julia is often seen. As Coiro points out, she moves with the persona through the different stages of development in the volume of poetry. She is a constant to which the persona frequently returns. His return to the character of Julia may be understood as a return to questioning, to interrogation, and to parody. Julia is a signifying character representative not of Julia Herrick
directly but of the need Herrick saw for the vindication of the feminine against the strictures English society had leveled against women.

Various observations on Julia’s presence in the fabric of *Hesperides* exist within Herrick criticism, as we have noted, but in general it can be said that Julia represents, and is a mirror for, the creative response of the persona to the various topics within the poetic volume. Her personality is a rubric of sorts, and through it the speaker of *Hesperides* enters certain spaces of discourse where convention may be challenged and relationships of mutuality between genders explored.

At the most basic level, the character of Julia exists as an object of aesthetic awe and wonder to the persona, a figure regarded through traditional Petrarchan attitude and with attendant terms. Often, the vocabulary of such poetry would anatomize the woman. Nancy J. Vickers argues that since the Diana-Actaeon myth was understood as a *topos* for the encounter of the pursuing lover (Actaeon) with the female love-interest prey (Diana), who unexpectedly unleashes her feminine power against him, an early strategy of Petrarchan love poets was “the neutralization, through descriptive dismemberment, of the threat. He [the poet] transforms the visible totality into scattered words, the body into signs; his description, at one remove from his experience, safely permits and perpetuates his fascination” (273). While I can find no reference to the Actaeon story in *Hesperides*, Herrick does seem to have picked up on this tendency enough that he engages in this same sort of poetic dismemberment of Julia. She is anatomized into “edible or septic pieces” (Schoenfeldt, 143). Her lips, breath, hair, teeth, cheeks, breasts, nipples, sweat, legs, voice, and other body parts are singled out for praise in different poems scattered throughout the secular verses. Herrick’s persona can safely approach her in this manner. But the relationship of Julia and the persona rapidly moves beyond the level of the admiring poet and the edible woman.

Julia and the persona forge a relationship in the book. Unlike the more conventional love poetry that operates around Petrarchan or medieval-romantic paradigms, and in which the remote lover is finally the possession of the pursuing lover, the persona, “Herrick,” and Julia interact, even converse at points. This is seen early on in poems such as “His sailing from Julia,” H-35. The narrator asks Julia to offer sacrifices to the pagan gods for his safety in his voyage and, for love’s sake, to kiss his picture. Rather than the normal protestations of love or admiration of body parts, this poem curiously touches the persona’s need for assistance and affirmation:

*Mercie* and *Truth* live with thee! and forbeare
(In my short absence) to unsluce a teare:
But yet of Loves-sake, let thy lips doe this,
Give my dead picture one engendering kisse:
Work that to life, and let me ever dwell
In my remembrance (Julia.) So farewell.

The emotional tone of this poem, its acknowledgement of fear on the part of the speaker, and his dependence on Julia for his continued identity, are in contrast to the glowing verses about her eyes, breasts, and nipples. Here Julia is not a constructed object of the persona's masculine gaze. The poem contains indications of mutuality. Julia, in fact, assumes the role of priestess and the narrator of communicant, and the narrator is dependent upon her. The phrase embedded in the poem, "mercie and truth live with thee," refers back to an incident recorded in 2 Samuel 15. David flees from his son Absalom, who is trying to kill him. He is surrounded by supporters, including one Ittai, a non-Hebrew dwelling as a foreigner in the land. David tells him he should not take the risk of fleeing with the royal entourage and being killed by Absalom's forces, saying, "return thou . . . mercy and truth be with thee" (v. 20). Ittai, and his people, however, remain loyal and accompany David in his flight from Jerusalem. The narrator hopes to see the same type of loyalty in Julia. This particular section of scripture, too, shows David, the King of Israel, in a state of abjection, often weeping, remorseful, almost certain of his own doom. It is the loyal supporters like Ittai that enable him to survive and eventually to prevail. Perhaps the poem suggests a role reversal similar to what is found in the biblical text. In the biblical text the king becomes the dependent one and his subjects are the active, capable agents in the situation. So with Julia and the persona. The conventions that restrict the female character to being beautiful and desirable give way in this poem to a colloquy of mutuality.

Julia often assumes the role of priestess. In H-539 she is the Flaminica Dialis, the Queen Priest, who must make sacrifice for her and the narrator, who have neglected the upkeep of Venus's temple. Here again, the narrator is strangely passive and Julia is the active figure in the situation. She is the one who must put on vestments and burn incense. The speaker begs, "Take then thy Censer; Put in Fire, and thus, / O Pious-Priestesse! Make a Peace for us." The entire poem is one of Herrick's curious conflations of Christian and Pagan, for while the worship is to Venus and she is the Roman priestess, the accouterments are reminiscent of a Christian church. The ceremony, on which depends the very lives of the characters in the poem, is entirely in her charge, so that the last words of the poem are a statement to her, "Redemption comes by Thee." The narrator assumes a passive role, Julia a religiously active role. The poem is vaguely suggestive of the conventional worship of love, but gender protocol is reversed. Julia is burning male incense.

This condition of equality is found elsewhere. "Herrick" and Julia converse in another poem centered around religious activity. The content
of "The Sacrifice, by way of Discourse betwixt himselfe and Julia," H-870, is not particularly remarkable as a poem. What is notable, however, is that the persona and Julia seem to be on of equal status. The speaker asks if everything is ready for the sacrifice. Julia replies that all propriety has been observed and all is ready, including the animal "we bring / For our Trespasse-offering." The inclusive plural pronoun appears here, and Julia exhibits relaxed familiarity with the workings and requirements of sacrifice. The persona responds:

All is well; now next to these  
Put we on pure Surplices;  
And with Chaplets crown'd, we'Il rost  
With perfumes the Holocaust:  
And (while we the gods invoke)  
Reade acceptance by the smoake.

Neither of these priests seems to hold rank over the other. Their equality is a startling variance from the accepted roles of men and women in early modern England. By removing the scene to pagan times, Herrick is able to evoke this sort of gender egalitarianism, but references to surplices and chapels, quotations and language from the Bible, and theological words like "transgression," "altar," even "old religion," all give an unquieting sense of modernity to the situations he describes. Julia is on equal footing with narrator, in a removed, artistic environment to be sure, but one that Herrick always manages to link to the tangible world in which his readers lived.

Julia seems, too, intimate enough and important enough to the persona that he frequently shares with her his thoughts and feelings about death, usually his own—though one poem he writes deals with her death. A poem in which the persona considers his demise is "His last request to Julia." The request is, "dearest Julia come, / and go with me to chuse my Buriall roome: / My Fates are ended; when thy Herrick dyes, / Claspe thou his Book, then close thou up his Eyes." This is not the type of thing a Petrarchan poet would say to the object of his affection. Julia is on a level with the narrator that he can put the deposition of his corpse in her charge, and of his art as well. She is to close his eyes and close his "book" too. The narrator addresses her demise in "To Julia," H-584:

The Saints-bell calls; and, Julia, I must read  
The Proper Lessons for the Saints now dead:  
To grace which Service, Julia, there shall be  
One Holy Collect, said or sung for Thee.  
Dead when thou art, Deare Julia, thou shalt have  
A Trentall sung by Virgins o're thy Grave:
Meane time we two will sing the Dirge of these;  
Who dead, deserve our best remembrances.

Julia's death is prefigured by the deaths of the saints to whom the service the narrator reads is commemorative. Currently, however, "we two" sing the service together. This service, unlike the others mentioned up to this point, is a Christian service. Julia, though a woman, co-officiates. At that time, women could not serve in the Anglican Church in any ministerial capacity, yet in this poem she is singing the service with the officiating priest. Here exists not only mutuality but equality of role in an area where gender inequality was strictly enforced.

Like many Renaissance writers, Herrick is not consistently liberating in his attitude toward Julia or his other female subjects. Very often she becomes the object of his gaze, and in this he prefers her naked. At least three poems bring out the voyeur in Herrick's narrator (H-414, H-824, H-939), and he asks her to "Appeare thou to mine eyes / As smooth, and nak't, as she that was / The prime of Paradice." Her breasts get a lot of attention, and he talks about them in more than one poem (H-230, H-440, H-491), asking to see them or to caress them. In this, Gordon Braden's observation that Hesperides, lacks adult sexuality (223) and that Herrick is a peeping Tom, seems to have more credence than some critics have afforded him (see Rollin, "Erotics of Criticism"). Yet if indeed something of Julia Herrick is in the character of Julia in Hesperides, this distancing would be understandable. With Julia, "prime of all," the narrator wants to see, to touch, but not to consummate. This is not the case with the other mistresses. In a poem addressed to Anthea (H-74) for example, the speaker frankly states his desire to have intercourse with her:

Ah my Anthea! Must my heart still break?  
(Love makes me write, what shame forbids to speak.)  
Give me a kisse, and to that kisse a score:  
Then to that twenty, adde an hundred more . . .  
But yet, though Love likes well such Scenes as these,  
There is an Act that will more fully please:  
Kissing and glancing, soothing, all make way  
But to the acting of this private Play:  
Name it I would; but being blushing red,  
The rest He speak, when we meet both in bed.

The speaker imitates Ovid and Cattalus's well-known poem, "Lesbia, vivamus me," but his passion will not be satisfied merely with kissing.
Foreplay leads to the “Act” that is unspeakable but clearly defined by his silence. Anthea, in fact, seems to be a mistress that Herrick’s persona is particularly attracted to in this regard. He later tells her she is sexy in bed (H-104).

With Julia he always stops short of consummation. Coiro has observed that “once Julia [Herrick] is recognized, almost simultaneously, as both mother and object of erotic desire, all of the remaining poems in Hesperides are poems of purification and sacrifice, with no acknowledgement of her physical attraction” (84). The poems of the two sacrificing together have been mentioned. And Julia does move from the role of a woman whom the persona wants to leer at, delighting in her “nipplets” and getting excited when she slips and he gets a glimpse of her genitals, to a woman who has given birth and goes to a “churching” ceremony (H-898). Through the range of poems she inhabits, she becomes a character who inspires but also disrupts, who is the conventional poetic female figure but then a subversive factor in the volume. Readers must always keep in mind that Herrick speaks through a character he has created and that the voice of the character, even though he is occasionally called “Herrick,” is not Herrick himself but an imaginative projection of various psychological and creative dispositions. Much of Herrick is in the persona, but the two are not the same. Similarly, Julia has something of Julia Herrick in her. She is the redemptrix of Herrick’s poetry, a salvific figure who comes alongside the persona to save him and his poetry. As Julia Herrick figured in her son’s life, so the significance of her namesake in his poetical project is considerable. And due to this connection, she is also a disruptive entity who pushes at the limits of early modern English social conventions. She leads the other mistresses, and the rather large gathering of women, real and imagined, that one finds in Hesperides, in a low-key challenge to the historical conditions that Robert Herrick thought inimical to his own mother and to women in general. And what he lacked in understanding on this particular matter he made up for in zeal.

Throughout the text of Hesperides (though not in Noble Numbers), Herrick moves in directions that challenge accepted gender configurations. His references to Julia, to the other mistresses, to his muse, his epithalamium poems, his occasional poems addressing both noble and common women, work together to question accepted norms. Trying to understand Herrick’s poetry dealing with women without recognizing this subversive, parodic element only leads one into a pathless quagmire as far as interpretation goes. Herrick defies the limits of standard interpretation in his presentation of gender. The subtle directions in his discourse on the matter open up the social text and suggest new possibilities as far as the manner in which women in his time were regarded, going far beyond the limits of poetic traditions, using text and language, using poetic liturgy, as
a means by which accepted injustices might be mollified and eventually perhaps even corrected.

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Herrick and Gender
