EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

The Judgment (and Women Problems) of Solomon in *Greenes Vision* (1592)

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Greenes Vision: Written at the Instant of His Death (1592), a work of mock authorial repentance, has often been read alongside a range of other ostensibly expiatory pieces that Robert Greene composed around the turn of the 1590s, including *Grene His Farewell to Folly*, *Greenes Mourning Garment*, and the two-volume *Greenes Never Too Late.* It takes the form of a pseudo-medieval dream vision in which an inscribed Greene, apprehensive about the nature of his own literary legacy and fearing 'future infamie', encounters the vaunted spectres of Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower.[1] The bulk of the text features a war of words waged between these two medieval literary celebrities, and, for this reason, it has excited a greater degree of interest from scholars in our own time than Greene's other, topically related pamphlets of penitence. Contemporary scholarship's ongoing fascination with Greene's nostalgic depictions of his Middle English predecessors has meant, however, that the presence of King Solomon – a third authorial ghost who materialises alongside Chaucer and Gower and intervenes in their literary dispute – has not received sustained consideration.[2] This is a lacuna that I here seek to rectify. As I will argue, Solomon functions in *Greenes Vision* not only as a third-party arbitrator in an aesthetic battle waged between 'Graue Laureats' (C2r), but also as a biased and ironically deployed peace-maker in an unresolvable clash of language and signification that ultimately seems to be just as much about the nature of women as it does about the literary modes and values that Chaucer and Gower represent.

[1] Robert Greene, *Greenes Vision Written at the Instant of His Death* (STC 12261; London, 1592), sig. C2v. Subsequent references to this text are cited parenthetically by signature.

[2] For a reading of *Greenes Vision* that posits the text as a 'valuable site from which to explore the complex and often convoluted nostalgia that informs many early modern uses of the medieval English past', see Megan L. Cook, 'Nostalgic Temporalities in *Greenes Vision*', *Parergon* 33 (2016), 39-56 (p. 39).

To appreciate the ironies inflecting Solomon's momentous scene of arbitration at the *Vision*'s end, it is first necessary to trace the outlines of the debate over 'Chaucerian' vs. 'Gowerian' poetics that precedes his entry into the text. In a persuasive close reading of this work, Jeremy Dimmick summarises the stances taken by the sparring poets thus: Greene's Chaucer – who is associated, by extension, with both Ovid and Greene himself – 'stand[s] for love poetry and licentious comedy', while Greene's Gower represents 'a serious and moral literature grounded in philosophy and the liberal arts'.[3] I am in broad agreement with Dimmick's characterisation and with previous scholarship's more general consensus that the *Vision* offers a 'playful treatment of the old debate between pleasure and instruction' that employs 'blithe and merry' Chaucer (C1r) and 'sterne and grim' (C1v) Gower as highly caricatured mouthpieces.[4] Nonetheless, I am also sensitive to additional, complicating factors that prior analyses of this text have stopped short of fully addressing. Namely, the *Vision* rhetorically politicises and militarises this debate, and, in so doing, it directly links its aesthetic concerns to the *querelle des femmes* with which medieval and early modern authors both within and beyond England were frequently preoccupied. Put otherwise, the battle over literary merit in *Greenes Vision* is conspicuously fused with questions about the nature of womankind.

We are primed to recognise this synthesis of topics – women and writing – as Greene's diametrically opposed Middle English revenants verbally negotiate their way into an ad hoc tale-telling competition. Using his skills of rhetoric and persuasion, each of the *Vision*'s medieval authors will take a stance on the nature and purpose of literature by relaying a single narrative in his own characteristic style and register. Notably, the fictive Chaucer prefaces his tale with a brief defence of his implicit associate Greene, saying he will 'shew' his opponent Gower 'such sentences' in the Elizabethan author's work 'as may like the grauest, please the wisest, and instruct the youngest and wantonnest'. Chaucer's ensuing list of twenty *sententiae*, purportedly culled from Greene's own literary canon, speak to what the inscribed medieval poet describes as 'the disposition of women' (C4v). Somewhat unsurprisingly, antifeminist considerably outnumber profeminist maxims in this list, which includes such kernels of wisdom as: 'Womens faces are lures, there beauties are baites, their lookes nets, their words charmes, and all bring men to ruin'; 'The Clossets of womens thoughts are euer open, & the deapth of their heart hath a string that stretcheth to their tongues end'; and 'As the glittering beames of the Sunne when it ariseth, decketh the Heauens: so the glistering beautie of a good wife

[3] Jeremy Dimmick, 'Gower, Chaucer and the Art of Repentance in Robert Greene's *Vision*', *The Review of English Studies* 57 (2006), 456-73 (p. 459).

[4] Meredith Anne Skura, *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 211.

adorneth the house' (C4v-D1v). These are Greenian proclamations, Chaucer submits, that even Gower must deem 'worthie graue eares', and his rival duly acknowledges that these 'sayings are good' (D1v). Despite their differences, these fictionalised medieval poets seem to agree on one thing: the evaluation of an author's worth and reputation is inseparable from his engagement in the debates of the *querelle des femmes*.

The conceptual slippage between writing worthily and writing about women in *Greenes Vision* carries over into the competition proper, which is overtly politicised and even militarised. Notably, Chaucer and Gower's tale-telling is framed as a means of offering confidential 'counsaile' to the inscribed Greene (C2r), and Chaucer initiates the contest by announcing,

> *Demosthenes* when he could not perswade the Athenians with his long and learned Orations, drew them to withstand *Phillip* with a merry Fable. And *Alcibiades* wrought more amongst his Souldiers with his pleasant allusions, then with all his graue exhortations: for proofe *Gower* thou shalt heere me tell a tale for the suppressing of iealousie, which tell mee how thou likest when thou hast heard it. (D1v)

These scene-setting references to the classical oratory of Demosthenes and Alcibiades position the ensuing clash between 'Chaucerian' vs. 'Gowerian' poetics squarely within the realm of statesmanship, diplomacy, and martial action.[5] As much as Demosthenes and Alcibiades are here reimagined as purveyors of 'merry Fable[s]', Chaucer and Gower are reciprocally rendered by this same comparison as political and military figureheads inducting the inscribed Greene into an ongoing literary conflict of national and international consequence. We are thus encouraged to perceive the medieval authors' sparring over writing and women as a veritable war of words.

The stated theme of Chaucer and Gower's storytelling contest is 'iealousie', but it is, in fact, the question of *women's behaviour* – a wellspring for endless literary feuds in medieval and early modern Europe – that lies at the centre of their two tales. Existing scholarship on *Greenes Vision* has tended to oversimplify the stakes of the authors' verbal skirmish by reducing it to a struggle over implicitly hierarchical genres. Arul Kumaran, for instance, summarises that '[e]ach poet makes his point by telling a story, Chaucer, a

[5] For evidence that Demosthenes, in particular, is likely to have been interpreted as an intensely political figure by late Elizabethan audiences, see Alastair J. L. Blanshard and Tracey A. Sowerby, 'Thomas Wilson's Demosthenes and the Politics of Tudor Translation', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 12 (2005), 46-80.

fabliau-like tale and Gower, a dignified moral *exemplum*', while Robert W. Maslen contends that Gower counters Chaucer's 'scurrilous *fabliau*' with 'a kind of saint's legend', and Steve Mentz describes their respective pieces as an 'imitat[ion] Italian novelle' and a 'saint's life'.[6] What such generically attuned assessments tend to neatly gloss over, however, is the crucial fact that Chaucer and Gower are pointedly depicted telling versions of the *same* story in *Greenes Vision*, and the symmetry of their respective tales falters only in their endings.

Although Chaucer sets his story 'in Grandchester hard by Cambridge' (D2r) and Gower in the further-flung 'citie of Antwerpe' (E1v), the two authors establish virtually identical situations in their respective tales. Chaucer introduces his audience to a wheelwright by the name of Tomkins who falls in love with Kate, a farmer's daughter who 'euery daye wente to sell Creame at Cambridge' (D2r). Following Tomkins's marriage to Kate, he finds himself consumed with jealousy since she continues to go 'as she was woonte when she was a Maide to Cambridge with her Creame' (D3r). Concerned that 'Schollers [a]re mad fellows', Tomkins fears 'some of them might teach his Wife Lodgick' and resolves to keep her by his side at all times to prevent such a fate (D3r). Likewise, Gower's complementary tale opens with Alexander Vandermast, a *sententiae*-spouting 'gentleman of good Parentage' (E1v), finding himself attracted to one Theodora, whom he marries in short order. Like the Chaucerian Tomkins, however, Alexander is soon overcome with jealousy. Worried that the other merchants who frequent his house 'come rather for the beautie of his wife, then for any other trade of Marchandize', he proactively 'pin[s]' his new wife 'vp in her Chamber, and ke[eps] himself the Key' (E2v).

Where the tales of Greene's combatants deviate is in their respective characterisations of women's nature. Suspected of infidelity and 'gréeued, that with out cause she was so wrongd', the falsely accused yet spirited Kate of Greene's Chaucer is said to have masked 'her gréefe with patience, and brookt [Tomkins's] suspition' only 'till she might with credit reuenge' (D3r). Though more chaste in tone, this reprisal (which Kate enacts with the complicity of a friendly scholar and her mother) is reminiscent of Alisoun's duping of John in the real-life Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*: in the pattern of John, Tomkins is likewise gulled and left to ponder his own apparent madness, and his eventual reconciliation with his wife explicitly relies upon his contrition. In contrast to Kate, Theodora is 'like to the virtuous Woman which *Salomon* sets out in the Prouerbes, who eates not her bread with

[6] Arul Kumaran, 'Robert Greene's Martinist Transformation in 1590', *Studies in Philology* 103 (2006), 243-63 (p. 256); Robert W. Maslen, 'Robert Greene and the Uses of Time', in *Writing Robert Greene*, ed. by Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 156-88 (p. 185); Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 178.

idlenesse, shee is vp earlie and late, labouring gladlie with her hands: she occupies Wooll and Flaxe, layes hould vpon the Distaffe, and puts hir fingers to the Spindle' (E3r). Nonetheless, she too is suspected of impropriety, and Greene's Gower conspicuously echoes his poetic rival's language when he relays that Theodora 'percieued the folly of her husband, and brookt it with great patience' (E3v). Lacking her 'Chaucerian' counterpart's proactive desire for retribution, however, the docile Theodora merely laments 'Her *Innocencie*' to herself (F1v). Gower's tale concludes with Alexander putting his wife's constancy to the test in what is – interestingly, given what Dimmick calls Ovid's status as something of a proto-Chaucerian, proto-Greenian 'bogeyman' throughout the pamphlet – a reprise of the Cephalus and Procris storyline from *Metamorphoses* 7.[7] After a chance encounter with a magician, Alexander unsuccessfully attempts to woo his long-suffering wife in the form of another man. Theodora's refusal of her disguised husband's suit is thus the means of her vindication, and the couple lives happily ever after.

The central question raised by this neatly paired set of 'Chaucerian' and 'Gowerian' tales in *Greenes Vision,* then, is this: how should a wife behave when unjustly accused of infidelity? In this sense, the *Vision*'s war of words highlights just how deeply intertwined questions of literary merit and women's nature were in the early modern literary imagination. To cast judgment on the one issue is to simultaneously take a stance with regards to the second. The fictive Gower, who sees 'bookes' as 'companions, and friends, and counsailors' that ought 'to bring youth to vertue', declares his own answer to this question to be 'more full of humanity' than Chaucer's, and Greene's inscribed persona agrees. In sharp contrast, most critics in our own time have found the supposed – if also fleeting – authorial victory of Gower over Chaucer at this juncture in the *Vision* unconvincing. Noting the 'cheery liberalism' of Chaucer's discourse, Maslen, for instance, argues that his 'ghost undertakes a defense of [pleasurable literature] that is as spirited as anything Lodge or Sidney could have written'.[8] Along similar lines, Carmine Di Biase insists that the historic 'Greene's *real* voice emanates most clearly and consistently from the fictitious […] Chaucer', and Dimmick speculates that, from the

[7] Dimmick, 'Gower, Chaucer', 470. Carmine Di Biase argues that Greene's particular adaptation of the Ovidian Cephalus and Procris storyline is inflected by an intermediary text found in George Pettie's *Petite Pallace of Pettie His Pleasure*: 'The Decline of Euphuism: Robert Greene's Struggle Against Popular Taste', in *Critical Approaches to English Prose Fiction, 1520-1640,* ed. by Donald Beecher (Ottawa: Dovehouse, 1998), pp. 85-108 (p. 98).

[8] Maslen, 'Robert Greene', p. 185.

audience's vantage point, 'if anyone wins the debate, perhaps it is Chaucer', who 'seems the most truly persuasive exemplar of authorship in the *Vision*'.[9]

I am admittedly not the first twenty-first-century reader of this text to have sensed that 'the debate over the nature of literature fuses with a debate on the nature of women' in *Greenes Vision*.[10] In *The English Romance in Time,* Helen Cooper has similarly, if passingly, commented upon the apparent 'parallel between the seductions of women and the seductions of literature' implied in the conflict between 'Chaucerian' and 'Gowerian' poetics.[11] To this effect, she notes that 'the paradigmatic quality of the debate over women's virtue' in Greene's era meant it could 'subsume or serve as a vehicle for debates of other kinds'.[12] I here aim to draw out the fuller implications of Cooper's fleeting observation, particularly as they relate to the *Vision*'s conclusion. After all, *Greenes Vision* does not simply end with Gower's momentary (if questionable) triumph over Chaucer. Rather, the dialogue continues with Solomon himself materialising 'in great royaltie, attired gorgeous, in the habite of a King' (H2r).

While Chaucer and Gower's discursive skirmish initially appears to have been waged for the inscribed Greene's benefit, it is evident that the power to make definitive aesthetic judgments does not lie in his hands. Indeed, the sudden appearance of Solomon renders Greene's previously expressed preference for 'Gowerian' poetics meaningless and underscores his persona's limited role as 'verie attentiue' audience rather than authority within the *Vision* (D1r). When Solomon tells the inscribed writer that he has 'come to put knowledge in [his] lippes, and to teach [him] wisedome', this strikes 'terrour', 'feare', and 'horror' in the fictive Greene's subservient (and perhaps too easily swayed) heart (H2v, H3v-H4r). The ancient king immediately assumes the role of literary arbitrator, and his apparent authority to do so is reinforced by prolonged descriptions of his 'royall Equipage' and 'massie Crowne', as well as the reactions he evokes from the *Vision*'s other characters: 'At his presence *Chawcer* and *Gower* abasht, and both putting off their Bonnets, fell on their knees' while Greene 'did him such duty as belongde to a Potentate' (H2r). With Solomon's dramatic entrance, we are made aware that what may have at first

[9] Di Biase, 'Decline of Euphuism', pp. 90-1 (emphasis my own); Dimmick, 'Gower, Chaucer', 464.

[10] Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 293.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid, pp. 293-4. Cooper has – albeit, again fleetingly – made similar comments elsewhere about how the 'debate [in *Greenes Vision*] works through the parallel of the "wantonness" attaching to both women and literature': '"This Worthy Olde Writer": *Pericles* and Other Gowers, 1592-1640', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. by Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 99–113 (p. 101).

appeared to be a two-party negotiation between Middle English stakeholders has been strangely triangulated all along. The Old Testament king admits he has been eavesdropping on Chaucer and Gower's volley of words, and he has already 'equally weighed their censures' (H2v). His peace-brokering verdict? Regardless of Theodora's explicit resemblance to his own Woman of Worth from Proverbs 31:10, Solomon does not rule in Gower's favour. Instead, he declares both medieval poets in the wrong. In fact, their entire '*Pro et contra*' battle on women and writing is founded on mere 'follies' (H2v). Asserting that 'all knowledge, all sciences, all artes, all learning except Theologie, be méere foolishnesse and vanitie' and that 'there is no wisdome, but the knowledge of the law of the Lord' (H3v), Solomon seeks to supress rather than mediate the *Vision*'s lively poetic clash. Hence his sweeping dismissal not only of 'Chaucerian' and 'Gowerian' aesthetics, but also of *all* secular literary pursuits.

Despite twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship's aforementioned tendency to hail Chaucer as the true poetic victor in the *Vision*, little critical attention has been given to interrogating the dynamics of Solomon's conspicuously princely third-party intervention in this rhetorically politicised and militarised war of wit and taste – or to teasing out what it means that Greene chose him to arbitrate this *particular* conflict. Arthur F. Kinney, for example, has characterised the 'final authority' exerted by the biblical king as 'moderate', while others simply remark upon his 'Tamburlaine-like charisma' or suggest that he strikes a 'grander and more authoritative' posture than either Middle English poet.[13] What is perhaps the most substantive recent analysis of Solomon's role in the text appears in Megan L. Cook's 'Nostalgic Temporalities in *Greenes Vision*', in which she submits that the proclamations of this 'late-breaking authority figure' have 'a conclusive force'.[14] Apparently taking Greene's Solomon at face value 'as a lover of wisdom' who 'exhorts the dreamer to turn away from amorous writing and to devote himself to moral instruction and the study of theology', Cook assumes that 'Solomon's intervention […] draw[s] a sharp boundary around Chaucer's and Gower's secular poetic authority'.[15] Further suggesting that 'Solomon's insistence on the primacy of wisdom stands in contrast with the ludic fiction of Chaucer and even "moral" Gower', she interprets the king as a figure 'located above and outside of […] literary tradition'.[16] In contrast, I would argue that, far from 'threaten[ing] to put a stop to th[e] ludic interplay'

[13] Arthur F. Kinney, *Humanist Poetics: Thought, Rhetoric, and Fiction in Sixteenth-Century England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), p. 227; Skura, *Tudor Autobiography*, p. 211; Kumaran, 'Greene's Martinist', p. 256.

[14] Cook, 'Nostalgic Temporalities', 55.

[15] Ibid, 40.

[16] Ibid, 41, 56.

that has characterised the *Vision*'s dialogue up to this point, the quasi-political intervention of the semantically slippery and intertextually charged figure of Solomon continues just such interplay.[17]

For sixteenth-century English audiences, Solomon's wisdom was, quite literally, proverbial. In his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, or *Education of a Christian Prince*, Erasmus recommended, '*Quod si quis meo velit vti consilio, statim a tradita loquendi ratione proponet Prouerbia Solomonis, Ecclesiasticum et librum Sapientiae*' [If any tutor wants my advice, as soon as [a] boy has a grasp of language he should present the proverbs of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, and the Book of Wisdom].[18] Following suit, pedagogical authorities including Thomas Elyot and William Lilly prescribed the books of Solomon ('wherein be well nyghe as many wysedomes, as there be sentences') for classroom use and translation exercises, while Solomonic *sententiae* and adages were also popularised in a host of English printed texts.[19] Michael Hattaway notes that, much '[a]s Hercules was a common Renaissance symbol of valor, so Solomon represented wisdom, and he [was] very frequently referred to as simply "the wise man"'.[20] This facet of Solomon's early modern reputation was, no doubt, bolstered by the enduring popularity of the Judgment of Solomon narrative from 1 Kings 3:16–28, wherein the biblical ruler settles a custody dispute between two women over a single male infant and, in the process, issues what has been hailed as one of 'the earliest judicial "speech-acts" recorded in Western law'.[21]

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[17] Ibid, 56.

[18] Erasmus, *Institutio Principis Christiani*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. by O. Herding (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1974), p. 180. The English translation provided here corresponds to *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. by Neil M. Cheshire and Michael J. Heath, ed. by Lisa Jardine (1997; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 61.

[19] Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Gouernour* (STC 7636; London, 1537), sig. Dd7v. Where Elyot declares that the 'prouerbes of Salomo[n], with the bokes of Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus, be very good lessons', Lilly more expansively affirms that '[a] great heal[p] to further [a beginning student's] redynesse of makyng and speakyng shall be, the mayster geue hym an englishe booke, as the Psalter, or S[a]lomons Prouerbes, or Ecclesiasticus […] to tourne euery daie […] into latin': Elyot, *Gouernour*, sig. E7r; William Lilly, *A Short Introduction of Grammar* (STC 15610.10; London, 1548), sig. a3v. For a sampling of early modern English translations, see: Thomas Cogan, *The Well of Wisedome* (STC 5485; London, 1577); Robert Allen, *An Alphabet of the Holy Proverbs of King Salomon* (STC 362; London, 1596); and Thomas Middleton, *The Wisdome of Solomon Paraphrased* (STC 17906; London, 1597).

[20] Michael Hattaway, 'Paradoxes of Solomon: Learning in the English Renaissance', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 29 (1968), 499-530 (p. 499).

[21] Marie Ashe, 'Abortion of Narrative: A Reading of the Judgment of Solomon', *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4 (1991), 81-92 (p. 81).

In the latter half of the sixteenth century, Solomon's famed judgement of 1 Kings 3 was reworked for early modern English consumption in texts including Book V of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596) and an adaptation of Sixt Birck's *Sapientia Solomonis* played by pupils of the Westminster grammar school (c. 1566).[22] Greene, too, was perceptibly inspired by this same narrative when he imagined 'the wise man' as arbitrator in his *Vision*. On an obvious level, Solomon's third-party intervention in the poetic clash between Chaucer and Gower parodies his famed biblical judgment. After all, in 1 Kings 3, Solomon was similarly tasked with resolving a conflict between two female stereotypes, the presumptive 'good' woman and the presumptive 'bad' woman. Like Kate and Theodora, these anterior biblical women of 1 Kings 3 are identical in their roughly sketched outlines (both prostitutes, both inhabitants of the same dwelling, both new mothers), yet ultimately distinguishable by their divergent modes of speech and behaviour. Indeed, Solomon threatens violence – proposing to cut the contested infant in two – in order to perform what Marie Ashe fittingly describes as a '"reading" of these two women' that reductively renders them, *à la* Kate and Theodora, as a set of 'paradigmatic contradictions […] bipolar oppositions, [and] mutually exclusive propositions'.[23] We might say, then, that the storytelling competition in *Greenes Vision* and the associated polarisation of 'Chaucerian' vs. 'Gowerian' women and poetics in this text literalises almost to the point of absurdity the highly gendered hermeneutic dynamics of this Old Testament tale.

Arguably, Solomon's claims to authority in *Greenes Vision* derive not only from the fact that the opposition between 'Chaucerian' and 'Gowerian' aesthetics reprises key elements of his much-lauded judgment in 1 Kings 3, but also from the fact that, as Victoria Brownlee and others have demonstrated, a number of early modern public figures (including Elizabeth I) were sometimes typologically associated with this learned Old Testament king.[24] These habitual appropriations of Solomon in the political sphere contribute to our sense that the biblical king's fictive intervention in the more purely literary realm of the *Vision* might be interpreted as a 'diplomatic moment' of sorts, to

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[22] See *Sapientia Solomonis: Acted Before the Queen by the Boys of Westminster School, January 17, 1565/6*, ed. by Elizabeth Rogers Payne (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938) and Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by A.C. Hamilton (1977; London: Longman, 1984), 5.1.26.

[23] Ashe, 'Abortion of Narrative', 87.

[24] On the English monarchy's Solomonic associations, see Victoria Brownlee, *Biblical Readings and Early Modern England, 1558–1625* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 49-78. A further discussion of Elizabeth I in this context can be found in Linda S. Shenk, 'Queen Solomon: An International Elizabeth I in 1569', in *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. by Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), pp. 98-125.

borrow Timothy Hampton's phraseology.[25] On one level, his loose associations with Tudor monarchical power render Solomon an apt arbitrator in an age-old aesthetic conflict that has been conspicuously nationalised in the figures of renowned English poets. That said, his range of symbolic connotations in the period expands far beyond political allegoresis or simplistic equation with Queen Elizabeth, and much the same sense of 'diplomatic scepticism' Nathalie Rivère de Carles has detected across contemporaneous works of early modern English drama is also evident in Greene's text.[26] Despite his self-affirming declarations that 'through [wisdom] kings raign: through her, princes make iust laws: through hir, Lords beare rule, & Iudges of the earth execute iudgement' (H2v), I would argue that the authority of Solomon to arbitrate in the *Vision*'s aesthetic warfare is palpably undercut by his own polysemy.

Solomon's ubiquitous 'wise man' epithet notwithstanding, Hattaway's work on this biblical king's early modern English reputation reveals that he was vested with a host of additional – and not always easily reconcilable – associations. To Francis Bacon, for instance, he was not merely a moral philosopher but also a natural philosopher *par excellence*, while to Reginald Scot, Solomon was something of a necromancer.[27] Crucial to my own argument about the *Vision*'s preoccupation with the *querelle des femmes* is the fact that Solomon had also long been, as Kenneth Hodges puts it, 'a staple of the antifeminist tradition' dating back to St. Jerome's late fourth-century treatise *Adversus Jovinianum*, or *Against Jovinian*.[28] This is a text that 'use[d] Solomon both as an authority and as an exemplar: the misogyny of some of the proverbs gave foundation to general attacks on women, and the story of Solomon being seduced away from God by a woman made him an example of a good man betrayed by sexual desire'.[29] What have been euphemistically termed the 'murky final years of Solomon's reign' were a subject of perennial fascination for subsequent generations of fiction-makers, as well.[30] And, significantly, both poets resurrected by Greene in his *Vision* had memorably touched upon this subject in their own Middle English works.

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[25] See Timothy Hampton, 'The Diplomatic Moment: Representing Negotiation in Early Modern Europe', *Modern Language Quarterly* 67 (2006), 81-102.

[26] Nathalie Rivère de Carles, 'The Poetics of Diplomatic Appeasement in the Early Modern Era', in *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, ed. by Nathalie Rivère de Carles (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1- 23 (p. 2).

[27] Hattaway, 'Paradoxes of Solomon', 526-30, 505.

[28] Kenneth Hodges, *Forging Chivalric Communities in Malory's 'Le Morte Darthur'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 40.

[29] Ibid, pp. 40-1.

[30] Brownlee, *Biblical Readings*, p. 72.

‘[M]edieval and Early Modern wisdom literature is’, as Emily C. Francomano describes, ‘peppered with quotes and paraphrases from […] Solomon’s observations about women’, and yet ‘readers also knew him as a classic counterexample: a man who, despite all his wisdom and experience, had been no match for the wiles of women’.[31] This rendered Solomon a key figure in any discussion of the ‘woman question’. Internal inconsistencies in the opinions attributed to the biblical king meant that he could equally be posited as a profeminist or antifeminist authority, though usually the latter identity seems to have prevailed. Such framing of Solomon as arch-misogynist finds clear literary expression, for instance, in the ‘game of Solomon Says’ played in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*.[32] To wit, when the rapacious Pluto lectures his wife Proserpina on the alleged ‘tresons whiche that women doon to man’, he paraphrases the thematically complementary ‘wordes’ of Ecclesiastes 7:28.[33] Crediting Solomon as ‘wys, and richest of richesse, / Fulfild of sapience and of worldly glorie’, Pluto asserts:

> Thus preiseth he yet the bountee of man:
> “Amonges a thousand men yet foond I oon,
> But of women alle foond I noon”.[34]

His authority-laden tirade is predictably met with frustration by Proserpina, who contemptuously responds:

> What make you so muche of Salomon?
> What though he made a temple, Goddes hous?
> What though he were riche and glorious?
> So made he eek a temple of false goddis.
> How myghte he do a thing that moore forbode is?
> Pardee, as faire as ye his name emplastre,
> He was a lecchour and an ydolastre,

[31] Emily C. Francomano, *Wisdom and Her Lovers in Medieval and Early Modern Hispanic Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 24.

[32] I borrow this phraseology of ‘Solomon Says’ from Daniel Kempton, who has used it to describe a similar exchange found in *The Tale of Melibee*: ‘Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee: “A Litel Thyng in Prose”’, *Genre* 21 (1988), 263-78 (p. 267).

[33] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), [Fragment 4] lines 2239, 2244.

[34] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, [Fragment 4] lines 2242-3, 2246-8.

> And in his elde he verray God forsook[35]

As this conversation between Pluto and Proserpina in *The Merchant's Tale* would indicate, Solomon's longstanding status in medieval European tradition, on the one hand, as an authority on women's foibles could be efficiently undermined by the fact that he was, on the other hand, a noted polygynist. Proserpina's dismissive branding of the biblical king as 'a lecchour and an ydolastre' speaks to the fact that, as relayed in 1 Kings 11: 1-8 and again repeated in Nehemiah 13:26, Solomon (who, we should also recall, was traditionally assumed to have written the racy Song of Songs as well as Ecclesiastes and Proverbs) had an insatiable taste for foreign women. In addition to Solomon's legendary interactions with the Queen of Sheba, we learn in 1 Kings 11 that, having amassed seven hundred spouses and an additional three hundred concubines, Solomon was led astray by them in his old age, going so far as to erect places of worship in which his foreign women could revere their false gods. This is elliptically referenced, for example, by Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales* when she slyly observes that 'the wyse kyng […] / hadde wyves mo than oon', and his romantic problems are pictorially memorialised elsewhere in Chaucer's canon: in *The Knight's Tale*, 'the folye of kyng Salomon' features amongst the 'portreitures' of those who 'caught were in [Venus'] las' that adorn the goddess of love's temple.[36]

Gower, too – the second of the medieval poets to be fictively animated in *Greenes Vision* – had much to say about the 'sotie' of Solomon.[37] Though he is referenced elsewhere in the text as an exemplar of good kingship, this 'wise ecclesiaste' nonetheless makes a memorable and distinctly less favourable appearance in Book 7 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, which narrates Solomon's sexually motivated downfall and apostasy.[38] Of this didactic tale, the text's accompanying Latin marginalia summarises:

> *Hic loquitur qualiter Principum irregulata voluptas eos a semita recta multociens deuiare compellit. Et narrat exemplum de Salomone, qui ex sue carnis concupiscencia victus mulierum blandiementis in sui scandalum deos alienos colerre presumebat.*

[35] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, [Fragment 4] lines 2292-9.

[36] Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, [Fragment 3] lines 35-6, [Fragment 1] lines 1943, 1915, 1951.

[37] John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 3, edited by Russell A. Peck, translated by Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 7.4498.

[38] Gower, *Confessio*, 7.4491.

> [Here he speaks how the unregulated lusts of Rulers often compels them to deviate from the straight path. And he narrates an instructive example about Solomon, who was conquered by the blandishments of women because of the lust of his flesh and thereby was led to worship strange gods, to his scandal.][39]

The ostensible moral of this Gowerian episode is that 'It sit a king wel to be chaste', and Solomon is thus presented as an instructive *exemplum in malo,* a man 'whos appetite / Was holy set upon delit, / To take of wommen the plesance'.[40] Given that 'alle mennes wit / In thilke time' was 'overpassed' by Solomon, we are told that 'upon his ignorance / The wyde world merveileth yit'.[41] How could a man who 'ladde under the lawe / The poeple of God, himself withdrawe / […] fro God'?[42] How could he fall into such error as 'worschip[ping] and sacrifis[ing] / For sondri love in sondri stede / Unto the false goddes dede'?[43] The answers to such questions, Gower's tale predictably purports, are simple: as a man susceptible to 'fleisshly lustes' and 'lecherie', Solomon 'dede ydolatrie' for the sake of 'Hise wyves and hise concubines / Of hem that weren Sarazines'.[44]

The two late fourteenth-century English poets whom Greene features aesthetically battling in the *Vision* are hardly the only medieval authors to have dwelt on Solomon's women problems. Other Middle English texts including the dialogue of *Solomon and Marcolf* and *Gawain and the Green Knight* similarly reinforce Solomon's antifeminist credentials or invoke his losing struggle against what the latter text calls the 'wyles of wymmen'.[45] It thus comes as little surprise to note that an English translation of the *Legenda Aurea,* or *Golden Legend* printed by William Caxton in the late fifteenth century relays a similar story about this Old Testament figure. There, Solomon is a man 'magnefyed aboue all the kynges of the world in rychessis and wysedom' whom 'all the world desyred to see […] and to here' on account of 'hys wysedom that god had gyven to hym'. Yet in his dotage, the same man who had 'made the book of the parables conteynynge xxxi chapytres, the booke of the canticles, the book of ecclesiastes conteynynge xii chapytres and the booke of sapience co[n]teynynge xix chapytres […] louyd ouermoche wymen, & specially straunge wymen of other sectes'. It is because

[39] Ibid, [Latin marginalia] 7.4473 ff.

[40] Ibid, 7.4547, 4477-9.

[41] Ibid, 7.4480-3.

[42] Ibid, 7.4485-7.

[43] Ibid, 7.4488-90.

[44] Ibid, 7.4484, 4544, 4495-7.

[45] *Gawain and the Green Knight*, in *The Works of the 'Gawain'-Poet*, ed. by Charles Moorman (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), line 2415.

Solomon king was so blinded by ‘most brennynge loue’ that his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines were able to ‘tur[n] hys herte’ and ‘ma[k]e hym honoure their strau[n]ge goddes’. Caxton’s translation further relates: ‘It is said but I fynde it not in the byble, that Salamon repentyd hym moche of thys synne of ydolatrye, and dyde moche penaunce therfor’.[46]

Figure 1. Woodcut illustration from *The Deceyte of Women* showing Solomon in bed with a woman. RB 60965, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

In the sixteenth century, Solomon would continue to be remembered for ‘béeing peruerted with hethen women […] notwithstanding, being otherwise, the wisest Prince in all the world’.[47] For early modern authors, as for their medieval predecessors, he therefore presented what Mishtooni Bose calls ‘not only a theological problem but also a spectrum

[46] *Legenda Aurea*, trans. by William Caxton (STC 24874; London, c. 1483), sig. h1v.

[47] Phillip Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses* (STC 23376; London, 1583), sig. H3r.

of literary opportunities'.[48] A mid-Tudor text entitled *The Deceyte of Women* (a 'lytle booke' or collection of narratives with the express purpose of illustrating the 'false wyles, and arte mischeuous' of women) contains yet another account of Solomon's career-ending gynephilia.[49] Here, the tale of 'the most wysest Salomon' who was brought to ruin for 'lou[ing] wel outlandy she women' appears alongside a multitude of other classical, biblical, and contemporary exemplars and is accompanied by a suggestive woodcut depicting the amorous king caught *in flagrante delicto* with a bare-breasted female companion (figure 1).[50] This image of the lust-blinded Solomon was propagated further by his notable inclusion in a song that was destined to remain 'perhaps the most widely imitated ballad' of the Tudor era: 'The Panges of Loue' (c. 1559).[51] Penned by William Elderton – an older contemporary and reputed 'notorious mat[e]' of Greene's – this ballad presents Solomon as the first in a list of ironic *exempla* that otherwise includes such legendary figures as Troilus, Hercules, Paris, and Leander.[52] The opening lines of the song's lyrics pointedly query,

> Was not good Kyng Salamon
> Ravished in sondry wyse
> With every livelie Paragon
> That glistered before his eyes[?][53]

Due to the appearance of the biblical king's name in the first line of Elderton's ballad, the frequently recycled tune to which it was set became known in the period simply as 'King Solomon', and the wide musical circulation of 'Panges of Loue' is attested by the many references to its lyrics found in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century works.[54]

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[48] Mishtooni Bose, 'From Exegesis to Appropriation: The Medieval Solomon', *Medium Ævum* 65 (1996), 187–210 (p. 192).

[49] *The Deceyte of Women* (STC 6451; London, 1557), sig. A2r.

[50] Ibid, sigs. H2r, H1v.

[51] Hyder E. Rollins, 'The Date, Authors, and Contents of *A Handfull of Pleasant Delights*', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 18 (1919), 43-59 (p. 51).

[52] Elderton and Greene's friendship is thus characterised in Gabriel Harvey, *Foure Letters and Certaine Sonnets Especially Touching Robert Greene and Other Parties by Him Abused* (STC 12900.5; London, 1592), sig. A4v.

[53] William Elderton, 'The Panges of Loue and Louers F[i]ttes' (STC 7561; London, 1559).

[54] See, for instance, the imitations and echoes of Elderton's ballad in: *A New and Mery Enterlude Called the Triall of Treasure* (STC 24271; London, 1567), sig. E1r; John Pickering, *A Newe Enterlude of Vice Conteyninge the Historye of Horestes* (STC 19917; London, 1567), sig. C2v; *Ane Compendious Booke of Godly and Spiritual Songs* (STC 2998; Edinburgh, 1621), sigs. M6v-M8v.

This includes, for example, William Shakespeare's early comedy *Love's Labour's Lost*, wherein Biron admits to his romantic feelings for Rosaline by saying,

> O, what a scene of fool'ry have I seen,
> Of sighs, of groans, of sorrow, and of teen!
> O me, with what strict patience have I sat,
> To see a king transformèd to a gnat!
> To see great Hercules whipping a gig,
> And *profound Solomon tuning a jig* (4.3.158–63).[55]

Simply put, Greene and his late Elizabethan contemporaries would have been well conditioned to recognise Solomon as an ambivalent signifier. What is more, by reimagining this Old Testament king as a reader and critic of popular literary genres (and of English literary history more generally), *Greenes Vision* invites its audience to reflect on Solomon's own prior history of representation in these same spheres. Bearing in mind the centrality of the *querelle des femmes* throughout Greene's text, what does it mean, then, that Chaucer and Gower's war of words is heavy-handedly arbitrated by a notoriously – even legendarily – poor reader of women? By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that much the same 'fissure between the enigmatic, the majestic, and the bathetic dimensions of the Solomon legend' that earlier writers including Chaucer and Gower pointedly probed in their works recurs in Greene's own neo-medieval dream narrative.[56] The deep-rooted and widespread popular traditions that link this paragon of wisdom with misogynistic sentiments and that make him out to be a victim of impaired erotic judgment complicate, to say the least, our acceptance of his peace at the end of *Greenes Vision*.

Considering Solomon's status as a regularly cited and often explicitly comic *exemplum in malo* illustrating the moral blindness precipitated by gynephilia, this hyper-sexualised polygynist is perhaps both singularly qualified and singularly unqualified to intervene in a skirmish that seems to be not only about competing literary modes, but also 'the disposition of women' more generally (C4v). As we are reminded by his characterisation in the works of Chaucer and Gower (amongst many others), Solomon can hardly be taken as a neutral or disinterested third party in this war. His own troubled history in this arena means that his arbitration on women/writing is hardly impartial, thereby introducing

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[55] William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Third Edition*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, Gordon McMullan (NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2016) (emphasis my own). Elsewhere in this same play, Armado pertinently comments that 'Salomon [was] seduced' by love despite his 'very good wit': 1.2.156-7.

[56] Bose, 'From Exegesis', p. 203.

further ambiguity rather than a sense of closure at the *Vision*'s end. The ironies of his princely position in this rhetorically politicised and militarised conflict underscore the great fragility of the arbitrated settlement he imperiously seeks impose upon warring poetic factions. Indeed, they invite us to dismiss King Solomon's attempt to suppress both 'Chaucerian' and 'Gowerian' poetics as a failure of diplomacy and yet another misreading of women in a long line of such readings and misreadings.