“Finally a woman confesses! Confess what? What women never allowed themselves to confess. What men always criticized on them: they only obey the blood and everything is sex on them, even the spirit.” — Pauline Réage, Story of O

Modern literary commentary has a tendency to dismiss William Shakespeare’s A Lover’s Complaint as a poem not worthy of his pen. However, certain scholars, such as Mac Jackson, Kenneth Muir, and Roger Warren, have brought this poem back into the world of criticism. The female Lover in the poem beguiles with her intriguing confession and shows the naïveté and power of consent and seduction. This narrative poem exemplifies the complexity of female love and how it inescapably leads to a broken heart. The female Lover in the Complaint is seduced, betrayed, and abandoned by her wooer; nonetheless, at the conclusion of her poignant lament, she discloses that, if given a chance, she would do it all over again. This strange contradiction has caused intriguing and rather perplexing interpretations through the centuries. Some critics have claimed that this work does not belong to Shakespeare. That idea probably derived from the long-held belief that Thomas Thorpe did not have Shakespeare’s authorization for publishing the Sonnets and this poem in a 1609 quarto (Bevington 160). Nevertheless this particular edition remains the only valid evidence that it is his poem.

In A Lover’s Complaint, Shakespeare explores and plays with the consensual form of a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. The female Lover is bedazzled by her lover’s florid eloquence and becomes blind with passion for the young man. Her innocence prevents her from seeing through his malicious intentions. She slowly gives in to his charm and consents to having an amorous relationship with him. After she is seduced, her lover leaves, and she is left to suffer in the ill-favored position she is in. At this point she realizes that she is betrayed. Yet, she also feels certain sexiness, and perhaps liberation, in the act of seduction, and so she decides to try it on her own.

My interest also lies in the Complaint as a confession and in the male lover who utilizes feminine features to achieve his masculine predatory goals. According to Joseph Shipley (Dictionary of World Literature), C. Hugh Holman (A Handbook to Literature), and Ian Ousby (Cambridge Paperback Guide to Literature in English) a COMPLAINT is a poetic expression of a personal
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lament. In such stories, usually a first-person male narrator tells of his misfortune. Katherine Craik notes that the early modern complaint poem can be traced back to Virgil and Ovid; however, the “female complaint” found its place in aristocratic and courtly cultures (434). Shakespeare’s perspective is interesting because his Complaint is a confession of guilt and sin given to a man by a woman, narrated by a male speaker. Furthermore, the confession functions not only in the religious aspect, but possibly as a means of seduction as well. In this complaint poem, the poet’s opinion can be interpreted through the few lines expressed by the voice of the narrator. This narrative is one of a third person reporting a woman’s overheard love tale. Shakespeare presents the tale in that way because he wants to present a societal problem pertinent to his age and not to give a threnody of his love, because in his works Shakespeare captures the ethos of his time and criticizes the contemporary social issues.

Shakespeare’s heroine begins her complaint on “a hill whose concave womb reworded / A plaintful story” (1-2). She is watched by an unknown auditor, who sees her “Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain, / Storming her world with sorrow’s wind and rain” (6-7). The unknown “voyeur” has no discomfort in watching the woman suffer. He even stays to listen to the “confession” of the woman to the reverend man. The reader never finds out anything else about this third party, who is the poem’s narrator.

According to Stanton, there is a strong possibility that he may be the lover, who is responsible for the condition the young woman is in (16). The narrator knows very well what the maiden is holding and what she is throwing away. And there is, perhaps, something sexual in the way he describes how the reverend man “slides” down his “grained bat” (64). The perception of the shabby stick is highly derogative, in a sexual way. The narrator, obviously annoyed by the presence and interest of the older man, sees the reverend man sitting down, and he comments, almost with jealousy, “When he desires her, being sat, / Her grievance with his hearing to divide” (66-67). While perusing these lines, the reader cannot but feel that there is more than just interest in the tale. The narrator shows emotions and therefore can be seen as a person close to the young woman, in which case he might be the male lover. This would also solve the problem of his being in such a desolate place at the same time as the young woman. He might have come
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to the place where they used to meet. However, the text does not provide any more details regarding this character.

The complaint turns into a confession when the “reverend man” comes along and captures the attention of the young woman. She sees him while his cattle are grazing nearby (57). He too notices the girl and apparently wants to find out “the grounds and motives of her woe” (63). The girl addresses him as “‘Father’” (71) and starts relating her story to him. It is at this point when her complaint becomes a confession. The reader presumes that she is telling her story in order to get absolution for whatever she has done. At least one expects that is the purpose of a confession. However, this particular confession is different, not only because of the place where it happens, but also for the reason for which it is given.

The confession takes place not within the walls of a chapel or church in the “court world” but instead beside the river and trees; it occurs in the “green world,” a place of alternative possibilities. I argue that the beginning and the end of this poem are symbolically feminine. It begins with the “concave womb” (1), which graphically and metaphorically presents the most intimate part of the female body. The poem’s concluding stanza has five sequential lines beginning with “O,” traditionally a feminine/yonic symbol. Kay Stanton writes in detail about the meaning and significance of the female/yonic “O” and the male/phallic “I”:

The maid’s first spoken word is “O,” as is the first word each of five of the last seven lines that she will speak (323-29), and she employs “O” several more times passim. From ancient times onward, the letter “O,” or number “0,” has been a female sexual (yonic) symbol (Cutner 156), as the letter “I,” or number “1” has been a phallic symbol (Cutner 158), with many cultures regarding “10” as the perfect number, as it represents the two sexes side by side (Cutner 160). In ancient Egypt, the “I” attached to the “O” represented the Bar of Isis, the sacred union of the sexes. (Stanton 3)

Therefore, if one accepts the interpretation that the term “concave womb” is used to give a feminine characteristic to the green world, then it is no coincidence that the young, and at this
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point unchaste, woman is giving her confession in nature, as far away as possible from the court world, which is a male-dominated society. The green world becomes the only possible “shelter” and source of solutions for the troubled woman.

Harry Berger discusses, in regard to Shakespeare’s work, the phenomenon of the “secondary world,” or “the green world” as Northrop Frye calls it, and describes it as the mirroring of nature. According to Berger, virtue and scorn, pure good and pure evil, are the two sides of the green world. It is a place of experimenting and withdrawal (15), and I concur with him that it is a place of withdrawal from society and the moral norms that the society imposes. In this case, it would be the norms and judgments that the male-dominated society laid upon the female part of the population. Thus this view supports my argument that the green world is feminine. However, I disagree with Berger that the green world is a place of pure evil and pure good, at least in the way in which he describes it. I assert that the green world is instead a place where one goes to find the solutions to one’s problems, so it becomes whatever one brings to it. A person of pure evil cannot find anything else but evil in it, and vice versa. If that is so, then there are two possibilities in the complaint. One is that the girl was used and rejected after having a passionate affair with a philanderer, in which case she brings her sorrow and her broken heart. The other possibility is that she is indeed a “fickle” maid (5). Apparently, although she has been used and rejected, she has learned something about the ways of love, and now she too is looking for a victim.

In the first case, the girl’s sorrow touches anyone who listens to her woeful story. She laments and mourns her lost innocence: “‘I might as yet have been a spreading flower, / Fresh to myself, if I had self-applied / Love to myself, and to no love beside’” (75-77). The reader cannot but sympathize with her stained virtue. One has to feel compassion when she exclaims regretfully, “‘But woe is me!’”(78). She confesses the ill deed, and it is only natural that one offers her absolution. Yet the reverend man stays silent during her whole confession. She reaches the end of her lament, and the reader never gets to hear what he says. The author leaves the reverend man’s response totally irrelevant to the tale, and, more importantly, to the outcome of the story.

The second interpretation is based on Shakespeare’s use of the word “fickle” in the opening lines (5), which is the first information about the girl that the reader gets from the narrator.
Because of the word’s meaning, Stanton argues, the female lover might be understood as utilizing the same techniques on her listener as her lover had once used on her (‘‘This Holy Fire of Love’’); the girl reports that her lover had said, “‘Lo! This device was sent me from a nun, / Or sister sanctified, of holiest note; / Which late her noble suit in court did shun’” (232-34). Therefore, the young man was an experienced lover, because he had seduced even one who had sworn to love only Christ.

The young woman slowly but surely gains the sympathy and trust of the reverend man, and just as the male lover endows her with all the gifts he has received from his previous lovers, she bestows her words upon the “priest”: “‘O father! What a hell of witchcraft lies / In the small orb of one particular tear’” (288-89). Yet with the same tears, she bedazzles him. Hence femininity is being utilized in a masculine manner to achieve female sexual liberation in a male-dominated society. Her last lines seem almost like a curse or chant and are filled with erotic imagery:

“O! that infected moisture of his eye,

O! that false fire which in his cheek so glow’d,

O! that forc’d thunder from his heart did fly,

O! that sad breath spongy lungs bestow’d,

O! all that borrow’d motion seeming ow’d,

Would yet again betray the fore-betray’d,

And new pervert a reconciled maid.” (322-29)

Shakespeare intentionally uses the repetition of the “O” to leave the reader with the subliminal image of the young woman completely opening herself up to the man to whom she is confiding. There is a strong sexual implication that with every “O” she says, she is getting closer to her listener, and that he, unknowingly, is getting more and more persuaded by her story.
In the end, the Lover asserts she would do it all over again. She tells the “reverend man” about her remorse and regret for giving herself to the male lover. One can look at the female Lover as a transformed woman. She has fallen and risen from her betrayal as an “educated” Lover in pursuit of her own “trophies,” since she does say that the lover’s tears did poison her while her tears restored him (301). Craik concurs that the last lines function as some sort of a curse; however, she writes that the female Lover’s lament is rather contradictory and seemingly reluctant. I argue that it is the seductive nature of it that makes it such.
Craik also comments that it is intriguing how the “burning blushes,” “weeping water” of the eyes, and “swooning paleness” are all feminine features, which the male lover employs with great skill to achieve his predatory goal (457). This is the key to the male seducer’s accessing of the maid’s heart and body. Femininity is what the girl relates to and trusts and is what, apparently, she herself exploits in the end, i.e. the beginning of the poem. Thus Craik and I agree that femininity and female sexual imagery are the keys to this poem.

The young maiden has clearly fallen in love with a handsome young man whose features are tempting to both men and women. She tells how “‘maidens’ eyes stuck over all his face’” (81), and further on in the text she points out that his looks reigned in the “‘general bosom’” (127). His apparently undisputed beauty attracted the young women. Joan Rees writes about this poem as depicting a reversal of a conventional love situation, and she posits that the male lover who is the object of unconquerable female desire is a mere parody of the chaste mistress who reserves herself for one man only. Rees’ comparison of the young man to a “chaste mistress” supports my argument that the female Lover is attracted to the feminine features of the young man. It is because of this femininity that she creates a bond with him and trusts him.

Apart from his beauty, the young man is also gifted in eloquence, which enables him to conquer even the most virtuous of maidens. He uses his oratory skills to enchant his listeners:

“So on the tip of his subduing tongue

All kinds of arguments and questions deep,

All replication prompt and reason strong,

For his advantage still did wake and sleep.

To make the weeper laugh, the laughers weep,

He had the dialect and different skill,
Catching all passions in his craft of will.” (120-6)
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The quotation shows how the young man employed his rhetorical skills to move his listeners to the extent that they would completely change how they were feeling. But what is even more remarkable is his will, which was equally powerful as his eloquence. I argue that his persuasiveness is of paramount importance to the outcome of the love relationship, because it teaches the maiden how to “catch all passions” with her speech. She uses her “subduing tongue” to enthrall the reverend man with her story.

Another accompanying attribute of femininity is innocence. The female Lover is intrigued and fascinated with the innocence that the young man displays, and she comments that not only is he beautiful but that, being “maiden-tongued” (99-100), he captivated and “moved” her. The young woman is entrapped in the web of the lover’s deceits. She is innocent, and she relates to his innocence, because it is familiar, and familiar is safe. She cannot see beyond the beautiful and honest façade that he has put on, and so she cannot be blamed for what has happened.

However, toward the middle of the poem (line 169), the tone and mood shift. The hunted becomes the hunter from this point on. The female Lover continues her story with acknowledgment of her full understanding of the male lover’s behavior and nature:

“For further I could say ‘This man’s untrue,’

And knew the patterns of his foul beguiling;

Heard where his plants in others’ orchards grew,

Saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling;

Knew vows were ever brokers to defiling [.]” (169-73)
She uses specifically strong words “say,” “knew,” “heard,” and “saw”—all of which show that she was fully aware of his traitorous nature. These lines imply that there is a change in the personality of the young woman. After these words she admits, “‘For feasts of love I have been call’d unto, / Till now did ne’er invite, nor never woo’” (181-82). I believe that this is the breaking point—where the hunted and wooed female takes on a masculine role and becomes the hunter, and the male lover takes on a feminine role and becomes the prey. This distinction between masculine and feminine is based on the norms and rules of male-dominated societies, where such role-reversals are not acceptable and not expected. Shakespeare plays with these roles and gives the woman an opportunity of becoming a “male” and getting back at the society, but he also lets the man manipulate the other sex with his feminine sexuality. The latter implies that Shakespeare assigns great importance to female sexuality.

The last instance in which the reader encounters the male lover is in the part where he is portrayed through liquid imagery:

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‘Tis said, his watery eyes he did dismount,

Whose sights till then were levell’d on my face

Each cheek a river running from a fount

With brinish current downward flow’d apace.

O! how the channel to the stream gave grace;

Who glaze’d with crystal gate the glowing roses

That flame through water which their hue encloses.” (281-87)
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If one acknowledges that water per se is a feminine image, then his masculinity diminishes and morphs into a female form. Every line of this stanza has at least one image of some form of water that gives the male lover a complete feminine feature. Beyond using eloquence, he also utilizes tears, because “his watery eyes” (289) can wear down even a “rocky heart” (291). Not only is he crying, which is a feminine trait, but he is also stripped of his male form. The young man tells her, “‘The broken bosoms that to me belong / Have emptied all their fountains in my well’” (254-55). Therefore, he gives the female Lover all the tears that the other women have shed and poured into him. It is interesting how, later, she will pour out her tears to the reverend man. It is no coincidence, then, that at the beginning of the poem, she is surrounded by water. The female Lover seems to have become aware of what caused her weakness, and in the encounter with the reverend man, it can be argued that she employs the same “tactics.” She appears to be taking advantage of his compassion. Finally, she admits that her “‘reason is resolved into tears’” (296). There could be a pun on the word “reason,” since it can mean that her mind is overwhelmed by tears, or that the

tears are the argumentation, which she is employing to seduce her own “victim.” Stanton elaborates on the reversal of both the female and male role and argues that the liquid imagery gives evidence to the role reversal and suggests a sexual exchange of fluids:

If she and her seducer have exchanged positions, such that he was “restored” and she “poisoned” by their sexual exchange of fluids (“drops”), then she may now be the seducer. He confessed his techniques to her and then employed them on her;

she so confesses and perhaps so employs. What finally convinced her to submit were his tears (again “drops”), plenty of which she has shed during her account. (16)

The girl is a part of nature, of the green world, and as such she embodies the sexual power to control men. However, in the relationship the roles get reversed, and he gains the sexual power through becoming more feminine. According to Joy Wiltenburg, the depiction of female sexuality is closely linked to issues of power: women’s power over men and men’s over women. The perception of power hovers over female sexuality, and furthermore, it is most commonly the
target of male physical desire (141). If so, then the reversal of the gender roles in this poem causes the female to become a pursuer and the male lover to usurp feminine sexual power.

A Lover’s Complaint is a syntactically, semantically, and metaphorically highly complex text. It is evident that the female lover is wooed, seduced, and rejected by her male lover. Her lament can be interpreted not only as a confession, but also as a method of wooing that she has learned from her previous amorous experience. The lover finds a way to her heart and body by embodying feminine features, which are metaphorically presented in the end with his becoming a body of water, which has a feminine significance. Therefore, according to this interpretation of the text, the way to conquering a female heart is through features that are known by and close to the woman.

Reference

1 For the purpose of clarification, further in the text I will refer to the female Lover with a capital “L” and the male lover with a lower case “l.”

2 Although Shakespeare did not authorize adding this poem to the quarto, he never denied his authorship of it.

3 For further reading about the green world refer to Northrop Frye on Shakespeare.

4 The OED shows “fickle” being used as false or deceitful in the sixteenth century (this meaning dates back to 1000 A.D.).