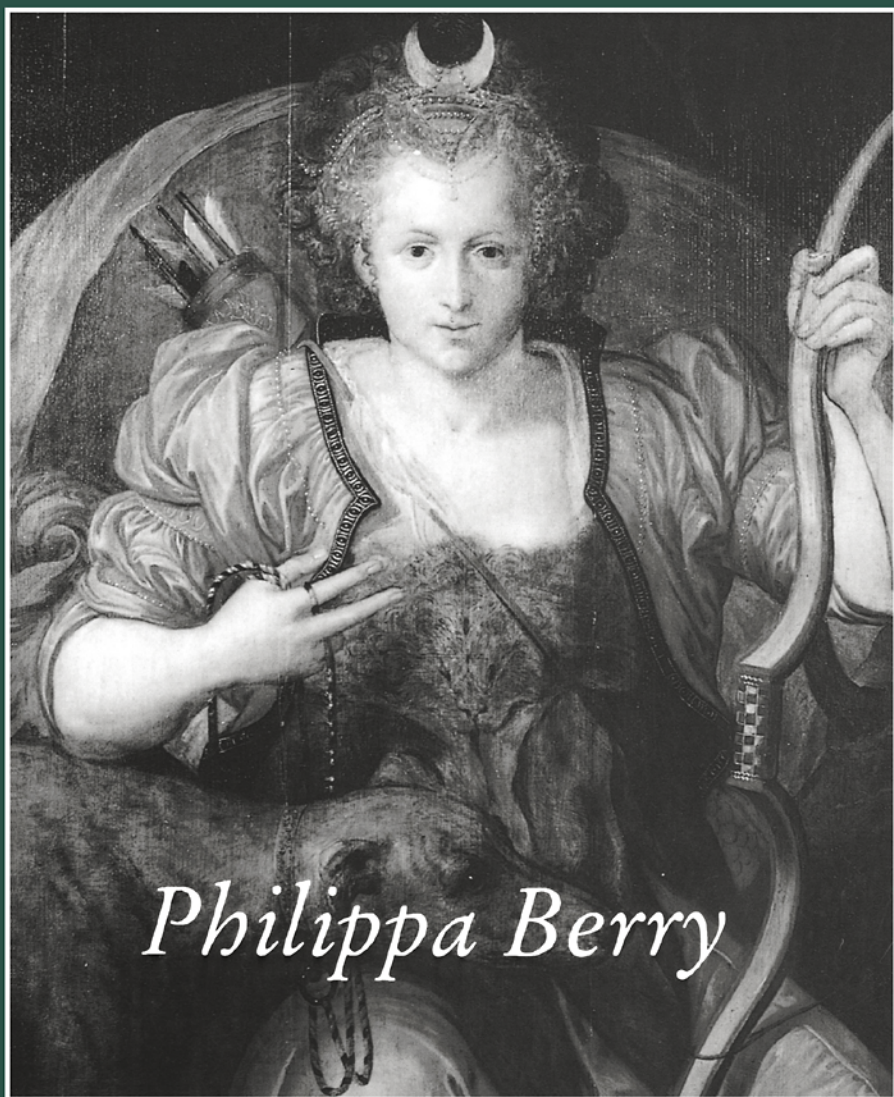




OF CHASTITY AND POWER

Elizabethan Literature and the Unmarried Queen



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Elizabethan Literature and the
Unmarried Queen

Philippa Berry



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For my mother and father, who shared with me their love
of history.

Man hath weav'd out a net, and this net throwne Upon the Heavens,
and now they are his owne.

John Donne, *The First Anniversary*

La verité s'y avère complexe par essence, humble en ses offices et étrangère
à la réalité, insoumise au choix du sexe, parente de la mort et, à tout prendre,
plutôt inhumaine, Diane peut-être...

Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*

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Introduction

What is the genealogy of western ideas of love? And what can a feminist interpretation of a specific instance in this complex chain of representations reveal? In undertaking this literary critical project, which is also an essay in cultural history, my aim is to clarify the contradictory relations of gender inscribed in the discourses of idealized love which influenced so much Renaissance literature: Petrarchism and Neoplatonism. What, I ask, are the implications of the paradox that is central to both Petrarchism and Renaissance Neoplatonism, whereby the elaboration of new concepts of masculine subjectivity was dependent upon an image of woman? And why does woman function in these systems as the privileged signifier of a sacred or supernatural dimension?

These issues are thrown into vivid relief by a consideration of the curious interrelationship between the love discourses and the literary 'cult' of a female Renaissance ruler—Elizabeth I of England. In the literary texts which the book considers, issues of sexual authority are often closely intertwined with a contest for political as well as imaginative power. I explore the implications of the fact that in sixteenth-century France as well as England, idealized attitudes to love were appropriated by the ideology of absolutist monarchy, and helped to shape the aesthetic representation of ideas of kingship. My argument is that with its assimilation of Petrarchism and Neoplatonism, Renaissance absolutism adopted a potentially unorthodox model of gender relations, whose inner contradictions became especially apparent in literary representations of an unmarried queen as an object of sublimated desire. Most importantly, the idea of feminine chastity which was emphasized by Petrarch and the Renaissance Neoplatonists acquired a new and unexpected significance when associated with a woman who was possessed of both political and spiritual authority.

Attitudes to love derived from Petrarchan love poetry and Florentine Neoplatonic philosophy were widely disseminated among western courtly societies during the European Renaissance. Although, as I shall show, these discourses differed in several respects, both systems combined a curiously paradoxical conception of a beloved woman with emphasis upon the search of a male lover for a new identity. The female beloved was declared by poets and writers to be the true object of the processes of emotional enquiry delineated in their discourses of love, and was accorded an exaggerated emotional and imaginative

authority. Yet her function in the love discourses was strictly codified (at least, when she did not happen also to be a queen). This figure was usually little more than an instrument in an elaborate game of *masculine* 'speculation' and self-determination, for the philosophical enterprise common to both Petrarchism and Renaissance Neoplatonism used woman as a 'speculum' or mirror of masculine narcissism.¹ The hypothesis that a chaste woman could serve as a bridge between the material world and an invisible spiritual dimension enabled Petrarchan poet and Neoplatonic philosopher to elaborate a new concept of masculine wholeness and self-sufficiency through or across her idealized figure. By this means, they affirmed Renaissance man's conviction that he could achieve a godlike control, not just over his own nature, but over his environment as well. So, paradoxically, this idea of woman as the sign of a supernatural or spiritual domain might be said to have enabled man gradually to reject the claims of an outer religious or spiritual authority.

It seems that in Renaissance literary texts which were influenced by concepts of idealized love, we may be able to trace an important preliminary stage in the definition of the extremely powerful (because rational) and implicitly *masculine* subject who was to provide the secular new philosophy of the late Renaissance with its first principle. The distinctive character of the rational subject of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century philosophy and science was indeed crucially indebted to a revolutionary shift in western epistemology which had been initiated by humanism. One result of this change was that the interior and spiritually oriented contemplative life privileged by medieval Christianity declined in philosophical status, and a secular and rational life of action gradually came to be accorded more value and importance.² Yet if we read the Renaissance discourses of love as orchestrating one of its earliest appearances, it seems that this new secular, rational, and active subject owed some debt to the very intellectual systems it ultimately dethroned: namely, to the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, as well as early Christian thought, all of which had defined subjectivity in contemplative, indeed spiritual terms. As we shall see, both Renaissance Neoplatonism and Petrarchism articulated a quite complex and contradictory relationship to the contemporary debate around the relative merits of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, and these contradictions left their trace on representations, not only of the male lover, but also of his female object of desire.

An emphasis upon the sublimation of sexual desire in order to obtain (self-) knowledge was central to Plato's *The Symposium*, reintroduced into western culture at the end of the fifteenth century through the translation of Marsilio Ficino. This text provided a vital impetus to the new version of Neoplatonic love philosophy which Ficino and members of his 'Platonic Academy' began to expound. In contrast, Petrarch and his poetic predecessors (the Italian *stilnovisti* and Dante in particular) had no direct access to Plato's love doctrines; they had assimilated a Platonic conception of love indirectly, via the work of Christian writers influenced by Platonism and early Neoplatonism, such as St Augustine and pseudo-Dionysius. But Renaissance discourses of love combined Platonic with

other motifs (derived from medieval courtly love, from Aristotelianism, and from other, esoteric sources usually referred to as Hermetic philosophy). The systems which resulted challenged both Platonic and Christian conceptions of love in several important respects. The transcendent and spiritual subject privileged by both Platonism and Christianity (which they asserted could be forged by sublimating earthly desires in the contemplation of deity), was always by implication subordinate to God. In these Renaissance systems, however, claims for man's spiritual or godlike attributes were not so obviously subordinated to a higher spiritual authority. Yet the most curious and most significant of the modifications made by these systems to the Platonic and Christian paradigms (both of which were distinctly misogynistic) was undoubtedly their focus upon a female, rather than male, object of sublimated desire. In fact, they accorded woman *qua* woman a significance she had not previously enjoyed within the context of western philosophy.

Ironically, the intellectual revolution within which Renaissance attitudes to love were implicated did not ultimately challenge the long tradition of western philosophical dualism, whereby the category of spirit was seen as being in fundamental opposition to that of matter. Instead, it merely reversed the pre-eminence which medieval thought had accorded a spiritual dimension over both the material world and its chief inhabitant, man.³ Inevitably, the category of spirit became progressively less significant in a philosophy committed to the search for empirical proofs upon which to found its hypotheses.⁴ But in Renaissance literature influenced by Petrarchism and Neoplatonism, this philosophical transition was still in process. And while she is typically constructed merely as the passive instrument of man's struggle for power over himself, over nature, and over an immaterial, 'other' world, the chaste beloved is occasionally seen as actually reconciling the opposition of spirit and matter within her person. The Renaissance discourses of love certainly attempted to deny the materiality of the 'chaste' woman they idealized: to exclude the female body, and feminine sexuality, from their idea of a chaste woman as exclusively spiritual (and as thereby inspiring a conviction in man's own godlike powers). But the mysterious bodily presence of woman haunts these systems, insisting upon a paradoxical conjunction of nature and spirit under the sign of woman.

My study begins by tracing the genealogy of this contradictory figure of a chaste female beloved within early western culture. [Chapter 1](#) commences with a discussion of what appears to have been a primary theological/ philosophical source of western representations of woman as the object of an idealized desire: the biblical figure of a female Wisdom (otherwise known as Sophia or Sapientia). The Wisdom figure seems to have been a key influence upon the Renaissance use of a chaste woman as a mediatrix between heaven and earth. As such she throws an interesting light upon a perplexing parallel which is occasionally hinted at in the love discourses, between the female beloved as the site of a mystical union between spirit and matter, and the incarnate male saviour of Christian doctrine. Both figures, albeit in different ways, are the bearers of meaning, of *logos*. At the

same time, the figure of Wisdom affords a vital precedent for the interrelationship of concepts of love and politics in the French and English Renaissance texts which I explore in later chapters. This first chapter then proceeds to investigate the various metamorphoses of the figure of an idealized beloved within a range of late medieval and early Renaissance representations, from medieval courtly love and Dante's *Divina Commedia* to those texts which codified Renaissance (as opposed to medieval) attitudes to love: Petrarch's *Rime Sparse*, and the philosophical writings of the Florentine Neoplatonists. Common to all was emphasis upon woman's role as a passive mediatrix of (self-)knowledge to man. But unlike the medieval formulations, Renaissance discourses of love were significantly shadowed by another image of woman, one which did not confirm their focus upon masculine similitudes. Many literary texts influenced by these Renaissance attitudes are punctuated by anxiety that the beloved's passive power might suddenly seek active expression, in an assertion of her own feelings and desires which threatened to escape the rhetorical or imaginative control of the male lover. It is at such moments that the female beloved is no longer perceived merely as a lifeless mirror, but briefly metamorphoses into a figure who now dynamically combines spiritual and material attributes, as a nature goddess or queen of faerie. In this guise, the beloved threatens rather than affirms the emerging self-image of the lover, opposing his masculine narcissism with an alternative, feminine, self-centredness, and reminding him of the prominence in the natural world of precisely those forces he is struggling to transcend and deny: mutability and decay leading to death. As [chapter 1](#) ends by pointing out, a myth which imaged this nagging doubt of the Renaissance lover most aptly was that of Diana and Actaeon, best known from Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses*. In their multiple representations of the tragic fate of Actaeon, the hunter who was metamorphosed into a stag and dismembered by his own hounds after he had inadvertently glimpsed the goddess of chastity and hunting naked in her woodland bath, Renaissance writers and artists explored their fear of some devastating reversal or *peripeteia* of the humanist desire to remake man in the image of god(dess) ([plate 1](#)).

These tensions within Petrarchism and Renaissance Neoplatonism became especially apparent when the Diana image was associated with their female beloved in literature and art which promoted the authority of the monarchies of late Valois France and Elizabethan England. [Chapter 2](#) explores the curious formulations of kingship and masculine identity which were elaborated in an aesthetic strand of sixteenth-century French absolutist discourse. By means of the close reading of a range of French Renaissance literary texts, as well as reference to various paintings and sculptures, it argues that while the absolutist mode of political power emerged within an overtly patriarchal society, its conception of the relationship of a (typically male) ruler to a state or *respublica* which was implicitly gendered feminine contradicted conventionally patriarchal models of masculinity.

But [chapters 1](#) and [2](#) also serve as preludes to the remainder of the book, which reinterprets the assembly of discourses which constituted a central element in

Elizabethan absolutist ideology: the courtly ‘cult’ of Elizabeth I. [Chapter 3](#) considers the absence of any emphasis upon gender within the influential account of this cult which still implicitly overshadows much Renaissance criticism: that of Frances Yates.⁵ I point out that Yates’ account of the cult overlooked the contest for sexual and political authority which motivated its initial formulation by Elizabethan courtiers, and argue that even some recent readings of literary representations of Elizabeth, while aware of gender issues, have none the less underestimated their importance. My interest is primarily in the problematic status of Elizabeth as a Renaissance woman ruler who was not only head of a secular state, but also ‘supreme governor’ of the English church. I argue that in spite of her position at the top of political and spiritual hierarchies which were androcentric, Elizabeth Tudor was not always necessarily represented as a passive emblem of patriarchal authority, a bearer of masculine power who just happened to be gendered female. An emphasis upon what one critic has termed ‘the powers inhering in her blood’ typically focuses upon Elizabeth’s place in a chain of patrilineal descent (the Tudor dynasty).⁶ In contrast to this view, I would contend that in order to understand her contradictory historical position *as a woman*, we have to consider the potentially subversive representation of Elizabeth as a Petrarchan or Neoplatonic beloved who also had both worldly and spiritual power. At the same time, we have to re-‘member’ and reinterpret Elizabeth’s forgotten ties to other women, and reconsider the significance of her permanently censored relationship to the figure of her decapitated (because supposedly ‘bad’—that is, adulterous) mother. The tragic life and death of Anne Boleyn overshadowed not only her daughter’s childhood but also, by implication, her reign. In an early contribution to Elizabeth’s literary cult, the ‘April eclogue’ of Edmund Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*, the importance of this relationship is obscurely hinted at, under the veil of mythological allegory. Here it is associated with a gynocentric model of Elizabethan courtliness which privileges ties between courtly women, rather than between female monarch and male courtiers, and which stresses the mysterious coexistence of spiritual power and a specifically feminine eroticism in the figure of Elizabeth as a chaste beloved.

The remaining three chapters delineate a diachronic study of Elizabeth’s courtly cult, tracing its changing formulation in a range of literary texts produced over two decades. Interest in definitions of masculine courtiership and courtliness has been a prominent feature of contemporary Renaissance criticism; as [chapters 4 and 5](#) demonstrate, a surprising range of alternative roles for the male courtier jostled for ideological dominance within the (relatively constricted) discursive domain of Elizabethan courtly literature, and each of these was informed by a slightly different interpretation of the roles of male lover and female beloved within Petrarchism and Neoplatonism.⁷ [Chapter 4](#) explores the elaboration and attempted manipulation of the idea of Elizabeth as a chaste beloved by a group of self-interested courtiers which began in the mid-1570s. This early version of the unmarried queen’s cult used aristocratic pastimes to propose an active and assertive idea of courtiership, one with a strong militaristic as well as radical

Protestant (or Calvinist) bias. During the decade of the 1580s, however, a more passive and contemplative model of Elizabethan courtliness was articulated in the courtly drama of John Lyly, which is analysed in [chapter 5](#). We may infer that this formulation was more congenial to the political perspective of Elizabeth, in that it implied the surrender of the (political and sexual) initiative of the male courtier to his queen. Finally, in [chapter 6](#), I argue that by the decade of the 1590s, frustration at the limitations which a courtly idealization of the queen was perceived to impose upon the search for masculine identity by male courtier or courtly poet was producing several texts which were deeply ambiguous in their representation of the ageing queen. I discuss Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, George Chapman's *The Shadow of Night*, Sir Walter Raleigh's fragment of a narrative poem, *The Ocean to Scinthia*, and Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene*; all these texts are marked in different ways and to different degrees by the profound anxieties which attended the reluctant recognition of the masculine subject that, as a woman possessed of power, Elizabeth could not ultimately be manipulated in the manner of other female objects of idealized desire. Implicit in these representations is the assumption that the unmarried queen's 'virginity' or 'chastity', which prompted her comparison to Diana or Cynthia, the Roman goddess of chastity, untamed nature and the moon, was not in fact an empty space, upon which might be inscribed the fruits of a search for the powers of masculine resemblance, but the sign instead of her own mysterious powerfulness, of a body and an identity which had somehow eluded successful appropriation by the masculine.

In its attempt to elucidate the interrelationship between Renaissance text and historical context, to unravel the political meanings encoded in a set of literary representations, this project has been influenced by the new historicist movement in Renaissance criticism, which as defined by Jonathan Dollimore is concerned to explore the relationships between the powers of the state and cultural forms.⁸ In particular, like many contemporary Renaissance critics, I owe an especial debt to Stephen Greenblatt's pioneering study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, which explored the limits imposed by ideas of secular and sacred power upon Renaissance constructions of identity.⁹ But if new historicist criticism is frequently concerned 'to amplify...the marginalized voices of the ruled, exploited, oppressed and excluded', to undertake a study of representations of Elizabeth is apparently to speak for the ruler and oppressor, the embodiment of state power.¹⁰ Yet by reading representations of the female monarch from a feminist perspective, it is possible to elucidate the curious conjunction of roles which Elizabeth had perforce to play (as oppressor and oppressed), the contradictory positions which she had to assume (centre-stage, and marginalized). When viewed from this angle, what is most striking about the queen, in vivid contrast to the repeated rhetorical emissions *about* her which were produced by many of her masculine subjects, is the dearth of texts which are indisputably authored by her alone. From the literary perspective, what chiefly remains of Elizabeth Tudor is her silence.

My feminist reading does not involve a detailed psychoanalytic study of the gender relations inscribed within Renaissance discourses of love. None the less, it has inevitably been influenced and informed by feminist psychoanalytic theory, and above all by the work of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Both Irigaray and Kristeva have frequently pointed to the need to understand and unveil the Platonic and Neoplatonic assumptions which inform western philosophy so profoundly (as, indeed, did Jacques Lacan). Among repeated references by Irigaray, Kristeva, and Lacan to Platonic concepts, one of the most relevant for my project in this book was Kristeva's use of the Platonic term *chora* to explicate her reformulation of the pre-Oedipal stage of infantile development.¹¹ As I point out in [chapter 1](#), this term was sometimes connected with the figure of a female Wisdom. While I consider that to propose an exact homology between the two discourses (of idealized love and psycho-analysis) would be to deny the historical specificity of the Renaissance texts, the parallels between the Renaissance attempt to elaborate masculine identity with reference to love and the psychoanalytic concept of the pre-Oedipal are quite striking. At the same time, I am indebted to one of Irigaray's most important contributions to feminist theory. This was her account of the patriarchal utilization of woman as a mirror of the masculine ego: according to Irigaray, this process of mirroring is occasionally interrupted by moments of crisis, when an 'other' image of woman intervenes in and disrupts this process of masculine specularization.¹²

The aggressiveness sometimes attributed to the female beloved of the love discourses seems to have been partly inspired by fear of an active female sexuality, which might elude the control and manipulation of the masculine subject. That this fantasy was closely connected with the disturbing possibility of woman taking narcissistic, and possibly even homosexual, pleasure in a female body is suggested by the recurrence of the figure of the goddess Diana in these discourses, whose association with close-knit communities of women from which men were usually excluded is stressed in so many of her myths.¹³ The female beloved's paradoxical combination of maternal nurturance with a disturbing self-referentiality is vividly suggested in a painting of Diana executed by the Flemish artist Frans Floris around 1560 ([plate 2](#) and cover). This painting is thought to have been owned by Elizabeth I early in her reign; that is, some time *before* she began to be complimented upon her own Diana-like 'chastity'. It is none the less interesting to speculate on the significance it may have possessed for its female owner, who as she approached 50 would have her political and spiritual authority exaggerated yet simultaneously challenged by her own representation as the passive object of a collective masculine gaze. The right breast of Floris' goddess is presented as a source of nurturance and power, and hints at a parallel with the literary and artistic motif of drinking from the breast of Wisdom, which was associated in medieval iconography with the acquisition of mystical knowledge ([plate 3](#)). But at the same time, the auto-erotic gesture with which this Diana holds her nipple appears ironically to resist the desire of any male spectator to remould her in the image of his own fantasy.

Chapter one

Mirrors of masculinity: Renaissance speculations through the feminine and their genealogy

Various hypotheses have been advanced concerning the reason for the prominent role accorded to woman within the western discourses of idealized love. In my view, both their contradictory idea of a chaste female beloved, and the political significance of these discourses (in particular the implications of their appropriation by Renaissance absolutism), are best illuminated by reference to a theological source. Some scholars have attempted to relate the cult of the Virgin Mary to the rise of idealized attitudes to love, since the precursor of the Renaissance systems, medieval courtly love, reached its peak of greatest popularity and sophistication at a time when devotion to the Virgin was accelerating.¹ In fact, Mary had little in common with the idealized women of courtly love, whose unavailability was usually strictly temporary. But the emphasis upon chastity in both Petrarchism and Florentine Neoplatonism meant that there were more parallels between Mary and the beloved in these systems (this is anticipated by Dante's *Paradiso*, where Dante's vision of the Virgin is a culminating point in the process of growth initiated by his love of Beatrice). In the Christian monastic tradition, ascetic practices were seen as necessary for the attainment of an especial intimacy with God; however, the physical purity of Mary was of a different order. Its chief purpose in the religious scheme of things was not *her own* refashioning or rebirth, but the birth of a being of a completely new order, who was seen by Christian theology as constituting a vital link between a divine transcendent principle and a fallen natural world, since his incarnation was held to have initiated the process of that world's redemption. Just as Mary was seen as a selfless *material* mirror of heavenly purity, a 'speculum sine macula' worthy to be the *theotokos*, mother of God, so the idealized women of the love discourses were the nurses or receptacles of new men, intermediaries between their lovers as they were, and as they hoped to be.

Yet, on the other hand, the cult of Mary did not define her worship in terms of desire. It did not see her as a bestower of creative as well as worldly power. Nor was emphasis upon her physical and spiritual purity paradoxically juxtaposed with abundant natural imagery. These aspects of the idealized female beloved accord more closely with another concept, pre-Christian in origin but assimilated by Christian theology, whose genealogy was closely associated with those Platonic and Neoplatonic world views to which Petrarch as well as the Florentine

Neoplatonists were indebted, and whose possession of masculine as well as feminine attributes more closely paralleled the sexual ambiguity which often characterized the female beloved in these systems. This was the idea of Sapientia or Sophia, the Wisdom of God (plates 3 and 4), who was described in Old Testament and Apocryphal texts as a female figure, and who often appeared in medieval texts as Lady Philosophy or Lady Reason.² As a bestower of wisdom she was most often connected with the Roman goddess Minerva or Pallas Athena in the Renaissance; but her links with an unfallen natural world, and her position as an object of desire, were paralleled not by Minerva but by Diana.³ Wisdom arguably had a position of greater importance in medieval Christian theology than did the Virgin Mary, although some of her attributes were gradually assimilated by the Virgin's cult. There are some interesting parallels between the worldly powers of the Wisdom figure and those accorded the ladies of courtly love. It was not until the end of the middle ages, however, that her supernatural attributes were assimilated by the discourses of idealized love. At this stage, Wisdom's status as a transcendent symbol within Christian theology was no longer secure. Yet in fact the significance of Wisdom as symbol had always been somewhat ambiguous, probably because of her contradictory position as an image of supernatural feminine creativity and power within religious and philosophical systems whose fundamental assumptions were patriarchal. In spite of her importance, it had proved disconcertingly difficult to place Wisdom within the frameworks both of Neoplatonic and of Christian thought. For example, during the middle ages the figure was associated with the second as well as the third persons of the Trinity, with both Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁴ In a rather similar fashion, the Renaissance attempt to accord fixed meanings to the figure of a desirable but chaste woman proved to be fraught with difficulties.

The Judaic sources of this figure were the 'Solomonic' or 'Wisdom' books of the Old Testament: these included Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Book of Job, the Song of Songs, and the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus and Wisdom of Solomon. The idea of wisdom was first explicitly connected with a female form in Proverbs, written in the fourth or third century BCE. The figure was here already much more than a mere personification of a divine attribute:

Happy is the man that findeth wisdom.... She is more precious than rubies; and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her; and happy is every one that retaineth her.⁵

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Wisdom figure as she appears in Proverbs is her claim that she was first of all God's creatures, possessing a divine origin prior to the creation, and assisting God at that event: