'A seale of Virgin waxe at hand / Without impression there doeth stand': Hymenal Seals in English Renaissance Literature

Abstract: This essay combines literary criticism with archival work in order to explore the relationship between two material signs that were often connected figuratively in English Renaissance literature, the seal and the hymen. While the seal authorised, authenticated and secured letters and other documents, many thought the hymen did the same for virginal female bodies. Looking at plays and poems in relation to the material culture of sealing in early-modern England, I analyse metaphors and similes which represent the seal as a kind of epistolary hymen and the hymen as a kind of human seal. In doing so, I demonstrate how Shakespeare, Donne and other authors drew on material and rhetorical traditions as they engaged with this reversible analogy. The essay focuses on the paradoxical fact that defloration was rhetorically linked with both the stamping and breaking of seals, acts of creation and destruction respectively. I conclude by discussing aspects of the hymenal seal that destabilise its status as reliable sign of patriarchal authority, especially the possibility of counterfeiting.

Keywords: literature, metaphor, seals, wax, letters, virginity, hymen, defloration

Biography: Dr Harry Newman recently completed his Ph.D at the University of Birmingham’s Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon. His project is an investigation of the language and imagery of three ‘impressing technologies’ (sealing, coining and printing) in Shakespearean drama, and in particular how they contribute to the construction of certain characters’ sexual identities.
A letter communicates meaning through material and social signs, and the study of epistolary cultures involves the interpretation of these signs. But how should we interpret the signs affixed to letters and other documents whose very appellation denotes the process of signification? I am referring not to signatures but to those other marks of identity and authentication, seals, the wax impressions which—etymologically speaking—were signa, ‘signs’.\(^1\) Sigillography, the study of seal-matrices and seal-impressions, can tell us a lot about the materials, designs and functions of seals in Renaissance England.\(^2\) However, it is also revealing to investigate seals’ figurative appropriations in Renaissance literature.\(^3\) As a figurative sign (i.e. metaphor or simile), the seal was so semantically adaptable that it imitated the malleable substance from which it could not be conceptually separated, wax. The language and imagery of sealing permeated a wide range of discourses, and were particularly dominant in theology and medicine. Building on biblical and patristic passages, Renaissance theologians evoked seal-impressions to represent, for example, the image of God imprinted in man and the sacraments.\(^4\) Medical and philosophical texts used the mechanics of sealing to explain a variety of physiological phenomena, including memory, sensory perception and biological conception.\(^5\) In imaginative Renaissance literature, sealing served as a metaphor for many different actions and experiences, but the seal was closely associated with ideas of erotic exchange and transformation. Sexual sealing metaphors were at least as old as Ovid, and they were usually variations of the typically patriarchal trope in which a woman was passively ‘sealed’ by a man.\(^6\) Women had long been rhetorically linked with wax, which Ann and John O. Thompson identify as ‘an impression-taking substance which has all the softness, malleability, inconstancy, and so forth of

\(^{1}\) OED seal n.\(^2\) All OED references are to http://www.oed.com [accessed 27 July 2012].


\(^{6}\) In one elegy of his Amore, Ovid imagines himself as the seal-ring he has given his mistress. For Marlowe’s translation, see Christopher Marlowe and John Davies, Elegies and Epigrams 1595, facsimile ed. (Menston: Scolar, 1973), 2.15, especially lines 15-7 (The Mason Text, sig. D2r-v).
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patriarchy's Eternal Feminine.'

By the Renaissance, the language of wax sealing was a well-established resource for describing sexual activities such as kissing, deflowering and impregnating.

This essay considers the reversible analogy between the seal and the hymen or 'maidenhead', the membrane whose rupture supposedly signified a woman’s loss of virginity. The links between the seal and the hymen were linguistic, functional and material in nature. Letter seals and hymens were understood to authorise, authenticate and secure private textual and sexual spaces. These spaces were similarly fetishized by discourses of patriarchal power that obsessively focused on dichotomies between the inside and the outside, the closed and the open, the private and the public, the hidden and the visible. In plays and poems of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the seal was often represented as a kind of epistolary hymen and the hymen as a kind of human seal. Paradoxically, the act of defloration was sometimes analogised with sealing, the creative stamping action of the letter-writer, but other times with seal-breaking, the destructive tearing action of the letter-reader. In this essay, I explore a range of literary examples of these tropes in conjunction with letters and other documents that reveal aspects of the material culture of seals in Renaissance England. In doing so, I suggest that the seal's association with the hymen contributed to its aura of secrecy, mystery, liminality and ambiguity in Renaissance epistolary culture. I begin by explaining the material processes and social functions of sealing. Then I examine the analogy between sealing and defloration. This is followed by a discussion of the figurative significance of unsealing and other kinds of seal-breaking. Finally I consider the importance of counterfeiting and highlight the instability of the hymenal seal as a sign.

The Seal as a Material Sign

In Renaissance England, seals were important material signs which—often in combination with signatures—authorised and authenticated a wide range of manuscript documents, from those pertaining to matters of state (e.g. royal patents, charters, proclamations) to those

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8 For examples, see Gordon Williams, A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature, 3 volumes (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 'impression' (2:705-6), 'seal' (3:1210).
9 OED maidenhead n. 1a.
10 Significantly, 'defloration' is itself a metaphorical concept. I use the term throughout this essay not because I wish to endorse the euphemism of cropping a flower, but because the metaphor (like those of sealing and seal-breaking) was common currency in Renaissance England; indeed, the verb 'deflower' was often used with an erotic sense (OED v. 1). The concept and its language are therefore relevant to an investigation concerned with how figurative descriptions of this sexual act in Renaissance literature contributed to patriarchal mythology surrounding the hymen.
concerning personal business and correspondence (e.g. bonds, wills, letters). In the case of private letters, seals served the extra function of security: the necessary action of unsealing a folded letter in order to read it meant that an illegitimate reading would be evident unless the perpetrator had the skill and materials with which to replicate the seal. In a letter written in 1600, which might have been addressed to Sir Henry Wotton, John Donne observes that:

If words sealed up in letters be like words spoken in those frosty places where they are not heard until the next thaw, they have yet this advantage, that where they are heard, they are heard only by one or such as in his judgement they are fit for.

Seals were signs, but they also secured the textual signs that letters contained. They were, as Innogen calls them in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, 'locks of counsel' (III.ii.36).

In order to seal a document, the sealer would adhere molten or ‘tempered’ wax to it and then make an impression in the wax with what is now known as a ‘seal-matrix’ or ‘seal-die’ (like the impressions they made, seal-matrices were usually referred to as ‘seals’). Whether circular or vesical (pointed oval) in shape, the face of each seal had a design engraved into it. Pressing a seal-matrix into soft wax produced a seal-impression or ‘figure’, a mirror-image of the incised design standing in relief. Sometimes seals were not affixed directly onto documents but appended to them using suspended tags such as strips of parchment. The latter were usually imprinted not just on the obverse (the front side) but also on the reverse using a ‘counter-seal’.

Letters were folded and sealed in various ways, all of which allowed letter-writers to conceal their messages. A standard technique was the ‘tuck and seal’ method. The letter-writer would fold a bi-folium letter twice horizontally and twice vertically before tucking the loose left end inside the right. Tempered wax would then be inserted into the resulting seam and a seal-matrix pressed onto the paper covering the wax to create an impression. Often,

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15 OED counter-seal n. b.

16 On this method and other techniques, see Daybell, *The Material Letter*, 49-50.
however, wax was placed over the seam and directly imprinted by the matrix, producing an exposed seal-impression. Certain letters, especially love-letters, were sealed over silk or floss that had been tied round the folded document as a sign of intimacy and affection.\textsuperscript{17}

Sealing-wax consisted primarily of bees-wax or (from the sixteenth century onwards) shellac.\textsuperscript{18} It was usually red, but other colours were also used (e.g. black, blue, green), often in order to signify something about the document or its author. Black wax, for example, communicated that a letter-writer was in mourning.\textsuperscript{19} Seal-matrices came in a range of shapes, sizes and designs, and were made of a variety of materials. The most important royal seal was the Great Seal, which consisted of two large circular interlocking matrices of heavy cast bronze or silver capable of impressing wax on both sides simultaneously. Other royal seals were smaller, and included the Signet Seal and the Privy Seal.\textsuperscript{20} Official seals’ designs generally depicted the people or institutions whose authority they represented: royal seals bore portraits of the monarch; monastic seals pictured their buildings, specific saints or biblical images; and local seals presented emblems related to their towns.\textsuperscript{21} Personal seals were usually metal signet rings, but they could also be hand- or desk seals (seals with handles) or fob-seals (small seals attached to chains).\textsuperscript{22} Joseph Loewenstein notes that the preferred material was bronze, ‘though silver, gems, and, for the poor, lead are not uncommon; in the sixteenth century, steel and iron come into more common use’.\textsuperscript{23} A range of designs were carved into personal seals, including heraldic shields and crests, images of animals, emblems and mottoes, and even visual puns on owners’ names and professions.\textsuperscript{24} These designs were often surrounded by Latin legends that identified individuals by name or otherwise. The fact that so many seal-matrices were designed to reproduce texts or images which represented their owners reinforced the status of seal-impressions as personal signs of identity.

A wide variety of people owned and used seals. Indeed, some were used by people other than their owners, including family members and secretaries.\textsuperscript{25} Loewenstein states that ‘[b]y the fifteenth century, the seal-matrix was part of the normal furniture of commercial life for Englishmen and Englishwomen above the middling sort, and for many of the middling sort as

\textsuperscript{17} Stewart and Wolfe, Letterwriting in Renaissance England, 36; Daybell, The Material Letter, 106.
\textsuperscript{18} Beal, Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 371.
\textsuperscript{19} Daybell, The Material Letter, 106.
\textsuperscript{20} Beal, Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 179, 371.
\textsuperscript{21} Daybell, The Material Letter, 105.
\textsuperscript{23} Loewenstein, ‘Forms in Wax’, 216n.11.
\textsuperscript{24} Daybell, The Material Letter, 105.
\textsuperscript{25} Stewart and Wolfe, Letterwriting in Renaissance England, 36; Daybell, The Material Letter, 106.
While certain personal seals were extremely expensive, others were quite affordable, and at the turn of the seventeenth century some cost no more than a few shillings. Some people owned more than one. We know from John Donne’s surviving correspondence that he had at least three seals: one bearing an image of sheaf of snakes, another portraying a wolf rampant surrounded by a sheaf of snakes, and a third—acquired after his ordination in 1615—depicting Christ crucified on an anchor. Shakespeare probably used seals, and it is possible that he was the owner of the gold signet ring found in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1810 and dated to around 1600, which bears the initials ‘W.S.’ in reverse. As I turn my attention to the imaginative literature of Donne, Shakespeare and other poets and dramatists, it is important to consider that even the most abstract seal metaphors were informed by and evoked the materiality of real seals, a materiality with which most writers (and many of their readers and auditors) would have been familiar.

The staging of seals in drama provides an intriguing link between the seals that circulated and signified in the material world of Renaissance England and those that feature in the fictional worlds of English Renaissance literature. Seal-matrices and seal-impressions—or at least objects representing them—appeared on the early-modern stage. The Great Seal is a symbol of authority in Shakespeare and Fletcher’s Henry VIII (1623). During the ceremonious procession at the beginning of Katherine’s trial, an elaborate stage direction describes ‘a gentleman bearing … the purse containing the great seal’ (II.iv.0.6-7). Seal-matrices of various kinds were kept in purses and bags, as were certain seal-impressions for protection. Traditionally, the matrix of the Great Seal was kept in ‘the burse’, a square-shaped case of white linen or leather which was embroidered with regal arms and emblems in gold and silver thread on a velvet and silk ground. On the stage as in the court, the ostentatious display of ‘the purse’ rather than the object it was designed to contain would have enhanced the mysterious aura of the seal itself, highlighting its veiled potential to manifest power in the form of an imprinted sign. Entrusted to Wolsey by the king, the Great Seal represents the Cardinal’s potency, and his fall from grace is confirmed when he is forced to ‘render up the great seal’ (III.i.230). The presence of seal-impressions on stage was often made conspicuous. In the first scene of the first part of George Whetstone’s comedy Promos and Cassandra (1578), a stage direction specifies that ‘the Kinges Letters

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26 Loewenstein, ‘Forms in Wax’, 206.
29 Stewart, Shakespeare’s Letters, 295-300.
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Patents … must be fayre written in parchment, with some great counterfeit zeale’.31 ‘What seal is that that hangs without thy bosom?’ York asks his son Aumerle in Shakespeare’s Richard II (1597; V.ii.56), drawing the audience’s attention to an incriminating bond. The scene is based on a passage in Holinshed’s Chronicles (1577), but the exposed seal is an addition, a light but effective touch of Shakespeare’s dramatization.32 While the letters and images displayed by seal-impressions would not have been visible from a distance, their bright colours made them perhaps the most stageable material aspect of dramatic documents.

Sometimes documents were sealed in front of early-modern audiences.33 In the first part of Thomas Heywood’s If You Know Not Me, You Know No Bodie (1605), King Philip’s sealing of a warrant for the execution of princess Elizabeth (his sister-in-law) is interrupted by the sudden entrance of William Howard and Thomas Gresham. ‘Stay your Imperiall hand,’ urges Howard, ‘let not your seale imprint / Deaths impresse in your sisters hart’.34 This essay is concerned with not just sealing but also seal-breaking, an action whose violence, destructiveness and potential illegitimacy invited comparisons with defloration. In various plays, characters break and rip off seals on stage. Upon receiving a bill in the unattributed Two Wise Men (1619), Antonio peruses it and then defiantly ‘teares off the seale’, declaring to the claimant ‘I owe him nothing, nor will pay thee any thing’.35 Antonio’s violation of the seal enacts his violation of the economic bond it authenticates. But tearing seals on bills and other forms of open correspondence was different to tearing those on private letters, which had to be unsealed before they could be read, even by their addressees. Letters are unsealed on stage in countless Renaissance plays, and sometimes the dramatic context of this action renders it highly symbolic.36 It is with this in mind that I will later discuss the sexual symbolism of Malvolio’s unsealing of a letter in Shakespeare’s Twelfth Night (1623).

However, before I can consider the action by which these fragile wax impressions were destroyed, seal-breaking, I must first focus on the action by which they were created, seal-stamping.

31 Whetstone, The Right Excellent and Famous Historye, of Promos and Cassandra Deuided into Two Commicall Discourses… (London, 1578), sig. B1r. Here ‘counterfeit’ identifies the seal as a stage property.
33 See, for example, S.S., The Honest Lawyer… (London, 1616), sig. K1r; and Richard Brome, The Northern Lasse, A Comoenie… (London, 1632), sig. H3v.
34 Thomas Heywood, If You Know Not Me, You Know No Bodie: Or, The Troubles of Queene Elizabeth (London, 1605), sig. F1r.
35 Two Wise Men and All the Rest Foose: Or A Comicall Morall, Censuring the Follies of this Age (London, 1619), 70.
36 Stewart discusses the on-stage unsealing of letters in several of Shakespeare’s plays, Shakespeare’s Letters, 41, 55-6, 60, 189-90, 227.
The Stamped Seal of Defloration

The relationship between the seal and the hymen was partly founded on the analogy wherein the sealing process represented or was represented by the sexual act of deflowering. In other words, Renaissance texts suggested that deflowering a woman was like stamping a seal and stamping a seal was like deflowering a woman. Thus the analogy between the seal and the hymen operated in both directions: sometimes the hymen was real and the seal figurative ('hymen/seal' tropes), other times the seal was real and the hymen figurative ('seal/hymen' tropes). The first kind was more frequent. Wax seals and sealing were common euphemisms for hymens and deflowering respectively. Gordon Williams observes that for a maid the analogy between losing virginity and being 'impressed' in Renaissance literature usually suggests that a 'benefit' has been 'conferred' by the event. This is often true of the sealing analogy, for virgins could be represented as being completed by the blood-red seal of defloweration: only when a man had 'set his seal' on a maid would she be perfected and become a woman. In Richard Brathwaite's satire A Strappado for the Diuell (1615), we read that “maydes, not stampt by men” could be made “‘Perfect’” by “What old Adam gave to Eue”, and that the virginal female body is “‘Weake[... Evidence ... / That has neither seale to showe, / Stampe, impression’”. The hymen/seal trope sometimes involved references to ‘virgin wax’, which was fresh or unused bees-wax. An ode in Robert Parry's romance Moderatus (1595) features a description of an unruptured hymen: ‘A seale of Virgin waxe at hand, / Without impression there doeth stand.’

The sealing trope is frequently employed to express the idea that defloweration allows men to take sexual possession of women. In John Donne's elegy “To his Mistress Going to Bed”, the persona’s erotic sealing metaphor signals his hope that the seduction of his shy and virginal mistress will result in a lasting occupation:

Gary R. Edgerton, The Poems of Robert Parry (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 321. As Edgerton notes, Parry may have been influenced by Philip Sidney's The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (London, 1590), in which a woman's hymen is blazoned as 'A daintie seale of virgin-waxe, / Where nothing but impression lackes' (sig. V7v).

 licence my roving hands, and let them go
 before, behind, between, above, below.
 o my America, my new found land,
 my kingdom, safest when with one man manned,
 my mine of precious stones, my empery,
 how blest i am in discovering thee!

37 Williams, Dictionary of Sexual Language, 2:705.
38 Richard Brathwaite, A Strappado for the Diuell: Epigrams and Satyres... (London, 1615), 81.
39 OED virgin wax n.
40 G. Blakemore Evans (ed.), The Poems of Robert Parry (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 321. As Evans notes, Parry may have been influenced by Philip Sidney's The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (London, 1590), in which a woman's hymen is blazoned as 'A daintie seale of virgin-waxe, / Where nothing but impression lackes' (sig. V7v).
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;  
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.\(^{41}\)

Here sexual possession is figured as colonisation. Thomas Healy writes that the persona asks his mistress for 'a legal patent to explore her undiscovered territory', and '[h]is explorations reveal that she is an unknown territory' when he 'find[s] her hymen intact'. With the final line, he attempts to 'formalis[e] his negotiation, setting his seal (his penis) where his hands have been'.\(^{42}\) The persona suggests that his manual foreplay anticipates sex in the same way a handwritten signature anticipates the authoritative stamp of a seal next to it. His hand and seal are mutually reinforcing signs of authentication, but it is the latter which will confirm his occupation. Most legal documents, which—unlike private letters—were usually made of durable parchment rather than paper, needed to be sealed. This was the case not just for 'bonds' and other personal business contracts, but also royal legal documents that granted rights and privileges such as charters and patents. Thus in William Percy’s play The Faery Pastorall (1824; composed in 1603), the maid Florida condemns the unwelcome advances of Learchus through a metaphor that alludes to the sealing of charters: ‘Wast not that wax ... / Of my virginitye ... he thought t'have stampt / His seale vpon and so t'haue borne the Floure / Of mee by Priuiledge of the Charter?’\(^{43}\) The sealing metaphor in Donne’s elegy seems to gesture specifically towards the sealing of patents which licensed exploration. Mary Ann Radzinowicz suggests that the word ‘Licence’ is a pun that ‘alludes to the license Queen Elizabeth gave first to Sir Humphrey Gilbert and then, when Gilbert drowned, to his half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh’.\(^{44}\) In 1584, Walter Raleigh received letters patent granting him ‘free liberty and license ... to discover search fynde out and viewe such remote heathen and barbarous landes Contries and territories not actually possessed of any Christian Prynce and inhabited by Christian people’. The patent was authorised ‘per breue de priuato sigillo’, ‘by writ of Privy Seal’.\(^{45}\) Raleigh’s authority as a coloniser was represented not only by sealed documents, but also by one of his seal-matrices, now held at the British

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\(^{43}\) William Percy, ‘The Faery Pastorall or Forrest Elues’, Huntington Library, MS HM.4, fols 62r-91r; fol. 71r.


Museum (see figure 1). The circular silver seal-die, which measures 5.7 centimetres in diameter, is inscribed with his arms and the date 1584, and its legend identifies Raleigh as ‘DOMINI + & GVERNATORIS + VIRGINIAE’, ‘Lord and Governor of Virginia’. By declaring his intent to set his seal of ownership on his virginal mistress, the persona of Donne’s elegy evokes just such an object.

Figure 1: A seal-matrix made for Walter Raleigh. © The Trustees of the British Museum

The analogy between the seal and the hymen is nuanced by the etymology of the word ‘hymen’ itself. ‘Hymen’ probably derives from the Greek *humēn* (ὑμην), meaning ‘membrane’ or ‘thin skin’ in a more general sense. Over the course of the sixteenth century, writers started using ‘hymen’ to refer to the virginal membrane in English, although this sense of the word had long been recognised in Latin. The word’s predominant meaning, however, was still Hymenaeus, the classical god of marriage, and it was sometimes used figuratively to refer to marriage or the wedding ceremony. Classicists argue as to whether there is an etymological link between the membrane (‘hymen’) and the god (‘Hymen’). Nonetheless, the homonyms were sometimes connected. Given that the hymen was frequently figured as

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46 The British Museum, Prehistory and Europe 1904.0113.2. The seal-die is catalogued in Tonnochy (no. 347).
47 Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginity and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 28, 150-1n.67. *OED*’s entry is misleading because its earliest example is from 1615 (hymen n. 1).
48 *OED* Hymen n. 1, 2.
a seal, it is curious that Hymen was the god who sealed couples into the bond of marriage or 'Hymen's bands', a common phrase which is used by Hymen himself in Shakespeare's *As You Like it* (1623; V.iv.127). More generally, the discourse of marriage was saturated in the language of sealing. Legal documents that authorised and authenticated the union were actually sealed. This may be why, in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600), Theseus refers to his wedding-day as a 'sealing day' that will secure an 'everlasting bond of fellowship' (I.i.84-5). But marriage involved sealing in figurative senses as well. While the rite of matrimony had not been officially considered a sacramental seal since the Reformation, marriage was often referred to as being sealed by the exchanging of rings, the joining of hands, and especially kissing (as at *The Taming of the Shrew* (1623) III.ii.122-3). The language of sealing rhetorically reinforced the idea that wedding ceremonies publicly contracted man and wife in the eyes of the law, but a marriage was only legally binding once it was sexually consummated. Several Renaissance writers exploit the idea that the legal and ceremonial sealing of marriage anticipates the sealing that will take place in the bedroom. In Robert Greene's comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1594), Earl Lacy shows his eagerness to marry Margaret by announcing that 'I'll plight the bands, and seal it with a kiss' (vi.126). Friar Bungay continues the sealing theme: 'I'll take my portace [prayer-book] forth and wed you here; / Then go to bed and seal up your desires' (vi.136-7). The wedding-day was apparently a 'sealing day' in several senses of the term.

The defloration/sealing trope was sometimes reversed so that literal acts of sealing were figured as defloration. In Thomas Randolph's pastoral comedy *Amyntas* (1638; licensed for the stage in 1630), the hopeful Damon argues that Laurinda wishes to give herself to him both in marriage and in body because she has given him a gift of wax:

[T]his plain signe confirmes her grant,  
She gave me waxe to seale the covenant.  
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50 At the end of Francis Kinnaston's amorous poetic sequence *Cynthiades*, the poet declares that the imagined untying of his bride's virginity will be an act by which 'Hymen not makes, but seales our love'.Kinnaston, *Leoline and Sydanis a Romance of the Amorous Adventures of Princes: Together with Sundry Affectionate Addresses to his Mistresse, Under the Name of Cynthia* (London, 1642), 152.

51 Shakespeare's marriage licence bond of 28 November 1582 once had two seal-impressions attached to it, but they have since disintegrated. Joseph William Gray, *Shakespeare's Marriage, His Departure from Stratford and Other Incidents in His Life* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1905), 33-5.

52 'Sealing day' was sometimes used of legal documents. In the scene of Heywood's *If You Know Not Me* cited earlier, King Philip employs the term in anticipation of his act of authentication: 'this is our sealing day / This our states busines; is our signet there?' (sig. F1r).

The sealing/defloration trope also occurred in references to letters. In John Taylor’s *A Brown Dozen of Drunkards* (1648), a pamphlet on the follies of drinking, we are given a description of a character named Lusty Lawrence, who seems aware that the kind of wax with which letters are sealed contributes to the meanings they convey: ‘[A]s he waxeth wild with wine, he would seale all his obseane Letters with Virgins wax ... he will promise every maid marriage, and seale his promise if he can with his owne Image’. Lawrence’s sealing of his lewd letters with virgin wax is a symbolic realisation of his fantasy of deflowering maids and—in a God-like act of creation—impregnating them ‘with his owne Image’.

**The Broken Seal of Virginity**

The reversible analogy between the unimpressed seal and the hymen is complicated by the fact that an unstamped piece of wax was technically not a seal. In *The Elements of Armories* (1610), Edmund Bolton writes that he cannot call ‘a plaine peece of Virgin-wax a seale, or a sheet of vnwritten paper a letter, or a maid a wife’ ‘without extreame impropriety, and abuse of speech’. Bolton suggests that a maid only becomes a wife once her marriage is consummated, once her husband has written on her paper and sealed her virgin wax. But ‘a plaine peece of Virgin-wax’ (i.e. virgin wax that is smooth because unstamped) is not a seal, and herein lies the strangeness of referring—as Robert Parry does—to the hymen as a seal that lacks an impression. It is significant, however, that ‘seal’ could mean not just ‘to stamp wax with a signet’ but also ‘to close up’. Ann and John O. Thompson write that ‘given that the wax could serve the ... function of securing [a] document against unauthorized examination, “seal” comes to mean a method of keeping things closed, or the activity of securing them’. The sense of the word ‘seal’ as ‘seal up’ or ‘fasten’ was reinforced by its homophone ‘seel’, meaning to sew up a hawk’s eyes during its training.
In a sense, then, it was virgins that were sealed. Like letter seals, the hymen was associated with enclosure and security because it was generally seen as a part of the female body designed by God or Nature to lock up virginal female genitalia. Giulia Sissa traces the ancient beginnings of the enduring concept that defloration is ‘[a] breaching of a seal, a breaking-through, a ruina that is both borne by the hymen and indicated by it’. She observes that, along with metaphors of locks, doors, gates and walls, the representation of the hymen as signaculum virginitatis or ‘the seal of virginity’ suggested a natural purpose of preservation and containment. The concept was authorised by its biblical precedence: the Song of Songs states that the virginal female body is hortus conclusus, fons signatus, ‘a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed’ (4.12). The persistent notion of the hymen as a security device encouraged the epistolary metaphor: while hymens supposedly locked up virginity, seals locked up letters.

Hymens and seals were not formidable physical barriers, but they could signify that a breach of security had occurred. Thomas Elyot’s Latin dictionary of 1538 describes the ‘hymen’ as ‘a skynne in the secrete place of a mayden, which whanne she is defloured, is broken’. Lexicographers and medical writers in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries offered similar definitions. In the anatomical text Mikrokosmographia (1615), Helkiah Crooke writes: ‘It is called Hymen quasi Limen, as it were the entrance, the piller, or locke, or flower of virginity. For being whole it is the onely sure note of vnsteyned virginity’. Indeed, the hymen was primary evidence in medico-juridical virginity tests performed by Renaissance midwives: as with documents presented in court, the presence or absence of a seal could determine legal proceedings. Medical theory and legal practice suggested the hymen served its security function in a similar manner to letter seals because—according to OED—a seal was ‘a piece of wax ... fixed on a folded letter or document ... in such a way that an opening [could not] be effected without breaking it’. If, as Elyot suggests, hymens protected and testified to the security of ‘the secrete place of a mayden’, seals did the same for the secret place of a letter: its concealed contents.

61 Helkiah Crooke, Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man... ([London], 1615), 223.
63 OED seal n.2a.
When unruptured hymens were analogised with stamped seals and especially letter seals, figuratively speaking defloration was not sealing but seal-breaking. In George Ruggle’s Latin university play Ignoramus (1630), the titular character’s joke about some prostitutes highlights the paradox that defloration can be represented as both the stamping and breaking of a seal:

TORCOL
Mihi crede, sunt illibatae, signataeque virgines.

IGNORAMUS
Signatae imo sunt signate communi sigillo: ha he.

TORCOL
Believe me Sir, they are unstained, and sealed Virgins.

IGNORAMUS
Sealed! I believe they are sealed with the common Seal. Ha, ha, he.64

Prostitutes were ‘sealed with the common Seal’ insofar as they were sexually available to all men, but Ignoramus’ jest—appropriately legalistic considering he is a lawyer—alludes specifically to official corporate seals.65 ‘Common seals’ were used, for example, by religious orders, towns and cities, guilds and educational corporations.66 When, on 8 March 1615, Ignoramus was performed before James I as well as courtiers and academics at Trinity College, Cambridge (Ruggle’s alma mater), a number of audience members may have been familiar with the college’s common seal, which represents Christ’s baptism, or indeed the common seal of the whole University.67 Made in 1580, the University’s third (and present) common seal is dominated by an image of the chancellor in an ornate gown sitting between two proctors. It is surrounded by the legend ‘SIGILLVM * CO[MMVN]E * CANCELLARII * M[AGIST]ROR[VM] * ET * SCHOLARIV[M] * UNIVERSITAT * CANTERBRIGIE’, meaning ‘The Common Seal of the Chancellor, Masters, and Scholars of the University of Cambridge’. Documents that bore the authenticating mark of this corporate instrument really were ‘sealed with the common Seal’.

65 OED common adj. 5a.
66 Some of these common seals are discussed in Bloom, English Seals, chs. 11 and 12. I am grateful to Adrian Ailes for advising me on my research of common seals at the National Archives.
67 See W. H. St. John Hope, ‘Paper on the Seals of the Colleges and of the University of Cambridge’, Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London 2nd series 10 (1885), 225-52. All of Cambridge’s colleges had common seals. Hope discusses Trinity College’s common seal (249), and the University’s common seal (227-8). Also see Bloom, English Seals, 237-9.
The exchange between Torcol and Ignoramus draws attention to the fact that virgins were variously described as having their seals both imprinted and broken by men. But what was the difference between the two tropes? Whereas the metaphor of sealing was often used to suggest that defloration conferred a benefit on a woman or even created her anew, that of seal-breaking implied it was a violent and destructive act. If the sealing trope represents women as impressionable because melted with desire, the seal-breaking trope portrays them as cold and unwilling. In William Davenant's *The Cruel Brother* (1630), Castruchio justifies the Duke’s rape of Corsa by claiming that ‘women / Are a kind of soft wax, that will receive / Any impression’ (IV.i.35-7). Corsa’s female servant Duarte contradicts Castruchio with the observation that sealing-wax (or ‘hard wax’) is only ‘soft’ and impressionable when heated: ‘Hard wax, when cold, / Accepts of no impression. By coldness / I infer chastity, for chastity / Is cold.’ (IV.i.39-42) But women who would not melt with desire could be broken by brute force because, as Castruchio menacingly replies to Duarte, ‘workmen are harder far / Than that hard wax’ (IV.i.42-3). The verbs typically used to describe the unsealing of letters captured the destructive nature of the action: seals were ‘broken’, ‘broken up’, ‘broken open’, ‘broken off’, ‘ripped’, ‘unripped’, ‘torn’, ‘torn open’, ‘torn off’ and ‘torn away’. The violence of unsealing was reinforced by the fact that tearing the paper of the letter was a distinct possibility, especially if a knife was not used. Sometimes even words were ripped out of place. In a letter written in 1651, Edward the second Viscount Conway chastises his daughter-in-law, the philosopher Anne Conway, for sealing one of her letters incompetently:

> Although I have troubled you sufficiently yet I must give you a little more in making a request to you, that since you write like a man, you would not seale your letters like a woman, your last letter was sealed upon the wrighting, and in the opening two or three wordes were torne out, allthough the letter was opened with providence that the writing was in danger of tearing.

Both men and women sealed and unsealed letters, but Edward Conway’s assertion that Anne writes like a man and seals like a woman testifies to James Daybell’s observation that ‘the theories and practices of letter-writing in the early modern period were radically

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gendered’. And because Edward identifies Anne’s incompetent sealing as feminine, it is difficult to think of his careful yet ultimately destructive unsealing as anything other than masculine.

Considering the inherent violence of unsealing, it is perhaps unsurprising that Renaissance authors repeatedly analogise defloration with the breaking of seals in order to represent the sexual act as unauthorised violation. In Shakespeare’s Henry V (1600), the king condemns those who have ‘beguile[d] virgins with the broken seals of perjury’ (IV.i.162). Gary Taylor suggests that ‘broken seals’ may not only mean “violently dishonoured guarantees”; probably alluding to the seals of marriage covenants’, but also violated maidenheads. Unlike the seals on marriage covenants, however, those affixed to private letters were usually supposed to be broken, albeit by an intended recipient. If we conceive of a virgin as being sealed like a letter, the act of unsealing can be recognised as a natural rite of passage rather than a violation. Margreta de Grazia writes that ‘women are sealed in two states: virginity and chastity. The hymenal seal is broken in marriage; the marital seal is broken by either rape or adultery’. The wedding-day, then, was not just a ‘sealing day’, as Theseus calls it, but also a seal-breaking day. When it took the form of sexual consummation on the wedding night, defloration broke the hymenal seal but also formed the marital seal because it legally secured the marriage bond that transferred a woman as property from the father to the husband.

Certain writers evidently figured defloration as seal-breaking, but conversely unsealing letters (and especially love-letters) was sometimes represented as defloration. In The Insatiate Countess (1613), a tragedy by John Marston, Lewis Machin and William Barksted, the frantic countess Isabella resolves to show her page the letter she is sending to the latest object of her affections, Count Massino, in order to prove that it is not a love-letter (II.iii.10-11, 15, 18). Her resolution is checked, however, by the thought that the arrival of a letter which has been unsealed might incite jealousy in the Count:

> Yet I should tear it in the breaking ope,
> And make him lay a wrongful charge on thee;

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72 I have cited the Folio text. In Q1 (1600; sig. D4v), Q2 (1602; sig. D4r) and Q3 (1608; sig. D4v), the king refers to ‘the broken seale of Forgery’, thereby alluding to seal counterfeiting, which I will discuss later.
74 De Grazia, ‘Imprints’, 42.
And say thou brokest it open by the way (II.iii.19-21)

If she were to unseal the letter, Isabella would presumably be able to reseal it, but she knows that tearing the paper would leave a trace of 'the breaking ope'. The ambiguity of the pronoun 'it' makes us think twice about what the 'wrongful charge' laid against the page might be. Will the page be accused of unsealing and looking at the letter, or could the imagined breach of etiquette be more sexual than textual in nature? Isabella is anxious that the torn letter would suggest that she is unworthy of the Count's love because she too has been broken open.

The unsealing of letters by people to whom they were not addressed was, in Alan Stewart's words, an 'utter breach of epistolary protocol'. Renaissance plays often exploit the dramatic potential of this transgression, which was a 'breach' in a physical as well as a social sense. In Shakespeare's King Lear (1608), Edgar anticipates his illegitimate unsealing of a letter intended for his brother by apologising to the wax, asking 'leave' to tear the inanimate matter (xx.251). Malvolio behaves similarly in Twelfth Night when he finds an undelivered letter that seems to have been written and sealed by his mistress Olivia. Preparing to open the letter, the steward asks for consent that is never given, pausing briefly when he recognises the design of the seal: 'By your leave, wax—soft, and the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal—'tis my lady. To whom should this be?' (II.v.90-3) Malvolio's unauthorised unsealing of the letter, which is addressed not to him but ‘To the unknown beloved’ (II.v.89), stages his illegitimate desire to unseal the virginity of his mistress, a woman whose heart has already been analogised with impressionable wax by Viola (II.ii.29-30). Just before Malvolio recognises the seal, he unconsciously sexualises the secret contents of the letter through his false identification of the superscription as her handwriting: 'These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand.' (II.v.85-7) Many scholars have asked, along with Sir Andrew Aguecheek hiding in the box-tree, 'Her c's, her u's, and her t's? Why that?' (II.v.88) As is commonly glossed, 'c ... u ... t'—'cut'—was 'slang for the female genitals'. Furthermore, the seal is an image of Lucrece. In the most commonly recounted period of her life, Lucrece was not a virgin. But as a rape victim, her seal of chastity was broken against her will. Malvolio's language and actions, then, may suggest that his unsealing is a kind of epistolary rape.

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76 Stewart, Shakespeare's Letters, 264.
78 For the argument that 'Malvolio's willingness to break the seal places him in a version of the rape of Lucrece' see Karen Robertson, 'A Revenging Feminine Hand in Twelfth Night' in David M. Bergeron
has no stage direction for Malvolio’s unsealing of the letter, but the action probably takes place during Fabian’s aside in the box-tree: ‘This wins him, liver and all’ (II.v.94). The line suggests that the unsealing is prompted by the organ thought to be the seat of sexual passion, the liver.79 By tearing the seal that fastens the folded letter and conceals its contents, by cutting through Lucrece’s waxen form, Malvolio thinks he will be able to see more of Olivia’s c’s, u’s and t’s, to enter a secret textual place he associates with her secret sexual place.

**Counterfeiting the Hymenal Seal**

Malvolio, however, is the deluded victim of a practical joke: the letter was written for him, but not by Olivia. Maria has created the letter by forging Olivia’s handwriting and stealing or counterfeiting her seal. Counterfeiting adds another layer to the relationship between the seal and the hymen because it presents the possibility of reversibility, of resealing something that has been unsealed. Throughout this essay I have drawn attention to the reversibility of the analogy under investigation: the figurative relationship established by hymen/seal tropes is reversed in seal/hymen tropes. It is curious that while the analogy between the seal and the hymen was reversible, the actions of unsealing and defloration were ostensibly irreversible. Neither seals nor hymens could be repaired once broken. This is why they were good indicators of the security of the textual and sexual spaces they protected. Counterfeiting, however, threw into doubt the stability of the seal and the hymen as signs. Seals could be and were counterfeited. It had been treasonous to counterfeit the Great and Privy seals since Edward III’s Treason Act of 1351.80 Works of rogue literature and legal depositions suggest that seal counterfeiters, sometimes called ‘jarkmen’, were able to reproduce official seal-impressions by carving their designs into materials such as wood, horn and bone to create counterfeit seal-matrices.81 Daybell notes that in early-modern England ‘forgers were skilful in the art of undetectably removing and reapplying seals to intercepted letters’.82 According to the Renaissance historian William Camden, after Francis Walsingham had unsealed, read and transcribed the correspondence of Mary Queen of

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Scots, Arthur Gregory would reseal the letters in such a way that ‘none could iudge them to haue beene vnsealed’.⁸³

It was thought that, like seals, virginity could be counterfeited. Renaissance literature refers to a variety of strategies for cheating on virginity tests, deceiving bride-grooms and presenting courtesans as what Torcol in Ignoramus calls ‘sealed virgins’.⁸⁴ In Thomas Middleton’s The Phoenix (1607), the disguised prince laments that it is ‘rare to have a bride commence a maid, / But does beguile joy of the purity, / And is made strict by power of drugs and art, / An artificial maid, a doctored virgin’ (viii.176-9). The phrase ‘drugs and art’ may allude to the use of astringent substances such as aluminium sulphate or ‘alum’, a whitish transparent mineral salt which could supposedly, in the words of a 1620s ballad, ‘restore a Maydenhead that’s vanisht’.⁸⁵ Widespread references to the application of such substances and other tricks suggested that, like an illegitimately unsealed letter, a deflowered virgin could be resealed and her integrity apparently restored.

The circulation of stories about counterfeiting virginity would have weakened confidence in the hymen as a sign of maidenhood, but for some in the Renaissance the hymen was always a counterfeit sign, or at least an unreliable one. Despite Crooke’s assertion that the membrane is ‘the onely sure note of vnsteyned virginity’, many medical writers questioned its form and function, and a number even denied its existence. Marie H. Loughlin writes that the ‘debate over the position, composition and indeed the very existence of the hymen indicates that this membrane is not an unequivocal sign of virginity for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European cultures; it is, instead, a site of pure ambiguity, a membrane whose material existence is both constantly called into question and vociferously insisted upon’.⁸⁶ For this reason it is appropriate that the hymen was repeatedly compared to seals, which were made of that most protean of materials, wax. Women’s association with wax could be evoked in order to suggest their intractability rather than their subjection to phallocentric and patriarchal authority. In a number of sexual sealing metaphors, the permanence of the stamp of defloration is drawn into question. From a certain perspective, women’s wax-like malleability may have made them receptive to men’s seals, but it also rendered them

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⁸³ William Camden, The Historie of the Life and Death of Mary Stuart Queene of Scotland (London, 1624), 173. I would like to thank Andrew Gordon for encouraging me to consider Arthur Gregory’s seal counterfeiting.


⁸⁶ Loughlin, Hymeneutics, 29.
incapable of retaining imprints. In Donne’s elegy “Nature’s Lay Idiot”, the persona bitterly laments that, having taught his mistress how to love and ‘with amorous delicacies / Refined thee into a blissful paradise’, she will now be enjoyed by someone else. ‘Must I alas’, he exclaims angrily, ‘Chafe wax for others’ seals?’ As A. J. Smith notes, ‘Chafe’ could mean ‘heat’ and ‘rub’ (the actions necessary for tempering sealing-wax), so the persona both ‘melts her for someone else to set their imprint on her’ and ‘arouses her for the sexual consummation that others will have’. The persona is horrified at the thought that all traces of their secret love affair have been erased from his mistress’s body and that ultimately his authority will be forgotten. No one will ever know that he was the first to seal her: his stamp of defloration is a mere phantom of a sign, an impression erased through chafing. If the sealing metaphor in Donne’s “To his Mistress Going to Bed” helps to construct a fantasy of enduring sexual possession and domination, that of “Nature’s Lay Idiot” dissolves this fantasy.

Many characters and personae in Renaissance literature analogise the hymen with the seal in order to mould the body part into a reliable sign of patriarchal authority, but in doing so they arguably reveal patriarchy itself to be wax-like because unstable and paradoxical in its attitudes to virginity. The commonplace man-seals-woman trope was destabilised by the fact that sometimes women were represented as sealing men. A man’s heart, for example, could be sealed with the image of his beloved, and his lips could be sealed with kisses. The analogy between kissing and sealing is explored in Shakespeare’s epyllion Venus and Adonis (1593). Having been kissed by Adonis, Venus describes his lips as “sweet seals in my soft lips imprinted” and solicits him to once again “Set thy seal manual on my wax-red lips” (lines 511, 516), producing a metaphor in which lips may be ‘meant euphemistically for other parts of the body’. A little later, however, the narrator transforms Venus’ lips from seal-impressions to seal-matrices when he describes her aggressive kissing of the passive and feminine Adonis: ‘What wax so frozen but dissolves with temp’ring, / And yields at last to every light impression?’ (Lines 565-6) The sealed becomes the sealer and vice versa. Indeed, the manner in which the virginal Adonis yields to Venus’ distinctly venereal impression subverts the defloration/sealing trope. The fact that a lot of women did own and use personal seals provides a material context for the metaphor, which is just one of many in

87 Smith (ed.), Complete English Poems, 103, lines 23-4, 27-9. Donne, who from 1597 to 1601 worked as secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal (Thomas Egerton), could be alluding to the office of ‘chafe-wax’ in the Chancery, which involved preparing wax for the sealing of official documents (OED n.).
89 Loewenstein argues that a number of Shakespeare’s sealing analogies illustrate the ‘impermanence’, ‘insecurity’ and ‘instability’ of patriarchal authority. ‘Forms in Wax’.
Renaissance literature that challenge the idea that only women can be subjected to sexual impressions.\textsuperscript{91}

Despite the instability of the seal as a figurative sign, this essay has attempted to set a critical stamp on an analogy that is reversible, ambiguous and paradoxical. But is it possible to investigate the hymenal seal without remoulding it into something that others might condemn as a counterfeit? The complexity of the analogy between the seal and the hymen is such that it resists generalisations (to call it ‘a patriarchal trope’ is certainly an oversimplification), but it clearly offers insights into how Renaissance writers conceptualised both the sexualised body and manuscript culture. Representations of the hymen as a seal are related to the impulse to textualise the female body in order to make it both legible and inscribable, and it is interesting to consider how these representations would have been affected by seals’ material and cultural shifts during the early-modern period (the increase in female seal ownership, the emerging use of shellac to make sealing-wax, etc.). The conceptualisation of seals as hymenal nuanced their status as tokens of authenticity, and it mystified, privatised and even fetishized the textual spaces concealed within sealed letters.

If, as Daybell argues, the concept of the letter as a private form of communication developed significantly in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, then perhaps the circulation of the idea that a seal was an epistolary hymen reflected or even contributed to that development.\textsuperscript{92} Further study of the rich and diverse language of sealing in English Renaissance literature would reveal more about the role that seals played in the cultural imagination of early-modern England. Such research would benefit from recognition that the figurative seal and the material seal were mutually influential signs.\textsuperscript{93}

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\textsuperscript{91} For evidence that women possessed and used their own personal seals in the late sixteenth century, see Daybell, \textit{Women Letter-Writers}, 53-4.
\textsuperscript{93} I would like to thank Christopher Burlinson, Jonathan Gibson, Kerry Gilbert, Andrew Gordon, Kara Northway, Gary Schneider, Daniel Starza Smith and Joel Swann for their helpful questions and comments following a presentation of an early draft of this essay at ‘Cultures of Correspondence in Early Modern Britain, 1550-1640’, a conference held at the University of Plymouth in 2011. The essay has also benefited from the advice of John Jowett and Tom Lockwood.