The topic we will discuss is the use of the gender debate in 15th-century Castile as an instance of self-fashioning. Although the texts of this debate were ostensibly about the nature of women, we will use them as illustrations of the creation of identities by male authors. The examples we will discuss come from scholarship on cancionero poetry, historiography, and the treatises of the querelle des femmes in 15th-century Castile. The authors we will examine are figures such as Álvaro de Luna, Juan de Mena, Diego de Valera, Alfonso Martínez de Toledo, Diego de San Pedro, Juan de Flores, Fernando del Pulgar, and Fernando de Rojas. We will demonstrate how the seemingly opposite strategies of courtly idolization and misogynistic denigration of women both served as a means for the projection of a male identity designed to allay, disguise, or negotiate man's need for woman.

Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning seems particularly applicable to the way in which the texts of the gender debate demonstrate that “self-fashioning occurs at the point of encounter between an authority and an alien.” Self-fashioning for these Castilian authors is either “submission to an absolute power” that makes Woman an authority, or the creation of an idea of Woman as “something perceived as alien, strange or hostile...[a] threatening Other [that] must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed.”

In addition, this project necessitates a position on the construction of the self historically. At issue in our effort will be the applicability for late 15th-century Castile of what Greenblatt outlined for England under Elizabeth I. We will advance a theory of how the identities defined by self-fashioning responded to new forms of expression of consciousness, and new forms of surveillance of conscience, popularized with the rise of Renaissance humanism, and we will examine the question of whether a new type of modern self arrives in this period. To provide a working definition of how the “Renaissance” of Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning applies, it is useful to first define how he sees the changes in the period affecting the generation of identities. As Greenblatt...
characterized it, Jacob Burkhardt’s crucial perception about the Renaissance was that the political upheavals in Italy in the later Middle Ages and the transition from feudalism to despotism fostered a radical change in consciousness: the princes and condottieri, and their secretaries, ministers, poets, and followers, were cut off from established forms of identity and forced by their relationship to power to fashion a new sense of themselves and their world. What emerged were the self and the state as works of art. A constant throughout the process that Greenblatt describes is that self-fashioning has to do with the interaction of these three key elements: subjects who are exposed to the ways of power, who are devoid of traditional means to create an identity, and who as a result forge a new way of seeing and articulating who they are through the written word.

Fashioning a Knight

Our discussion begins with one mode in which relationships of power and gender intertwined: self-fashioning through courtly love service. If we are to speak of self-fashioning in the context of Renaissance England and 15th-century Castile, what is it that was fashioned? Particularly in Greenblatt’s chapters on Thomas Wyatt and Edmund Spenser, the self that was fashioned was that of a gentleman and knight, a way of being in the world that was capable of negotiating the twisting turns of power and influence by the creation of a masculine persona in word and deed. This has proven to be one of the most fruitful and well-established avenues for adapting the concept of self-fashioning to 15th-century representations of male comportment in Castile.

The most obvious model for adaptation from Greenblatt is the role he identifies of the cult of Queen Elizabeth I in his chapter on Spenser, “To Fashion a Gentleman,” which provides a useful framework for understanding the caballero culture that formed around 15th-century Castilian queens such as María of Aragon and Isabel I. Greenblatt describes a court culture under Elizabeth I in which “male sexual aggression—the hunt, the loathing, the desire to master—is yoked to the service of ideal values embodied in a female ruler, and it is through this service that identity is achieved.” If the product of self-fashioning is a knight, then a powerful lady is the mirror in which that identity is verified. What sort of subject is created when the power with which these authors deal is gendered as feminine, when it is romanticized in a way that employs “the mutual interest of both ruler and subject in the transformation of power

3 Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning, 178.