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My Spent Life's Breath: A Psychoanalytic Study of Don Carlo Gesualdo

“So here we are, whether we like it or not, in the realm of necessity.
And yet which of us has ever heard talk of art as other than a realm
of freedom?”

—Igor Stravinsky

I.

The often stated goal of psychoanalysis is to provide a person the ability to know his or her self. This task, though impossible, is seemingly made more doable with the assistance of various modes of discourse—competing explanations one shuffles through as a photographer flips through lenses. Just as musicology presents a view of its subject unreplicable by psychoanalysis, so, too, does composer-centered psychoanalytic inquiry, with its unique emphasis on biography, render a different perspective than musicology. Thankfully, the field of psychoanalysis is rich with studies that draw from both discourses—studies that treat biography and text as complementary aspects of a person and his work.

That music has a psychological function for people, whether composing or listening, is inarguable. Heinz Kohut described the art as “a universal phenomenon” which “must fulfill a deeply rooted human need” (1). Some, like Darwin, have seen music as a vehicle for social organization and communication. Others, like Riemann, claim that music exists for its emotional expressivity. Regardless, its rhythms and tones punctuate our existence. We find its traces in experiences as diverse as the comforting sob of an infant and the exhilarating uproar shared among the crowd at a rock concert. Such variety of appearance suggests that, socially and personally, music serves diverse, specific functions, such as shaping the mind's architecture to form and interpret “the sound image of the self” (Anzieu n. pag.).

The present study will focus specifically on the relationship between the composer and what Kohut might deem “mastery of the musical task” (12). At the core of Kohut’s argument is the idea that, psychologically, musical compositions can ease psychic stress. As a listener encounters a motif, altered rhythm, or any of the possible tonal organizations that constitute a composer’s vocabulary, the listener is able to submerge herself into the task of organizing the piece (Kohut 15). The listener uncovers the larger structural apparatus around which the composer built his artifice, and, in proving able to make sense of and organize what were previously unfamiliar sounds, asserts her psychological agency over the composition. Why do people like this? Because, Kohut claims, music provides people with “an enjoyable ego activity” that responds to “the threat of being overwhelmed” (24). This enjoyment takes its root from the experience of being an infant who makes a song of its weeping, as protection from and mastery of a barrage of external stimuli (such as noise, light, and movement). Thus, music allows an exercise that preserves the ego and relieves it of tension.

Although Dr. Kohut explores mastery in the context of the audience’s participation, the implications for the composer remain enormous. Martin L. Nass, in deemphasizing the role of these phenomena for the composer, still acknowledges that “mastery and reorganization of sounds perpetuate the composer’s link with the past in a variety of ways and provide a vehicle for creative expression” (279). Essentially, music gives the composer the tools to become the architect who designs the ever-evolving “sound image of the self” (Anzieu n. pag.). However, claiming that this alone constitutes the composer’s need to create would be reductive and misleading. What composer approaches the craft simply to boast about her dexterity without yearning to communicate experiences by using music’s unique and abstract language? Yet recent psychoanalytic theory has questioned the idea of the composer’s ability to communicate,

particularly through a score. As the gap between composer and listener is peopled by publishers, performers, and even audio engineers, what began as the content of a composer's intention is increasingly transformed by numerous interpreters who must issue their judgment in transmitting a piece (Kramer xiii). Of course expression is important to the composer, but claiming that it, as a sibling of communication, is solely what drives one to compose is also suspect. A composer that has performed written music must be aware of the creative role each player exerts between the sound that is initially imagined and the piece that is eventually performed. Something else, then, that complicates the need for mastery must motivate the composer.

The answer lies in Freud's formulation of the psyche as a division between primary and secondary process-functions, and how music-focused psychoanalytic theory can elaborate on their roles for the creative mind. Primary process-function activities are those carried out strictly "between the self and itself" (Noy 223). These relate to the drives that direct an individual's interior life, such as the pleasure principle, dreams, and the discharges of energy that can lead to hallucination and disengagement with reality (Freud 326). Secondary-process function activities, instead, are those which invite the ego to regulate the discharge of energy in a manner that does not conflict with reality, but rather demands recognition of social life as a mediator "between the self and others" (Noy 223). Clearly, artistic activity resides at some boundary between the two. For what art does not have some trace of the fictional and hallucinatory? In Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," the author claims that "to be a work means to set up a world" (170). Artists, then, enable the work to establish this world. Yet what art does not also reflect recognizable traces of the physical and social world in which every artist must participate so that she may create? To Pinchas Noy, art, then, is a "synthesis between the self-centered primary process and the reality-oriented secondary process" which "reflects the special function of art as

a bridge between the self and reality” (223).

The result of this division and its oscillating tension is what aestheticians call form. Form is the text, or composition, itself, and the particular structure in which it is arranged. It is the artist’s creation, and therefore what contains traces of the psyche’s repressed meanings and desires. It begs for analysis, though one informed by specific biographical considerations. However, it should be obvious that artistic life does not completely equate to personal life. Such a formulation would be crude and counterproductive; instead, the artistic life is one aspect among many which can assist in attaining a deeper understanding of a creative personality. This study merely assumes that to exclude the artistic, or the study of form, would cut us off from a valuable tool that aids in the task of understanding the personal, and that psychoanalysis is a discourse uniquely situated to unite the two.

Before this study proceeds further, we must acknowledge that our theory still falls short of explaining where the desire to compose takes its root; this study will add another layer: that of the role of anxiety. Anxiety is, of course, a universal, even biological, concern. Theologian Paul Tillich lends credence to this idea, claiming that “man in every civilization is anxiously aware of the threat of nonbeing” (43). In Melanie Klein’s terms, the self can never resolve this fear of death. Instead, desire emerges. That composition and creation stem from an interior desire is hardly surprising. However, when desire is seen as “fundamentally a type of anxiety” against which “the ego erects psychic barriers designed to curb its growth,” desire becomes far more interesting (Kristeva 85). It demands an action of the ego—a socially acceptable response. And the ego answers with art. Composition, then, becomes not merely a regressive act that recreates the experience of an infant (a view that seems uttered by one who never wrote music, anyway), or the link between the psychical and social, but also an existential expression: art as an act of

self-affirmation in the face of death, and a device for easing the life of the psyche.

If the present study has established that psychoanalysis is a tool worthy of exploring music and its many personalities, then the next task is selecting a composer. This study seeks to examine the life and work of Don Carlo Gesualdo, Prince of Venosa, who was commonly referred to as both musician and murderer. The reasons for this choice bear defending.

It is not hyperbole to state that the biography of Don Carlo Gesualdo is one of the richest in music history, particularly for a study of the psychic function of composition. A prince living in 16th century Italy, he was born into nobility and a class that imposed pressure and ceremony as the mundane obligations of honor. These he often transgressed. He murdered his first wife, though this did not exactly count as one of his transgressions; he unrepentantly cheated on his second, and the conduct surrounding this affair earned the attention of the Inquisition. His music is known for its extremely expressive, near tortured character and its “tonal orientation” seen as an intriguing “mixture, capable of being identified now with Renaissance, now with Baroque practice” (Watkins *Gesualdo* 204). Yet it is not these acts or his musical style in the abstract that hold interest for this study. It is the specifics of these instances, details appreciated only under closer examination, which reveal meaningful connections between Gesualdo’s life and art. Details such as what Gesualdo said before and after murdering his wife, how the daily whippings he ordered on himself in his later years were perhaps motivated by constipation, and that the lyrics he used for the Responsorial suggest the composer identified himself with the suffering of Christ: it is these details that must reveal something about Gesualdo’s psychic life and what function, mentally, music performed for him.

Partially because of Gesualdo’s histrionic life and musical legacy, his biography has often been prone to irresponsible dramatization and speculation—this means Gesualdo needs

demythologizing. Early chroniclers have either simplistically attributed his music to his “psychic ambivalences,” or they have treated the two totally separately (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 91). Either way, the common practice in Gesualdo studies would suggest it inappropriate to inquire as to how the composer’s psyche might manifest traces of unconscious or repressed desires in a way that elude the tools of psychoanalysis. The author does not believe this is actually the case.

Another issue in Gesualdo studies is historical perspective. Only within the last century have scholars consciously broken away from the tradition of musicology that imposes aesthetic values from the author’s culture onto Gesualdo’s time (though, of course, this can never be done away with entirely). The result of that projection was often erroneously describing key stylistic and technical traits, an occurrence which, if the aim of this study is valid, would have ill-equipped earlier psychoanalytic observers of Don Carlo. Previous studies have also misunderstood crucial events in Gesualdo’s life, building on the likely false story of Don Carlo murdering his infant son or claiming Gesualdo suffered whippings because he was plagued by demons (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 34). Either in a musical or historical sense, the character of Gesualdo has been repeatedly distorted. The task ahead, as Rudolf Bultmann demands of theologians, is demythology.

Finally, that Gesualdo’s life and art appear to modern audiences as the traces of a defiantly singular voice is true, but Gesualdo also remains a product of his culture. As a prince in Renaissance Italy’s patriarchal society, he enforced and reacted against prescriptive gender roles and codes of honor. He also nearly pursued a life as a cardinalate and found himself often aligned with the values of the Counter-Reformation (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 15). Undoubtedly, these issues must color and complicate our study of his psyche, as these pressures certainly affected him. Also contrary to earlier musicology, Gesualdo is not a lone voice of harmonic

dissonance and chromatic experimentation. As Watkins outlined in his seminal first biography of the composer, Gesualdo is a Mannerist, whose style fits into a context with composers who preceded and followed him. Still, his music, and what renders it spectacularly expressive, resists description and the sort of analysis that reduces it to disparate technical elements. As with poetry, the magic of Gesualdo's music is generated when the formal aspects of his compositions allow a rich and cacophonous "interplay of elements" that create an entirely unexpected sound image of a self (Miller 298).

The argument this study advances is that the texts and the form Gesualdo crafted are the result of Don Carlo's need for an outlet over which the composer could mirror his personal transgressions, exert control, and be liberated from other psychic imbalances. Control can be defined as the establishment of form through the manipulation and arrangement of various aesthetic or structural elements of a composition, such as harmony, tempo, and, among others, text-setting. Sometimes, these elements work within the established rules of a given genre, though, sometimes without. In the music of Don Carlo Gesualdo, obedience to these formal conventions and the seeming transgression of them mean both states are engaged. Gesualdo achieves this oscillation through a strictly disciplined, near excessive, composition style—one that asserts the composer's power to shape, order, and manipulate his content. When he achieves this effect, the text that emerges suggests form, content, and control, in service of the ego, are the tools the Prince of Venosa used to enact mastery over and reconciliation of deeper psychic imbalances. Indeed, imbalances molded as much by the character of an exterior world—its local pressures and aesthetic norms—as by an interior, troubled self.

The goal of this study is to explore as many aspects of Gesualdo's life as possible in order to establish a holistic understanding of him. Although no discourse can ever totally answer

why people engage in a process as complex as composition, perhaps allowing psychoanalytic theory to inform how one examines variables as diverse as gender norms, textual word-splitting, and existential anxiety can provide an imaginative lens through which we are privileged a view of the composer we might be surprised to know could be captured.

II.

The legacy of Don Carlo Gesualdo survives because of his music. Born in the Italian town of Taurasi on March 30, 1566, Gesualdo would become a composer crucial to discussions of all three major artistic and cultural periods associated with the centuries surrounding his birth; Renaissance, Mannerist, and Baroque aesthetic (and modern understandings of them) have each been informed by the legacy of Gesualdo (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 15). His music, written often to be performed by just five voices, has been said to “create a state of tortured suspense” and “musical nausea similar to...visual seasickness” (Rowland 43). Such characterizations might explain the affinity composers as experimental and challenging as Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Boulez share for the composer/prince. But in order to avoid a mistake of the past—treating Gesualdo as an artistically peerless and mythical figure—placing Don Carlo in a historical context more accurately portrays why his art continues to mesmerize listeners.

At a basic level of aesthetic description, Gesualdo is a Mannerist. He is a participant of a period in art history that, increasingly, is defined as its own time separate from yet distinct as Renaissance and Baroque culture. On a general level, critics have historically defined Mannerist art paradoxically: it is an art that subverts and shatters the norms and values of Renaissance theory; it is an art that affirms and relies on those same norms and values (Kirchman 6). To distinguish more dramatically and specifically between Renaissance and Mannerist practice, art

historians emphasize a few characteristics.

Mannerist art calls attention to artifice and the text as a creation, rather than representation of reality. This is fitting, as Mannerism is derived from *maniera*, a term whose closest English equivalent is stylishness, therefore, a term that makes obvious the singular stamp of a personal creator. That Mannerist art almost devalues reality to create something more desirable is also obvious; Vasari used the term *maniera* in “reference to the painter’s copying of the most beautiful elements...and combining them to make the most perfect whole” (Watkins *Gesualdo* 99). Consequently, in Mannerism “subjectivity replaces objectivity, the personal vision of the artist counterbalances the scientific view of an ordered universe, and irrationality” gains privilege (102). Mannerism is an art concerned with self-awareness and the power of the creator.

Mannerist art is intentionally difficult for the audience—it delights in challenging the rationalizing intellect. In painting, this effect might be achieved in a piece where “the eye can never come to rest on anything, but is kept constantly traveling around and around the composition following the curving lines...until a sense of nausea is produced...there is no firm place to rest...the eye can grasp no pattern” (Rowland 15). Thus, Mannerist art counters the declaration of Renaissance theologians that art should be comprehensible so that it might inspire devotion to God (Cardinal Paleotti even “saw paintings as books for the illiterate”) (Kirchman 14). To appreciate Gesualdo, such an aesthetic vocabulary must be transposed to describe the characteristics of Mannerism in the language of music.

Discussions of 16th century Italian music should be prefaced, though, with an understanding of the modes Renaissance composers used. In this system, called modality, each of the twelve existing modes constitutes a tonal organization that relies on intervals between notes for identification, as opposed to scales and, therefore, the placement of specific notes found

in modern tonality (McClary 19). For example, in the key of A major, an A tonic is required. This key could be transposed to another key without altering the composer's index of intervals. In modality, however, different modes give the composer different sets of intervals, so a composer could not transpose an Aeolian piece to the Phrygian organization. It would not lend the composer the same melodic choices. In more technical language, Susan McClary writes that:

The Aeolian modes differ from Dorian on the higher level of available secondary areas: while the inherently high sixth degree of the Dorian diatessaron facilitates authentic cadences onto the fifth degree...the low sixth degree of Aeolian does not allow for such cadences (20).

Thus, each mode allows the composer a different expressive vocabulary.

The intervals that modes employ are “octave (diapason), fifth (diapente), and fourth (diatessaron)” (18). The arrangement of these intervals, and the stretching of their boundaries, are most clearly seen in cadences, which occur at the end of musical sections throughout a composition. Cadences are the primary way musicologists assign modes to compositions; cadences direct the resolution of a section and can give the impression of a central tone or a stable place from which the composer builds a complex of intervals. But unlike the tonal system, modes, in the 16th century sense, do not have tonics. Without delving too much further into the technical details of this system, modern listeners usually find the modal system to be one that sounds less stable, or centered, than the tonal system. Modes, then, are able to represent the interior psychic life with a sense of instability that scales cannot access.

Particularly well-suited to modality's ability to represent an unstable psyche is the musical form Carlo Gesualdo most often worked in: the late Italian madrigal. This form consisted of secular songs that were relatively short and featured four to six voices, though

Gesualdo almost entirely composed for five. These compositions were set to brief poems, and featured all voices singing from the speaker's perspective, or the first person. When, according to the practice of multi-voiced polyphony, each voice has a distinct melody, the effect this practice produces is, for the audience, disorienting. It is also the sense of hearing a fragmented self speak. Such an implicit psychological incoherence reflects the broader characteristics of Mannerism, with its emphasis on the irrational and conflicted nature of interior life (Rowland 20).

This point is amplified as well by the typical lyrical content of the madrigal. Most madrigals deal with issues of romance or extreme states of passion. These songs rely on "elements of contrast and oxymoron which allow the composer an opportunity to paint with bold and expressive gestures. The pleasure-pains, the bitter-sweets, the dolorous sighs and the rapturous breathing, and especially death in life and life in death" are themes that occupy the madrigalist's mind. One of the most appropriate examples of this oxymoronic style is Gesualdo's "Luci Serene e Chiare" and is worth printing in full:

Luci serene e chiare,
 voi m'incendete, voi, ma prova il core
 nell'incendio diletto, non dolore.

Dolci parole e care,
 voi mi ferite, voi, ma prova il petto
 non dolor nella piaga, ma diletto.

O miracol d'amore!
 Alma che e tutta foco e tutta sangue
 si strugge e non si duol, more e non langue.

Serene, clear eyes,
 you inflame me, but my heart feels
 delight in the flames, not pain.

Sweet, dear words,
 you wound me, but my heart feels
 not pain in the wound, but delight.

O miracle of love!

The soul that is all fire and blood
 is consumed without pain, dies without languishing (McClary 150).

Although the lyrics might seem comically melodramatic, most madrigalists marry a piece's lyrical content to its music, sometimes, critics thought, to the detriment of the piece. Such a union allows the composer greater power and authority in shaping the piece, to use musical tools such as dissonance, tempo, and polyphony to withhold thematic resolution, emphasize moments of textual paradox and evoke the Mannerist inclination towards psychic instability.

As suggested, the late madrigal has a close relationship to prosody. Madrigals were set to poems of an unprescribed number of lines. Similarly, the late madrigal did not specify a rhyme scheme; instead, one of the few requirements of the form was for the poet to use "alternating heptasyllabic and hendecasyllabic lines" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 114). Composers might set their music to a madrigal from Tasso or Petrarch, among others; composers might also, like Gesualdo, use texts of an anonymous source.

One of the other few forms Gesualdo wrote for is the Responsoria. Unlike the moldable madrigal, this form was quite strict and its purpose was well-defined. The Responsoria consisted of twenty-seven response texts, with nine performed on Maundy Thursday, nine more on Good

Friday, and finally nine more on Holy Saturday of the Catholic calendar (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 261). As such texts were pre-selected and dealt with the martyrdom and resurrection of Christ, inarguably the most important events in the Church year, their performance is fittingly dramatic, with candles on the altar being extinguished in certain responses so that the church sits in near darkness by the end of select songs. Ideally, the interplay between light and music (made particularly effective in a spacious cathedral) would culminate in an “Act of Worship” that glows “with an emotional zeal,” that enraptures “the heart of man,” and forces “Reason...to be dissolved in a spiritual and mystical experience” (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 266).

Brief discussions of Mannerism, modality, the madrigal, and the Responsorialia hopefully provide a view into the basic context from which Gesualdo emerges, particularly as it relates to this study. The exploration of the topics above is undoubtedly inexhaustive; however, if a study of Gesualdo’s compositional character necessitates an understanding of these terms so that one might more accurately distinguish Gesualdo from his contemporaries, then so be it. Yet Gesualdo’s compositions are not merely reflections of 16th century Italian music theory; his music bears the stamp of a unique and inimitable artist pushing the aesthetic boundaries of his age.

One of Gesualdo’s most striking characteristics is his treatment of text setting—or, the way Gesualdo approaches the relationship between the composition and the text it performs. The madrigal is, by definition, an art married to prosody. Because madrigal music had to follow a text, certain aesthetic conventions arose dictating how a composer should handle syllables, words, and larger considerations of syntax. By the end of the 16th century, many of these conventions had grown tiresome to critics. Writing about the madrigalist’s inclination towards a paradoxically metaphorical and literal representation of individual words, in which the music

mirrors the text in an obvious fashion, Doni claims that “if [composers] wish to set such words as denote height or speak of the sky...they will suddenly search out the high notes, or those placed high upon the staff; and if on the contrary they...mention the Inferno, they will have the voice plummet the depths to the lowest note of the scales” (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 170). Gesualdo is not entirely free of this charge, or at least the excessive drama Doni is accusing composers of nurturing. Instead, Gesualdo dramatizes the text in a way that evokes the Mannerist aesthetic of disruption—a manner that also suggests Gesualdo takes the practice further than similar composers would. While Gesualdo’s contemporaries such as Marenzio and Wert might compose a section lyrically containing “sospire” and “respiro” (related to sighing and breathing, respectively) with “a rest just before the appearance of the word,” Gesualdo indeed takes it a step further. Gesualdo, in *Suspirava il mio core*, splits the syllables of the word and inserts a rest in between—a stylistic trait that is “virtually non-existent in the five-voice madrigals” of the aforementioned contemporaries (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 171). This practice, of splitting words related to breath and the lungs, performs a double function: such extreme word-splitting intensifies the music and draws attention to the technological aspects of performance—the body of the performer and therefore the presence of the composer who, through the text, invisibly directs it. This is surely another example of Mannerist disruption coupled with Gesualdo’s unique touch.

Gesualdo also employed repetition in a particular fashion. A fashion, Susan McClary describes, necessitated by the composer’s desire “to allow its utter strangeness to sink in” (168). Common practice of the time led madrigalists to repeat small sections of music over different lines and verses of the poem. Composers might even “occasionally” feature repetitions of large musical sections (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 120). But Gesualdo used repetition sparingly, so as to,

through the course of a more varied composition, pair more musical ideas to a larger number of words and phrases throughout the text. This partially explains why Gesualdo's treatment of a specific poem is usually longer than a contemporary's handling of the same piece, though that is not always the case. When large scale repetition occurs in Don Carlo's later madrigals, the repetition does not recycle a musical idea so it can consume more of the text; rather, Gesualdo's characteristic repetition is like that of "Moro, lasso." In that composition, when the singers finish the poetic line that will, measures later, serve as the music's concluding line, too, the large repeated section triggers a false ending. How disruptive for the audience, this ending that draws attention to the composer and his creation, to "the sense of difficulty, even unnaturalness, in the forging of musical formal ideas" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 123).

Repetition and the organization of larger musical sections also lent Gesualdo another opportunity for stylistic innovation: the use of silence. In music, silence is a gesture unparalleled in its profound and overwhelming drama. When it appears, it has the power to realize Brecht's conception of alienation and engage the intellect of the audience. *Why is there no music here?* a listener asks. *And, more importantly, what sound will appear next?* Silence between sections amplifies the sense of a false ending, or dead-end, for the listener, but it also clearly separates different movements of a composition. This effect is most apparent in "Hai rotto e sciolto e spento" of the second book of madrigals, particularly the *Delitiae Musicae* performance of it. After the first half of the poem, when the final syllables of "ch'arse il mio core" have disappeared, the audience sits in silence for nearly four seconds before the "O me beato" section begins. Such an example is not isolated and represents a consistent compositional trait.

Gesualdo also ties the music to the text in his treatment of tempo. Musicologists have historically viewed the rapid fluctuation of tempo in his madrigals as a sign of the composer's

aesthetic irreverence. Instead, as Watkins suggests, tempo fluctuation is a musical practice required by approaching the text holistically—how both its lyrical and tonal content can “emphasize the issue and compound of the effect” of alternating tempos (*Gesualdo* 108).

Generally, Gesualdo’s sixth book of madrigals, containing “Moro lasso”, demonstrates the composer’s most representative treatment of tempo. In the case of “Moro, lasso”, the composition begins with a dramatic and slow set of shifting chromatic textures. Over the lyrics of “Moro, lasso, al mio duolo (I die, alas, in my grief),” Gesualdo summons 11 of 12 chromatic pitches in the dramatic and slow first three measures (*Gesualdo* 74). As soon as the mood of the lyrical phrase changes to the subject of life (“E chi mi puo dar vita”; “The one who could give me life”), the tempo quickens noticeably. In “Io parto e non piu dissi”, also of Gesualdo’s sixth book of madrigals, the tempo functions similarly: when the lyrics dwell on pain and absence, the music is markedly slower than when the lyrics, as they do in measure 7, turn to life (“vita”) (*Gesualdo* 29). In these instances, lyrics, harmony, and tempo are all influenced by the character of each other.

A final characteristic of Gesualdo’s worth noting is his advancement of the harmonic/tonal vocabulary. At the writing of Gesualdo’s madrigals, Italian Renaissance composers had access to three sharps as accidentals in the modal vocabulary. Because of Don Carlo’s prolonged modulations (or switching from one “key” to another), the composer ends up extending “the list of sharps to the complete complement of seven,” though when this occurs Gesualdo is trying “to produce the major third of a major triad” in obeying the music theory conventions of his age (*Watkins, Gesualdo* 195).

Although the individual practices above may seem like remarkable but merely historical aspects of Gesualdo’s life, they also reveal something about the psychological makeup of this

composer. In many of the instances above (word-splitting in the text, tempo fluctuation, modulation, and advancement of the harmonic vocabulary), Gesualdo follows certain aesthetic conventions so strictly that they merely appear to break the rules they establish. This is what allows the musicologist Dinko Fabris to declare that, musically, Gesualdo “was a conservative—as conservative as it was possible to be at this time” (Ross 87); it also allows Gray and Heseltine, in their 1926 biography of the composer, to declare some of Gesualdo’s passages as standing aesthetically “in complete isolation, almost without ancestry” (122). If it sounds as if our Don Carlo has a paradoxical relationship with aesthetic conventions, it is because he does. But his seeming transgression of these aesthetic values has parallels in other areas of his life as well.

III.

As much as Gesualdo is a Mannerist musician, he is also a prince and, therefore, nobleman living in 16th century Italy. Issues of patrilineage, honor, gender, and intra-family socio/political maneuvering were considerations to which he was inarguably bound. Although these issues might seem unrelated to a musico-psychoanalytic study, we must first learn rules if we are to understand exactly how and why, as in Gesualdo’s case, they are broken.

The importance of patrilineage on Gesualdo’s life almost cannot be overstated. In many ways, it was to rescue Don Carlo from historical obscurity by enabling him to devote his life to musical composition. The second-born son of Fabrizio Gesualdo, a man who appreciated literature and kept a court of musicians, Don Carlo was not originally destined for a life of personal freedom (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 4). His older brother Luigi (born in 1563), should have, according to hereditary law, been the male heir to the title of Prince of Venosa and to an inheritance of immense wealth (15). Fabrizio Gesualdo wanted Don Carlo to instead pursue an

ecclesiastical career, as the Gesualdo family could count a number of impressive church figures among their members. But Luigi, the eldest born son, died in 1584, shifting Gesualdo's allegiances from Rome back to the Gesualdo familial line (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 15). Fabrizio quickly arranged for his son to marry Donna Maria D'Avalos, popularly believed to be the most beautiful woman in southern Italy. In 1586, Don Carlo and Donna Maria became husband and wife (Gray and Heseltine 11). Only seven years later, Fabrizio passed away, and Don Carlo became head of the family. He was thus expected to do what Italian poet Torquato Tasso describes as the role of the father in his essay, "The Father of the Family": "in handling property he has two ends: conservation and increase" (Tasso 79). Although inheriting the wealth of his father allowed Gesualdo a profound sense of personal freedom (particularly to compose), it also forced him into a set of constricting social norms that he had not experienced before.

Intertwined with the concept of patrilineage is another issue crucial to the historical Don Carlo Gesualdo: honor. Honor ruled the public and private spaces Gesualdo inhabited—it led thousands of Italy's men to hold mass fist fights over control of bridges in the *guerre dei pugni*; it permitted men to bait bulls through Italy's piazzas in an attempt to assert dominance and keep the streets free of women in the *caccia dei tori*; it required a husband to seek revenge against an unfaithful wife (Davis 24).

Indeed, in 16th century Italy, honor nearly always operated along the lines of gender. Although expectations of honor and gender varied greatly according to different levels of class, certain normative values were imposed upon all. The primary "virtue of a woman," Torquato Tasso wrote, is "to know how to obey a man...in a civil manner, as the citizens of a well-ordered city obey the laws and the magistrates" (85). Neither men nor women, though, seemed terribly concerned with following government law when it ran counter to gender norms, as displays such

as the *guerre dei pugn*i often ran “in direct defiance of the...police” (Davis 24). Instead, Italians upheld codes of honor by separating and defining gender roles. The public space (with the exception of the church) was masculine; private, domestic spaces were associated with the feminine (Davis 19). Sexually, masculine behavior was active, the feminine was passive, and thus, as Michael Rocke argues, gender boundaries were identified mostly by how they were performed—in other words, by behavior and not biology (150). If behavior was central to maintaining gender norms, then gender norms could be molded, policed, or, most importantly, resisted. As these characterizations reveal, honor and gender were great sources of conflict for many living in 1400-1600 Italy.

Perhaps there is no word better than conflict to define Don Carlo’s attitude towards the princely expectations placed upon him. Throughout his life, Don Carlo would take titles as prestigious as “Prince of Venosa, Count of Cossa, Marquis of Laino, and Duke of Caggiano” (Newcomb 409). His uncle, Carlo Borromeo, was an influential member of the Counter Reformation and his uncle Cardinal Alfonso Gesualdo had an incredibly successful ecclesiastical career. There is no doubt that Gesualdo was born into one of the noblest families of his age, though he did not exactly behave accordingly. For example, noblemen were expected to moderate their passions by elevating reason above emotion and excess. As Fontanelli’s 1594 correspondences about Gesualdo make clear, though, Don Carlo obeyed passion in excess. His “frank and open passion for music was rather an improper thing for a nobleman” (Newcomb 415). When he was expected to receive “the visit of the Patriarch of Venice,” he did so “with extreme annoyance and only because he was expressly asked to do so by Cardinal Gesualdo” (418). Clearly, to Gesualdo, princely matters mattered far less than musical ones. When Gesualdo murdered his unfaithful first wife, popular opinion was not against him because he

murdered her, but because of the excessive spectacle he made of it. He openly had affairs during his second marriage and was known for a violent temperament (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 28). It seems as though much of his life was spent in an unhappy performance—a performance he practiced with either too much or not enough enthusiasm. Composing, then, was one of the few activities that satisfied him and filled him with pleasure. Composing allowed him a release from mental states of such a remarkably extreme variety.

IV.

The argument this section will advance is that Carlo Gesualdo's music owes much, though not all, of its origin to the composer's ego and its need to engage in a sort of playful mastery. In other words, composition lent Don Carlo control, or the ability to meaningfully manipulate, form, and give substance to his unconscious desires. Specifically, composition allowed Gesualdo to oscillate between aesthetic norms and innovations, weave formal structures of (self-perceived) dexterity, and compensate for his anxieties about gender, his body, and redemption. A few specific examples will demonstrate this point.

As mentioned before, Gesualdo's society was one of constant gender-specific expectations. Among them, "the control of women's sexual conduct and reproductive functions was accorded especially high importance" (Rocke 151). Don Carlo failed to uphold this expectation, and such failure was undoubtedly a source of extreme frustration in his life. From treatises by poets (Torquato Tasso's "The Father of the Family") to the sermons of friars (such as Girolamo Savonarola), gender was a subject for which Renaissance Italy had a wealth of ideologues (Rocke 150). The following are just a few ways that Gesualdo resisted, and was therefore shamed by, the values of these ideologues.

Don Carlo's first wife, Donna Maria D'Avalos, was famously unfaithful. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this detail as "chastity...played an essential role in the pervasive culture of honour" in Renaissance Italy, and "a woman's sexual behavior largely [defined] both her own standing and those of her family and of the males responsible for 'governing' her" (emphasis mine) (Rocke 151). Thus, Gesualdo's failure to adequately "govern" Donna Maria meant he had lessened the integrity of the family name—a development made harsher by the fact that previous members of the Gesualdo family could satisfy Tasso's directive for fathers to govern in the pursuit of property. As Glenn Watkins notes, "through a series of good marriages the family in time acquired titles and property in a seemingly endless stream" (*Gesualdo Hex* 3). However, Don Carlo was to be the end of the family's social and material ascent (15). These failures meant some cultural authorities could describe Gesualdo as performing his gender roles in a near liminal, socially subversive manner.

The psychological stain this development left did not end there, though. As the MS Corona claims of Don Fabrizio Carafa, the man who received Donna Maria's affection, he was "reputed to be the handsomest and most accomplished nobleman of the city" with "manners so courteous and gracious, and of appearance so exquisite...one would say he was an Adonis" (Gray and Heseltine 13). Donna Maria was, by most accounts, also an extraordinarily beautiful woman. The remarkable appearances of these two lovers lead Gray and Heseltine to go so far as to remark that "the only person in the whole narrative who is not lovely beyond words is our poor Carlo" (13). The extent to which Gesualdo took the insult seriously is reflected in the words he said before him and his servants murdered the two lovers: "Kill that scoundrel along with this harlot! Shall a Gesualdo be made a cuckold?" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 22). Although duty-bound to murder Donna Maria, the drama Gesualdo pursued the act with reveal the composer's temperamental

inclination.

Yet some theorize that assigning shame to those who do not follow the dictates of patrilineage is rooted in a culture's collective and existential response to death. From a Kleinian perspective, this would manifest itself in Gesualdo's life and he would respond with an activity that resists the death drive. Composition is that activity, and a practice particular to Don Carlo demonstrates why.

Musical practice in Italy of the 1590s did not encourage composers to present his or her work in score; instead, composers often had books printed in individual voices or parts. This made it easier for giving the work to performers so that the piece might be heard by an audience, but it did not allow a patron to view the composition's structure and patterns with as much of a blueprint. In Anthony Newcomb's "Carlo Gesualdo and a Musical Correspondence of 1594," the author points out that Gesualdo, who was wealthy enough to finance his own printings, had his works printed in score. For this, he had no financial incentive. According to Newcomb, though, Gesualdo "was a composer who [kept] his own works in score so that their contrapuntal artifice [might] be more clearly understood and appreciated" (416). Gesualdo used his texts to prove his compositional dexterity to others, something for which the composer "went to great trouble" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 167). Though writing under the guise of the Capuchin friar Don Gio: Pietro Cappuccio, Gesualdo wrote his own dedication for the first printing of the fifth book of madrigals. In this dedication, he claims that the reason he is printing this volume is so that "certain composers" will stop "attributing to themselves many beautiful passages" of his own "works and innovations" (which his guise addresses to "Your Excellence") (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 166). More than any other reason, Gesualdo printed these compositions so that he would be honored and recognized for their merit, and that they might survive his otherwise crumbling family dynasty.

A psychoanalytic study of Gesualdo would, of course, be incomplete without a discussion of the role of the body. Perhaps just as intense as the social pressures already mentioned, Don Carlo faced several interior stresses that could drive his unconscious and, therefore, influence his art. And still as relevant is his treatment of the bodies of others, as these instances might reveal cases of transference.

Returning to the murder of Donna Maria, the details of the scene, and the specific wounds that Don Carlo inflicted on his ex-lover, are curious. When Don Carlo carried out his revenge killing on the evening of October 16, 1590 (or the morning of October 17, 1590), he enlisted help from several close relatives and servants (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 12). As violence in the name of honor was sometimes carried out by groups of young men, this detail is relatively unremarkable. However, Don Carlo commanded his cohorts to kill Don Fabrizio so that he, Don Carlo, could devote his attention solely to Donna Maria. While Don Carlo's relatives pierced Don Fabrizio's head, arms, and elbows, Don Carlo worked so that "the Princess's wounds were all in her belly and especially in those parts which most ought to be kept honest" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 13). Thus, if Don Carlo believed that Donna Maria, through infidelity, had tarnished his masculinity and therefore castrated him, inflicting wounds upon the parts of Donna Maria's body associated with feminine reproductive power could very well be his way of castrating her. Indeed, Don Carlo appeared to be in a state of extreme psychic imbalance as he committed the murder, one disconnected from reality and driven more by the hallucinatory unconscious. Emerging from Donna Maria's room with blood-drenched hands, he went back inside to inflict more wounds, claiming, "I do not believe she is dead" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 22).

What Donna Maria's murder reveals is a tendency crucial to understanding Gesualdo's psyche: the composer seemed to follow the laws of honor so intensely and with such excessive

devotion that he almost managed to violate them at the same time. Essentially, Don Carlo's wife cheated on him so he did what custom dictated and arranged to kill her. His problem here (though one not seen as a vice in his compositional practice) is that he took the sentiment of the act too far. Gesualdo left Donna Maria with especially grotesque wounds that emphasized what he perceived as her crime, and, in doing so, seemed to violate another rule of honor—one that forced him into hiding for fear of being killed by his victims' families. For just as Gesualdo, in his compositions, followed aesthetic convention with such a magnificent degree of devotion that he seemed to bend certain rules, so too did he exhibit this characteristic in his social life. As Fontanelli notes in his 1594 correspondences, Don Carlo "moves about in an extraordinary fashion" and "insists on service in the grand manner of Spanish ceremonies such as...keeping a torch lit in front of his drinking cup, covering his plate while he drinks, and similar things" (Newcomb 415). Honor was something he performed with a theatricality that struck others as odd. Yet as much as these performances describe Don Carlo, they also reveal his desire for a release from certain personal expectations. Just as an actor slips into a role and, in a way, out of the self, in Gesualdo's ceremonious performances he was freed of being anything but the model nobleman he hoped he actually was. Perhaps this activity partially explains Don Carlo's affinity for keeping a court, appreciating literature, and composing: all of these were things his father did (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 4). Of course Gesualdo pursued all three for additional reasons, but to emulate Fabrizio Gesualdo also allowed him to assume Fabrizio's masculinity and, in turn, be released from his own failures. Obviously, composition is the channel Gesualdo pursued with the most enthusiasm, and Gesualdo's later life might reveal why.

Don Carlo's later life was plagued with scandal and seclusion. In February 1594, shortly after the controversy involving Donna Maria had calmed down, Don Carlo remarried—a move

"virtually demanded" by "both social protocol and family ambitions" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 20). His second wife was Eleonora d'Este. Their marriage began normally, but within a few years had devolved into another scandal. The two soon lived apart (he in the town of Gesualdo and she in Ferrara). Eleonora showed no sign of being eager to rejoin her husband as "patterns of physical and psychological abuse...had already become apparent" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 22). Furthermore, when the two were reunited in Gesualdo, Don Carlo began having extra-marital affairs, eventually becoming so obvious about it that he enjoyed "his mistress under the eyes of the Princess, and all others in the castle without regard and without temperance" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 32). Such a seemingly extreme disregard for matrimonial custom at that point reflects Gesualdo's shifting desire to be liberated from numerous obligations altogether. The mistress referred to above was convicted of being a witch, and one who made Gesualdo consume her menstrual blood (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 28). This event was extremely, almost doubly, without regard to Renaissance practice as men were forbidden from intercourse with their wives while they were menstruating (and the fact that Gesualdo engaged in intercourse with a menstruating "witch" amplifies the magnitude of his transgression) (Rocke 156). Still, a closer, more interior look at Gesualdo's body can elucidate why he carried out these acts.

By the time Gesualdo was in his final years, he had developed severe respiratory and digestive problems. At his castle, he kept servants who beat and whipped him daily. Earlier chroniclers of the Prince's life suggest he underwent this ritual because he was haunted by demons and the guilt of murdering his first wife, but recent scholarship more closely connects it with his bodily problems. "Ten or twelve young men, whom he kept specially for the purpose, were to beat him violently three times a day, during which operation he habitually smiled" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 58). Watkins concludes that "these beatings can thus be readily

interpreted as therapeutic massages intended to alleviate intestinal and respiratory difficulties" (59). This ritual helped the Prince undergo a feeling of "spiritual ecstasy" in freedom from his internal pains: "an indication that the emptiness he felt had been replaced by a feeling of being alive and whole again" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 59). This suggests Gesualdo sought liberation from his body—a desire necessitated by the fact that "the Prince of Venosa...was unable to go to the stool without having been previously flogged" (Watkins, *Gesualdo Hex* 58). Unable to "govern" his bowels, his wife, or even the dignity of his name, the one thing Gesualdo and his ego could control continued to be composition and the small escape from suffering it allowed him.

One final point worth examination is the sense of self in his Responsoria cycle. Throughout Don Carlo's madrigals, the concepts of death, suffering, and redemption figure prominently. Such concepts were typical for the late Italian madrigal, though Gesualdo, without parallel, emphasized the union between the conceptual and musical idea. Yet Don Carlo's Responsoria cycle stands out especially for its sort of identity fixation. As previously mentioned, this cycle deals with the martyrdom of Christ—an event rife with potential for the display of suffering. Don Carlo capitalized on this. Although his contemporaries were loathe to write expressive Responsoria cycles, Gesualdo's is one of the most memorable of his age. Furthermore, rather than the composer practicing a distance between himself and the figure of Christ in the texts, in Gesualdo's Responsoria "we feel" the composer's "greater personal commitment, and witness the potential confusion between 'the sufferings of the dying Christ (and) those of the composer himself. We sense that Gesualdo...has seized here upon the ultimate vehicle for self-flagellation" (Watkins, *Gesualdo* 258). It is only through composition that Gesualdo can juxtapose his bodily problems with the suffering of Christ—he can thus articulate

the scope of his unhappiness: it is all encompassing, eternal, and equal to the suffering of the figure he kneels to for redemption. Such a move obviously empowers Gesualdo. He masters not only the composition and its formal arrangements that he can manipulate, but also the story of Christ. He alters the religious narrative in suggesting a parallel between him and the Savior, and this move speaks especially well to the anxiety of a composer increasingly burdened by the fear of eternal death—in becoming like Christ, he subverts the expectation that he is, as he must have sometimes suspected, very much unlike Christ and therefore bound for endless suffering.

V.

At this point, a fair question to pose is what can the information above tell us not just about Carlo Gesualdo, but for larger considerations in psychoanalysis. The answers, of course, force us to return to specific analysis of Carlo Gesualdo's habits.

Kohut's idea of musical mastery is central to the lessons of Gesualdo. According to Kohut's theory, a composer derives pleasure from expressing his or her dexterity—an idea demonstrable in the case of Don Carlo (12). His remarkable practice of self-printing scores obviously bespeak a composer whose joy is bound up in recognition, and perhaps an implication of this theory is that recognition is itself a creative act. If, as has been written, Gesualdo had been noticed traveling the city incognito so as not to be known or disturbed, Gesualdo often found something undesirable in his social (and physical) self being known. Instead, his satisfaction, and what may be the satisfaction of many composers, came from creating a self separate from his body—a self communicable only through a score and its performance, and therefore a self that resists death with more resilience than the human body can.

The practice of self-printing also evokes the idea that art mediates the distinction between

the self-centered primary and social-oriented secondary process functions. Composition is an immensely personal act, one that the self carries out in conversation with itself. Yet as Gesualdo and Kohut's theory reveal, composition is just as likely a social act. In Gesualdo's case, composition allowed his ego to create a more idealized, honorable, and masculine version of himself and to disseminate it socially. Of course such a practice could lead the psyche to a state of Freudian narcissism, but many composers, including Gesualdo, do not fall into such a trap.

The problem of self-identification in the *Responsoria* also raises issues regarding empathy as a function of composition. As some have stressed that in psychotherapy, psychoanalysts must practice empathy in order to cure the patient, viewing the text as the analyst and the composer as the patient reveals interesting implications. For Gesualdo, identifying with the Christ is one of the most powerful testaments to the empathetic power of composition. Although Don Carlo's confusion of self and Christ may somewhat be the result of a strangely inflated ego, it is also a sincere attempt to uncloak and articulate the self as experiencing psychic imbalances as painful as the suffering of the figure at the center of Christian tradition—this allows Don Carlo to express his mental state in a mythological arrangement that is without obvious parallel. For other composers, too, the creative act is one that allows them to engage in transference—the projection of their repressed unconscious desires onto another object (in this case, the text). For psychoanalysts, this is a useful tool.

A final lesson worth contemplating is how Gesualdo's ego practiced mastery over the text. This habit finds its most useful example in Don Carlo's use of word-splitting in his compositions. In these instances, the composer's ego exerted a degree of control that practically ruptured certain formal practices while still maintaining them. Although many composers do not pursue form and its aesthetic norms in the same manner Don Carlo does, many composers deal

with it in one way or another. An appropriate way to summarize not only the playful mastery the ego desires in composition but also this project itself, is with a rumination on composition from Igor Stravinsky:

My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame
that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings.
I shall go even further: my freedom will be so much the greater and more
meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I
surround myself with obstacles...To the voice that commands me to create
I respond with fright; then I reassure myself by taking up as weapons
those things participating in creation (65).

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