THE ECONOMICS OF GENDER RELATIONS IN LONDON CITY COMEDY

BY

KRISTIN WEISSE

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

English

May, 2015

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Approved By:

Sarah Hogan, Ph.D., Advisor

Olga Valbuena, Ph.D., Chair

Susan Harlan, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Hogan— not only for her helpful input and guidance throughout the process of writing this thesis, but also for inspiring my interest in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature through her remarkable energy and enthusiasm. In addition, a special thanks to Dr. Harlan and Dr. Valbuena, whose Renaissance drama classes further solidified my desire to research London city comedy and whose suggestions were also integral to the completion of this project. I am immensely grateful to have had the opportunity to work with such an intelligent and lively group of women.

Moreover, I would like to thank my friends and teammates for their constant love and encouragement throughout my entire time as a graduate student at Wake Forest. Thank you especially to my “soulmates” Lizzie and Kelly for the endless trips to Camino (which made thesis writing so much more enjoyable), the ice cream dates, the epic road-trips, and for always being there for me to lean on and to learn from. Thank you also to Sam, Kaitlyn, Kathleen, Aubrey, and Chandler for the constant motivation both intellectually and physically (whether out on the trails, on the track, or even just lounging around the kitchen of 1022 Polo), and for the much-needed distractions from writing and reading.

And finally, I want to acknowledge my family: since the days of picking up books and “reading” aloud before I actually knew how to, they have always been my biggest supporters. Words could never express the magnitude of my gratitude and love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .........................................................................................iv

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................v

CHAPTER ONE:
THOMAS DEKKER’S *THE SHOEMAKER’S HOLIDAY* .........................1

CHAPTER TWO:
THOMAS DEKKER AND THOMAS MIDDLETON’S *THE ROARING GIRL* .....24

CHAPTER THREE:
THOMAS MIDDLETON’S *A CHASTE MAID IN CHEAPSIDE* ...............50

CONCLUSION .......................................................................................75

WORKS CITED ....................................................................................79

CURRICULUM VITAE ...........................................................................86
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the influence of nascent capitalism on gender interactions in three London city comedies—Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Dekker and Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, and Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*—to reveal men’s commodification of women as a defining feature of the genre. By charting the ways in which the men of these plays frame the women as commodities, I propose that city comedy stages a fraught condition for the contemporary female subject: men insist upon her visibility as a good circulated within the marketplace, while simultaneously asserting her invisibility as a productive laborer within the economic sphere. Heightening this tension, women’s appearances outside of the home are increasingly associated with prostitution, as if to form a link between abstinence from economic activity and chastity; yet at the same time, the men of city comedy frame female chastity as a valuable commodity made visible within the public marketplace. All three of these plays ends with a festive marriage celebration as if to mask or erase such contradictions, but a thorough examination of their gender relations ultimately demonstrates city comedy’s role in exposing these tensions rather than resolving them.
INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the commercial theater in late sixteenth-century London, the city itself experienced sweeping changes such as an expansive growth of overseas trade, the emergence of abstract notions such as “credit” and “the market,” and early developments of capitalist social relations. The increasing wealth and social diversity of the capital city generated leisure, conspicuous consumption, and a market in amusements such as the theater (Womack 24). Rapid population growth and increased foreign immigration also facilitated the theater’s popularity, and plays performed on stage shaped the ways in which Londoners comprehended and made sense of their fast-changing urban, commercial environment. In this way, London’s shifting economic climate provided an ideal place for early modern theater to emerge and thrive (Howard 2). Dramatists became increasingly aware of their expanding audience, and while many earlier sixteenth-century plays focused on wealthy members of the court or aristocratic subjects, a new genre began depict middle class lives in London— the city comedy. Brian Gibbons, credited for writing the first book exclusively on city comedy, writes that such plays were primarily crafted from 1597 to 1616 and can be characterized by their satiric tone, their urban London setting, and episodes of trickery (24-25). Theodore Leinwand, whose book The City Staged also deals primarily with the genre, focuses on the unique character types featured in city comedy and the staged relations among merchants, gentry, and women (7). Since these earlier studies, critics have generally characterized city comedies by their inclusion of specific geographic landmarks within London and their depiction of everyday transactional culture (Grantley 88).
Despite a consensus over its more general characteristics, studies of city comedy began as recently as the 1930’s\(^1\), and the term remains slippery and unstable. Critics cite the genre as having different functions and different relationships to the city itself. For instance, Gibbons’s study focuses on city comedy’s moral and didactic aims, and he proposes that playwrights thus distort and exaggerate reality to satirically communicate their messages (202). Yet L.C. Knights’s earlier sociological account *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* interprets city comedy as a more realistic reflection of the changing nature of economic conditions and culture in London. Leinwand instead proposes that although the genre should not be considered a perfect mirror of London life, it is at least informed by economic reality (3). While city comedies perhaps should not be viewed as entirely accurate reflections of late sixteenth and early seventeenth century urban London, they nonetheless provide a useful window into the economic and social transformations that occurred within the early modern city.

According to Alexander Leggatt, the chief concern of city comedy is “how to get money, and how to spend it; how to get a wife and how to keep her” (4). Critics have also noted the prominent connection between romantic love and economics within city comedy. These plays often deal implicitly with economics in their marriage plots, portraying marital relationships through an economic prism so that human transactions can be seen as matters of debt, credit, profit, loss, and so forth (Horwich 292). I intend to focus my discussion on three city comedies dating from 1599 to 1613, all of which weave together aspects of a changing economic culture with seemingly traditional plots of

\(^1\) While Brian Gibbons is credited with writing the first book exclusively on the genre of city comedy, L.C. Knight’s study *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1930) is typically considered the “originary contextual study” (Cordner lvi).
marriage and amorous encounters: Thomas Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Dekker
and Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl*, and Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Each of these plays ends with a joyful marriage celebration that appears to
mask or erase economic tensions. However, the increasingly commercial spirit of the
period manifests itself through the ways in which the male characters commodify women
and treat them as goods to be possessed and exchanged. And as I will argue, the mirthful
conclusions of each play cannot resolve the reality of economic hardship for women in
early modern London.

Critics have debated the way in which the rise of capitalism in the late sixteenth
and early seventeenth century affected woman’s position within the economy. Michelle
Dowd explains that women were more likely to participate in multiple sectors of the labor
economy over the course of their lives, and concerns consequentially arose regarding
their position within the developing consumer economy (3, 5). Traditionally excluded
from public life, women began to enter the early seventeenth-century marketplace as both
buyers and sellers (Newman 133). Yet Silvia Federici argues in *Caliban and the Witch*
that women’s power and opportunity actually diminished as a result of capitalism’s rise;
she asserts that women’s work came to be seen as a natural resource lying outside market
relations, and was therefore excluded from receiving a wage (97). In other words, the
development of a new sexual division of labor devalued women’s work by subjugating
domestic labor and women’s reproductive functions to the labor of the workforce (12).
Federici develops upon Maria Mies’s *Patriarchy on a World Scale* which similarly traces
the sexual division of labor as a means of oppressing women and their reproductive work
during the early developments of capitalism, specifically characterized by the rise of the
wage relation. These accounts suggest the ways in which men were able to profit from women’s labor while refusing to acknowledge it as a form of economic production, as if to establish the sphere of the market as an entirely masculine domain.

While Garret Sullivan also proposes the effacement of women’s roles as productive or wage-earning laborers during the development of capitalism, he nevertheless points out that the visibility of shopkeeper wives increased markedly as a means to attract customers. In light of the developing consolidation of gender roles, even such passive appearances within the public sphere of the marketplace were viewed as transgressive (Sullivan 33). Sullivan contends that women’s presence there transformed them into potential commodities, and their actual contributions to the household were overshadowed by their conversion into “wares and ornaments” (32). In this way, women’s visibility as sexual objects within the marketplace corresponded with their invisibility as productive members of a household economy. Moreover, the concern over women in public spaces often led to common accusations of crimes such as engrossing or prostitution, as if to automatically link marketplace visibility with sexual transgression (Anglin 20). Within the next three chapters, I will bring Sullivan’s observations about women’s threatening visibility and Federici’s claims regarding the exploitation of their bodies and their reproductive labor into the context of these plays in order to explore the motivations underlying the conversion of their women into marketplace commodities. Ultimately, the three city comedies reduce female characters to passive commodities instead of active participants within the economy; such a representation redirects agency back upon the men who profit from their exchange in an attempt to maintain control over a marketplace deemed exclusively masculine.
In his thorough study *Worlds Apart*, Jean-Christophe Agnew identifies the way in which the very idea of the market became more complex during the era of city comedy. He argues that by the sixteenth century, the increasing abstraction of the market transformed it into a process as opposed to its late medieval definition as a singular, physical marketplace\(^2\) (Agnew 28). He likens the theater to the market as places traditionally associated with visibility, but he proposes that the newly intangible concept of the market mirrored the theater’s growing connotations of concealment and misrepresentation\(^3\): “Renaissance theater formally reproduced the same symbolic confusion that a boundless market had already introduced into the visual codes and exchange relations of a waning feudal order” (113). Playwrights therefore dealt with economic anxieties over the representational strategies of commodity exchange by developing theatrical conventions that could capture and reproduce them (Agnew 12).

Agnew’s discussion of the expanding boundaries of the new conceptual market has interesting implications on men’s commodification of women on the stage. Karl Marx explains in his seminal work *Capital* that commodities are purchased in order to be exchanged (65). In light of the market’s status as more of a process than a place, to conceive of the woman in terms of market exchange asserts her visibility, even if she is not physically present in the marketplace.\(^4\) Such a phenomenon creates a problematic

---

\(^2\) Agnew further declares that this new market came to encompass acts of buying and selling, regardless of locale, and the exchange values of goods and services (41).

\(^3\) Agnew identifies the increasing artificiality of the theater as manifested by the “multiple and concealed intentions” of characters, as especially revealed by verbal asides and soliloquies spoken only to the audience (109).

\(^4\) Garret Sullivan identifies a similar tension when he writes that “[women’s] dangerous visibility means that while they no longer participate in labor deemed inappropriate to their sex, they may become commodities available to all men.” (38-39) He refers specifically to an inevitable “insinuation of commerce into every aspect of human activity,” focusing on the notion of space and the ways in which men resist these spatial conflicts (25).
scenario for the woman who is treated as an object within the market yet is 
simultaneously discouraged from entering or operating within this market on her own 
terms. While the men of city comedy seek to confine their women to the private, 
domestic sphere, they inherently reintroduce the female characters into market circulation 
through their commodification.

Moreover, studies of Elizabethan and Jacobean theater cannot ignore the fact that 
women were restricted from acting onstage, as young male actors would have played the 
roles of female characters. Yet women attended theatrical productions, and playwrights 
depended on their attendance for revenue; playgoing was a principle pleasure for men 
and women alike (Orlin 229). The theater thus sought to limit women’s presence on the 
stage, yet it relied on a visible female audience for revenue. Similarly, Dekker and 
Middleton’s city comedies ultimately reveal the problematic way in which commercially 
driven attitudes frame women as commodities circulating the marketplace in a society 
that discourages their physical participation in the public, economic sphere. The men 
within city comedy establish women’s visibility as commodities but also insist upon their 
invisibility as laborers, just as the theater depends on women’s attendance for profit while 
prohibiting their appearance on the stage. Furthermore, the young male actors who played 
the roles of female characters would have depicted women on the stage at the same time 
that actual women were prohibited from appearing there. In this way, the theater becomes 
an ideal medium for playwrights to exhibit the strained relationship between men’s dual 
desire to showcase the woman as commodity and to insist upon her concealment; the very 
nature of the all-male stage only magnifies such tensions.
On top of commodifying its female characters, each play also associates the virtue of chastity with abstinence from visible economic participation. The Christian tradition established a link between the desire for consumer goods and sexual desire in response to increased consumption during capitalism’s emergence, and women’s proximity to luxury commodities therefore aroused anxieties over their sexual purity (Archer 186). However, Rachel Trubowitz describes the increasingly spiritual role that mothers were expected to embody within the newly Protestant nation as a reason for women’s re-domestication inside the home (32). As Trubowitz points out, the nursing mother might gain special value and cultural capital in her spiritual importance (9). Such a position emphasizes the woman’s chaste image within the confines of the domestic sphere and in the context of motherhood. Yet the three plays discussed within this paper introduce several women without children or whose relationships to their children are hardly alluded to, and even one who resists marriage entirely. The non-maternal woman in the marketplace thus upends the view of woman as devout nurturer, and as these three city comedies demonstrate, she instead becomes increasingly linked with prostitution and lewdness.

With these ideas in mind, Dekker and Middleton’s plays expose a further tension within city comedy’s portrayal of women as commodities: men relegate women to the private, domestic sphere as beacons of chastity, while simultaneously treating them as objects to be circulated within a boundless marketplace conflating sexual relationships with commodity exchange. 5 Whether or not such plays should be regarded as accurate representations and reflections of contemporary London, the interactions that unfold on

---

5 Various critics have explored the conflation of sexual relations and commodity exchange within city comedy. Susan Wells writes that “The critical edge of city comedy is sharpest in its exploration of the relation between sex and money” (56). Leinwand similarly notes the way in which the entire economy of city is sexualized (73). I will explore this phenomenon within the chapters of this paper, especially in the context of A Chaste Maid in Cheapside.
the stage inevitably reflect city comedy’s preoccupation with the anxieties surrounding 
not only the fluidity and abstraction of commodity exchange, but also women’s 
problematic roles in the midst of this emergent economic system.

Thus, this thesis seeks to address the effect of contemporary economic conditions 
upon the gender relations and romance plots of The Shoemaker’s Holiday, The Roaring 
Girl, and A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, but it will also chart the ways in which a capitalist 
context influences and problematizes the roles of its female characters. These three plays 
conveniently span Gibbons’s identification of city comedy as occurring between 1597 
and 1617; Dekker wrote The Shoemaker’s Holiday (1599) towards the very beginning of 
this range, while Middleton crafted A Chase Maid in Cheapside (1613) near the end (with 
The Roaring Girl situated between in 1611). In this way, I will chart how the dynamic 
between gender interactions and economy shifts and develops throughout the genre’s 
prime. Chapter One examines The Shoemaker’s Holiday as an early example of city 
comedy’s preoccupation with women’s commodification, despite the shoemakers’ denial 
of such commercial influence. In its discussion of The Roaring Girl, Chapter Two 
discusses men’s more deliberate portrayal of women as commodities, and through the 
character of Moll Cutpurse focuses especially on whether women can effectively resist 
their commodification. Finally, Chapter Three explores A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, the 
most obvious example of the conflation of social interactions with economics, in order to 
observe what happens when women attempt to participate just as actively in their 
commodification. While the shoemakers of Dekker’s earlier play condemn Hammon’s 
commodification of Jane, by the time of A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, both the men and 
women openly and even proudly commodify their sexual behavior and conflate social
interactions with economics. Bridging Dekker’s more nostalgic and sentimental vision of London and Middleton’s satiric portrayal of a world that entirely blurs sex and commerce, *The Roaring Girl* presents a rare portrait of a woman who supports herself economically without resorting to prostitution and who refuses the binding dependency ensured by marriage. Although Moll resists commodification and containment throughout the play, the Epilogue reduces her to a painting sold for profit, reasserting the Roaring Girl’s status as a commodity and drawing attention to the theater itself as a form of commodity.

These chapters will therefore provide an in-depth look at the ways in which the men of city comedy respond to capitalist impulses and anxieties over women’s increasing visibility by commodifying their wives and daughters. Yet while these men conceptualize their women within the expanding market as objects of exchange, they simultaneously frame economically visible women as whorish and unchaste. And as eventually epitomized by *A Chaste Maid of Cheapside*, such a tension heightens as the economy becomes further conflated with sexual relations. Thus, these city comedies expose the fraught position of the early modern woman, who must passively circulate throughout the market as a commodity but is restricted from actively asserting her presence there.
CHAPTER ONE:

THOMAS DEKKER’S THE SHOEMAKER’S HOLIDAY

The Shoemaker’s Holiday as Early City Comedy: Exposing Economic Tensions

On the surface, Thomas Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday (1599) comes across as a jovial celebration of urban communal labor and a rejection of capitalist economic systems in favor of artisanal values and guild culture. For this reason, critics have argued whether the play can even be classified within the genre of city comedy. Brian Gibbons, Theodore Leinwand, and Aaron Kitch have rejected characterizing it as such due to its non-satirical and sentimental glorification of city life; rather than revealing the social tensions that define mature city comedy, these critics assert that the play suppresses them. The Shoemaker’s Holiday certainly suggests nostalgia for a feudal London through its multiple references Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of King Henry V, performed only a few months before Dekker’s play and certainly recognizable to Dekker and his audiences (Harris xi). Brian Walsh identifies the unavoidable connections between shoemakers and the soldiers who fought in King Henry V’s well-known battle at Agincourt: he references the celebrated speech that Henry delivers in Shakespeare’s play on St. Crispin’s Day in 1415, noting that the brothers Crispin and Crispianus were canonized as the patron saints of shoemakers (337). Although the King who appears in the last scene of The Shoemaker’s Holiday remains unnamed, the play’s setting in the midst of England’s fifteenth-century wars with France imply his identity as Henry V. And the various allusions in Dekker’s play to the rhetoric of shoemaking within Henry’s St. Crispin’s Day speech suggest a desire return to this old fifteenth-century world, as if to mask the realities of proto-capitalism that city comedy seeks to represent on the stage.
On the other hand, critics such as John Twyning and Darryll Grantley both contend that *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* should be considered a part of the genre. Grantley argues that although city comedy would evolve in the following decades, many of its enduring elements are present in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, such as a preoccupation with material culture (87). In agreement with this stance, I seek to illustrate that the play actually exposes contemporary economic and social tensions rather than concealing them, therefore justifying its categorization as city comedy. Dekker creates a hybrid mixture between an older world grounded in communal fellowship and a new capitalist one in which commercial ventures and luxury commodities are the means for gaining wealth (Harris vii). Through this forced combination, he exhibits the tensions underlying London’s transition from a feudal system to a capitalist one. Specifically, the ways in which the male characters interact with and commodify Jane, Rose, and Magarey (the three principal female characters) reveal the inescapable presence of masculine economic anxieties regarding the rapidly shifting marketplace.

In addition, numerous critics such as Matthew Kendrick and David Scott Kastan have focused on the shoemakers’ disassociation with London’s emergent consumerist economy. Instead, I will propose that capitalist motives and related economic pressures govern all of the male characters, in order to ultimately suggest that such behaviors and mindsets limit the women of the play. Despite their role as artisanal laborers, Ralph, Lacy, and Simon Eyre all respond to and participate in consumerist culture, as evidenced by the ways they view and treat their wives. Moreover, *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* provides early glimpses of women’s threatening visibility in the urban economic sphere, a major motivation behind their husbands’ attempts to commodify, silence, and contain them. The
play ends with a celebration of love and a scene of festivity, but its conclusion cannot effectively mask the economic anxieties that eventually bring about the oppression of the shoemakers’ wives. Borrowing from Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch*, I will argue that the men commodify these women and thus frame them as goods within the marketplace, while simultaneously restricting their visibility within the marketplace in order to profit from their domestic labor. The conclusion of this chapter will examine whether these female characters can effectively resist such treatment and will finally explore the ways in which sexual relations and notions of chastity changed as the economy became more orientated around commodity production and exchange.

**Defining Commodification in the Context of City Comedy**

In contrast to the shoemakers of Dekker’s play, the city gentleman Hammon’s behavior most obviously communicates an emergence of capitalist influences. “Dost thou think a shoemaker is so/ base to be a bawd to his own for commodity?” Ralph asks when Hammon offers twenty pounds in exchange for Ralph’s wife Jane (18.83-84). The shoemakers condemn and disparage Hammon, the play’s stock commercial capitalist, for his treatment of women as purchasable goods. Hammon initially acts towards Rose “like a man impatient to strike a bargain,” and when he fails to win Rose over he resolves to try another market in the form of Jane (Mortenson 250). In his discussion of the play’s economic values, Kendrick notes that “as a consumer in the London marketplace, Hammon cannot approach Jane as a fellow human being but only as a good to be purchased, as a commodity displayed within a shop window” (269). Hammon’s practice of watching Jane from outside of the seamstress shop conveys the image of a consumer longing for an object on display. As Hammon declares, “Thus I oft have stood/ In frosty
evenings…Enduring biting cold only to eye her” (12.15-17). Critics have overwhelmingly agreed that Hammon’s objectification of Jane reflects a commercialist attitude, one that the other men of the play denounce. Kendrick further claims that by setting themselves apart from Hammon, the shoemakers “understand love as rooted in the social relations established by the labor process,” rather than as achieved through the exchange of money (270). Because the shoemakers prevail at the end of the play (as evidenced by their Shrove Tuesday celebration and the successful marital plots), one would assume that the play denies and even attacks the influence of capitalism on amorous interactions. Yet while *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* certainly condemns Hammon’s treatment of Jane as a marketplace commodity, the shoemakers themselves unconsciously exhibit similar attitudes.

Ralph and his fellow shoemakers furiously condemn Hammon’s commodification of Jane, but what does it mean to commodify, and how does this concept connect to women? The term commodity, an essential unit of capitalist economy, refers to a good produced for the purpose of exchange (Marx 65). In other words, a commodity has value by virtue of this ability to be exchanged, in contrast to its inherent use-value. In a capitalist system, one buys in order to sell; laborers produce commodities to meet others’ needs in order to eventually satisfy their own. In this way, human labor becomes a good to be bought and sold, and thus transforms into a type of commodity itself (Marx 75-76). What is especially significant about Marx’s discussion of commodities is that under capitalism, social relations begin to resemble the circulation of goods in the marketplace, and city comedy particularly illustrates this phenomenon through the men’s commodification of women.
While Marx’s discussion of capitalism explains the way in which human labor transforms into a commodity to be bought and sold, Silvia Federici proposes that women’s work within this system is not even allowed the possibility of being bought. In *Caliban and the Witch*, Federici identifies the marked separation of gender roles brought about by developments of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She refutes the commonly held belief regarding women’s heightened opportunity as workers in capitalist society, instead identifying a discriminating division of labor that confined women to the domestic sphere and viewed their labor and reproductive power as a natural resource or “non-work” (97). She outlines the contemporary attitude “that women should not work outside the home, and should engage in ‘production’ only in order to help their husbands” (92). Federici argues that this differentiation did not arise from the irrelevance of housework for capitalist accumulation, as women have always been producers and reproducers of labor power, the most essentialist capitalist commodity. Rather, it stemmed from an economic system that does not recognize labor-power as profitable, and thus deems it a natural resource (Preface). She explains that “In the new monetary regime, production-for-market was defined as a value-creating activity, whereas the production of the worker began to be considered as valueless from an economic viewpoint” (75). Such a system undoubtedly encourages women’s economic dependence on men, and men therefore become the sole wage earners. Federici writes that

What stands out in this type of arrangement is that though the wife worked side-by-side with her husband, she too producing for the market, it was the husband who now received her wage. This was true also for other female workers once they married. In England, a married man was legally entitled
to his wife’s earnings even when the job she did was nursing or breast-feeding (98).

As Federici points out, husbands can sell their wives’ unwaged work within the new capitalist system; in this way, the product of the women’s labor becomes a commodity that the men profit from. And because female reproductive and domestic labor is deemed merely a natural resource, men can also separate the woman from the masculine sphere of the marketplace, thus reducing her visibility outside of the home.

**Crafting Jane into Commodity: From Seamstress to Silence**

Federici’s argument provides rationale for why the shoemakers of Dekker’s play cannot escape an economic system fostering the oppression of their women. As evidenced by the way in which he conceptualizes his wife as a pair of shoes, Ralph might be said to construct Jane’s identity as commodity. In Scene 18, Ralph identifies his wife upon his return from war in France only after recognizing the shoes he has crafted for her; it is through their presence that Ralph tells Firk “I know she’s mine” (18.11-12). Critics have commented on how the shoes’ association with Ralph’s ability to produce goods sets them apart from the arising commodity system and its separation of the producer from his or her product. However, Douglas Bruster points out the way in which Ralph inscribes Jane’s name in the shoes, as if equating her identity with the commodity itself (77). It is important to note that Ralph does so before he leaves for war, a time in which he would have been anxious to mark his control over Jane; Ralph’s gift to his wife becomes a way for him to signify that her identity is formed through his labor, and not her own. In this sense, representing the woman as a passive commodity therefore allows
Ralph to stress his own identity as the masculine wage-earning producer. One also cannot ignore the bawdy connotations associated with the shoe as an object that one inserts a foot into, as if to represent a vagina. In this light, Jane herself becomes the sexual object that Ralph profits from; she is reduced to her role as a reproductive laborer.

Jane worries for her economic wellbeing when Ralph is forced to leave for war, exclaiming “O let him stay, else I shall be undone!” (1.142). Yet she does find work once Ralph leaves; the stage directions of Stage 12 depict Jane working at a seamstress shop, one of the rare work opportunities afforded to women at the time. Harkening back to Federici’s argument, Jane’s public activity as a seamstress becomes problematic for Ralph in that it challenges his own masculine role as the sole household provider and threatens his ability to profit from her wage-less domestic work. Ralph’s ardent desire to assert his possession over Jane (as evidenced by the way in which he marks her as his own commodity) might therefore be interpreted as a reflection of his anxiety over her increased state of economic autonomy and a desire to confine her to the “non-work” space of the domestic. Only by doing so can he can take advantage of her labor while still maintaining his status as the masculine economic wage-earner.

Moreover, as Garrett Sullivan points out, “Women’s status as shopkeepers, associated with their visibility, made them effective vendors but also possible commodities” (32). Jane’s sheer visibility sheds insight upon Hammon’s tendency to view Jane as purchasable commodity. The early modern period witnessed a striking increase in commodities available for sale and their “presentation as spectacle” in the marketplace (Newman 131). This novel availability of goods suggested prodigious excess and caused anxiety over the developing takeover of consumerism; in response,
men not only targeted women as the primary consumers of proliferating possessions, but also conceived of women as commodities themselves (Newman 133). When Hammon first beholds Jane, he watches her work from outside her shop window as if she were a good on display. Jane then asks “Sir, what is’t you buy?/ What is’t you lack, sir?” (12.22-23). The assumption in this scene, of course, is that Hammon seeks to buy Jane; Hammon acknowledges that Jane will not readily sell herself, but he declares that he will at least try his luck (12.24). As Sullivan notes of city comedy, “Commercial exchange and acquisition of wealth are inseparable from the female shopkeeper’s implicit offering of herself as the commodity that the consumer lacks” (25). Jane, catching onto Hammon’s motives, initially asserts “My hands are not to be sold,” as she has already given them to Ralph (12.28). But by the end of the scene, after learning of Ralph’s supposed death, she ultimately gives into Hammon’s attempts to claim her: “If ever I wed man it shall by you” (12.122). Jane’s visibility as a seamstress thus leads to her eventual containment by means of her commodification.

Ralph does more subtly craft an image of Jane as commodity by associating her with the shoes, yet unlike Hammon, he does not blatantly view her as an item to be bought and sold. Still, Ralph does eventually profit from his wife, in a manner even more obvious than from the benefit of her unrecognized domestic labor. Scene 18 stages the scenario in which Hammon offers to buy Jane for twenty pounds of gold. While Ralph refuses to trade his wife for financial profit, he still ends up gaining the money from Hammon, who insists that Ralph receive it in exchange for “that great wrong [I] offered thy Jane” (16.89). Jane’s exchange value is therefore still stressed, even if Ralph does not have to sell her.
Natasha Korda claims that Jane’s activity as a skilled seamstress able to earn her own living allows her to resist her commodification (590). However, the gender interactions that occur within Scene 18 certainly challenge this view of Jane’s newfound economic autonomy and empowerment. If the woman were to be entirely removed from her identity as commodity, one would expect that this final offer of gold (and its connection to female possession) would not be included within the outcome of the scene. Yet through Hammon and Ralph’s financial transaction, the men continue to translate the female body into an exchange value, even after Ralph refuses to sell his wife. When Hammon recognizes that he has wronged Jane, he offers the twenty pound (Jane’s “price”) to both Jane and Ralph. Federici points out that the husband was entitled to any of his wife’s wages, which suggests that Ralph is ultimately the one who profits from the transaction. Furthermore, Jane is silenced entirely as the play progresses. While she speaks a few lines early on, by the time that Hammon makes his financial offer, Jane does not utter a single word. And as Rhonda Arab argues, Jane’s increasing helplessness suggests that she must be “rescued” by Ralph and his fellow shoemakers from Hammon’s commodification (67). In this way, Jane cannot thrive alone as an autonomous seamstress in the economy; earlier suggestions of independence are shattered by her vulnerability once Hammon steps in. That Jane does not speak again after the business transaction in Scene 18 suggests her inability to break away from the confines of male ownership; and that Ralph must rescue her from Hammon’s commodification reveals that the emerging economic system has made her independence an impossibility. Federici claims that marriage became a woman’s true career during the shift to capitalism, which limited the woman’s agency outside the home (93). Similarly, Jane’s identity shifts from early

---

6 Refer to page 6 for Federici’s discussion regarding a husband’s legal entitlement to his wife’s wages.
glimpses of economic individuality as a seamstress to complete dependence upon the husband figure once Ralph returns from war. Ralph not only regains control over his wife, but also effectively relegates her from the economic realm of the male workers and unconsciously reduces her to a domestic reproductive laborer—or, his own commodity.

The Grotesque Female Presence: Displacing Capitalist Gains onto Margery

Like Jane, Margery Eyre undergoes male treatment influenced by consumerist attitudes and anxieties that ultimately seek to contain her threatening visibility and loquaciousness. More than any of the amorous relationships in the play, audience members witness numerous interactions between Simon Eyre and his wife. Considering his identity as the celebrated guild worker who rises to the role of mayor but still identifies with the community of his fellow shoemakers, Eyre might initially be considered the embodiment of everything anti-capitalist. However, in conversations regarding his role in The Shoemaker’s Holiday, critics have debated the way in which Eyre attains his position of prestige and status. As Brian Walsh points out, Eyre’s means of acquiring wealth departs from the traditional values of honest labor that a shoemaker would be thought to embody (330). In the play, the disguised Lacy introduces Eyre to a Dutch skipper looking to sell exotic commodities. By dressing as a wealthy lord and with the aid of a loan from Lacy, Eyre convinces the skipper that he has sufficient credit to purchase the cargo and sells it for an impressive profit (Harris viii). Eyre thus becomes a “huge gainer;” he leaps into a position of success with only a scare explanation regarding the bargaining of commodities that he takes part in (Mortenson 247). Jonathan Gil Harris explains that “Eyre the artisan and civic benefactor blurs into Eyre the merchant venturer, who deals in exotic commodities associated with traders in the East and the new joint
“stock companies” (21). In this way, Eyre enters the high-risk, high-gain world associated with global capitalism’s profit motives (Harris 21). As commercialist ethics increasingly privileged competition and initiative, Eyre thus succeeds by embracing these principles in exchange for the security and stability of the productive labor market.

Various critics have also observed the way in which Dekker’s story strays from Thomas Deloney’s *The Gentle Craft*, his main source material, in its shady depiction of Eyre’s capitalist venture. In Deloney’s account of the story, Eyre attains his wealth through the natural chance of a sea storm and sober business practices; rather, in Dekker’s version, the competitive mindset of capitalist economics propels Eyre’s rise in fortune (Mortenson 244). Yet despite these obvious intrusions of new commercialist values, Eyre undoubtedly celebrates the shoemakers and still manages to maintain an admirable reputation and association with these men; his change in status does not seem to change the way in which the other characters view him. As Hodge states when Eyre dons his new attire, “Why now, you look like yourself, master!” (7.103) How, then, does Eyre manage to remain relatable and even revered among the group of shoemakers? As critics have pointed out, Eyre deflects anxieties regarding his new status as a financial man upon Margery, who in turn becomes an outlet for his own concerns regarding his elevated position and his accumulation of capital. Ann Christensen emphasizes Margery’s undesirable portrayal, asserting that Eyre’s wife is satirized for commercialist attributes such as ambition and greed that would have caused anxiety during the time of the play (455). Christensen explains the tensions that might have accompanied displays of financial success; by singling out and deriding Margery’s own tendencies to flaunt her social station, Eyre is able to diminish his own status as a “gainer.” Furthermore, his
devaluation of Margery is notably more pronounced in Dekker’s play than in *The Gentle Craft.*  

Intimately related to his murky financial success, Eyre contributes to a culture of consumerism by providing his wife with extravagant clothes. Margery undoubtedly becomes enamored with the new fashions that she flaunts; although Eyre provides her with these resources, he repeatedly makes derogatory comments regarding her attire. When Eyre first tells Margery that he will “Make thee a lady,” he gives her a French hood (3.2.143). Like the shoes that become associated with Jane, the French hood also signifies an object that a body part is inserted into, thus invoking symbolism of the vagina and stressing Margery’s identification as a sexual object. Eyre remarks in Scene 17, “Lady Madgy, thou hadst never covered thy Saracen’s head with this French flap, nor loaden thy bum with this farthingale— tis trash, trumpery, vanity!” (17.13-16) His language in Scene 20 also reflects such a contemptuous attitude towards Margery’s clothing, as he remarks “Vanish, Mother Miniver-Cap, vanish! Go, trip and go, meddle with your partlets and your pishery-pashery, your flews and your whirligigs!” (48-50) Here, Eyre identifies his wife with the fur-trimmed (“Miniver”) cap as if her clothing embodies her identity as consumer, in turn transforming her person into the commodities that she dons. “Pishery-pashery” refers to gaudy clothing, “flews” to the flaps of Margery’s hood, and “whirligigs” to her hooped skirt; Eyre’s comments portray Margery’s dress as foolish, and he derides her affection for her new attire (Harris 106). Karen Newman’s observation that “newly proliferating consumer goods and the anxiety,

---

7 Christensen points out that in Dekker’s play, Margery’s contributions to the family business are “stringently subordinated,” while in Deloney’s account the wife makes frequent economic contributions (454).
even alienation, that capital produced was displaced onto the feminine” echoes the way in which Eyre displaces his own recent connection to luxury items onto his wife (123).

Eyre’s treatment of Margery not only reflects his anxiety over his own capitalist identity, but it also demonstrates the same tension regarding women’s place within the developing economic system as applied to the discussion of Jane. Federici’s stance on women’s relegation to the domestic sphere relates to Eyre’s treatment of Margery in that he constantly seeks to keep her contained and on the outside of his fraternal group of workers, thus limiting the recognition of her reproductive work as economic and social contribution. Arab presents a similar account to Federici regarding sexual division in the transition to capitalism:

Anxieties about women in the workplace in the early modern period were eventually resolved by women’s withdrawal into the newly emerging private domestic sphere; this was achieved by the destruction of the household production unit under capitalism and by ideological forces that worked to define women’s roles as domestic. (68)

From the perspectives of Federici and Arab, Eyre’s interactions with his wife might be seen as attempts to maintain this sharp division of gender roles initiated by a capitalist economy. When Eyre declares his fellow male workers as the “arms of [his] trade” and “pillars of [his] profession,” he then contrastingly demands that his wife leave his sight, referring to her repeatedly as “kitchen-stuff” (7.44, 57-59). Here, he communicates anxiety over his wife’s attempts to remain included in the male work environment, and labeling her as “kitchen-stuff” reflects a desire to relegate her to household chores.
Furthermore, Korda points out that “kitchen-stuff” was used “as an inexpensive substitute for high-grade tallow in tanning leather… one of the deceitful trade practices for which shoemakers were taken to task during the period;” she suggests that by identifying Margery with a dishonest practice, Eyre disavows such methods by projecting them onto his wife (586). And just as Ralph equates Jane with the shoes he crafts, here Eyre also reduces his wife to the kitchen-stuff he and his men use to make shoes. In this way, he reduces her to his own commodity, as if to assert his ability to possess and craft her identity. Moreover, Sullivan points out that working women were seen as being in competition with male-dominated guilds (34). By repeatedly pushing his wife out of the business-end of the shop and back into the kitchen to prepare meals for the men, Eyre demonstrates his uneasiness with Margery’s ability to make visible economic contributions, as well as her habitual presence in the male-dominated realm of the workers. This relegation allows Eyre to set himself apart from his wife as a wage-earner and to assert his own productivity and membership within the male community.

Eyre’s continual efforts to limit Margery’s talkative disposition also reflect a desire to exclude her from the workplace. As mentioned in the previously discussed dialogue, Eyre continuously tries to force his wife to stop speaking in the presence of the shoemakers. He also attempts to silence Margery in the first scene when she speaks in front of Eyre and his men on behalf of Jane. He quiets her condescendingly, remarking “Away with your pishery-pashery, your pols and your edipols. Peace, midriff; silence, Cecily Bumtrinket” (1.158-159). Notably, the discussion she interrupts attends directly to economic concerns, as the men are debating whether to let Ralph retain his position within Eyre’s circle of shoemakers or to send him off to war. Evidently, Eyre does not
welcome his wife’s opinions regarding his economic affairs, especially when his men are present. Talkative women were thought of as dangerous in early modern England, as they posed a threat to male dominance and to masculine control of commodity exchange (Newman 134). Margery’s talkativeness in the public sphere of the wage-workers becomes especially threatening in light of the heightening gender division that Federici identifies a key aspect of capitalism, within which the development of a new patriarchal order made women servants of the new male force (115). With this explanation in mind, Eyre’s constant attempts to publically silence Margery’s voice in the presence of his male workers reflects his desire to denounce any form of her economic agency or meaningful contribution, allowing him to continue exploiting her domestic labor.

Eyre repeatedly refers to his own wife not only as if she were a commodity but also as if she were a grotesque object (Miller 75). Peter Smith stresses that Margery is often addressed in anal-terms such as “hopperarse” (20.45), alluding to the openness of the anus implied by the grotesque (172). Moreover, he observes that “Margery’s very physicality is fluid, constantly expanding with her wish to wear new periwigs for her hair, a French hood for her head, farthingales (extended skirts supported by hoops) for her bum and new shoes for her feet” (172). In this way, she exemplifies Mikhail Bahktin’s concept of the grotesque body in that her appearance is ever-changing and uncontained (Miller 75). Shannon Miller sheds light onto contemporary male views on female physicality in that “Attempts to control Renaissance women consequently idealized a classical, contained body; the traits praised in a woman were a closed mouth, carefully guarded chastity, and limited physical mobility” (76). The way in which Eyre refers to Margery’s physical qualities especially communicates this anxiety regarding the publicly
visible woman’s portrayed openness and fluidity. Moreover, the insults that Eyre uses to label his wife associate her physicality with whoredom, clearly marking her off from the idealized chaste body and also associating her with the extreme form of female sexual commodification made literal: prostitution. For instance, in Scene 7 he refers to her as a “powder-beef quean,” with “powder-beef” implicating cheapness (Harris 25). Eyre notably makes this comment when Margery scolds one of the shoemakers for loitering; her intrusions into the economic sphere become associated with anxieties over her sexuality. In the same scene, Eyre also scolds “Peace, you bombast-cotton candle quean—Away, Queen of Clubs, quarrel not with me and my men, with me and my fine Firk” (7.35-37). Peter Stallybrass notes the assumption among sixteenth-century male writers that the woman’s body is naturally grotesque and must be subjected to constant surveillance that concentrated on three areas: the mouth, chastity, and the threshold of the house (124). Eyre’s comments throughout Scene 7 relate back to all three of these areas, as he not only tries to silence his wife and exclude her from the public realm of the workforce (and thus back into the private home), but his use of the word “quean” again suggests loose sexuality and portrays women’s involvement in the economic sphere as a form of harlotry. Moreover, in *Half Humankind* Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus identify the vain woman as a common female stereotype of the time period, one that invoked men’s fear of both economic disaster (by virtue of the wife spending all of her husband’s money) and sexual betrayal (56). In this way, the woman as excessive consumer also relates to her status as sexually promiscuous. As I will continue to argue in

---

8 Federici also comments on the “battle against the body,” as self-management was portrayed as a vital requirement in a capitalist socio-economic system; the grotesque quality of Margery’s uncontained body thus threatens the value of women’s restrained sexuality and activity (149).
the next two chapters, the idea of chastity becomes increasingly implicated with the economic involvement as the era of city comedy progresses.

Thus, Margery’s repeated appearance outside of the domestic sphere and in the presence of the shoemakers clearly challenges woman’s relegation to the private home, leading to Eyre’s negative comments targeting her sexuality, her vanity, and even his reduction of her body to “kitchen-stuff” as a form of commodification. Moreover, as Christensen explains, “Though households were the main unit of ‘credit’ in the period, some of the members were discredited as economic life was reimagined to the diminishishment of women” (475). Relating back to Federici’s argument regarding division of labor roles, Christensen contends that Eyre’s derogatory comments towards his wife set up a gendered hierarchy between his business and Margery’s housework that supports it, therefore establishing a divide between commercial and domestic duties (456).

Through Eyre’s repeated efforts at silencing Margery and disparaging the grotesque quality of her body—a body that he also often frames as a form of commodity itself—Dekker’s play thus communicates a proto-capitalist outlook encouraging the separation of women’s domestic and reproductive labor from the male productive workforce, one that seeks to keep her confined within the home in a refusal to acknowledge her economic contribution.

The Non-Working Woman: Rose as the Declining Aristocrat’s Prize

Although he disguises himself as a shoemaker and takes on the identity of an artisan laborer, Roland Lacy’s behavior towards his love-interest Rose throughout The Shoemaker’s Holiday also suggests a capitalist impulse to view her as a commodity.
Primarily, the diction that Lacy employs when discussing his relationship to Rose frequently relates to economics. He speaks to her in financial terms in Scene 15, when he remarks that “thou payest sweet interest to my hopes,” and he craves her presence “Like to a bold-faced debtor” (15.11, 14). Moreover, when Lacy’s uncle Lincoln discusses Lacy’s behavior and interactions with Rose, he also invokes economic discourse. Lincoln questions “Does he so carelessly venture his life/ Upon the indignation of a king?”; his use of the word “venture” suggests that Lacy’s actions resemble a gamble (8.24-25). In the same scene, Lincoln blatantly discusses his nephew’s behavior in economic terms, commenting that Lacy has “consumed his credit” (8.42). The very nature of the men’s treatment of Rose suggests economic motives, and in this way, Rose herself becomes a “prize” through which he can profit. Moreover, Lincoln constantly portrays his nephew as a spendthrift, as he declares, “A verier unthrift lives not in the world/ Than is my cousin…” (1.17-18). Lincoln’s descriptions of Lacy’s destitute condition intensify the importance of marriage to Rose as a means of economic gain. The transition to capitalism diminished the economic power of the aristocratic class to which Lacy belongs, and marriage to a merchant’s daughter would have served as a means to salvage and retrieve that lost power. Although Lacy might fashion his pursuit of Rose strictly in the name of love, his frequently referenced financial struggles suggest an ulterior economic motive, one that frames Rose as a commodity.

Just as Lacy’s mindset stems from a desire to cash in on Rose’s exchange value, Rose’s father looks upon his daughter as a good to be traded for profit. When Oatley learns that she has fled with a shoemaker, he angrily remarks “Will she forget her birth, require my care,/ With such ingratitude? Scorned she young Hammon/ To love a
honnikin, a needy knave?” (16.41-43) and harshly declares that “I’ll not account of her as of my child” (16.48). Typical of city comedy (and foreshadowing a main theme of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*), the daughter becomes a commodity on the marriage market. As if to prevail over such consumerist attitudes through the power of love, the King declares in the last scene of the play that “Where there is much love, all discord ends” (21.119). Yet Lacy’s own desire to wed Rose invokes his profit-seeking impulse, one that *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* initially appears to suppress. Just as the play masks itself as an idealized celebration of communal values, Lacy disguises himself as a laboring artisan; his veneer allows him to shield his social position as a declining aristocrat, but his consumerist intention to profit from Rose’s exchange-value as commodity cannot be fully contained by his disguise.

Unlike Margery however, characters do not comment negatively upon Rose’s body or attack her sexuality. And unlike Jane, Rose is not utterly silenced or portrayed as vulnerable by the end of the play; although not nearly as outspoken as Margery, she at least delivers lines in the last scene (21.69, 82, 85-86). Rose even achieves her goal of wedding Lacy despite her father’s efforts to commodify her. What then prevents the men from treating her as harshly and critically as Margery, and what allows her to escape the silencing of Jane’s character? Arab notes that “While Margery the authoritative working woman is demonized, Rose, the artisan’s daughter who moves out of the sphere of production and takes her place in the merging private sphere, is idealized” (67-68). Arab raises a key point in that Rose generally remains separate from the economic realm of the

---

9 Bruster elaborates on this phenomenon by explaining that “Women were more often portrayed as commodities, with marriage frequently seen as middle-class transaction, one which could remain financially profitable well after the ceremony and the exchange of dowry” (43).
workers; in contrast to Margery (who is constantly asserting herself into the homosocial, economic space of Eyre and his shoemakers) and Jane (who takes up work as a seamstress), Rose does not intrude upon or present herself in the workplace.

**Rose does** operate like a participant of the economy in Scene 2 when she offers her servant Sybil clothing in exchange for information about Lacy: “Do this, and I will give thee for thy pains/ My cambric apron, and my Romish gloves,/ My purple stockings, and a stomacher” (54-56). Here, Rose engages in the developing system of trade and exchange while also capitalizing upon an increased interest in the possession of commodities. Building upon woman’s association with commodities, Eyre brands both Jane and Margery in scornful terms related to luxury items, but Rose escapes such labels. What separates Rose from the other women is that she proposes this transaction with Sybil in the private space of the home, minimizing her visibility and her threat. Whereas the men witness Jane’s working role as a seamstress and Margery’s attempts to assert herself within their fraternal interactions, Rose remains concealed within the “newly emerging private domestic sphere” that Smith identifies; therefore, her actions are acceptable, even when tied to economics (68). Harkening back to Sullivan’s assertion regarding dangerous female visibility, Rose avoids the degrading comments directed towards Margery as well as the portrayed vulnerability of Jane in that she is not visible in the marketplace or in the public and economic realm of the male workers.

Yet as I have proposed, the male characters still commodify Rose. In achieving her desired end, does she truly overcome treatment as a mere object within the marketplace? She certainly succeeds in opposition to her father’s efforts to utilize her marriageability for its exchange value, yet Lacy ultimately profits from Rose’s status as a
commodity that can bolster the economic credit of his declining class. Moreover, although victorious by the end of the play, Rose’s means of evading a negative portrayal (by confining her actions to the private sphere) raises the question of whether her character would only encourage female audiences to do the same. As an idealized woman who does not work for a living and who does not associate with the workforce, Rose exemplifies Federici’s claim regarding the oppressive division of labor that served to exclude women from earning a wage. Jane is silenced after she takes up wage labor, just as Eyre repeatedly tries to mute Margery’s voice in the context of the public, economic sphere. Although Lacy, Oatley, and Hammon all treat Rose as a commodity, she does attain the most desirable portrayal, and her chastity is never questioned or attacked. In this way, Rose’s separation from wage labor and from the public marketplace assures her chaste image as well as the limited voice and agency that she does exercise; yet this agency is confined to the private domain, and she still undergoes commodification. Rather than allowing her to circulate visibly through the public space of the marketplace, this type of commodification seeks to keep her comfortably contained as an unwaged domestic and reproductive laborer.

Conclusion

While The Shoemaker’s Holiday might initially resist classification as city comedy in its glorification of the artisanal class and its attempt to mask contemporary economic concerns, the play actually reveals such tensions through the shoemakers’ subtle capitalist behaviors. The influence of an emergent capitalism becomes apparent in the way that the men treat the women, specifically in their behaviors and attitudes towards Jane, Margery, and Rose. Jane is only able to escape Hammon’s
commodification by relying upon the rescue of Ralph, who also more subtly limits her autonomy by asserting his ability to craft her identity. Margery frequently invades the economic sphere of the shoemakers, which compels Eyre to label her as grotesque and whorish and motivates him to continuously silence her voice. Rose attempts to resist her father’s commodification, only to end up with a man who will profit from her exchange-value just as successfully. The men frame all three women into commodities, even if they do not consciously realize or accept it. But as Marx’s Capital explains, commodities are purchased in order to be exchanged, which inherently reintroduces the woman into circulation within a market becoming both physically and conceptually more expansive in early modern London. Thus, the men attempt to contain the female characters and to discourage their presence within the public economic sphere, while also framing them as objects of exchange within this very realm.

One also cannot ignore the comedic tone of Dekker’s play, as especially emphasized by the slippage between material objects (Jane’s shoes, Margery’s hood) and women’s bodies. On one hand, the treatment of women’s commodification through bawdy humor could be viewed as an attempt to simply mask the gravity of this tension. However, in light of the anxieties surrounding women’s association with loose sexuality in public, I would instead argue that Dekker employs these sexual innuendos to draw attention to the absurd position into which the women are placed: reduced to erotic objects within the marketplace, yet meanwhile expected to remain invisible and chaste. Dekker’s playful tone lacks the biting satire that Middleton eventually employs in his work, but these sexually-charged comedic undertones serve as his own means of drawing
attention to the carnivalesque quality of an economic system that creates such a fraught condition for women.

While Jane’s work as a seamstress does initially allow for her visibility in the marketplace, she ultimately relies upon her husband for protection from Hammon, which only ensures her containment within the domestic sphere. Only in this way can Jane maintain the chaste and respectable identity that Rose, who is entirely isolated from the market and the workforce, more fully embodies. Out of the three women, Margery’s behavior is most transgressive in her extreme loquaciousness and her blatant attempts to assert herself into the public realm of her wage-earning husband and his workers. And thus, it is worth noting that out of the three women, Margery is depicted as the most sexually promiscuous. The play contains no hint that Margery is ever unfaithful to her husband, yet her behavior marks her as a whorish “powder-beef quean,” as if visibility within the economic sphere links to a lack of chastity. In the next two chapters I will elaborate upon the suggested link between whoredom and economic involvement, a connection that becomes even more prominent in later city comedies.
CHAPTER TWO:
THOMAS DEKKER AND THOMAS MIDDLETON’S THE ROARING GIRL

An Overview: Cross-Dressing and Female Shopkeepers in the London Marketplace

While critics have debated whether The Shoemaker’s Holiday should be considered a city comedy, The Roaring Girl (1611), a collaboration between Dekker and Thomas Middleton, has been more commonly regarded as exemplary of the genre. The play typifies city comedy in the topographical detail of its London setting and its portrayal of intrigues involving commonly depicted types such as young gallants and citizens and their wives (White 50). What also sets this later play apart from The Shoemaker’s Holiday is that The Roaring Girl presents a woman who resists commodification outwardly—a female character that dresses like a man. Moll Cutpurse, the play’s protagonist, speaks out on behalf of her sex against consumerist male attitudes. Her complex gender identity complicates the consolidation of gender roles that Federici identifies as a defining feature of capitalism’s emergence, and prompts the question of whether rebellion against such a system fostering women’s commodification and oppression could have been practical or achievable. This chapter will examine the interaction between Moll’s economic involvement and her ambiguous sexuality; while her economic independence drives the men’s desires to reduce her to a marketplace commodity, she counters her threatening visibility by molding herself in an image of chastity. Still, the male characters continuously eroticize Moll, but she profits by taking advantage of their false impressions of her sexual desire.
However, Moll is not the only female character worth analyzing; the play does offer a more conventional portrayal of the passive and obedient woman in the form of Mary Fitzallard, whose resistance against her own commodification requires masculine aid. *The Roaring Girl* also features three citizen wives who actively participate in the commercial economy, whose over-emphasized sexual desires and reduction to commodity form overshadow their independence, and it will be helpful to situate the portrayal of these wives in the context of critical debates about women’s roles and their visibility in the developing economy. Similar to *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, *The Roaring Girl* “culminates in a world of festival,” as Mary successfully weds her true love Sebastian; love becomes the central theme of the play and a uniting force (Cheney 214). Yet this celebration of love cannot undo or effectively resolve the economic tensions exposed by the men’s commodification of the women and the resulting oppression it causes, even despite Moll’s blatant resistance. While the play’s “Roaring Girl” rejects men’s attempts to conceive of her as a prostitute and commodity, the Epilogue portrays Moll (and by extension, the play) as a painting to be sold for profit. Although the character Moll might be able to resist commodification, the pressures of the emergent economic system reinscribe her within the theatrical marketplace and its dynamics of circulation. Still, if Moll serves as a commodity at the play’s conclusion, the playwrights lose ownership of her once the production ends and after they have profited from her character; in this way, Moll preserves a unique female mobility despite her ultimate role as commodity.
Moll Cutpurse: Resisting Commodification

Moll Cutpurse’s opposition to oppressive male treatment takes numerous forms. Perhaps most notably, Moll challenges cultural codes regarding acceptable female behavior by cross-dressing. In order to contain the public within their proper social station, especially in urban centers such as London, the state regulated dress through sumptuary proclamations (Howard 421). The changing economy began to strain traditional views of the social order, thus investing extra importance in clothing’s ability to distinguish social groups. As Jean Howard notes,

Social mobility was a fact…and economic and cultural changes were creating tensions between a social order based on hierarchy and deference and one increasingly based on entrepreneurship and the social relations attendant upon the emergence of early capitalism. (422)

However, the social order depended not only on maintaining a sharp distinction between different social classes, but also between genders, as a means of emphasizing the gendered division of labor (Howard 423). In his *Anatomy of Abuses*, Phillip Stubbes describes one’s apparel as the primary means by which to distinguish one sex from the other (73). When women dressed in men’s clothes, they therefore became masterless women and threatened the hierarchy of gender roles (Howard 424). Moll’s transgression is not only limited to dress, as she also physically fights with the men and deftly keeps up with their underworld cant. In addition, she forcefully speaks out against men’s tendencies to assume a woman’s willingness to prostitute her body, vowing that she will not allow for her own commodification. Before examining Moll’s response to male
attitudes, it will be helpful to first understand background information regarding her character.

Dekker and Middleton model Moll Cutpurse after the notorious London figure Mary Frith, a pickpocket and prostitute who dressed in male clothing (Garber 221). Frith is known to have even attended a showing of the play in late April or early of May 1611, in which she appeared on the stage in men’s attire; this was extremely controversial, as women were not allowed to perform on the public stages of London, and Frith was consequently imprisoned in Bridewell (McManus 213). Scandals about clothing find particular focus in the folk figure of Long Meg of Westminister, whose popular story was first printed in a 1582 pamphlet life about her life; Long Meg also dresses in men’s clothing and champions her sex by defeating various men including debtors, thieves, and braggarts (Shepherd 202). Despite the strength of her character, part of the tradition of Long Meg is her sexual monstrosity, reflecting the contemporary discomfort regarding women in male clothing (Shepherd 206). As evidenced by the popular polemical tract *Hic Mulier*, cross-dressing women were viewed as possessing an excessive sexual appetite:

…you have taken the monstrousness of your deformity in apparel, exchanging the modest attire of the comely Hood, Cowl, Coif, handsome Dress or Kerchief, to the cloudy Ruffianly broad-brimmed hat and wanton Feather; the modest upper parts of a concealing straight gown, to the loose, lascivious civil embracement of a French doublet, being all unbuttoned to entice, all of one shape to hide deformity, and extreme short waisted to give a most easy way to every luxurious action… (126)
This passage depicts the cross-dressing woman’s clothing as a means to lure, tempt, and seduce others, or to provide unrestrained access to body parts in the context of sexual interactions (as denoted by “every luxurious action”). As Hic Mulier communicates, women who dressed like men were associated with an uncontrolled sexuality (Howard 424).

In the formation of Moll’s character, Middleton and Dekker appear to draw out Frith and Long Meg’s more desirable qualities while suppressing her more problematic ones. In Middleton’s Epistle “To the Comic Play Readers” that precedes the play, he writes that he will leave out the inappropriate: “Worse things, I must needs confess, the world has taxed her for than has been written of her…” (17-19). As McManus comments, “the play also validates its audience by offering them in Moll a merry rogue with a heart of gold and a strict moral sensibility that just happens to conform to their own ideals” (220). Moll therefore becomes a censored and somewhat glorified version of Mary Frith (or Long Meg), one who exhibits strength and fights for justice. In the play, Moll is known as a notorious thief, but she declares that this accusation is untrue:

…I must confess,

In younger days, when I was apt to stray,

I have sat amongst such adders, seen their stings—

As any here might—and in full playhouses

Watched their quick-diving hands, to bring to shame

Such rogues, and in that stream met an ill name. (5.1.298-303)
While at one time close to being a cutpurse in her “younger days,” Moll explains that she now uses her familiarity with the London underworld to protect others from thievery and to “bring to shame” those who take part in it. Joseph Dollimore further remarks that “Frith/Moll is appropriated for a partial critique of patriarchal law, sexual exploitation, and aristocratic culture” (264). In light of her celebrated image, I will focus especially on Moll’s valiant efforts to resist capitalist-influenced male attitudes, and then on whether her resistance can be deemed achievable.

Male characters attempt to commodify Moll throughout the play, and some of the most obvious examples occur among her interactions with the gallant figure Laxton. Laxton first depicts Moll as an eroticized good for sale in Act 2, when he declares that he would “give but too much money to be nibbling with that wench” (2.1.176). He further depicts the female body as something that can be bought, commenting that “Money is the aqua fortis that eats into many a maidenhead” (2.1.183-184). Unlike the more subtle behavior of the shoemakers depicted in Dekker’s earlier play, here Laxton openly commodifies the woman and embraces a consumerist mindset reminiscent of Hammon’s; he cannot separate financial transactions from his views of women and sex. Later in the scene, Laxton offers ten angels to meet with Moll as if she were a prostitute; the very concept of prostitution conceives of the female body as a good of exchange by framing sex as an economic transaction. Federici identifies prostitution, a prime example of the commodification of one’s sex, as a resulting condition of women’s disadvantaged economic status (94). Moll scorns the practice by comparing men to rapacious fishermen feeding upon prey:
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fall’n wives.
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten,
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fast’ned on a golden hook;
Those are the lecher’s food, his prey. (3.1.95-99)

Here, she expresses sympathy for women who may ultimately resort to prostitution as a result of their disadvantaged economic status and draws attention to a contemporary economic system that associates women’s sexual activity with profit while also insisting upon female chastity.

In the same scene, Laxton’s attempts to commodify Moll become even more obvious in that she counters them with bold declarations of resistance. Moll refuses to resort to male objectification in order to survive; for instance, she declares to Laxton that

…she that has wit and spirit
May scorn to live beholding to her body for meat
Or for apparel, like your common dame
That makes shame get her clothes to cover shame. (3.1.133-136)

Again, Moll frames prostitution as means of survival for “common dames” who must succumb to the practice in order to feed and clothe themselves, recognizing its necessity for these women but refusing to take part in it. She then condemns the common perception of woman’s body as “meat” to be purchased and consumed, asking Laxton “Am I thought meat for you?” (3.1.102). As Dollimore points out, Moll “offers the truly exceptional view of prostitution as a sexual exploitation rooted in economic exploitation”
Similarly, Newsman asserts that “Moll’s speech at 3.1 refuses the power relations that have made Laxton assume he can safely use her as an erotic object, a fond flexible whore” (283). In other words, by refusing to conflate her sexuality with a marketplace commodity, Moll draws attention to the injustice inherent in male attitudes that seek to do so.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the rise of capitalism encouraged that women be viewed not only as goods themselves, but also as excessive consumers. Moll first appears in the play as a consumer; when the gallants try to detain her, she proclaims “I cannot stay now, i’faith. I am going to buy a shag ruff” (2.1.190-191). Moll announces her intention to make this purchase three more times within the scene, blatantly asserting her role as consumer in the last of these instances when she declares to Mistress Openwork “I come to buy” (204, 208, 220). Aside from Moll’s own assertions of her role as consumer, the male characters frequently comment upon and exaggerate Moll’s desire to consume goods. For instance, when discussing his intention to ruin Moll, Sir Alexander remarks that “Deep spendings/ May draw her that’s most chaste to a man’s bosom” implying that women can always be manipulated by luxury items (1.2.220-221). He later attempts to frame Moll by strategically placing luxury items in her view, assuming that she will steal them. As Newman proposes, by supposing Moll’s hyper-consumerist disposition, Sir Alexander acts as if “money can buy her” when he attempts to catch her in the act of taking the precious objects (281).

Moreover, throughout the same scene, Sir Alexander and Trapdoor make bawdy remarks as if to eroticize Moll as a sexual object to be sexually consumed. For instance, Trapdoor comments that “Being a stout girl, perhaps she’ll desire pressing; then all the
weight must lie upon her belly” (4.1.26-27). While accused criminals were pressed with weights until they pled or died, “pressing” also has a sexual connotation in its reference to being positioned beneath a man in intercourse (Panek 66). Sir Alexander responds with “Belly or back, I care not so I’ve one,” the double entendre of course suggesting that he will be satisfied whether he receives her sexually from the front or from behind (4.1.28).

The gallants also depict Moll as a highly sexualized figure throughout the play; when she first appears on the stage in Act 2, Laxton comments in an aside that

Methinks a brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her, and ne’er be beholding to a company of Mile End milkshops, if he could come on and come off quick enough. Such a Moll were a marrowbone before an Italian; he would cry “bona-roba” till his ribs were nothing but bone. I’ll lay hard siege to her. (178-183)

Here Laxton utilizes a military metaphor to invoke a fantasy of sexual violence gang-rape; Moll is no longer the consumer, but instead, the sexual object to be consumed.

Howard moreover proposes that Moll is the most highly eroticized figure in the play, as the men constantly speculate about her genitalia, her erotic performance, and the possibility of engaging in sex with her (278). More generally, the “man-woman,” in other words, the woman who dressed like a man, was commonly said to display the female failing of sexual looseness; this figure is like the whore in that both refuse subjection to a permanent male partner (Shepherd 202). Recalling the attack on masculine women delivered in Hic Mulier, the cross-dressing woman was said to have embodied “the impudence of Harlots” (Hic Mulier 125). Despite tendencies of the male characters to
depict her in an erotic manner, some critics have maintained that Moll manages to speak out against women’s commodification and sexual exploitation while also retaining a chaste image. As a proponent of this view, Patrick Cheney contends that Moll is asexual and communicates a lack of sexual desire (225). Furthermore, Clare McManus proposes that Moll is the only sexually unavailable female character in the play, and she can therefore opt out of the commodification of her body by asserting her chastity (221-22). What is important to note here is that in her refusal to marry, Moll refuses to bed any partner, male or female, which might serve as a pronouncement of permanent chastity. When Moll first asserts her resistance against marriage, she declares that “I love to lie o’both sides o’th’bed myself,” which certainly implies that she refuses sex entirely. At the same time, it might also mean that she prefers to pleasure herself, or even that she has the power to seduce both men and women (as both a man and a woman herself, pleasing and receiving pleasure), thus perpetuating her eroticized image (2.2.37-38).

Reflecting her ambiguous sexual desires, the nature of Moll’s economic involvement is equally vague. On one hand, Moll might be said to operate as her own master in the marketplace through her emphasized independence. At the same time, Aaron Kitch also interprets Moll as distancing herself from the London economy:

Moll’s moral character derives in part from her ability to separate herself from the hawking and adultery of the shop owners. She does not attempt to steal the valuables that Sir Alexander dangles before her, and she remains untainted by the marked coins that he and Trapdoor use as bait in Act IV. Her character emerges in opposition to economic activities; her
credibility is a product of her rejection of the multiple forms of economic deceit in the play (48).

In regards to Moll’s economic role, Dekker and Middleton never clarify Moll’s livelihood; she is not actually a thief, but also not a wife, a whore, or a shopkeeper. And while the disguised Moll undoubtedly does engage with and deceive the gallants, she does so not sincerely but rather to teach them a lesson regarding their own corrupt treatment of women as economic objects. For instance, after taking Laxton’s gold in exchange for their proposed sexual encounter at a prescribed meeting place, she instead challenges him to a duel there and declares “Thou’rt one of those/ That thinks each woman thy bond flexible whore” (3.1.72-73). In this way, although Moll actively interacts with others in the actual marketplace, she refuses to operate within the sexual economy (where women’s bodies are treated as commodities) on the males’ terms. Therefore, Moll’s character resists neat categorization both in terms of her economic involvement and her sexuality.

Despite Moll’s ambiguous livelihood, she certainly maintains economic independence through her rejection of marriage. Moll forcefully declares to Lord Noland that she will only marry “When you shall hear/ Gallants void from sergeants’ fear,/ Honesty and truth unslandered, Woman manned by never pandered…” to which he responds “Sounds like doomsday” (5.2.223-226, 231). She criticizes women’s consequential loss of agency; marriage is “but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i’th’place” (2.2.43-45). Federici’s account of gender divisions during the emergence of capitalism describes the way in which “The sexual division of labor that emerged from it not only fixed women to reproductive work, but
increased their dependence on men, enabling the state and employers to use the male wage as a means to command women’s labor" (75). Within such a system, women’s labor within the home became labeled as a natural vocation and its function in the accumulation of capital became invisible (Federici 75). By refusing to marry, Moll therefore refuses to submit to a man and confine herself to the domestic sphere of unpaid work. Federici further notes that “The assumption was gaining ground (in the law, in the tax records, in the ordinances of the guilds) that women should not work outside the home, and should engage in ‘production’ only in order to help their husbands” (92). In this way, Moll rejects subjecting herself to the loss of economic independence that a married woman might experience within the contemporary economic system.

Yet what complicates this discussion is that Moll never visibly works in the play; thus, while her attack against marriage might reflect a refusal to chain herself to the economic dependence of a man, audiences never clearly witness how Moll actually does manage to thrive economically. However, a few scenes do offer glimpses at Moll’s means of accruing profit. The first instance in which we observe Moll earning a livelihood is when Laxton offers her ten angels after mistaking her for a prostitute (2.1.272-273). Here, Moll achieves at least some of her economic success by taking advantage of the male consumerist attitude that crafts a false impression of her sexual desire and views her body as commodity. But in the other instance where Moll visibly makes money, she does so dressed like a man. Disguised as Sebastian’s music teacher, Moll profits as a musician when she plays the viola de gamba in 4.1. The viola’s shape and the manner that it was played (resting between parted knees) contributed to its common usage as a bawdy metaphor for female genitalia (Tiffany 95). The scene itself is
loaded with sexual double-entendres, as Sebastian describes the disguised Moll as a musician of “excellent fingering” with the “most delicate stroke” (4.1.173, 175). By playing the viol, Moll takes on a masculine role; as Howard notes, she appropriates the instrument not to make herself a sexual object but to express her own subjectivity (125). Sir Alexander is aware that his son’s music teacher is actually Moll in disguise, and he hands his son four damaged angels to give to Moll in hopes that she will be arrested once she tries to spend them (4.1.210-211). Moll does profit from her labor here, even if the reward she receives is not legitimate. Her labor as a musician offers the possibility of the woman’s participation in wage-labor, yet it could be argued that Moll can only earn a wage by laboring under the disguise of a man. And even though Sir Alexander acknowledges Moll’s masquerade, the fact that he offers her counterfeit coins undermines the idea of the woman as a wage-earner. Still, Moll declares the profitability of her labor at the end of Act 5 when she announces “Here be the angels, gentlemen; they were given me/ As a musician” (5.2.259-260). Moll’s ambiguous livelihood therefore suggests the possibility of an alternative to prostitution or marriage, but audiences never clearly witness precisely what form this alternative takes.

Moll’s Counterpart: Mary Fitzallard as The Traditional, Non-Working Woman

Mary Fitzallard, whose name itself invites comparison to Moll, also takes part in the struggle against commodification. Sir Alexander, her suitor Sebastian’s father, clearly views Mary as a commodity; he labels her a “beggar’s heir,” and Sebastian notes that his father only cares about “what gold/ This marriage would draw from him” (1.1.85, 88). In Sir Alexander’s rapacious eyes, Mary is equal to her dowry, and this dowry will not provide him with a profit or an advantage. Reflecting on not only her status as a
commodity but also her gentle disposition, Leinwand describes Mary as a “sweet, vulnerable object of desire” (187). Throughout the play, Mary is also referred to as a “virtuous maiden” and a “virtuous gentlewoman” (1.2.166, 5.2.100, 196). Although she does rebel by strategically pursuing a relationship with Sebastian, she remains representative of the more accepted image of a woman as dependent. Mary can only resist Sir Alexander through the aid of Moll (who facilitates the marriage of Mary and Sebastian); as White notes, Mary is totally passive and cannot achieve her aim without masculine help (58). To describe Mary as entirely dependent might be an overstatement, as she does manipulate the men in order to meet secretly with Sebastian in the first scene of the play; this scheme occurs before she can utilize the assistance of Moll. However, Mary undoubtedly remains soft-spoken and reliant when juxtaposed with Moll. She ultimately achieves her desired end, but she cannot do so autonomously; just as Jane of *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* can only resist Hammon’s commodification with Ralph’s assistance, Mary depends on Moll’s “masculine” aid.

In the aforementioned scene in which Mary manages to visit with Sebastian, she disguises herself as a seamstress. Reflecting another parallel between Mary’s character and Jane’s in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Mary pretends to assume the type of work that Jane briefly adopts once Ralph has left for war. McNeill notes that poor and economically unmarriageable women who represented the bottom of London’s labor market typically adopted such a profession (200). As a low-status job, work as a seamstress would have been associated with prostitution, and the footman Nearfoot mistakes Mary for a prostitute throughout the scene. When she asks permission to visit Sebastian, he remarks that “You shall fructify in that which you came for; your pleasure
shall be satisfied to your full contentation,” suggesting that it is her sexual pleasure that will be fulfilled (1.1.6-7). Notably, this is one of two scenes in the play in which Mary becomes connected with sexual promiscuity and prostitution, inviting Nearfoot’s opinion of her as commodity; she is overwhelmingly portrayed as the chaste, obedient, contained female figure elsewhere. Yet by taking on the identity of a worker in the marketplace, even if her position is low, Mary becomes a threat to the expected order of male dominance. Nearfoot himself occupies a low position, and thus treating Mary as prostitute arguably serves a greater purpose than simply causing audience members to laugh— it might also express male discomfort with the woman who occupies a wage-earning role outside of the domestic sphere. When Mary accepts her status as Sebastian’s (eventual) wife and economic dependent, she transforms back into the chaste, sweet woman rather than the threatening prostitute. In this way, the low-wage woman becomes more dangerous than the aristocratic woman who does not work. This discussion reflects back on the distinction in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* between Jane (the low-wage worker) as visible commodity, in contrast to Rose (the non-worker)’s more desirable portrayal.

The other scenario in which Mary becomes eroticized occurs in 4.1, where she dresses as a man so that she can encounter Sir Alexander unrecognized. Mary remains almost entirely silent during the scene, speaking only three brief lines. Heather Easterling describes Mary as “a nearly silent and conventionally demure female figure in the play, suddenly eroticized by her costume when she cross dresses” (91). Sebastian objectifies her here, viewing her as a sexual possession; when he kisses her in male attire, he remarks that “…every kiss she gives me now/ In this strange form is worth a pair of two” (4.1.57-58). Sebastian’s language in this instance also communicates his betrothed’s
affection as having a certain exchange-value attached with it. His use of the word “worth” frames the female body as a commercial good, even if his discourse is not consciously meant to reflect an economic mindset. Sebastian diminishes any sense of threat to gender roles that Mary might embody in her male dress by reducing her to a sexual object. By the last scene in which Mary weds Sebastian, she utters only two short lines: “Duty and love may I deserve in those,/ And all my wishes have a perfect close” (5.2.201-202). Her words here epitomize the obedient, pure, and faithful wife; marriage to Sebastian and the resulting dependency it ensures effectively abolishes any sense of dangerous sexual desire or economic autonomy. Thus, Mary’s virtuous portrayal at the play’s conclusion correlates with her economic submission to her husband and to any type of visible and productive commercial participation.

**The Shopkeeper Wives: Economic Participation and Sexual Desire**

Framed in the midst Sebastian and Mary’s romance, Dekker and Middleton also present interactions among three citizen wives, their husbands, and gallant figures. These women contrast with the chaste and obedient figure of Mary in that they remain extremely visible in the marketplace. The stage direction at the start of Act 2 introduces Mistress Gallipot, Mistress Tiltyard, and Master Openwork in front of a pothecary’s shop, a feather shop, and a sempster’s shop, signifying their husbands’ respective professions. The three shops on stage serve as examples of what was a fairly new phenomenon at the time of the play: the luxury commodity outlet store (Mun 177). From the start, the scene exhibits the bustling capitalist spirit of the London market. Leinwand effectively describes the staging in Act Two as “a cityscape unrivaled on the Jacobean stage,” where “actors shuffle back and forth from one shop to next on the open city street,” and where
“cheapening, punning, bantering, and trade intersect as the exchange of capital infiltrates customer, immaterial, marital, extramarital, and master-servant relations” (73). Mrs. Openwork opens the scene and immediately invokes this commercial spirit by asking “Gentlemen, what is’t you lack?/ What is’t you buy?” (2.1.1). Her question recalls the same one that Jane asks Hammon when he enters her seamstress shop, again implying the notion that the female saleswoman herself can be bought. As Sullivan describes, the female shopkeeper “both attracts business to the shop and threatens to become one of its marketable wares” (26). Similarly, Howard notes that “Those who sold goods could be suspected of also selling themselves” (125). Thus, the shopkeeper wives might be assumed as stand-ins themselves for the luxury commodities in their husbands’ shops, and the gallants certainly conform to such a mindset; these men are more interested in the “profit” they can obtain from the women in contrast to the goods being sold.

Audiences quickly learn that these shopkeeper wives are frequently the target of the young gallants who seek to take advantage of their husbands’ wealth. The gallant Laxton, who finds no success in his interactions with Moll, is more profitable in his attempts to engage with Mistress Gallipot as if she were a prostitute. Laxton first hopes that she will furnish him with thirty pounds in exchange for sexual pleasure; in a letter to her, he requests “Furnish me therefore with thirty pounds; you must do it of necessity for me. I languish till I see some comfort come from thee, protesting not to die in thy debt, but rather to live so, as hitherto I have and will…” (3.2.61-64). Here, Laxton regards Mistress Gallipot as a commodity, an object that he can sell back to her own husband (as he expects that Gallipot will pay the sum in order to keep his wife in his possession). Not unsurprisingly, when Gallipot learns that he is at risk of losing his wife to Laxton, he
declares that “I’ll buy thee of him, stop his mouth with gold” (3.2.142). The transaction seems to spiral out of Gallipot’s control when Laxton then demands a greater sum: “Make up the money I had an hundred pound,/ And take your bellyful of her” (4.2.276-77). Laxton and Gallipot both act like consumers taking part in marketplace transactions, and the men even reference Mistress Gallipot in terms of consumption. Gallipot first equates his wife with scraps of food that he has fed on, and he then speaks of her as a garment that he wears (3.3.247, 252-254). However, Mistress Gallipot does not lack agency in the situation as if she were merely a passive good on the market. She participates just as actively in Laxton’s schemes; in fact, she concocts the lie that she was once betrothed to Laxton before she met her husband, in turn compelling Gallipot’s efforts to keep the gallant away by paying him off (3.2.124-125). In this way, she utilizes the men’s commodification of her body to her own advantage, as a means to rebel against a husband that cannot satisfy her.

Goshawk, another gallant, similarly treats Mistress Openwork as a commodity through which he can acquire financial gain. His own scheme involves convincing Mistress Openwork that her husband has been committing adultery; like Laxton, his behavior also invokes a profit-seeking, consumerist attitude at the expense of Openwork’s loss. When Mistress Openwork catches onto the scheme, she portrays Laxton as if he were a hunter pursuing a duck: “…this water spaniel dives after no duck but me; his hope is having me at Brentford to make me cry quack” (4.2.33-35). Her metaphor here resembles the same diction of conquest that Moll uses in Act 3 to describe the gallants as if they were fishermen feeding upon prey in their treatment of the female as a prostitute. What Moll and the shopkeeper wives have in common, perhaps inspiring
the gallants’ tendencies to view them as prostitutes or commodities, is their visibility in the marketplace. Returning to the previous discussion of Mary’s unthreatening status as a non-working woman, the shopkeeper wives’ embody the sense of dangerous power that even a low-wage female worker might have possessed; such a visible presence in the public economic sphere contributes to their association with prostitution and their hyper-sexualized portrayal.

Moreover, Stock and Zwierlein connect the conflicts among the shopkeepers and the gallants, typical of city comedy, to the shifting economy:

Early modern capitalism was described, and exposed, by contrasting it with the natural workings and proper management of the body. Illicit sexual activity, usually the adulterous liaison between a citizen’s wife and a gentle or noble gallant, was employed as an ever titillating dramatic metaphor for urban conflicts over status and possession. (14)

Although the citizen wives never actually engage in full-blown adultery, their interactions with the gallants reflect such tensions over their possession. The slippery sexuality of the wives and their inability to be controlled by their husbands parallels a common form of anxiety experienced by early modern subjects—the abstraction of commodity exchange and the fluidity of “a placeless market” (Agnew 9, 85). Agnew’s account on the increasingly abstract and expanding notion of the market, as an idea rather than a concrete place, suggests the difficulty of comprehending and controlling commodity exchange within its unspecified boundaries. By portraying a woman as sexually loose, she too becomes an outlet for men’s anxiety over the market’s dangerous fluidity in that
her sexuality becomes difficult to contain. Depicting women as sexual objects of exchange within this market becomes a means for men to simultaneously exercise control over both the dynamics of this abstracted market and women’s sexual appetites.

In regard to their sexual desires, McManus observes that the shopkeeper wives are portrayed as lustful and deceptive, and their husbands cannot satisfy them economically or sexually (219). Howard describes their depiction as “sexually demanding, potentially unchaste, and probably more interested, as a daily matter, in riding the stone horse from on top than in submissively ‘ingling’ with their husbands” (277). For instance, Mistress Gallipot chides her husband’s lack of libido; “Your love is all words; give me deeds. I cannot abide a man that’s too fond over me— so cookish! Thou dost not know how to handle a woman in her kind” (3.2.24). The wives not only condemn their husband’s sexual impotence, but they also comment on the insufficiency of the gallants. Mrs. Openwork comments that “they hang the head,” and Mistress Gallipot adds “Then they droop,” both phrases suggesting sexual inadequacy (4.2.53-54). The ways that the gallants speak about the shopkeeper wives also suggest these female characters have voracious sexual appetites. For instance, Laxton boasts that he maintains control over Mistress Gallipot by pretending to complain that they have never had the opportunity to have sex; he suggests that she repeatedly tries to seduce him, to which he responds by feigning ignorance (“I rail upon opportunity still, and take no notice on’t”) (125-126). In this way, the shopkeepers’ wives appear consistently insatiable, bordering on the grotesque in their inability to be contained. Not only are they over-sexualized, but the playwrights portray these women as humorous and laughable. Leinwand observes that “Middleton and Dekker protect us from the effects of the fully independent, sympathetic
city wives by giving us as much of them to laugh at as to laugh with” (156). For instance, Mistress Openwork’s treatment of her husband is ridiculous, comical, and over-the-top in her rapid assumptions of his adulterous behavior.¹⁰

Howard notes that merchant couples often could only survive economically by dividing between them the labor of making their businesses profitable, and she interprets this reality as anxiety-provoking for the male head of household (277). For this reason, as economically useful women who demand more sex than their husbands can afford them, the shopkeeper wives are silenced entirely and pushed aside by the end of Act 4 (Howard 277). The silencing of the wives becomes especially observable in that the husbands are quick to forgive the male gallants over their wives once their schemes have been revealed; in fact, Gallipot and Openwork invite the gallants to dine with them, while Gallipot ends the scene by warning his wife that “[she] who most brags is most whore” (4.2.361). In other words, Gallipot chides his wife for appearing whorish, while he easily pardons Laxton’s behavior. Howard aptly labels the male camaraderie at the end of the scene as “an orgy of male bonding” (277).

The citizen husbands and gallants thus at first competitively treat the women as commodities, engaging in capitalist-oriented competition. However, the women also participate actively in these schemes, taking advantage of their husbands in order to aid the gallants. In these instances, they possess a threatening degree of agency, also reflecting their visible presence within the marketplace; in the end, the two different male social groups must join together to finally silence the women and to reassert their

¹⁰ In 2.1, Mrs. Openwork viciously questions her husband’s fidelity: “How now, greetings? Love terms, with a pox, between you? Have I found out one of your haunts?” (211-212) Her rapid interrogation frames her as overbearing and contributes to her comical and undesirable portrayal.
dominance. Therefore, the men come together to contain the women, both by reducing them to commodities and literally overpowering their voices— just as the shoemakers must silence Jane and Margery in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*. At the same time, there is no clear indication that these shopkeeper wives will be entirely removed from the shops\textsuperscript{11}, and their commodification only perpetuates their visibility within the marketplace as visible objects of exchange.

**Returning to Moll: The Ultimate Commodity?**

Although Moll also undergoes commodification, she ultimately represents the only female character who does not allow this treatment to silence her voice and diminish her public presence. But can Moll’s resistance actually be considered effective? Surely her attempts to establish sexual and economic autonomy are more radical than any of the women in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* in not only her dress but her behavior (fighting with a sword, expressing fluency in the underworld cant, and so forth). T.S. Eliot praises Moll as both an idealistic and a realistic female character, implying that she executes her resistance effectively (192). In doing so, he celebrates Middleton (who he credits rather than Dekker for creating Moll’s character) as “a great observer of human nature” (192). Yet on the other hand, Theodore Leinwand’s chapter “Wives, Whores, Widows, and Maids” proposes that Moll’s character cannot be taken seriously; Moll’s abilities to fight valiantly in defense of the weak and to skillfully defeat evil make her appear “like Superwoman, and not a portrayal of a flesh-and-blood woman” (197). He moreover describes Moll as a “fantasy,” or an “embodiment of what an oppressed woman would

\textsuperscript{11} Recall Sullivan’s assertion that the visibility of shopkeeper wives was a common and increasingly popular practice used by shopkeepers to attract customers (33).
imagine herself to be in a time or land in which she has real power (198). Therefore, although Moll’s character speaks out on behalf of women and the injustices done to them, she is too extreme, extravagant, and even exceptional to realistically change any attitudes towards contemporary women (Leinwand 198-199).

Dollimore raises a further complication in that Moll’s resistance stems from adopting the appearance and behavior of a male; in this way she imitates the masculine order that she attempts to overcome (254). While he argues that Moll takes part in a successfully subversive “resistance from within” by operating within the existing system of male commodification rather than escaping it, I would argue that Moll herself actually perpetuates the practice of commodification. When Moll comments that “I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,/ I that can prostitute a man to me,” she adopts the mindset of the male consumer (3.1.111-112). Rather than simply defeating the notion of woman as sexual prize, she reverses it so that the man becomes the object of consumption; by adopting this capitalist persona both in appearance and mindset, she affirms its continuance. Thus, instead of erasing or defeating the men’s consumerist attitudes of commodification, Moll utilizes her knowledge of the sexual economy to manipulate it to her advantage.

Furthermore, although Moll seeks to escape commodification throughout the entire play, the Epilogue portrays her as the subject of a painting to be sold for profit:

A painter, having drawn with curious art
The picture of a woman- every part
Limned to the life- hung out the piece to sell.
People who passed along, viewing it well,
The Epilogue, delivered by Moll herself, compares the play to a portrait, and it is the woman’s physical features that ensure the painting’s profitability. In this way, the Epilogue’s message suggests Moll as the commodity that allows the play to profit. The character Moll might attempt to resist her commodification on the stage, yet in the real world of the marketplace, Dekker and Middleton ultimately rely on their Roaring Girl’s notoriety for revenue. The last word of the play reinscribes Moll within Laxton’s view of the female body as something to be bought and sold; while Moll might not be take the form of “meat” here, she still becomes, in the end, a good to be sold for profit and consumption—this time as a portrait and the play itself. Interestingly, Moll has the last word in the play, but the message she communicates reflects the capitalist mindsets of the male playwrights who fashion her character and profit from it.

One also cannot ignore that Moll’s character would have been played by a young male actor; thus, a young boy disguised as a woman disguised as a man would be the one resisting commodification and economic injustice on the stage. Such a phenomenon draws attention to theater’s performative quality, just as the Epilogue also reminds audience members of the play’s status as a production. However, the Epilogue declares that “The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,/ Shall on this stage give larger recompense,” reminding us that the play is based on a real figure (35). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Mary Frith did appear on stage—and, as a woman, was arrested for doing so. Thus, while the character Moll might visibly assert her agency onstage, the real Mary ends up imprisoned. Moreover, references to the authentic Roaring Girl in the Epilogue reinforce that the playwrights have used her identity to profit financially; the
staging of Moll Cutpurse as commodity contrasts sharply with the relegation of the real Mary from the stage. Despite this contradiction, if Moll (and by extension, Molly Frith) does ultimately remain a commodity at the end of the play, the playwrights might be said to lose ownership over her once the play ends; once audiences consume her, she is no longer in their possession. In this way, Moll retains her mobility and independence; although she might not undo her commodification, she at least possesses wisdom of its workings and operates within it to ultimately achieve a rare form of economic independence.

Conclusion

*The Roaring Girl* presents a portrait of London in which male gallants and merchants alike commodify diverse female figures. However, the women’s varying degrees of economic involvement and power reflect different representations of their sexuality. Mary Fitzallard, who only enters the economic sphere in the disguise of a seamstress at the start of the play, is ultimately depicted as chaste and virtuous; the shopkeepers’ wives, who are extremely visible within the marketplace and intimately involved in financial transactions with the gallants, are overwhelmingly viewed as sexually insatiable and bawdy. In this way, Mary’s ultimate portrayal reflects that of the economically removed Rose of *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, while the threatening economic presence of the shopkeepers’ wives, like Margery Eyre, correlates to their whorish characterizations. The position of Moll, the “Roaring Girl” who complicates the consolidation of gender roles most radically, remains more ambiguous; the men view her as erotic amidst suggestions of her asexuality, just as her own role in the economy reflects a similar obscurity and complexity.
Despite whether Moll can even be considered a realistic model of resistance against commodification for female audiences, Dekker and Middleton depict her as a commodity in the play’s Epilogue. In this way, although she might be victorious over the male characters’ consumerist attitudes, she eventually cannot escape from her portrayal as a good for consumption. Yet at the same time, the play must end, and Moll’s character thus passes from the possession of the male playwrights; while Moll might not be able to disengage entirely from her role as a marketplace commodity, she does achieve a distinctive mobility and resistance against containment. The tension surrounding Moll’s status at the play’s conclusion therefore reflects what I propose as a characteristic tension of city comedy: male characters seek to relegate women from the expanding marketplace, yet women’s status as commodities actually depends upon their visible circulation. Moll maintains economic independence, but the play ultimately insists upon her commodification. And as a commodity, Moll’s character is at once demeaned but also ultimately made more visible and more mobile once Moll passes from the possession of the playwrights at the play’s end. The marketing of the real Mary Frith undoubtedly treats the woman as commodity, but her commodification does not merely serve to objectify her or to render her invisible. By insisting upon the real Roaring Girl’s onstage appearance at the end of the Epilogue, Middleton and Dekker also expose women’s mobility and capable agency; such a strategy might be said to ultimately mock statues against women’s theatrical labor by calling attention to a system that profits off of women’s commodification yet also prohibits women themselves from operating within the public sphere of wage-earners and laborers.
CHAPTER THREE:  
THOMAS MIDDLETON’S A CHASTE MAID IN CHEAPSIDE

Background: The Sexual Economy of Cheapside

Thomas Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside (1613), the culmination of his city comedies, offers an especially clear example of nascent capitalism’s influence upon human relationships, especially those involving sex. As the commercial center of London, Cheapside boasted around 400 shops and 4000 trading plots; this old market street derives its name from the Anglo-Saxon word “ceap” meaning “barter,” and its side streets were named for the various commodities made and sold in them, such as Bread Street, Honey Lane, and so forth (Newman 237). Manuela Rossini describes Cheapside’s role within London as a reflection of the new economic climate:

Replacing the medieval marketplace, Cheapside represents the shift in the meaning and function of the market, a shift whereby a former gathering of people governed by the idea of communal exchange is turned into a location for private retailers driven by the desire to accumulate and make private profit… (92)

A Chaste Maid of Cheapside not only exposes audiences to commercial exchanges within the transforming London marketplace, but also concerns itself heavily with sexual exchange. Seung-Hee Roh writes that “the play discloses us to the making of an early modern city in which monetary interests intersect with almost all social and erotic relations,” and he notes the way in which the discourse of commodification circulates
throughout Cheapside. Social transactions in *A Chaste Maid of Cheapside* become blurred with commercial exchanges, and men and women alike participate in such behaviors.

Although the play features four separate plots, for the purposes of this chapter I will focus specifically on the treatment of Moll Yellowhammer as a good for sale on the marriage market, as well as Tim Yellowhammer’s marriage to the Welsh Gentlewoman solely for her dowry. In addition, I will examine the manipulation of Mistress Allwit’s sex as commodity. More obviously than *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* and perhaps even more so than *The Roaring Girl*, principles of capitalism and associated anxieties affect men’s attitudes towards women; and like the shopkeeper wives of *The Roaring Girl*, women such as Mistress Allwit attempt to use their commodification to their advantage. The lone female character who tries to resist commodification is Moll, who triumphs at the play’s conclusion by marrying her true love, Touchwood Junior. At first glance, this happy ending appears to criticize and counteract the consumerist behavior of the play, but love cannot undo prevailing attitudes of marriage as economic transaction. Following the same structure as the previous two chapters, I will first discuss the ways in which the play’s male characters commodify the female characters, but here I will place emphasis on women’s own perpetuation of this commodification. I will then discuss the ways in which women’s economic participation comes to implicate loose sexuality, reflecting a male desire to contain the women within the domestic sphere— and to build off of Federici, to ensure that their reproductive power cannot be recognized as productive labor.
Moll Yellowhammer: A Maidenhead Worth Gold

Mr. Yellowhammer epitomizes the blurring of human interaction and commodity exchange in the treatment of his daughter Moll, the play’s “chaste maid.” To Yellowhammer, Moll is a commodity on the marriage market whose chastity, virtue, and dowry he seeks to sell for his own profit. However, not only does Moll’s father exhibit such an attitude, but Maudline Yellowhammer also looks upon her daughter as a marketable good whose sale will elevate the family’s status. Through her parents’ eyes, Moll is ultimately a business asset (Brissenden xvii). Knights describes that “fortune-hunting” during the time of the play took on various forms, especially through the pursuit of an economically strategic marriage; ambitious middle-class figures such as the Yellowhammers were particularly anxious to ally themselves with subjects of noble birth such as Sir Walter, Moll’s intended suitor (125). Knights points out that on the stage, “…the miseries of enforced marriage do not only provide a romantic situation to be exploited, they point to the increasing dominance of the economic motive in every sphere of human life” (126). Even when Yellowhammer learns of Sir Walter’s reputation as a whoremaster, he refuses to impede Moll’s marriage to him, reasoning that “The knight is rich, he shall be my son-in-law/ No matter so the whore he keeps be wholesome,/ My daughter takes no hurt then; so let them wed” (4.1.278-281). In other words, Yellowhammer would rather take advantage of his daughter’s exchange-value than protect her wellbeing. Moreover, Moll’s status as commodity becomes obvious in her repeated association with gold and jewels; as Barber describes, she becomes “part of the family capital” (4). For instance, when Yellowhammer first discovers Touchwood Junior’s scheme to wed Moll, he declares “…I will lock up this baggage/ As carefully as
my gold; she shall see as little sun,/ If a close room or so can keep her from the light on’t” (3.1.43-45). Here, Yellowhammer’s diction blatantly frames his daughter as if she were gold to be hoarded, or a commodity to be taken out of circulation. Moreover, after blocking Moll’s attempt to escape with Touchwood Junior, Maudline announces to Sir Walter that “I have brought your jewel by the hair,” again invoking her daughter’s monetary value (4.2.64). That Maudline labels Moll as Sir Walter’s jewel (emphasized by the pronoun “your”) also stresses Moll’s status as a possession through which Sir Walter can ultimately profit.

Not only do Moll’s parents perceive of her as a commodity, but her suitor Sir Walter expresses a similar attitude in that Moll’s desirability stems from her exchange-value, in the form not only of her dowry but also her virginity. Sir Walter’s motives are entirely economic: Roh describes that the marriage of Sir Walter and Moll would enact “a negotiation between status and monied interests” (191). Sir Walter’s sole desire for financial advantage becomes especially apparent when he rejoices the imminence of the marriage ceremony and the impending profit he will derive from it:

   I never was so near my wish, as this chance
   Makes me; ere tomorrow noon,
   I shall receive two thousand pound in gold,
   And a sweet maidenhead
   Worth forty. (4.2.90-94)

It is not only the wealth associated with Moll’s dowry (“two thousand pound in gold”) that Sir Walter seeks to possess, but he also valuates her virginity. In Cheapside, virginity
is an especially desirable commodity; in Sir Walter’s description, Moll’s virginity
denotes monetary value.

It is also noteworthy that Moll’s commodification is often expressed in terms of
gold. Newman identifies the special place that gold played in the cultural imaginary of
both early modern England and in the more general development of Western capitalism
(238). Gold is the standard with which all commodities’ exchange-values are measured,
and it therefore serves as “a purely ideal of notional form” (Newman 239). When it seems
that Moll will not recover from her illness, Tim pronounces that “Gold into white money
was never so changed/ As is my sister’s colour into paleness” (5.2.20-21). Tim thus
expresses Moll’s decreased value in monetary terms, with gold being the most prized
form. As a goldsmith, Yellowhammer’s labor itself consists of crafting gold into luxury
commodities for profit; similarly, he attempts to frame Moll as one of his valuable wares.
And because gold plays such a key role in commodity circulation through its attachment
to endless forms of equivalence, its repeated mention in various contexts of the play also
suggests the heavy conflation of market processes and social relations. Similarly, Sir
Walter seeks to wed his niece, the Welsh Gentlewoman, to the Yellowhammers’ son Tim
and proclaims to her that “I bring thee up to turn thee into gold, wench…” (1.1.98). Sir
Walter’s remark here is exemplary of the commodity circuit of exchange, in which one
buys in order to sell—just as he intends to sell his niece. Furthermore, associating his
niece with “gold” reflects the same connection between woman and capital as observed
in the discussion of Moll. And because Newman describes gold as the most pure form
through which other commodities are measured, gold also associates with virginity’s
unequaled value. In this way, Sir Walter’s comment takes on an additional meaning, as
we learn later in the scene that he plans to pass his niece off as a virgin (the Welsh Gentlewoman is actually a prostitute). The discourse of woman’s interchangeability with gold therefore not only stresses the blurring of commerce and human relationships, but also the valuation of virginity as the ideal commodity.

The Yellowhammers similarly view their male son Tim as a business asset; yet their main focus regarding his marriage centers on the Welsh Gentlewoman, or in other words, the woman’s high exchange-value. Both the Yellowhammers and Tim repeatedly equate the Welsh Gentlewoman with the resources her family will provide, continually referencing the nineteen mountains and multiple cattle to her name (3.2.127-129, 4.1.93-94, 5.4.104-106). Highlighting further the woman’s status as commodity, Roh emphasizes that Tim observes no difference between the Welsh Gentlewoman and a jade (meaning a horse), with both being objects of exchange (214). In this scene, Tim declares:

I bought a jade at Cambridge,
I’ll let her out to execution tutor,
For eighteen pence a day, or Brainford horse races;
She’ll serve to carry seven miles out of town well. (5.4.95-97)

His words here not only equate the woman with an animal raised in order to be sold as commodity, but also suggest a double entendre in that his dealing of the horse mimics hiring out his wife as a prostitute (Brissenden 105). And on top of the obsession with her dowry, The Welsh Gentlewoman is never even labeled with a proper name, stressing her status as an impersonal object circulated within the marketplace. Instead, the adjective
“Welsh” recalls the cattle included in her dowry, as “runts” were associated with Wales (Brissenden 72). In this way, the Welsh Gentleman becomes defined by her exchange-value and even takes on a carnal, animalistic association. Further intensifying her bestial depiction, Tim declares to the Welsh Gentlewoman that “Tis a true saying, there’s nothing tastes so sweet as your Welsh mutton” (4.1.163). He continues his sexual pun by commenting “It was reported you could sing,” and he even comments that “…before I marry/ I would see all my wife’s good parts at once,/ To view how rich I were” (163, 165-167). The woman’s association with consumption (denoted by the term “mutton,” also slang for a loose woman) is followed here by the commodification of her body. Tim speaks of how “rich” he will once he consumes the Welsh Gentlewoman, implying the value of her body parts in terms of both economics and sex. The men view women as excessive consumers, but also as “mutton” for consumption.

Moll and Touchwood Junior exemplify what Barber terms “a norm of human relations,” in contrast to the economically-driven attitudes exemplified by Mr. and Mrs. Yellowhammer, Tim, and Sir Walter; Touchwood Junior’s interest in Moll is inspired by love rather than any concern with her dowry (6). Moll and Touchwood Junior successfully marry in the last scene, and Sir Walter even ends up in debtors’ prison. Like The Shoemaker’s Holiday, the play concludes with a joyous feast and a celebration of marriage, and its conclusion appears to imply that the young lovers’ values triumph over the consumerist attitudes that frame Moll as a commodity. However, while Newman notes that many critics have moralized Middleton’s play using love as a means to overcome the commercial mindsets of Sir Walter and the Yellowhammers, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside cannot erase the tensions caused by these capitalist-driven attitudes.
Barber observes in his evaluation of the play’s conclusion that “The conventional happy ending is undermined by Yellowhammer’s reflection on the economy of having two weddings for the price of one” (4). Wells similarly describes that the “fairytale plot of marriage” becomes a story of greed, rather than a portrayal of love triumphing over consumerism (58). In the end, Yellowhammer stresses that he has still found a way to profit off of the marriage through his final declaration: “So fortune seldom deals two marriages/ With one hand, and both lucky. The best is,/ One feast will serve them both…” (5.6.123-125). Ultimately, love cannot prevail over consumerist mindsets in the world of Cheapside.

As in The Roaring Girl, Moll Yellowhammer, who shares the same name as the protagonist of Dekker and Middleton’s earlier play, refuses to commodify her sex. Yet the Moll of A Chaste Maid in Cheapside seeks to resist such treatment by securing her own desired marriage, rather than condemning the institution. By wedding Touchwood Junior, Moll escapes her parents’ efforts to sell her chastity in exchange for Sir Walter’s land and wealth, but it is debatable whether this self-chosen union allows Moll to effectively resist her commodification. Roh interprets Moll’s rebellion as “an urgency of an alternative to the tyrannical convention of exchange between men;” from this perspective, Moll does exhibit a means of resistance (212). However, Gail Paster argues that Moll’s marriage ultimately restricts her and leaves her contained (62). As Maudline asserts in the very first scene, “But ‘tis a husband solders up all cracks,” as if to comment on a woman’s total obedience once married (1.1.31). And recalling Federici’s argument, marriage ensures the woman’s overwhelming economic dependence and containment once her own labor is devalued as unworthy of a wage. Although Moll might dodge her
parents’ overt attempts to treat her sex as a commodity, the contemporary economic system will not allow her to escape commodification; within the bond of marriage, a man obtains a wife and then profits from her unpaid reproductive and domestic labor. In this light, marriage becomes like a form of prostitution itself, in which the woman trades her sexual availability for financial security (Leinwand 141). This is not to suggest that Touchwood Junior will consciously treat Moll as commodity after their union; rather, the division of labor and wage system governing contemporary London ensures the woman’s economic dependence on her husband, as well as his ability to profit from his wife’s unpaid labor. And as I will continue to argue in the case of Mistress Allwit within the following sections, if the married woman does try to assert an economic presence (either in terms of the traditional marketplace, or within the sexually governed market of Middleton’s play), she suffers a whorish and grotesque portrayal.

**The Allwits: A Contented Cuckold and a Woman’s Manipulation of her Commodity**

Another subplot very visibly treats the woman and her body as commodity: the triangular relationship between Mr. Allwit, his wife, and Sir Walter. Allwit takes advantage of Mistress Allwit’s affair with Sir Walter by proudly allowing her to offer up her sex as a commodity. In city comedy, husbands who utilize their wives’ sexual favors towards other men for financial gain are called wittols, or knowing cuckolds; Rossini describes this practice as the “most explicit commodification of the woman’s body” (92). In exchange for his wife’s sex, Sir Walter provides the family with children and wealth. Recalling the Welsh Gentlewoman’s own animalistic status, Allwit keeps his wife as if she were a form of livestock whose service he exchanges for the free upkeep his family

---

12 See page 5 for an explanation of Federici’s discussion surrounding this phenomenon.
and of his livelihood (Roh 206). Roh goes on to explain Allwit’s role as wittol in terms of commodity circulation, where the profit Allwit receives in exchange for his wife’s sexual favors outweighs the social stigma tied to cuckoldry:

Allwit’s wittolry is initially a kind of artisan production, the commodity of which is exchanged in equivalence: Allwit (the seller/wittol) is paid the full value of his commodity (wife/sexed property), in that Sir Walter (customer/thief) takes the burden of the husband in the household and the sexual economy. Allwit’s loss of social credit is compensated by the gain of wealth extracted from Sir Walter (customer/gull). (207-208)

As emphasized by Roh’s thorough explanation, Allwit is willing to sacrifice his own social reputation and masculinity in order to prostitute his wife: through Allwit’s character, Middleton demonstrates an exaggerated and absurd manifestation of commodification, as if to literalize the view of marriage as prostitution. Allwit describes his contentment with how he has profited from the exchange in his soliloquy in Scene 1, as he happily boasts that

Her sugar by whole loaves, her wines by rundlets.
I see these things, but like a happy man,
I pay for none at all, yet fools think’s mine;
I have the name, and in his gold I shine. (1.2.38-41)

Allwit’s satisfaction with the benefit derived from his wife’s commodification contrasts sharply with the outward condemnation of such behavior in The Shoemaker’s Holiday; recall how Ralph asks “Dost thou think a shoemaker is so/ base to be a bawd to his own
for commodity?” (18.83-84) Less than twenty years later, Middleton’s play instead communicates a masculine comfort in expressing such consumerist attitudes towards their women, as if these attitudes are the norm.

However, the men are not the only ones who profit from the transformation of their wives’ or daughters’ sex into commodity form. Rather than resist her commodification, Mistress Allwit uses it to her own advantage. She serves not merely as a pawn within Allwit’s scheme, but rather actively and willingly participates in it. In 5.1, once Sir Walter no longer can provide the family with wealth or land, Mistress Allwit strategically declares that she must obey her husband and condemns the knight. In other words, once the Kixes’ estate will pass onto their offspring rather than to Sir Walter, Mistress Allwit realizes the commodification of her sex will no longer bring the family an advantage. She suddenly performs the role of the faithful wife, declaring to Sir Walter that she “must obey [her] husband” (5.1.131). She then plays along with Mr. Allwit’s attack on the knight by denying any intimacy with Sir Walter: “I’ll see him hanged first; I defy him,/ And all such gentlemen in the like extremity” (5.1.156-157). Ingrid Hotz-Davies contends that Mistress Allwit’s lack of feeling suggests a “carefree, unproblematic prostitution in which everyone lives happily ever after” (32). However, I would instead suggest that the focus be directed upon Mistress Allwit’s ability to tactically benefit from the commodification of her body only when it is profitable; rather than exposing a lack of feeling, her behavior here demonstrates her knowing and skillful participation within the economic scheme. Just as Maudline Yellowhammer contributes as actively as her husband to Moll’s treatment as a good on the marriage market, Mistress Allwit willingly adopts a consumerist-driven mindset, privileging material gain over all
else. While Moll’s exchange value derives from her virginity, here Mistress Allwit’s offering of sexual favors garners profit—and she seeks to capitalize on this fact. In this way, Mistress Allwit’s behavior contrasts markedly from a character such Moll in *The Roaring Girl*; rather than speak out against her husband’s prostitution of her body, she perpetuates it.

Leinwand points out that Mistress Allwit comes across as cold and ruthless in her own manipulation of sex as commodity (168). I have argued that she is cunning and capable in her awareness of the role she must play, but as the play progresses, her husband’s comments depict Mistress Allwit as an increasingly unattractive character. Such an observation is especially applicable to the christening scene of Mrs. Allwit’s daughter, in which Allwit mocks his wife’s voracious appetites:

> These women have no consciences at sweet-meats…No mar’l I heard a citizen complain once that his wife’s belly only broke his back: mine had been all in fitters seven years since, but for this worthy knight that with a prop upholds my wife and me, and all my estate buried in Bucklersbury. (3.2.69, 72-76)

When Allwit describes the wife’s belly as breaking her husband’s back, he refers simultaneously to her greed and lust. A large belly could signify both pregnancy (implying sexual activity) and a full stomach (as a sign of excessive consumption); in both cases, the quote implies a woman’s uncontrollable appetites. Fortunately for Allwit, Sir Walter has taken care of his wife’s expenses and the costs of her christenings by serving as the “prop” that supports the family’s well-being. Otherwise, Allwit’s back
would be in “fitters” or fragments, utilizing more physical imagery to emphasize the sexualized and carnal image of the woman and her over-sized belly.

Moreover, Mistress Allwit speaks only sparingly throughout the play, and the bulk of her lines occur solely in 5.1, once Sir Walter has lost his land and she denies having relations with him. Here, Sir Walter refers to her as a “loathsome strumpet,” an “unconscionable woman,” a “foul whore,” and he wishes upon her “the common misery of an English strumpet” (5.1.38, 41, 110, 113). These repeated accusations of whoredom leave audience members to ponder Mistresses Allwit’s loose sexuality, rather than to admire her skill in manipulating the sexual economy. Moreover, the Allwits decide at the end of the play to move to the Strand, and Allwit insinuates that the new house will serve as a brothel: “We are simply stocked with cloth of tissue cushions,/ To furnish out bay windows: push, what not that’s quaint/ And costly, from top to bottom” (5.1.171-73). As Brissenden notes, Allwit’s use of the word “quaint” (and its suggestion of “cunt”) communicates his intention to establish the brothel-house (95). In addition, “bay windows” refers back to the notion of the visible woman and her association to prostitution, and it is Mistress Allwit herself who suggests moving to the Strand, a place notorious for courtesans (Brissenden 95). While Mistress Allwit might be a more active participant in the play’s sexual economy, she likewise becomes linked with uncontrollable sexual appetites and prostitution. Just as Allwit prostitutes his wife (who willingly complies), and the play suggests that their new home will become an actual brothel. In this way, Middleton satirizes the very nature of marriage itself as a form of prostitution, where the woman must exchange sex for economic security.
Like Mistress Allwit, a male character Touchwood Senior utilizes his sex as a profitable commodity. Taking advantage of his remarkable fertility, he impregnates the barren Lady Kix in exchange for financial reward from her husband Sir Oliver. For the Kixes, Touchwood Senior’s fertility is a commodity which also allows them to profit; it produces a child who will inherit their land and keep it in the family name (otherwise, this land will pass to Sir Walter). Just as Mistress Allwit does, Touchwood Senior offers his sex as an object of exchange within the marketplace in order to support his family. However, the play’s characters (and by association, the playwrights) portray Touchwood Senior in a positive light; he is never linked with promiscuity or lewdness as Mistress Allwit is. Instead, Touchwood Senior announces the marriage of Moll and his younger brother in what serves as the lengthiest speech of the last scene, reflecting his newfound position of power. As the scene progresses, Sir Oliver also glorifies him:

I am so endeared to thee for my wife’s fruitfulness
That I charge you both, your wife and thee,
To live no more asunder for the world’s frowns;
I have purse, and, and board for you: Be not afraid to go to your business roundly,
Get children, and I’ll keep them. (5.4.78-83)

Touchwood Senior thus profits by gaining monetary wealth and support for both himself and his family. Although Sir Oliver fails to realize that Touchwood Senior himself has impregnated Lady Kix (he believes that a special liquid is cause for the success), the key point here is that the play ends depicting Touchwood Senior as potent, virile, and even heroic. Moreover, Paster’s article on the “leaky” women within Cheapside points out that
while urinary references and water symbolism signify feminine lack of restraint, Touchwood Senior’s association with water (through both the “water” he administers to the Kixes and his literal semen) has economic value and denotes power (60). It is noteworthy that Touchwood Senior sells his sex strictly for procreation, whereas the transaction between Mistress Allwit and Sir Walter involves sex for pleasure; not only is it inappropriate that Mistress Allwit sells her sex, but by doing so not solely for purposes of reproduction she further solidifies her association with prostitution. Regardless of each character’s motives, Touchwood Senior’s effective manipulation within the sexual economy encourages an admirable representation in contrast to Mistress Allwit’s grotesque portrayal. Moreover, the celebration of Touchwood Senior becomes especially interesting in light of Federici’s discussion of men’s ability to profit from women’s reproductive labor by deeming it as a natural resource. Touchwood Senior and Mistress Allwit both engage in reproductive labor; but while the former profits immensely, it is always Allwit whose gain is emphasized in regards to his wife’s commodification (as emphasized by his aforementioned soliloquy in 1.2, where he delivers 46 lines boasting just how much he has benefited from the scenario). Although Mistress Allwit certainly does profit, audiences only explicitly hear about the advantages her husband gains, as if to reaffirm that the woman’s labor should not be recognized as financially lucrative.

---

13 Merry Wiesner explains the contemporary Catholic belief that sex was only acceptable within marriage as a means of procreation, while Protestant thought instead depicted sex as a means of “increasing spousal affection.” The approval of marital sexuality did not diminish females’ dangerous sexuality however, and sexual activities were only permissible when within marriage and when considered “natural” (58).
“Chaste Maids” or “Chased Maids”: The Problematic Standard of Chasity within the Sexual Economy of Cheapside

It is therefore clear that sex becomes conflated with commodity circulation throughout *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Daughters, wives, and even some male characters come to be viewed as objects through which a man or a woman can profit; yet an interesting tension arises in that although sex is traded for financial gain, women are still expected to be “chaste maids.” The title itself plays upon this oxymoronic notion; the heightened blurring of sexual and commercial relations in Cheapside would have ensured the rarity of finding a chaste maid there (Newman 238). The scarcity of pure, virginal women in Cheapside thus ensures Moll’s high value. Yet at the same time, audiences would have recognized the pun on the phrase “chaste maid” as also signifying “chased maid,” implying prostitution (Rossini 92). Rossini proposes that this play on words “suggests the paradox or hypocrisy rather of a society that tries to make chastity a marketable commodity like everything else while condemning and punishing the prostitutes’ selling of her own body” (92). In the commercial center of Cheapside, where sex comes to associate so markedly with profit, prostitution of a woman’s body becomes an economic reality and a means of survival for many women. As Moll reminds audiences in *The Roaring Girl*, prostitution is a necessity for some women, especially when considering the devaluation of their labor as real and worthy of earning a wage. But the women who engage in the newly emerging sexual economy make themselves visible and are framed by the playwrights and the male characters as whorish, lewd, and undesirable. Chastity in the play therefore comes not only to refer to sexual behavior but

---

14 Leinwand points out that the transmission of property was contingent upon the legitimacy of heirs, and it was therefore essential that a man could be certain both of his wife’s chastity before marriage and her fidelity during it (141).
also to an abstinence from visible participation in economic affairs, just as strongly as it
does throughout *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* and *The Roaring Girl*. But in *A Chaste Maid
of Cheapside*, the question of knowable chastity becomes especially anxiety-provoking in
a marketplace that is so completely infiltrated with sexual exchange.

Further amplifying the anxiety surrounding chastity, *A Chaste Maid of Cheapside*
features women who emerge into public spaces of the market. The play itself opens with
the exchange between two women— Maudline and Moll—and the stage direction
indicates “a shop being discovered,” immediately linking women to the marketplace.
Similarly to *The Roaring Girl*’s shop scenes involving the shopkeeper wives, women’s
visibility in the market motivate men to transform them into articles for sale themselves
as a means of overshadowing their economic contributions (Sullivan 32). Similarly, Sally
Anglin notes that

> Women became more visible outside of the home, in family-owned shops
> or working in the markets, but even as they were, in many ways,
> physically less limited, they were forced to remain at the social margins,
> risking harassment or accusation of crimes such as prostitution or
> engrossing. (21)

On top of women’s appearances in the marketplace, Paster notes that the very nature of
Cheapside’s economy, with the fluctuation of commodity form and commercial relations,
opens the categories of class and gender to structural redefinition (56). Women’s
problematic visibility, amplified by the fluidity of commodity exchange, fosters an
environment in which the notion of chastity becomes all the more important as a means of ensuring female obedience and containment.

In spite of Cheapside’s preoccupation with sexual exchange, men’s anxieties over such containment permeate the play, especially in response to women’s unrestrained sexual behaviors. Paster proposes that the women’s inability to control their bladders or bodily secretions reflects their problematic “female uncontrol” (54). The infamous christening scene invokes a sense of the women’s exceptionally uncontrolled sexual appetites; Allwit describes his wife and the Puritan gossips as sexually overpowering and ravenous as they stuff their mouths and pockets with meat. As he observes:

Now out comes all the tasseled handkerchers,
They are spread abroad between their knees already;
Now in goes the long fingers that are washed
Some thrice a day with urine—my wife uses it—
Now we shall have such pocketing;
See how they lurch at the lower end. (3.2.56-63)

Allwit’s depiction of the women portrays them as disturbingly uncontained. They “lurch” in order to claim as much food as possible for themselves, again invoking the connection between women and excessive consumption. Moreover, Allwit’s diction is loaded with sexual puns and innuendos; the women’s handkerchiefs are spread between their knees, and “the lower end” references not only the far end of the room but also bodily imagery. The phrase “Now in go the long fingers,” immediately following the image of the handkerchiefs spread between the women’s knees, even suggests female masturbation
and invokes the objectionable notion of sex as pleasure rather than procreation. Allwit’s mention of the “urine” on the women’s fingers also reflects back upon Paster’s examination of women’s inabilities to control their secretions. Through the association invoked by the handkerchief that his own wife uses, Paster demonstrates that Allwit sees the female gossips “in a sisterly collusion with his prolific wife,” including his wife within this group of greedy consumers and lustful figures (58).

Drawing added attention to women’s sensuality and openness, one cannot ignore the play’s context: *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* takes place during Lent, a forty-day period devoted to fasting and penitence in commemoration of Christ (Brissenden xxvi). Lenten values such as the restraint of appetites juxtapose the fluid and unbounded marketplace of Cheapside itself, as if the city comes to resemble the grotesque image of the mobile, open female body (Roh 193). Relatedly, frequent references to consumption, especially of meat or “mutton” also pervade Cheapside. The consumption of meat was forbidden during Lent, as hilariously emphasized in 2.2 when the Wench (one of the many women Touchwood Senior has impregnated) tricks a group of promoters by leaving them her bastard child hidden under a slab of mutton. The promoters confiscate meat from others only to consume it themselves; as Allwit notes in reference to these men, “This Lent will fat the whoresons up with sweetbread/ And lard their whores with lamb-stones” (2.2.68-69). By anticipating that the promoters will intercept her meat, the Wench takes advantage of their consumerist attitudes and calls to attention their hypocrisy. Although only a tangential episode in contrast to the play’s more central plots, this scene not only amplifies Middleton’s satirical tone but also mirrors the contradictory and even hypocritical nature of women’s treatment in the play: the promoters preach the
prohibition of meat but attempt to consume it themselves, just as visible women within the marketplace are condemned as whores by consumerist male characters who simultaneously frame female chastity and virginity as commodities on display.

Although he puts on the appearance of being entirely in control of his wife’s affair with Sir Walter, Allwit’s comments during the christening scene suggest anxiety over the open exchange of his wife’s body and her sexual behavior. What sets Mistress Allwit’s commodification apart from other female characters is that she actively takes part in it—an agency that results in her unrestrained and whorish portrayal in a context where chastity and sexual purity supposedly remain supreme values. Mistress Allwit’s association with excess here resembles Margery’s unrestrained appetites for luxury items in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* as well as the shopkeeper wives’ insatiable sex drive in *The Roaring Girl*, all of which communicate male discomfort with women’s visibility in economic relations; an anxiety they draw out by depicting these women as grotesque and impure. Furthermore, the final lines of the play also draw attention to chastity as synonymous with decreased visibility and economic containment, as the Welsh Gentlewoman (whose status as a whore has been exposed) declares that marriage will make her honest (117). Following marriage, laws of coverture ensure the Welsh Gentlewoman’s economic dependence on Tim; and as Federici points out, marriage further limits her to the private domestic space by de-valuing her labor as wage-less work. But even marriage cannot truly make the woman chaste; as the Allwit plot clearly demonstrates, marriage itself becomes like a form of prostitution, and Mistress Allwit’s

---

15 Amy Louise Erickson explains the contemporary law of coverture in that “Under common law a woman’s legal identity was eclipsed—literally covered—by her husband in marriage. The property she brought to a marriage (dowry or portion) all came under immediate control of her husband” (24)
loose sexually and unrestrained appetites are heavily emphasized as if to draw out this tension.

What makes Moll especially marketable within the play’s sexualized marketplace is her chastity, and her sexual purity becomes a main selling point. Interestingly, as Newman points out however, “Moll’s mother seems to view her daughter’s chastity as undesirable and unlikely to win her a husband” (238). Maudline attacks her daughter’s dullness and accuses Moll of having forgotten her “dancing,” in contrast to her own “lightsome and quick” spirit at Moll’s age (1.1.8-12). Clearly, Maudline’s speech contains sexual innuendo, with “quick” referring to pregnancy. As a female character, Maudline seems to acknowledge the economic advantage that Moll might gain by marketing her procreative body. Yet the male characters constantly stress the value of Moll’s virginity, and Sir Walter also attempts to frame his niece as sexually pure: he tells her that “Here you must pass for a pure virgin” (103). Although Moll Yellowhammer may not visibly participate in the traditional notion of the economy, she does assert her own agency within the “marriage market” (through which her parents try to profit off of the sale of her dowry and her chastity). While the value of Moll’s chastity is emphasized throughout the play, when she tries to escape the home in order to elope with Touchwood Junior (thus expressing agency within the marriage market), Tim refers to her as a “mermaid” and Yellowhammer labels her an “impudent strumpet,” both serving as labels for whoredom (4.2.67, 71). In other words, when Moll tries to visibly participate in the sexually conflated marketplace on her own terms, the male characters depict her as a whore, as if she has tarnished her chaste reputation. Moreover, Moll’s escape from the

---

16 Paster’s emphasis upon water and liquid as symbols of “female uncontrol” also apply to Moll’s escape by boat and Tim’s label of her as a “mermaid.”
confines of the home reflect Anglin’s assertions regarding threatening public visibility as an indicator of prostitution; Yellowhammer and Tim do not merely condemn Moll’s disobedience, but rather describe her in terms suggesting sexual promiscuity.

Newman suggests that the family’s outraged reaction communicates anxiety over the endless circulation of commodities in the newly capitalist economy (245). Recalling Agnew’s concept of the increasingly boundless and abstract concept of the market, a more encompassing and less concrete definition of this space threatens men’s ability to contain women’s appearances there. Yet by commodifying the women, the male characters of the play (and even some female characters) constantly reintroduce them into the market, perpetuating the very system of fluid market exchange that causes their anxiety. Just as Moll’s family markets her chastity as a valuable commodity, they simultaneously condemn her own assertions of visibility within the marriage market as a marker of promiscuity. Such a system makes it difficult for a woman to uphold the virtue of chastity when her presence within the market of sexual exchange is made inevitable by virtue of her commodification.

Conclusion

Returning back to the discussion of woman’s commodification, the marriage scene at the end of *A Chaste Maid of Cheapside* ultimately reinscribes both the Welsh Gentlewoman and Moll herself to commodity form through Yellowhammer’s insistence on the bargain of the “two-for-one” marriage; his comment reasserts marriage as an economic transaction in which the family gains an advantage through the exchange of their daughter. Moll becomes threatening when she appears to circulate openly as an
object of exchange (as emphasized by her attempt to leave the home), yet her father relies on her commodification to profit. Therefore, she must operate as a commodity only under his control; as a free-floating good of exchange, she is dangerously uncontrolled and even jeopardizes the important market value of her chastity by virtue of her visibility. In this way, the theater exposes the difficulty in reconciling women’s roles within an emerging capitalist economic system that is on one hand so concerned with the profitability of sex but on the other is heavily preoccupied with women’s chastity, invisibility, and containment. The sexual transactions and excessive consumption depicted on stage during Lent, a time of fasting and bodily restraint, visually reflect the fraught and even absurd position of the women of Cheapside. Despite a common impulse to moralize Middleton’s play as simply a warning against greed or consumerism,17 *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* does not offer a simple alternative for women who must remain “chaste maids” yet who live in a city environment where men’s commodification of their bodies and their sex fashions them into “chased maids.”

*A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* stands out from the two previously examined plays in terms of its bitingly satirical tone. In contrast to the light-hearted and bawdy humor that characterizes *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*, Middleton’s play presents a world entirely saturated with consumption and perverse human relationships, as exemplified by scenes such as the christening and the interaction in which the promoters unknowingly intercept the Wench’s child. Through characters who commodify women and sex so blatantly (such as Allwit, Sir Walter, and Yellowhammer), Middleton fully exposes a world in

17 Newman notes that many critics have moralized Middleton’s play by seeking to distinguish between the sordidness and commercial values of the Yellowhammers/Allwits and the triumph of Moll and Touchwood’s love and fidelity” (243).
which even the sacred institution of marriage becomes a form of prostitution. What sets *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* especially apart from *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* and *The Roaring Girl* is the way the women so actively try participate in the commodification of their bodies, whether it be a figure such as Mistress Allwit who tries to profit off of her sexual favors (whether for financial support or pleasure) or Maudline Yellowhammer who seeks to take advantage of her daughter’s virginal status. In a capitalist system where, as Federici points out, men seek to keep the woman confined within the domestic sphere as a natural resource, the idea that she too can profit from her commodification becomes problematic and anxiety-provoking. The theater is an ideal place to stage such concerns, as by nature it displays contradictions regarding visibility and female participation—women attended the public theater as visible consumers and were showcased as characters onstage, yet were prohibited from acting on the stage themselves. Such a contradictory scenario reflects the desired portrayal of women in city comedy: invisible as a wage-earner, yet visible as an eroticized object of display.

The final scene’s image of Moll Yellowhammer emerging from a coffin after feigning her death particularly brings to light the conflict over woman’s visibility; here, the character Moll appears to break free from containment and to enter the marketplace of Cheapside on her own terms. Yet one must note that a boy actor would have been playing Moll’s role, as if to highlight the illusion of Moll’s independence. And Moll leaves the coffin in order to marry, thus ensuring her economic dependence and the perpetuation of her commodification within a capitalist economic system that frames marriage as if it were a form of prostitution itself. It is not as if women are helpless within the economy of Cheapside, as characters such as Mrs. Allwit and Moll do clearly exercise agency.
Similarly, in the world of the theater, women figured prominently in clothing trades on which it depended upon, and they served as actual participants in playhouse housekeeping. However, it is the men who most visibly profit in Cheapside, just as male characters visibly dominate the actual stage. And the men of the play represent chastity as a most desired commodity, thus situating the woman within the marketplace while simultaneously linking marketplace visibility with prostitution and unrestrained appetites. *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* fully embodies this strain: its saturation with sexual exchanges and images of consumption, countered by its Lenten context and expectations of women’s chastity, illustrates just how vexed women’s roles within London’s nascent capitalist economy had become.

---

18 Korda notes that although women’s economic participation in the theater was hampered by licensed trades, “they turned to London’s shadow economies to earn a living as second-hand clothing dealers, pawnbrokers, peddlers or hawkers, servicing the theater in this capacity… housewives thus not only served as metatheatrical emblems of theatrical housekeeping, but were themselves participants in the work it involved” (9).
CONCLUSION

In response to the marked increase of luxury commodities available for sale in the London marketplace, women of the early modern period were targeted both as primary consumers of goods and as goods themselves. As a uniquely visual medium, the theater became a primary means of grappling with the changing market and with women’s roles within this new world of commercial exchange. Recalling Agnew’s association between the theater and the market, the London stage allowed playwrights to reproduce the representational difficulties of the marketplace; just as the marketplace’s visibility was becoming increasingly compromised, so too was the theater acquiring connotations of concealment and artificiality. Adding an additional layer of tension, women’s visible presence within both the market and the theater threatened the consolidation of gender roles that sought to relegate women to the home by devaluing their reproductive and domestic labor. As Dekker and Middleton’s plays showcase, the male characters of city comedy often deal with women’s appearances in the marketplace by reducing them to passive commodities, whether unconsciously as in *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* or purposefully and even boastfully in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Yet although such commodification may not physically situate the woman in the public marketplace, it at least circulates her within the conceptual market; as Sullivan comments, “while women may be removed from the marketplace, they cannot be removed from the market…” (38). Similarly, while the all-male stage undoubtedly gestures towards a desire to ensure women’s invisibility, scholars such as Korda and Newman have stressed that women attended, consumed, and even participated in the production of plays; and in order to gain revenue, plays often depended on the staging of popular female characters.
Moreover, Peter Stallybrass connects the fluidity of the early modern market to the grotesque, uncontained female body that should be subjected to constant surveillance (124, 126). As Dekker and Middleton’s plays demonstrate, women who do venture into the public realm of the marketplace such as Margery Eyre and Mistresses Gallipot, Openwork, and Allwit suffer characterization as hyper-sexualized, grotesque, and insatiable—as if to take on the same qualities of this unrestricted market. Only when women do not work (aside from their domestic labor, classified as “non-work”) can they achieve a chaste image, one that leaves them fully dependent upon their husbands economically. Moll Cutpurse of *The Roaring Girl* challenges this binary in her rejection against the commodification of her body and of marriage, yet the play’s Epilogue attempts ultimately to frame her as the commodity through which Dekker and Middleton profit. This conclusion draws attention not only to city comedy’s preoccupation with commodity exchange but also with the problem of reducing women to commodities; although the Epilogue portrays Moll as commodity, it also ensures that she will be passed back into circulation once the play ends, thus freeing her from strictly male control (as both male and female audiences would have consumed her character). Still, Moll is an exceptional character whose economic livelihood is never actually established or explained, and two years later, in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Middleton presents us with the characterizations of femininity that associate economic activity with prostitution—and the alternative is complete dependence upon the husband through marriage laws and a contemporary economic system that devalues woman’s work and comes to represent a form of prostitution in itself. Still, this later play differs from Dekker’s turn-of-the-century production in that men and women alike participate in their
commodification; however, women’s increased agency is shadowed by male anxieties that frame such behavior as sexually transgressive.

Thus, the early modern theater becomes an ideal medium for staging and trying to make sense of the abstraction of commodity exchange, and interactions between male and female characters reflect the strong influence of emergent capitalism on these relationships. As a defining feature of city comedy, men’s commodification of women reflects anxieties over women’s visibility and participation within this shifting economic system. And as argued throughout these chapters, the men of city comedy only perpetuate such a tension by introducing women into the market as objects of exchange while insisting upon their invisibility as productive laborers. Howard optimistically proposes that the theater might play a role in resolving this fraught scenario for women:

The public theatre was not a ritual space, but a commercial venture. Citizens’ wives who went to this theatre might, at one extreme, be invited by its fictions to take up positions of chastity, silence, and obedience, but at another extreme by its commercial practices they were positioned as consumers, critics, spectators, and spectacles. The theatre as a social institution signified change. It blurred the boundaries between degrees and genders by having men of low estate wear the clothes of noblemen and of women, and by having one’s money, not one’s blood or title, decide how high and how well one sat, or whether, indeed, one stood. To go to the theatre was, in short, to be positioned at the crossroads of cultural change and contradiction—and this seems to me especially true for the middle-
class female playgoer, who by her practices was calling into question the “place” of woman (440).

By virtue of her status as a playgoer and thus a consumer, the woman in this context certainly does challenge the consolidation of gender roles which seeks to keep her confined from the economic sphere. However, one must remember that the real Mary Frith was arrested when she attempted to appear on the public stage. While Dekker and Middleton utilize Frith as commodity by profiting from the public display of her character, her own attempts at asserting visibility are ultimately suppressed. Such a reality reflects the very conflict with commodification in city comedy: men insist upon the women’s invisibility as economic participants, while at the same time framing them as visible objects of consumption—a contemporary tension that redemptive forces such as love and holiday cannot neatly overcome or resolve.
WORKS CITED


---- The Shoemakers Holiday, or The Gentle Craft. With the humorous life of Simon Eyre, shoemaker, and Lord Maior of London. As it was acted before the Queenes most excellent Majestie on New-years day at night last, by the right honourable the Earle of Notingham, Lord high Admirall of England, his servants. London, 1600.

--- *The Roaring Girle, or Moll Cut-Purse. As it hathe lately beene Acted on the Fortune-stage by the Prince his Players*. London, 1611.


*Hic Mulier: or, The Man-Woman: Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminine of our Times. Exprest in a brief Declamation.* London, 1620.


CURRICULUM VITAE
KRISTIN WEISE

EDUCATION

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem NC
MA, English
(Expected) May 2015
GPA: 3.9

University of Connecticut, Storrs CT
BA, English & Psychology
May 2013
GPA: 4.0

RELATED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Writing Center Tutor/Graduate Assistant
Wake Forest University Writing Center, Winston-Salem NC
Tutor
Counseling Program for Intercollegiate Athletes
University of Connecticut, Storrs CT
Technology Intern
Connecticut Writing Project
University of Connecticut, Storrs CT