

**Women in Play:**  
**Queering Patriarchal Economies in Early English Drama**

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
University of Manitoba  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by  
Judith R. Anderson

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## ABSTRACT

“Women in Play: Queering Patriarchal Economies in Early English Drama” addresses the division in literary scholarship between the medieval and Renaissance periods by considering the categories for women in the drama of both periods. Despite the “grand master narrative,” identified by Lee Patterson as the cause of the marginalization of medieval studies, and despite the perception that the spiritual subject matter of the medieval cycle drama is opposed to the secular subject matter of Renaissance drama, the categories for women are constructed by, and necessary to, the “economies” of both medieval spiritual and Renaissance secular dramas. In the medieval cycles, these categories serve to instantiate a patriarchal religious economy of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection; in Renaissance drama, these categories serve to validate a patriarchal marriage economy. When read in the context of queer theory, however, these categories – Virgin, Whore, and Wife – and by extension, dramatic periods, not only come to signify their own inefficacy as meaningful categories, but signal the problematic nature of having such categories in play at all.

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For my family, past and present,  
in all of its delightfully queer permutations.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Chapter One

Introduction: "Queering the 'Master Narrative'" .....	1
---	---

## Chapter Two

"Queering the Patriarchal Spiritual Economy in Medieval Drama" .....	25
--	----

## Chapter Three

"Queering the Patriarchal Secular Economy in Renaissance Drama" .....	48
---	----

## Chapter Four

Conclusion: "Queering Medieval and Renaissance Drama" .....	72
---	----

Works Cited .....	74
-------------------	----

## Introduction:

### Queering the "Master Narrative"

In the medieval cycle drama "The Annunciation" (Wakefield), Joseph arrives home after a nine-month absence to find his wife, the Virgin Mary, visibly pregnant. He delivers a monologue that describes a virgin required by the bishops to marry "the law for to fulfill" (l. 244), a wife so much younger than her husband that he is afraid of being cuckolded, "For yong women will nedys play them / With yong men" (ll. 302-3), and a woman's pregnant body that betokens her as a whore: Joseph says the baby's father "is som othere man" (l. 298). That the body of one woman, the married and pregnant Virgin Mary, can represent so many types of women at once embodies the very inefficacy of the categories of Virgin, Wife, and Whore. The paradox represented by Mary's pregnant body in the medieval cycle drama is analogous to the problem of women in medieval and early modern drama. These plays suggest a patriarchal imperative to read, define, categorize, and thereby control women.

I begin with the Virgin Mary, because, as Ruth Evans argues in her analysis of the significance of virginity in the Middle Ages, "Virginity disorganizes temporal sequence" (27). In bringing together plays from the medieval cycle dramas and the Renaissance, I am not attempting to uncover origins, or to simply revise the teleology of modernity. Rather, I wish to trace the commonalities in the representation of women in both dramatic periods. The categories of Virgin, Wife, and Whore are prevalent, and the patriarchal economies of both dramatic worlds depend upon the stability of these categories.

Whether primarily secular or spiritual, the dramatic worlds of the plays I am considering here are economies: ostensibly closed ideological and patriarchal systems that rely on the categorization of women, and the circulation of these categories. As long as women fit certain stable and representable (and, I might add, stereotypical) categories, they can be circulated within the system by husbands, fathers, or God, for the benefit of these patriarchal authorities. The circulation of women, then, is both literal and ideological; for example, virginity is an ideal for securing favourable marriage arrangements: the Virgin is circulated, both as a commodity for marriage and as a stable category of identity. As I will argue in more detail in the following chapter, the primarily spiritual economy of the medieval cycle drama relies on certain women to support its redemptive scheme. The Virgin Mary's virginity, for example, must be verified before the medieval story of Christian history can continue, and if necessary, as it proves to be in "The Annunciation," an angel will come down from heaven and assure doubters, such as Joseph, of her virginity. The very need for assurances, however, both highlights the dependence of the patriarchal economy – in this instance, the linear narrative of Christian history which illustrates and confirms God's authority – on the categories, and at the same time points to the unreliability of these categories. Although these categories of Virgin, Wife, and Whore are thus necessary to the patriarchal economies, the women I consider in this thesis resist categorization. These women, then, unreliable and indefinable within these systems, queer in relation to their (medieval) religious or (Renaissance) secular economies, do "contrapuntal ideological work," to borrow a phrase from Claire Sponsler, and challenge the economies that seek to circulate them.



The second aspect of my argument is concerned with periodization. While it is clear that differences do exist between the two periods, it is my contention that when difference is overemphasized, the possibilities for reading similarities are obscured. When it comes to the dramatic representation of some women, the divide between medieval and Renaissance does not obtain. The division of these periods is perpetuated by what Lee Patterson identifies as the progressive “gigantic master narrative” (“Margin” 92) of modernity, which begins with the Renaissance, and the underlying privileging of progress that informs this narrative. Instead of simply shifting this master narrative in order to locate the origin of modernity in medieval literature, as Patterson proposes, I resist such teleological meta-narratives of progress. I argue that over-arching narratives, which posit progress by focussing on mainstream subjects that support the linear narrative, limit discussion of marginal subjects, such as women, and of other literary periods, particularly the medieval. I hope to show, then, that one way in which it is possible to resist perpetuating this marginalization is by applying queer theory to plays from both periods.

Queer theory, with its practice of juxtaposing a wide variety of texts and/or contexts in unconventional ways, provides a means of thinking that avoids these marginalizing narratives written by traditional historicism, and creates space for talking about women and the medieval. My approach to queer theory in this thesis is primarily concerned with both the heterosexist roles set out for women by agents of the patriarchal economy and the concomitant privileging of linearity and progress (both within the dramatic worlds of the plays being considered here, and in the criticism on these plays’ dramatic periods). The teleology of the Renaissance has proven very difficult to undo;

however, as Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger point out in their introduction to *Queering the Middle Ages*, “the preposterous thinking of queer theory [. . .] usefully interrupt[s . . .] teleological sequences” (xii), thereby allowing for the deconstruction of these categories and the economies that marginalize them. In the following pages I will take together the drama of both periods across the medieval/Renaissance, religious/secular, and premodern/modern divides, in order to highlight the ways in which female characters cross the boundaries constructed for them, and thereby challenge the patriarchal economies in which they are expected to circulate.

Binary categories or divisions, such as medieval/Renaissance or religious/secular, are unfortunately “institutionalized within the academy” according to Richard Emmerson, who cites “text/context” and “literary construct/historical reality” (25) as the major examples of this. New Historicism, because of its “recognition of the reciprocal nature of literary and other texts” (30) – the way context informs text and vice versa – has done a lot to challenge these binaries. The result is a critical approach that allows for the possibility of making use of historical context in literary scholarship in ways that do not necessarily support problematic “master narratives” such as the one identified by Lee Patterson; examples of this historical context can be found in the work of social historians such as Ruth Mazzo Karras and Dyan Elliott, which focuses on marginal subjects such as prostitution, and everyday social practice, such as marriage. Particularly useful to my project is the (feminist) New Historicist notion that, when it comes to considering women’s roles in the past, it is not enough to assume that women are conforming to the roles set out for them. According to Emmerson, medievalists can learn much from New Historicism, which developed in Renaissance studies, including the idea that “historical

research should not only situate dramatic texts more accurately, but also explore how they participate in, rather than just ‘reflect,’ history” (29). Focussing unilaterally on the historical context as background of a literary work, as some medievalists are wont to do, obscures this aspect of “participation,” subversion, and the New Historicist notion that the past can only be seen through the lens of the present. However, Emmerson adds, like many scholars of various other theoretical stripes, “New Historicists studying Renaissance drama are unlikely to direct their critical skills toward the full range of this theatrical activity [to include medieval drama], because [of. . .] their failure to interrogate a key assumption of the old historicism, the period distinction rigidly drawn between the Middle Ages and Renaissance” (30). Queer theory deconstructs many of the same binary oppositions as New Historicism, but is an especially useful approach for deconstructing those binaries pertaining to sexuality, gender, and history’s period distinctions.

It is rare to find a critic who considers both medieval and early modern drama together. One exception to this generalization is R. Chris Hassel Jr. in his “Intercession, Detraction, and Just Judgment in *Othello*.” Hassel notes the play’s references to Desdemona’s “likenesses and dissimilarities to the Virgin of religious art, the mystery plays, and associated Reformation controversy” (43). Hassel’s article provides a historical context that is useful for considering the relationship between categories of women and the two dramatic periods being considered in this thesis. However, more often than not, when scholars of early modern drama do make reference to the medieval period, as Hassel does, it is to assert a line of inheritance or development – in this case, the changing attitude towards representations of the Virgin Mary from the medieval to the Renaissance period – and to imbue their arguments and their early modern subject

matter with the kind of authority that comes with the identification of origins. This strategy is one that is fundamental to “traditional historicism [which . . .] insists on straight chronologies that privilege a value-based movement of supersession and progress” (Burger and Kruger x). That which is “superseded” is, in turn, less highly valued in ways that often go unchallenged.

Postmodernism, according to Lee Patterson, can and should provide this challenge; and yet, despite the affinities between these periods, a division continues to exist between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in scholarship. In Patterson’s estimation, “[m]ost literary scholars and critics consider medieval texts to be utterly extraneous to their own interests, as at best irrelevant, at worst, inconsequential; and they perceive the field itself as a site of pedantry and antiquarianism, a place to escape from the demands of modern intellectual life” (“Margin” 87). This division, and the fear of medieval irrelevance and inconsequentiality expressed by medievalists such as Patterson, is attributable to historicism as it has traditionally been practiced, which marginalizes that which does not provide a neat and tidy point of origin – a cause to explain a present-day effect – a history that, to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, tells “the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary” (263). For, according to this linear and sequential brand of history, the Middle Ages, “as the name with which the Renaissance endowed it declares [ . . . ] is a millennium of middleness, a space that serves simply to hold apart the first beginning of antiquity and the Renaissance rebeginning” (Patterson “Margin” 92). As Patterson characterizes it, rather than a bead on Benjamin’s historicist rosary, the medieval period is a space between two beads, and is therefore rendered a subject area unworthy of attention.

The reason for the “middleness” of the Middle Ages is its position relative to the Renaissance. According to Patterson, “the ultimate cause [of the marginalization of medieval studies] must be sought in the pervasive and apparently ineradicable *grand récit* that organizes Western cultural history, the gigantic master narrative by which modernity identifies itself with the Renaissance and rejects the Middle Ages as by definition premodern” (“Margin” 92). In fact, a student of medieval literature who is interested in alternatives and/or challenges to traditional historicism is much more likely to come across (still relatively rare) scholarship that considers the medieval period alongside discourses of the twentieth-century, than those of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> It is in this type of scholarship where queer theory is most prevalent, because of its interest in making connections across, rather than drawing lines between, different subject areas; as I will argue below, queer theory is ideally suited for challenging the “master narrative” that divides the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

There are differences, of course, between the drama of the medieval and the Renaissance periods, and maintaining that there are queer women in the drama of both periods is not to argue that no other differences exist. However, the degree of difference, as I will show below, is being debated and can no longer be taken for granted. Perhaps what has been accepted as the most significant difference between the drama of these periods is in the subject matter. To say that medieval drama is primarily spiritual, and that Renaissance drama is primarily secular, as I do in this thesis, is not to suggest that they are exclusively so, and in the following two chapters I will also make reference to the

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<sup>1</sup> Some examples of scholarship concerned with both the pre- and postmodern include Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval*, which includes a chapter on Quentin Tarantino’s movie *Pulp Fiction*, and Garret Epp’s “Ecce Homo,” which compares medieval dramatizations of Christ with, among other things, modern sport culture.

secularity of medieval drama and the spirituality of Renaissance. It is easy, however, to see where this perception of spiritual/secular difference comes from. The medieval cycle dramas take as their subject matter stories from the Bible, and dramatize major events in the history of Christianity. The cycles span the beginning of time to the Last Judgment, and put God, Jesus, Mary, and the Angels centre-stage. The subject matter of much of the drama of the Renaissance, however, is less overtly-concerned with spiritual matters. For instance, the plays *Othello* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* are occupied with more secular concerns, such as marriage, and the wealth and social status that can come with it. As I will argue in more detail in the third chapter, Shakespeare and Middleton do not offer the divine intervention found in "The Annunciation." Instead, by way of their respective use of tragedy and satire, Shakespeare and Middleton dramatize the problematic consequences of living by secular appetites alone.

A second important difference between medieval and Renaissance drama that is worth noting here is in the staging and production of the plays themselves. The cycle drama was arguably staged processionally, the annual performances of these cycles took up all of Corpus Christi Day, and these huge endeavours featured the involvement of most of the members of any given town; according to William Tydeman, "medieval theatre was designed for the community as a whole" (202).<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to the more professionalized theatre of Renaissance London. The building of the professional playhouses after 1567 was temporally coincident with the suppression of the cycle plays

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<sup>2</sup> Tydeman adds that medieval theatre "frequently constituted a venture in which large sections of the population were active participants, and one in which the presence of an audience was freely acknowledged and gratefully relied upon to such an extent that its members could be addressed from the stage" (202). See Tydeman for an informed and imaginative description of the staging of the medieval cycles. Katie Normington also provides a good description of the business of putting on these plays. The theory of procession staging of the medieval cycles, although for the most part accepted, is still under debate, and the specific details are by no means settled.

and all “theatrical display[s] of Christ’s flesh [. . .] along with dramatic representation[s] of God” (Epp 247). A broad consideration of the differences described here (and I name here only the most obvious ones) – religious/secular, amateur/professional, community/city, processional/fixed staging, and so on – could help to justify an argument that these theatres have little in common, and therefore need not be considered together.

In recent years, however, the distinctions between these binary oppositions have been more subtly qualified, primarily by medieval scholars, and the division between Renaissance and medieval drama becomes less justifiable. For instance, the work of Tydeman and Katie Normington has shown that the hiring of professional actors to perform in the medieval cycles was not unheard of, thereby presenting a challenge to the amateur/professional difference. Claire Sponsler and Pamela Allen Brown, to varying degrees, address the importance of women’s work and women’s communities in the medieval cycle plays; as they observe, social issues are frequently raised in the medieval plays in ways that present a challenge to readings that insist upon religious/secular difference. Lawrence Clopper, in his chapter entitled, “The Persistence of ‘Medieval Drama,’” gives a detailed account of performances of biblical drama occurring late in sixteenth century, challenging the “commonplace that the northern cycles came to their end at the hands of Protestant bishops because the plays could not be cleansed of their Catholic content” (286). And while professional playhouses were being built after 1567, pageants and civic processions were still a regular occurrence; this fact presents a challenge to the perception of difference in staging.

A summary comparison of medieval drama anthologies published in the twentieth century provides a useful illustration of a century-long shift in scholarly thinking about

the relationship between medieval and Renaissance drama. At the beginning of the century the study of medieval drama was a curiosity justified only by the influence the drama might have had on the great drama of the Renaissance; by the end of the century, the idea of progress is less prevalent, and the study of medieval drama requires less justification. David Bevington, in the Preface to his 1975 anthology, signals his intent to “replace Joseph Quincy Adams’s [1924] *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*. [. . .] Adams’s emphasis was on the evolution of pre-Shakespearean drama; the earlier drama was of interest primarily because of what grew out of it” (xiii).<sup>3</sup> Bevington then introduces his first chapter with this narrative of progress: “Most medieval drama is religious in nature and origin. It grew out of the liturgy, or prescribed form of worship, of the tenth-century Christian Church” (3). And if this religious narrative of progress will not serve to recuperate the reputation of medieval drama, Bevington adds an ancient one: “today we can see [. . .] a process of gradual transition by which drama was born in the very center of rite – a process that must have occurred also in ancient Greece” (8). By contrast, Greg Walker’s anthology, published in 2000, includes a brief introduction which states simply that there was neither an “immediate and dramatic break with the past in the later sixteenth century” nor a “progression from simple religious plays to sophisticated ones” (viii).

There are at least two different narratives of progress implied in the criticism mentioned above: the first, an evolution from either the classical or the liturgical to the cycle dramas, which has been heavily contested; the second, an evolution from medieval

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<sup>3</sup> Bevington goes on to say that “the present collection offers medieval drama as an artistic achievement in its own right”, in contrast to Adams’s bias, “common to men of his generation [. . .] who, as heirs of Victorian culture, tended to regard the medieval world as disfigured by Catholic superstition, ignorance, and coarseness” (xiii).



cycle drama to Renaissance drama.<sup>4</sup> Clopper critiques these evolutionist theories: "The desire for origins, especially the need to place those origins in the classical tradition, resulted in a history of the drama that was continuous" and necessitates "an overly elaborate and unnecessary sequence of causes" (2). Crucial problems with these theories, he points out, such as "the almost total absence of an antitheatrical polemic in the late Middle Ages," are glossed over in exchange for these tidy explanations (1). Now, medieval scholars "deliberately avoid speaking of the evolution of dramatic forms" (19).

In his introduction, Clopper parenthetically attributes this progressive approach to history to the Burckhardtian notion of the Renaissance. Jankowski explains that "Until recently, both literary and social/historical critics had accepted the paradigm articulated by [Jacob] Burckhardt that the 'Renaissance' was the time of the 'rebirth' of classical learning and culture, the 'birth' of 'man' as an individual, and the movement away from a religiously dominated to a secular life" (*Women* 22). This much-debated Burckhardtian model has had implications for how critics approach the medieval period. As Emerson puts it, "Although usually not made explicit, the value judgments implicit in the model are obvious: the Middle Ages were traditional, naive, illiterate, close-minded, religious, and dead, whereas the Renaissance was progressive, experienced, literate, free-thinking, secular, and reborn" (31). This is not to say, of course, that all medievalists challenge this Burckhardtian narrative, or that all Renaissance scholars subscribe to it. In theory, the idea of a Burckhardtian Renaissance has been thoroughly discredited. Michael Hattaway, in his introduction to *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture*, points out that "Burckhardt's categories, which rest upon notions of 'genius',

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<sup>4</sup> Clopper and Emerson are two scholars among many who credit O. B. Hardison's *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1965) with having "exposed the evolutionist thinking of earlier scholars" such as E. K. Chambers and K. Young (Clopper n. 1).

‘individuality’ and secularization [. . .] may not, however, fit the English experience” (3).

Feminist scholars especially have benefited from the discrediting of such a monolithic view of the period. Jankowski, in a brief survey of New Historicist Renaissance scholarship, points out that:

Rather than accepting a *single* view of a *specific* circumstance called ‘the Renaissance,’ critics are now open to the flexible nature of the period – caused by the conflict between various paradigms and ideologies – and the necessity of considering the *various* discourses that were in circulation regarding any concept.

(*Women* 22)

In discrediting the Burckhardtian narrative, feminist New Historicists have created room for discussion of previously-neglected paradigms and ideologies in the Renaissance period. However, while scholars such as Jankowski and Jean Howard do explicitly challenge the Burckhardtian notion of the Renaissance, they do not, I maintain, go far enough. One would expect that feminist scholars – usually suspicious of such things as the “gigantic master narrative” – would attempt to avoid reproducing and/or merely revising such narratives. Instead, some Renaissance feminist scholarship has, in fact, benefited, inadvertently perhaps, from the division between the Renaissance and medieval periods. One case in point, which will be explored more fully below, is Jankowski’s *Pure Resistance*, which argues that virgins in Protestant England are “queerer” than virgins in medieval (Catholic) England. In general, the very notion of a Renaissance relegates medieval women to the margins of these important discussions of autonomy and representation.

My thesis takes up Patterson’s implicit challenge to deconstruct the “gigantic master narrative,” and revises feminist readings of Renaissance plays to include medieval drama. While Patterson usefully names the problem, it is not so easy to concur with his

proposal for a postmodernist history. His 1990 article does not so much suggest changing the way literary history is conceived and written, and the authority with which it is imbued, as it suggests a simple relocation of modernity's point of origin. To borrow once again Benjamin's metaphor of the historicist rosary, Patterson wants the medieval period to be a bead, rather than a space in between other beads; he does not want to trade the historicist rosary for something less linear. His goal is not to undermine the significance of origins and the narratives they support, but to borrow the relevance the Renaissance has been granted by this (privileged) origin in order to give it to the Middle Ages. In "The Place of the Modern in the Late Middle Ages," Patterson explains: "If the Middle Ages is to become part of a usable past, it must take its place in the teleological story we constantly retell ourselves" (54). Patterson's objection is not that a master narrative exists, but that this master narrative has not often enough included the work of medievalists. He argues that "to dispense with diachronic periodization" which renders medieval studies "hopelessly *passé*" will only lead to "the deficiencies of periodization in its synchronic form, to the pastism and antiquarianism that are the *bêtes noires* of medieval studies" (54). Notably, Emerson also makes use of this diachronic/synchronic binary, and neither he nor Patterson seems to appreciate that there may be another way of addressing the problems of periodization. As Dinshaw points out, "postmodern interventions are hampered by their binary blind spots" (Dinshaw 16); queer theory attempts to deconstruct them.

Rather than attempt to write a new or revised master narrative which includes medieval drama as a point of origin for modernity, my thesis challenges the reliance on such narratives. This is not to say that it is possible, or even desirable, to dispense with all

narratives, or to say that these narratives have never contributed to arguments that prove useful on other grounds. One narrative, supplied by Jankowski, provides an argument that is central to this thesis. In her book, *Pure Resistance*, Jankowski reasons that virgins in the Renaissance are queer because they exist outside of the secular economy of the capitalist and patriarchal family. My thesis expands on her notion of queerness as women's resistance to circulation within a patriarchal economy. However, to make her argument, Jankowski relies on a fundamental binary opposition between the medieval and early modern periods; because the rest of her argument is so important to this thesis, I quote her at length here:

in order to understand the rigidity of the early modern sex/gender system, it is important to recollect that the sex/gender system of medieval England and Europe was not as restrictive as it would become under Protestantism. [. . .] As a result, within Catholic Europe, gender was not only organized around the traditional man/woman binary, but around the theological virgin/not-virgin one as well. Such an organization makes gender more difficult to analyze but also allows more options for exploring gender positions. (10)

Jankowski opposes a rigid early modern (Protestant) sex/gender system to a less restrictive medieval (Catholic) system in order to bolster her argument that Protestant England's virgins were not only queer, but queer-er, if you will, than medieval virgins. I do not care to engage in a debate about whether virgins from one period or another are more or less queer, and I question Jankowski's overemphasis of the rigidity of the Protestant system in relation to a less restrictive Catholic system (thereby setting up her own restrictive binaries) in order to make her overall argument. However, it is her strategy for reading virginity in general as queer that makes *Pure Resistance* such an important text for my project.

Jankowski's term "queer" is not specific to same-sex desire or what today might be called homosexuality; rather, it posits a kind of a-linear, non-conformist, non-normative space which exists despite, or in spite of, mainstream constructions – in this case, the patriarchal sexual economy. She describes her approach in this way:

I want to use the notion of queer as a category that disrupts the regime of heterosexuality to understand just how the concept of the perpetually virgin woman acted as a threat to the sexual economy of early modern England. I want to do this by suggesting that virginity represented a queer space within the otherwise very restrictive and binary early modern sex/gender system. (8)

According to Jankowski, the sexual economy of early modern England constructs virginity as a transitional state, one that will necessarily end with marriage, and is, in fact, understood in terms of a means to securing marriage. I concur with Jankowski on this point, and as I will show in the following chapters, the linear trajectory from Virgin to Wife is complicated by queer virgins. A virgin who resists this trajectory – by not acting chaste, by choosing a husband not of her parents' liking, or by refusing to marry altogether – is resisting the authority of the patriarchal economy by disturbing the linearity of her expected progress through life. As Evans describes it, "the strange temporality of virginity shakes the foundations of linear chronology, calling into question the proprieties of 'before' and 'after'" (27). By expanding on Jankowski's argument that queer virgins complicate the trajectory from Virgin to Wife in the early modern period, I will argue that it is the Virgin's a-linearity, her queerness, that is in effect in medieval drama as well, and that contributes to the disruption of the boundaries between the periods and between other categories of women.

I also expand on Jankowski's argument about early modern virgins to include the category of Whore. Evans and Jankowski are both writing about virgins, but the category

of the Whore is constructed in many of the same ways in both the medieval and Renaissance periods, with many of the same effects. The Virgin/Whore dichotomy is a commonplace notion, so much so that one can hardly speak of one without the other. These opposing categories define each other. At work in the drama of both periods is the notion that the Virgin (Mary) is a recapitulation and redemption of the Whore (Eve), and attached to this binary is a clear moral hierarchy and narrative of progress. The Virgin is figured in the Christian narrative of history as the spiritual and moral improvement on the original and immoral Whore. My thesis is not so much concerned with the sexual activity (or lack thereof) of the women in these plays, but the relationship between these categories for women and the patriarchal economies and narratives that rely on them. The patriarchal economy, whether primarily (medieval) spiritual or (Renaissance) secular, attempts to circulate the Virgin in the same way as it does the Whore, in order to support its own narratives. In the medieval period, the narrative is one of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection; in the Renaissance it is dramatized as the trajectory women are expected to follow from Virgin to Wife, which serves the secular appetites of the men who control them. And finally, the "grand master narrative," discussed earlier in this chapter, is supported by the perceived differences between the periods. Women's queer resistance to categorization disrupts the patriarchal economies in their respective plays and the narratives of progress to which they contribute.

The relationship between sexuality and history, which is so important to queer theory, is summarized helpfully by Kruger and Burger:

In Western, Judeo-Christian understandings, 'proper' sex takes as its ultimate cause the divine institution of heterosexuality in both the biblical narrative and in the structure of the natural ('procreative') world. If queer theory exposes the

fictionality of such sexual constructions, it also suggests that the stabilization of a sequential 'pre' and 'post,' cause and effect, might be thought otherwise. (x) Hayden White, writing about the meta-narratives necessary to historiography, states that all "historical narratives presuppose figurative characterizations of the events they purport to represent and explain" (27); a crucial feature of these narratives, then, is the practice of "progressive elaboration" that serves to make elements of the narrative "identifiable as a totality" (29). In history as well as in fiction, then, the Whore must come before the Virgin, and the medieval before the Renaissance, if either is to fulfil its figurative role in the narrative.

But the work of queer medievalists such as Carolyn Dinshaw and Garrett Epp are examples of the destabilization of the "pre" and "post" and the assumptions about causality that come with such temporal markers. While these scholars are primarily concerned with the meeting of the pre- and post-modern, their work is evidence that medieval texts can be read and appreciated outside of their place as "pre-Renaissance." Epp, Dinshaw and others have shown that queer theory allows valuable connections to be made between texts or discourses that do not, initially, appear to belong side-by-side. Dinshaw uses the metaphor of "touch" when she describes queer theory's ability to show "something disjunctive within unities that are presumed unproblematic, even natural" (151). The idea is that "queerness knocks signifiers loose, ungrounding bodies, making them strange, working in this way to provoke perceptual shifts" (151). Queer theory knocks historical events loose from the Benjaminian historicist rosary; without the string to keep the events organized chronologically in a linear narrative, "pre" and "post," cause and effect, become problematic concepts, and new juxtapositions can be made. Dinshaw says, "We need to complicate any positivistic understanding of causality when we think

of the relations between medieval and modern, to open up new possibilities for understanding 'new times.' Benjamin alludes to such a treatment of the past and present generally in his image of the constellation" (44). The constellation, rather than the rosary, allows for connections that subvert the usual cause-and-effect strategy for reading medieval literature.

Queer theory, in exposing the fictionality of such constructions – the ways in which supposed causes do not precede their effects but are instead themselves the (ideological) effects and justifications of certain normative behaviors – has developed a politics that allows it to claim such previously disallowed sexual positions and desires as both powerful and meaningful. (Burger and Kruger xi)

The intersection of sexuality and history, then, makes queer theory ideally suited to an approach that seeks to subvert the marginalization of women and medieval drama.

As I described above, Jankowski points out that Protestant England and medieval Catholic England have different sexual economies. She argues that a life-long commitment to virginity was more socially-acceptable for medieval Catholic women than for Protestant English women, and this difference makes Protestant virginity especially remarkable, transgressive, and queer. In emphasizing difference, however, she misses an opportunity to investigate the similarities between dramatizations of women in both periods. Unlike Jankowski, I see potential in these similarities to subvert the marginalization of women in both periods. By expanding on her concept of a patriarchal system that seeks to circulate women, I will show that the categories for women are constructed by, and necessary to, the economies of *both* medieval and Renaissance drama, thereby circumventing the medieval/Renaissance divide and allowing room for a discussion of women in the drama of both periods. Jankowski argues that women in Renaissance drama serve a patriarchal and secular economy. In the medieval cycles, I



add, the categories of Virgin and Whore serve to instantiate a patriarchal spiritual economy of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection – an economy best exemplified by V. A. Kolve's treatment of the cycles.

Kolve's book is an example of a trend in scholarship on medieval drama which attempts to recuperate the overlooked and/or much-maligned medieval drama to which Bevington refers in his anthology (quoted above). To do this, scholars such as Kolve make arguments for a thematic coherence which in turn serves as evidence of artistic merit. The thematic coherence for which they argue, however, is inextricably linked to the Christian subject matter of the plays, and as Katie Normington points out,

Interpreting women's characterization through the application of prefiguration holds two dangers. First, it tends to flatten out specific nuances of individual characters and forces them into fulfilling certain stereotypical roles. Second, it perpetuates the dichotomy of virgin/whore: characters are read as sinful or sin-free. Characters are interpreted as belonging to the lineage of Eve or showing the piety of Mary; they cease to be viewed for their own individuality. (94)

In the following chapter I show that Kolve's description of a spiritual economy in the medieval cycles does what Normington describes. In seeking out the ways in which the plays "fit" within the overall purpose of the cycles, as Kolve conceives it, he overlooks the slippages and disjunctions, the queer spaces, where the women in these plays challenge the meaningfulness of the categories of Virgin and Whore.

Critics of both medieval and Renaissance drama have relied on the stability of these categories of Virgin and Whore, and many of the plays from these periods appear to turn on their existence, but in fact, the essential or representative Virgin or Whore is nowhere to be found. In the following two chapters I will examine the roles of women in a sample of plays from both periods as queer challenges to the economies that rely on

these categories. What becomes clear from these readings is that these are categories with no characters to fill the roles. Coppélia Kahn states that, in Renaissance drama, “the opposition of virgin to whore [. . .] was intended to limit and contain women” (256), but while the categories certainly exist, as does the patriarchal imperative to “limit and contain” women, the women in these plays are not so easily categorized. Evans, in describing the state of virginity in medieval drama, could also be describing the general state of women in the drama of both periods: “the N-town pageant articulates what is both disturbing and powerful about virginity: a state that refuses representation, whose ‘truth’ cannot be spoken by the body, yet which acts as a relay-point for faith, devotion, and knowledge” (22). This resistance to representation, and the repercussions of such resistance for the stability and circulation of these categories of women, can be found in all of the plays being considered in the next two chapters.

A project with a much broader scope than this one would include a discussion of gender representation. It seems customary, for example, to point to the practice of cross-dressing on the Renaissance stage as a dramatization of the slipperiness of gender.<sup>5</sup> While not directly questioning the category of “woman,” my thesis takes for granted the premise that “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” and that it is “impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (Butler 6). Although gender itself is not the subject of my thesis, gender as a construct is, in terms of the categories for female characters in the drama, and the dependence of patriarchal economies on these categories. The parallels between gender binaries and the other

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<sup>5</sup> Jankowski, Howard, and Orgel are a few examples of scholars who address questions of the performativity of gender on the Renaissance stage.

binaries I mention here are notable, however. Although Judith Butler is speaking specifically about gender when she points out that “hegemonic cultural discourse [is] predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality” (13), this also holds true for the narratives which are the subject of this thesis.

Like the binary of man/woman, then, the binary of Virgin/Whore cannot be taken for granted as natural and unconstructed. The Virgin and the Whore are categories that, when set in opposition to each other, appear to define the representational boundaries for female characters in medieval and Renaissance drama. The Wife is a third category which, I argue, ultimately subverts the Virgin/Whore dichotomy and the economies that rely on this construction. Despite the economies’ apparent insistence on controlling the movement and signification of women, especially Wives, the Wives in medieval and Renaissance drama are not so much limited and contained by the opposition of Virgin to Whore as they are free to play around, between, and outside of such categories. Instead of being fully controlled by the binary construction, then, the Wives in these plays occupy the entire continuum that ranges from Virgin to Whore, and ultimately empty the binary of its signifying power. It is for these reasons that I will focus primarily on wives in the following chapters. Gill, Mak’s wife in “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant” (Wakefield), makes no attempt to behave as a chaste wife, is described by Mak as a stereotypical shrew, and yet she proves to be an indispensable partner to her husband. Similarly, Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* features wives who are problematically and simultaneously chaste and whorish; Mistress Allwit, for example, is perpetually having another man’s children, with the blessing of her apparently happily-married husband. The Virgin Mary serves the patriarchal spiritual system and at the same time serves a

challenge to it by way of her virgin pregnancy. Desdemona is mistaken for a whore by Othello, murdered by him, and in her death serves a challenge to the patriarchal secular system that attempts to categorize women. And so, while it is certainly easy enough to identify the wives in these plays – they're everywhere, after all – it is not so easy to find wives who exemplify the Wifely ideals of chastity, fidelity, and obedience.

The plays under consideration here are populated by women who are queer by virtue of their non-conformity; they resist authority and categorization. In many instances, however, these women are subsequently recuperated into the prevailing spiritual or secular economies, as is Noah's Wife when she boards the ark in the medieval flood plays. This recuperation is most often accomplished through some means of intervention: in "The Annunciation" an angel must reassure Joseph that Mary has been faithful; in "Noah's Flood" Noah's wife boards the ark only after the weather worsens; in *Othello* Desdemona's innocence and Iago's plot is realized and immediately revealed by Emilia, but only after Desdemona has already been murdered; and in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* elaborate deception and coincidence, including a faked death, are necessary to effect the approval of the marriage between Moll and Touchwood Junior. These interventions, from above or by way of unlikely plot twists, function to remedy an anarchy of representation and restore the world order which these women are to serve. However, the very need for such intervention also announces the potential for anarchy. Such interventions not only evidence how instrumental these categories are to the economy by their insistence on restoring stability, but signal the constructedness and tenuousness of these patriarchal economies which are always at risk of being subverted by unstable categories. Even in instances where a certain degree of instability is required,

by God, for example, in order to remedy the instability and thereby assert His divine power, or by the genre of tragedy which is predicated on the instability of categories, a queer approach to these plays reveals that the status quo, the stability of these categories for women, can never be fully restored. Ultimately, these figures – Virgin, Whore, and Wife – and by extension, I will argue, dramatic periods, not only come to signify their own inefficacy as meaningful categories, but signal the problematic nature of having such categories in play at all.

I will examine medieval dramatizations of the Woman taken in adultery, Joseph's discovery of Mary's pregnancy, "The Second Shepherds' Pageant," "The Fall of Man," and the flood plays featuring Noah's wife; I will also examine Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. I did not choose these particular plays in an attempt to give a comprehensive overview of the drama of both periods – that is an endeavour well beyond the scope of my project. Rather, in selecting plays from the medieval cycles, I sought out those plays that dramatized key moments in the history of Christianity and/or women who had key roles in this history. Women do not figure prominently, in terms of quantity, in the medieval cycles, and so my selection of plays was, out of necessity, also partly based on this limiting factor. I also decided not to discriminate between plays from different cycles since authorship of the cycles is so difficult to determine.<sup>6</sup> From the Renaissance I determined to choose one tragedy and one comedy, not in order to draw any broad conclusions based on genre, which, again, would be beyond the scope of this project, but in order to suggest that the issues of women's

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<sup>6</sup> Arguably, the Wakefield cycle was penned by a single author, known as the Wakefield Master, but this is an exception rather than the rule. The nature of the production of these plays, the number of years (and one presumes, revisions) of performances, and the fact that most of the cycles come to us through late manuscript copies of missing performance texts, makes it almost impossible to speak of an 'author'.

representation are not limited to specific genres. Both *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and *Othello* are explicitly concerned with the question of what constitutes a chaste woman, and were first performed during the reign of King James when virginity became less celebrated than it was previously; the similarities between the plays of both periods are all the more notable for these historical differences. And finally, I selected one play by Shakespeare in order to call attention to the misconception that medieval plays, as the title of Adams' anthology, *Chief Pre-Shakespearean Dramas*, suggests, are not simply "pre-Shakespearean" but can be fruitfully read alongside, and in relation to, Shakespeare's plays.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. In Chapter Two and Three I will put the queer theory outlined in this introduction into play, by applying this theory to the categories of Virgin, Whore, and Wife in medieval and Renaissance drama respectively. In the final chapter I will extend the implications of these readings of medieval and Renaissance plays in order to draw some conclusions about the problem of periodization. I deliberately use the terms "Middle Ages" (or "medieval") and "Renaissance" throughout my thesis in order to highlight the problems of periodization I have outlined in this introduction, and in my concluding chapter I will propose a linguistic shift to speak of the drama of both of these periods as "early English." It is my contention that a consideration of the categories of Virgin, Whore, and Wife makes it possible to efface the boundary between these two periods, at least as it pertains to representations of women. I will conclude that, when it comes to discussing the representation of women in early English drama, such historical categories need not apply.

## Chapter Two:

## Queering the Patriarchal Spiritual Economy in Medieval Drama

As I noted in the introduction, Bevington's 1975 anthology of medieval drama briefly traces the history of critical approaches to these medieval plays; one of Bevington's goals is to redeem medieval drama as a worthy object of study. To do this he asserts its place in an evolution of the dramatic genre, and female characters are considered only insofar as they support Bevington's model. In fact, most scholars of medieval cycle drama, when they consider women at all, read the characters of Eve, Mary, Noah's wife, and the Woman taken in Adultery as instrumental in an over-arching meta-narrative of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection. This strategy, of which V. A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* is an example, confirms the cycles' coherence, the dramatists' skill, and finally, the drama's worthiness as an object of academic study.<sup>7</sup> This privileging of the narrative of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection, is an attempt to legitimate medieval drama. It is marginalized as a result of another narrative, namely the "gigantic master narrative" identified by Patterson, which tends to consider medieval drama only as a marginal and an unaccomplished pre-cursor to the great drama of the Renaissance. To replace one "master narrative" with another, however, is to marginalize something else. In redeeming medieval drama, scholars such as Kolve posit a doctrinal and thematic coherence in these plays which relies on a typological reading of Eve as Whore, and Mary as the Virgin who is able to correct Eve's

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<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Woolf's *The English Mystery Plays*, although a little more careful to talk about the dramatization of these plays' female characters, is another example of this approach.

mistake. This coherence obscures the ways in which these women queerly resist categorization, and subvert both the effectiveness of the categories and the spiritual economy dependent upon them.

I will argue further that medieval wives in these plays occupy the space between the opposing binary positions of Virgin and Whore, thereby collapsing the binary itself. Without an archetypal Virgin or Whore, and with Wives that move all along a provisional continuum between these opposing poles, these medieval plays do not support the typological readings scholars such as Kolve have attempted to apply to them. Noah's wife in "Noah" (Wakefield), and Mak's wife, Gill, in "The Second Shepherds' Pageant" (Wakefield) are two characters who illustrate the anarchy of representation which ensues from these plays' failure to dramatize the possibility of exclusively defining any of the categories of Virgin, Whore, or Wife. Divine intervention, such as that of the angel who reassures Joseph that Mary has been faithful, remedies this anarchy, but in doing so also announces that this anarchy is in play and working counter to the spiritual economy of these cycles put forward by scholars such as Kolve. To a point, the divine intervention establishes God's divine authority, and some representational instability serves to dramatize the importance of faith to a stable spiritual economy; however, what these unstable categories and scenes of divine intervention reveal is that the doctrinal narrative so attractive to some medieval dramatic scholars cannot suffice as a complete description of these plays. In fact, it is that which is queer, and does not fit this notion of a spiritual economy, that opens up possibilities for thinking in new non-linear ways about medieval drama itself, and its relationship to the drama of the Renaissance.



Kolve, in *The Play Called Corpus Christi*, argues that the medieval cycle dramas are coherent and thematically consistent. He posits that the medieval playwrights dramatize Biblical episodes that contribute to an over-arching story of man's redemption. As he sees it, "the original rationale [of the dramatization of the Corpus Christi story] was in large part grounded in the nature and needs of the Christian religion" (271). The bulk of Kolve's study, then, is concerned with illustrating the drama's thematic coherence by pointing out how plays in the cycle contribute to the redemption arc, and his commentary on the drama accomplishes two things: it names the spiritual economy that demands that the Virgin and the Whore exist as stable and representable figures, and it supports his study's stated recuperative purpose to "discover the kinds of intention and achievement that are uniquely [the drama's] own" (266). Kolve privileges the idea of thematic consistency within the cycles themselves – and assumes, further, that this consistency is something the authors of these cycles would have intended – in order to create a place for medieval drama in the over-arching "master narrative" of dramatic history.

What becomes clear in a study such as Kolve's, which postulates thematic and doctrinal coherence, is the importance of recapitulative women in this spiritual economy. Kolve's approach limits his range of inquiry; the discussion of medieval drama becomes concerned primarily with if, and how, aspects of the drama satisfy the already established spiritual economy. Thus, in N-Town's "The Woman Taken in Adultery," when the accusators call the Woman a "[w]hore" and a "qwene" (l. 147; 69) before bringing her to Jesus to be judged for adultery,<sup>8</sup> scholars such as Elizabeth El Ireby can conclude that the Woman in this play is a recapitulation of Eve: "That the Woman is an adulteress immediately suggests to the audience a powerful stereotype – prostitute and Eve" (10). El

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<sup>8</sup> All line numbers in this chapter refer to Bevington's edition of *Medieval Drama*.

Itreby further describes the Woman as an “anti-type of the Virgin [. . .] She has committed the crime [adultery] of which the Virgin is wrongly accused” (10). Not surprisingly, El Itreby’s starting premise, echoing Kolve’s generalization about all of the dramatic cycles, is that the N-Town cycle is a unified whole, organized around the principles of “the abuse-of-power redemption theory and the doctrine of the recapitulated fall” (4). Kolve and El Itreby are only two scholars among many whose theories of recapitulation and thematic coherence in the medieval cycles include reading Eve as Whore and Mary as the Virgin who is able to correct Eve’s mistake and instantiate redemption for mankind.<sup>9</sup>

However, a closer examination of the women in these plays reveals that the archetypal Virgin and Whore are absent. Although the Woman taken in adultery is called a whore by the Scribe, the circumstances around the accusation of adultery made by the scribes and Pharisees take the form of a conspiracy to set a legal trap for Jesus. Phariseus suggests a “fals qwarel” (l. 57) to publicly prove Jesus’ inconsistency, and the Scribe cites Moses’ law regarding adultery, “That every advowterere we shuld qwelle, / And yitt with stonys they shulde be slawe” (ll. 107-08). They ask Jesus to pass judgment on this Woman, in order that they may pass judgment on Jesus, and this renders their accusations suspect. On the other hand, Jesus responds to the accusators in such a way as to dispel the accusations, not to prove the Woman innocent of the charges. The Woman does provide a kind of confession; she asks Jesus for mercy, and admits to “sinnys abhominable” (l. 211), but there is no evidence here of promiscuity or prostitution, of anything other than a single transgression.

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<sup>9</sup> Other scholars who employ this strategy include the afore-mentioned Rosemary Woolf and David Bevington.

In addition to the limited evidence and the suspect circumstances around the accusation of the Woman, this play further destabilizes a simple reading of the Woman as Whore by adding the complicating factor of public shame. When the Woman is faced with these accusations, she emphatically asks them to kill her before they publicly accuse her:

Stondinge ye wil not graunt me grace,  
 But for my sinne that I shal die,  
 I pray yow kille me here in this place  
 And lete not the pepyl upon me crye.  
 If I be sclaudryd opynly,  
 To al my frendys it shul be shame,  
 I pray yow, kille me previly;  
 Lete not the pepyl know my defame. (ll. 169-176)

This speech, which emphasizes the threat of death by twice including the phrase, “I pray yow kille me,” is not found in John 8:1-11. In the medieval play, public shame appears to be a fate worse than mere death, and this emphasis resonates with medieval practice: as Dyan Elliott explains in her description of medieval marriage, “Ecclesiastical courts [. . .] harshly punished the offence [of adultery] in both sexes, often whipping offending parishioners through the streets in their underclothes, regardless of their sex” (52). The punishment is different – stoning instead of whipping, death instead of humiliation – but the emphasis on public defamation is the same in both medieval practice and the medieval dramatization, where it is not an issue in the biblical version. This added element, the Woman’s insistence that she would rather be killed in private, affects the significance of her unpunished body at the end of the play. The language she uses in her request for a private death is ambiguous: the Woman opens her plea with the conditional

“standinge” – *since* they won’t be merciful, and *if* she must die, *then* she would like it not to be public – and then uses the term “sclaundryd” to describe the public charge and punishment (ll. 169-173). It is clear that she does not want to bring shame to her friends, or let the people know her “defame.”

Her death would mark her as an adulteress, and her wish to be punished privately could be read as a sign of her guilt, a move to avoid being given the label of Whore, to limit the range of signification her publicly-punished body would effect. However, by showing the Woman mercy, Jesus makes the Woman a different public example, and complicates any simple reading of her guilt or of her representational role. The threat of public shame makes it unclear just what the Woman is supposed to signify by play’s end. Because she is neither killed nor cleared of the charge of adultery, the Woman’s unpunished body highlights “the anarchic potential of woman’s adultery” (Elliott 52). Clearly the Woman has been caught in some kind of sexual act – the young man running away with pants in hand suggests as much – but the play appears to work against any meaningful examination of the degree to which this Woman is a categorical Whore. Ruth Mazo Karras, in her study of prostitution and sexuality in medieval England, explains that the word “whore [. . .] could refer more generally to any woman who engaged in nonmarital sex, even with only one man” (11); and so, within these broad parameters, any woman engaged in adultery could, by definition, be called a whore. The ambiguity of the degree of her sin, however, locates the Woman in a liminal space which benefits Jesus (he gets to show that mercy is great), and the redemption arc (she prefigures the mercy mankind could receive on Judgment Day), but which undermines her typological role in the redemption arc: her status as a second Eve.

Gail McMurray Gibson aligns the Woman with Eve using the logic that “though Adam in his fallen nature encompassed the full generous possibilities of human sin, a fallen woman in this same symbolic discourse sins, of course, in the only way that a fallen woman sins, by her sex” (405). Bevington makes the same connection between the Woman taken in adultery and Eve, but he also reads the Woman as a prefiguration of Mary: “The adulterous woman recalls Eve as fallen woman, and yet by her dignity in the face of oppression she also reminds us of the Virgin Mary bravely facing her detractors” (460). The search for a definition of what then constitutes Eve’s sinfulness turns up instead another example of Bevington’s circular logic: in his brief introduction to the York cycle’s “The Fall of Man” he writes, “Eve’s role as sinful woman points forward to Mary’s role as the mother of God” (267). The trace of the archetypal Whore remains ever-present but elusive.

The medieval dramatization of Eve in “The Fall of Man” does not appear, however, to support this popular reading of Eve as Whore. In this play, Eve eats the forbidden fruit because Satan says, “goodis shalle ye be” (l. 70); she repeats this to Adam: “we shalle be goddis and knawe al thing” (l. 103). Eve’s sin is dramatized as a susceptibility to desiring knowledge and power. The play makes only an oblique suggestion that this sin might be related to Eve’s sexuality: immediately after the transgression is acknowledged by both of them Adam says, “Eve, thou art to blame. / To this enticed thou me” (ll. 108-09), and this is when they realize that they are naked. However, the suggestion that Eve’s sin is a sexual one is mitigated shortly afterwards by Adam’s accusation that Eve has “made this bad bargaine” (l. 119). Eve is criticized by

Adam not so much for being a temptress, but for having made a bad deal: the chance to “knewe al thing” is not worth the consequence of having disobeyed God.

God’s punishment further complicates a simple reading of Eve as Whore. He is clearly addressing Eve when he says, “Say, Eve, why hast thou garte thy make / Ete frute I bad[e] thee shuld hynge stille, / And comaunded none of it to take?” (ll. 144-146), placing the blame on her, but the following speech elides any punishment specific or exclusive to Eve:

And on thy wombe than shall thou glide,  
 And be ay full of enmité  
 To al mankinde on ilke a side;  
 And erthe it shalle thy sustinaunce be  
 To ete and drinke.  
 Adam and Eve, alsoo, yhe  
 In erthe than shalle ye swete and swinke,  
 And travaile for youre foode. (ll. 155-162)

The first half of this passage is directed at the serpent that tempted Eve, and God’s reference to “thy womb” suggests the possibility that this punishment is gendered. But this play makes no mention of the punishment dealt specifically to Eve in Genesis 3:16: “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” Instead, God’s punishment in the play is that both Adam and Eve will have to work for their food, and no mention is made of Adam’s God-given right to “rule over” Eve. The words “swete and swinke” might have some sexual connotations, but again, God addresses this to both Adam and Eve, thereby undermining the idea that a fallen woman “sins, of course, in the only way that a fallen woman sins, by her sex” (Gibson 405). This may hold true in biblical scholarship, but in “The Fall of Man,” Eve’s

sin is a transgression which is only partially figured in sexual terms, and the Whorish significations available in the biblical story are downplayed rather than expanded upon.

Given the indeterminacy of Eve's sin in "The Fall of Man," and its partial and tenuous sexual implications, the significance of the figure of Eve in these plays as Whore – against which the Woman Taken in Adultery, among others, is read – is questionable. Scholars are quick to take for granted that Eve in "The Fall of Man" is a figure of the Whore; but, in the model used by scholars such as Gibson, Bevington, and Jankowski, Eve as Whore can only be extrapolated by association with what comes after: Mary's virginity and the birth of Christ. Jankowski helpfully summarizes this progressive narrative: "Mary became the exemplar of the female Christian life; she was the new, sinless Eve who would replace the Old Testament Eve as the symbol of what a woman could obtain if she were vigilant" (*Pure Resistance* 71). But as Burger and Kruger argue, this model relies on "a stabilized temporality,"

condensed both in a myth of origins – for the West, the story of Adam and Eve – that does not reflect true origin but is rather the effect of a particular human understanding of 'proper' sexuality, and in a myth of nature, considered separate from and prior to the cultural but in fact an effect constructed from within culture to serve particular cultural ends. (xii)

This approach allows for the possibility that Eve's sinfulness is, actually, constructed after, and as an effect of, the privileging of Mary's virginity. And while the idea of Eve as Whore was certainly available in the medieval period, the medieval dramatization of Eve in "The Fall of Man" does not support the typological readings of the cycles put forward by Bevington *et al.* The archetypal Whore is nowhere to be found.

A Virgin, however, ought to be easier to locate. During the opening of "The Annunciation" (Wakefield), God explains his three-fold reason for his "son manhede take" (l. 30):

A man, a madyn, and a tre-  
 Man for man, tre for tre,  
 Madyn for madyn - thus shal it be.  
 My son shall in a madyn light,  
 Agans the feynd of hell to fight,  
 Withouten wem, os son through glas  
 And she madyn as she was. (ll. 32-38)

According to the plan God sets out in this play, Mary is a recapitulation of Eve within a larger system of mankind's redemption. That Mary is a "maydn" is made clear in "The Annunciation" when the angel Gabriel visits Mary, addresses her as "qwene" of "all virgins" (l. 80), and tells her that she will bear a child. She confirms her virginity by stating, "I cam never by mans side, / Bot has avowed my madynhede / From fleshly gett" (ll. 113-15). Mary's virginity is a key component of God's plan; without a "madyn" in which to "light," Jesus cannot fight the "feynd of hell."

At the same time that Mary's virginity is being emphasized, however, it is also being undermined. Gabriel's use of the term "qwene," which evokes the derogatory use of "qwene" found in "The Woman Taken in Adultery," anticipates the accusations Mary will face once she's pregnant. "The Annunciation" is based on the Gospel according to Luke 1:28-38, until the time Joseph arrives onstage at line 155 when the "contradictory message" (Coletti 68) of Mary's pregnant body is emphasized for the following 170 lines. Joseph's doubt, referred to only briefly and elliptically in Matthew 1:20 ("while he thought on these things"), dominates almost half of a play which is otherwise remarkably



faithful to its Biblical sources. A crisis of representation occurs because a woman cannot be both pregnant and a virgin. According to Ruth Evans, what is notable about medieval virgins is “their power to unsettle and confound social and sexual expectations” (36), and Mary’s pregnancy is an extreme example of this. Joseph exclaims, “A, hir body is grete and she with childe!” (l. 158); then he declares, based on the sight of her, that he “might well wit that yowthede / Wold have liking of man” (ll. 165-166). Despite her interjections that the child is both Joseph’s and God’s, Mary’s words fail to assure Joseph of her chastity. Her denials only call “attention to the subversive nature of her body by calling attention to its openings – its mouth and vagina” (Jankowski *Women* 38). She can do little to reconcile her embodied contradiction, or to assuage Joseph’s doubt. As Evans characterizes it, “virginity can never be a sure thing. Faith and miracle plug the gap between suspicion and certain knowledge, but they only displace the questions onto other sites, other bodies, other texts” (Evans 22). In fact, nothing but divine intervention can effect a change in how Joseph reads Mary’s body.

Mary’s ambivalence as a sign renders her a problematic Virgin archetype in the overall spiritual economy of the medieval cycle drama. Theresa Coletti, in her discussion about Joseph’s “misnaming” of Mary, points out that “critical readings of these hermeneutic errors have focused mainly on the problems of the interpreter rather than on the ambivalent sign herself” (73). Joseph doubts his wife’s chastity, not simply because of his imperfect faith, but because her body instantiates an anarchy of representation; he names it as such when he says to Mary, “Thy body fames the[e] openly” (l. 213). This play underscores the fact that a pregnant Virgin is unrepresentable in the very act of attempting to represent her on stage. In the context of this crisis, the divine intervention

of the angel who assures Joseph that Mary “hase consavyd the Holy Gast” (l. 333) reinforces the impossibility of Mary. The divine intervention reads as a *deus ex machina* in its sudden and contrived resolution to Joseph’s problem, and this has contradictory effects on the significance of “The Annunciation:” Mary must be a virgin in order for the spiritual system to function, and she is, and it does; but, Mary’s virginity is also underscored as so difficult to establish that divine intervention is required to protect the integrity of both Mary’s virginity and the spiritual system on which it depends.

In a related play, the N-Town “Trial of Joseph and Mary,” Mary is brought to trial to prove her chastity. In this play, too, Mary’s virgin pregnancy challenges the patriarchal desire for stable representability:

The infancy plays’ interest in the forms of social disorder underwritten by the representation of Mary’s body illustrates what Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have observed of the symbolic domains – the human body, psychic forms, geographical space, and the social formation – in which cultures ‘think themselves’ in the most immediate and affective ways’: ‘transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any one of the domains may have major consequences in the others.’ (Coletti 86)

Although Coletti’s focus is on social systems rather than spiritual systems, her conclusion that “Mary emerges as a sign of difference, of the irreconcilability of matter and spirit, the human and the divine” (Coletti 86) is applicable here. By “transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order,” Mary as Virgin puts this category’s significance in question in ways that reverberate throughout the medieval cycle dramas, and throughout modern readings which would rely on the stability of the category of Virgin in these plays.

One of this chapter’s aims is to “queer” the women so important in medieval cycle drama as figures in its Christian narrative. Jankowski, in *Pure Resistance*, argues

that queer virgins exist as such in the post-Reformation period because the all-encompassing secular economy of the patriarchal family, combined with capitalism, has no place for virgins. Virgins, then, are rendered queer because they are outside the circulation of that secular economy. Jankowski also makes clear, in reference to their medieval counterparts, that “it is not possible to consider these early Christian and Roman Catholic virgins queer. They were part of a culture whose notions of sexuality and gender identification were not restricted to a simple binary” (74). As a result, she characterizes early modern Protestant virgins as “radically different” (74) from medieval Christian virgins.

However different the virgins of the medieval and early modern periods may be, readings of virgins from both periods are made possible by Jankowski’s concept of “economy.” If the spiritual economy of the medieval cycle plays requires virgins – as opposed to the early modern secular economy which does not have a place for virgins – and if these medieval virgins prove to be difficult to read, identify, and/or represent as Virgins, then this effectively sets these women outside and against the spiritual economy that seeks to circulate them, and renders them queer within the terms of Jankowski’s definition. Further, Jankowski’s queer argument can be fruitfully expanded to include medieval whores, when they, like virgins, are also problematically located outside the drama’s spiritual economy.

Instead of existing as independent, opposing, and stable categories within the spiritual economy of the medieval cycles, then, the Virgin and the Whore define the parameters of representation for the female characters in these plays. That the queer categories of Virgin and Whore are in play is most evident in relation to the wives of

medieval drama. As Elliott explains, a clear moral hierarchy for categories of women existed in the medieval period:

The married woman's position was [. . .] compromised by the clergy's traditional bias in favour of celibacy, which assigned to marriage a less estimable position in the hierarchy of salvation than either virginity or chaste widowhood. The Middle Ages inherited the patristic reckoning which accorded virgins a hundred-fold reward in the kingdom of heaven, consecrated widows sixty-fold, and matrons a mere thirty-fold. (Elliott 40).

But the wives in medieval drama, such as Noah's wife in "Noah" (Wakefield), and Gill, Mak's wife in "The Second Shepherds' Pageant" (Wakefield), do not appear to be interested in subscribing to this moral hierarchy, despite the need of the spiritual economy for them to do so. As Bevington's typological reading characterizes it, "Noah" "looks both backward and forward:" "on the one hand, Noah's difficulties in controlling his disobedient wife recall Adam's problems with that 'beginnar of blunder,' Eve (l. 406); on the other hand, the flooding of the world prefigures the Baptism and the Last Judgement" (290). According to this narrative, Wives are located somewhere between the categories of Virgin and Whore, but, I will argue, Noah's wife and Gill resist this containment by moving freely between these categories; this movement ultimately empties all three categories of their meaning and jeopardizes the narrative that depends on them.

Bevington's reading of Noah's wife as belonging to a continuum that consists of Eve at one end and redemption at the other is not unique. Rosemary Woolf comes to a similar conclusion, adding the Virgin to the redemption side of Bevington's continuum: "It can thus finally be seen that the dramatists understood the doctrine that Noah's wife signified the Virgin in an idiosyncratic way, for in her the redemption is adumbrated, but

the relationship is not that of Noah to Christ but of Eve to the Virgin" (144-145). Noah's wife is located somewhere between the categories of Whore (Eve) and Virgin (Mary) both in this doctrinal scheme and in terms of her dramatization. Like Eve and the Woman taken in adultery, Noah's wife undermines patriarchal authority: where Eve disobeys God, and the Woman taken in adultery does not respect the law against adultery, Noah's wife challenges the authority of her husband. Like Mary, Noah's wife will, eventually, agree to follow God's plan and usher in a new era for mankind. Within these correspondences, there are also differences. Noah's wife is openly critical of Noah: in her first moments on stage she nags him about where he's been (l. 192), for not working hard enough (ll. 195-198), for being "always adred" (l. 201), and she even wishes that God would send Noah the fill of sorrows of which Noah is so fond of talking (ll. 205-207). Nowhere in the medieval cycles do we see Eve or Mary speaking in this way either to their respective partners, or to God.

In addition to open criticism of Noah, Noah's wife subverts her husband's authority through resistance. Her resistance to going onto the ark, and her physical altercations with Noah, are often explained away as examples of the play's indebtedness to fabliaux and their "stock figure[s] of the shrewish wife" (Woolf 138). Noah gestures towards this fabliaux heritage, after God tells Noah that he and his family are to go onto the ark to "fill the erth agane" (l. 180) after the Flood, when Noah replies:

My [wife] will I frast what she will say,  
 And I am agast that we get som fray  
 Betwixt us both.  
 For she is full tethee,  
 For litill oft anger;  
 If any thing wrang be,

Soyne is she wroth. (ll. 183-189)

As becomes evident later in the play, this “wroth” frequently takes the form of physical violence. As Clare Sponsler points out, violence, when enacted by women, “is able to call into question the bases of masculine authority and to destabilize accepted patterns of social control” (Sponsler 141). The resistance of Noah’s wife calls to mind Sponsler’s description of the resistance of the mothers in “The Slaughter of the Innocents,” and their resulting threats to male power (145). The parallel here is even more striking when one considers, as Sponsler does, the significance of women’s tools in this resistance: where in the Slaughter plays ladles and distaffs are used against the soldiers, in “Noah” and “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant” the distaff is also featured, not so much as a weapon, but certainly as a signifier of women’s work as resistance, a point to which I will return.

Another approach to reading Noah’s wife’s resistance comes from Pamela Allen Brown, who argues that, although Noah’s wife “is generally treated as a [. . .] cartoonish arch-shrew [. . . she] is never simply a shrew:”

First, she was an enormously popular character who gave the English stage its first ‘native comic role for women.’ Second, she stands up for the familiar world that is threatened with destruction. [. . .] An archetypal jesting woman with a certain performative doubleness, she represents the homely worlds of neighborhood and alehouse yet finally crosses to the sacred space of ark and covenant. She often addresses the audience directly, establishing a close bond with it through asides, proverbs, and jests. (69)

What Brown characterizes as “doubleness” in reference to Noah’s wife’s association with different spaces – the neighborhood and alehouse, then the ark – is also evidenced in the character of Noah’s wife. Her “shrewishness” is supplanted by marital fidelity and obedience, once she gets onto the ark, in a rather abrupt change of personality. Noah’s

invitation to his wife, to “with good will com into this place” initially provokes threats of violence from her (l. 335; 342); the conflict escalates to the point that Noah says to her, “I shall make the[e] still as stone, beginnar of blunder! / I shall bete the[e] bak and bone, and breke all in sonder” (ll. 406-07). It is not until she is “bet so blo / That [she] may not thrife” (ll. 413-14) that she relents and acknowledges the “perlous case” (l. 431) of the flood. Once on board the ark, the tone shifts, and husband and wife begin to cooperate: he asks her for her “counsell” (l. 472); and she helps Noah on the ark when asked, without incident, as when he tells her to tend the helm (l. 433). When Noah calls his wife the “beginnar of blunder” (l. 406), he is evoking an Eve such as the one dramatized in “The Fall of Man” – she is punished, not for being a Whore, but for disobeying and undermining patriarchal authority. But on the ark, Noah’s wife is helpful, obedient, and relatively soft-spoken. This change is abrupt and jarring, calling into question whether an unwilling participant such as Noah’s wife, whose objections to being controlled are violently quieted, can serve the redemption narrative that Woolf describes.

Wives in “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant” are represented in terms similar to those for Noah’s wife. The wife of the Second Shepherd, who never appears onstage, and Mak’s wife, Gill, are also “shrewish.” The Second Shepherd’s opening speech features a complaint about marriage:

Som men will have two wifys, and som men thre  
 In store.  
 Som ar wo that has any!  
 Bot so far can I:  
 Wo is him that has many,  
 For he felys sore. (ll. 85-90)

He warns young men against wooing and wedding, and uses his own wife as an example. After describing her as being “as great as a whall [with] a gallon of gall” (ll. 105-106) he closes his speech with the exclamation, “I wald I had ryn to I had lost hir!” (l. 108). The second Shepherd’s description evokes Noah’s description of his wife. In both cases, the husbands signal their lack of freedom: one in wishing he could run away from the “shakyls” his wife embodies (l. 72), the other in fearing the consequences of telling his wife what to do (as when Noah is afraid of what his wife will say about God’s command to build an ark). The lack of autonomy and self-determination voiced by these husbands is reinforced by the structures of authority these plays set out. Where Noah is, in a sense, caught between God and his wife, the Second Shepherd gives his complaint about marriage between two other complaints made by two other Shepherds about their subjugation to their lords and masters. The implication is that, in the context of having to obey lords and masters, husbands are resentful when their wives will not respect the chain of command and in turn obey their authority as husbands.

It would appear, then, that Kolve is right when he asserts that, in the Noah play at least, the question of “‘Maistrye’ is, then, the key to the brawling” (149); had he considered “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant” in his study, he would likely have made the same statement about this play as well. But Kolve does not consider the effect of such contestations of “maistrye” on the spiritual economy he describes. The male anxiety about power is evident, not only in direct relation to Wives, but in the insults the Shepherds use against each other. “Shrew” is used by the Second Shepherd to describe the Third Shepherd, likely to reinforce the Second Shepherd’s higher status (l. 151). He uses it again, echoing the Third Shepherd’s insult to Mak, who has a reputation for



stealing sheep (l. 221; 210). The use of “shrew” as an insult towards those who are subordinate seems ironic, however. The definition of a shrew is summarized succinctly by Brown in her *Better a Shrew than a Sheep*: “Shrew bad, patient wife good.” Brown explains that “in early modern parlance a shrew was a garrulous, domineering, and intractable wife” (1). The “maistrye” that Kolve identifies as the “key to the brawling” is won by the husbands in the end, and their wives are recuperated into the spiritual economy they are expected to serve.

It is curious, however, that both “Noah” and “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant” try to have it both ways in their respective dramatizations of Noah’s wife and Gill, by emphasizing the women’s resistance so strongly and then abruptly containing it. In “The Second Shepherds’ Pageant,” Gill is abrupt, bossy, and resents interruptions to her spinning work (l. 298), and Mak’s description of her to the Shepherds certainly paints no more favourable a picture (ll. 236-252). Gill’s insistence on working echoes Noah’s wife’s stubborn refusal to get onto the ark; instead of obeying Noah, Noah’s wife insists, “This spindill will I slip / Apon this hill / Or I stir oone fote” (ll. 364-366). Elliott provides this historical context for medieval marriage:

Barbara Hanawalt posits that the rigours of the peasant economy necessitated the contribution of both husband and wife, and that this, in turn, created a mutual dependency that she characterizes as a partnership marriage. But it should be noted that, in theory, the peasant husband’s power over his wife was as comprehensive as a man of more fortunate birth.<sup>10</sup> (45)

Elliott’s description highlights an ambiguity about the degree of a husband’s authority over his wife: tension arises as a possible result of trying to reconcile “mutual

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<sup>10</sup> Elliott adds that, “So far-reaching was the husband’s governance over his wife that a murderous attack on the husband by his subject wife was considered treasonous rather than simply criminal” (45).

dependency” and “comprehensive” authority over one’s wife. This historical context provides ways for thinking about, and explaining, the curious dynamic between spouses in these medieval plays; Noah’s wife and Gill, by privileging their own work – which benefits their husbands as well as themselves – are thereby attempting to assert a degree of autonomy that challenges the “comprehensive” authority of their respective husbands. When Noah wants his wife to interrupt her work to attend to larger matters such as the redemption plan, she responds by saying, “Yei, Noe, go cloute thy shone! The better will thay last” (l. 353); Bevington glosses this line as “mind your own business,” but it also highlights her valuing of practical work (“mend your shoes”) over Noah’s theory about the end of the world. In similar terms, Mak not only interrupts Gill when he arrives home with the stolen sheep, but argues that his work is more effective than hers: “For in a strate can I gett / More then thay that swinke and swette / All the long day” (ll. 311-313). This use of “swinke and swette” calls to mind the punishment accorded to Adam and Eve in “The Fall of Man,” and Adam’s admonition to Eve that she has “made this bad bargain” in choosing to eat the forbidden fruit (l. 119). In these examples, Noah, Mak, and Adam are mistrustful of women’s work and question its value. Women’s work is described by Sponsler, in a different context, as “resistance [. . .] within the contested economies” (145). Sponsler’s focus is on urban economies, but these examples of women’s work in these plays also signal a resistance to the plays’ spiritual economies.

Once the comedy of the “garrulous, domineering, and intractable” shrew is achieved, these plays try, unsuccessfully, to turn back to spiritual matters and restore these wives to their typologically-important roles. “The most powerful institution enforcing female subordination was the church. Despite (or because of) the flood of

sermons and pamphlets instructing them about their lowliness, jesting women [of which Noah's wife is an example] display a bracing lack of reverence for their spiritual guides" (Brown 12). If we use the categories of Virgin and Whore provisionally, which I maintain is the only way in which they can be used, then it could be argued that where Noah's wife was once whorish (ie. subverting authority, acting like a shrew), she is now, on the ark, virginal (ie. contained, self-controlled). Gill's trajectory is similar, but unlike Noah's wife's prefiguring of redemption by starting a new and better world after the Flood, Gill enacts a mock nativity scene immediately before the Shepherds go off to witness the real nativity. Here are yet more examples of divine intervention and unlikely plot twists instantiating a sudden change in representation, and ultimately subverting the recapitulative and redemptive spiritual economy evidenced through the need for such intervention. And so, while Woolf's reading of Noah's wife as signifying "the Virgin in an idiosyncratic way, for in her the redemption is adumbrated, but the relationship is not that of Noah to Christ but of Eve to the Virgin" (144-145), can serve as a broad generalization, it fails to consider the implications of the dramatic shift in Noah's wife's characterization from Whore to Virgin. In addition to the fact that the categories of Whore and Virgin are not so clear-cut, the dramatization of wives such as Noah's highlight the fact that the category of Wife is constructed to serve a redemptive narrative, but the characters who are wives do so unconvincingly.

It is necessary to use these categories provisionally because the characters that supposedly fill these roles only do so in problematic ways. The moments of intervention mentioned above do not allow these female characters to construct their own representations. Eve and Mary are both silenced in their respective plays, either by divine

intervention or by representatives of the divine. Eve is tempted by God-like knowledge, but once faced with God's judgment her final words of the play are a lament for her wrongdoing: "So welaway / That ever I did that dede so dill!" (ll. 148-149). Eve leaves the last words of the play to Adam and God. Mary, when faced with Joseph's accusations of infidelity in "The Annunciation," says very little save repeating the notion that the child is both God's and Joseph's (i.e. l. 195); once the angel confirms this, Joseph's anxiety about the contradictory significations of Mary's body is suddenly quieted by the explanation. As when Mary's wish not to marry is over-ridden by the bishops at her temple – Joseph tells us that "She wold none othere [than God], for any sagh. / Thay said she must – it was the lagh" (ll. 239-240) – the intervention of the angel over-rides the resistance evidenced by Mary's pregnant body. And finally, the worsening storm combined with Noah's admonitions effect the same kind of silencing of Noah's wife that we see in "The Fall of Man" and "The Annunciation."

The common experience of being silenced by patriarchal systems, or representatives of that system, is a similarity that signals the mainstream strategy of dealing with that which does not fit. As Karras bluntly puts it in her historical study of medieval prostitution, "The threat of whoredom justified controlling the behavior of all unmarried women" (20) in an economy which determined that all women ought to be married, if not to a man then to God.<sup>11</sup> In reference to the spiritual economy of the medieval cycles, some twentieth-century scholars such as Kolve ignore the aspects of the

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<sup>11</sup> While Karras' study of medieval prostitution is not overtly aligned with queer theory, there are some notable affinities between queer theory and Karras' social historicist approach – namely, her concern with marginalized historical subjects and with querying the historical/social structures that marginalize them. It is these kinds of politically-committed (new) historical studies that nicely complement queer approaches to literary texts, and ultimately suggest possibilities for thinking about literature and history in ways that avoid the marginalizing "master narratives" discussed at length in the introduction to this thesis.

plays which are queer and which, by virtue of their queerness, undermine the stability of the redemptive and recapitulative spiritual economy they argue is at work in the cycles. The medieval cycle drama is supposed to be coherent, according to some, but the women in these plays defy that coherence and instead, “do contrapuntal ideological work, even while in the service of a dominant religious message and a civic power-structure” (Sponsler 160).

The characters considered in this chapter are not stable signifiers. Instead, they signify the impossibility of signification; they resonate with the traces of similarities to, and differences from, the categories of Whore and Virgin that have been constructed by the patriarchal economy that depends on them. These women do not “fit” the roles assigned to them by the teleological medieval spiritual, and contemporary critical, economies of thought. There is potential in these “queer” characters to disrupt the historicist and patriarchal thinking that necessarily inculcates marginality, and in the following chapter I will argue that this also holds true for the women in the secular economy of Renaissance drama. It is this same historicist and “progressive” linear thinking that demands and constructs the boundaries between women and men, religious and secular, premodern and postmodern, and Virgin and Whore.

## Chapter Three:

## Queering the Patriarchal Secular Economy in Renaissance Drama

I pointed out in the previous chapter that Theodora A. Jankowski's argument in *Pure Resistance* is that virgins in Protestant England are queer by virtue of the fact that they operate outside of the secular Protestant patriarchal economy of the period. In this economy, Jankowski argues, all women are expected to follow a trajectory from Virgin to Wife. "Consequently, while virginity remained a highly fetishized space, its fetishization now resulted from the necessity of ensuring paternal parenthood within the newly emerging capitalist / bourgeois family and only applied to the transitory state of premarital virginity" (Jankowski 113). Virginity, as a transitory state within the mandated trajectory, is always, then, conceived of in relation to marriage. Some women in these plays, however, challenge this trajectory; virgins avoid marriage or marry against their parents' wishes, and whores pursue marriage. These queer challenges on the part of Desdemona, Moll, and others, blur the boundaries between the categories of Virgin, Whore, and Wife, and highlight the narratives that rely on the stability of these categories. In this chapter I will argue that both Shakespeare's *Othello* and Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* dramatize a critique of the secular appetites of those characters who attempt to profit from the categorization of women and the control of these women's marriage trajectories.

As I have already noted, this thesis is, in part, concerned with questioning the efficacy of periodization and the narratives of progress in scholarly criticism that

sometimes depend on the division between medieval and Renaissance. One such narrative of progress, that of decreasing misogyny from the medieval period to the Renaissance, can be found especially in criticism on Shakespeare's *Othello*. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, husbands such as Noah in the medieval cycle drama express anxiety about being subjugated to their domineering wives, and they usually do so in misogynistic ways. This same anxiety is evident in the drama of the Renaissance period as well, and is often discussed by Renaissance scholars. Stephen Orgel explains that "the charge that women have usurped the place of men, or the fear that they will do so, is so commonplace as to constitute a moral topos in the period" (108). For instance, the murder of Desdemona and Emilia has garnered a great deal of critical attention, and a number of feminist critiques of *Othello* consider the ending of this play in the context of misogyny and gynophobia. Ruth Vanita concludes that "*Othello* is the only one of Shakespeare's major tragedies in which the innocent victim is put to death before our eyes after systematic physical and mental torture in the presence of witnesses, and this is possible because she is a wife" (Vanita 349). At the same time, however, Vanita attempts to rescue the drama of this period by constructing a narrative of misogyny that conceives of the Renaissance as at least "better than" the medieval period when it comes to questions of misogyny and women's autonomy.

Narratives of progress are sometimes constructed by Renaissance feminist scholars to help contextualize the roles of women in the plays being considered, and these are supported by the "gigantic master narrative" dividing this period from the medieval. In Sara Deats's article on *Othello*, she repeats a commonly-held and oft-repeated belief

that misogyny in this period is less wide-spread and less evident than in the medieval period:

Although, as Linda Woodbridge and Valerie Wayne demonstrate, the blatant misogyny so characteristic of the medieval period may have dwindled into a residual discourse by the time of *Othello*'s production, the relationship between the sexes and the role of women in society remained a central area of contestation at this period. (190)

Huston Diehl calls upon the same notion of progress as Deats when she states that the intention of her paper is to position *Othello* "in the historical moment known as the Protestant Reformation" rather than focusing "on the enduring conventions of a misogynist tradition that the Renaissance inherited from classical and medieval Christian cultures" (113). Diehl, in the very act of naming that on which she will not focus, reinforces the "misogynist tradition." But where Noah and his wife trade blows in the medieval flood plays, Othello not only strikes his wife, but murders her; where Mak complains loudly about Gil's fecundity and work ethic, Allwit in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is his wife's pimp. It will require a study more broad than this one to undo the attractiveness of the misogynist narrative referred to by Vanita, Deats, and Diehl. However, the question of misogyny inevitably brings with it questions of morality and value: stating that the drama of the Renaissance treats women better than that of the medieval period serves to demarcate the two in ways that obscure the commonalities of women's representation in the drama of both periods. Instead, the differences in the treatment of women to which Deats and others allude could more usefully be read as an indication of the extent to which the women in these plays are still misread, mistook, and misappropriated by the patriarchal economies that seek to control them.



Like the women considered in the previous chapter on medieval drama, the women in these plays cannot be contained by the categories of Virgin, Wife, and Whore; Moll and Desdemona escape their fathers' houses. The pervasiveness of these categories, and the expected trajectory of women's lives, is evident in *Othello* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Marriage is an important topic in both of the plays being considered in this chapter. As Coppélia Kahn characterizes it, "to assert that the basic condition for the representation of women in [Renaissance] drama is marriage is to state the obvious, to reiterate a cliché, to return to the starting point of feminist criticism a decade or more ago" (246).<sup>12</sup> Less obvious, and worthy of more critical attention, is the nature of women's resistance to the state of marriage and the effect this has on the trajectory imposed on them.

Both *Othello* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* portray fathers concerned about their right to control whom their daughters marry. Stephen Orgel provides a historical context for these dramatic fathers' anxieties about their authority. He explains that:

As far as paternal prerogatives were concerned, there were sufficient ambiguities within the English system to justify the anxieties of a father who assumed his rights over the disposition of his child to be absolute. English fathers were legally entitled to arrange their daughters' marriages as they saw fit, and of course had control of all property that accompanied the daughter; but until 1604 the legal age of consent was twelve for women (fourteen for men), which meant that daughters over the age of twelve were also legally entitled to arrange their own marriages.

They might make themselves paupers by doing so, but they could not be stopped.

(Orgel 36-37)

Orgel adds that "Middle- and lower-class arrangements, however, would have been much less constrained, as there was much less at stake. Indeed, middle-class London was a

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting, also, that Kahn writes this in 1991.

place of unusual liberty for women" (37). *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* dramatizes this setting, and the anxiety of the father that arises from the ambiguities to which Orgel refers. In Middleton's play, Yellowhammer is ruthless in his attempts to secure his daughter's marriage with Sir Walter; and yet, questioning Moll's peevishness, he says, "I fear nothing / But that she's taken with some other love; / Then all's quite dashed: that must be narrowly looked to" (I.i.169-71). This amusing moment of foreshadowing, during the scene in which Touchwood Junior is commissioning Yellowhammer to make the very ring with which he intends to marry Moll, anticipates the trouble Yellowhammer will have to go to in order to try to ensure his daughter marries Sir Walter. While Moll's marriage is being "narrowly looked to" by a father who wants to ensure his daughter follows the straight linear trajectory from Virgin to Wife, she will, in the end, make a circuitous escape and marry a man of her own choosing. The fact that Yellowhammer "fear[s] nothing / But that she's taken with some other love" highlights both the importance of this match to him, and the possibility that enough resistance from the daughter could "dash" the father's plans.

Similarly, in the early scenes of *Othello*, when he accuses Othello of enchanting his daughter, Brabantio explains that it makes no sense to him that

... a maid so tender, fair, and happy,  
 So opposite to marriage that she shunned  
 The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,  
 Would ever have, t'incur a general mock,  
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
 Of such a thing as thou. (I.ii.67-72)

Desdemona's opposition to marriage was evidently successful until she met Othello. The implication that Desdemona has at least some say in who she marries is further reinforced

when Brabantio says, "If she confess that she was half the wooer, / Destruction on my head if my bad blame / Light on the man!" (I.iii.177-179). Brabantio's role as head of the household, which gives him authority over his daughter, is clearly not absolute; her choice to marry Othello, then, subverts his role as his daughter's "head."

Further, both Yellowhammer and Brabantio think of their daughters in terms of property, wealth and social status. As Orgel's description (cited above) of the degree of a father's control over his daughter's marriage implies, money and the status that comes with are important factors in decisions about marriage. In Middleton's comedy, Sir Walter Whorehound is a desirable match for Moll, in Yellowhammer's eyes, because of his money and title. In the play's final scene, after Moll and Touchwood Junior have been married, Yellowhammer and his wife arrive to find the congregation expecting "a storm" (V.iv.62) in response to Moll's unauthorized marriage; instead, Yellowhammer declares, "I stand happy, / Both in your lives, and your hearts' combination" (64-65). He explains his change of heart by saying that "The knight's proved villain" (66) and then makes reference to Lady Kix's "belly [which] begins to blossom" (74) with the child who will disinherit Sir Walter – the knight, with no reputation and no inheritance to his credit, no longer has anything to recommend him to Yellowhammer, and so, his objections to Moll and Touchwood Junior's union are happily dropped. A similar focus on marriage for wealth and status is evident in another storyline in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*; Yellowhammer and Sir Walter have not only arranged for the marriage of Sir Walter and Yellowhammer's daughter, but they've arranged a marriage between Sir Walter's "niece," the Welsh Gentlewoman, and Yellowhammer's son. The men's financial ambitions are made clear throughout the play, with frequent references to "some nineteen

mountains” (i.e. I.i.131) that make up the Welsh Gentlewoman’s supposed inheritance, and with Sir Walter’s explanation to the Welsh Gentlewoman that, “I bring thee up to turn thee into gold, wench, / and make thy fortune shine like your bright trade” (I.i.98-99). Notably, Yellowhammer’s response to the (false) information about the Welsh Gentlewoman’s “nineteen mountains” is that he is “overwhelm[ed . . .] with love and riches” (I.i.133). In Yellowhammer’s conflation of “love and riches” in a conversation entirely about “riches” alone, Middleton signals the moral shortcomings of the father’s motivations for marrying his daughter. In Middleton’s *Cheapside*, largely populated by characters who are primarily driven by financial motives, women like Moll and the Welsh Gentlewoman are “brought up” to be turned “into gold.”

The opening act of *Othello*, unlike that of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, is not about the arrangement of a daughter’s marriage, but the elopement of a daughter with a man not of her father’s choosing. Although Shakespeare’s play is not concerned with the comic social climbing and financial ambition found in Middleton’s play – the tragedy instigated by Iago’s social climbing and financial ambition is a different point, one to which I will return – it is notable that, despite the difference in focus and genre, *Othello* still offers a father’s view of marriage that is predicated on issues of wealth and social status. Brabantio’s characterization of Desdemona’s “shunned” suitors as “wealthy curled darlings of our nation” (I.ii.69) succinctly describes the basis of his objection to Othello: wealth, social status, and race. More distressing to Brabantio than the financial, however, are the social repercussions of Desdemona’s choice. Her marriage to Othello, according to Brabantio, “incur[s] a general mock” (I.ii.70), implying his own anxiety about how Desdemona’s choice of husband will reflect upon him and his ability to control his

daughter. In an effort to shore up his threatened status as “head,” Brabantio goes on to state that “The Duke himself, / Or any of my brothers of the state, / Cannot but feel this wrong as ‘twere their own” (I.ii.97-99), thereby attempting to assert his paternal (and political) authority by calling upon his alignment with the Duke, and emphasizing Othello’s outsider status. Brabantio’s phrase “my brothers of the state” makes an analogy between family and country that emphasizes his authority over his daughter and the degree to which Desdemona has transgressed the expectations of the society in which she lives. In the scene in which Brabantio and Othello plead their respective cases to the Duke (I.iii), the Duke is also trying to solve the confusion surrounding the size and destination of the Turkish fleet. When Brabantio complains that his daughter has been “abused, stol’n” (I.iii.62) from him, the Duke offers to let him read “the bloody book of the law [. . .] After [his] own sense,” even if were the Duke’s own “proper son [who] / Stood in [Brabantio’s] action” (69-72). The line between matters of the state (“the bloody book of the law” and the Turkish conflict) and matters of the family is blurred in this scene, suggesting that Desdemona’s betrayal of her father’s authority has implications beyond her immediate family.

Whether the context is the building of one family’s estate, such as Yellowhammer’s, or the association of a daughter’s betrayal of her father’s authority with a betrayal of the nation-state, both of these plays evidence a patriarchal economy that depends upon daughters who will marry according to their fathers’ wishes. I have already mentioned Jankowski’s argument that all women in this period were expected to follow a trajectory from Virgin to Wife in order to fulfill the imperative of a patriarchal secular economy. Before turning to a discussion of how this trajectory is challenged in both

*Othello* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, however, I will argue that the category of Virgin, the starting-point of this Virgin-Wife trajectory, is problematic in its instability. Neither of these plays offers us an example of an ideal Virgin who embraces her duty to her father and the patriarchal economy he represents; instead, both Shakespeare and Middleton, to varying degrees, highlight the difficulty of knowing who the Virgins are.

According to Jankowski, virginity in this period was no longer celebrated the way it was in the medieval period. "Like consecrated Catholic virgins, Elizabeth claimed personal autonomy. But given the negative image of virginity in Protestant England, *any* comparison to virgins was bound to be 'tainted'" (*Women* 89). I have already pointed out that, in respect to the medieval dramatization of Mary, this notion of a Catholic Virgin's personal autonomy cannot be taken for granted; once again, Jankowski may be relying overly much on the division between the medieval and Renaissance periods. However, while the image of virginity might have changed from the medieval period to the Renaissance, the Virgin/Whore binary is still very much in play, as it is in medieval drama, and the binary is still collapsed in its dramatization. The commercial setting of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, for example, underscores the financial motives directing Yellowhammer's desire to marry Moll to Sir Walter, and blurs the distinction between Virgin and Whore. As Kahn points out in her description of the play's title, "Cheapside is the market area of London, and the chaste maid is named Moll – a nickname both for Mary and for women of the underworld, evoking in a word both virginal and whorish representations of women" (253). The double meaning of Moll's name highlights the fact that her virginity has been turned into a commodity by her parents, revealing the corrupted ideals of the Yellowhammers. Moll's mother criticizes, in turn, Moll's

appearance by saying that she is “drowsy browed, dull eyed, / drossy spirited” (I.i.10-11); her dancing, “like a plumber’s daughter,” which leads Maudline to declare that she “deserve[s] two / thousand pound in lead to [her] marriage, and not in gold- / smith’s ware” (18-20); and her failure to learn that “’tis the waving of a woman / Does often move a man” (45-46). Maudline’s criticisms of her daughter, complete with sexual innuendo (“’tis a husband solders up all cracks” [31]), are focussed on improving Moll’s marketability as a potential wife; the innocence and chastity that would be associated with virginity is privileged by neither Maudline, (and once Moll determines to pursue marriage with Touchwood Junior) nor Moll.

Desdemona, like Moll, marries against her father’s wishes; like Moll, too, she is associated with the Virgin Mary in such a way as to evoke whorish connotations. R. Chris Hassel Jr. makes a good case for the influence on Shakespeare’s *Othello* of the medieval plays about the pregnant Virgin Mary, by pointing to Desdemona’s role as intercessor between Cassio and Othello, as well as Othello’s doubt about Desdemona’s chastity. As in the medieval play “The Annunciation,” the husband of the chaste woman cannot believe his eyes, and thinks his wife a Whore. In another article drawing a connection between Desdemona and the Virgin Mary, Huston Diehl argues for a parallel between Othello’s misreading of Desdemona as Whore and the iconophobia circulating in England. She explains that

When they ‘bewhore’ the beloved images of medieval popular piety, the iconoclasts call attention to the erotic dimension of late medieval sacred art, sexualizing the Virgin Mary and the chaste female saints. [. . .] In such attacks on images the Reformers transform one of the most powerful images of the Middle Ages – the idealized holy woman – into a whore. Might not Othello’s

denunciation of 'the divine Desdemona' as 'that cunning whore of Venice' (2.1.73; 4.2.90-91) rehearse this same terrible transformation? (Diehl 126). What Diehl characterizes as the "terrible transformation" of Desdemona into a "cunning whore" is instigated by Iago. Motivated by his own aspirations for wealth and social status, Iago not only exploits Othello's insecurities when he convinces him that Desdemona is a "cunning whore," but he exploits the epistemological instability of the categories of Virgin and Whore. The key scene that confirms Othello's suspicions about Desdemona's infidelity is notably made up of a conversation between Iago and Cassio which Othello observes but cannot hear (IV.i.92-161). By speaking to Cassio about Bianca, Iago leads Othello to "mentally substitute[ ] his chaste wife for the prostitute" (Diehl 127). In this play, as in "The Annunciation," it is not possible to tell a Virgin from a Whore just by looking. It is not only Desdemona who is substituted, but Bianca as well. When she interrupts the scene, carrying Desdemona's handkerchief and saying, "This is some minx's token, / and I must take out the work? There; give it your hobby- / horse" (IV.i.148-150), Cassio runs after her explaining, "She'll rail in the streets else" (156). Cassio describes himself as "a customer" (118) of Bianca's, and yet she accuses him of infidelity as if she were a wronged woman. As Diehl points out, "Through the use of dramatic irony, audiences observe how easily characters can confuse the virgin and the whore" (127). This dramatic irony, in concert with Othello's jealousy, and Iago's control over what Othello sees, sets the tragedy in motion.

Shakespeare, of course, leaves no doubt that Desdemona has been wrongly accused of being a Whore. Unlike some of the characters in the play, the audience is privy to the actual content of the conversation between Iago and Cassio, and not just the appearance. Brabantio's warning to Othello – "Look to her, Moor, if thou has eyes to see.



/ She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.293-94) – only underscores the fact that Brabantio's eyes were also ineffective in preventing his own deception. Howard makes reference to "the idea that women are universally prone to deception and impersonation. This is a cultural construction of the feminine, familiar from the antitheatrical tracts, which serves the political end of justifying men's control and repression of the volatile and duplicitous female" (61). Iago uses this logic when he convinces Othello that he should be suspicious of Cassio: "She did deceive her father, marrying you; / And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, / She loved them most" (III.iii.206-07). Instead of putting Desdemona's chastity in doubt, however, Shakespeare shows Iago to be a self-serving manipulator of the categories of Virgin and Whore, not just in relation to Desdemona's representation, but Emilia's as well. When Emilia realizes that Iago's "reports have set the murder [of Desdemona] on" (V.ii.192), she speaks up and exposes Iago, even though, she admits, "'tis proper I obey him" (201). In this scene, and in others before it, Iago has been critical of Emilia, and here he calls her a whore for betraying him. The first interaction in the play between Emilia and Iago consists of his complaining, unprovoked, that she has "too much" speech, and when pressed by Desdemona, he gives laundry list of Emilia's un-wifely qualities (II.i.101-12). But in the final scene, "too much" speech is to Emilia's credit; her actions are dictated by what she feels is morally right, rather than what she feels is her obligation to Iago. Emilia's willingness to question the wifely role is evidenced earlier in a conversation between her and Desdemona. As Desdemona anticipates her punishment for infidelity, she asks Emilia if "there be women [who] do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?" and if Emilia would "do such a deed for all the world?" (V.i.60-62). Desdemona appears unable

to even imagine the possibility of infidelity, but Emilia pointedly asks, “have not we affections, / Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?” (V.i.99-100).

This conversation between Emilia and Desdemona makes clear both Desdemona’s privileging of the chaste ideal, and Emilia’s more flexible ideals. And yet both women are murdered by their husbands. Vanita points out that after Emilia is murdered by Iago, “there is a fairly longish interval before the third body, Othello’s, is added to the bed. In that interval, the spectacle of Desdemona and Emilia lying dead together is much more strongly suggestive of how great lady and ordinary gentlewoman are equally defenseless as wives, yet retain their dignity in death” (352). This “spectacle,” I would add, also suggests that, regardless of these women’s ability or willingness to fulfill the roles set out by Iago and Othello, these men’s privileging of the categories of Virgin and Whore finally makes it impossible for their wives to succeed. Shakespeare’s tragedy ensures that the sympathy of the audience is firmly with Emilia and Desdemona in this final scene, suggesting that it is their shared moral virtue, rather than their varying degrees of chastity and loyalty to their husbands and their categories, that is celebrated by this play.

Where Iago’s blurring of the boundary between Virgin and Whore leads to tragic consequences, the representational instability of these categories is a source of satire in Middleton’s play. *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is populated with several characters who confound categorization. As in *Othello*, this play reveals these categories to be problematic. For example, the Welsh Gentlewoman is able to fool the Yellowhammers and their son, Tim, into not only believing that she is “heir / to some nineteen mountains” (I.i.130-31) but that she is a virgin. When it is discovered that the Welsh Gentlewoman is

actually a whore, Maudline reminds Tim that he said once that “by logic [he] would prove / A whore an honest woman” (V.iv.106-07), and by marriage, he does. Mistress Allwit is another character who defies easy definition. She is, indeed, a wife, but Allwit and she have spent the past seven years living off of Sir Walter’s money and raising his children. When this arrangement ceases to be financially beneficial, the couple decides to “let out lodgings [. . .] / And take a house in the Strand” (V.i.168-169) – the Strand is glossed in the text as “the most fashionable part of London [. . .]; a resort of high class whores.” And finally, Lady Kix was having trouble getting pregnant until she had sex with Touchwood Senior, making Sir Oliver announce, “my wife’s quickened, I am a man for ever!” (V.iii.1). There is some suggestion from Sir Oliver, when he says to Touchwood Senior, “I have purse, and bed, and board for you: / Be not afraid to go to your business roundly” (V.iv.81-82), that the Touchwoods and the Kixes may find themselves in an arrangement similar to the one between the Allwits and Sir Walter. In all of these various relationship configurations, what becomes clear is that the categories for women do not obtain in this play. As Kahn outlines it, “A whore is all body, all lust, without soul; a wife or a virgin, all soul without body or lust. To a great extent, the obsession with sexuality which marks Jacobean drama centers on the distinction between and confounding of these categories” (251). Middleton does confound these categories, by satirizing or celebrating various sexual relationships in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, not for their conformation to categories, but based on the degree to which these relationships are informed by the good intentions of those involved. This is a point to which I will return shortly.

What the above examples show is that women can be Virgin, Whore, and Wife, alternately or simultaneously; in *Othello* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* these categories are rendered ineffective, despite attempts made by characters such as Iago and Yellowhammer to benefit from their use. Although Jean Howard is referring to the historical context of the drama, the parallels for the dramatization of women are evocative:

What seems most troubling about the overt shapeshifting of actors and the elaborate and changing dress of women is that both expose the hollowness of essentialist rhetoric[. . . C]hanging material conditions in urban London make it possible, and in some cases inevitable, for men and women to assume new social positions and engage in new social practices which make talk of an unchanging social order or a 'true' unchanging identity seem either absurd or willfully repressive. (43-44)

The "hollowness of essentialist rhetoric" to which Howard refers seems especially applicable to women, whose bodies, as Jankowski points out, are constantly changing. Writing specifically about "Women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," Jankowski argues that women, "if they were not virgins – drifted into and out of pregnancy with alarming regularity. Thus, the female body – in direct contrast to the male body – is a body in a state of constant flux. And, as such, it is capable of producing a threatening uneasiness" (*Women* 176).<sup>13</sup> The social flux to which Howard refers, and the physical flux of women's bodies to which Jankowski refers, offers a context by which one can explain the means of resistance to categorization and containment expressed by

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<sup>13</sup> Gail Kern Paster, in *The Body Embarrassed*, states that the "Renaissance association of women and water is used [. . .] to define the female body even when it is chaste [. . .] as a crucial problematic in the social formations of capitalism." The body is represented as "beyond the control of the female subject, and thus as threatening the acquisitive goals of the family and its maintenance of status and power" (25). Paster is making a larger argument about the significance of women's incontinence in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and although this thesis is not concerned with incontinence *per se*, Paster's discussion of water is relevant to my argument, below, about Desdemona and Moll's queer trajectories.

Moll and Desdemona in their respective plays. These women are able to exercise their own will, and shift and change in order to pursue their own desires, despite the ostensible authority certain men have over them.

Desdemona and Moll, in defying their parents' wishes and marrying the men of their choosing, can be considered "queer virgins" by Jankowski's definition. Both women attempt to pursue their own desire, and therefore operate outside of the authority their parents and their societies' attempt to exercise. Moll and Desdemona queer the trajectory they are expected to follow from Virgin to Wife by literally and figuratively choosing an alternate path. Shakespeare and Middleton dramatize both the literal containment, and circuitous escape, of queer virgins. The need to lock up one's daughters is evoked by Iago in the opening scene of *Othello*. He wakes Desdemona's father with shouts of "thieves!" and asks Brabantio, "Are your doors locked?" (I.i.82; 86). Brabantio tells the Duke of the "theft" and "enchantment" of his daughter, and before the Duke realizes that it is Othello who has wronged Brabantio, he says

Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding  
Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself,  
And you of her, the bloody book of law  
You shall yourself read in the bitter letter  
After your own sense. (I.iii.67-71)

This speech raises the possibility that Desdemona's marriage to Othello could be undone, or else that there could be legal repercussions for Othello which would impede the happiness of these newlyweds. Before the audience can see the two lovers joined, Othello and Desdemona must defend their actions. The Duke refers to the situation as "mangled matter" (174), and advises Brabantio to make the best of it – it is not until the third scene of the play that the father reluctantly gives to Othello "that with all my heart / Which, but

thou has already, with all my heart / I would keep from thee" (195-97). Even after Brabantio gives his daughter to Othello, he still grieves, and is unwilling to let Desdemona stay with him while Othello goes to Cyprus. This is clearly not a marriage easily made. In addition to the complications that arise immediately after Othello and Desdemona elope – which includes Desdemona being "transported [by . . .] a gondolier, / To [ . . . the] Moor" (I.i.24-26), a trip to Othello's lodgings, and another trip to the Duke's council chamber – Othello and Desdemona are then separated for their journey to Cyprus, and a storm delays Othello's arrival.

A similarly circuitous journey, out from under lock and key and through a river, is enacted in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Allwit tries to prevent the marriage between Moll and Sir Walter Whorehound so that he "shall not lose [Sir Walter] yet" (IV.i.269). He warns Yellowhammer that Sir Walter is "an arrant whoremaster, consumes his time and state, / -- whom in my knowledge he hath kept this seven years, / Nay coz, another man's wife too" (IV.i.233-35). But Moll's parents are so intent on marrying her to Sir Walter that Yellowhammer reasons 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" (IV.i.278-80). Yellowhammer's statement that Moll will not be hurt by this marriage is quickly put into question moments later when Moll escapes out from "under a double lock" and through a "little hole looked into the gutter" (IV.ii.34, 41) only to be dragged out of the river by her mother, and tugged "home by the hair" (55). As Kahn helpfully explains, "Even though a wife's body may be properly enclosed within the locked house, whenever desire is aroused, she threatens to escape ideological confines, and undermines the male authority in which marriage is grounded" (249-50). In

Middleton's play, this escape is represented spatially, as well as ideologically, through Moll's circuitous journey out of her parents' house, via the sewer system, to Touchwood's boat, into the river, and back again. The complicated trajectory from Virgin to Wife is not straightforward but full of detours and deception.

The fact that water figures in both Desdemona's and Moll's respective queer trajectories is significant in two ways. Firstly, the canals of Venice and the Thames in London are both important to the commercial interests of their respective cities, and as I noted above, issues of wealth and social status are central to Brabantio's and Yellowhammer's concerns about their respective daughter's marriages. That these women would utilise these commercial thoroughfares to make their escape highlights the subversiveness of their marriage choices. Secondly, Desdemona's and Moll's respective water journeys symbolically mark a transition in their status from Virgin to not-Virgin. Gail Kern Paster argues that, in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, there is a "thematizing of female uncontrol through the discursive association of women and water" (57). She draws a parallel between the "dangerous unreliability of women" and the "dangerous changeability of water" (47), which further reinforces Desdemona's and Moll's queerness. Rather than follow the straight line to marriages their fathers want for them, Desdemona and Moll change and shift out from under the control of their fathers.

These plays are dramatizing a non-straightforward trajectory from Virgin to Wife. In both of these plays, the desire of the queer virgin is a source of contention for those who wish to dictate whom she marries. For the movement from Virgin to Wife to be effected as neatly as those with authority would like, it is necessary for women to be identifiable as Virgin, Wife or Whore. Sir Walter Whorehound, for example, expects that

the Yellowhammers will lock up their daughter, preventing her from eschewing her virginity to become another man's wife, so that he can safely marry Moll and collect her dowry. But this queered trajectory, a "mangled matter" of detours and doubt, confounds the categories for women, and thwarts attempts at containment. I argue in the previous chapter that a medieval spiritual economy of recapitulation, redemption, and resurrection depends upon the stability of the categories of Virgin, Whore and Wife. In Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Shakespeare's *Othello*, however, this primarily spiritual economy has been replaced with a primarily secular economy, comprised of the competing appetites, and authority, of individuals. However, as with the previous chapter's consideration of the secular in the primarily spiritual medieval drama, the secularity of Renaissance drama does not proscribe issues of spirituality or morality. Rick Bowers describes the world of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* as a place where "characters do not look up to heaven. Instead, they look around at each other" (Bowers 1.22). While several of the characters in Middleton's play are not concerned with looking "up to heaven," this is not to say that *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is not concerned with questions of morality.

For example, in Act V, when Moll has fallen ill and her family fears that she is near death, Touchwood Senior arrives with news that his son has died. Maudline asks, "Dead sir?" and Yellowhammer replies, "He is. Now wife let's but get the girl / Upon her legs again, and to church roundly with her" (V.ii.85-87). Moll faints with the news of Touchwood Junior's death, and the mother's attempt to revive her consists simply of "Moll, daughter, sweet girl speak; / Look but once up, thou shalt have all the wishes of thy heart / That wealth can purchase" (93-95). This instruction is an amusing example of



the point Bowers makes, above, and it is ironic in this secular, and self-serving, context. Like Yellowhammer's conflation of "love and riches" in the opening scene of the play when Sir Walter describes the "nineteen mountains" belonging to the Welsh Gentlewoman, Maudline also conflates her love for her daughter with her love for riches. In this crisis, Moll's parents are primarily concerned with finalizing their marriage plans for Moll and Sir Walter. Convinced that Moll is dead, as Touchwood Senior and Susan carry her body offstage, Yellowhammer's first words are:

All the whole street will hate us, and the world  
 Point me out cruel: it is our best course wife,  
 After we have given order for the funeral,  
 To absent ourselves, till she be laid in ground. (107-10)

He suggests that they spend that time getting Tim married to the "rich Brecknock gentlewoman," to which Maudline replies, "We'll not lose all at once, somewhat we'll catch" (V.iii.115). These parents' preoccupation with the wealth and social status that come with the marriages arranged for their children distract them from the less tangible ideals of love and honour; rather than mourning his daughter, or perhaps taking the time to consider how his attempts to control Moll may have contributed to her death, Yellowhammer, looking not up but at "the whole street," is concerned that the world will "point [him] out cruel," primarily because of the detrimental economic impact this perception might have on his neighbourhood business. Middleton, by dramatizing such an extreme case as a young girl's death, highlights a moral blindspot in the Yellowhammers' relentless pursuit of riches.

Allwit is another character who is concerned with the opinions of others only insofar as they might impact his standard of living, and the scene between Allwit and

Yellowhammer in Act IV provides an opportunity for both characters to be simultaneously satirized. Allwit visits Yellowhammer in hopes that the planned marriage between Sir Walter and Moll will not go forward, thereby protecting Allwit's own financially advantageous situation. Without introducing himself, he tells Yellowhammer that Sir Walter has kept a married woman and her house, husband, and children for the past seven years. When Yellowhammer asks, "What an incomparable wittol's this [Allwit]?" and "What a base slave is that?" (l. 243; 246), Allwit simply responds, "Tush, what cares he for that? / Believe me coz, no more than I do" (ll. 244-45). He explains that this is his living, like a butcher or a poulter; Yellowhammer's insults and disdain highlight the lovelessness of such an arrangement and Allwit's questionable morality. However, Yellowhammer simultaneously resolves, after all of his hypocritical objections, to do as Allwit does. In his own self-serving move, Yellowhammer decides that after a good sweat to rid Sir Walter of any venereal disease (l. 281) the marriage will go ahead anyway. This scene mutually reinforces both men's privileging of wealth, and leaves both open to the audience's scorn.

The final scene of the play, however, offers the possibility for celebration within the context of the satisfying of characters' appetites. While critics debate about how to read the wedding of Touchwood Junior and Moll – as a kind of redemption of a stable world order or as an ironic and contrived *deus ex machine* – it is worth noting that the marriage is won by acclamation of those gathered for the funeral: it is both a celebration of the reversal of death, and an example of the satisfying of the public's desire.

Touchwood Senior asks those in attendance, "Whose heart would not have sprung with joy and gladness / To have seen [Moll and Touchwood Junior's] marriage day?"

(V.iv.25-26). He does not ask if the crowd if it is a good match, or if the Yellowhammers should not have interfered; Touchwood Senior's is not a question of right or wrong, but one of liking and pleasure. However, in this scene Middleton leaves open the possibility that it is not simply the satisfying of individual pleasures and appetites which is problematic; instead, it is the self-serving manipulation of others in pursuit of these appetites which invokes scorn. The marriage between Touchwood Junior and Moll, while arrived at by large-scale deception, ultimately is detrimental to no one. When Yellowhammer arrives at the funeral to find that Moll and Touchwood Junior are married, he says, "I stand happy [. . .] The knight's proved villain, / All's come out now, his niece an arrant baggage" (V.iv.64-67). Yellowhammer has lost nothing by losing the marriage to Sir Walter, and so he is happy to set aside his objections. Further, Touchwood Senior's orchestration of the marriage is motivated by his desire to see the young lovers happily married. As Margot Heinemann explains in reference to Middleton's early pamphlets, Middleton "express[es] a radical city contempt for the rich and idle – for courtiers and lawyers and parasitic gentry at least as much as dishonest merchants and moneylenders – and an unforced sympathy for the hardships of small tenant-farmers and the working poor" (52). Because Touchwood Senior's manipulation and deception is for the greater good, and not for his own personal gain, he escapes the satire that Middleton reserves for his more selfish characters.

Pleasure, in terms of appetite or wealth, is privileged and pursued by men such as Allwit and Yellowhammer, who do not appear to have much concern for the happiness of others, in the secular world of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. In *Othello*, Iago is similarly motivated by his pleasure, and not by a concern for others, but the result is tragic rather

than comic. Iago says that Desdemona's "appetite shall play the God / With [Othello's] weak faculties" (II.iii.319-20). This is a notable statement for Iago to make, considering that he may as well be speaking of himself. Iago is his own prime mover in this play, and he insists that those around him, especially Othello, look to him for guidance. As he explains to Roderigo in the opening scene, "In following [Othello], I follow but myself – / Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty, / But seeming so for my peculiar end" (I.i.59-61). His use of "heaven" here is ironic. Unlike the world of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* where "characters do not look up to heaven," Desdemona and Othello do look for moral guidance, but find only Iago's "seeming" and manipulation. In a way similar to Joseph's misreading of Mary's pregnant body in the medieval play "The Annunciation," discussed in the previous chapter, a handkerchief, a persuasive Iago, and Othello's own inability to think outside the Virgin/Whore binary, lead Othello to believe his wife is a whore. The ocular proof in *Othello* proves to be as unreliable, to say the least, as that in "The Annunciation"; but no angel comes to reassure Othello. "[I]n *Othello*, prayers and protestations to heaven are frequent but impotent" (Hassel 53). Neither Middleton nor Shakespeare offer their characters the divine intervention afforded to characters in the medieval plays such as Joseph and Noah; Iago can safely declare that "heaven is my judge" because heaven is empty. But the happy ending of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* occurs anyway, not because of divine intervention, but in part because of the intervention of Touchwood Senior. In *Othello*, Emilia does intervene, but her intervention comes too late, with the result that her murdered body is added to Desdemona's in the final scene.

While the medieval drama considered in the previous chapter is based primarily on religious subject matter, the plays of Shakespeare and Middleton under consideration

here implicitly criticize those characters who self-servingly circulate women in a secular economy by attempting to contain them within the categories set out for them. When these dramatic worlds are populated with individuals competing to satisfy their appetites for wealth, power, and sex, and when women (through marriage and procreation) are the means for satisfying these appetites, it is not surprising that, as Jankowski argues, a trajectory for women from Virgin to Wife is insisted upon by the economy that depends upon it. However, the anxiety that women might want to satisfy their appetites, too, by choosing husbands, or rejecting marriage altogether, leads to an anxiety that causes characters such as Othello to complain: "O curse of marriage, / That we can call these delicate creatures ours / And not their appetites!" (III.iii.267-69). This anxiety that men might not be able to distinguish between the Virgin, the Whore, and the Wife, is revealed in the lengths parents and husbands will go to keep women "locked up" and is evidence of their dependence on these categories. But Middleton and Shakespeare complicate the simple movement from Virgin to Wife when Moll and Desdemona get married; the queer virgins queer the trajectory, and blur the boundaries between the categories that are expected to validate the centrality of marriage. In a way similar to that described in the previous chapter, the women in these plays do not fit the categories, and in their disruption of the boundaries between categories, these plays finally suggest the possibility of a disruption of the boundary between medieval and Renaissance drama.

## Conclusion:

### Queering Medieval and Renaissance Drama

I have argued in this thesis that, while there are certainly differences between the drama of the medieval and Renaissance periods, the drama of both periods is concerned with dramatizing women's resistance to patriarchal economies. By expanding upon Jankowski's notion of a patriarchal economy which is dependent upon the containment and control of women, it is possible to talk about the commonalities between these two periods. Where the medieval plays I have considered here primarily dramatize a patriarchal spiritual economy of recapitulation, resurrection, and redemption, those of the Renaissance considered here primarily dramatize a patriarchal secular economy dependent on a narrative of women's expected trajectory from the category of Virgin to the category of Wife. Both economies prove to be, to varying degrees, dependent on the stability of the categories for women: Virgin, Whore, and Wife.

The economies in both periods, however, must withstand challenges from women who resist being controlled and contained. This resistance marks these women as queer, and in turn, by way of the anarchy that results from this resistance to representation, "mangles" the linearity of these economies' narratives. There is yet another narrative in play in the drama of both periods, and this is the "gigantic master narrative" identified by Patterson and discussed in my introduction. This narrative, which relies on a fundamental difference between the medieval and Renaissance periods, finally, is also disrupted by these queer challenges. Despite the differences between them, the drama of the medieval

and Renaissance periods are both partly concerned with women's challenges to their respective economies, and in this way it is possible to see the correspondences – the places where medieval and Renaissance do “touch” – and circumvent the “gigantic master narrative” overly-relied upon by dramatic scholars of both periods. I am in agreement with Clopper when he states, “I do not believe that we have a simple, linear dramatic history: medieval, early Tudor, and then Renaissance” (24); according to Clopper, the “evolutionary model” is “an intellectual scam to maintain a distinction between us, we moderns, and them, those medieval people” (269). It is my hope that by continuing to consider the drama of the medieval and the Renaissance together, we can challenge the narrative of progress implicit in such labels by speaking rather about “early English” drama.

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