

**Green Gowns and Crimson Petticoats:
Prostitution and the Satire of Material Desire in Middleton and Jonson**

Elyssa Y. Cheng

Abstract

This paper explores representations of prostitution and the satirical criticism of material desire in Thomas Middleton's *Michaelmas Term* (1604) and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). In *Michaelmas Term*, a "pestiferous pander" lures a beautiful country lass to the city where she is overwhelmed by the fashionable clothing and material delights that prostitution offers and agrees to become a wench. In another Middleton play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, a couple agrees to prostitute the wife in exchange for an extravagant life far above their designated social class. In Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, the pig-woman, Ursula, along with her pimps, draws city wives into prostitution by tempting them with sumptuous clothing. This paper argues that although Middleton and Jonson approach the cultural phenomena of prostitution and conspicuous consumption differently, both of them blame the propensity to consume exotic fashion and luxuries on women and focus on how women's material desire seduces them to enter the sex trade. Past critics have never directed their attention to the men's vanity toward wealth-conferred status and their anxiety toward women's agency under the mercantile market economy in these works. As revealed in Middleton and Jonson's plays, the male resistance not only illustrates the early modern Londoners' fear of acknowledging themselves as active participants in the emerging proto-capitalist economy, but also discloses their apprehension in losing patriarchal control, especially in a society where women's chastity is no longer sacrosanct.

Keywords: material desire, prostitution, conspicuous consumption

In medieval London, prostitution was deemed a threat but tolerated by the civic administration. As Ruth Mazo Karras (1989) observes, although prostitution was considered to threaten the patriarchal social order in this period, brothels were seen as “a necessary evil” and recognized by municipal authorities as a sexual outlet to ensure that sinful men would not corrupt chaste women or even turn to sodomy (p. 399). By the end of the sixteenth century, due to the enactment of the enclosure movement, the changing market economy, and rapid population growth, England suffered unprecedented economic depression (Amussen, 1988, pp. 64–67; Kinney, 1990, p. 19, pp. 24–25; Singh, 1994, p. 25; Underdown, 1985, pp. 20–33). Owing to the enclosure movement, significant numbers of poor, dispossessed women were compelled to migrate to London for employment opportunities (Underdown, 1985, pp. 20–33; Kinney, 1990, p. 19).¹ Therefore, as Jean E. Howard (2007) notes, by the end of the sixteenth century bawdy houses were widely spread throughout London, and prostitution became one of its most serious social problems (p. 126).²

While the sex trade allowed women to acquire economic independence, it threatened to disrupt, or even subvert, the established patriarchal hierarchy. Frederick Engels (1942) argues that primitive family was primarily matriarchal (pp. 42–43), but as society advanced and wealth increased, men overthrew women’s supremacy in the family to secure the inheritance rights of their children. Men took command in the home, degrading and reducing women to servitude (ibid., pp. 49–50). Keith Wrightson (2000) maintains that early modern society was primarily male-dominated, and women were simply taken as helpmates (pp. 30–68). The Jacobean city comedies that I will discuss in this paper delineate early modern women’s acquisition of economic independence through the sex trade; in the meantime, they also reflect early modern

¹ Previous Renaissance historians and literary critics have considered poverty as the primary reason for early modern women to become prostitutes. For example, Ruth Mazo Karras and Paul Griffiths contend that many young women became prostitutes in London because they were unskilled and came to the capital without any interpersonal connections (Karras 1989, p. 420; Griffiths 1993, pp. 50–51). Jyotsna Singh (1994) argues that the high unemployment rate, population displacement, and the early modern tendency to devalue women’s labor (such as spinning) all contributed to women’s selling their bodies in the capital (pp. 28–29). Jean E. Howard (2007) notices that the Elizabethans experienced serious economic infringement in the 1590s. During that moment of economic depression, many women migrated to London for employment opportunities, only to find themselves being excluded from most of the guilds, and were forced to become prostitutes out of financial necessity (p. 126).

² In his research on early modern prostitution, Wallace Shugg (1997) finds that crimes committed in the brothel districts had, by 1546, reached a threshold where Henry VIII had to issue a proclamation to close all establishments of prostitution; however, the eradication of the suburban brothels did not suppress prostitution. Instead, it helped spread the prostitutes around the city and led to serious social problems (pp. 294–99).

men's anxiety that they would lose patriarchal dominance.³ In Middleton's *Michaelmas Term* (1605–06), a country girl is seduced to London by a "pestiferous pander" in the hope that she can shed her humble country origins for social advancement in the city. Tempted by a glamorous satin gown, she agrees to become a prostitute to enjoy a luxurious city life. In Middleton's other play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), a husband allows his wife to be the mistress of a degenerate gentleman in exchange for a costly life far above their social class. In Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), the Puritan husbands (as represented by Proctor John Littlewit) and the city administrators (as represented by Justice Overdo) neglect their husbandly duties and patriarchal control so as to let the bawds and pimps seduce their wives through the promise of wearing sumptuous clothing and the enjoyment of comfortable city life. By examining the discourse of whores, pimps, and bawds in these plays, I argue that due to the emergence of proto-capitalism, the early modern Londoners were greatly tempted by their material desires but fought with their consciences about obtaining and enjoying luxuries. The city comedies I research reflect their struggle to possess and enjoy luxuries and their ambivalence about surviving in a transitional world where wealth was beginning to displace hereditary rank. These plays, as a whole, reveal strong male resistance toward the mercantile market economy. Such resistance not only illustrates the early modern Londoners' fear of acknowledging themselves as active participants of a proto-capitalist market economy, but also discloses their apprehension about losing patriarchal dominance. Before I closely examine the plays, I will explain why clothing became a luxury in this period and how the playwrights criticized women's material desire, extending it to satirize women's trafficking their bodies to acquire sumptuous apparel. While the emerging proto-capitalist economy awakened women's materialistic desire, women's new search for financial independence provoked male anxiety that they would lose patriarchal control.

In her introduction to *Michaelmas Term*, Gail Kern Paster (2000) notes that in Elizabethan England, clothing distinguished social rank, but after the repeal of the sumptuary laws in 1604, clothing came to mark wealth rather than social status (p. 35). Historian Lawrence Stone (1967)

³ Prostitution-related material was ubiquitous in late-Tudor and early-Stuart plays. I chose these three plays because they tend to reinforce a moralistic, patriarchal world. However, there are other plays that portray prostitution from different socioeconomic perspectives. For instance, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker's collaborative work, *The Roaring Girl* (1611), describes the historically notorious whore, Moll Cutpurse, who often cross-dressed as a man and led an economically independent life as a prostitute. Thomas Dekker's plays, *The Honest Whore, Part I* (1604) and *The Honest Whore, Part II* (1604–05) delineate the converted whore Bellafront, portraying her conversion from a courtesan to an honest city wife.

remarks that clothing was originally “a status symbol” of the aristocracy, but it gradually evolved into “a vehicle for conspicuous consumption” for Londoners, and their pursuit of sumptuous clothing was so zealous that even foreign observers were shocked by their fashion consciousness (p. 257). Historian F. J. Fisher (1948) found that by the early seventeenth century, Londoners were so obsessed with fashion that they sometimes sold their land in exchange for fashionable apparel (p. 46). Howard (2000) discovered that by the early seventeenth century, Londoners started to be fascinated with foreign imported fashions and fantasized about lavish lives far above their designated social classes (p. 151).

All the above-mentioned references display a close connection between the Londoners’ zest for extravagant clothing and conspicuous consumption, but Ian W. Archer and Karen Newman clearly illustrate the link between women’s material desire and their conspicuous consumption of clothing. In “Material Londoners,” Archer (2000) argues that the increasing consuming power of women and youth evoked male anxiety and was considered a threat to the patriarchal social order (pp. 184–86, esp. p. 184). As Archer’s research shows, this evocation propelled the early modern moralists to conflate the desire for luxuries with women’s sexual desire and their disobedience (ibid., p. 186). Newman (1991) argues that consumption was seen as an activity to which women were conspicuously as well as dangerously prone, and she claims that early modern Englishmen, especially those pamphleteers, blamed imported luxuries and sumptuous clothing for stimulating women’s material desire and luring them to traffic their bodies for luxurious material enjoyment (pp. 131–43). This early modern male anxiety toward women’s insatiable material desire and their propensity to conspicuous consumption is also revealed in Middleton’s *Michaelmas Term*, in which a country girl is seduced by sumptuous clothing to enter the city’s sex trade.

In the play, a country girl is inveigled to London by a pander, Dick Hellgill, and is immediately taught that material ornaments, such as “wires and tires, bents and bums, felts and falls” outweigh her virginity (1.2.15).⁴ As Howard (2007) notices, this country girl is given no name except “the generic one” of Country Wench, and as one of Middleton’s habitual dramatic designs in crafting symbolic names for his urban characters, “Country Wench” is a constant pun to remind his audiences that this woman is brought to the city explicitly for “country

⁴ Subsequent citations of the play are taken from *Michaelmas Term*, edited by Gail Kern Paster (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000).

matters” (p. 131). Hellgill first instructs the country girl that if she wants to live in the city like a “gentlewoman” (1.2.7) and to gain “better advancement” (1.2.20), she should become a prostitute. The pander clearly tells the Country Wench that “Virginity is no city trade; / You’re out o’th’freedom when you’re a maid” (1.2.45–46), and attempts to use a prostitute’s elaborate costumes to seduce the girl. The Country Wench initially resists but cannot hold on when the pander lays before her a satin gown. For her, to shed her “servile habiliments” (humble country clothes) (1.2.6) and to assume a prostitute’s elaborate costumes is simply a change of wardrobe, but for Middleton as well as his contemporary audience, her change of clothing indicates not only an erasure of her past, but also her degeneration from a chaste maid to a corrupt whore.⁵

In an aside, Hellgill comments: “So, farewell wholesome weeds where treasure pants, / And welcome silks where lies disease and wants” (1.2.53–54). The pander’s remarks pointedly capture the connection between a prostitute’s sumptuous clothing and her eventual contraction of venereal disease and dying in foreseeable poverty. As Paster (2000) observes, for a whoremonger such as Hellgill, the Country Wench is merely a piece of marketable commodity—as “man’s meat” to be fed to satisfy man’s carnal desire (p. 28).⁶ Her value as a commodity far outweighs her maidenhead. For the Country Wench, the city represents a world of fashionable clothing and material luxuries, and she readily abandons her simple and virtuous life in the country to explore a more exciting life in the city. However, her exchange of humble country clothes for the city whore’s elaborate costumes resembles the allegorical figure Michaelmas Term’s doffing of his white cloak of the country to don the black gown of a lawyer or a city official in the play’s Induction (1–5). Similar to the Country Wench, when Michaelmas Term arrives in the city, he immediately discards his conscience to opt for the evil and cunning city life. Here, Middleton presents the city as a man-devouring and conscience-erasing world to which simple and virtuous country folks are lured and where they lose their conscience.

In Act III, scene i, the Country Wench undergoes a total makeover by a tailor and a tirewoman.⁷ As one would expect, the whole scene is replete with bawdy, sexual innuendos.

⁵ For the cultural connotations of clothing and the constructions of social identities, see Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000); Mathew Martin, “[B]egot between tirewomen and tailors’: Commodified Self-Fashioning in *Michaelmas Term*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 5.1 (1999): 21–36; and Paster’s discussion in the introduction of *Michaelmas Term*, especially pp. 20–32.

⁶ The phrase “man’s meat” is actually delivered by The Country Wench in the play. See 1.2.58–59 in Paster, 2000.

⁷ According to Gail Kern Paster, a “tirewoman” here refers to “one who assists at a toilette, especially at

The tirewoman, Mistress Comings, suggests that the Country Wench adopt a hairstyle “still like a mock-face behind” because “[t]is such an Italian world, many men know not before from behind” (3.1.18–20). Howard (2007) points out that Mistress Comings’s suggestion alludes “knowingly to the supposedly Italian vice of anal intercourse” (p. 132). The Country Wench’s transformation after her total makeover can be best shown via the way she readily adopts the lewd discourse of a city whore, as she replies to Hellgill, “Out, you saucy, pestiferous pander! I scorn that, i’faith” (3.1.28), and the pander joyfully comments: “Excellent, already the true phrase and style of a strumpet” (3.1.30).

Deeply impressed by the Country Wench’s transformation, Hellgill cannot help but exclaim over clothing’s power to erase one’s humble origins and its potential to construct new social identities: “You talk of an alteration; here’s the thing itself. What base birth does not raiment make glorious? And what glorious births do not rags make infamous? Why should not a woman confess what she is now, since the finest are but deluding shadows, begot between tirewomen and tailors?” (3.1.1–5). Hellgill’s quasi-moralizing comment reminds Middleton’s audience of the Induction, where the metaphysical dramatic figure Michaelmas Term discards his white country cloak of conscience to don the lawyer’s black gown. Indeed, the Country Wench’s abandonment of her virginity and humble country clothes and her adoption of a city whore’s sumptuous costumes illuminate a pathetic moral corruption hidden beneath her beautifully refined exterior. In the play, this makeover is so total that even her father fails to recognize her, but his brutally honest comment discloses this inside–outside discrepancy in the very same woman: “Thou fair and wicked creature, steeped in art! / Beauteous and fresh, the soul the foulest part” (1.3.290–91). To defend her degeneration into the sex trade, the Country Wench argues:

Do not all trades live by their ware and yet called honest livers? Do they not thrive best when they utter most and make it away by the great? Is not wholesale the chiefest merchandise? Do you think some merchants could keep their wives so brave but for their wholesale? You’re foully deceived, an you think so. (4.2.11–16)

hairdressing.” See note 24 in Paster (2000), p. 56.

Playing with the pun between “wholesaling” and “hole selling,” the Country Wench explicitly renders her sexual services as a “trade”—selling holes—which is no different from any other city trade.

In the final courtroom scene, the Scottish gentleman Lethe is forced to marry the Country Wench as his deserved punishment for pandering sex in the city. In the play, the Country Wench uses a whore’s attire to erase her humble origins in the city and elevate herself from her modest country birth to a respectable gentlelady-ship. Here, sumptuous clothing has helped obscure or even liquidate female identity in the urban milieu. For the Country Wench, clothing not only erases her humble social origin, but also constructs a new social identity for her. In this play, she manages to elevate her social status via trafficking her body. Middleton shows how the city degrades and demoralizes innocent folks with its materialistic lures. His work reflects a world undergoing rapid socioeconomic changes—a world where conventional value judgments of the middling sort seem to be obscured and distorted by people’s desire for material luxuries, a world where men only care for the ostensible appearances and display of women no matter whether they are chaste or not.

In another Middleton play, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (written in 1613, published in 1630), the playwright portrays a willing cuckold who pimps his wife for material enjoyment. At the beginning, the cuckold Mr. Allwit details the pleasure of pimping and extracting his wife’s sexual labor for material wealth over the course of the previous ten years:

I thank him, he’s maintained my house this ten years;
 Not only keeps my wife, but ’a keeps me
 And all my family. I am at his table;
 He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse
 Monthly or weekly; puts me to nothing,
 Rent, nor church duties, not so much as the scavenger.
 The happiest state that ever man was born to!
 I walk out in a morning, come to breakfast,
 Find excellent cheer; a good fire in winter;
 Look in my coal house about Midsummer Eve,
 That’s full, five or six chaldron new laid up;
 Look in my backyard, I shall find a steeple

Made up with Kentish fagots which o'erlooks
 The water house and the windmills. I say nothing,
 But smile and pin the door. (1.2.16–30)⁸

From his discourse, we find this complacent cuckold pleased to have his wife's adulterer, Sir Walter Whorehound, fulfilling all his husbandly duties for him: furnishing a good table, rent, church and childcare duties, fire in winter, and even childbearing. We also come to realize that with Sir Walter's maintenance, the Allwits lead an extravagantly opulent life, much above their middle-class origins.

In the play, via his elaborate dramatization of Mistress Allwit's lying-in scene, Middleton displays the extravagance of a private mistress's life. At the beginning, Mr. Allwit catalogues the luxurious material ornaments and supplies in Mistress Allwit's lying-in chamber—the product of the sale of Mistress Allwit's body:

When she lies in—
 As now she's even upon the point of grunting—
 A lady lies not in like her: there's her embossings,
 Embroid'rings, spanglings, and I know not what,
 As if she lay with all the gaudy shops
 In Gresham's Burse about her; then her restoratives,
 Able to set up a young pothecary
 And richly stock the foreman of a drug shop;
 Her sugar by whole loaves, her wines by runlets.
 I see these things, but like a happy man
 I pay for none at all, yet fools think's mine;
 I have the name, and in his gold I shine. (1.2.30–41)

This catalogue of rich textiles and tapestries hanging on the walls and the fully stocked restoratives in his wife's lying-in chamber displays the material wealth that the Allwits enjoy

⁸ This and subsequent citations of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* are taken from Bevington et al., 2002, pp. 1453–1514.

by prostituting Mrs. Allwit. In this passage, we find that Mr. Allwit does not feel ashamed of pimping his wife; on the contrary, he is happy that he can enjoy the material luxury but does not have to pay for it.

As Janelle Day Jenstad's (2004) research shows, in early modern England, lying-in offered a venue for the pregnant woman and her husband to display their wealth and social status. The construction of a lying-in chamber involved the family's ability to show off their household space and to purchase sumptuous furnishings (p. 375). Due to the lying-in chamber's social and material signification, Jenstad argues that "lying-in must not be constructed as a private event"; the material display in the lying-in chamber "constituted a material system of signs through which social meanings were registered" (ibid., pp. 375–76). During a pregnant woman's lying-in period, the bedchamber was turned into a communal space where midwife, female friends and neighbors, and relatives visited, especially at the gossips' feast that followed the christening of the newborn baby. These women had ample opportunity to compare every aspect of the material display of the lying-in chamber, from furnishings (textiles, linens, bedding, curtains, hangings, and carpets) to food supplies (restoratives, spices, wine, and comfort food). At the bastard's christening, Mistress Allwit invites her neighbors and girl friends as gossips to her lying-in chamber. The luxurious display of her childbirth chamber evokes an implicit equation between the Allwits' wealth and the desirability of Allwit as an ideal candidate for husband (Jenstad, 2004, p. 390). From analyzing Middleton's lying-in scene and comparing it with the Countess of Salisbury's lying-in chamber,⁹ Jenstad concludes that Middleton was acutely aware of the differences between the mercantile standard of property-conferred status and the aristocratic standard of hereditary rank (loc. cit.). Living in a time of rapid social flux and reconfiguration, Middleton displays the contradiction between the two ways of conferring ranks in his portrayal of the lying-in scene.

Jenstad's research not only offers the audience a platform to think about Middleton's attitude toward wealth and hereditary rank, but also helps us further consider Middleton's attitude toward the sale of women's flesh for material enjoyment. For the Allwits, their household is a brothel in which Mistress Allwit sells her sexual favors to a single patron, Sir Walter Whorehound. In exchange for her sexual services, Sir Walter supports Mistress Allwit, her husband, and all their bastard children. As readers, we have to be aware that although Sir

⁹ The Countess of Salisbury was the wife of William Cecil, the second Earl of Salisbury and son of Robert Cecil.

Walter appears to be the titular supporter of the household, in reality it is Mistress Allwit who uses her body as an instrument of labor to support her family.

In the past, critics have pointed out that women are treated as marketable commodities in this play. Newman (2006) contends that in it women are “ware made up for commercial transactions” (p. 244). Swapam Chakravorty (1996) notes that Mr. Allwit takes his wife as his “personal capital” (p. 99). Rick Bowers (2003) asserts that Mr. Allwit pimps and extracts his wife’s sexual labor for his selfish ends and considers prostituting his wife as service-providing (para. 21). Arthur F. Marotti (1969) observes that although Sir Walter’s relationship with Mistress Allwit is illicit, he thinks of her as his “rightful possession” (p. 70), and he even condemns the willing cuckold for having sex with her: “I heard you were once offering to go to bed to her” (1.2.96–97). Both Mr. Allwit and Sir Walter consider Mistress Allwit a commodity, especially Mr. Allwit, who is not ashamed of prostituting his wife, but also converts the familial relationship and marital bonds with his wife into a business partnership. He takes prostitution as a trade like any others: “butchers by selling flesh, / Poulters by vending conies, or the like” (4.1.216–17), and allows his wife to go to bed with Sir Walter in exchange for a luxurious material life.

Here, Middleton focuses on how material desire erodes a couple’s conscience so as to let the husband pander his wife for an opulent life far above their social status. At the end of the play, when Sir Walter is hurt in a duel, the announcement of his supposedly fatal wound ends this unnatural parasitic relationship. At first, Mistress Allwit and her bastard children are all summoned to help Sir Walter restore his senses, but only to provoke his last “will” in curses. Seeing that there is no way to recoup Sir Walter’s benefits, Mr. Allwit and his wife decide that they are going to desert their “benefactor” in his hour of need. Here, Middleton further accentuates this couple’s moral depravity and their greed for material wealth by revealing their plan to move to the Strand and use the money Sir Walter left to them to establish a brothel there. Middleton definitely enlivens a couple whose conscience had been totally blinded by their material desire. For him, the lack of moral direction in family life is the bitterest satire of the proto-capitalist society. While Middleton delineates women’s fall from innocence to prostitution, showing a stark contrast between the country and city life, Jonson depicts the complete lack of innocence in city life and ridicules especially the Puritans and the middle class for their greed for money and luxuries. In *Bartholomew Fair*, he overlaps sexual desire with

material desire and singles out the Puritan and middle-class husbands' hypocritical negligence of religious, juridical, and patriarchal control.

In this play, Jonson harshly critiques his contemporary Londoners' zeal for imported foreign goods and extravagant clothing, especially for luxuries far above their designated social classes. Even the Puritan Proctor, John Littlewit, is proud that he can afford to buy a velvet cap and Spanish high shoes for his wife, who has the name of Win, and he is not shy to display his personal wealth and pride to Winwife, his mother-in-law's suitor (1.1.18–25).¹⁰ Winwife joins Littlewit to praise Win for her fine clothing and expresses his admiration for Littlewit's financial affluence (1.2.3–8). Here, Jonson does not glorify Littlewit's economic success and his ability to afford his wife conspicuous imported foreign fashions. Instead, he shows that in pursuing luxuries, this middle-class couple are leaving behind values of patriarchy and prudence, and considers Littlewit's indulgence as negligence of husbandly duty. However, the Littlewits are not the only characters in the play who are lured by their material desire. Justice Overdo, Jonson's allegorical figure for civil administration, is so preoccupied with scooping out the enormities (criminal behaviors) in the city that he also allows his wife, Mistress Overdo, to stray by herself in Bartholomew Fair, and subsequently be seduced by Ursula's prostitution ring via the promise of a city whore's sumptuous clothing and a comfortable city life.

If material desire tempts women to fall, then Jonson's pig-woman, Ursula, is a modern-day representation of Eve, the first woman who tempted man to fall, and her roast-pig booth is extended to represent the main harbor for all criminal activities. Previous literary critics such as James E. Robinson, Jonas A. Barish, Renu Juneja, Ian McAdam, and G. M. Pinciss, have noticed Ursula's association with Eve (Robinson, 1961, p. 71, 80; Barish, 1959, p. 5; Juneja, 1978, p. 342; McAdam, 2006, p. 428; Pinciss, 1995, p. 353).¹¹ In the play, Ursula is corpulent and works in an extremely hot environment. She claims to the thief and ballad singer Nightingale that her heavy sweat makes her like a garden pot and people can follow the S-shaped drips she makes to find her (2.2.47–55). This severe working condition propels Ursula to smoke and drink heavily (2.2.79–87). Her booth is not merely a commercial site where overpriced roast pigs are served; beer and ale are sold in false measures, and tobacco is

¹⁰ Subsequent citations of *Bartholomew Fair* are taken from Bevington et al., 2002, pp. 961–1066.

¹¹ In "Dramatic and Moral Energy in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*," Joel H. Kaplan (1967) furthers this association and argues that Ursula does not simply arouse people's appetite by the aroma of her roasted pig, but she also serves as "a purveyor of punk" that drives people's appetite to "lust and prostitution" (p. 146).

audaciously adulterated. It is also a hotbed for various criminal activities: it receives the purses that Edgeworth and Nightingale steal; it houses Whit's and Ursula's prostitution rings; and it covers for Knockem's audacious thievery. Ursula's arch-enemy in the play is named Justice Adam Overdo, who is Jonson's allegorical figure for corrupt juridical administrators. Overdo claims that he has been combating Ursula's prostitution and theft rings for the past twenty-two years (2.2.74–77). Suspecting that Ursula uses her roast-pig booth as “the very womb and bed of enormity,” he assumes a disguise in order to uncover underground crimes (2.2.109–10).

As Joel H. Kaplan (1967) points out, Bartholomew Fair serves as a base for the bawds, Captain Whit and Jordan Knockem, to lure honest city wives Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo into the sex trade through the promise of material enjoyments, especially fashionable clothing above their social class (p. 147). Knockem seduces Win with a city whore's elaborate apparel—“wires,” “tires,” “green gowns,” and “velvet petticoats” (4.5.35–39)—while Whit lures Win by reminding her that if she turns into a prostitute, then she does not have to spend any money for all the comfortable and luxurious city delights in which she can partake—coach riding, playgoing, supper with gallants, and drunken revelry (4.5.37–38). However, luxurious clothing not only seduces honest city wives into becoming whores but also attracts potential customers and triggers business competition among prostitutes.¹² Fearing the richly dressed Mistress Overdo will challenge her market, the common whore Punk Alice harshly beats Mistress Overdo and angrily complains that “[t]he poor common whores can ha' no traffic for the privy rich ones. Your caps and hoods of velvet call away our customers and lick the fat from us” (4.5.67–69). Punk Alice's words, no doubt, demonstrate the fierce competition between city whores, especially in their competition over luxuriously elaborate costumes with a garish taste for color combinations.

In the final scene of *Bartholomew Fair*, when the Puritan husbands (John Littlewit and Justice Adam Overdo) discover their wives wearing the city whores' elaborate costumes among the puppet-show audience, they finally come to realize that their negligence of husbandly duties has left their wives subject to the seduction of sumptuous clothing and propelled them to turn into prostitutes by following their material desires.¹³ As Paul A. Cantor (2001) maintains, to

¹² Gustav Ungerer's (2002) research shows that prostitutes spent a significant amount of money on costly garments as “provocative signifiers of commodified sex” (p. 141).

¹³ Rene Juneja (1978) notes that at the end of the play, John Littlewit finally comes to realize that his wife is not simply a display idol, “the little pretty Win,” but a woman of flesh and blood and of desire. His negligence of her

epitomize Bartholomew Fair as “the new world of capitalism in a nutshell,” Jonson “makes prostitution as an integral part of the fair,” showing that “everything has its price in money and everything is up for sale”— even human flesh (p. 31). The wives’ willingness to sell their bodies in exchange for luxurious city delights demonstrates their desire for material wealth in a world of changing economic values.

The satires as revealed in Middleton’s and Jonson’s plays reflect how London underwent rapid socioeconomic changes in the early Jacobean period.¹⁴ Although whores, pimps, bawds, and brothels were perceived as sites and emblems of urban ills,¹⁵ these plays illustrate how London was changed as well as challenged by emerging proto-capitalism. In *Michaelmas Term* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Middleton presents a world where wealth has surpassed moral censure, religious discipline, and juridical surveillance. In Middleton’s dramatic world, not only women, but also men, are ensnared by the allure of material enjoyment. Middleton’s prostitutes escape social censure and legal punishment, and their husbands do not fear to pimp their wives for luxuries. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson demonstrates the early modern male anxiety toward women’s proclivity for foreign fashion and imported luxuries. He presents a world where women are easily tempted by extravagant clothing and comfortable city lives, asserting that it is the husbands’ negligence of their duties as well as the lack of juridical control which allow the honest city wives be tempted by their material desire and fall into whoredom.

Although Middleton and Jonson approach the cultural phenomena of prostitution and burgeoning material desire differently, both of them blame the propensity to consume exotic fashion and luxuries on women and focus on how women’s material desire is what seduces them to enter the sex trade. In the meantime, they understate the Puritan and middle-class men’s

has almost let her “drift toward prostitution” (p. 353). Ian McAdam (2006) observes that Overdo’s fantasies about omnipotent control are finally “silenced” by his own wife’s affinity with whoredom. For McAdam, the unveiling of Win Littlewit and Mistress Overdo as whores re-establishes “the need for effective patriarchal control” and reminds the Puritan husbands of their more “mundane” (social and sexual) responsibilities (pp. 428–29).

¹⁴ For a comprehensive study of the socioeconomic exchanges in this period, see Wrightson, 2002.

¹⁵ Previous early modern historians and literary critics had shown that prostitution was considered a crime and social ill. Ian Archer (1991) points out that prostitution was seen as promoting social instability and sedition because brothels harbored runaway apprentices and vagrants (pp. 204–56). Jyotsna Singh (1994) argues that although under ostensible surveillance and restriction, prostitution was perceived as a crime in early modern England, and prostitutes were often associated with the criminal underworld (p. 11). Steven Mullaney (1998) lists the facilities that were deliberately kept apart from the city of London and argues that these brothels were put in the Liberties of London and under civil surveillance because they were potential sites for social disruption, and brothels were on the list (pp. 26–60).

vanity of showing off their financial affluence by displaying their wives with elaborate foreign clothing and even in prostituting their wives to enjoy a life far above their designated social status. All in all, living in the transitional world of emerging proto-capitalism, both playwrights are highly resistant to a world where women acquire agency and financial independence, a move that would be vividly and colorfully illustrated through the sex trade. By understating Puritan and middle-class men's hypocrisy in acknowledging their own material desire and monetary greed, Middleton and Jonson display a world where prostitution is harshly blamed underneath a misogynistic view that women are more easily lured by pretty things than men. In doing so, the satire of both playwrights relegates the roles of women and thereby reinstates patriarchal exploitation and commodification of women.

References

- Amussen, S. D. (1988). *An ordered society: Gender and class in early modern England*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Archer, I. (1991). *The pursuit of stability: Social relations in Elizabethan London*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511522468>
- Archer, I. (2000). Material Londoners? In L. O. Orlin (Ed.), *Material London, ca. 1600* (pp. 174–92). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Barish, J. A. (1959). *Bartholomew Fair* and its puppets. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 20.1, 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-20-1-3>
- Bevington, D., Engle, L., Eiseman Maus, K., & Rasmussen, E. (Eds.). (2002). *English Renaissance drama: A Norton anthology*. New York: Norton.
- Bowers, R. (2003). Comedy, carnival, and class: *A Chaste maid in Cheapside*. *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 8.3, 1.1-22. Retrieved from: <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/08-3/bowcome.htm>>.
- Cantor, P. A. (2001). In defense of the marketplace: Spontaneous order in Jonson's *Bartholomew fair*. *Ben Jonson Journal*, 8, 23–64. <https://doi.org/10.3366/bjj.2001.8.1.7>
- Chakravorty, S. (1996). *Society and politics in the plays of Thomas Middleton*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dekker, T. (1997). *The roaring girl*. (1611). (Elizabeth Cook, Ed.). New York: Norton.
- Dekker, T & Middleton, T. (1998). *The honest whore, parts one and two*. (1604–05). New York: Routledge.
- Engels, F. (1942). *The origin of the family, private property, and the state*. New York: International Publishers.
- Fisher, F. J. (1948). The development of London as a center of conspicuous consumption in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* (4th series), 30, 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3678697>
- Griffiths, P. (1993). The structure of prostitution in Elizabethan London. *Continuity and Change*, 8.1, 36–63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416000001909>
- Howard, J. E. (2000). Women, foreigners, and the regulation of urban space in *Westward ho*. In L. O. Orlin (Ed.), *Material London, ca. 1600* (pp. 150–67). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Howard, J. E. (2007). (W)holesaling: Bawdy houses and whore plots in the drama's staging of London. In *Theater of a city: The places of London comedy, 1598–1642* (pp. 114–61). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Jenstad, J. D. (2004). Lying-in like a countess: The Lisle letters, and the Cecil family, and *A chaste maid in Cheapside*. *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 34.2, 373–403. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-34-2-373>
- Jones, A. R. & Stallybrass, P. (2000). *Renaissance clothing and the materials of memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jonson, B. (2000). *Bartholomew Fair*. (1614). In D. Bevington, L. Eagle, K. Eiseman Maus, & E. Rasmussen (Eds.), *English Renaissance drama: A Norton anthology* (pp. 961–1066). New York: Norton.
- Juneja, R. (1978). Eve's flesh and blood in Jonson's *Bartholomew fair*. *Comparative Drama*, 12, 340–55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1978.0042>
- Kaplan, J. H. (1967). Dramatic and moral energy in Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew fair*. *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., 137–56.

- Karras, R. M. (1989). The regulation of brothels in later medieval England. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14.2, 399–433. <https://doi.org/10.1086/494515>
- Kinney, A. (Ed.) (1990). *Rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Marotti, A. F. (1969). Fertility and comic form in *A chaste maid in Cheapside*. *Comparative Drama*, 3, 65–74. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.1969.0004>
- Martin, M. (1999). “[B]egot between tirewomen and tailors”: Commodified self-fashioning in *Michaelmas term*. *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 5.1, 2.1-36. Retrieved from: <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/05-1/marttailhtml>>.
- McAdam, I. (2006). The puritan dialectic of law and grace in *Bartholomew fair*. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 46.2, 415–33. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2006.0017>
- Middleton, T. (2000a). *A chaste maid in Cheapside*. (1613). In D. Bevington, L. Engle, K. Eiseman Maus, E. Rasmussen (Eds.), *English Renaissance drama: A Norton anthology* (pp. 1453–1514). New York: Norton.
- Middleton, T. (2000b). In G. K. Paster (Ed.), *Michaelmas term*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mullaney, S. (1988). *The place of stage: License, play, and power in Renaissance England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newman, K. (1991). *Fashioning femininity and the English Renaissance drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Newman, K. (2006). *A chaste maid in Cheapside* and London. In G. A. Sullivan, Jr., P. Cheney and A. Hadfield (Eds.), *Early modern English drama: A critical companion* (pp. 237–47). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Orlin, L. O. (Ed.) (2000). *Material London, ca. 1600*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Paster, G. K. (2000). Introduction. *Michaelmas term*. By T. Middleton. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Pinciss, G. M. (1995). *Bartholomew fair* and Jonsonian tolerance. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 15.2, 345–59. <https://doi.org/10.2307/451029>
- Robinson, J. E. (1961). *Bartholomew fair*: Comedy of vapors. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 1.2, 65–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/449340>
- Shugg, W. (1977). Prostitution in Shakespeare’s London. *Shakespeare Studies*, 10, 291–313.
- Singh, J. (1994). The interventions of history: Narratives of sexuality. In D. C. Callaghan, L. Helms, and J. Singh (Eds.), *The wayward sisters: Shakespeare and feminist politics*. (pp. 7–58). Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Stone, L. (1967). Conspicuous expenditure. *The crisis of the aristocracy 1558–1641*. (Abr. ed.). (pp. 249–67). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Underdown, D. (1985). *Revel, riot, and rebellion: Popular politics and culture in England, 1603–1660*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ungerer, G. (2002). Prostitution in late Elizabethan London. *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 15, 138–223.
- Wrightson, K. (2002). *Earthly necessities: Economic lives in early modern Britain*. London: Penguin.

Author email: elyssacheng@yahoo.com.tw

Acknowledgements

I want to thank Professor Barbara Bono (Department of English, The State University of New York, University at Buffalo), Professor Patricia Haseltine (Retired Professor, Department of English Language, Literature, and Linguistics, Providence University, Taiwan), and Professor Scott Oldenburg (Department of English, Tulane University) for reading drafts of this essay and offering comments.