SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN JACOBEAN AND CAROLINE COMEDY
LAUGHING MATTERS: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN JACOBEAN AND CAROLINE COMEDY

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Abstract

This dissertation examines representations of sexual violence in Jacobean and Caroline comedy. While representations of rape in early modern tragedy have received considerable attention, criticism has largely overlooked the extent of sexual violence in early modern comedy – in part because comedy tends to represent sexual violence in ways that do not match up with recognisable rape scripts. This project argues, however, that, like rape, the sexual violences of comedy “humiliate and induce fear, constraining the activities and choices of victims” (Anderson and Doherty 21). The study particularly examines dramatic representations of whore shaming, rape hearings, and cuckoldry in order to discuss how sexual violence is encoded in comic tropes, the comedic genre, and early modern culture generally. This systematic sexual violence took a daily toll on the lives of early modern women, limiting their ability to give meaningful consent, to control their bodies and sexual expressions, and to make choices within marriage. But while comedy often invites its audience to laugh at sexually violated women, rendering the violence they experience acceptable, it can also invite us to see that violence as violence – thereby challenging the ethics of our laughter.
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Declaration of Academic Achievement

The dissertation is entirely the student’s own research contribution.
Introduction:

Sexual Violence in Early Modern Comedy

Struprum, Ravishment, and Chastity: Understanding the Rape Culture of Early Modern Patriarchy

Early modern England was undeniably a patriarchy. This fact seems obvious, but its significance cannot be overstated when considering the sexual violence that proliferates in seventeenth-century drama. Patriarchal ideology supported and directed the development of the legal statutes and procedures that defined and processed matters relating to sexual violence and consent, as well as cultural attitudes to rape charges and verbal and physical sexual abuse. Patriarchal ideology and its inherent misogyny were also responsible for common perceptions of what qualities (like chastity) were most valuable for women to possess, which bodies were valuable and which were not, and the attendant belief that non-valuable (that is, lower-class, non-English, sexually promiscuous or otherwise unruly) bodies could be open to sexual abuse without recrimination.¹

As my chapter on rape laws and rape hearings reveals, the ways that early modern law and culture understood and defined sexual violence are primarily driven by and representative of male concerns about sexual violence and were perhaps at odds with how women might have perceived sexually violent acts, how they might have defined sexual

¹ Barbara Baines, in “Effacing Rape in Early Modern Representation” (1998), quotes Bracton – “the primary Renaissance authority on rape” (70) – in his summary of the degrees to which rapists were punished, noting that while all rapists are legally to receive some punishment, whether the victim “is married or a widow living a respectable life, a nun or a matron, a recognized concubine or a prostitute”; however, Bracton goes on to qualify that “a like punishment will not be imposed for each” (71). Baines suggests that this distinction is meant to indicate that some female bodies – particularly virgins – are more valuable than others. (Certainly, the qualification tempers the enthusiasm that Corinne Saunders has for Bracton’s “remarkable” defence of the prostitute in her own history of rape laws.)
violence, and the legal responses they may have desired or thought adequate. Certainly, the way that early modern law defined and handled rape falls far short of what contemporary feminists would consider adequate. As historical and critical work has shown, early modern understandings of sexual violence – when they actually paid attention to rape as a crime against the body (“struprum”, or eventually, “raptus”) as opposed to a property crime (“ravishment”) – tended to focus on rape or attempted rape to the exclusion of all other sexual violence; as I will show, early modern law failed to account for acts of violences like marital rape, coercion, or verbal sexual abuse. The law did not, of course, deliberately exclude these violent acts from its corpus, but the patriarchal concern regarding sexual violence is nevertheless almost exclusively limited to rape – a fact that is a main consequence of a long history in medieval and Roman law classifying rape as a property crime committed against the husband or father who was the legal “owner” of his wife or daughter. Such a view of sexual violence obviously excludes the possibility, for example, that a husband could rape his wife (as she is his property he cannot possibly be guilty of her theft/ravishment). Moreover, as my chapter

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2 Corinne Saunders traces medieval and early modern rape laws’ use of “struprum” to Justinian law. While medieval and early modern uses of “struprum” generally refer to rape, Saunders notes that under Justinian law, “struprum ... signified pollution through illicit sexual relations; these were not necessarily non-consensual” (35). Thus “The charge of struprum might apply to ... adultery” and rape itself “was treated as struprum, as a blemish on the woman rather than as an offence committed against her.” Saunders very rightly concludes that “This notion of pollution will prove particularly influential to later attitudes to rape” (35).

3 As with many literary historians working on sexual violence in the early modern period, Baines draws from T.E.’s The Lawes Resolutions of Womens Rights: or, the Lawes Provision for Woemen – a summary and critique of laws made to govern women. Although T.E. argues in defence of women (noting, for example, that many of the laws concerning women are unjust), he yet defends the idea that “women’s subjugation under man’s law is predicated upon God’s curse upon her” (74). He notes that as a consequence of this punishment, women “make no lawes [and] consent to none ... All of them are understood either married or to bee married and their desires or [are?] subject to their husband.” Baines does suggest he is uneasy about “the injustice in this scheme” (75); nevertheless, it shows how naturalised the idea of women being subjects or property of men was.
on whore shaming discusses, verbal sexual abuse might be accounted for as slander, but only if the attack on a wife could be proved to have economically harmed the husband whose “property” she was.

Of course rape, while it may have been primarily considered a property crime, was also a sexual crime, as Carolyn Sale observes in her history of rape laws, particularly in her discussion of the (probable) lawyer T.E.’s criticism of changes to rape/ravishment law beginning under Adelstan. *Struprum* and ravishment were related and often conflated crimes, but had two different meanings – the former referring to what we would now consider rape and the latter referring to theft or stealing away of female “property” (thus, ravishment did not *necessarily* include rape). Under Adelstan’s laws “struprum” was a serious crime, call[ing] for judgment upon ‘life and member”’ (5): it was an offense punishable by death, mutilation, or the loss of “all of [the rapist’s] possessions” (6). But Sale suggests, according to T.E.’s history, that the period also begins a trend of the “attenuation” of rape laws; Adelstan’s law, for example, first introduces the possibility of a victim giving “consent” after the rape has occurred, but prior to the rapist’s conviction (thus allowing rapists to escape those harsh punishments). Adelstan’s rule thus marks the beginning of the “shift that shows rape or ‘struprum’ being sidelined as the law expends its efforts on codifying its response to the crime with which it is so intimately related, ravishment” (5).

Saunders notes that following the Norman Conquest, laws governing rape and ravishment were based increasingly on Justinian law that, along with its conflation of *struprum* with moral pollution, was generally unfavourable to women. Norman laws saw
an “ero[sion]” of “the independence and high legal status granted to women in the Anglo-Saxon law codes” (51). This erosion was associated with the development of the primogeniture system which allowed women to inherit property only when married, thus rendering them into valuable objects to which property could be attached, purchased, and ravished. Women’s reduction to propertied objects thereby accounted for the increasing conflation of “rape and abduction” into “the crime of raptus” when “abduction became the core legal issue” (52).

Under 6 Richard 2, remarks Sale, a rape victim had even lost the ability to decide for herself whether a crime of rape/ravishment had taken place: “Construing the crime of ravishment as a property offense, 6 Richard 2 transfers the right to make an appeal of rape from the woman herself to her husband or father” (6). As the concern for defining and punishing ravishment intensified, medieval and early modern law showed a correlating lessening of concern for struprum as a physical violence directed at a victim’s body; struprum and ravishment were still intertwined with each other, but the harsher punishments always applied to ravishment (6-8). By the early 1600s, Sale recounts, Sir Henry Hobart was able to interpret 3 Henry 7 and 4 & 5 Phi & Mary so that he deemed a man who had raped a twelve-year-old girl to be not guilty since she “was neither heir apparent to her father nor had lands or goods” and ravishment could only be prosecuted when “the crime has been motivated by [the rapist’s] intention to secure her property as his own” (8). Sale astutely sums up this response by noting that an emphasis on ravishment over rape resulted in “the effacement of the crime when it [wa]s performed, to use Hobart’s wording, against women who are ‘nothing worth’ – the very circumstance in
which the crime is more likely to be rape in the sense of enforced copulation rather than ravishment in the sense of enforced marriage” (8). The kinds of cases like the one Hobart assessed did ultimately lead, Sale notes, to the important revisions to rape law that happened under the statute of 18 Eliz. 1 which protected unpropertied children against rape/ravishment, and which refused such rapists the escape clause of benefit of clergy (9-10), but as Hobart’s case (which actually postdates that statute) shows, rape continued to pass unprosecuted. Indeed, Baines argues that Elizabethan laws, while they paid increasing attention to rape as a crime affecting the will and body of the woman rather than the loss of property, still did very little to improve the lives of victims of sexual violence: rape convictions continued to be startlingly low, the bodies who “counted” when considering whether rape occurred were still those possessing conventional social or economic value (virgins, “good” women, or women with property), and the seriousness of rape/ravishment charges was still more concerned with the property aspect of the crime rather than with the sexual (4).

Within this paradigm of sexual violence, moreover, rape seems to become the only sexual violence with which the law is concerned, and a very narrow definition of rape for that matter. Laws seem ill-equipped to account for violences like marital rape or coercion; the concept of marital rape simply seems not to have existed, while a woman raped by coercion would likely have been viewed as consenting to her rapist/ravisher’s demands and therefore herself committing a property crime against her husband or father. Even forcible rape/ravishment, if it was not consistent with anticipated images of what rape “looked like,” might not have been accepted as sexual violence: if rape is a forcible
removal of property then surely it leaves a physical presence on the body of a non-consenting woman. Kim Solga and Saunders note that the hue and cry which served as the first step in making a rape claim relied heavily on visible proof that a woman did not consent to her sexual violation. Both critics cite Glanvill’s description of the hue and cry: “A woman who suffers [rape] ... must go ... to the nearest vill and there show trustworthy men the injury done to her, and any effusion of blood there may be and any tearing of her clothes” (Solga 36). The hue and cry is designed to provide “physical evidence (such as blood, torn clothing, and bruises)” (Saunders, 63) that serve as proof of a woman’s lack of consent to the crime – with the implicit suggestion that a woman lacking this physical evidence of rape may be deemed not to have been raped. As I discuss at greater length in my second chapter, a reliance on physical evidence as proof of rape does not leave room for rapes performed by the threat of violence or abuse of power absent from the actual use of physical force that would leave the recognisable signs of rape on the body.

Additionally, the processes that insist on a woman showing physical marks as signs of her lack of consent also privilege male-prescribed concerns (proving beyond a doubt that a woman did not consent) over concerns of the victim (recovering from a traumatic event, protecting herself from public humiliation or interrogation).

The entire imperative to prove a woman did not consent privileges the idea of male honour and pain over female experience. As Solga notes, the body that can perform the hue and cry and which is recognisably marked by rape can testify beyond a doubt that a woman did not give consent (35-39). The early modern rape script of the hue and cry gives a concrete form to an intangible (consent):
if rape is fundamentally unmarked, a crime that trumps the (eye) witness, then it is ultimately much more than an assault on a body or family. It is an assault on knowledge itself. By reproducing her rape as a performance in which a standardized version of her suffering registers as proof of her chaste intention before a body of citizens designated as her official witnesses, the victim mitigates the anxiety born both from those witnesses’ failure to see her original trauma, and, beyond that, of the impossibility of their ever knowing the truth or falsehood of her claim of non-consent. ... rape is (re)staged in order to allay the fears about its initial invisible enactment, but in the process it goes missing again, metamorphosing from a woman’s psychic and social trauma into a matter of masculine honour. (39)

The ability to determine consent without ambiguity and to apportion blame accurately (to determine whether a rapist or an unfaithful wife has committed the crime against a husband) reveals that the legal processes designed to respond to sexual violence were primarily concerned with retaining mastery over one’s masculine identity. Women ultimately end up as victims of this attempt at mastery: if dramatic representations are anything to go by, when a woman cannot prove unambiguous lack of consent her father or husband may disown her and leave her to die (as Vermandero and Alsemoro do to Beatrice-Joanna in The Changeling, c.1622). Even when a rape victim can prove lack of consent, as Lucrece can, her suffering is still likely to be co-opted by the men who turn her rape into a matter of masculine honour, avenging the wronged husband/father (even if, like Collatine, he contributed to her rape by bragging about her chastity rather than protecting it).4 The laws that emphasise the forcible nature of rape and its visible

4 As Ian Donaldson explains, however, even though classical accounts of the rape (on which early modern writers like Shakespeare and Heywood based their retellings) are clear that Lucretia is innocent (21-2), and her suicide was unproblematical to “early Christians” (25), the matter of her suicide troubled later church fathers like Augustine who wondered why, if “Lucretia’s mind did not go along with the act” (29), she committed suicide, which Augustine equates to kill[[ing] ... the chaste and innocent” (29). As Donaldson’s account traces, this ethical problem Augustine raises is the opening for later critics and re-tellers of the Lucretia narrative to doubt her innocence at all: “one common speculation was that Lucretia killed herself because she had not been able totally to suppress all feelings of pleasure when Tarquin raped her” (36).
aftermath, therefore, along with the whole imperative to prove lack of consent, has more to do with men’s obsessions with controlling female bodies and sexuality and preserving their own masculine honour and less to do with women’s physical and psychological wellbeing – even though a female victim suffers far more from the event of sexual violence.

As my chapters on whore shaming and cuckoldry demonstrate, the consequences a woman faces for being “unchaste” are manifold. Chapter one reveals the degrees to which suspicion over a woman’s sexual chastity extended to other aspects of her life and character; consequently, any form of social unruliness – for example, being a gossip or shrew or engaging in any kind of “transgressive” gender behaviour – was seen as an extension of sexual unchastity, and vice versa. My survey of a number of whore-shaming plots reveals that even a chaste woman whose social/sexual actions are misinterpreted to be unchaste would find herself object of verbal, physical, and sexual violence (as Hero is in Much Ado About Nothing, c.1598). As a result, whenever a woman is perceived to be sexually suspect her body becomes open to sexual abuse from which laws cannot protect her. But, as the comedies and historical critical readings of slander laws in that chapter also demonstrate, even when a woman successfully proves her chastity (and thus proves that men who abuse her have committed slander) she receives very little in reparation.  

Baines also notes how the conflation of Christian doctrine (including Augustine and Hildegard of Bingen’s writings) with theories of sex and conception in Galenic and Aristotelian medical theories, resulted in theories of female sexuality in which “the carnal pleasure that defines woman, that makes her always ready for coitus, easily overrides the will to resist, and thus to believe that sexual intercourse is always, in some sense, consensual for the woman” (82).  

5 That whore shaming is dealt with under slander law shows us one more way in which early modern laws were ill-equipped to recognise sexual violence. Today we would consider verbal abuse sexual harassment if not overt sexual violence – and even in early modern England verbal accusations could have serious legal
My survey of cuckold plots in chapter three further emphasises this point, repeatedly showing that women who commit adultery often meet tragic ends – in contrast to men like Wendoll in Thomas Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) and Dalavill in his *The English Traveller* (1633) who may be morally censured but who escape with their lives, or men like Theanor in Fletcher, Massinger, and Field’s *The Queen of Corinth* (c.1616) whose lives are saved when their victims elect to marry them. Meanwhile, as that chapter also reveals, the laws governing adultery and divorce tend to have harsher social, economic, and legal consequences for women than for men leaving them excluded from communities and stripped of financial maintenance. Indeed, as Lynne A. Greenberg observes in her introduction to the “Legal Treatises” containing *The Lawes Resolutions*, *Feme Coverts*, and *Baron and Feme* texts, by 1650 the legal definition of adultery would be a crime that only women could commit: “The statute defined adultery as sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man not her husband. Intercourse between a married man and an unmarried woman, however, was not deemed adultery for purposes of the Act” (xxiii). Meanwhile Suzanne Gossett reviews case studies that demonstrate how “repeatedly women did penance when men were accused of adultery” (312). This double standard is at odds with one of the most common plots of cuckold comedies in which a lover persuades/coerces an unwilling wife to betray her husband. These dramas and the criticism on legal and historical contextual materials repeatedly demonstrate that

and social consequences for women, ruining both their own and their husband’s good names, and, if dramas like Thomas Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* (c.1604-11), Ben Jonson’s *The New Inn* (1629), and John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* (c.1603/04) are any indicators, rendering women’s bodies accessible to further sexual violence (whether further whore shaming or physical sexual violence). Yet legal categories for responding to this sexual violence fall under slander laws rather than being considered a form of sexual violence itself.
laws represented male concerns regarding sex, chastity, and violence towards women but failed to protect women or offer legal, social, or economical support when men raped, coerced, or otherwise abused women sexually with the consequence that their chastity came under scrutiny.

“Strictly tied to ... the law”: The Absence of Meaningful Consent in Early Modern England

Definitions of consent in the early modern period, then, are driven by patriarchal understandings of the concept rather than by women’s concerns, despite the fact that women were more likely to be the victims of sexual violence. Here it seems appropriate to refer to Sale’s commentary on T.E.’s introduction. “‘Women onely women,’ he writes, ‘have nothing to do in constituting lawes or consenting to them, in interpreting Lawes, or in hearing them interpreted at lectures, leets or charges,’ yet they are strictly tied to whatever the law legislates on their behalf (Lawes Resolutions, 2)” (4). Meaningful consent was always already compromised for women since legal definitions of consensual and non-consensual sex were written by men – and, as Sale goes on to add, written in a language, ”Law French”, in which the majority of women would not have been literate (4).

As with the concept of marital rape, the idea of consent within marriage did not seem to exist, hence the dearth of formal laws governing sexual consent in marriage. Instead, discussions about consent and sex almost entirely take place within the context of ravishment laws – and again are mostly concerned with sorting out matters of property
rights and violations. For example, in the debate on the possibility of marriage to one’s rapist, very little is said about what that possibility – a response to rape that theoretically and legally nullifies sexual violence by allowing a victim essentially to give consent “after the fact” (to use Heidi Breuer’s phrasing, 5) – might mean for the couple’s future sexual relationship. The work of Karen Bamford, Gossett, Sale, and Baines on “marriage as a solution to rape” (Bamford 126) reveals to what extent laws governing rape and consent were primarily concerned with maintaining the social structures of the household and (patriarchal) family and with managing property. Baines particularly suggests the connection between marrying the rapist and the treatment of rape as a property crime by arguing, following J.B. Post’s work on ravishment laws, that Glanvill and Bracton advocate the “solution” of marriage to one’s rapist as a consequence of viewing women as property rather than people, and rape as an act which “defile[s]” a woman, making her an “unmarketable commodity” (72). 6 Again, according to Sale, the arguments over whether consent after the fact was allowable seem entirely to be based on property concerns, with the result that some laws prohibited the possibility of marrying one’s rapist on the grounds that consenting to ravishment made women complicit in a property crime against their parents; such prohibitions were decreed in the hopes of deterring women from arranging their own marriages (6-7). Under the statute of 6 Richard 2, parents could

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6 Saunders is again slightly more optimistic in her interpretation of Glanvill, recalling that Glanvill claims marriage to one’s rapist in the crime of raptus was “an impossibility” excepting when “king and family consent”; while Saunders argues that Glanvill’s statement marks “contemporary concern regarding unacceptable marriages” (53), to me the statement indicates again the way that women did not have complete control over their ability to consent: one can imagine circumstances in which families pressured women to marry their rapists when it was financially advantageous to do so or when they wanted to conceal the shame of rape – ultimately it is still up to a woman’s parents whether an act of rape is “forgivable” or not.
claim rape/ravishment, and charge not only the ravisher but also the daughter who consented to the ravishment and who then lost her rights to property (7). Thus Sale reveals that laws prohibiting consent after rape were as dehumanising and concerned with property as those that allowed marriage to one’s rapist – a resolution that, according to Baines, is “possible only because ‘family honour’ and the economic value of a woman matter far more than the rape victim herself” (72).7

7 As Saunders suggests, however, the concept of marriage to one’s rapist was not entirely uncontroversial even in early modern England. For example, in The Queen of Corinth, another potential rape victim, Beliza attempts to dissuade Merione from marrying her rapist, arguing that she will come to regret the marriage, since:

If thou prevaille [in suing for mercy], even he will punish it,  
And foolish mercy shew’d to him undoe thee,  
Consider, foole, before it be too late,  
What joyes thou canst expect from such a husband,  
To whom thy first, and what’s more, forc’d embraces,  
Which men say heighten pleasure, were distastefull” (5.1).

Beliza’s argument against marrying her rapist overtly interrogates the justness of a law which fails to protect the victims of rape by allowing them to marry their rapists, thereby committing themselves to lifetime of sexual violence – becoming the legal property of the man who has already proven his abusive nature. Even the queen of Corinth herself, the mother of the rapist Theanor, sentences him to death, on the grounds that, having raped two women, he is doubly guilty, and needs to pay for both crimes. Since he can only marry one of the women, he may die in order to atone for the second crime: “He cannot marry both, but for both dying, / Both have their full revenge” (5.1). According to the words of her sentencing, if a man commits rape once, he may be redeemed, but to do so twice is to place him beyond the mercy of the law, or “Ours [our laws], concerning Rapes, / Provided the same latter clause of Marriage / For him that had falne once, not then foreseeing / Mankinde could prove so monstrous, to tread twice / A path so horrid”. Such an ending – especially Beliza’s impassioned pleas for Theanor’s death, and her marked unhappiness at his probable redemption, qualifies, for me, the idea that the ending is “unequivocally festive”, as Bamford argues it is (142); some of the characters may be truly relieved at Theanor’s reformation, but not everyone is necessarily so. Beliza’s words, and the Queen’s critique of the way that Theanor has transgressed the limits of the law, occurring so near the “happy” ending possibly ring still in the audience’s ears, prompting them to view the “comic” conclusion as problematic. Gossett additionally argues that both contemporary and “Jacobean audiences” probably found the ending uneasy, primarily because “Our natural inclination is not to accept this very vivid rape as the foundation of a marriage” (323). That such a response was both legally permissible and a way of providing a “comedic” end to comedies like The Queen of Corinth and The Spanish Gypsy (1623), however, as a way of “repairing” rape shows a profound lack of either concern or understanding for the emotional and psychological damage that rape could inflict on its victim. As Gossett argues, “Plays which assume that rape victims must die may imply a concern and respect for women in general which is missing from the plays which do not automatically condemn the heroine to death”, but instead provide a comedic ending through marriage to the rapist (326-27). I am not entirely convinced by this assertion, but I do agree that the marriage to a rapist at the ends of tragicomedies like The Queen of Corinth does show disrespect towards victims as well as ignorance about what rape means for women. Such endings, as Bamford argues, are also a symptom of the “ambivalence about rape characteristic of both its
Sale’s entire history of rape laws demonstrates that that consent was triply meaningless for women – they did not consent to the laws men wrote for them, governing sex and rape; they could be pressured to “consent” to rape in order to clear the rapist from charges of violence, and to preserve their worth as sexual property; but they could not consent to husbands of their own choosing without fear of having that consent turned against them. All these laws show a disregard for women’s desires, consent, and control over naming what happened to their bodies as violence or not in favour of emphasising parents’ rights to control property through their daughters. This legal legacy that empties consent of meaning is one that all early modern Englishwomen inherited.

The very possibility of marrying the rapist as a legal solution to rape reveals that early modern patriarchy viewed sexual “consent” in a way that differs greatly from contemporary understandings of the term and from etymological meanings of the word. Consent does not have to precede sex as we generally accept it must today: women can legally nullify rape, turning sexual violence into sex by giving consent after the fact. And though I do not discuss bed-tricks at length in this version of my project, the abundance of plots in which a wayward man is “reformed” by being tricked into having sex with a woman he does not desire shows that consent might merely mean agreeing to participate in a sexual act without having full knowledge or control of how that act is taking place and with whom. Finally, consent is perceived as already given within the framework of early modern marriage, so that any claim of marital rape (except perhaps in extremely

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treatment in the dramas generally and in early modern English culture and society at large” (30); these endings also reflect early modern rape culture’s “reluctance to support the prosecution of rape in Jacobean society” (33).
violent instances) is always already nullified. Contemporary culture would deem each of these situations in which sex occurs without prior, active, and enthusiastic consent to the entire set of conditions surrounding each particular sexual act as inadequately consensual, yet all are at least possibilities in early modern law and literature.

The idea that marriage inherently bestows consent on normative sexual acts is part of the mechanism that allows rapes occurring prior to marriage – as well unwanted sex within marriage – to be converted into “just sex”, to borrow a phrase from Nicola Gavey. Gavey’s central argument is that our understanding of heterosexual sex contains within it a certain amount of “ambiguity over distinctions between what is rape and what is just sex” and her work seeks “to problematize that whole domain of sexual taken-for-granteds that allow this kind of confusion” (2). Gavey argues that prior to the 1980s there was a certain amount of sexual violence that women were taught was simply part of what married sex entailed, including the idea that “sex was a husband’s right and something a wife endured by duty – perhaps unpleasant enough that she’d need to distract herself and dissociate by ‘lying back and thinking of England’” (2). While Gavey traces this expectation that women must endure unwanted sex in marriage to the Victorian period, I argue that – to an extent – it also applies to early modern expectations that women fulfill their sexual duties in marriage – duties to which they consent in the very act of marrying.

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8 Among these “taken-for-granteds” are the ideas that women should not enjoy sex (at least not as much as men) (2) and the “coital imperative” (9) that means some sexual acts that do not include vaginal penetration are discounted as sex (thereby allowing certain sexual violations that do not include intercourse to be discounted). The coital imperative also makes meaningful consent difficult since women cannot easily refuse intercourse without seeming to refuse sex altogether, a refusal which marks them as frigid or loveless (9).

9 Early modern theories of conception, however, also depended upon women experiencing pleasure in sex, and in this regard differ from Victorian models; the acknowledgement that women experience pleasure in sex is, as already discussed, also one of the reasons women were suspected of enjoying rape in early modern culture.
The idea of automatic consent (as well as the bed-trick in which one is unaware of whom he or she is having sex with) also seems at odds with the etymological meaning of the word: "con- together + sentīre to feel, think, judge, etc" (OED. consent v. “Etymology”). Sex in which one party either does not know whom they are having sex with or does not want to have sex with the other – whether that sexual act takes place within or without marriage – is hardly “feeling together.” A woman might have theoretically given “consent” to think and act according to her husband’s will at the moment of entering into marriage with him, but this theoretical notion of consent seems far from the spirit of the etymological sense of the word.

Legal definitions of consent differed in one final significant way that is worth briefly mentioning: while in contemporary models of sex and sexual violence we acknowledge the obstacles to giving meaningful consent within the framework of a relationship framed on a power imbalance, early modern paradigms of marriage were in fact based entirely on an imbalance of power: that is, even in companionate marriages that viewed women as spiritual equals, a man was yet considered the head of the marriage whose will was meant to govern his wife’s (just as his voice spoke for hers in court). The idea of marital consent similarly relies on the logic of this power imbalance: a husband does not have to ask for consent because his wife is both his property and his subject and therefore obligated to think/feel along with his will. This flawed model of consent suggests one more way in which sexual violence is institutionalised in early modern patriarchal culture.
Early Modern and Contemporary Landscapes of Sexual Violence

My attempts to think through the differences between early modern and contemporary ideas concerning consent are representative of one of the greatest challenges of writing this dissertation. While much of my vocabulary and understanding of sexual violence and “rape-supportive” culture (Anderson and Doherty 1-24) come from readings by contemporary theorists and researchers on sexual violence (like Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty, Gavey, Susan Brison, Ann J. Cahill, Joanna Bourke, and others), I have attempted to avoid reading early modern sexual violence solely through the lens of their work. Instead, I have often opted to return to the studies by early modern critics and historians who have interpreted legal and cultural documents in order to develop an understanding of the landscape of sexual violence in seventeenth-century England. As my discussion of laws governing marital rape and consent demonstrates, historically-specific legal customs often inflicted or supported sexual violence. Recent modifications to laws (such as the introduction of marital rape to laws codes in the 1990s10), and to cultural attitudes regarding sex and violence (attaching less value to chastity while increasing attention to gender and sexual inequality11) mean that women have – at least theoretically – protection from and acknowledgement of this aspect of sexual violence.

My guiding definition of sexual violence does come from Doherty and Anderson’s summary of decades of work in rape studies – particularly Liz Kelly’s

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10 Débora de Carvalho Figueiredo notes that marital rape was made illegal in the UK “in 1991 in precedent and 1994 in statute” (225), while Gavey observes that terms like “acquaintance rape”, “marital rape”, and “date rape” entered general vocabulary in 1980s (1).

11 See Gavey, 1. Solga (citing Laura Gowing) notes also that conceptions of “women’s sexual passivity” and “men’s sexual appetites [being] inherently aggressive” were also commonplaces in early modern England as much as they are in contemporary culture (35).
assertions that rape is only one “part of a ‘continuum of sexual violence’”, “that sexual violence is part of a general pattern of domination alongside other forms of economic and social control” (20), and that:

all forms of sexual violation, from verbal abuse to rape and murder, have a common character in that they can all function to humiliate and induce fear, constraining the activities and choices of victims and reassuring perpetrators of their potency. The impact or “seriousness” of any particular incident will depend on the subjective experience of the victim. (20-1)

This definition has guided my interpretation and discussion of sexual violences in early modern comedy, enabling me to identify as sexual violences incidents which are not rape but which possess a sexual nature and demonstrate an attempt by an individual or a legal or cultural practice to humiliate or terrorise. Frequently, I also attempt to imagine how violent acts or situations might be interpreted by female characters, audiences, or critics and find that situations which we might perceive as innocuous or “normal” when adopting the point of view of a male subjectivity reappear as violences when approached from the point of view a female subjectivity. Thus I do interpret the pillaging of Pinnacia in The New Inn (1629), for instance, or the lewd and insinuating jokes directed at Moll in The Roaring Girl (c.1604-11), or the treatment of Celia in the trial scenes in acts 4 and 5 of Jonson’s Volpone (1606), as sexual violences, even though they have not always or typically been read as such by critics. Even though none of these three instances involves rape in its narrowest and most recognisable form (if at all), as my chapters discuss in detail, all three moments involve humiliation and fear of a sexual nature. Defining sexual violence according to Anderson and Doherty’s terms has allowed me develop a picture of the “continuum of sexual violence” they discuss. As I will discuss momentarily, while
rape itself appears infrequently in comedy, we can find many instances of other sexual
violences on that continuum.

Although the landscapes of sexual violence in early modern and contemporary
Anglo-American culture are different, then, continuities also exist that remind us that the
history of sexual violence in seventeenth-century culture is one we have inherited and are
still working through today. Not only has contemporary theory on sexual violence been
appropriate and useful in understanding early modern drama but early modern drama also
has the potential to speak relevantly and incisively to problems in our current rape-
supportive culture – if only we pay attention to such matters. I have become increasingly
aware, for instance, of the way that critical arguments often unconsciously rest on
inherited “rape myths”:\(^\text{12}\) for example, that all women secretly want sex, only say “no” to
protect their reputations, and will enjoy sex once it is forced upon them, and that men are
helpless to control their sexual desires. Giveny argues that rape myths are a large part of
the “cultural scaffolding” of rape culture. The idea that “men are always eager and ready
for sex” positions men as aggressors and women as either passive recipients or resistive to
sex within “normal” heterosexual gender relationships – and this version of
heterosexuality is ubiquitous in “Pop culture”, “appear[ing] everywhere from media
portrayals of male sexuality, to jokes, and people’s serious explanations for everything
from sexual harassment to the need for Viagra” (8). But these ideas about heterosexual
gender relations also appear within the academy – for example, in the arguments that read
rapes as “seductions” (as Heidi Breuer has so astutely articulated). Rapists, from Aleyn in

\(^\text{12}\) See Anderson and Doherty 36-8, and Bourke 21-49.
Chaucer’s “The Reeve’s Tale”, to Callimacho in Machiavelli’s Mandragola, to Volpone, and many besides have been defended as seducers, and excused on the very grounds that the characters themselves employ to justify their rapes – that women secretly “like it” but must protest to preserve the performance of chastity (or that they simply do not know they like sex yet, and must be taught). My dissertation follows works like Breuer’s in inviting us to think outside such masculinist paradigms of reading texts and understanding sex and sexual violence – in asking us to break with the continuum of the thought pattern underlying this particular myth that suggests women like rape.

Two other relevant and common myths are the persistent idea that women lie about rape, making false claims for gain or revenge, and that rape somehow does not “count” as much when a woman is known to be sexually active. We see both myths at play in the second chapter’s discussion of “what was done to Elbow’s wife”. Critical work on this scene (when it exists) tends to accept Pompey’s version of events that heavily implies Mistress Elbow went into Mistress Overdone’s house actively looking for sex – a scenario that also tacitly implies that Elbow’s wife has somehow misled Elbow by allowing him to believe the claims he brings to court that some kind of sexual act was done to her against her will. The scene rests on the rape myth that women usually lie about sexual violence (here, that Mistress Elbow is lying to preserve her reputation and to keep herself out of trouble with her husband). The usual critical dismissal of this scene as a comic version of what will potentially happen to Isabella and what actually happens to Mariana suggests that critics generally take Pompey at his word that no sexual violence really occurred that might compromise the scene’s funniness. Pompey’s version of events
insinuates, additionally, that the reason women lie about rape is because they have something to gain from doing so. In Mistress Elbow’s case, she protects herself from charges of adultery. But as both this chapter and other critics observe, women are more likely to suffer further abuse, disbelief, public humiliation, legal punishments, and the loss of social standing and economic support for bringing charges of rape and slander to court. (The same is, dispiringly, often still true.) Bamford reminds us of Nazife Bashar’s findings that “rape ‘usually constituted less than 1 percent of all indictments’” between 1558 and 1700. She argues that this statistic can be explained by the “humiliation” early modern English culture attached to rape, in addition to “pressure from, variously, the assailant, his family, her own family, and the community” (“Rape and Redemption” 31). Both the humiliation and the pressure to keep rape silent are rooted in the misogynist commonplace that rape is “a sexual act that both parties enjoy, something the woman could have avoided” (30-1). Additionally, Gossett suggests another reason rapes were rarely brought to court was that men were generally acquitted (312); she also cites cases in which women who did bring rape to court were themselves imprisoned (313).

Despite these similarities between early modern and contemporary Anglo-American rape culture (to which we must pay close attention if we hope to cease reiterating rape myths), there are many differences between the two. In addition to laws recognising marital rape and verbal sexual abuse, and laws that protect sex workers (at least in theory), an increasingly vocal segment of contemporary culture is speaking out against both sexual violence and its “cultural scaffolding”. Increasingly, demonstrations of rape culture (like male entitlement, rape jokes, eroticised representations of rape and
sexual violence) are called to task for their latent misogyny. Meanwhile notions like that of enthusiastic consent suggest that women can and should articulate desire and enjoy sex without fear of reprisal or harm. We also live in a culture that pays increasing attention to the connections between constructions of masculine honour and the silence that surrounds sexual violence when it happens to men. Finally, while “slut shaming” still exists and is unfortunately widespread in contemporary Anglo-American culture, the overvaluation of women’s chastity that we see represented in early modern drama does not occur to the same consistent degree that it did 400 years ago.

**Chastity and Rape**

It may not be overstating the case to claim that chastity may have been the most important determiner of female worth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Saunders points out that the relationship between chastity and rape has existed throughout the history of rape laws, beginning with the “laws of Ælfred (c. 890)” (39) where “the compensation to be paid for the rape of a virgin is equivalent to that required for the killing of a young man; the implication is that loss of virginity was equated with death” (41). This point is a main undercurrent of my dissertation and reappears from different angles throughout the chapters. For example, it shows itself in the recurring anxiety in cuckold plays that a husband may not be able to protect himself from his wife’s insatiable desire for extramarital sex. It similarly underlies the concern in cuckold comedy and tragedy that masculine honour is inextricably dependent upon the ability to control a wife’s sexuality. The weight of a woman’s chastity in determining her worth is the crux of both Heywood's
and Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* – a rape which would not have happened if Collatine had not felt the need to brag about (and been able to prove) his wife as a paragon of chastity; the loss of her chastity, moreover, proves to be the stuff of high tragedy (and arguably Rome’s founding moment as a republic).

The significance of chastity reveals itself, too, in the ways that women lose protection from slander when sexually or socially suspect, the loss of financial support (their dowry, a right to work, hold property, or represent themselves in court if they commit adultery and are subsequently separated or divorced from their husbands), and in the outcomes of plays like *The Changeling* which suggest that women who have failed to protect their chastity deserve rape and death.\(^\text{13}\) Chapter one discusses the hypocrisy of patriarchal culture that declares chastity to be the most important quality a woman can possess when men (like *The Dutch Courtesan*’s Freevill or *Measure for Measure*’s Angelo) use their political, social, and economic power to coerce women into sex, or are happy to contribute to the sex trade, or otherwise fail to protect and respect female chastity. (Meanwhile men who fail to protect their own chastity often receive relatively minimal punishments.)

As with the concept of default marital consent, I am tempted to read the patriarchal prescription of chastity as a kind of widespread sexual violence that all early modern women experienced. Women lived with the tacit threat that failing to exercise their sexuality in the correct way might result in verbal or physical punishments, and the

\(^\text{13}\) Here it may be useful to recall Bracton’s assertions that while all rapes are bad, not all rapes are equally punishable, depending on whether the raped woman is a virgin or a prostitute; Saunders notes that this kind of thinking also dates back to Justinian’s code which defined *raptus* as a sexual violence that occurs to “unmarried women, widows, and nuns” – women who “are devalued by rape as they are by abduction” (34).
loss of legal and social protections that chaste women enjoyed. This is not to claim that the harshest punishments always were applied or that women never behaved in an unruly manner, sexually or otherwise (indeed, almost every city comedy suggests the opposite is true). But the attempt to control female sexuality with punishments existed nonetheless. One of the central impulses of my dissertation has been to unpack the ways the violence of the chaste imperative is encoded in both the legal and social quotidian of early modern women and in the structures of comedy and tragedy themselves.

Representing Sexual Violence in Comedy

One of the central problems of my dissertation has necessarily been a consideration of the different ways that comedy and tragedy respond to sexual violence. My work is heavily indebted to Donaldson’s *The Rapes of Lucretia* (1982), Bamford’s *Sexual Violence on the Jacobean Stage* (2000), and Solga’s *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts* (2009). Fascinatingly, although none of these studies deliberately departs along generic lines, the plays that seem most applicable as studies of sexual violence are tragedies (although Bamford includes an extended analysis of tragicomedies like *The Queen of Corinth* and *The Spanish Gypsy* in addition to her analyses of tragedies). In many instances, moreover, the sexual violences these critics take up are limited to rapes (Donaldson, of course, is deliberately examining a history of textual, pictorial, and dramatic versions of one particular rape narrative). Admittedly, Solga’s work responds to the problem of how to dramatise violent spectacles, and one of her main points is that we come to sexual violence with a script already in mind of what it
should “look like”. Her work ends up examining a number of rapes because rape is an overt and readily identifiable form of sexual violence that we can isolate as a way of talking about sexual violence; as Bamford and Solga have both demonstrated, there are a remarkable number of horrific rapes in early modern drama that demand discussion.

My aim in this project has not been to repeat the already incisive and comprehensive readings of rapes in tragedy, but to extend the arguments and concerns Solga and Bamford have raised by applying them to the kinds of sexual violences we find in comedy. It struck me early on in my reading that there are a plethora of sexual violences in comedy, many of which we are taught to laugh at and disregard. The violent stripping of Pinnacia, the laughter at Pompey’s rape jokes, the violent verbal abuse of Franceschina – even the rape jokes/threats directed at the cross-dressed Morello in James Shirley’s *The Bird in a Cage* (1633) – such moments have either been treated as merely comic or have been generally ignored in productions and criticism. This disregard for comic sexual violence has often struck me as startling when compared to the serious and manifold considerations of rapes in tragedies like Heywood’s 1608 *The Rape of Lucrece* (or Shakespeare’s poem), *Titus Andronicus* (c.1592), and even *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1595).

Why should genre matter in considering sexual violence?

I suspect genre matters first because, as Donaldson shows, rape is foundational to tragedy. Donaldson’s central argument concerning the Lucrece story and its retellings through the centuries is that the rape in the story is a primarily political act that enables

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14 See Solga’s chapter on “Rehearsing Sexual Violence in *Titus Andronicus*” (29-62). Solga does also consider at length the way that murder and suicide are violences that are the product of institutionalised misogyny and responses to women’s sexuality, and so arguably sexual violences.
the men of the Roman republic (particularly Brutus) to finally exile the political tyrant, Tarquin, the father of Sextus Tarquin who commits the rape itself. The story is, Donaldson claims, “a powerful myth of revolution” (104). The Tarquins are associated with the Roman kings (105), and so the rape of Lucrece and its aftermath is an etiology about the founding of Rome as a republic: “A political myth is being fashioned; an archetypal and instructive story, against which later historical events may be measured” (107). While the narrative Donaldson traces suggests that earlier depictions of Lucrece, including early modern accounts, allow more space to Lucrece and her personal tragedy, with later (post-1700s) depictions focusing increasingly on the rape as a political tragedy, Bamford’s readings show admirably how Lucrece’s rape is already co-opted by patriarchal narratives in the seventeenth century: “for early modern England as for Post-Republican Rome the legends of Lucretia and Virginia provided a golden world of heroic virtue ...in this classical paradigm male valor triumphs over tyranny. At its close a new political order is established in which male lust and aggression have been expelled and male property rights vindicated” (62-3). Bamford’s work on this “Classical Paradigm” (61) agrees with Donaldson’s overall reading that rape is an event that primarily affects men – the Lucrece narrative “is essentially about the need to behave like men” (Donaldson 139). Within this narrative, Lucrece’s violated body is reduced to a symbol of the evils of the old republic: the forcible loss of Lucrece’s chastity is an event worth mourning.

Additionally, the violence of the rape and its aftermath and the trauma that attends that loss is entirely in keeping with the tone of tragedy. But that same trauma and pain is
in stark juxtaposition with the (usually) comic mode of comedy. Most of the comedies I discuss move towards a resolution in which community and family divides are repaired—and (as \textit{Measure for Measure} (1604) and \textit{Volpone} demonstrate remarkably well) this movement is inherently troubled by overt sexual violence. Tellingly, most of the plays that include rape or rape attempts resolved by “comedic” endings tend to be classified as tragicomedies like \textit{The Queen of Corinth} or “problem” plays like \textit{Measure for Measure} (which has also been classified as a tragicomedy). Sexual violence, when it is easily recognisable, threatens to break the comedic frame, rendering comedy’s restorative endings hollow, insincere, or simply very troubling. Thus, as my dissertation reveals, comedy often represents sexual violence in ways that are not as extreme and overt as rape. Instead, comedy represents different kinds of sexual violences that are more palatable or, because they have been so normalised as part of everyday culture, are not immediately visible. If these violences trouble comedy’s restorative ending (and, as defences of both Freevill and Duke Vincentio show, not all critics and audiences are troubled by these less obvious sexual violences) they do so in more subtle ways that are sometimes difficult to articulate.

That the presence of sexual violence in plays like \textit{The Dutch Courtesan} and \textit{Measure for Measure} is apparently debateable suggests a second reason that sexual violence in comedy sometimes passes unremarked. While the rapes of Lucrece and Lavinia are unquestionably sexual violence, rape jokes like the ones Pompey makes, or

\footnote{The two terms – comedy and the comic – are neither synonymous nor inextricable from one another, however much they usually go hand-in-hand. Throughout this project I use “comedy” to refer to a generic structure, and “comic” to refer to a mode which generally includes laughter, humour, as well as tropes which are designed to invite laughter.}
the verbal abuses Franceschina suffers are not always interpreted as being connected to rape itself.16 That is, we do not always and automatically think of rape jokes, other sexual violences, or general misogyny as part of the same culture as “more serious” events of rape.

Finally, it is sometimes difficult to discuss the presence of sexual violence in comedy because doing so necessitates reading against the grain of the comic tropes that comedy frequently employs. This kind of reading is difficult for two reasons. The first obstacle (I suspect) is that we are accustomed to laughing at tropes like the double entendres I discuss in my chapter on rape trials, or at the gendered humour encoded in cuckold plots; consequently, we may recognise the structure of a joke or comic trope and be prepared to laugh even before we have time to consider what we are laughing at. Critical readings of Celia provide a good example of this willingness to laugh, and my second and third chapters on rape trials and cuckoldry, respectively, examine the male privilege involved in the default critical stance that assumes that we can safely disregard when a woman refuses to cuckold her husband, because the comic trope of cuckold plots (until plays like *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-8), *Westward Ho!* (c.1603), *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616), and, of course, *Volpone*) is that an initially-reluctant woman will

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16 The rapes of Lucrece and Lavinia are sexual violences, even if those violences are often ignored except for their symbolic and narrative purposes. I am often troubled, as Donaldson is, by the way that the seriousness of the physical, emotional, and psychological damage sexual violence inflicts on women is often implicitly disregarded (or not even considered) when a rape serves a narrative or metaphoric purpose. As Donaldson notes, drawing from Simon de Beauvoir, “By converting a woman into a symbol (or an object of veneration), you may partly obscure the fact that her story is a dispiriting one, her real sphere of activity sharply delimited. It is through women, writes Simone de Beauvoir, that certain historical ‘events have been set off, but the women have been pretexts rather than agents. The suicide of Lucretia has had value only as a symbol’” (10). The assumption that Lucrece’s rape is entirely about men – in particular, the founding of the (patriarchal) Roman republic – sees the rape of a woman reduced to a mere plot point. And so often the seriousness with which Lucrece’s rape is considered has more to do with the significance of the founding of the republic rather than the rape itself.
eventually give in and learn to enjoy sex. Such narratives may indeed be humourous (Boccaccio’s version of the story on which *The Devil Is an Ass* is based is quite funny, as are a number of similar stories in the *Decameron*). But when we pause and consider what we are laughing at, we may realise that the joke draws on a misogynist conception of women as sexually voracious and unable to control their bodies or desires; the trope also suggests that because women are sexually voracious, we need not give any credence to a woman who refuses sex, because she is either hiding something, resisting her true nature, or is sexually naive (in which case her would-be male seducer knows her desires better than she does). Thus one trope simultaneously invokes two of the rape myths I discussed earlier. Even if a cuckold plot unravels in the “traditional” way, as Boccaccio’s story does, we need to be able to recognise that this trope is a fictional product of patriarchal ideas of what women are like and not necessarily representative of what women “really” are.

Instead of following along with the comic’s directive to laugh, then, one must often resist that directive in order to unpack its latent misogyny. Unpacking the inherent misogyny in certain comic tropes and jokes, however, can feel like a way of ruining the joke. In my analysis I have often risked interrupting laughter in favour of repeatedly asking “what are we laughing at here?” While I think it is important to understand what is funny about a joke or comic trope, it is also important that we understand the costs of such laughter – and perhaps understanding the costs of laughter may prompt us to move towards more ethical, thoughtful, and self-reflective ways of staging and reading plays that are rooted in misogyny.
As my dissertation, I hope, makes clear, however, I think plays like *The Dutch Courtesan*, *The Roaring Girl*, *The Devil Is an Ass*, *Volpone*, *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c.1606), and *Measure for Measure*, often turn a critical eye on comedy itself, the sexual violence encoded both in comic tropes like the cuckold plot and the malaprop-ridden constable and in everyday cultural practices like whore shaming, laws governing adultery, and the double standards for men and women regarding sex in early modern culture. While all of these plays to some degree earnestly redeploy tropes that trivialise or laugh at sexual violence and misogyny, they also frequently draw attention to and call into question the way sexual violence is encoded in comedic structure, comic tropes, and the patriarchal ideology governing women’s everyday lives.

**Chapter Summary**

While all three chapters of my dissertation confront the problem of early modern culture’s overvaluation of chastity, chapter one, “Shaming the Whore: Prostitution and Slander on the Early Modern Stage”, takes on the problem most comprehensively and directly. This chapter examines the seeming contradiction in the fact that a woman’s worth is almost inextricable from her ability to preserve her chastity – as a maid (by not having sex) and as a wife (by fulfilling her sexual duties to her husband and no one else). A woman’s sexual chastity, moreover, was often conflated with her social chastity; thus a woman who was seen to be “unruly” by nature of being a prostitute, a scold, immoderately sexual, in control of her income or her husband, or otherwise engaging in transgressive
gender behaviour, was considered unchaste for both sexual and non-sexual reasons. Women who were chaste nominally had legal protection from slander and, as many plays (notably *Much Ado About Nothing*) that condemn the men who would deceive, seduce, and slander chaste maids reveal, truly chaste women were also entitled to protection from sexual and other violence. Women who failed to protect their chastity, however, lost all claims to protection from both verbal and physical sexual violence. In early modern law, an unruly woman’s body cannot be slandered because it has already lost its chastity, while in early modern drama, an unruly woman’s body is repeatedly shown as deserving sexual violence – whether the verbal abuse Franceschina receives in *The Dutch Courtesan* or the humiliating stripping of Pinnacia in *The New Inn*.

But the chapter also reveals that whore shaming was widespread in early modern culture and did not seem to distinguish between chaste and unchaste women (indeed, given that almost any transgression could render a woman’s body “unchaste” it seems impossible at times to find any woman who can live up to standards of chastity). A survey of both tragedies and comedies in which women are named whores and abused – whether for social or sexual transgressions, real or merely perceived – reveals that both chaste and unchaste women endured verbal sexual abuse. And while dramas like *Much Ado* seem to promise that a truly chaste woman’s chastity will “out” itself in the end, generally slandered female characters who work to protect their chastity suffer greatly for their sexual slanderings, and are offered very little in way of reparation (some, like Desdemona, can hardly be comforted by the fact their chastity is proven in the end when they are already dead). This lack of reparation mimics real slander cases in which women
tended to receive very little personal reparation for public and erroneous whore shaming and slander.

The second half of the chapter also examines four plays at length – *The Dutch Courtesan*, *Bartholomew Fair*, *The Roaring Girl*, and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*. These plays point to the hypocritical behaviours of men who value women primarily for their chastity but who also either fail to protect women’s chastity or who are happy to solicit their sexual and other favours. Some of these men, like Freevill, shame and abuse the women whose chastity they destroy. Besides pointing a censuring finger at male hypocrisy, these plays also celebrate (to some extent) the unruly women who refuse to be entirely broken by whore shaming.

One of the problems this chapter introduces (besides the overvaluation of chastity) is that women often gain very little by playing along with culturally-imposed rules governing their sexual behaviour, but stand to lose much more when they refuse to or are seen to fail at following such rules. This problem returns in chapter three’s consideration of cuckold plots, particularly in *The Devil Is an Ass*. In this play, Frances Fitzdottrel has no way of actually escaping her abusive and foolish husband, nor of gaining complete control over the couple’s finances. Nor can she find relief by taking on a lover since doing so risks losing her dowry and any ability to support herself financially (as well as promising social humiliation and abuse, if “respectable” men’s treatment of women like Franceschina, Ursula, or *A Trick to Catch the Old One*’s Courtesan is any indication).

Another problem the chapter on whore shaming briefly introduces is the way that verbal abuse can easily develop into physical abuse: the crowd in *The New Inn* moves
rapidly from shouting insults at Pinnacia for her transgressive sexual relations with her husband Nick Stuff to “pillag[ing]” her, crowding around her in a cacophonous mob and stripping her to her underclothes. Chapter two, “Traumatic Comedies: Rape Spectacles in Measure for Measure and Volpone”, examines the relationship between obvious physical sexual violence (like rape) that matches up with recognisable rape scripts, other sexual violences (like coercion and the “secondary rape” that often occurs in to victims of sexual violence in courts of law), and rape jokes (that may or may not be readily identifiable as sexual violence).

The chapter draws heavily from Solga’s work on the limitations of legal processes like the hue and cry in witnessing sexual violence and in offering reparations to its victims. Generally, the hue and cry is unable to account for any sexual violences that do not produce a body visibly marked by that violence: coercion, sex obtained by deceit, sexually violent threats or other verbal violence cannot be registered by the hue and cry as sexual violences. (Indeed, Baines observes that “Given the various means of coercion, the law’s increasing reliance upon the concept of consent during the Renaissance resulted in a tendency to avoid the reality of rape altogether”, 5). Nor are the legal processes that handle rape able to address the invisible emotional and psychological trauma of a person who has suffered sexual violence. These processes demand immediate and public action and show a lack of understanding of the way the fear and humiliation attending sexual trauma might be at odds with the demand to show one’s torn hair, clothes, and bloody or bruised body as “proof” of having been raped.  

Moreover, both Bamford and Solga draw

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17 I am not the first to make this observation. Baines, reviewing T.E.’s discussion of the hue and cry, notes
parallels between the way that a woman’s experience of rape is wrested from her in the legal process of the hue and cry so that it becomes an experience from which men determine meaning and declare closure, and the ways that representations of rape in tragedy similarly wrest that experience from female rape victims so that the pain, meaning, and process of healing sexual violence become all about men and male communities.

My chapter argues that although tragedy is able to appropriate women’s experience of rape, absorbing it into its generic structure, comedy is troubled by rape: although both Volpone and Measure for Measure (the two plays that are at the heart of the chapter) provide nominal comedic closure in the form of the punishment of the attempted rapist and trickster Volpone and the forced marriages of Lucio and Angelo, neither play succeeds in providing a truly celebratory end. The chapter traces the presence of repeated forms of sexual violence in both plays: Angelo and Claudio’s attempted coercions of Isabella, the hearing on behalf of Mistress Elbow during which her experience of sexual violence is mocked and trivialised by Pompey’s double entendres/rape jokes, the bed trick on Angelo, and the forced marriages themselves, which promise continuing sexual violence in Vienna’s future, Volpone’s attempted rape of Celia, and the “secondary rape” she experiences in the courtroom. These repeating instances of sexual violence haunt the

“the humiliation inherent” in the process of proving lack of consent, particularly the “ordeal” that follows “Should the accused claim ‘that he did not deprive her of her maidenhood since she is still a virgin’” whereby “the woman should be examined by ‘four law-abiding women sworn to tell the truth as to whether she is a virgin or defiled’” (76). Here Bracton shows the same obliviousness to what the legal processes around rape might mean for victims that Glanvill shows in his assumption that marrying one’s rapists is sometimes an acceptable way of resolving sexual violence. And Bracton is not alone in his obliviousness, Baines argues: T.E. also shows “indifferen[ce]” and confusion about why the reasons why women remain silent about rape (77).
plays in a way that is mimetic of trauma itself, ultimately troubling the idea that comedy can provide “closure” to sexual violence. Additionally, both point to the ways that comic conventions encode sexual violence. The plays challenge us to consider the costs of our laughter, and this invitation should prompt us, as critics, directors, and audiences, not to unthinkingly redeploy rape myths in our own readings of the play.

Chapter three, “Jonson and Coverture Law: Rewriting the Cuckold Tradition in Volpone and The Devil Is an Ass”, continues to consider how larger tropes or plots can encode misogyny and sexual violence, normalising that violence to the extent that we may not be able to recognise it as violence at first glance. The chapter argues that Jonson’s plays present a realistic view of marriage for early modern women. Both plays place women – Celia and Frances Fitzdottrel, respectively – at the centre of a plot which is normally dominated by and concerned primarily with men: the cuckold drama. A survey of cuckold plots (and criticism related to this tradition) reveals that cuckold dramas are often about a man attempting to prove his masculine superiority to other men by either outwitting and seducing another man’s wife or by proving his ability to outwit a would-be cuckold and to protect his wifely “property”. Generally, when husbands are foolish and abusive, they are marked as “deserving” cuckoldry; whether their wives humiliate them by having extramarital sex or cause them to reform by refusing to have an affair (and their fidelity is often still accompanied by a humiliating revelation of their husband’s unworthiness), the end focus remains the same: the lesson the cuckolded man learns about masculine honour and good husbandry.
Jonson’s plays, however, are careful to reference the legal and economic restrictions that real women faced under coverture laws, as well as the legal, economic, and social punishments a woman might face if she committed adultery. Unlike the chaste but merry wives in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or *Westward Ho!*, Celia and Frances are not rewarded for chastity or ingenuity with an unqualifiedly happy ending or with reformed marriages – Frances manages to expose her husband’s foolishness and extract control of the couple’s finances from him, but there is little indication that her marriage itself has improved drastically. Celia is freed from her abusive husband by a separation, but it is difficult to claim that she is truly happy by the end – indeed, as the previous chapter observes, the sexual violence she has endured seems to have silenced her by the end. This limited reformation of their position, however, is all that Celia and Frances can hope for.

Taken together, all three chapters outline a continuum of violence that early modern women lived with in their everyday lives; the chapters also reveal the verbal, emotional, and psychological aspects of that quotidian sexual violence. Some plays, like *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, *The Roaring Girl*, and *The Devil Is an Ass* try to imagine (often limited) alternatives to the double standards on sex that contribute to sexual violence, by imagining a world in which men and women are judged by the same standards of social behaviour and prostitution is socially acceptable (*Trick*), or by pointing out that male hypocrisy must be stripped from marriage (*Roaring Girl*) and wives recognised as intelligent and moral people (*Devil*) before companionate marriage
can function without sexual violence. Other plays merely draw our gazes to the verbal, physical, and psychological abuse embedded in the practices of everyday life.

**Sexual Violence in Jacobean and Caroline Drama**

Sexual violence is not a phenomenon unique to Jacobean and Caroline drama. My dissertation hints at its awareness of the arbitrariness of temporal demarcation lines in its brief discussions of at least one Elizabethan play (*Titus Andronicus*, c.1588-93) and two Restoration dramas: Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* (1675) and Crowne’s *City Politiques* (c.1680s). One very common plot of Elizabethan drama recurs in Lyly’s *Gallathea* (c.1585-91), *Endymion* (c.1588), and *Sapho and Phao* (c.1584) and is also the main plot of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (c.1594-6): the magical seduction in which an unwilling or unknowing man or woman is bewitched into love or lust with a desiring lover. This plot, just as much as cuckold plots, raises problematic questions about meaningful consent and the way that sexual violence becomes palatable when disguised as being “just” a story or narrative convention. Restoration drama is even more overt in its use of sexual violence – and especially rape/attempted rape – as a narrative device. By the Restoration many obvious rapes are discussed primarily as metaphors for the political struggle between the Whigs and Tories – and thus many critics approach rape as being not really “about” rape.¹⁸ These plays, too, would provide fertile ground on which to consider questions of masculine appropriation of female experiences of sexual violence.

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¹⁸ See particularly Douglas Canfield’s “Tupping Your Rival’s Women: Cit-Cuckolding as Class Warfare in Restoration Comedy” (1996).
The sexually violent landscapes of Elizabethan and Restoration drama, though, are also markedly different from those in Jacobean and Caroline drama. I was initially drawn to the latter because of my interest in city comedy, which did not flourish until the reign of James I. And while this dissertation has examined plays across sub-generic lines, it has not escaped my attention that a number of the comedies which prove particularly fruitful in considering sexual violence are the city (or at least urban) comedies of Shakespeare, Jonson, Marston, and Middleton: *Measure for Measure, Volpone, Bartholomew Fair, The Devil Is an Ass, The Dutch Courtesan, The Roaring Girl, A Trick to Catch the Old One*. The amenability of Jacobean and Caroline city comedy to explorations of sexual violence has two causes: the first is that city comedies tended to be interested in presenting the city in ways that approached a kind of (heavily qualified) “realism” – and part of that realism included representing women as something other than chaste or whorish “types”, but rather as figures with complex sexual and social behaviours who played an active role in household and city life. Second, city comedy – even when it celebrates urban life – does not often shy away from satirising the more unpleasant elements of city life, and is therefore amenable to critiquing (or at least representing) hypocrisy and violence. Thus the city comedies that were so prevalent in the Jacobean and Caroline periods offer less-than-idealised fictional representations of sexual violence as it might have existed in the lived realities of early modern women in London. Jacobean and Caroline city comedy was, finally, rather in the habit of turning a reflective and sometimes cynical eye back on its own dramatic traditions, and so there are many plays in which the kind of meta-commentary on comedic structure and comic tropes are readily available.
As a final note, I should point out my awareness that my discussions of sexual violence take place largely within a heterosexual framework of sex and violence, and privilege violence experienced by women as a consequence of the way normative constructions of gender intersect with scripts for heterosexual sex. While a future project will include chapters on the often-paired tropes of the bed trick and forced marriage and on male rape jokes as a way of exploring sexual violence towards men, this current version of my reading on sexual violence in comedy focuses on the ways that women as subjects of patriarchy were affected by sexual violence in myriad ways. The continuum of sexual violence represented in this project is therefore only partly complete, but hopefully opens the way for further discussion of sexual violence in early modern comedy.
Chapter One

Shaming the Whore: Prostitution and Slander on the Early Modern Stage

Introduction

What kind of violence is effected in naming a woman a whore? In early modern England the word was used so frequently it seems almost a wonder that its meaning did not stale. As Laura Gowing succinctly notes, “The word ‘whore’ [along with its synonyms, ‘jade’ and “quean”] was the most common form of abuse” underlying defamation suits women brought to court between the years 1572-94 and 1606-40 (Domestic Dangers 63 and 64). Reading early modern drama, along with critical work on defamation law, prostitution, and unruly women, we might build the impression that the words “whore” and “woman” were frequently synonymous in early modern London. Despite its apparent mundaneness, however, in a culture that valued women primarily for their chastity, the insult did not lose its bite, and the negative connotation underlying the word persisted: to be named a whore – whether the nomination was true or false – was a notably bad thing. And while verbal sexual violence may seem initially trivial in comparison with the kinds of sexual violence I discuss in the following chapter on rape hearings, I propose that verbal sexual violence is part of the same sexually violent landscape that works to control women’s sexuality, punishing their failure to safeguard their chastity with public shaming, verbal and physical violence, and legal and economic penalties (in this chapter, the right to be protected from slander; in chapter two, the right to reparations following rape; and in chapter three, the legal protection and support given to women under laws governing
coverture and the *feme sole*). A woman perceived to be “unruly”, whether sexually or socially, was also perceived to be open to sexual violence, both verbal and physical.

This chapter particularly explores the violence attached to the word “whore” and its synonyms (“courtesan”, “quean”, and “jade” for example). It considers such words as applied to different bodies: literal prostitutes and courtesans, unruly women and wives, and slandered maids. Exploring these variations, I will argue that although slander law nominally draws a distinction between chaste women and whores (and other unruly women), all women – including the chaste ones – experience similar acts of sexual violence in their daily lives; plays like John Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan* (c. 1603/04), Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* (c.1604-11?), and Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c.1606), however, render these violences visible.

**Definitions of Slander: Early Modern Law and Drama**

In including slandered maids among these other “unruly women” I am invoking the violence of defamation as a kind of whore shaming. Defamation is connected to prostitution in important ways, as this chapter will show. Both the verbal abuse of prostitutes and the defaming of good wives or single women involve labelling a woman a “whore” (or one of its synonyms). The difference between the two acts of naming, however, would have been fairly clear to early modern people, and is the difference between a true fact and a lie. To nominate a woman who is involved in the sex trade a “whore” is merely to apply a descriptive label. That label carries negative connotations
(of physical, social, and moral pollution), but the person who invokes the label (i.e., the person who shames the whore) is not at fault. To call a prostitute or courtesan (or even an adulteress) a whore is not to defame that woman, because she has already, by participating in extramarital/commercial sex, ruined her own fame or reputation. Defamation, by the early modern legal definition, only “occurs when the malicious imputation of a crime to a person of good reputation brings the victim into jeopardy within the community” (“Ars Infamia” 102), according to M. Lindsay Kaplan. Nancy E. Wright, in her work on slander in *Much Ado About Nothing*, elucidates Kaplan’s definition in a very clear dramatic context when she discusses where the guilt of slander lies in the play:

Leonato must accept the judgment of the Friar, who decides that when the accusation about Hero was published at the wedding, Claudio ‘thought his accusation true’ (4.1.232). As a result, the community accepts the assumption that Claudio and Don Pedro had ‘honourable’ intentions when they declined to participate in a marriage that they honestly believed would subvert masculine and feminine honor. It is Don John’s private communication of the slander to Claudio and Don Pedro that, according to the Friar, is culpable. The community accepts the Friar’s judgment that Don John spoke and acted because of a malicious intention. (96)

In other words, in order to be found guilty of defamation, the person making the claim has not only to be telling an untruth about a woman’s sexual and social behaviour, but the defamer must also know that the claim is untrue and be deliberately spreading the false rumour with the intent to harm the slandered person’s reputation. It lies with the person defamed (and whatever witnesses he or she can find) to prove three things: first, his or her own innocence and good character; second, the malicious intentions of the defamer; and third, that the defamatory remarks had a negative and recordable effect on one’s
“professional or personal status” (Cerasano 169). This last criterion was especially important in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries when common law courts increasingly handled defamation cases (168). As S.P. Cerasano argues, it could be very difficult even for chaste women to prove all three aspects of defamation and to achieve reparation. A woman working as a prostitute or having sex outside of marriage, however, could claim none of the criteria for defamation: she had no good character to spoil, and thus her profession or social standing could not be any further harmed by humiliating remarks. Anyone who named her a whore (however spitefully) was not committing an act of malice, but only applying a properly descriptive label. The effect of the legal distinction between what does and does not constitute a defamatory remark regarding a woman’s sexual reputation, then, seems to be that the prostitute or sexually unruly woman named whore cannot seek redress, whereas the slandered woman can seek reparation.

The legal distinction between the “whorish” and the chaste woman, then, seems initially clear, except that slander laws often failed to account for the complex picture of verbal violence that naming a woman a whore entailed. For example, such distinctions do not examine the underlying social causes that move women into positions where prostitution is a viable (and perhaps the only viable) option; they also fail to consider factors like the double standard applied to women and men regarding extramarital sex. Early modern drama, however, lays out this picture clearly. The word “whore” and its synonyms carry and inflict violence on prostitutes, bawds, and courtesans in ways that to some early modern dramatists (and likely to many contemporary feminist critics) seem to
exceed simple legal or social categorisation. For these dramatists, whore shaming is an act of violence, whether or not an audience member agrees with patriarchal culture’s assumption that the violence is “earned”. Despite the fact that verbally abusing a prostitute was a lawful and socially acceptable act, then, whore shaming and its underlying causes were not invisible to early modern individuals. Some early modern plays invite the audience to pay attention to violence inherent in whore shaming. The four plays I discuss in the second half of this chapter certainly do so.

I suggest that whore shaming encompasses a wide spectrum of verbal violence, interwoven with complex social causes and effects. On one end of the spectrum are figures like the prostitute, the courtesan, and the bawd (and perhaps even the adulteress), for whom whore shaming is considered socially and legally acceptable. The verbal abuse of such women tends to obfuscate the social inequities that shape these women’s choices who are then victims of verbal abuse from their communities. On the opposite side of the spectrum is the slandered chaste woman (both sexually and socially chaste): she is a woman with a good reputation, and is theoretically legally protected from whore shaming and verbal abuses. This does not mean that legal protection was ever fully mobilised: as Cerasano and others point out, it could be difficult for women to receive real reparation for the verbal abuse they experienced. As I have already observed, malicious intent and the damage to one’s reputation were hard to prove; Cerasano adds to these difficulties the fact that early modern culture assumed women did not possess professional or social standing in the same way that men did. As an example, Cerasano considers Elizabeth Ridge who found herself needing to purge her reputation, but encountering obstacles:
As a single woman she could not show loss of or damage to her marriage; as a young woman of her class, not engaged in meaningful work or a trade, she could not claim ‘damage’ to her professional life; as a woman, denied full status as a citizen, she could not easily assert that her public presence had been ‘damaged’. If a woman was called a ‘whore’, she had little compensation to look forward to.

(171)

Even married women, who had an easier time proving that slander had caused damage to their marriages, could expect little in the way of direct reparation since, as Cerasano reminds us, “A woman’s reputation belonged to her male superior, who ‘owned’ her and to whom she could bring honour or disgrace. In so far as a woman was ‘renamed’ when she was slandered and her identity thus altered, her husband lost his good name and was rechristened with abuse – slandered by association” (172). As in rape hearings, in cases where a married woman was slandered, her husband usually brought the case to court, and received the monetary compensation. Despite the difficulties achieving compensation for slander, Cerasano notes “Not surprisingly, given the personal costs involved, no woman felt that she could afford to ignore a public allegation such as slander” (171). Some of the plays I discuss featuring slandered chaste women raise precisely these questions about the inadequacies of reparation for slander (for example, the slander of Hero in Much Ado).

Between these two positions on the chastity spectrum is the “unruly” woman. This woman is not, professionally speaking, a whore (or even an “unprofessional” adulteress),

19 Elizabeth Ewan, examining defamation trends in Scotland, notes a similar practice of compensating the husband of a slandered woman: “husbands ... appeared in the court ‘for their interest,’ a legal requirement as husbands were responsible for any penalties incurred by their wives. In these cases, ‘for his interest’ took on an added meaning, as a husband would be anxious to prove that his wife was not a whore and that he had what was perceived by the community as proper control over her sexuality” (166). Similarly, Kaplan and Katherine Eggert in their co-authored article on slander in The Winter’s Tale note that once the Star Chamber began hearing defamation suits, “a husband might complain that he, his wife, and the community at large were damaged by sexual slanders against her” (105) and receive monetary compensation.
but nor is she “chaste” in the social sense of that word (she is neither silent nor obedient). As Gowing notes, “whore” was often “shorthand for much wider grievances. Because the sexual honesty of women had implications for so many other spheres, from their speech to their financial honesty, it easily became the focus for disputes over a whole range of familial and community issues” (“Language” 35). Kaplan and Eggert note a similar connection between sexual misconduct and “female offenses” in general, noting that there were common concerns about women in the period, their sexuality, and their authority (a circumstance discussed by early modern commentators never as autonomy from men, but always as power over men). Female criminality was on the whole popularly defined in terms of either inverting gender hierarchy, as in petty treason or scolding, or transgressing social mores, as in bastardy or prostitution, or both, as in adultery or witchcraft ... Accusations of sexual impropriety often were unsubtly coded attacks on women’s perceived dominance over men in a nonsexual sphere.

Following Gowing, Kaplan and Eggert argue that petty treason and scolding demonstrate women’s ability to exercise authority “over men”, resisting their husbands’ dominance through physical or verbal violence (murder or scolding). They thus invert the commonplace gender hierarchy that naturalises men’s authority over women. These crimes have sexual corollaries in cuckoldry/“adultery” (leading to “bastardy”) and prostitution, where women express their sexual autonomy (and, in the case of the prostitute, economic autonomy). These unruly women again gain a kind of authority or power over their husbands – the adulteress by demonstrating her ability to humiliate her husband, revealing to him his lack of control over her sexuality, his heirs, and perhaps his ability to provide sexual pleasure, and the prostitute by her lack of dependency on a
husband. In discussions by Gowing and Kaplan and Eggert, verbal abuse detaches from sexual behaviour to become a violence against unruly gender behaviour: suddenly the neat legal distinction – either a woman is a whore and can be named such, or she is not and to name her in this way is to commit defamation – becomes complicated, as do the laws protecting her. If a notably unruly woman is called a “whore” it may be that no one will actually believe the literal meaning of the word (that she is sexually immoral), instead understanding it precisely as shorthand for her social failings. Such a circumstance would leave an unruly woman unable to claim true defamation; however, she would still experience the full force of the word’s violence. Can this kind of verbal abuse be redressed in the terms of the legal environment that protects women from slander? (Here it is especially pertinent to recall that the common law courts of the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries understood defamation more and more as a violence which affected one’s economic, professional, or social standing in a community.) We can imagine, then, contexts in which a woman might experience the violence of being called a whore and simply have to accept that violence on some level.

**Considering Whore Shaming: Aims and Methods**

The aims of my chapter are threefold. First, I wish to illustrate the violence involved in whore shaming by tracing instances of it throughout early modern drama. I do so in order to outline a (perhaps not altogether startling) point: whore shaming was a common and socially acceptable part of early modern English culture. Its acceptability is based on (as I suggest in the introduction to my entire dissertation) the underlying assumption that
women’s chastity is at the root of a woman’s value: thus a woman who fails to protect her chastity should *expect* a certain level of harassment and abuse.

While this misogynist belief does exist in contemporary Anglo-American culture, I am careful in my thinking about early modern drama to distinguish between early modern and contemporary feminist attitudes towards whore shaming. Female chastity may continue to be over-valued by certain segments of our population; however, practices like adultery or prostitution do not strip women of almost all of their remaining civil rights. This is not to claim that women who practice these extramarital sexual activities – particularly professionally – do not experience violence and unequal treatment at the hands of the law, but we at least nominally have laws in place to protect women from harassment and violence regardless of their sexual practices. Such laws were *not* in place in early modern England, and their non-existence is one of the factors which crucially distinguishes how we should understand the particularity of sexual violence in early-modern English culture (along with the different understandings of consent in early-modern English and contemporary Anglo-American cultures).

My second aim of the chapter is to draw attention to the way that, despite legal fictions attempting to distinguish between prostitutes (criminal and unruly sexual bodies without rights) and chaste women (lawful and properly sexual bodies who retained legal rights), whore shaming in fact occurred almost indiscriminately (as early modern drama represents it at least). Thus women of any class, nationality, or degree of chasteneness could experience verbal harassment and not receive satisfactory redress (and the historical evidence Gowing and Cerasano point to, which shows that “whore” was the most
common epithet used to abuse women and that women had difficulties receiving redress for verbal violence, does support the picture that drama gives us of this widespread harassment).

Thirdly and finally, I wish to show that some dramatists noticed and commented on the injustice of whore shaming, both by pointing it out as a tool of violence levelled at all women and by vividly drawing the landscape of everyday legal and social violence that women experienced, a landscape which ultimately supported more brutal instances of verbal violence. Not all of the dramatists I discuss, then, accept the violence of whore shaming as a necessary experience for women. Many of the plays I discuss walk an indistinct line between acknowledging whore shaming as a fact of early modern life and condemning it.

As a final bit of preamble, I will address one of the most recent works on the subject of prostitution in early modern England: Duncan Salkeld’s *Shakespeare Among the Courtesans* (2012). Salkeld’s work has been invaluable in helping me pay closer attention to how I am thinking about the work that drama is doing when it represents whores and whore shaming. My sense is that Salkeld sets himself in opposition to what he considers the overly optimistic work that feminist critics of the 1990s and 2000s produced on Jacobean and Caroline drama. This body of work, Salkeld claims, enthusiastically celebrates the feisty and ingenious courtesans and whores of early modern drama:

Criticism can fall in with the idea that a cultivated, educated and able woman who sells sexual favours might be the pioneer of women’s autonomy and agency in an era of widespread misogyny – a figure to be admired or celebrated. The notion is seductive, but to read the courtesan in this way is to pass over the histories of abuse that often mark their narrative, and to ignore the truth that few women, if
any, have ever chosen prostitution as a career because they genuinely liked it.

Historical evidence, Salkeld argues, shows that real prostitutes did not in fact lead happy lives: they were the victims of poverty, verbal abuse, and physical violence, including rape and murder. Even the famous and popular courtesans of Italy tended to thrive only for brief periods of time before sliding back into poverty and friendlessness (4). Salkeld’s argument picks up on critical and historical work on Italian courtesans, like that of Maritere López. López astutely observes that despite the Italian courtesan’s social and class privilege (relative to the lower-class meretrici), what success she did have, was contingent upon male patrons who ultimately had more social and economic capital, and who were free to break off the relationship without the same degree of economic or social loss that a courtesan would experience (106).

To some extent I agree with Salkeld: prostitution was far from glamourised in early modern texts (whether fictional or historical). I do not think, however, that this reality – which most feminist historians do acknowledge – necessarily excludes or negates the possibility that dramatists (as well as ordinary people) might have interrogated the social conditions that created that violent reality for any woman who used her sexuality for economic gain or to navigate her position as woman within early modern culture. I think it reasonable to assume that popular entertainment like comedy responded to the real conditions that prostitutes experienced as it simultaneously responded to the on-going conversations and debates circulating around those conditions. All of the comedies I discuss in this chapter do to some extent redeploy misogynist assumptions about women and chastity – but they often do so at the same time that they
interrogate those assumptions. I acknowledge, for example, that recent critical readings of Moll Firth in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Roaring Girl* do sometimes wishfully cast Moll as a kind of proto-feminist figure; but I also think the play itself invites us to see her as a champion of early modern women’s worth. I find value in uncovering moments where women, largely victims of sexual and gender violence, *did* resist that violence, just as I find value in uncovering moments where male dramatists provide models (even if unrealistic models) for critiquing the patriarchal culture that inflicts verbal and other violences on women.

My chapter continues by considering representations of women who are literal prostitutes, and the verbal violence they experience because of their sexual activities. The chapter moves on, however, to consider how the verbal violence towards these women differs very little from that experienced by women who are not professional whores, prostitutes, or courtesans, but who are called whore and shamed in similar ways as literal prostitutes are because of their unruly disruptive gender behaviour. The chapter then shows how even chaste maids and wives are not immune to this kind of verbal violence – even if, legally, they were more protected from slander.

Critics can find it tempting to adopt a position towards female characters that is something akin to that of a judge presiding over a defamation case and to either exonerate the women as “slandered” (deciding they are definitively victims) or to condemn them as guilty (since they have somehow invited verbal violence for their unruly sexual or gender behaviour). While the first half of this chapter does try to understand the reasons certain female characters are verbally abused, I have also tried to avoid making judgments about
the innocence or guilt of these same women. Instead, I wish to lay out the landscape of sexual and gender violence in relation to whore shaming. I argue that The Dutch Courtesan, Bartholomew Fair, The Roaring Girl, and A Trick to Catch the Old One expose double standards regarding sexual behaviour and the quotidian nature of verbal violence that can be launched at women with very real consequences. These plays all try to celebrate the unruly woman in a way that does not reflect the reality of the period, but does conjure up a potent alternative to the everyday misogyny of whore shaming (whether the whore is real or not).

**Plotting Whore Shaming in Early Modern Drama**

Critics like Salkeld, López, Ann Rosalind Jones, and Melissa Mowry have done valuable work tracing the lives and abuse real women in early modern Venice and London encountered when they were involved in the prostitution trade. These critics have framed my understanding of the violences that women both inside and outside the sex trade could experience for being perceived as “whores”. Their work has also helped to balance the optimism I locate in works like A Trick to Catch the Old One. Other critics

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20 Attitudes towards and understandings of prostitution differed significantly in Venice and London – with the primary difference being that prostitution was never legalised and hierarchised in London in the same official way that it was in Venice. These differences notwithstanding, representations of prostitution in English drama draw heavily from ideas of courtesans and whores as represented in both Italian texts like Aretino’s pornographic dialogues and plays, and English reports of Italian courtesan culture like Coryate’s Crudities.

21 Jones’s “Prostitution in Cinquecento Venice: Prevention and Protest” (2010), for example, argues that prostitution was often the product of “economic hardships” (43) and male exploitation (53-4), and was not a way of living women entered into lightly (ignorant of the dangers and social judgment that prostitution drew), nor one that they chose because of bad moral character. Mowry, focusing more on Restoration and early eighteenth-century prostitution, points to the ways that prostitutes continued to be familiar social and legal “outcasts” (106) who were both more vulnerable to violence and less able to profit from their illicit activities than other criminals (107).
like Kier Elam, have drawn my attention to the various meanings and abuses of “whores” in early modern drama.\(^{22}\) The work of Jean Howard and Celia Daileader offers more optimistic feminist readings of the whore as a prevalent and important figure in Jacobean culture and drama.\(^{23}\) Finally, Frederique Fouassier and Coppélija Kahn’s work has been vital in influencing my understanding of the connection between the “whore” and the chaste woman.\(^{24}\) Kahn’s “Whores and Wives in Jacobean Drama”, has been particularly influential; she considers the way that “whoredom” (248), although it was nominally the antithesis of marriage, frequently became an “internal threat rather than an external one” (248), owing sometimes to men’s inability to adequately protect married chastity because of their own lust. She also argues that Jacobean dramatists when representing wives and whores “frequently fix and unfix ... the polar oppositions of wife and whore, virgin and whore” (251). Kahn’s argument suggests an idea that is central to this chapter – that all women were perceived as potential whores, and thus all women were potential victims of the kinds of verbal and physical violences that the plays I examine demonstrate. These,

\(^{22}\) Elam catalogues seventeenth-century English “courtesan drama” (236), noting the broadly varied meanings of the word “whore” – a word which can be used to describe literal bawds, like Putana in John Ford’s *Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (c.1629), and sexually suspect women, like Anabella in the same play (237). She also notes, like Salkeld, the trend in Jacobean and Caroline drama for the courtesan figure to disappear from the English stage only to reappear in the Restoration.

\(^{23}\) Howard’s “Sex and the Early Modern City: Staging the Bawdy Houses of London” (2007) considers the prevalence of various forms of prostitution in early modern London despite its official illegality and points to the early modern “whore” as a rich and complex figure in early modern drama and especially comedy. Daileader’s “The Courtesan Revisited” (2007) examines the courtesans and whores across Middleton’s drama, observing how critical reactions to these women (applying moral judgment and double standards related to sex) reveals an unconscious “misogyny” (224) that Middleton’s works are precisely working to resist.

\(^{24}\) Fouassier’s “The Prostitute in English Renaissance Drama” (2006) argues that English drama tends to represent prostitutes through “negative definition” (31); that is, as figures who refuse to fit within appropriate legal and social boundaries for describing, classifying, and containing early modern women.
in addition to a number of other critics, have considerably influenced my thinking about prostitution in comedy, and in relation to both marriage and the single woman.\textsuperscript{25}

Building on this important published work, I will briefly discuss only a few instances from Jacobean and Caroline drama, and only those dramas where the fact that a woman is named a whore is more than passing abuse, and is instead a key scene or plot point. Broadly, three major “whore-shaming” plots recur with frequency in early modern drama. First, there are those in which men label women as whores and otherwise abuse or shame a female character because she actually is a whore, or connected to the prostitution trade to some degree. Freevill’s abuse of Franceschina in Marston’s \textit{The Dutch Courtesan} is a prime example of this kind of plot: among other insults he names her “arrant strumpet” (2.1.130), “venom’d gonnhory (132), “rampant cockatrice” (3.1.221), and ultimately “a creature made of blood and hell” (5.1.77). Another example is Harebrain’s abuse of courtesans in Middleton’s \textit{A Mad World My Masters} (c.1605-8): he begins by ordering the disguised courtesan\textsuperscript{26} during her visit to his wife to “rip up the life of a courtesan, and show how loathesome ’tis” (1.2.57-8). Significantly, his fear of courtesans is here conflating “courtesan” and “adulteress”. Seemingly unable to differentiate between kinds of sexually promiscuous women, Harebrain’s main fear is that his wife will commit adultery; asking the Courtesan to speak against courtesans, then, he is also

\textsuperscript{25} There is again a large of body of critical work on early modern prostitution in both England and on the continent as represented in visual art, poems and ballads, and news books, broadsides, pamphlets and sermons. See, for example, Mark Albert Johnston’s “‘To What Bawdy House Doth Your Maister Belong’: Barbers, Bawds, and vice in the Early Modern London Barbershop” (2010), Diane Wolfthal’s “The Woman in the Window: Licit and Illicit Sexual Desire in Renaissance Italy” (2010), Jon Arrizabalga’s “Medical Responses to the ‘French Disease’ in Europe at the Turn of the Sixteenth Century” (2005), and Paula M. Woods’s “Greene’s Conny-Catching Courtesans: The Moral Ambiguity of Prostitution” (1992).

\textsuperscript{26} She is tellingly named “Frank Gullman” (\textit{Dramatis Personae}), suggesting the courtesan’s supposedly inherent connection to deceit and criminality.
inoculating himself against cuckoldry (or so he thinks). Indeed, he describes adultery as a “deadly sin ... That villanous ringworm, woman’s worst requittal” (1.2.138-9) and concludes that “‘Tis only lechery that’s damn’d to th’ pit-hole” (40). Harebrain here connects three different sexual vices – adultery, lechery, and prostitution – suggesting the three sexual crimes (specifically when committed by women) are interchangeable. This plot involves whore shaming, but the women who are shamed as “whores” are, as Harebrain’s speech reveals, not always professionals in the prostitution trade. The play does contain a certain amount of shaming of literal whores as well, such as when Follywit claims that “Who keeps a harlot ... needs nor thief, disease, nor enemy” (4.3.53-4), or when Sir Bounteous, having just discovered he has been robbed by Frank Gullman, claims that a “vild whore” (4.3.80) is “the worst creature that ever breathes” (78) and an “execration” (83). On the surface, the play participates in mockery and whore shaming supporting the commonplace notion that prostitutes are also petty criminals, and that their bodies are incontinent and execrable.

Similarly, Hippolito denounces the “harlot” (dramatis personae) Bellafront in vulgar and abusive terms in Dekker’s The Honest Whore, part 1 (c.1604):

You have no soul, that makes you weigh so light;
Heaven’s treasure bought it:
And half-a-crown hath sold it: – for your body
Is like the common-shore, that still receives
All the town’s filth. The sin of many men
Is within you. ... there has been known
As many by one harlot maimed and dismembered,
As would ha’stuffed an hospital: this I might
Apply to you ... O you’re as base as any beast that bears, – ...
You’ll let a Jew get you with a Christian:
Be he a Moor, a Tatar, though his face
Look uglier than a dead man’s skull.
Could the devil put on a human shape,
If his purse shake out crowns, up then he gets;
Whores will be rid to hell with golden bits
...
A harlot is like Dunkirk, true to none,
Swallows both English, Spanish, fulsome Dutch,
Back-doored Italian, last of all, the French,
And he sticks to you, faith, gives you your diet,
Brings you acquainted, first with Monsieur Doctor
And then you know what follows. ...
Methinks a toad is happier than a whore;
That one with poison swells, with thousands more
The other stocks her veins: harlot? fie, fie!
You are the miserablest creatures breathing,
The very slaves of nature ...

Bellafront’s abuse of the occupation of the harlot (which I have abbreviated by about 70 lines) could act as a primer in the variety of abuse prostitutes experienced: it covers the prostitute’s supposed duplicity (pretending to be beautiful when she is disease-ridden, and, elsewhere in the diatribe, pretending to have her “maidenhead” when she does not), the fact that she is damned or born without a soul, that she is a source of destruction for men – both economically and in health. It connects the prostitute with “perverse” practices like anal sex (the “back-doored Italian”) and with England’s political enemies (particularly Catholic nationalities, but generally the Spanish, Dutch, Italian, and French). The speech describes the prostitute as a monster and a beast (one worse than a toad) and additionally connects her duplicity and soullessness with a lack of Christian faith. Hippolito paints a picture of her body as morally, spiritually, and physically execrable, associated with every kind of outsider imaginable, and a danger to honest Christian Englishmen.
A final example of whore shaming on this curtailed list is Overdo’s assessment of Ursula in Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*: Overdo notes, upon seeing Ursula, that he both “know[s]” her and identifies her as a “punk, pinnacle, and bawd” (2.2.59-61) who has been before him in the courts (note that his memory of her concerns not primarily her commercial crimes but her sexual ones). When he does write her up in his book for her commercial fraudulence – he overhears her outlining her plans to inflate the prices of her tobacco and ale and to cheat the customers of full portions – he exclaims “This is the very womb and bed of enormity! Gross as herself!” (87).\(^{27}\) He characterises her economic fraudulence in female and also implicitly sexual terms: Ursula the “punk, pinnacle, and bawd” gives birth to commercial enormities that are as monstrous as her own body. Her fraudulence seems, in Overdo’s mind, to be the natural though monstrous offspring of her other sexual crimes. Again the sexually unruly woman is connected to duplicity, criminality, and grotesqueness.

Women who are not strictly courtesans, bawds, or whores fare little better than those who actually make a living from the London sex trade. Many women who are key players in “whore shaming” plots are not actually prostitutes; nevertheless, these women find their sexual reputation attacked because they engage in unruly *social* behaviour.\(^{28}\) Examples include Moll Frith, in Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*, whom Sir Alex Wengrave, in his discussion of her with Trapdoor, names a “wench” who “strays so far from her kind / Nature repents she made her” and “a mermaid / Has tolled my son to

\(^{27}\) Gail Kern Paster notes also the connections Overdo draws between Ursula’s crimes and the more grotesque qualities of her body (37).

\(^{28}\) Many of the women I discuss throughout this survey could in fact fit into both plots: Ursula, as I have already suggested, is connected to prostitution, but also generally criminal, generally unruly, and physically grotesque.
shipwreck” (1.2.24) – note again the casual connections of a disorderly woman with monstrousity, magical trickery, and sexual profligacy: Moll is an unnatural woman who has bewitched Sebastian like a siren or mermaid. In 2.1 Mistress Openwork assumes, based on Master Openwork’s willingness to sell his best “shag ruff” (202) to Moll, that the latter must be one of her husband’s mistresses: “How now, greetings, love-terms with a pox between you, have I found out one of your haunts?” (204-5), and she turns Moll out of the shop. In the same scene Laxton assumes, based on town gossip, that Moll’s body is for sale, imagining that a “brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her” (172) and that “an Italian...would cry bona roba till his ribs were nothing but bone” (175-6). The justification for Laxton’s fantasies is based entirely on Moll’s trangressive dressing practices, which call her body into doubt and make it a subject for public scrutiny. As she passes through the shops, Laxton, Goshawk, and Mistress Gallipot discuss Moll’s behaviour. Goshawk names her “the maddest fantasticall’st girl” and adds “I never knew so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together” (186-7). Laxton continues his lewd fantasies “She slips from one company to another like a fat eel between a Dutchman’s fingers” (188-9). He tellingly imagines Moll’s body as an almost phallic object (an eel) – perhaps matching the “mannish” parts of her that her male clothing both conceals and calls to mind in those who see her cross-dressed body.29 Mistress Gallipot perhaps responds to Laxton’s imagery in her summary of the town gossip about Moll: “Some will not stick to say she is a man / And some both man and woman” (190-1). I will have more

29 Andor Gomme, in his notes to lines 175-6, observes that Laxton’s association of Moll with Italians perhaps registers associations with the Italians supposed “fond[ness] of unorthodox coital positions”, and suggests that “Moll’s ‘masculinity’ might here imply a suggestion of buggery”. The connection might explain why Laxton, though he assumes Moll is sexually promiscuous, also imagines that he can still buy Moll’s “maidenhead” with his “golden auger” in lines 176-9.
to say about Moll momentarily, but she, at least in Middleton and Dekker’s representation of her, is ultimately revealed to be *not* a whore (a fact the audience is aware of throughout the entire play). Yet the community labels her a whore because it does not approve of her cross-dressing and other behaviours. (Here it is pertinent to recall Gowing’s observation that “whore” frequently acted as a metonym for a wide variety of problematic social and familial behaviours within the community.)

Pinnacia the tailor’s wife in Jonson’s *The New Inn* is similarly labelled an “immodest woman” (4.3.74), because she capitulates to her husband’s sexual desires:

> When he makes any fine garment will fit me,  
> Or any rich thing that he thinks of price,  
> Then I must put it on and be his countess  
> Before he carry it home unto the owners.  
> A coach is hired, and four horse; he runs  
> In his velvet jacket thus to Romford, Croydon,  
> Hounslow, or Barnet, the next bawdy road;  
> And takes me out, carries me up, and throws me  
> Upon a bed –

Here suspect sexual behaviour – even though in the context of marriage – is described in terms that evoke both literal prostitution and sexual unruliness in general. Pinnacia herself links the game to bawdiness – a word which she probably intends to mean “lewd” (*OED*, “bawdy”, adj.2, 1), but which still reminds us of literal bawds like Ursula. Lady Frampul names Pinnacia simply “immodest” – a gentler form of verbal abuse than naming her a “whore” (especially when we contrast Lady Frampul’s admonishment with that of Hippolito in *The Honest Whore*). She does not need to explicitly name Pinnacia a whore, though, given that her name is a form of “pinnace”, a word already connoting “a mistress or prostitute” (*OED*, “pinnace” II.3): audience members no doubt can make the
connections themselves. Meanwhile, Lord Beaufort identifies the couple’s sex games as a kind of “fornicati[on]” (77), and Lord Latimer accuses him of lying “With his own succuba in all your names” (80-1).\textsuperscript{30} The punishments the couple receives – Pinaccia is to be “sen[t] ... home, / Divested to her flannel, in a cart” with “her footman [her husband, Stuff] beat[ing] the basin afore her” (97-9), and Stuff is to be tossed in a blanket until “the stuff stink again” (97) (that is, until he defecates) – are punishments that were commonly used to correct domestic disorder between couples: both sexual disorder (adultery and cuckolding) and non-sexual disorder (wife beating and scolding). The punishments in this instance, however, are not for any of these common domestic misbehaviours. The couple have a somewhat topsy-turvy domestic gender hierarchy, but the more shocking revelation for the gentry crowd, perhaps, is that Stuff and Pinnacia, far from coming to violent exchanges or blows, seem in concord about the power dynamics of their relationship. Pinnacia, for all of her protestations that her husband both concocted the game and insists that she play it, seems to enjoy playing the role of the lady (and the lady in charge at that): in 4.2 she orders her husband around as her servant with considerable gusto:

\textbf{PINNACIA} Your wife! Ha’not I forbidden you that? Do you think I’ll call you husband i’tthis gown, Or anything in that jacket but Protection? Here, tie my shoe and show my vellute petticoat And my silk stocking! Why do you make me a lady

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\textsuperscript{30} Latimer’s accusation is essentially a confirmation of Beaufort’s assertion that Stuff is a fornicator, as anyone familiar with Jonson’s epigrams on Sir Voluptuous Beast will know. Voluptuous Beast is a courtier who, like Stuff” “instructs his fair an innocent wife / In the past pleasures of his sensual life” (1-2) and “her (hourly) her own cuckquean makes / In varied shapes, which for his lust she takes” (5-6); the follow-up epigram confirms Kahn’s assertion that the early moderns connected fornication with whoredom, baldly stating “Than his chaste wife, though Beast now know no more, / He adulters still: his thoughts lie with a whore” (1-2).
If I may not do like a lady in fine clothes?

STUFF Sweetheart, you may do what you will with me.

PINNACIA Ay, I knew that at home, what to do with you.  

Pinnacia’s exclamatory style here, her coy reference to “knowing what to do” with her husband, and her detailed (enthusiastic?) description of the couple’s sex games in 4.3 confirms, I think, Lady Frampul’s assertion that she “glorifies in the bravery o’the vice” (75). Nick Stuff and Pinnacia probably enjoy a healthy sex life. Thus the blanket-tossing and charivari normally given to correct domestic discord are here meted out in order to police a domestic harmony that the rest of the community finds perverted, as well as to punish the pair’s violation of spiritual laws that forbid fornication in marriage.

As Coppélia Kahn notes, fornication could become an “internal threat” (248) within marriage:

Sex belongs within marriage, to ward off the threat of whoredom—yet also threatens to become a sort of whoredom within marriage. Enjoying sex merely ‘for pleasure’s sake’ would be tantamount to whoredom, yet it is through pleasure that the mystery of ‘one flesh’ decreed by God when he created woman for man, is enacted, and pleasure is integral to the intimacy of companionate marriage. (249)

Kahn nicely points out the difficulty of distinguishing between perverse and healthy sexual pleasures within marriage, as well as the ease with which whoredom gets evoked in relation to sex – even lawful and divinely-sanctioned sex. Tellingly, the crime of fornication takes on a distinctly gendered description, cloaked in terms of bad female sexuality even when the man is an active participant in the “crime”. This kind of relationship, however, is not one that is typically sorted out or intervened in by the community (in Kahn’s description, the affront is one the couple causes in their relationship with God). Jonson’s play, though, expresses anxieties that this kind of
pervasive private behaviour might have consequences in the public sphere. Significantly, another reason the couple are punished might be their violation of sumptuary laws meant to maintain class order. In adopting the garments of upper-class ladies, Pinnacia commits an act that mocks gentlewomen like Lady Frampul who earnestly wear such clothes. The act also approaches a kind of fraudulence: the couple are stealing some of the use of a gown that does not belong to them. Their behaviour also violates real sumptuary laws. Thus this short scene invokes a range of sexual misconducts – literal prostitution, adultery/cuckoldry, fornication – and connects them obliquely to social and economic misbehaviours like scolding and fraud. When the aptly-named Pinnacia is called “immodest” and disrobed (shamed), it is not because she actually is a prostitute, but because she is unruly both sexually and spiritually.

The scene is quite comical, and despite my use of Kahn’s analysis that such fornicating sex games were a kind of whoredom (a typically female crime), the crowd within the play seem to accuse Stuff and Pinnacia equally. Lady Frampul accuses Pinnacia of being an “immodest woman” at the same time that Lords Beaufort and Latimer name Stuff a fornicator; both receive a physical punishment for their crimes. What I find somewhat disturbing in the scene, however, is the element of sexual violence that Pinnacia receives. The blanket-tossing Stuff experiences is unpleasant, humiliating, and potentially violent, but the disrobing of Pinnacia has, for me, a distinctly sexual edge:

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HOST    Pillage the pinnace.
LADY FRAMPUL    Let his wife be stripped.
BEAUFORT    Blow off her upper deck!
LATIMER    Tear all her tackle!
LADY FRAMPUL    Pluck the polluted robes over her ears,
Or cut them all to pieces, make a fire o’them!
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PRUDENCE  To rags and cinders burn th’idolatrous vestures!  

(89-94)

The violent act of pillaging becomes explicitly sexual as instead of a ship being divested of its wealth, Pinnacia’s very body is divested of its clothes. The moment is saved from complete shock and violence because Pinnacia is not, of course, entirely stripped, but left wearing her undergarments or “flannel” (98); however, the moment has the potential to be quite violent in its staging as the crowd of lords, ladies, the Host, and all their servants crowd around Pinnacia, shouting for her garments to come off and perhaps actually tearing her clothes off as they do so (it is not entirely clear whether the lords and ladies are actually doing the things they call for, or if Fly and the other servants are doing the stripping for them at their behest). Either way, the moment is a cacophonous one with the outnumbered Pinnacia the object of both the physical violence and violent noise. Moreover, the stripping of her gown is intended to humiliate her sexually and publically. Significantly, just as the verbal abuse levelled at both husband and wife is distinctly gendered as a kind of whoredom, so too is the sexual aspect of the couple’s punishments levelled more at Pinnacia’s female body than Stuff’s male one. The punishments are, by early modern standards, socially acceptable as common punishments for domestic misconduct that interrupts the well-being of the community – and again, the play suggests the ways that the couple’s private fornication might affect the community. However, the scene also indicates to me the difficulty of distinguishing clearly between sexual, economic, and social misbehaviour (a fact which ultimately allows a community to mete sexual violence upon women who have primarily committed non-sexual crimes), and the ease with which even mild verbal violence metamorphoses into physical sexual violence.
Lady Frampul may be gentler in her verbal abuse than men like Sir Alex Wengrave or Hippolito are, but she also is one of the leaders in the sudden stripping of Pinnacia’s garments by the mob.

The eponymous wife, Aretina, in James Shirley’s *The Lady of Pleasure*, like Pinnacia, is not a prostitute, but, like Pinnacia, she bears connections to sexual indiscretion in her very name. “Aretina” perhaps recalls the pornographic writer Aretino. In act 5, perhaps the most shocking scene in the play, Aretina’s nephew, Mr Fredericke, tells his aunt (as he makes sexual advances toward her) that he and his licentious friends have been drinking toasts to her health:

> our first health began  
> To the faire Aretina, whose sweet company  
> Was wished by all; we could not get a lay,  
> A Tumbler, a Device, a bona roba  
> For any money, drawers were growne dull,  
> We wanted our true firkes and our vagaries.  

(5.138-43)

As Marilyn J. Thorssen explains in her notes to the play, “tumbler”, “device”, and “bona roba” are all “euphemisms for prostitutes” (141n). The play is fairly unsubtle in its commentary: in Thorssen’s words, “While it is true that Aretina is not a prostitute, repeated associations of her actions and those of a prostitute suggest that had she not seen the path she was descending, she would ultimately have become little more than a prostitute in time” (“The Dual Mode” 53). Even her nephew’s clumsy and incestuous attempts at seduction are given to be understood as Aretina’s fault: Bornwell grievously worries in an aside that “Tis pitty [Aretina’s] rash indulgence should corrupt / So faire a Genius” (2.37-8). As if to confirm his anxiety, upon Fredericke’s first entrance at the
beginning of act 2, Aretina herself laments that his university education has “spoild” him (79), exclaiming as proof:

he did name
Logicke, and for ought I know be gone
So farre to understand it. I did alwayes
Suspect they would corrupt him in the Colledge.
Will your Greeke sawes and sentences discharge
The Mercer, or is Latin a fit language
To court a mistresse in?  

(79-85)

Even though Alexander Kickshaw in the same scene makes a fairly sensible suggestion that Fredericke continuing to dress in black shows an overly-extended period of mourning for his father’s death (“while you ware it for / Your father, it was commendable, or were / Your Aunt dead, you might mourn and justify”, 52-4), the play as a whole makes no serious condemnation of Fredericke’s reserved black clothes, his scholarly interests, nor any potential melancholy he might be experiencing. To the contrary, his shaking off of his black clothes becomes a moment of moral failing – both his and Aretina’s, since she at this point fails to give him proper instruction about how to enjoy pleasure rationally. She also fails to model such chaste enjoyment properly herself. Instead she sets out an ideal education that celebrates the very obsessions with fleeting fashion with which she herself is gripped (characteristic of Caroline and Restoration drama, this education is associated with French schools: 55-69). Unsurprisingly, then, when Fredericke does shake off his melancholy, he ends up repeating her errors, drinking, gaming, dancing, and courting with an impropriety that returns to horrify her in act 5.

The play’s moral lesson is ultimately about how to enjoy pleasure chastely. It contrasts two different kinds of “ladies of pleasure”, a phrase which, Thorssen notes
(citing G.E. Bentley), “was normally used in the time to mean ‘prostitute’” (53); however, *The Lady of Pleasure* introduces the possibility of a more positive connotation of that phrase, in the figure of the chaste Celestina who “like Aretina, pursues pleasure and freedom, so much so that her free activities have roused gossip concerning her chastity. However, she wittily manipulates her suitors and counters the gossip by her exemplary conduct” (43). Where the play presents Aretina as the cause of Fredericke’s dissolute behaviour, Celestina with her wit and her love of chaste pleasure “shames [a dissolute Lord] into repentance and admiration” (43) in act 5 (ll 312ff). (Like Moll in *The Roaring Girl*, however, Celestina also comes under sexual suspicion as the result of her vibrant and public presence.)31 Meanwhile, Aretina, who demonstrates less self-control and consistency than Celestina in her appetites for fashions and fun, commits adultery before her reformation occurs: the play links social appetites and lack of modesty with illicit sexual appetites (adultery), and finally with prostitution. To fail to control one’s appetite for non-sexual things is to fail to control one’s sexual body. The play is a kind of meditation on and warning about how whores come to be, and shows again the link between women who are socially unruly and those who are sexually unruly.

These plots, then, illustrate how the word “whore” begins to take on wider meanings: the same word can describe women who dress in transgressive ways, married women who express their sexuality improperly, and even women who simply talk too much. Yet even women who attempt to live as obviously chaste maids and wives in both

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31 Celestina would have been known to an early modern audience as the titular prostitute in Fernando de Rojas’s *Celestine; or, the Tragick-comedie of Calisto and Melibea*, which was translated and available in England by the 1630s, becoming a popular tale through the early eighteenth century. Shirley is thus capitalising on a popular narrative and doubtless having fun overturning his audience’s expectations by having his Celestina turn out to be lighthearted but ultimately chaste.
their sexual and non-sexual behaviours find themselves in the position of being labelled whores by their lovers, husbands, and fathers. The mistakenly-slandered chaste woman seems to have been a favourite plot of Shakespeare’s: she appears in his tragedies, for example, Desdemona in *Othello* (1603-4); in his romances, such as Innogen in *Cymbeline* (c.1609/10) and Hermione from *The Winter’s Tale* (1609-11), and comedies (Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*). In each of these plays the jealousy of the male husband or lover leads him to mistakenly identify his wife as sexually promiscuous and to punish her with murder (Othello), attempted murder (Posthumous, Leontes), imprisonment (Leontes again), and denunciation and abandonment (Claudio). In each of these plots, the man’s overhasty slandering of a truly chaste woman becomes either the catalyst for tragic denouement or the main (and potentially tragic) problem that the structures of comedy and romance must work to overcome. Each of these plays, significantly, makes the moment of accusation a particularly violent one: Othello believes his wife is a “strumpet” (5.2.86) and so smothers her; Posthumous’s anger results in the moment in 3.4 when Pisanio, bearing his letter accusing Innogen of “play[ing] the strumpet in [his] bed” (21-2), confronts Innogen (albeit reluctantly) with his sword before devising the plan for her escape; Leontes’s proclamation of Hermione’s guilt results in the death of Antigonus, of his son, Mamillius, and the seeming death of his wife as she collapses in a “mortal” faint at the news (3.2.47). Hero suffers a similar fate to Hermione, though her “death” lasts only two days (in play-world time), and not the extended sixteen years of Hermione. Hero also endures in 4.1 (again, like Hermione) a humiliating public denunciation of her supposed crimes. Claudio’s renunciation of Hero at the altar seems staged to cause her the
most public hurt: he waits until Leonato has given her away to him before passing her back again – probably with considerably rough physical treatment to match the violence of his exclamation-riddled speech in this scene: “There, Leonato, take her back again. / Give not this rotten orange to your friend. / She’s but the sign and semblance of her honour” (29-31). All of these women remain sexually chaste, faithful to their husbands or lovers, and even attempts to be obedient to the men in their lives. Yet because they are surrounded by men who cannot control their own desires (Giachimo in Cymbeline), jealous passions (Leontes, Othello, and Claudio), and evil ambitions (Iago) they find their chaste behaviour is futile in preventing a slander of their good names. Indeed, they find it almost impossible to prove their chastity beyond a doubt. Tellingly, all of these plays involve husbands or lovers misjudging visual evidence (such as the visual evidence in the handkerchief scene in Othello, the conversation between Hermione and Polixenes in The Winter’s Tale, or the window scene in Much Ado), or oral evidence (such as Iago and Jachimo’s stories of Desdemona’s and Innogen’s faithlessness). Chaste women find themselves powerless to perform chastity in a way that is convincing enough to override the impassioned beliefs of their lovers or husbands. Ironically, half of the women are thus pushed to what might in non-extenuating circumstances be deemed “unruly” behaviour (Innogen dressing as a boy, Hermione and Paulina deceiving Leontes and the rest of Sicily).

These plays outline an important lesson about the fragility of a chaste body and reputation, neither of which can adequately protect or prove itself when faced with male aggression, lust, and jealousy. The plays also reveal the potentially dire consequences for
women when their chaste behaviour and reputation loses against male irrationality. In a comedy Hero can be protected by her friends who refuse to believe the slanders against her and ultimately restore her reputation – even though she metaphorically “die[s] defiled” (5.4.63) before being reborn. The tragic Desdemona, however, literally dies at the hands of her jealous and credulous husband.

Of course, chastity is not meaningless in these plays: in all of the examples I have given, the fact that the accused woman has remained truly chaste is represented as the issue that enables her to reclaim her place in licit society. Othello’s strangling of Desdemona is followed by Emilia’s revelation that she herself gave the handkerchief to Iago: she testifies to Desdemona’s chastity and Othello, as he dies, describes her in death as “Cold, cold ... even like thy chastity” (5.2.81-2), thereby admitting his fault in marring her reputation and murdering her. The realisation that he has unjustly murdered a chaste woman is the final tragic impetus that brings him to suicide. That is, the fact of Desdemona’s chastity proves important enough that the loss of her life is a tragedy that needs to be mourned and punished. In the romances and tragicomedies I have been discussing, the revelation that each woman is truly chaste allows her to be welcomed back to the arms of her lover.

Without her chastity, a woman has very little chance in a comedy or romance to be redeemed and restored to her rightful social place. This claim is certainly true of The Winter’s Tale, where the oracle’s revelation that “Hermione is chaste” (3.2.193), followed by the news that Mamillius is dead – news which Leontes interprets as a sign that he has acted incorrectly and that “Apollo’s angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my
injustice” (143-4) – moves Leontes to attempt to repair his wife’s reputation in front of the court. At the end of the play when Hermione is miraculously restored to him, Leontes reiterates her guiltlessness and his crime in slandering her: “Both your pardons, / That e’er I put between your holy looks / My ill suspicion” (5.3.148-50). Leontes here admits that again a male voice was enough to obfuscate in his own eyes at least, the reality of female chastity. Similarly, upon hearing Borachio reinterpret the balcony scene truthfully, Claudio admits his error in repeating the slanders Don John fed him, and reconstructs Hero before the crowd as chaste again: “Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I loved it first” (5.1.235-6). He further offers to do penance for his careless and violent talk: “I know not how to pray your patience, / Yet I must speak. Choose your revenge yourself, / Impose me to what penance your invention / Can lay upon my sin” (255-8). Tellingly, Claudio offers his apologies to Hero’s father, suggesting that he too has been a victim of the slanders against Hero (and, since she is his legal property, he really would have been able to claim damage along with Hero). Yet Claudio also refuses to wholly accept guilt, adding “Yet I sinned not / But in mistaking” (258-9); however, he at least does accept what he thinks is going to be real penance – the loss of his right to choose his next partner – and additionally promises to recite a hymn of pardon before Hero’s grave “Yearly” (5.3.23), an act which is significant as a kind of symbolic and semi-public reconstitution of the “dead” Hero’s reputation, involving a description of Hero as Diana’s “virgin knight” (13). Again, it is up to male voices to declare and confirm (or not) female chastity. Conversely, Much Ado proves again that women, even when they are chaste, cannot protect their chaste reputations; however, if they fail to have
chastity that can ultimately be proven then women will never have the chance of having
their reputations and lives restored. Even Hermione, whose chastity is seriously
questioned only by Leontes (while the rest of the court either remains dubious of his
accusations or praises her with faint blame), cannot rest secure in her chastity until
Leontes himself finally publically announces his error and confirms her reputation as a
chaste wife.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Whore Shaming: The Early Modern Quotidian}

From these instances, we might draw a few general conclusions. The first is that chastity
matters – particularly if one is a woman. Female chastity mattered in early modern
defamation suits, just as it matters in determining the outcome of early modern drama.
The murder of a chaste woman can motivate tragic catastrophe; alternatively, the
revelation of her chastity can lead to the play’s comic restoration. Secondly, Renaissance
drama does not advocate the slandering of truly chaste women (nor did early modern law
permit such slanders). The men who commit acts of slander in the four plays I have been
discussing are all reprimanded for their act of slander: Don John, Claudio, and Don Pedro
by the Friar, Beatrice, and Leontes; Othello and Iago by Emilia; Leontes by Paulina and
Antigonus. As I observed already, most of the men in fact admit – publicly – their own
error in reacting over-hastily to reports, scenes, or gossip that tells them their wives or

\textsuperscript{32} A similar pattern follows in \textit{Cymbeline}, with Innogen’s chastity not able to be recognised or protect her
until a man – her very slanderer, Giacomo – speaks her innocence publically before the court. Her chastity
perhaps protects itself most strongly of all the women I have discussed her, remaining visible to Pisanio
despite the malicious slander Posthumous and Giacomo speak against her. Her chastity is in many ways the
catalyst that allows the romance to end happily, since its visibility to Pisanio prompts him to help her
escape and unknowingly find her brothers and bring them home again.
lovers have betrayed them. Thirdly, and most complicatedly, the plays reveal the difficulty women have protecting their chaste reputations – nearly raising the question about why chastity matters at all when even chaste women’s bodies are subject to malicious, humiliating, and potentially deadly gossip. At the same time, however, that the plays suggest that chastity almost ceases to matter because men will ruin their reputations anyway, they also suggest that chastity will almost inevitably “out” itself at the last possible moment, suggesting that chastity finally does matter, and provides a kind almost magical or divine protection for good women (although in tragedies like Othello the revelation that Desdemona was chaste comes too late to save her – though not too late to make Othello realise that the loss of her life was truly tragic). This is exactly how Leontes interprets the death of his son and loss of his wife and daughter: both fate and Apollo are angry that he has dared to harm a chaste woman in spite of the oracle’s edicts.

I suggest that here we can see how comedies, tragicomedies, and romances have adapted the trope of the woman saint from what Karen Bamford labels “virgin martyr” narratives (28): “What do these legends say about sexual assault? They tell us that it is the natural response of unredeemed masculinity to feminine ‘beautie and comlinesse,’ and thus that the female body is the instrumental cause of the assault. They tell us too that if a woman is good enough the assault will be ineffectual” (28). For all that comedies, tragicomedies, and romances at least avoid the rape-or-death conflict of the medieval virgin martyr narrative (where death represents the preservation of chastity), these genres do preserve the logic that undergirds these tales, suggesting that the mere fact of chastity can and will protect itself – sometimes with divine assistance, and sometimes with only
the help of the generic trajectory. According to the patterns of comic and romantic restoration, chastity seems to have a magical power to reveal itself – even though plays like *The Winter’s Tale* and *Much Ado About Nothing* particularly show that the legal systems and power hierarchies of the everyday real world tend to make chastity impossible to see.

Despite the failure of slander law to adequately protect women off the stage, however, it too carries on the logic of the martyr narrative in a tempered form, assuming that a woman who is truly slandered will be able to supply witnesses who can give character references confirming her chastity as a wife or single woman. In theory, slander law operates as kind of a secular version of the divine protection chaste women receive in the martyr tradition. Yet both the legal and historical evidence and many dramatic representations of whore shaming suggest that reality often failed to reflect that theory. Moreover, determining chastity is not such a straightforward matter when chastity depends not only on sexual behaviour but also on transgressive or unruly non-sexual behaviours. For example, plays are not always so quick to denounce the men who “slander” women. In Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*, Moll’s manly and transgressive gender behaviour almost excuses (or at least explains) the mistaken slander she experiences. Indeed, biographies of the real Mary Firth or “Moll Cutpurse” clearly link the real Moll’s nonssexual transgressions of cross-dressing and stealing with her sexual deviances: one example is her purported “autobiography” which in its attempts to emphatically distinguish between cross-dressing/cross-gender behaviour and prostitution actually points to early modern culture’s impulse to link these two crimes. Mary Frith
repeatedly points to ways in which she defies the expectations of her gender: taking
tobacco where previously “no Woman before me ever smoakt any (41, sig. C9r), or
provoking shock with her “new guise of a Doublet and Pettycoat (51, sig. D2r). Yet she
also reiterates that she was never a prostitute, providing her address in order to prove that
she is “no Lady Errant” (47, sig. C12r) and playing tricks on other women who attempt to
shame her, one of which involves repaying the charge of being a cut-purse with tricking
her accuser, a “Wench” (84, sig. E6v), into revealing in public that she is no longer a
maid (84-7, sig. E6v-E8r).\textsuperscript{33} Moll tends to assert her own sexual chasteness by shaming
other women, and constantly attempts to maintain the difference between sexual chastity
and criminal behaviour. Most often, though, she fails at her demarcation. For example, in
the episode with the Wench who accuses her of being a cut-purse, she herself
hypocritically deceives the woman for identifying her (rightly) as a criminal and in doing
so perhaps undermines her own credibility. Repeatedly proving herself a criminal and a
liar, how likely is it that her readership is going to believe her claims to sexual chastity –
particularly when the stereotypes of both female prostitutes is that they are devious
criminals? And this same “autobiography” is prefaced with a description of Moll that
perhaps calls into question her own claims to sexual propriety, pointing out that

She never had the Green sickness, that Epidemical Disease of Maidens after they
have once past their puberty ... No sighs or Dejected Looks, or Melancholly
clouded her vigorous Spirit, or suppress her Joviality in the retired thoughts and
despair of a Husband; she was troubled with none of those longings which poor
Maidens are subject to: she had a power and strength (if not the will) to command
her own pleasure of any person of reasonable ability of body, and therefore she

\textsuperscript{33} The incident involves tricking the unfortunate woman into attempting to feed a piece of meat to Moll’s
pet dog with the woman’s left hand. According to Moll, “\textit{if he taketh it from you and eat it, you are a
perfect Maid; otherwise not}” ([99], 85). The woman agrees to the test, not knowing that Moll has trained
the dog to take food only from her right hand.
needed not whine for it as long as she was able to beat a fellow to complyance without the unnecessary trouble of Entreaties.

While this description can be charitably read as a comment on Moll’s spirits, her almost heroic independence, and her lack of need for a husband, it can also of course be interpreted as a comment on Moll’s promiscuity: she may lack the green sickness, a build-up of blood which was commonly “treated” with married sex, because she obtains sex for herself whenever she wants it. She may not experience maidenly melancholy because she is in fact no longer a maid. The description cheekily frames how a reading audience might respond to Moll’s claims about her sexual propriety. At the very least, it reveals that in making herself a public figure by her cross-dressing and other criminal exploits, Moll has rendered her body and sexuality available for public commentary.

While this “autobiography” is as fictitious and biased a representation as Middleton and Dekker’s laudatory one, it suggests that at least some of the audience might have shared the opinions of men like Sir Alexander Wengrave and Laxton that Moll’s unruliness was enough to render her body up to sexual scrutiny, advances, and abuse. These same audience members might believe that wives like Mistress Gallipot are fortunate to escape similar public scrutiny and verbal abuse for their adultery. Certainly even Moll herself ultimately defends the values of fidelity and chastity in marriage (so long as the husband has earned such virtuous behaviours from his wife). The play does not unequivocally celebrate unruly women (whether they are sexually or socially unruly) – and by extension, does not condemn unequivocally the verbal abuse of such women.

Plays like *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Dutch Courtesan* perhaps cast blame on the men who name women as whores, but both plays also present verbal abuse as a matter-of-
course experience for unruly women. Thus Franceschina is imprisoned at the end of the play, even though, as I argue below, she is also the central critical voice declaring how whore-shaming practices are fantasies of hypocrisy, a double standard, and the product of misogynist fear. But the constant verbal abuse she experiences and her final arrest also point to the fact that women who misbehave are generally the victims of abuse and punishment (verbal, physical, and sexual). Similarly, Bartholomew Fair blames Justice Overdo and Littlewit for their hypocrisy and their inability to control their households because of their own uncontrolled appetites and makes them (rather than Ursula) the butt of the play’s comical judgments, but the play also observes the common everyday practice of whore shaming. Plays like The Honest Whore, The Lady of Pleasure, and The New Inn do not at all attempt to rescue whores and other sexually transgressive women from verbal abuse; instead all three plays present whore shaming as a necessary tool in the reformation of whorish women into chaste wives. Even in Othello, The Winter’s Tale, Cymbeline, and Much Ado, the act of labelling promiscuous women whores is not of itself condemned – only the act of labelling a chaste woman a whore is presented as heinous.

Ultimately, the common attitude these plays together illuminate is that while it is an offense to name chaste women whores and to cast aspersions on their sexuality, it is not an offense to name unchaste women whores – because they have somehow earned the label.34 The plays provide the sense that there is a hierarchy of women: chaste women are

34 Disturbingly the same misogynist logic that governs slander governs rape, which, as I elucidate in my chapter on rape trials, is a crime that cannot happen to whores who in their very promiscuity have offered up their bodies for public consumption. As in the legal procedures governing rape, victim-blaming is integral in responses (including critical responses) that wonder “why did she behave that way, if she did not want to be thought a whore?”
both socially valuable and not to be slandered, but unchaste women are valueless and open to verbal (and physical) abuse. In the case of unchaste women, the verbal abuse is not, in fact, slander at all, but merely a descriptive label, and a just one. If the woman is chaste, like Hero, then comic structure or the process of law will see that her chaste reputation is restored, a fact which men like Leonato and the Friar assume is enough to compensate for the effects of slander. Finally, if a woman is chaste but unruly, then she might have to accept that she will experience verbal abuse, though that verbal abuse might, as in the plays about obviously chaste women, be occasionally apologised for, or proven wrong. The plays I have been discussing, when read together suggest that slander rarely exists with real consequences for the victim – a point that the historical research on the topic of defamation cases seems to back up. Most critics, even if they reveal that defamation cases for calling women whores or other sexually slanderous names were numerous, also argue for the difficulty plaintiffs had proving slander and receiving real redress (and recall Cerasano’s argument that single women particularly had difficulty obtaining redress). The overall lesson is that women can and will experience violence, whether verbal, physical, or sexual, regardless of their chastity, and few will receive adequate redress. We might ask to what extent Hero receives justice for the violence she experience. Certainly in *Othello* the dead Desdemona cannot be soothed by the news that her reputation has been restored.

**Resisting Whore Shaming: Four Jacobean Comedies**
In her incisive work on Middleton’s women, Daileader argues that the dramatist was “Dismissed as a misogynist by early twentieth-century critics” (223), an error which recent criticism been largely unable to rectify. Daileader argues that in fact Middleton “resisted” what she calls “The early modern obsession with female chastity” and the assumption that “prostitutes and erring wives” should be lumped in with “all the diseased, anonymous, rhetorical ‘whores’ of masculinist discourse” (224). Daileader instead argues:

> to Middleton, women are, above all, human – and being human means being sexual. Male promiscuity is, if anything, more frequently represented and more harshly ridiculed in Middleton than female promiscuity, yet critics turn a blind eye to the former, in an unconscious and therefore doubly insidious reiteration of the double standard. Critics assume that when men are shown as sleazy, conniving whore-mongers that is ‘realism’, but when the spotlight falls on an unchaste bride or a wily prostitute, that’s misogyny. (224)

Daileader points to an attitude that contemporary critics can unconsciously adopt which tends to automatically assume that female characters who are unruly or sexually deviant are supposed to be objects of judgment: we see the unruly woman and assume that the dramatist wants us to applaud either her final condemnation or reformation. This attitude is certainly not limited to Middleton’s plays: for example, the same critical stance perhaps explains the history of criticism attached to *The Dutch Courtesan*, which until very recently mostly assumed that Freevill is a kind of moral comic hero, while Franceschina is the absurd comic villainess.

My reading of Middleton’s *The Roaring Girl* follows Daileader’s lead in paying more attention to the ways in which the play asks us to acknowledge the inequities, logical fallacies, and violences that undergird early modern patriarchy. By not assuming a
position of judgment that focuses solely on the unchaste women, we can begin to see that some comedies offer a far more nuanced and complex picture of early modern attitudes to sex and gender. I extend Daileader’s sympathetic reading of Middleton’s unchaste women to other unchaste women in Jacobean drama, and arrive at much the same conclusion as she: “These women are flawed, but not more so – indeed, often considerably less so – than his men. But they are also brave, intelligent, vibrant, funny, and resourceful – and at their worst, only doing what they must do just to get by in this mad, mad world” (238).

As the mistakenly slandered chaste woman plots show, men could very easily destroy women’s reputations. It seems profoundly unjust to a contemporary commentator that the chastity on which a woman’s social worth and legal status heavily depended could be destroyed in a moment. But one does not have to cast modern values anachronistically back onto seventeenth-century London to note that dramatists of this period were commenting on the sexual violence of whore shaming and the way that this verbal violence was connected to a quotidian gender violence built into the structures of the early modern state (which assumed that women should have less power and less of a legal or institutional voice than men, and that it naturally followed that women should submit to and become the willing subjects of men both in the wider state and at home). Because the gender hierarchy of “man-as-ruler, woman-as-subject” is so prevalent and

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35 Although women also tended to destroy other women’s reputations: as Kaplan and Eggert note, many of defendants in defamation suits against were, in fact, other women (89). Women eagerly take part in the whore shaming in The New Inn where Lady Frampul is one of the leaders in Pinnacia’s disrobing, and in The Roaring Girl, where the city wives gossip about Moll’s sexuality as much as Laxton and Sir Alex Wengrave.

36 The idea that women were supposed to submit to men as the heads of state and marriage is one that has been widely discussed by a number of critics to the point of becoming commonplace.
naturalised, the sexual violence that punishes women’s violations of gender norms often comes across as “naturally” justified.

The plays I discuss in the second half of this chapter do not invite easy reading of words like “whore”, but call them into question; this interrogation, however, was not necessarily a project led solely by dramatists like Jonson, Marston, and Middleton. The questioning of inequitable social and legal codes affecting women was already happening historically and culturally in early modern London. I am not, of course, arguing that the status of women and the agency they had in matters of sexual consent, legal autonomy, or the right to work, inherit property, or control the use of their bodies was drastically changing. Again, I do not at all dispute the fact that prostitutes in early modern England were victims of violence, poverty, rape, exploitation, and verbal abuse; they were legally defined as criminals and rarely held up as ideals in an unqualified manner. What I do suggest, though, is that the prostitute or “whorish” woman’s body can be thought of as the site of debates over the inherent worth of women, the expectations of wives, the ideal of chastity, and attitudes to sex and gender – and that we do see these debates happening very clearly in dramas featuring “whorish” women. I would like to think about four of these women – Franceschina from Marston’s *The Dutch Courtesan*, Ursula from Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, Moll from Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*, and the Courtesan from Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch an Old One* – in order to elucidate what assumptions about gender and sex are being made, reiterated, or interrogated. I ultimately contend that these plays, in the process of interrogating assumptions behind the figure of
the “whorish” woman and how she should be treated, render the violences that all women experience – whether whores, maids, widows or wives – more visible.

In other words, I am disagreeing with Salkeld’s tacit assumption that, because the whore in Jacobean and Caroline drama tends to be married off or imprisoned by the end of the play, this necessitates that the audience altogether forgets her voice and any social commentary she makes. Salkeld himself points to the voice of women like Mistress Overdone in Measure for Measure, and suggests that “‘marry-a-punk’” plays “could have uneasy effects”:

Marriage to a prostitute left narrative complications unresolved, and implied that just as whores could become wives, so also wives might prove wicked ... Furthermore it ignored the fact that even as playwrights transformed their prostitutes into citizens, hardship and poverty would continue to turn citizens into prostitutes in the alleyways, gardens, messuages, tenements and chambers of the city.

Though the whore may be physically reintegrated into the culture of the play, the audience may be left with doubt as to whether this integration is comedically “happy”. Salkeld’s main focus in this example is more on the way that the instability of the wife/whore dichotomy destabilises the closure involved in comedy’s return to patriarchal (i.e., married and law-abiding) order; however, he also points to the fact that such marriages do not resolve the complaints that prostitutes and women raise throughout the course of the play about the inequitable social conditions that make them turn to prostitution. I also think that such marriages do not necessarily make the audience forget displays of verbal and physical violence women might encounter.

37 See particularly chapter 7, “Vanishing Tricks: Dekker, Marston, Shakespeare and Middleton” for his discussion of this trend.
It is additionally true, however, that not all plays suggest the whore can be easily reintegrated. Indeed, I am looking at four women who are labelled whore, who are associated with either prostitution, or “whorish” or unruly behaviour, and who by the end of the play, remain unmarried, unrepentant, and not wholly controlled or silenced. Franceschina, Moll, Ursula, and Middleton’s Courtesan trouble the comedic closure to which Salkeld points. These women refuse to disappear and instead invite us to see the figure of the “whore” in a complicated way that simultaneously upholds many of the negative meanings of “whore” while inviting us to think the word in new, less judgmental ways. In suggesting that women like Franceschina, Moll, Ursula, and the Courtesan complicate how we think of the early modern whore, I am accounting for recent arguments about prostitution that are sceptical of celebrating the courtesan/prostitute as a proto-feminist figure, at the same time that I am suggesting that this body exists on stage in complicated ways that resist the complete erasure of the social problems and violences she represents. She may not be a proto-feminist figure, but she is an interrogator of comfortable labels.

To start, I will briefly recall the instances where each woman is named a whore. Franceschina attracts the greatest numbers of epithets: Freevill alone calls her “arrant strumpet” (2.1.130), “venom’d gonnhory (132), “rampant cockatrice” (3.1.221), and “a creature made of blood and hell” (5.1.77). In the first act of the play Freevill’s names for her are slightly more fond – he calls her a “my creature: pretty, nimble-eye’d Dutch Tanakin; ... a soft, plump, round-cheek’d froe” (1.1.140-44); additionally, he is willing to admit his attachment to her. Moreover, although he makes snide remarks about the way
that the word “courtesan” is used to make the word whore seem better than it is – “Whore? Fie, whore! You may call her a courtesan ... ’tis not in fashion to call things by their right names” (1.2.97-100) – he also tries to argue to Malheureux that brothels are “most necessary buildings” (59) and prostitution a pragmatic profession (92-120). But his lack of interest in marrying Franceschina, or having anything to do with her after his marriage to Beatrice, and his increasingly violent names for her reveal that his compliments are no more than pretty and convenient talk (he will not abuse her as long as he wishes to use her). By the third act, he has decided that she is worthy of being “enjoy[ed] and in “blood cold, / ... laugh[ed] at” (3.2.256-7), and begins to verbally abuse her more and more violently. Franceschina is, incidentally, named whore (or one of its synonyms) not only by her vengeful former lover but also by most of the other characters in the play, including Cocledemoy (4.3.15), Malheureux (1.1.96; 1.2.129), Sir Lionel (4.4.74), and Crispinella (5.2.14). Even Mary Faugh and Franceschina, when their tempers flare, trade barbs which draw on the professions of whore and bawd as insult in 2.2: Franceschina calls Mary Faugh “‘vitch, bawd, polecat!” (33) and Mary Faugh returns with the slightly-less-direct insults that Freevill is a “true whoremaster” and a “constant drab-keeper” (36-7), implicitly suggesting, by extension, that Franceschina is a whore and a drab and should never have had any higher pretentions. The sheer commonality of the use of whore, strumpet, common woman, drab, as insults – used even by “chaste” ladies like Crispinella – suggests the frequency with which such abuse is meted out without resistance. Thus even though Freevill’s verbal abuse of Franceschina becomes quite
violent over the course of the play, no one except Franceschina bothers to react to it: his epithets are certainly not slander in any legal sense of the word.

The name-calling that Ursula endures in *Bartholomew Fair* is related to both her connections to prostitution and her other unruly and criminal qualities. In addition to Justice Overdo’s naming of her as a “pink, pinnacle, and bawd” in 2.2, and his further claims that she is both criminal and “gross”, are Ramping Alice’s insults in 4.5 that Ursula is a “bawd in grease” (61), the “sow of Smithfield” (63), a “Cat-a-mountain vapours” (65). All of these insults attack both her sexual criminality and her physical body (she is loud, fat, and covered in the pig grease she sells). Alice’s final insult that Ursula “broke out the bottom o’ the [Bridewell] cart, night-tub” (68–9) again suggests the uncontainable grotesqueness of her body (as John Creaser identifies in his notes to these lines, the cart was a common punishment for “Bawds and whores” and a “night-tub” was a container “For collecting filth and night soil”). The word “bawd” with which Alice starts her invective, here, just as in Overdo’s use of the word in act 2, covers many of the different meanings that whore shaming typically implies (everything from illicit female sexuality, to female criminality, to physical grotesqueness and social unruliness). Other characters, however, also name Ursula “bawd” as a way of expressing affection, such as when Knockem is indignant that Quarlous and Winwife have “abused the good race-bawd o’ Smithfield” (2.5.152-3). I will return to the significance of this contrasting use momentarily.

Moll, as I have already observed, is not a prostitute; the only evidence of potential sexual deviance she gives is that she occasionally goes partly dressed in male clothing.
Yet this does not stop men like Laxton from concocting sexual fantasies about purchasing her maidenhead (which Moll rebukes as a means of degrading her worth or “think[ing] me whorish”, 3.1.87). Nor does it stop men like Sir Alexander Wengrave naming her a whore: when Sebastian asks “Why is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?”, Sir Alexander replies “seek all London from one end to t’other, / More whores of that name than of any ten other” (2.2.148-51). (Tellingly, Sir Alexander here also abuses Mary Fitzallard, the chaste “Moll” of the play whom Sir Alexander dislikes because of her small dowry.)

Importantly, much of the derogatory speech directed at Moll Cutpurse is not the same kind of violent naming that Franceschina receives from Freevill but, as Jane Baston observes, a kind of underhanded teasing, such as the snide remarks her tailor gives her in 2.2, when he requests, “If you go presently to your chamber, Mistress Mary, pray send me the measure of your thigh by some honest body” (93-4). When Moll promises to send the information by “a porter”, the tailor replies “So you had need, it is a lusty one, both of them would make any porter’s back ache in England” (95-7). Baston points to similar instances of such sexual teasing, such as Sir Alexander’s “double entendres of ‘fingering,’ ... and ‘pricksongs’” – puns which Baston claims “objectify Moll in sexual terms” (67). Similarly, in 5.1, she observes that Trapdoor sings his song inviting Moll to “’wap’ and ‘niggle’ under the ‘ruffman’s’ (i.e., copulate under the hedge)” (68); Baston argues that this kind of teasing, the second instance of which Moll gamely participates in, ultimately constrains Moll’s ability to act as a truly radical feminist figure. I do not wholly agree with Baston’s argument, but I do think she is right to note the meanness that underlies some of the teasing Moll endures; presented in the guise of a joke as it is, however, makes
the verbal abuse Moll experiences more difficult to isolate as abuse.\footnote{Specifically, I wonder if Moll’s radical defences of her gender that Baston identifies as being prevalent in the first half of the play are necessarily negated by the containment strategies the play uses in the second half (such as using Moll as the enabling force behind the very conventional marriage of Mary Fitzallard and Sebastian Wengrave, or Moll’s participation in the sexual teasing). The two exist alongside each other in uneasy ways, but I do not think this means one view of Moll must ultimately triumph.} One can see how this kind of verbal violence could potentially humiliate and put an unruly woman “in her place”, at the same time that it resists being read as slander. If the verbal abuse is just teasing, and Moll is participating in the teasing, and she has “invited” it by dressing and acting in ways that men do, could she ever claim that she is the victim of malice?

The Courtesan in \textit{A Trick to Catch the Old One} does not accumulate condemning names as frequently, or consistently as Moll, Ursula, and Franceschina; however, this lack of verbal abuse is mainly the result of the fact that after 1.1 she is disguised as a wealthy widow. When she is finally revealed in 5.2, however, she does receive a chorus of derogatory names, including “courtesan” (96), “strumpet” (98, 128), “quean” (100), “Dutch widow” (108), and “whore” (112). In the context of act 5, even “courtesan” becomes an insult, when Hoard’s friends mock him for “dot[ing] on a courtesan” (96), suggesting that doing so is a sign of old age and senility. They suggest that his marriage is both “a folly” (91) and a kind of slander he visits upon himself: “Fie, fie! A man of your repute and name! / You’ll feast your friends, but cloy ‘em first with shame” (93-4). Even Witgood, who himself seems to find no shame in spending time with a courtesan and relying on her wits, uses the epithet “whore” here as an insult, because he knows that the other men, at least, view connections with a courtesan as shameful acts. And indeed, throughout the play the men talk about men like Witgood who visit courtesans disdainfully as “brothel-master” (1.3.28-9; 2.1.209.), “brothel-vomiting rascal” (1.4.14),
and “brotheller” (2.1.3). Hoard himself reacts just as Witgood intends, finding the prospect of being legally joined to a courtesan a humiliation, angrily shouting “Out, out! I am cheated; infinitely cozened!” (106). But the men who are most terrified by brothels, and most ashamed of being connected to courtesans – Lucre and Hoard – are also the butts of the play’s jokes; Witgood himself, so frequently condemned by Lucre, Hoard, and their friends, is in fact the cleverest man in the play, and ends up profiting immensely (as does the Courtesan herself) from his friendship with a courtesan. His joke in 5.2 is misogynist, drawing on Hoard’s fear of being humiliated by coming into contact with a “whore”; as I discuss later, however, he also seems not to put much stock in their disdain for courtesans and bawds himself.

As I have already intimated, three of these women (Ursula, Moll, and Franceschina) are also unruly in addition to being sexually unchaste, and it is their obvious unruliness that their communities respond to as much as their sexual professions. All three women make spectacles of their body: Moll in her cross-dressing and sitting on the public stage to watch plays, Ursula in her grotesqueness, and Franceschina in offering her body for sale and dressing herself in the clothes of a courtesan. Additionally, three of the women (Moll, the Courtesan, and Franceschina) are involved in performances that involve wearing costumes and acting for others. Moll actively performs as man, learning sword fighting and swearing and out-performing men like Laxton at these arts. The Courtesan pretends to be a widow, a role that may disguise the fact that she is a courtesan, but which is intended to draw the attentions of both Lucre and Hoard. Franceschina performs, in a more intimate setting, her songs and witty conversation – that is, the arts of
courtesan as Thomas Coryate infamously outlines them: “she will endeavour to enchant thee partly with her melodious notes that shee warbles out upon her lute, which she fingers with as laudable a stroake as many men that are excellent professors in the noble science of Musicke; and partly with that heart-tempting harmony of her voice. Also, thou wilt find [her] ... a good Rhetorician, and a most elegant discoursrer” (267). Two of the women are associated with commercial endeavours and the nascent capitalist market. Ursula is the head of a business selling flesh (pig flesh and prostitutes), drink, and lavatory space. Franceschina and Mary Faugh operate a women-run sex trade that profits from male appetites. Significantly, these endeavours mark both another example of the women’s entry into public space (since they put themselves and their wares out in the London marketplace for public consumption) and one more example of the way women are treading on male social territory: reclaiming the right to engage in trades and money-making ventures (a right which women, because of coverture and labour laws, tended to participate in as wives, and less frequently as independent labourers).

Ursula, Franceschina, and Moll transgress expectations that women ought to be chaste in one additional, final way. The bodies of all three women are incontinent. Ursula’s body, breaking the cart that should tame her, excreting like a “night-tub” or lavatory, constantly giving orders to Mooncalf, letting loose a barrage of shouts at Ramping Alice or curses when she scalds her leg in 2.5, gives the impression of being ever-expanding and incapable of being confined. Her body almost seems to have turned itself into a metaphorical resemblance of the appetites and excretions of the customers who come to her booth to eat and drink, visit a prostitute, or use the toilet. Franceschina,
as Freevill points out, turns into a “punk rampant” (2.2.83), releasing streams of angry invective and threats, such as her desire to “scratch out her eyes and suck the holes” (81-2), or when she names Mary Faugh a “vitch” (along with many other names) earlier in the same scene; violent rage-filled speeches characterise Franceschina’s appearances in her remaining scenes in the play. Even the chaste Moll lets her body roam freely through the community. (Her speeches in 3.1 and the epilogue, however, do not, I think, count as a kind of verbal incontinence, given that she uses pointed reason in order to defend women’s chastity; her voice may be “unruly” in that it is not silent, but it is not incontinent on the same level that Ursula and Franceschina’s voices are). All three women – and especially Franceschina and Ursula – embody Gail Kern Paster’s description of women as “leaky bodies” marked by incontinence (23). These women do not just transgress expectations of gender by crossing into male behaviours, but also fail to perform female chastity in a way that is markedly female, thereby becoming grotesque versions of women.39

I think it is important, however, that critics have had a difficult time dismissing these unruly and whorish women altogether. Ursula and Franceschina may not be presented as the most attractive women, and they, together with Moll and Middleton’s Courtesan, definitely represent transgressive femininity. Yet there is also something

39 And again, we might contrast these women to Much Ado’s Hero, who provides a starkly continent contrast to both her cousin Beatrice and the incontinent and transgressive women I discuss here. Beatrice’s wit and her initial refusal to marry, of course is far from condemnable, and indeed, is the source of much of the lively spirit of the play: she too, is ultimately chaste, though not as obviously chaste as her cousin. Hero is entirely removed from the plot to defame her and ruin Claudio (that is, her body is not even present in the scene that the villainous Don John sets up to frame her). She reacts to Claudio’s defamation and renunciation of her with overwhelming grief, “fall[ing] to the ground” (4.1.107sd) in a faint; however, she is also quickly moved to “patience and endur[ance]” (254). Hero is a woman who should be difficult to even attempt to slander, which, as I have argued, is precisely what makes the very fact of her slander so potentially tragic.
likeable about their wit, their criminal ingenuity, and the force of their anger. Indeed, contemporary feminist critics of these plays have tended to see these qualities as signs that real women were not always chaste, silent, and obedient, that they were more vocal, more independent in thought, and indeed, more complicated than the prescribed ideal. Certainly, the dramatists who constructed these women had to at least acknowledge the complexity of real women who do not easily fit into a chaste mould. Given that attitudes toward marriage roles, the rights of men and women following divorce, labour laws, the murkiness of defamation cases, the remarriage of widows, and gender and sexual violence in marriage were already up for debate in the general populace, it is not very radical to suggest that dramatists too had complex and shifting ideas about women, marriage, and gender and sexual violence and were willing to use their plays to comment on the inequalities between men and women in a patriarchal culture. Franceschina, Moll, Ursula, and Middleton’s Courtesan are associated with prostitution and unchaste sexuality, laughed at, and verbally abused; however, they are simultaneously alluring, full of comic energy, and witty and forceful satirical commentators on the power relationships between men and women. That they are so admirable, and perform such witty commentary suggests their plays register discomfort or dissatisfaction with the status quo that allows violence towards unchaste women.

Tellingly, none of the women I have been discussing are only or just whores. Ursula, Franceschina, Moll, and the Courtesan are uncomfortable figures, but they are not women like the Duchess in Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* or Tamora in *Titus Andronicus*, clearly and almost absurdly villainous. They are instead likeable and
alluring: much of the comic energy of their play derives from these unruly female bodies. Ursula and Moll are perhaps more obvious sources of comic energy. Ursula is a “she-bear” (“The Persons of the Play”, 17n), but she is also the maternal she-bear who guards over the family of fairground criminals, as Helen Ostovich argues: “Ursula may call Mooncalf ‘false faucet’, ‘rascal’, ‘changeling’, ‘stote’, ‘vermin’, and ‘errant incubee’, but she has an almost motherly concern to teach him ... [and] Mooncalf has an almost filial admiration for Ursula’s proficiency in execration” (“General Introduction” 45). In 2.5 when Ursula scalds her leg, “the in-group loyalty of the fair people asserts itself, as the rogues of the fair co-operate to help Ursula. Mooncalf watches Joan Trash’s basket while she fetches cream for the burns. Leatherhead, Nightingale, Edgeworth, and Knockem settle Ursula in her chair, tend her wounds, and salve her self-esteem” (46). Ursula clearly commands the respect and love of her criminal family, and the caring she inspires is part of what makes the fairground criminals so effective as a group. Ursula is grotesque, but she also commands loyalty, and in many ways her competitive, at-times-squabbling “family” work together far more honestly and loyally than any of the middle class visitors to the fair grounds. They are not duplicitous towards each other as Quarlous and Winwife are; they do not abuse their power as Justice Overdo does (at the very least they are open about their willingness to take advantage of the more foolish visitors to the fair); they are not hypocrites, always casting judgment on others when their own family is falling apart (as Littlewit and Overdo are). Moreover, Ursula may attract laughter from the city dwellers, from her own family, and from the audience, but she is by no means the main object of laughter in the play. That position falls to the man who believes he fills the most
socially “respectable” position in the world outside the fair, Justice Overdo, who is forced in the final act to admit that he is unaware that his own wife has gotten drunk and dressed as (perhaps even acted as) a prostitute (and who returns his hypocrisy to him in the form of very public vomiting). Justice Overdo, not Ursula, is defeated in the end. Originally wanting to discover all the “enormities” of the fair (2.1.31), arrest offenders, and subject the unruly fairground to his justice, Overdo ends up inviting all the citizens and the fairground actors into his home for a dinner party (5.6.81-95). Rather than being stopped, the fair crosses into the territory of Justice Overdo’s home, and Ursula and her family carry on as usual. They will be back in Smithfield the very next year. Disorderly Ursula might be the object of laughter, but, as numerous critics have argued, she is also the very embodiment of Jonson’s comic force, and this makes her very difficult to reduce to the label of a mere “whore”.40

Moll is an even more obvious and active comic impetus in The Roaring Girl. “Earning” the title of whore for her gender transgressive behaviour, Moll is nevertheless the play’s most vocal and successful defender of chastity. She leaves the play having forced Laxton to beg forgiveness: “I do confess I have wronged thee, Moll ... / ... I ask

40 Robert Evans’s review of critical work on the play notes that Ursula has attracted “special emphasis” in comments on the fairground inhabitants, including Freda Townsend’s early argument that Ursula “is the lynchpin of the highly complex plot” (275). In addition to the studies Evans lists, Lawrence Manley argues that Ursula’s booth is the place at which the transformation (and “degradation”) of the seemingly respectable fairground visitors takes effect (463-7; 462). Melinda Gough similarly notes that “critical consensus favors Ursula as the most compelling of the play’s characters” (95); Gough argues that Ursula and her booth embody not just the fairground spirit but that of the theatre itself, embodying everything about the public stage against which the antitheatricalists railed: “she epitomizes the very ‘enormities’ which make the stage, according to its enemies, a dangerous enchantress” (84). This argument helpfully draws out the ways in which comic energy and sexual unruliness meet in Ursula, with the play drawing a “constant analogy between the fair, Ursula’s ‘pigbox,’ the theater, and sexual license” (87), noting that Jonson’s sympathies ultimately seem to lie with Ursula and her unruliness, rather than the antitheatricalists (95), however corrupt she is.
thee pardon / ... / I yield both purse and body” (3.1.116-20). She also delivers to a rapt audience, in response to Lord Noland’s query about when she will marry, her lecture on men’s hypocrisy:

I’ll tell you when i’faith
When you shall hear
Gallants void from sergeants’ fear,
Honesty and truth unslandered,
Women manned but never pandered,
Cheaters booted but not coached
Vessels older ere they’re broached.
If my mind be then not varied,
Next day following I’ll be married. (5.2.216-24)

Moll’s main point is not limited to the fact that men slander women to begin with, but that they are active destroyers of chastity. The men who should protect womanly and wifely chastity pander their wives and have sex with other women as soon as they can. Additionally, men slander women’s reputations without any proof or logical consistency. Moll identifies her refusal to marry as a refusal to capitulate to the way husbands abuse their power and make their own wives into whores. Her eschewal of marriage, then, though it appears initially antagonistic to the usual comic order that reclaims whorish women and ensures the continued chastity of chaste women, actually supports the orderliness of marriage. Moll cannot get married because men have destroyed the order marriage brings. Her cross-dressing, smoking, and fighting continue to be markers of female disorderliness, but she is also, by defending chastity, one of the more orderly bodies in the play. She is both whore and not whore, both disorderly and chaste. On the whole (as a number of critics have argued) she is a figure the play asks us to admire rather
than demean as Sir Alexander and Laxton do. In many ways she is the recognisable comic hero of the play.

Of the four women, Franceschina’s comic and redeeming qualities are perhaps the most difficult to make a case for, given critical history attached to her which repeatedly condemns her. Admittedly, she can be a difficult character to make sense of. At times she seems to be the object of the play’s satire: she is, as the title claims, a “Dutch” courtesan, and it is possible that she then fits into a history of xenophobic representations of foreigners on the English stage, as Andrew Fleck and Howard have argued. Fleck claims that “By yoking this aurally discordant stage accent to Franceschina’s alluring Venetian manners, Marston heightens her comic absurdity” (15). Howard agrees, noting that by linking prostitution with Dutchness in the play, Marston at least partly argues that “Wives are English: prostitutes are foreign” (“Mastering Difference” 109). Howard does argue that Cocledemoy destabilises the connection between non-English things and bad quality, but Franceschina still comes out, in her argument, as “a monster of deformity, a hybrid creature who masters no one language but roils about in a mixture of many” (111-12). Howard’s and Fleck’s arguments are supported in the play by Freevill’s reminder of the Dutch wars occurring at the time the play was written and performed: “I would have married men love the stews as Englishmen lov’d the low countries: wish war should be maintain’d there lest it should come home to their own doors” (62-5). Dutchness did in part signify political turmoil, and Franceschina’s Dutch voice, which moves from delivering artful speeches to delivering invective over the course of the play, does invoke these connections between “Dutchness” and violence and chaos.
I think it is simultaneously possible, however, to read Franceschina’s accent in the way that Marjorie Rubright does, as another everyday and familiar voice of the London streets: “Although the English-speaking theater audience may have known but a few words and phrases in Dutch”, Rubright notes, “they were probably familiar with the sound of merchants with Dutch accents in commercial centers such as the Royal Exchange” (97). Julie Sanders similarly notes that “scenic detail” in the play “captures something of London in 1604-5, including its soundscapes” – an achievement that the play partly accomplishes “through the identity and language of the play’s female protagonist Franceschina. She herself stands for the significant presence of Dutch immigrant communities in London, including the theatregoing districts such as the Blackfriars precinct, where their skills in textiles and related crafts were much in demand” (paragraph 6). To support Rubright’s and Sanders’s arguments further, I would draw attention also to Fouassier’s observation that amongst London prostitutes, “Flemish brothels were an institution in England, and a guarantee of quality” (33). A Dutch voice need not necessarily or only signify “otherness”, any more than it must necessarily link foreignness to immorality and inelegance. For example, Hans in Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday is comical and yet respected for being hardworking, loyal, and skilled in his trade. And although “Hans” is in fact a disguised English man, Rowland Lacy, it is only by adopting the guise of a Dutch middleclass craftsman that Lacy is able to shed his prodigal ways and become loyal and hardworking.

Without actually surveying the responses of early modern audiences, the most we can claim is that people likely had differing and multivalent responses to Franceschina’s
Dutch accent – it may have signified many qualities, positive and negative, at once. It is hard to claim for certain, then, that the play’s laughter is targeted at her body solely because of her accent. Such an argument begins to seem more likely when we consider her murderous and incontinent wrath. Even if we accept that Franceschina has some justified motivation for wanting to seek revenge on Freevill for lying to her, for thinking he can simply pass her off to his friend, and for verbally abusing her, we might yet admit discomfort with Franceschina’s violent threats to Beatrice and Freevill. There must be something appealing about this woman, however, something that attracts our interest and perhaps even our sympathy. Indeed, I would argue that the fact that Franceschina is at some level a sympathetic and dynamic character is what rescues the drama from being a dull morality play, instead pushing it into the genre of city comedy. If she were completely unattractive, then her reputation as a courtesan – as well as Malheureux’s immediate fascination with her – would make very little sense. There are, after all, whores seemingly everywhere in London, both by the reckoning of the characters in the play and by Howard’s compilation of the historical data on the subject. Reading through a number of plays which create a “fantasy” that “the place of prostitution is potentially everywhere” (“Sex” 122), Howard argues that the figures around prostitution in the early seventeenth-century supported this fantasy: “Plays about London life highlighted whore plots in part because prostitution had taken a new form after the 1546 dissolution of the stews, had spread widely and been nurtured by the very social changes that were making London into a much bigger and more cosmopolitan environment. Prostitution was part of London life, and theater practitioners knew it” (122-3). How does Franceschina manage
to stand out amongst these hordes of whores? The answer might lie in the fact that she is a courtesan. The wide circulation of books like Coryate’s *Crudities* did seem to introduce into the English mind the idea that somehow courtesans were different, a higher class of prostitute than common jades or whores. As Coryate notes, the word courtesan “is derived from the Italian word cortesia that signifieth courtesie. Because these kinde of women are said to receiue courtesies of their fauorites” (264). Coryate’s not-entirely-flattering etymology links the courtesan both to the courtesy of court culture and to the courtesies, or gifts or payments, rendered for her services. An oft-quoted line in Edward Sharpham’s *The Fleire* (c.1606-7), shows the English understanding of the courtesan’s connection to the court more pointedly: reacting to Fleire’s report that the two sisters Florida and Felicia are known abroad as “stately whores”, Florida indignantly asks, “why are wee whores?” When her sister mildly inquires “What are we else?”, Florida answers with “Why we are Curtizans”, with the difference between the two being that “a whore is for every rascall but your Curtizan is for your Courtier” (2.203-8). One gets the sense from this and other representations of courtesans that the English opinion of courtesans was in fact the one that Freevill makes such fun of – a courtesan is somehow more socially refined, more exotic, and therefore more alluring than a whore. At the same time, however, English drama also tends, as Salkeld rightly observes, to mark all prostitutes, whether foreign courtesans or English jades, as “whores” at the most basic level.\(^{41}\) This is precisely what happens in Marston’s play: the same characters who call Franceschina a whore are also often those who are most fascinated by the courtesan’s art. Freevill’s

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\(^{41}\) See particularly Salkeld’s chapter on “Courtesan Culture in Kyd, Marlowe, and Heywood” for his discussion of how early modern drama represents courtesans.
comment about “call[ing] things by their right names” belittles Franceschina as a whore in the very same moment that he brings the abstemious Malheureux to see Franceschina’s courtesan arts of singing and playing her lute.

Ultimately, we must use our own judgment to decide whether the play claims that Franceschina is simply another whore; I argue here, however, that it gives enough evidence to make the case that she is not. When Franceschina admonishes Malheureux for proceeding too quickly to sex, she tells him he is trying to “gulp down all delights at once” (5.1.25), before promising to teach him how to “chew your pleasure vit love; / De more degrees and stepts, de more delight” (29-30). Malheureaux’s response is telling: he exclaims, “What, you’re a learned wanton, and proceed by art” (32-3) – as though he is shocked to realise once again that she is something slightly more than the strumpet he keeps naming her.

Franceschina has not only mastered the courtesan’s arts, she is also an incisive social commentator, as she demonstrates in her assessment of how men treat women: “You bin all unconstant. O unfaithful men – tyrants! betrayers! De very enjoying us loseth us; and, when you only ha’ made us hateful, you only hate us. O mine forsaken heart!” (2.2.114-118). Men, according to the courtesan, set up an ideal of chastity and

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42 Mike Cordner even argues, in his article on “Franceschina’s voice” that it is possible that Marston even deliberately “reduces – or abandons completely – his phonetic rendering of her accent and writes out individual lines and sections of speech with little or no indication of foreignness. These include some of the most sharply accusatory and plangent utterances he assigns her. ... The fact ... may indicate a desire that these blows should be allowed to land home, without even the slightest risk of her accent weakening their force”. (paragraph 18). In any case, Cordner argues, no character within the play ever has difficulty understanding Franceschina, despite her accent (paragraph 16), and so we should not assume that she is meant to be a figure of fun only. Throughout his article, Cordner posits that Franceschina is a more complex and intelligent character than critics have typically read her, pointing at everything from the lack of verbal tricks played on her as a means of humiliating her and exposing her linguistic ineptitude (paragraphs 10-11,
then actively collude in its destruction. Freevill wants Franceschina’s body and profession to be available when he gains by their presence (first pleasure, and then protection from cuckoldry); but he wants to disavow his involvement with Franceschina when a more socially and economically advantageous – and safer – offer arises in the form of the chaste, obedient, and entirely unquestioning Beatrice.\(^43\) He also wants to be able shame the women he enjoys without any threats to his safety and manhood (one of the reasons he is appalled to learn that she has asked Malhereux to kill him: naming her a “bloody villainess”, 3.1.231). It becomes even more difficult to argue with Franceschina’s cutting assessment when we see Freevill use not only Franceschina, but also his own chaste wife. Beatrice is entirely obedient to Freevill’s male control, so much so that her capacity to forgive and love is seemingly endless. Freevill rewards her love and obedience by manipulating her virtues for his own pleasure (and her pain). Acts 4 and 5 read like a cruel love test in which Freevill delights in the extent to which Beatrice is his chaste and private property. In 4.4 he covertly watches the moment when Franceschina reveals that the two were lovers, and so witnesses first-hand Beatrice’s continued loyalty to Freevill

\(^{13-14}\), to (like Rubright and Sanders) the commonality of Dutch presence and language in London, which would render her voice foreign, but not inherently laughable (paragraphs 7-9).

\(^{43}\) Beatrice is a safer choice of woman for Freevill to marry because she is both from venereal disease and the duplicity of the courtesan. As a true maid, Beatrice also poses no health threat to prospective suitors since a woman who has never had sex cannot infect her husband with venereal disease. Freevill does praise Franceschina for being “none of your ramping cannibals that devour man’s flesh, nor any of your Curtian gulfs that will never be satisfied until the best thing a man has be thrown into them” (1.2.86-9), a line which might refer doubly to the prostitute’s tendency to spread consumptive diseases like syphilis, and her wasting of men’s money and reason in passionate lust. Despite Freevill’s praises of Franceschina, he certainly has pox on his mind: in an earlier defence of courtesans he jokes that “do you give them a French crown, they’ll give you the French” (1.1.116-18). Beatrice’s value is only increased by her lack of the French disease. Similarly, just as Beatrice is not a health threat to her potential husband, she also promises to pose no threat of either cuckolding or scolding him. When courting her, Freevill tells her that he hopes “others disesteem / Your matchless graces, so I might safer seem. / Envy I covet not ... / He that is wise pants on a private breast” (2.1.32-37; my emphasis). The main advantage Beatrice has over Franceschina is that she can be labelled private property (an impossible thing for a woman who is economically independent and who is willing to sell her breast to any man who takes her fancy).

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(even when she thinks he is dead and has no more reason to remain loyal to him). In response he deems her a wife who is a “worthy, dove-like virgin without gall” (79-80).

Even so, he decides that “grief endears love” (79) and delays telling her that he is alive as a way of manipulating her emotions, and gaining more of her loyalty by making her miss him. Unlike the wrathful Franceschina whom the men of the play frame as irrational in her passions, Beatrice responds to Franceschina’s news that Freevill has kept her as his mistress (and the sight of her own ring on Franceschina’s finger) with complete and submissive acceptance: “O my heart! I will love you the better; I cannot hate what he affected. ... Alas, I was not so ambitious of so supreme an happiness that he should only love me” (4.4.52-64). When he finally does reveal himself, he refuses to tell the entire truth about the cause of Franceschina’s wrath. By the end of the play he has not precisely admitted to having sex with Franceschina. His apology to Beatrice is crafty in its subtle omission of this fact: “Nor ever hath my love been false to you; / Only I presum’d to try your faith too much, / For which I am most grieved” (5.2.55-7). Freevill’s apology (if we can call it that) is at root a vague claim that allows him to continue to claim fidelity to Beatrice without truly confirming or denying his involvement with Franceschina. And he gets away with his lie only because Beatrice and Crispinella are already primed to agree that Franceschina’s claims are a kind of malicious slander against Freevill’s good character. Crispinella assures her sister fifty lines earlier: “Sure Freevill was not false; / I’ll gage my life that strumpet, out of craft / And some close second end, hath maliced him” (12-15). Neither the sisters nor the play presses Freevill to explain himself more clearly, and we are left to decide for ourselves whether his love has remained “true” or
not, but (for me) the words seem uncomfortably similar to his earlier lies to Franceschina, and suggest a pattern of Freevill’s deception with women. Neither courtesan nor chaste maid, then, earns Freevill’s honesty.

His courtship and marriage are also based on something of a lie: he does not admit to her his reasons for being attracted to her (her dowry and her freedom from venereal disease), and one might argue that his vows of love are insincere, based on a tacit refusal to admit that he actually finds courtesans more sexually exciting than chaste women. One wonders how compelled he will feel to return the fidelity he expects of her. If Freevill does return to visiting brothels he risks infecting his own marriage with the sexual disease he does not want his wife to bring to the marriage bed – but this would only be the material side of the moral pollution he brings to the marriage by lying to his wife. Indeed, Ostovich argues that Freevill has already “poison[ed]” his marriage in visiting Franceschina, “engaging passionately with [her] without ... thinking at all of embracing the ‘modest pleasures’ of ‘equal hearts’ with a wife, whose ‘sober’ ignorance’ might satisfy him more than all of Franceschina’s sexual expertise. He has not treated Beatrice as an equal, and does not expect marital sex to match what he enjoyed with his mistress” (paragraph 5). In hypocritically applying a double standard to the sexual freedoms men and women can enjoy (both within and outside of marriage), Ostovich concludes, Freevill thus destroys the two qualities required for a companionate marriage grounded on “mutual consent”: “trust in the partner’s honesty, which Freevill has failed to provide” and “respect from the partner, again something which Freevill has failed to demonstrate” (paragraph 5).
Finally, Freevill does not possess the same qualities of forgiveness as Beatrice does: he shows no mercy to Franceschina for plotting revenge, nor does he ever admit his role in making her unhappy. His refusal to admit that he only values female chastity for the social capital it can lend him, his unwillingness to practice preserving chastity of any female body but his own wife’s, and his contradictory view that bawdy houses are necessary and yet the women who run them can be shamed and devalued ultimately contribute to a culture that makes a mockery of the values of marriage which women like Beatrice are commanded to uphold – at the same time that the threat of social ostracism and denigration is levelled at them should they fail to uphold these values. Women who commit to being wives – giving up their domestic and financial autonomy – do not necessarily gain the respect and fidelity from men that marriage is supposed to provide them. Ultimately both prostitute and wife have very little to distinguish between them, as Franceschina very well knows. The ironic parallels between Franceschina and Beatrice that the play draws repeatedly do a lot of work to support Franceschina’s statement that men use and then abuse women, and ultimately cast the play’s happy ending into some doubt. Despite her violence and any comical absurdity her accent lends her, Franceschina’s critiques speak truthfully, and linger even after she has been arrested and led off-stage.

Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* perhaps offers the most radical resistance to whore shaming and the easy comic recovery of the whore in marriage. Despite the verbal abuse that the older men heap on her in 5.2, I contend that the play resists shaming Middleton’s Courtesan for her sexuality. Indeed, when Witgood makes a
single initial attempt to shame the woman he has been having sex with and now intends to
give up in favour of marriage (in the manner of Freevill), the Courtesan immediately
corrects him, using much the same accusation that both Franceschina and Moll voice in
their plays. Witgood immediately replies with contrition:

**Courtesan**  I have been true to your pleasure, and all your
lands thrice racked was never worth the jewel which I
prodigally gave you – my virginity.
Lands mortgaged may return and more esteemed;
But honesty, once pawned, is ne’er redeemed.
**Witgood**  Forgive; I do thee wrong
To make thee sin, and then to chide thee for’t
**Courtesan**  I know I am your loathing now. Farewell.
**Witgood**  Stay, best invention, stay.
**Courtesan**  I that have been the secret consumption of your
purse, shall I stay now to undo your last means, your wits? Hence courtesan,
away!

(1.1.36-47)

While Witgood partly recants his derogatory words to the Courtesan (that she has wasted
his money and wits) because he realises he needs her in order to work his schemes against
his uncle and Hoard, the moment also stresses his dependency on the Courtesan (which
she emphasises by forcing him to apologise several times before she agrees to stay and
help him in his scheme). After this moment Witgood treats her as though she were his
trickster sister-in-arms (as she undoubtedly is). At the end of the scheme both courtesan
and prodigal share in the rewards: Witgood regains his mortgaged lands from his uncle
Lucre, and marries the wealthy Joyce, and the Courtesan marries the equally wealthy
Hoard. Witgood attempts to raise a distinction between courtesans (duplicitous female
criminals) and prodigal-tricksters (duplicitous male criminals), but the Courtesan and the
play itself reject this distinction, forcing Witgood to acknowledge the similarities between
the two figures, and to admit that both have an equal chance at regaining a place in
society through their wits. In fact, the play’s comic plot depends on both dissolves being able to think quickly and discharge their wits equally.\(^{44}\)

But the Courtesan is not Franceschina, angry, volatile, terrifying, and potentially repulsive: her words are as measured as Moll’s at the end of \textit{The Roaring Girl}. Nor is she Moll, however, able to reveal herself as actually chaste. She admits from the first to having sex with Witgood. Witgood does attempt to soothe Hoard by assuring him again that he is the only man with whom she has had sex, and that “Excepting but myself, I dare swear she’s a virgin” (5.2.160-1). The Courtesan herself promises to reform into a chaste wife, arguing that her previous sexual experience actually makes her less likely to cuckold her husband:

She that tastes not sin before, twenty to one but she’ll taste it after. Most of you old men are content to marry young virgins and take that which follows; where, marrying one of us, you both save a sinner, and are quit from a cuckold for ever.

‘And more, in brief, let this your best thoughts win:
She that knows sin, knows best how to hate sin.’

(146-52)

The courtesan’s words do seem to follow the “marry-a-punk” repentant whore plots that Salkeld discusses; however, I wonder if the Courtesan’s words are not tinged with a certain amount of irony. The joke of the play is not just that Hoard is deceived into marrying a whore, but that the Courtesan gains a fortune by doing so. When Witgood advises her to marry Hoard, he does so in terms that describe explicitly what she stands to gain by doing so: “He’s rich in money, moveables, and lands – marry him; \textit{he’s an old}

\(^{44}\) Following Daileader’s convincing argument about Middleton’s plays, I think the juxtaposition invites us to consider why critics have tended to apply more moral judgment to female criminals (and more forgiveness to male criminals). Why can male criminals be easily accepted as dramatic types when female criminals have to be explained?
*doting fool, and that’s worth all* – marry him; ‘twould be a great comfort to me to see thee do well” (3.1.113-15, my emphasis). It’s not only that the Courtesan’s marriage will provide her immediate social and economic comfort, but that he is *old*. Witgood’s coy “and that’s worth all” more than hints at the implication of Hoard’s doting age: he is likely to die at any minute, leaving the Courtesan a wealthy young widow. When the Courtesan vows to remain faithful to her husband, then, even if she is sincere in her promise, she will not have to keep that promise for very long. Once she is a widow she will be free to use both wealth and sexuality however she likes – indeed a running joke in the play is that “widow” is just one more euphemism for “whore”.

Witgood does not marry the Courtesan in the end, and Hoard has to be tricked into marrying her. Such facts suggest that having a prostitute as a marriage partner is still a kind of punishment. Yet part of Hoard’s dismay at discovering he has married a courtesan is learning at the same time that he has *not* married a rich widow. When he learns of the deceit he exclaims “I am cheated” – a word which could refer to being the victim of trickery generally, but it also invokes the spectre of monetary value: he thought he was getting a “widow” (5.2.110) of “four hundred a year” (2.1.55) and finds he has gotten a “Dutch widow” (5.2.108), a penniless prostitute. When the Courtesan responds to his accusations of trickery she points out to him, “I told you true I’d nothing” (141), referring specifically to her supposed wealth.

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45 I am not certain there is any reason to believe that she is necessarily sincere: knowing sin might help one hate sin, but it might also whet one’s appetite for the same, and the Courtesan has already proven that she is more than clever enough to deceive her foolish husband.
Meanwhile, Witgood’s motivations in marrying Joyce Hoard remain almost mysterious. It is difficult to get a sense of their relationship since they never have a conversation with each other in the play: in 3.3 Witgood sends her a letter beginning “Dearer than sight” (15) but the entire missive reaches only four lines, and does not give any sense of what qualities she has about her that are so dear. Joyce herself sheds no further light on the matter (but then she is only in two scenes and speaks seventeen lines in the entire play). We only learn three facts about Joyce over the course of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*: she is the niece of the Hoard brothers; she is an undesirable match, according to Lucre, who does not want to see either his nephew or his stepson marrying the niece of his enemy; and she has a dowry of “a thousand good pound” (1.1.143). It amounts, then, to the simple fact that the Courtesan and Witgood are really in the same economic and social position – a fact which would explain why, despite their affinities, neither seems seriously interested in the other as a marriage prospect. Neither of them can provide the other with economic and financial security. By the logic of comedy they cannot marry each other, because their marriage would be too fragile. Witgood must marry Joyce, the Courtesan must marry Hoard. Witgood’s decision not to marry the Courtesan may have very little to do with shame.

What the play seems to be trying to do is to level the comic playing field between two types of criminal or unruly bodies: and though both tricksters end up married at the end, their delight in their trickery, and their ability to profit from their deceits might lead the audience to question whether their marriages truly reform either courtesan or prodigal. *A Trick to Catch the Old One* seems to be playing with the idea that neither criminality
nor sexual misbehaviour need preclude the possibility of a socially viable marriage, while also suggesting that marriage need not exclude criminality, adultery, lust, greed, or dishonesty. The celebration of the prodigal/prostitute is perhaps not reflective of real attitudes outside the theatre, but I would prefer to understand the play as a thought experiment that imagines a community accepting and forgiving human weaknesses rather than punishing them. The play presents a powerful “what if” (what if women were not harshly judged for having sex?) that imagines the possibility of words like “whore”, “prostitute” and “courtesan” being social descriptors or types for real bodies rather than abusive words laden with misogynist assumptions.

I have been trying to suggest throughout this chapter that this kind of imagining, which is a form of interrogation or scepticism of misogynist social practices like whore shaming, occurs in the other plays in less overtly hopeful forms. Indeed, all four of the women I have discussed here defy comic conventions and representations of whores. Franceschina, rather than being married and redeemed, goes to prison, unrepentant, her criticism lingering in the audience’s ears. Ursula neither repents, nor marries, nor is imprisoned. Her penultimate scene in the play – the argument with Ramping Alice – shows her at her loudest and foulest-mouthed, and yet she is not arrested or put in the stocks. Soon after, she joins in the havoc of the puppet show in act 5, crying for Justice Overdo to stop Troubleall from stealing her pan. Overdo finds himself having to confess that Quarlous, having stolen Troubleall’s clothes and incited the latter’s theft from Ursula to cover his nakedness, is the true “enormity” (5.6.51) – just before Mistress Overdo vomits and the justice is forced to admit his own loss of control over his household.
Presumably Ursula then returns to her booth and her business, serving more customers their pork and ale and prostitutes. Though it goes unsaid, we know that Ursula and her criminal family will return to the fair the following year, up to their same old tricks.

Finally, Moll refuses to marry until men begin to treat their wives justly, and begin to earn the patriarchal power they want to wield over women. Her refusal to marry is rendered palatable because she also has proven to be, and promises to continue to be, actually chaste. At the same time that she capitulates to patriarchy’s demand for sexual chasteness, however, she also refuses to capitulate to all the demands of “proper” and chaste female behaviour. Significantly, she also refuses, at the same time that she defends her right to be disorderly, to bear the name “whore” with all of its negative connotations. Where *A Trick to Catch the Old One* imagines a world where the word whore could be merely descriptive, and *Bartholomew Fair* imagines a world where women can be whores and remain unbowed by the abuse and mockery the word tries to inflict on them, *The Roaring Girl* imagines a world where the word whore might not apply to women who remain unmarried, who dress in men’s clothing, who swear and fight and smoke like men, or who engage in any other socially (though not sexually) unruly behaviour.

All three plays, moreover, make their commentaries by showing the social forces that necessitate prostitution and other unchaste behaviours (poverty and men’s infidelity, willingness to have sex with prostitutes or any available women generally, and failure to protect the chasteness of their own marriages). The plays also suggest that the unchaste women who arise from these social predicaments cannot simply disappear into convenient matrimony. The marriage that comes at the end of comedy is the unrealistic
solution to the problem of the whorish woman: it does not solve the problems that cause prostitution, and it also does not address the violence which “unchaste” women experience in the every day.

The plays I have been discussing also show how verbal violence is complicated to see and read and understand: in the example of the Courtesan from *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, is it an act of violence to call her a whore? Characters like Hoard do attempt to use the word in a shaming way, but the play as a whole, as I have argued, attempts to show that these men perhaps err in thinking the word should necessitate shame. There is nothing wrong with being a courtesan, the play seems to suggest by the end (no more than there is anything wrong with being a widow). In the examples of Franceschina, Ursula, and Moll, however, the word and its synonyms end up carrying a lot of violent force. In the examples I gave above, Freevill, Overdo, and Sir Alexander Wengrave’s use of words like “whore”, “strumpet”, and “quean” are meant to convey disdain and shame. Ursula and Moll are able to repel or withstand the violent blows the word intends to land upon them, Moll by beating Laxton and by refusing sexual advances throughout the play, and Ursula by outwitting Overdo with the help of her criminal network, and by simply outlasting his bombastic efforts to control the fair, persisting with her unchaste, commercial, and criminal ventures.

Because these characters are strong enough to survive the violent verbal abuse they experience does not mean the violence itself disappears or is negated. Critics like Salkeld and López are correct to point out in the at-times horrific court cases and anecdotes they provide involving rape the violence that prostitutes experienced, including
forced prostitution, murder, or imprisonment. We must not forget that prostitution was a criminal profession in early modern England, and its practitioners were both casually and legally reviled. Even though some dramatists, lawyers, and other writers were able to see the social causes of prostitution, and to point out the unjustness of the laws that punished them, their efforts did not altogether do away with commonplace ideas that prostitutes were valueless, deceitful, damned, poisoned, and poisonous. Their efforts did not overturn laws which made the profession of prostitution punitive, laws which deprived prostitutes of rights to work, own property, or receive what social assistance was available. In such circumstances the word “whore” could and did carry a lot of violence – even if in some contexts it could be used jokingly or merely descriptively, and even if women could resist the word, survive it, or critique it.

I have pointed out the ways that the plays I have discussed at length in the second half of this chapter do repeat the violence of whore shaming; however, I have also tried to show the ways that they make verbal violence against women visible. *The Dutch Courtesan* observes that the social environment created by patriarchy often produces situations in which women cannot escape being treated like whores; it also draws attention to the way that male treatment of whores is overly aggressive, violent, and hypocritical; it renders the men who visit and shame whores as potentially appalling as the grotesque and violent prostitute Franceschina, and allows her to voice a complaint about the double standard of gender and sex, a complaint that cannot be entirely silenced by the comedic marriages which conclude the play.
The Roaring Girl disconnects the sexual and the social (behaviours) of women, pointing out the fallacy that the two are inherently linked. Sexual chastity is not the same as social chastity, and the two should not be shamed equally. Moll’s final speech makes the same point that Marston’s play makes: that men turn their wives into whores, and then punish them for it. It also points to the way that the label of whore is often applied over-hastily and incorrectly, and that spurious and spur-of-the-moment shaming can have real and violent consequences for women.

Bartholomew Fair suggests that not all women associated with prostitution are morally corrupt, but, by including prostitution among food, drink, and other fairground pleasures, presents sexuality as a normal – if sometimes grotesque – human appetite, something that provides pleasure; the people who don’t understand and accept this desire (like Justice Overdo), who try to defame, exorcise, and do violence to women connected to sex and the sex trade are often hypocritical and small human beings. The play’s comic energy works against men like Overdo and for women like Ursula.

Finally, A Trick To Catch the Old One suggests that women who are deemed whores often behave no differently from men – who do not suffer this same violence in response to their actions. As in The Dutch Courtesan we might begin to question assumptions that men and women within a comedy or in life outside the theatre ought to be judged differently for sexual promiscuity and disorderly behaviour. The play does not present men as any more worthy of the privilege of exercising sexual or other autonomy or of being allowed to decide what is morally right (in fact, none of these plays allow that easy belief). Middleton’s play posits that men are corrupt, greedy, and dissolute; women
like the Courtesan are greedy, corrupt, and dissolute as well, but this fact is understandable and acceptable. Middleton’s play suggests, clearly and audaciously, that audiences could learn to see comic women in the same way as they do comic men: with forgiveness, admiration, and laughter, rather than with judgment or violence.

**Conclusion**

Although early modern slander laws nominally protected chaste women from whore shaming, as the historical work I discussed in the first half of this chapter reveals, slander charges were difficult to prove, and often resulted in unsatisfying reparations for women since it was more likely that an offended woman’s husband would be considered the “victim” of slander. As we shall see in the following chapter, the same is often true of rape hearings where men are considered the victims of violations to their female “property”.

Plays like *Much Ado About Nothing* suggest that truly chaste women have an almost miraculous or divine protection from slander: even when women like Hero are victims of malicious and erroneous whore shaming, their chastity always reveals itself by the end of the play. But plays like *Othello* reveal that whore shaming can have disastrous and violent consequences. Women who imagine themselves in Desdemona’s place are unlikely to have been entirely comforted by the fact that her chastity is ultimately proven and punishment laid on her slanderer. Similarly, I wonder how many women who experienced whore shaming were entirely comforted by the outcome of a successful slander case. In both instances, however, verbal violence and shaming has already been
inflicted; such violence is not erasable. But when we also account for the seemingly innumerable ways that women could be declared “whorish” – whether for real or imagined sexual or social unruliness – it begins to seem as though all early modern women were always already under suspicion of being a “whorish” woman whose body was perceived as open to further verbal and physical sexual violence. The four plays I consider in the second half of this chapter, however, expose the patterns of sexual violence underlying the overvaluation of chastity and shaming of unchaste women. Each of the plays uses different interrogative strategies, sometime defending prostitution and other expressions of female sexuality as no more criminal than men’s sexuality, sometimes celebrating female bodies in which sexual and social unruliness intersect, sometimes denouncing the men whose sexual appetites encourage sexual “unruliness” in women who become objects of those same men’s humiliation. In making the violence of whore shaming visible – and also making visible the quotidian mechanisms (what we would now call “rape culture”) which enable legal, social, physical, and verbal violence towards prostitutes, unruly, and even chaste women – these plays create the grounds whereby real social problems can be explored and newer social relationships imagined. The voices which begin these plays’ commentaries belong to four admirably unruly women.
Chapter Two

Traumatic comedies: Rape Spectacles in Measure for Measure and Volpone

Introduction

As my reading of the pillaging of Pinnacia in Jonson’s The New Inn intimated, seemingly “innocuous” violences like verbal sexual abuse are often not far from more physical sexual violences. This chapter more explicitly explores the “continuum of sexual violence” in early modern drama and culture (Kelly 46-60; Anderson and Doherty 20), considering how easily recognisable (and recognisably serious) violences like rape are often buttressed by less visible – but no less serious – sexual violences. These violences include coercion, forced marriage, marital rape, and verbal violence, but also the violences embedded in legal scripts (including the hue and cry and conventional rape spectacles) and cultural narratives (including tragedy and comedy) that themselves enable the effacement of women’s experiences of sexual violence.

When early modern tragedy represents the raped body it draws on two defining aspects of laws governing the formal trial and prosecution of rape. First, tragedy presents rape as a spectacular event; that is, both public and legal stages need to transform or translate sexual violence into a readable spectacle in order to notice, discuss, and understand that violence. This spectacle is grounded in (and acted by) a female body.46 Second, despite the female body's embodiment of the spectacle of rape, nevertheless, as

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46 Throughout this chapter I discuss sexual violence and especially rape as a violence done to a female body by a male agent. While I acknowledge that men too can be victims of sexual violence, in this chapter I am drawing specifically from early modern legal processes governing the trial of rape; by the definition of early modern law, rape was a violence that could only occur to women under very narrow circumstances. As Solga notes, “By the time Elizabeth’s reign neared its end, rape was defined by the absence of a woman’s consent to sexual intercourse with any man who was not her husband” (34).
in real legal processes where courts usually tried rape and awarded reparations for sexual violence on behalf of men – the father or husband whose reputation and property (that is, his daughter or wife) is damaged by the rape – rape in tragedy tends to present this spectacle as an catalyst for exploring rape’s personal and political effects on a community of men. In Karen Bamford’s words, “early modern drama most frequently represents sexual violence in terms of its effect on male bonds” (81).

Bamford and Kim Solga both argue that the stage too easily appropriates the spectacle of rape that otherwise might generate pathos for victims of sexual violence on stage and allow the audience to witness the trauma of rape.47 These critics argue that instead of representing female concerns around sexual violence, early modern drama tends to focus on how rape functions within androcentric narratives and relates to male concerns. In her work on the invisibility of sexual violence on the early modern stage, Solga draws connections between the real world process of the hue and cry and staged versions of that process. In the former, a woman’s violated body acts as physical proof of rape or attempted rape, making sexual violence “actionable” (39) so that the male witnesses and judges responding to rape can provide closure that makes sense within a

47 The importance of witnessing, as way of both acknowledging and recovering from the trauma following sexual violence, has been well discussed both by those critics who work in trauma theory generally and those who study sexual violence specifically. As Susan Brison notes, in Aftermath (2002), “Unlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a common shattered world, rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what’s so distressing. ... it’s essential to talk about it, again and again. It’s a way of remastering the trauma, although it can be retraumatizing when people refuse to listen. In my case, each time someone failed to respond I felt as though I were alone again in the ravine, dying, screaming. And still no one could hear me. Or worse, they heard me, but refused to help.” (15-16). Throughout this chapter I think of the ways that witnessing serves both a legal function and a means of facilitating recovery – a first step of which is audiences and critics learning to see and hear sexual violence in early modern drama as violence. This process necessitates viewing women on stage not merely as symbols of purity or chastity, but as characters with potential subjectivities in their own right.
patriarchal legal system. Drama similarly reduces the violated body to a symbol that allows the audience to feel like it “gets” the trauma of rape. Ultimately, Solga and Bamford explore the ways that tragedies resist the processes of appropriation and reduction, and look for the possibilities by which the stage can represent rape in such a way that the audience is invited to pay closer attention to the experience of the victim. This chapter is indebted to their work, which, along with rape trauma theorists like Susan Brison, has informed much of my thinking about rape spectacles on stage and their connection to and comment upon the early modern judicial practices that sought to resolve sexual violence. My contention is that while both comedic structure and comic tropes often seem at odds with serious explorations of sexual violence – wanting to cover up moments of sexual violence and to banish rape from the stage in order to preserve the generic structure and mood of the play – *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *Volpone* (1606) are two comedies that locate problems of sexual violence at the heart of each play. These comedies represent spectacles of rape and sexual violence unconventionally and, consequently, interrogate the ways that comic tropes normalise violence, critique the processes by which rape is tried, and broaden definitions of sexual violence beyond simply rape/attempted rape. They invite the audience to pay greater attention to the psychological and emotional experiences of the victim, and present sexual violence as a kind of trauma that resists appropriation and (legal or dramatic) closure.

Before moving on, I should re-emphasise an argument I make in my introduction and that I will elaborate on momentarily: I read tragedy as a genre complicit in the

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48 As Solga argues concerning Sonia Ritter’s Lavinia in Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (56). See discussion on pages 127-8 below.
appropriation (and mockery) of the rape spectacle and female experience of rape and rape
trauma. I think Bamford’s analysis of a series of Jacobean plays dealing with sexual
violence nicely shows this complicity, and I will offer two or three examples below as a
way of demonstrating that point. In contrast, I see comedy as less able to absorb
completely female experiences of sexual violence – perhaps because sexual violence is
inherently troubling and jostles against comedy’s emphasis on restoring communities and
its use of comic tropes to incite laughter. Bamford’s readings, along with Solga’s, and Ian
Donaldson’s work on the Lucretia story, remain ever-present in my mind as I consider
both how comedy works to resolve the spectacle of rape and the different ways that
tragedy and comedy, respectively, close off and return to female subjectivity regarding
sexual violence – as well as the ways that sexual violence sometimes works with and
sometimes disrupts generic narrative trajectory.

Rape Scripts in Early Modern Law
Solga’s work has been invaluable in framing my understanding of how drama responds to
and reiterates the legal processes that handled sexual violence in a real-world context.
This understanding has aided me considerably in thinking through the ways that comedies
like Measure for Measure and Volpone at once repeat but also differ from patterns of
representing sexual violence in both early modern law and tragedy. One of the central
tenets of Solga’s work is that even in “early modern culture” outside the theatre, raped
women become “actors in a theatre of trauma” in which they rehearse the telling of their
rape in a way that follows familiar rape scripts.\textsuperscript{49} This familiar rehearsal begins with the hue and cry, a process that involves the rape victim making a spectacle of her violated body, as the Glanvill treatise’s description of the process of hue and cry prescribes: “A woman who suffers [rape] ... must go ... to the nearest vill and there show trustworthy men the injury done to her, and any effusion of blood there may be and any tearing of her clothes” (36). Solga describes this “rehearsal of rape” as a “social good” (30) because it is ultimately designed to seek redress for the violence that the rape victim has experienced. But she also notes that the performance primarily takes place for the benefit of male witnesses, in order that they will be able to make sense of the event in the terms of communal and legal justice.\textsuperscript{50} That is, the spectacle of the hue and cry “is designed expressly to translate rape’s meaning, its suffering, and its cultural import from the sphere of a traumatized woman’s body into the space of the male public sphere” (30). In so doing, the legal process inadvertently closes off the experience of the female victim, refusing to work through what sexual violence may mean personally to her, or to consider the difficult question of how an individual or community might redress the emotional and psychological wounds rape causes a victim. The hue and cry may be a “social good”, but it is also limited in its capacity to truly “witness” the event told from the perspective of the victim.

Of course, Solga is not claiming that male witnesses and judges representing the law automatically and consciously try to make the rape into a matter affecting patriarchal

\textsuperscript{49} “The performance’s “efficacy derives from the fact that ... it is not meant to be new at all” (30).  
\textsuperscript{50} As Solga points out in her readings of various medieval and early modern legal treatises on rape, women are supposed to cry to the “trustworthy men” (36), or the “men of good repute” (37), as well as “the reeve” (36), “the king’s serjeant, the coroners and the sheriff” (37), all positions likely to be filled by men.
power only, or that these men deliberately try to wrest the meaning of rape away from female subjectivity; however, because a patriarchal institution (the law) is responsible for acting as witness and resolving the violence done to a rape victim, and because that same institution is always already laden with latent misogyny (the kind of misogyny that, for example, suspects women might be complicit in their rapes, and therefore needs to “absolve the victim of any potential complicity”, 31), and because that institution is located within a culture that inherently privileges male experience over female, a woman’s experience of rape trauma and its personal significance is almost inevitably and automatically lost.

Within the process of the hue and cry, Solga argues, bruises and blood become signifiers not of personal suffering, but of the marks of violence proving that a father or husband has experienced a violation of his property and honour. As I discussed in my introduction, the bruises and blood a woman shows in the hue and cry also “regist[e] as proof of chaste intention” (39), confirming, then, that a wife or daughter did not in fact consent to the violation, and that the violation was therefore the fault of another man. This demand that a woman prove her chastity by the same spectacle that ultimately allows men to take legal action (or, in most tragedies, revenge) against another man is, of course, additionally disturbing in its reproduction of the familiar humiliating doubt of a rape victim’s claim – she cannot simply ask for justice for the traumatising violation she has experienced, but must first prove that she is not lying about that experience – and must do so in order to console the men in her life that she has not wilfully humiliated them. Thus Solga concludes that in the process of allaying male fears that one’s wife or daughter may
have been complicit in the violation of the chastity, a “woman’s psychic and social trauma” somehow “goes missing” (39) as she is forced to care more about proving her attempts to defend her chastity than about obtaining a sense of security, dignity, and self following an act of sexual violence.51

Overall, Solga argues, the social and legal scripts governing rape in early modern England did not have space to account for the female experience of rape. Instead, legal and cultural scripts concerning rape victims were designed to bring closure to a violent event for the men affected by that violence, but not necessarily for the rape victim herself on her own terms. Tragedy similarly brings closure to the event of rape in such a way that male concerns about sexual violence are addressed at the expense of female ones. This closure might come in the form of a woman enacting the hue and cry, just as raped women were expected to in the world outside the theatre. Solga offers a compelling example in her reading of Titus Andronicus, when she notes regarding the men’s reaction to Lavinia’s violated body: “Lucius’s anxious question (on 3.1.88) isn’t ‘what happened to Lavinia?’ but rather ‘who did this to Lavinia?’ – until the latter is answered the former is of little matter to anyone. This is the problem that the hue and cry is meant to address” (46-7). The spectacle of rape, although brutal and obvious, cannot have any meaning for the men in the play until they have a male political enemy to pursue. The script of raising

51 Laws and legal processes concerning rape therefore privilege male anxieties about rape over female ones. They also privilege, as Solga notes, visible physical violence which almost entirely “carries the burden of proof in the telling of rape” (37), discounting experience of sexual violence that leave no physical evidence, including coerced sex and marital rape. Finally, early modern laws on rape privilege immediate over delayed justice: the raped woman has to show her wounds and blood while they are still visible. Moreover, a woman who delays telling about her rape is likely to have her case dismissed due to lack of evidence; she is also likely to face charges of false accusation (38). But the imperative for immediate reporting leaves no room for the psychological damage or the trauma rape can inflict (which can take months or years for an individual victim to process).
the hue and cry is the necessary prelude to male action that “makes sense of” and clears up the effects of rape. As we shall see, however, early modern comedies are not able to deploy these scripts unproblematically – nor are they able to entirely foreclose female subjectivity in response to sexual violence.

**Hostility to Women: Jacobean and Caroline Rape Narratives**

Donaldson and Bamford trace an additional disturbing trend in Jacobean drama’s responses to rape: not only is the rape of a woman often reduced to its symbolic meaning in narratives about men, but often rape victims become targets of cynical interrogation, disgust, or mockery. A misogynist repulsion for the rape victim is visible in the way that rape is often represented as a kind of “pollution”. In Donaldson’s reading of the story, Lucrece’s violated body is a symbol of the evils of the old republic. Lucrece herself must ultimately commit suicide to provide a kind of symbolic cleansing: she “fears that her blood has been tainted by Tarquin’s rape, and sheds her own blood as a consequence and recompense” (135). Donaldson suggests that Lucretia’s suicide clears the state from the hint of any sexual guilt or moral “pollution” (23) – even if that pollution is inflicted upon her unwillingly.\(^{52}\) Even in narratives that accept that Lucrece was unwilling to have sex with Tarquin, she symbolically takes the blame for Tarquin’s staining presence into herself. Ironically, though, as Donaldson points out, her suicide conflicts with later Christian notions of suicide as a sin of despair, and may even cast doubt on Lucrece’s

\(^{52}\) “In a society in which a woman is regarded as subordinate and property of her husband, her rape, even if she resisted and detested it, may seem to bring disgrace upon her, but – more importantly, upon her husband. The woman kills herself rather in the same spirit in which a junior minister, innocently caught up in a public scandal, might resign rather than bring down his prime minister and government” (Donaldson 11).
sexual purity: “One common speculation was that Lucretia killed herself because she had not been able totally to suppress all feelings of pleasure when Tarquin raped her” (36). Thus Lucrece is never able to wholly escape victim blaming and shaming for the act that so conveniently enables the men of Rome to prove their masculine honour.

Donaldson lays out an idea that is also the crux of Bamford’s readings of the increasingly cynical responses to rape victims over the history of Jacobean drama: that women are always complicit in their rapes on some level. In the Jacobean period, Bamford argues, representations of raped women become more “sinister” (81), often casting the blame for the ruin of the state onto the rape victims themselves, or revealing their deaths following rape (both as a means of proving their chastity and as means of signalling their sense of violation) to be pointless since men are concerned with neither women’s violations nor with seeking justice on the victim’s behalf. Many plays also eroticise the rape scene, but simultaneously present female sexuality as something “fearful, potentially demonic” (69). Such representations thus cast doubt on even the most chaste women: if women are inherently sexual, if their beauty incites men to rape, then how chaste are they? They must on some level desire rape. (As we shall see, this argument also reappears in Celia’s appeal to Volpone).

For example, in Heywood’s dramatic version of the Lucrece story, Bamford argues, Lucrece’s rape continues to function as the catalysing event, but Heywood’s play “deprives Lucrece of her traditional glory: her death does not empower the Romans in the same way. ... Brutus upstages Lucrece; his heroism owes nothing to hers, his sword symbolizes the Romans’ renewed virility. Lucrece’s suicide is almost irrelevant” (73). In
addition to removing even more of Lucrece’s agency in response to her rape, Heywood’s play presents the violence as a matter to be laughed at when it parodies the event in the Clown’s song which “reenacts the rape in a jocular context. ... We are invited to laugh about the rape: It becomes, temporarily, a comic seduction, a humorous exploit” (73). Here Bamford is following Donaldson’s argument that to laugh at a rape is depoliticise and trivialise it. Thus the play further alienates Lucrece from the personal significance of her own rape trauma, first presenting it primarily as a political event effecting patriarchal rule and then laughing at it as if to say it does not matter at all.

Bamford, however, primarily examines tragedies, which (I argue) explains the success with which the plays she offers as case studies attempt to appropriate and trivialise rape and to silence and/or denigrate rape victims. A crucial point of this chapter is that non-tragic genres, as Bamford herself observes when she turns her attention to plays like Cymbeline (c.1609/10), are less able to absorb rape into their generic structures.\(^53\) Bamford’s analysis of Shakespeare’s romance notices an important structural distinction between tragedy and comedy (or romance) when it comes to rape: rape can define the structure of tragedy, but threaten the structure of other genres.\(^54\) My own reading of how laughter works in both the courtroom scenes in Volpone and the hearing

\(^{53}\) Bamford positions Shakespeare’s romance as lying somewhere between tragedy and comedy. Innogen is only metaphorically raped in Cymbeline because an actual rape would necessitate that the narrative follow the plot of Lucrece to its paradigmatic conclusion: “Imogen would have to die – either by her own hand or another’s”. Because she is not actually raped, Innogen’s chastity and the romance’s happy ending are preserved – and the audience gets to enjoy the eroticism of the “not rape” while avoiding ethical quandaries and generic (88).

\(^{54}\) This distinction is also very important in understanding why comedies like Measure for Measure and Volpone represent sexual violence in forms that invoke the conventional rape spectacle, but which do not exactly meet our expectations of what sexual violence “looks like”, as I will go on to discuss in the second half of this chapter.
on behalf of Elbow’s wife in *Measure for Measure* shows that laughter can work to trivialise and obfuscate rape but it can also work to expose the unjustness of legal mechanisms and generic structures that attempt to close out the female experience of sexual violence. This exposure works particularly cuttingly in comedy where sexual violence can disrupt our notions of comedy’s “happy” ending. In a tragedy like Heywood’s *Rape of Lucrece*, however, even the comic works with the tragedy’s appropriation of Lucrece’s rape; the parody offers a crude form of comic relief that trivialises sexual violence before the play returns its attention to the serious business of “repairing” the rape through Brutus’s vengeance. The play does not, as I will argue *Measure for Measure* does, invite us to think about how tragedy encodes sexual violence within its generic structure that seems to promise closure for the problem of rape. Instead, as Bamford astutely argues, the play itself ends by re-emphasising “male bonding” and “male heroism” and “It is with this glorification of male heroism, rather than the vindication of female integrity, that the weight of the play finally lies” (74).

Bamford’s reading of Heywood’s tragedy suggests the extent to which tragedy is able to foreclose female subjectivity from its narrative. We are invited to celebrate the restoration of male honour and to think about the costs of that honour to dead rape victims like Lucrece. John Webster’s *Appius and Virginia* follows a similar pattern of disempowering a female rape victim, this time by silencing her voice altogether: “the focus is not on the daughter’s suffering, but on the father’s. Webster exploits the pathos of his grief in the death scene. Indeed, after Virginia’s prophetic rebuke to Appius ... she is silent for almost 200 lines ... before dying without a word” (76). As in Heywood’s
"Lucrece" “the heroine’s death recedes in importance before the male bonding that it provokes” (77). I would suggest that the silence a woman experiences on stage following rape, however, has the potential to be indicative of trauma that makes putting one’s experience into words – making sense of the event in an ordered narrative – seem overwhelming and impossible. Celia too, as I will argue, has difficulty speaking following Volpone’s attempted rape. The problem is that when the silence is immediately taken up by male voices (as it is in Appius and Virginia and Volpone), we are distracted from truly paying attention to that silence and what it might mean for the female victim. In Webster’s tragedy, however, the play itself is primarily concerned with the actions of the men who are capable of speaking over Virginia’s silence, and never draws our attention back towards her; Volpone, by contrast, invites us to pay attention to Celia’s state of mind to a greater degree.

_Hengist, King of Kent_ (c.1619-20), to offer a third and final example from Bamford’s work, provides a “parody” of rape narratives (111-12) in which both the rape and the secondary public humiliation of the chaste Castiza are ultimately pointless acts which lead to no narrative closure or restitution of the political state. Despite the earnestness with which Castiza, like Lucrece, internalises the importance of chastity (114), the rape of Castiza itself becomes an entertaining piece of meta-theatre as “We are directed away from empathy with the victim to admiration of the technical skill of the plotters” (115). Castiza’s death is a pointless gesture in a dramatic framework that cares less about women’s suffering than about men’s ingenuity, and rape is nothing more than an entertaining script, artfully played out.
The narrative Bamford outlines reveals that the imperative that women protect their chastity and follow rape scripts not only positions women’s experiences of rape as secondary to men’s concerns but also that victims’ attempts to prove their chastity are often futile: men like Hengist’s Vortiger can easily reinterpret the signs of the raped body to blame the victim, while men like Titus and Collatine reinterpret the same signs to have personal meaning for themselves rather than for their daughter and wife – the former negates the efficacy of the hue and cry, while the latter results in even an efficacious performance of the rape spectacle providing little justice for the victims, and still failing to protect them from death. And even dying does not necessarily prove a rape victim’s chastity, as Lucrece’s does not. Women watching these plays may have questioned whether the ability to prove one’s chastity is really worth dying for; they may also have wondered whether and why their primary concern following a rape would be the impulse to prove their chastity – or why the men in the play seem more concerned with their own suffering rather than that of direct victims of sexual violence like Castiza and Lavinia. Performing the script correctly becomes a high-stakes game for women both on and off the stage: if they fail they lose social respectability and earn legal punishments as well as humiliation and mockery. But if they succeed then they do not seem to gain much, since it is the husband or father who receives reparations in real life, and heroic glory in the plays.

Problematically, however, we also know that rape rarely follows the conventional scripts: Volpone and Measure for Measure show multiple instances of sexual violence, none of which match up to what rape treatises describe rape as “looking like”. Plays like
*Measure for Measure* and *Volpone* also invite us to start seeing and thinking about sexual violence from a female perspective, rather than an experience that only has meaning within a patriarchal narrative. Rather than celebrate the men who terrorise, laugh at, demean, and silence victims, these plays invite us to pay attention to the experiences of victims of sexual violence, and to how patriarchal structures try to efface those experiences with inadequate (generic or legal) “resolutions”.

**The Impossible Representation of Rape Trauma**

Donaldson, Bamford, Solga all argue for the way that dramatic representations of rape make the female experience of rape vanish, or represent their concerns and trauma as secondary. Solga’s book, however, considers not only the way that plays that make the female experience of rape “disappear” from the stage (15), but also how recent productions have been working to draw our attention back to it, to consider what happens to the female experience of rape. Her discussion of how to represent rape ethically on stage has greatly influenced my readings of comedy by prompting me to think about how sexual violence may already have a presence on stage that we as critics have tended to ignore by only approaching rape through inherited rape myths and through limited conventional understandings of what rape “looks like”.

There are at least two immediate obstacles to representing the experience of rape ethically on stage. The first complication is that the trauma of rape goes well beyond the moment of the act itself. Representing rape ethically means accounting for trauma that lasts beyond the witnessable act itself: but how can we possibly stage a thing we cannot
see? How do we witness a violence when that violence is mostly invisible? The second problem, as I suggested in the close of the previous section, is one of presentism: as contemporary critics and audiences, we too have scripts for reading a raped body, and for “understanding” what that experience must mean for women. We, too, deploy these scripts inadvertently for the greater “social good” of attempting to recognise, sympathise, and take action against an injustice. So, for example, Solga argues that Deborah Warner’s 1987 production of *Titus* tried to focus on both Lavinia’s pain and “the disconnect between Lavinia’s experience of her trauma and her family’s understanding of it” (51-2).

The intent seemed to be to invite the audience to acknowledge her pain and to sympathise with it, at the same time that it tried to reveal the men’s complete disregard of her pain. But the performance, according to Solga, risked making Lavinia’s experience of rape overdetermined. The audience, from their privileged position, watching the men disregard Lavinia’s trauma, was invited to feel as though it “got” the rape (56). The very act of trying to make invisible rape trauma visible trivialised the experience of rape trauma, making it easily comprehensible, when the main crux of trauma is that it is an experience that resists communicability – it is a wound beyond the representable and understandable. So if we feel like we “get” trauma, we have in fact failed to understand it completely.

Moreover, if we think we “get” Lavinia’s pain, we may in fact stop paying attention to it, leaving her with no audience to which she can articulate her experience (a position which Brison identifies as feeling like experiencing the violence and fear of rape all over again, 16). This invitation to “understand” the experience of rape, Solga argues, does not invite us to consider at length the disorienting psychological confusion of rape trauma. Ritter’s
performance, like all scripts that offer to make sense of rape in a legal or social context, failed to understand that rape trauma is not a thing that can be made sense of with a single script made easily recognisable through repeated rehearsals. In contrast, Solga sees Julie Taymor’s 1999 film production as productively resistive to rehearsing a recognisable script, instead inviting the audience to witness Lavinia’s disoriented performance of rape’s traumatic aftermath (59-61). I argue that Measure for Measure and Volpone also gesture towards rape trauma by representing it as something that early modern hue and cry rape scripts cannot resolve (particularly when these are, as the plays critique, extremely inefficacious in responding to sexual violence), nor can it be resolved by convenient narrative conclusions. These comedies depict rape trauma in a less overt way than Taymor’s Titus, but they still work to resist our expectations of what rape “looks like”, and the frames through which we read and understand rape.

However successful they are in practice, feminist performances and readings of women like Lucrece and Lavinia are important precisely because they ask us to see how narrative closure often fails to adequately consider female subjectivity in regards to rape. When we begin considering questions like “what is Lavinia feeling after her rape, or moments before her death?”, or “is Titus morally right to kill Lavinia?” (rather than just viewing her rape and death as foregone conclusions of the “classical [rape] paradigm” of a masculinist tragedy, Bamford 61), then we begin to cast doubt on the necessity of this kind of narrative, on its costs to women – particularly, how such narratives normalise rape as an everyday violence women must endure. Perhaps we also pay greater attention to the
fact that tragic resolutions do not necessarily resolve the sexual violence experienced by the narrative catalyst.

Although tragedy might lend itself to such feminist interpretations, it also has many limitations in its ability to critique sexual violence – limitations that I argue are the product of its generic structure. The first problem is a counter-intuitive one: the ease with which tragedy can represent rape spectacles on stage in an almost unremarkable fashion. Audiences of a tragedy expect blood, violation, and death because these events are entirely in keeping with the tragic tone/mode. When a rape spectacle is presented in a play like Titus, containing so many other spectacular corpses and hewn limbs, the violence risks losing its edge, becoming unsurprising and dull. Even when the violence is spectacular, we expect it to occur in tragedy, and so its presence is almost automatically normalised (of course there is a violated body in Titus). By contrast, such a spectacle in comedy – and indeed even the very topic of sexual violence – is inherently troubling. When Volpone suddenly moves to rape Celia, any laughter we previously enjoyed suddenly becomes very uncomfortable. What, we may ask, is a rape doing in a comedy?

I am not claiming that tragedy cannot interrogate the rape scripts it deploys. (Bamford and Solga have identified many representations of rape that trouble conventional rape narratives). Nor am I claiming that comedy cannot find ways of representing, covering over, and distracting from sexual violence – or laughing at it. Indeed, my project is engaged in revealing the ways that comedy normalises sexual violence such that we can laugh at misogynist jokes or tropes that encode sexual violence almost without thinking. But comedy is also able to deploy sexual violence in
uncomfortable ways that call the very structure of comedy and its tropes into question. *Measure for Measure* and *Volpone* do precisely this: emphasising sexual violence just enough that our gaze is drawn towards it and we are invited to ask the uncomfortable questions. When sexual violence occurs in comedies like *Volpone* and *Measure for Measure*, the endings may be nominally comic, but have tended to leave critics with a deep sense of unease.

Additionally, because tragedy can represent sexual violence in a clear and recognisable form without an immediate threat of disrupting its generic frame, it is perhaps less able to explore the spectrum of sexual violence. When tragedy wants to really draw attention to sexual violence it tends to heighten already-familiar representations of rape. Hence, Titus offers a version of an already familiar rape victim, Philomela, in a heightened form: Lavinia loses her hands as well as her tongue following the rape. But in order to preserve their comic frames comedies like *Measure for Measure* and *Volpone* must represent sexual violence in more palatable forms: coercion, almost rape, or rapes that are talked about in disguised ways as in the case of Mistress Elbow. The risk, of course, is that because they do not match up with conventional rape scripts the sexual violences will fail to be recognised; characters within the play and critics alike might refuse to acknowledge they ever happened. But Shakespeare and Jonson’s plays, I argue, point very emphatically to these violences as violences that the audience must witness, and as a result, we are invited to acknowledge and think about sexual violence in ways beyond the conventional rape spectacle.
Rape and Comedy: Incompatible Narratives?

The rest of this chapter explores what happens when the spectacle of the raped body appears in comedy. How does comedy attempt to control audience reactions to it (the way we witness or read that body)? How does the raped body disrupt narratives of closure that try to close off female subjectivity? What disturbing questions does this body raise about justice, generic structure, and the everyday sexual violence women experience? Measure for Measure and Volpone are two comedies in which sexual violence is at the heart of the play’s dramatic problems. Yet because this violence is not rape in its most recognisable form – and because the play articulates some episodes of sexual violence through comic tropes – there has been less attention in both criticism and in performances of both plays to the problem of sexual violence than to other problems that the plays present. For example, in the rather large body of criticism on Measure for Measure, the bulk of attention has been to topics such as religion (particularly Catholicism and Reformation politics),\(^{55}\) justice, ethics, and knowledge,\(^{56}\) political theology,\(^{57}\) politics, kingship, and


government,58 legal concerns,59 as well as performance and textual history. The articles referred to here provide a representative (though by no means complete) sample of the major trends in Measure for Measure criticism in the last ten years (2003-13). What we can note is that questions concerning politics, ethics, and morality continue to dominate work on the play – a fact that makes sense given that the play is so centrally concerned with the question of political power and corruption. But sexual violence is also a central concern of the play. A number of articles do consider sex and its relation to politics – indeed, criticism from the 1980s and 1990s tended to take a much more overtly feminist approach, considering problems of marriage, patriarchal control (particularly Angelo and the Duke’s manipulation of women like Isabella), women’s role as property, and Isabella’s decision not to save her brother and her silence in response to the Duke’s marriage proposal in 5.1; however, there have been considerably fewer considerations of sexual violence as a central topic, and fewer that take on the problem of rape directly.60 A

57 Eric V. Spencer “Scaling the Deputy: Equity and Mercy in Measure for Measure” (2012); Debora Shuger, Political Theologies in Shakespeare’s England: The Sacred and the State in Measure for Measure; Jonathan Goossen, “‘Tis Set Down So in Heaven” (2012); James A. Knapp, “Penitential Ethics in Measure for Measure” (2011); Sarah Beckwith, “Medieval Penance, Reformation Repentance and Measure for Measure” (2007); Maurice Hunt, “Being Precise in Measure for Measure” (2006); Stacy Magedanz, “Public Justice and Private Mercy in Measure for Measure” (2004); and James Ellison, Measure for Measure and the Execution of Catholics in 1664” (2003).
60 Among prominent recent articles that do explore problems of sexual violence more directly, particularly in relation to women include Kathryn Schwarz, “‘Twixt Will and Will Not’: Chastity and Fracture in
similar trend occurs in *Volpone* criticism: critics have tended to pay much attention to legal elements of the play, the representation of Venice, the play’s metatheatrical elements and reflections on Jonson’s experience of writing for the public stage, aesthetic, erotic, and moral concerns, the Gunpowder Plot, the play’s classical, contemporary, and historical sources, tricksterism, genre, and cuckoldry (as previously outlined in the chapter on cuckold plots). The criticism has paid little extended attention to Celia and the problem of sexual violence, with the notable exceptions of Martin Andrew’s “‘Cut so Like [Her] Character’: Preconstructing Celia in *Volpone*” (1996), Howard Marchitell’s “Desire and Domination in *Volpone*” (1991), and Charles Hallet’s “Jonson’s Celia: A Reinterpretation of *Volpone*” (1971). This dearth of attention...
has, I suspect, much to do with the fact that comedy does represent sexual violence in oblique ways that are covered over by comic tropes, and so the scope of the sexual violence in both plays is not always immediately noticeable. I will ultimately assert, however, that the plays also do a lot of work to challenge these tropes, and ask us to think about what we are really laughing at when we laugh at certain comic conventions.

In some ways the lack of overt attention to the problem of sexual violence is understandable because the plays present many obstacles to recognising the victims of sexual violence as violated bodies. Even before we encounter these impediments we have to overcome the problem that Donaldson and Bamford diagnose in tragedies like *Titus Andronicus* where violated female bodies are almost instantly appropriated – both by the men of the play and by critics – as symptoms of disruptions to masculine authority. This inattention is most noticeable in the dearth of critical responses to the hearing on behalf of Elbow’s wife in 2.1 of *Measure for Measure*. When critics mention this scene at all, they tend to focus on Pompey, Angelo, Elbow, and Escalus (the men in the scene), and their attitudes towards law or justice. The scene opens with Escalus and Angelo’s debate about how law and mercy ought to operate – a debate which invites reading the following episode (in which Elbow brings Pompey and Froth in front of the acting magistrates Angelo and Escalus in order that they may judge his wife’s complaint of sexual violence), as an ironic commentary on the practical application – and mishandling – of justice and mercy. Frequently critics use the scene as a mode of commenting on Angelo’s

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69 The scene is one of the least-commented upon in criticism on the play, often referred to only in passing if at all, and also often cut in production, as Edward L. Rocklin, citing George Odell’s theatrical history of the play, notes (230-1).
abandonment of the hearing part way through, due simply to impatience: “This will last out a night in Russia, / Where nights are longest. [To Escalus] I’ll take my leave” (122-3). His abandonment of a case concerning possible sexual crimes by the ill-reputed tapster – a title Escalus himself acknowledges is a cover for being “partly a bawd” (196) – and his customer because that case is tiresome is a clear foreshadowing of his hypocrisy regarding sexual crimes later in the play. In contrast many critics argue that the scene’s chief purpose is to showcase Escalus as a true moderate of justice – neither too lax, like the Duke, nor too strict, like Angelo. True to his earlier advocation for mercy for sexual criminals, Escalus allows Froth and Pompey to escape unpunished – though with the warning that he will make good on Angelo’s earlier promise – that is to have Pompey “whipped” next time the tapster offends (223). But the act of mercy seems unjust, thoughtless, and ill-bestowed if Mistress Elbow is, as I believe she is, the victim of attempted rape or rape – a fact which most critics fail to comment upon.70 Instead Escalus

70 For example, Joanna Altieri argues that “Escalus is the character who speaks and acts for melioration” who bridges ideal (which Angelo and Isabella live by) and “reality” (15). Andrea Cilotta-Rubery argues that “Escalus ... remind[s] us of how power ought to be handled [and] makes us feel uncomfortable with how it is used by others” (particularly Angelo) (95). She characterises the confrontation between Pompey and Elbow in 2.1 as a difficult “’he said, she said’ situation” (94) that Escalus resolves with equal fairness to both parties (Altieri does not discuss Mistress Elbow or the possibility of sexual violence at all, however, in her description of the trial’s “resolution”). Other critics who read the scene as a way of commenting on Angelo and Escalus’s rule include Gordon Ross Smith, who argues that the scene is a vehicle for satire, central to which is Elbow, whose malapropisms highlight the way that “the demigods of authority” (again, particularly Angelo) have made “travesties of justice” (75). Martha Widmayer, who begins “Mistress Overdone’s House” by also noting the dearth of critical attention to 1.2 and 2.1 (181), does an extended reading of these scenes as a way of understanding how the alehouse allows Shakespeare to present a complicated critique of the court and communal corruption generally. She does not at all discuss Mistress Elbow however; sexual violence is in fact absent from the list of “small-scale” crimes Pompey and Mistress Overdone are involved in at the alehouse (188-9). Mario DiGangi, who does focus on Mistress Elbow as way of critiquing male authority in the play, suggests that she is a threatening figure because she is an “emblem of ... dangerous [female] desire” (590) that cannot be controlled even in marriage. Thus even in the rare instances when critics do look directly at Mistress Elbow in 2.1, rather than reading the scene as a commentary of male rule, they do not necessarily consider how she fits in with the general theme of sexual violence in the play. DiGangi does note that the play represents women with a degree of sexual autonomy
begins the motions to have the position of constable stripped from Elbow himself – a man who, while admittedly incompetent at his job, is the only person in the scene who seems concerned about the fact that Mistress Overdone’s brothel is all too willing to press non-consenting women into service.\textsuperscript{71} Mistress Elbow herself is first reduced to a joke and then all but forgotten as the scene begins and ends by focusing most clearly on the characters, judgments, and hypocrisy of the four men. Judging by the way criticism has handled the scene, she \textit{almost} seems to be invoked merely as a convenient plot device by which Escalus’s ideas of mercy can be tested and Angelo’s hypocrisy can reveal itself – as well as being a medium for easy laughs. Thus the violence she experiences is trivialised and mocked at the same time that the play (or perhaps the play’s critics) appropriates the experience of rape to make meaning for the men in charge of Vienna’s state.

Again, I do not claim that these questions of failed justice or hypocrisy are unimportant or even unrelated to the problem that Angelo and Escalus fail to address seriously the violence done to Mistress Elbow – indeed, the two problems are intrinsically

\textsuperscript{71} Altieri, reviewing Shakespeare’s comic constables, argues that Shakespeare realised the comic constable has no place in \textit{Measure for Measure}, “a playworld where law is truly at stake” (16). But Phoebe S. Spinrad (who similarly reads the scene as a critique of the Viennese court’s ability to deliver justice, proposing Elbow as the active antithesis of the theoretically-operative but ultimately inactive Angelo and Escalus) notes that he is at least able to “break up whatever it is that is happening in Pompey’s alehouse” in 2.1 and to later “bring Pompey to justice ... on charges that apparently stick” even if ultimately he cannot bring Pompey in on charges of rape successfully (161).
related. My concern is that, critically, both the violence and the lack of redress that Mistress Elbow experiences have gone almost uncommented upon in favour of thinking about the play’s concern with the failure of justice as delivered by men like Duke Vincentio and Angelo. Alternatively critics are concerned with the way that the play’s ideas of justice intersect with sex and desire and are undergirded by theological and political philosophies written by men. Deborah Shuger’s monograph on the play, as an example, adopts the position that the play’s concern with sexual behaviour is really one more aspect of politics; such criticism is thus not primarily concerned with the problem of sexual violence as sexual violence. I do not dispute that matters of sex and sexual violence have political meaning in *Measure for Measure*, but my concern is that sex and sexual violence are often considered secondary to matters of state and religious politics and are often read for the meaning that the play’s treatment of sex and sexual violence can shed on (androcentric) legal, political, and religious institutions. I think there is also much to be gained in thinking about what sexual violence means when we consider it primarily as an act of sexual violence, and thinking about what that violence means for the women who experience it. That is, I want to consider sexual violence not only as a

72 Shuger’s book reads *Measure for Measure* as a “meditation on its ... political moment” (1); she does not argue that the play is not also about sexual violence, but her main concern – as with many critics – is the way that the play takes up political matters, to the extent that it can act as a “basis for rethinking English politics and political thought circa 1600”. Shuger’s reading of the play, however, harnesses sexual violence to political meaning: the play announces to her, “I am about equity, justice, pardons, about sexual regulation, sacral kingship, the enforcement of good faith promises, about what to do with unrepentant felons and discarded whores, the inseparability of private morals from public justice, and above all, about the relation of the sacred to the state. These are political issues” (2).

Again, I should emphasise that Shuger’s book is in no way alone in its tendency to focus on androcentric politics – it simply happens to provide a convenient and extended example of this kind of argument.
symptom of bad (male) rule, but also as a full and lived reality for women with lasting emotional and psychological consequences.

We might find the centrality of sexual violence in both Measure for Measure and Volpone easier to acknowledge if the bodies experiencing that violence appeared on stage in the easily recognisable form which the hue and cry outlines. But neither play presents such a body: Mistress Elbow does not appear on stage, and Isabella and Celia ultimately escape the coercion and rape, respectively, with which Angelo and Volpone threaten them. The consequences of a woman’s escape from rape are perhaps clearest in the avocatori’s response to Celia and Bonario’s claims in the trial in act 4 of Volpone. Because the pair are presenting an attempted rape “only”, they have no visible physical evidence of the crime. The avocatori are left with only verbal accounts as evidence and when Celia and Bonario are unable to speak convincingly (and conversely, when Voltore, Mosca, Corbaccio, and Lady Would-be have no difficulty speaking in court), the avocatori are unable to recognise and recriminate the violence against Celia. Indeed, because she lacks any clear and obvious visible proof of her story, not only does Voltore’s testimony render her accusation false, but the lawyer and the rest of the characters accuse Celia herself of being sexually promiscuous with Bonario and of crying rape as means of covering up her sexual desires:

This lewd woman [Indicating Celia]
That wants no artificial looks or tears
To help the visor she has no put on,
Hath long been known a close adulteress
To that lascivious youth there [Indicating Bonario]; not suspected,
I say, but known, and taken in the act,
With him; and by this man [Indicating Corvino], the easy husband,
Pardoned; ...
For these [ie. Celia and Bonario], ...
Began to hate the benefit, and, in place
Of thanks, devise[d] ...
to murder him. When, being prevented
By his more happy absence, ...
dragged forth
The agèd gentleman that had there lain bedrid
Three years and more, out off his innocent couch,
Naked, upon the floor, there left him; wounded
His servant in the face; and, with this strumpet
The stale to his forged practice, who was glad
To be so active
...thought at once to stop
His father’s ends, discredit his free choice
In the old gentleman, redeem themselves
By laying infamy upon this man[.]

(4.5.34-91)

As Heidi Breuer could predict, suddenly lack of proof turns the rape into “not rape” (2, citing Christina M. Rose) for which Celia (along with Bonario) is at fault. In Volture’s account her real tears, far from working as signs to corroborate her story, are mere feints (whereas Volture presents Volpone’s feigned disguise as a true signs of enfeebled age). Presumably, if her body had borne the recognisable traces of rape as prescribed in the legal process of hue and cry, Volture might have had more difficulty turning the story around to make Celia the aggressor. This point is disputable, however; Volture’s description turns Celia’s real tears into performance and Volpone’s performance into “real” old age. Much of the humour in this first court scene derives from the irony that Volture can so easily flip reality and fiction, reinterpreting signs and bodies for the avocatori who seem to have no skill in reading bodies correctly themselves. Thus we are left to wonder: if Celia had been raped and had then come onstage bearing the recognisable signs of that violence, would the avocatori be able to recognise those signs as “real” indicators of sexual violence? The problem is that the avocatori cannot seem to
properly read either physical bodies or verbal testimony, and Voltore might just as easily have spun a clever story to explain away the visible signs of rape. At the very least, such a body might make it less easy for audiences and critics to find the scene funny in an innocuous way.

While I will ultimately argue that their bodies do bear the traces of sexual violence, neither Isabella’s nor Celia’s body bears those traces in an obvious way. The combination of scenes where sexual violence is explicit with the lack of bodies bearing obvious signs of that violence enables the plays (and their critics, audiences, and directors) both to discuss sexual violence (albeit with limited focus on the women and their experience of that violence) and simultaneously to trivialise or find humour in that sexual violence. Celia again presents a clear example of these seemingly contradictory responses. Few to no critics approve of Volpone’s attempt to actually rape Celia (adopting the stance that rape itself is undoubtedly condemnable), yet it seems that because Celia is not actually raped we are free to laugh at and aesthetically enjoy the preceding “seduction”.73 Much the same attitude would account for student responses I have previously encountered to Angelo and Claudio’s coercion of Isabella – that because Angelo does not literally rape Isabella it is wrong to read his coercion as sexual violence:

73 Many critics, including Roston, Hallett (56, 60, 65-6), Richmond Barbour (5), Ellorashree Maitra (116), Oliver Hennessey (90, 97), Stephen Greenblatt (90, 97), James D. Redwine Jr (306, 309), and Richard Dutton (“Beast Fable”, 351) casually discuss the scene in terms of a “seduction”. This phrasing attests to Breuer’s argument that there is a latent rape apologist attitude undergirding much criticism on works discussing seduction and romance literature. Which is not to say that these critics condone Volpone’s rape attempt – some, like Hallett and Hennessy even condemn it, along with critics’ attempts to “exculpate old Volp” (Hennessey 87) – but in terming the scene a seduction, critics automatically and unconsciously privilege Volpone’s perspective on events in act 3, assuming that because Volpone uses language that otherwise be used in a seduction poem, then the scene is a seduction. But this attitude necessitates privileging Volpone’s perspective over Celia’s. Celia gives clear indications that she views the scene not as a seduction but as an attempted rape. That this privileging of Volpone seems to be the default critical position says a lot about how normalised sexual violence is in our own culture.
a number of students would rather frame Angelo’s offer as one of sex rather than sexual violence – a position which trivialises her experiences and objections to his violence.

A common attitude in criticism and performance seems to be that because Celia is not actually raped, it is possible (though not inevitable) to laugh at and otherwise enjoy the aesthetics of many of the scenes in which she is most victimised. As I have suggested, these scenes include the attempted rape/"seduction" scene in act 3 and the trial in 4.5. Because both scenes are cloaked in comic traditions and tropes, they do in fact structurally direct audience responses towards laughter. As Murray J. Roston points out, for example, the rape/"seduction" scene in 4.5 draws on a tradition of commedia dell’arte plays in which a sexually naive heroine initially refuses sex with a potential lover (usually for moral reasons) but ultimately abandons her fidelity and chastity once she discovers that sex with the young lover is better than sex with her ageing and jealous husband:

Incidentally, Celia’s resistance to Corvino’s demand that she sleep with Volpone in no way contradicts traditional expectations, as the wives in the Italian versions also resist initially. But Celia’s reluctance is even more understandable, as the proposed amorato is, to the best of her knowledge, a repulsively emaciated creature.

When she is brought into the bedroom, and Volpone ... reveals himself as a virile, eager young lover, not only does he woo her with a serenade echoing Catullus’s fervour for his beloved Lesbia, but he proceeds to offer her a wealth of superlative delights in language such as had won for Marlowe’s Tamburlaine the love of the beautiful Zenocrates. Again, therefore, his actions at this point should evoke a very positive audience reaction ... All this points toward the auspicious fulfillment of his love, his song assuming Celia’s readiness to respond to his overtures, just as Lucrezia does when Callimacho doffs his disguise. (5-6)

I have three objections to this argument. The first is a more general objection that it seems to borrow from rape-apologist thinking governed by what Breuer once identified as “classic male rape fantasy” (2): that is, when a woman says “no” we need not take her
protestations seriously because she will discover that she likes sex after the fact. This attitude appears especially when women object on moral or religious grounds which both urban characters within seventeenth-century drama and contemporary critics reject as viable because they are old-fashioned or out-dated. Out-dated morality or not, the assumption of male characters and critics alike that they know what is best for a woman when it comes to sex is both misogynist and resonant of rape culture. Tacitly adopting this position, I would argue, encourages a one-sided and overhasty reading of early scenes in *Volpone* in which Celia objects to Corvino and Volpone’s deal. It also necessitates seeing Celia as a naive type when there are plenty of indicators that she is both a forcible speaker in her interactions with her husband, and is also much smarter than Corvino. To read her as a mere *commedia* type does her a disservice.

My second objection is that the play Roston chooses as his paradigmatic example is Machiavelli’s *La Mandragola* in which the only “proof” that the manipulated wife Lucrezia liked sex with Callimacho, the would-be lover whom she rejects earlier in the play, is the report by Callimacho himself as he describes the scene that took place in the bedroom in 5.4:

I felt ill at ease until about three in the morning, and even though I was having a great deal of pleasure, it didn’t seem right to me. But once I had let her know who I was, and made her realize the love I felt for her, how easy it would be for us to live happily ever after, without any scandal, thanks to her husband’s simple-mindedness; and once I promised I would marry her whenever the good Lord decided to get him out of the way; and aside from all those valid reasons, once she had had a chance really to appreciate the difference between my technique and Nicia’s, between the kisses of a young lover and those of an old husband, she sighed a bit and said: “Since your cleverness, my husband’s stupidity, my mother’s silliness, and my confessor’s guile have led me to do what I would never have done by myself, I have to judge that this comes from a divine providence that willed it so. I am not capable of refusing what heaven itself wants me to accept.”
Callimacho tries to present the male fantasy version of the sexual encounter – that since he was able to convince her that he loved her, and since she accepts it after the fact, the rape was merely a seduction by an eager lover. Even trying to justify his actions, his story clearly indicates that he had sex with Lucrezia before explaining these things, and that she was reluctant and unhappy about the sex up until three in the morning. Even after she supposedly enjoyed it (and we have only Callimacho’s version of events to verify this fact – Lucrezia herself does not speak extensively about her feelings after the event\textsuperscript{74}) his relation of Lucrezia’s responses still reveals her reluctance: she agrees to become his lover only because everyone in her life has forced her to do so (including divine providence). My sense is that if Lucrezia did give “consent” after the fact, the consent is rather empty because it is the product of coercion: she is a woman who is simply trying to make the best of a bad situation.

The penultimate time we see Lucrezia is 3.11, when she reluctantly agrees to have sex with Callimacho – only after her friar, Timoteo, lies to her, (after having been bribed by Callimacho and Lucrezia’s mother Sostrata, he twists scripture to explain to that adulterous sex is not a sin). Pressured by her mother, her husband, and Friar Timoteo, Lucrezia agrees, but her “consent” shows all the signs of being coerced: “All right, I’ll do

\textsuperscript{74}3.11 is also the last time we see her speak at length. She does appear briefly in act 5, scenes 5 and 6. While in 5.6 she does say “I am more grateful to [Callimacho] than I can say. I am sure he will be like one of the family” and instructs her husband to pay Timoteo for arranging the match, the line seems incongruous with the earlier descriptions of forced sex and with Lucrezia’s seeming anger with her husband and mother in 5.5. In 5.5 Nicia notes that she “talks back” asking them curt questions like “What has to be done now?” and “What is it you want?” Her curt replies might be performed as merely Lucrezia’s having discovered she need not be submissive to her foolish husband, but they may equally, I would suggest, be the replies of a woman angry at having been betrayed by her family. Her willingness to accept Callimacho is, as she says, the result of having to make the best out of being forced into a sexual relationship with him – but this response is hardly what we might call enthusiastic consent. Certainly the play does not provide enough evidence that she is the “happy” adulteress critics have assumed she is (Ciliotta-Rubery 104).
it. But I don’t think I will live to see tomorrow morning” (227). Again, “I’ll do it” is hardly an enthusiastic agreement to the circumstance, and her fear that she will not “live to see tomorrow” (referring to either spiritual or physical death from grief at having to violate her chastity) bespeaks her unhappiness – a sentiment she reiterates in her last spoken line of the play a moment later: “May God and Our Lady help me, and keep me from harm!” From then on, the sexual encounter with Callimacho is narrated through the voice of men, Callimacho, who claims she enjoyed sex with him in 5.4, and her husband Nicia, who describes how he manouevred Lucrezia into bed in somewhat brutal terms:

But I don’t see why she had to put on so many coy airs before she finally got into bed. “I just can’t!...” “What will I do!...” “Oh dear!...” “Mamma mia!...” If her mother hadn’t told her to get her ass moving, she never would have gotten into that damned bed. I hope she gets the pox! I like to see women a bit fussy, but there’s a limit! She snapped our heads off, the bird-brained bitch! If anyone shouted: “Hang the most virtuous woman in Florence!” she would answer: “What have I done to you?” But I know that she’ll end up coming around[.](4.8)

Everything about Nicia’s description suggests that Lucrezia clearly voiced her lack of consent, and that the men (and her mother) overrode her complaints and forced her into the bedroom. The assumption that she must have ultimately liked sex with Callimacho because previous women in commedia plays and fabliaux reportedly liked sex when it was forced upon them is again a sexual(ly violent) act seen through the lens of male fantasy. Indeed, seeing and hearing about Lucrezia’s refusal should perhaps make us question all the more the reports like Callimacho’s that she enjoyed sex.

My third objection to Roston’s argument that we ought to assume Celia would end up enjoying the sex into which her husband coerces her is the evidence suggesting that Volpone would like to challenge commedia traditions: we note, for example, that while
Callimacho in *La Madrigola*, like many cuckoldling tricksters, succeeds in his cuckoldry and emerges the victor of the play, *Volpone* famously does not allow the title trickster either to seduce Celia or to succeed in his trickery. The final act validates Celia and her morality – a fact that should make us pay attention to the manifold ways the play resists comic tropes all along. We may want to pay attention, for example, to Celia’s forcible speech in her act 2 interactions with her husband – which Charles Hallett notes, “do not indicate any particular lack of intelligence” (58), but rather identify her firmly as a figure of “quietude”, Christian morality, and the ideally chaste woman of Elizabethan England. Hallett’s assessment that Celia’s interactions with Corvino in act 3 are in fact meant to establish Celia’s character in advance of the “seduction” scene seems apt to me: we learn, Hallett argues, that “Celia is going to be absolutely immovable” (60); unlike Roston, Hallett suggests that there is much evidence before 3.7 that indicates she is not another commedia adulteress in the making. We may also want to pay attention to the fact that Volpone’s so-called “seduction” speeches, while lavish and aesthetically pleasing, are also laden with images of consumption and rape. These images should trigger (as they do in plays like *Cymbeline* and *Titus Andronicus*) some discomfort. The scene, after all, seems to generate much of its comic energy from the irony of the extreme disjunction between Volpone’s eager desire and Celia’s revulsion, but Volpone’s rape allusions might remind us that this comic energy – which is indeed typical of the kinds of commedia plots Roston describes and the medieval fabliaux Breuer outlines – is essentially a kind of rape joke. As another example, the laughter garnered from Voltore’s ability to render Celia’s testimony completely meaningless and impotent is very similar to the kind of laughter
derived from Subtle, Face, and Doll’s fast-paced fleecing of clients in *The Alchemist* (1610) – but the difference between the two plays is that in *Volpone* the victim of trickery is not greedy, ambitious, narcissistic, or herself a con-artist: Celia is a clear victim. While I think both scenes in *Volpone* are funny in a way – that is, capable of provoking laughter – the laughter is, and should be, an uncomfortable one. Some directors and critics, however, have tried to present and read the scenes as light bawdy farce, as Peter Smith notes the English Shakespeare Company’s 1990 production did:

> As he tells the wilting Celia that *Then I will have thee in more modern forms*, he opens a drawer under the bed and pulls out a basque, a whip and other paraphernalia of sadomasochistic delight. There is no holier-than-thou superiority about these sexual proclivities. Luscombe’s direction is too fresh and funny and we see not a dark depravity but an intensely comical and lewd indulgence. (76)

Other critics have read the scene as inviting grotesque laughter without an ethical purpose: as Rick Bowers suggests in “What’s Funny about Volpone” (2011), what really matters is Volpone’s “intertextual joking in the form of exoticised deception. Whether played as bouncy bedroom farce or sadistic sexual force, this scene thrives on energy and timing undercut by Bonario’s entry as would-be saviour ... Is it rape or is it romp? In *Volpone*, all data is dada” (113). Again, both positions – reading the scene as too comical to be dark or privileging the comic energy alone – depend on ignoring Celia’s perspective on events, which she clearly indicates are terrifying to her. These kinds of critical responses are perhaps understandable for two reasons: first, the play has a long history of critics and directors reducing Celia to a kind of moral type merely (as I noted in my chapter on cuckold plots); second, the play, as I have been arguing, lacks a body obviously marked by rape.
But why does neither play ultimately include such a body when both Measure for Measure and Volpone clearly want to talk about rape and sexual violence? The reasoning may be as simple as the antagonism between comedy and rape. As I discussed earlier, the presence of rape in a comedy tends to break the comedic structure, redirecting the narrative trajectory towards either tragicomedy or outright tragedy – both genres which have different ways of responding to sexual violence, absorbing it into its generic structure, and often redeploying it as a way of working through patriarchal concerns. Structurally, tragedy can cope with rape quite easily because the usual tragic response – the death of the rapist – fits well with the structure and mode of tragedy. Violent antagonists, loss of life, and the disruption of justice are common elements in the tragic plot, as is an unhappy ending. Comedy less typically includes such elements; indeed, extreme sexual violence such as the rapes we see in Titus Andronicus, The Queen of Corinth, or The Rape of Lucrece would be cataclysmic events within the comedic structure, necessitating a harsh final justice. But comic endings tend to confirm the solidity of the communities dramatised. Even in Measure for Measure and Volpone – plays which include sexual violence but still lack the violent rape spectacles of Shakespeare, Fletcher, and Heywood’s plays – the final harsh judgments in response to rape and abuse of power have troubled the history of criticism on both plays, being cited again and again as problems which need explaining (but which no one can seem to explain satisfactorily) and as events which make the plays dark comedies. Moreover, since victims do not recover easily from rape trauma, rape – even when included in oblique ways – proves a major obstacle to comic closure. Thus comedy tends to represent
sexual violence in its more mundane, and less easily visible, form. And so Measure for Measure and Volpone, probably the two most famous comedies to deal with sexual violence and rape in extended ways, also seem to be concerned with representing violated bodies in less spectacular ways than a play like Titus. By doing so both Measure for Measure and Volpone just barely hold their comedic structure together while still discussing sexual violence.

Representing Violated Bodies in Comedy

Measure for Measure 2.1 provides the clearest example of how comedy treats rape in an oblique way. The scene does resemble the legal process by which women could bring sexual violence to court. Following the initial hue and cry, the “trustworthy men” who witness the physical evidence of rape or attempted rape would present this evidence to court magistrates on behalf of the victim. In the context of 2.1, then, Elbow functions as both a “trustworthy man” and the victim’s husband, and is doubly invested with the authority to speak for his wife in court, with Angelo and Escalus acting as magistrates in the legal process. Thus even though Mistress Elbow is not present at the hearing, she is legally represented in the ways that both a married woman and a rape victim would have been in seventeenth-century England. However mimetic of real legal processes the hearing is, though, in terms of dramatic effects the absence of Mistress Elbow’s body on stage limits how audiences and critics engage with her experiences. Despite the question of “what was done to [the body of] Elbow’s wife?” (127), the central problem on which the scene hangs, the body in question never physically appears. Elbow’s wife does not
have a chance to allow her body to signify the sexual crimes that she and her husband want addressed. Neither we nor Angelo and Escalus can witness the physical evidence of sexual violence, nor can we witness Mistress Elbow’s emotional response to that violence. Consequently, it becomes easier to trivialise or overlook her experience.

Her violated body is nevertheless represented on stage by proxy, and so both the audience and the characters within the play are in fact forced to confront the matter of rape. The issue is clouded at the same time that it is brought to the fore, however: Elbow speaks badly and is ultimately unable to articulate what actually happened in Mistress Overdone’s brothel. Rather than successfully directing our gaze to the imagined scene of sexual violence, then, the attention of the court audience (Escalus, Angelo, and Pompey) as well as the theatre audience refocuses on Elbow himself, with his comical inability to use words correctly (and, in a number of productions, on his clumsy and exaggerated gestures). His malapropisms and the laughter his speech unintentionally garners (from both Pompey and the audience) obfuscates the crime: confusing “respected” for “suspected” (145) and “detest” for “protest” (63), Elbow inadvertently constructs a version of his wife who, according to the literal meaning of his testimony, matches Pompey’s description of her – that Mistress Elbow is the sort of woman goes to bawdy houses actively seeking men with whom to have sex. An audience more concerned with the way Elbow’s mistakes humourously turn all of his words into their opposite meanings might find amusement in the scene, but perhaps overlook the seriousness of the crime he
is reporting as Angelo and Escalus do. By voicing rape through the comic trope of the ill-spoken constable – a trope Shakespeare uses to more innocuous effect in plays like *Much Ado About Nothing* (where Dogberry, because he is assisted by the somewhat more competent men of the watch, is ultimately able to report the crime of slander) – that rape becomes less obvious and therefore more palatable. Elbow’s malapropisms ultimately distract our attention from Mistress Elbow’s raped body.

Oddly, in spite of the constable’s malapropisms, Angelo and Escalus give every sense of being aware that Elbow is misspeaking. Angelo corrects Elbow’s misuse of “benefactors” when he means “malefactors” (47-9), suggesting he has at least a general sense of what Elbow really means, while Escalus asks the constable to clarify what he means by “detest” when, having heard that she is “an honest woman” (66), he asks “Dost thou detest her therefore?” (67). Escalus certainly understands Elbow’s accusation that Mistress Overdone runs a “bawdy house” (69) because he is able to ask a follow-up question (“How dost thou know that?” 71). And yet he is still distracted enough by Elbow’s way of speaking that he seems to forget to pursue the matter of the violence against Elbow’s wife (choosing instead to gently reprimand Froth and Pompey). The moment in which his attention is irrevocably redirected seems to occur after Escalus, having turned to Pompey to hear “what was done to Elbow’s wife”, is distracted by

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75 Angelo and Escalus certainly have this response in the 1979 BBC production: they are a mixture of wearied and amused by Elbow’s mistakes and Pompey’s puns throughout the scene in the lead-up to Angelo’s exit. And Escalus’s response to Angelo’s announcement that he is leaving due to boredom is to chuckle: clearly the two men have a sense that Elbow has a sex-related crime to report but neither seems to think that crime is serious, suggesting that they are not really aware that he is reporting rape.

76 Indeed, the BBC production has both Angelo and Escalus share knowing smiles with each other when they hear Elbow speak, suggesting they entirely understand him, but are too amused by his errors to take his charge seriously.
Pompey’s witty argument that Froth’s “face is the worst thing about him” and that therefore “how could Master Froth do the constable’s wife any harm?” (140-3).

Pompey’s argument may be witty, but his merriment at the expense of Mistress Elbow – along with Escalus’s indulgence towards and forgiveness of Pompey – is potentially horrific in light of her experiences. Rape/attempted rape is traumatic in any circumstance, but when one considers the fact that Mistress Elbow is heavily pregnant and that the violence inflicted upon her occurs more than once, if Pompey’s insinuation that “There was nothing done to her once” is true (128, my emphasis), then Pompey is incorrect to imply that Master Froth could do her no harm. He causes harm when he participates in her repeated violation, and harm again if that violence (and its attendant trauma) results in miscarriage or postpartum trauma. A reading that takes account of these events from Mistress Elbow’s point of view, then, might find it difficult to accept Pompey’s fallacious reasoning as easily as critics like Maurice Hunt do. Hunt argues in favour of Pompey when he suggests that Pompey’s ability to describe the scene with precision works to supply a kind documentation or evidence that proves his testimony true in contrast to Elbow’s failure to provide clear evidence (248). Hunt also defends Escalus, arguing that when Pompey’s testimony is interrupted by Angelo’s dismissal of the case (249). Escalus instead looks into Froth’s face for evidence of his innocence (251). And while Hunt admits that “the features ... of tipsy Froth provide less assurance that an existential ‘reading’ of them can promote justice” (251), he also suggests the play might ultimately invite us to accept this appraisal as valid because in previous plays like Much Ado about Nothing Shakespeare allows Hero’s virtue to be stamped on her face.
(260); moreover, Escalus’s forgiveness of Froth enacts the “legal equity” (260) of the just sovereign. Whether or not Froth’s face is a valid form of evidence, Hunt argues that Escalus is in the judicial right to forgive him. But I have argued that Measure for Measure is a much more troubled comedy than Much Ado and what Hunt’s reading of the play neglects to even consider is the fact that in allowing Froth to go free – whether because of presumed innocence or “Christian mercy” (262) – Escalus fails to provide justice for Mistress Elbow who, the scene heavily suggests, is a victim of Froth and Pompey’s sexual violence. That Hunt appears not to even consider how the outcome of the scene might affect Elbow’s wife is one more example of the way that critical arguments have tended to overlook the play’s rape culture.

Having almost already accepted the tapster’s witty but logically fallacious argument, however, Escalus turns to Elbow to challenge the assertion (“He’s in the right, constable; what say you to it?” 144), and at this moment Elbow has his greatest failure of words: “First, an it like you, the house is a respected house; next, this is a respected fellow; and his mistress is a respected mistress” (145-7), three times repeating the malapropism that confuses “suspected” for “respected”. His outburst is followed by Pompey’s witty quip: “By this hand, sir, his wife is a more respected person than any of us all” (148-9), a remark that simultaneously mocks Elbow’s error, insults his wife (who is already a victim of a crime), and provokes Elbow into greater rage and inarticulacy. And at this point Escalus seems to lose all interest in hearing Elbow, and begins to mock his speech along with Pompey. When Elbow in his impotent anger at Pompey’s obfuscation of the crime, confuses the term for “slander” – “prove this [that his wife is of
suspect morality] ... or I’ll have mine action of battery on thee” (160-1) – Escalus replies, “If he took you a box o’th’ear you might have your action of slander too” (162-3), mockingly supplying the word Elbow really means. He mocks his speech a second time when Elbow asks what he should do with Pompey, by replying “Truly, officer, because he hath some offences in him that thou wouldst discover if thou couldst, let him continue in his courses till thou knowst what they are” (166-8). Escalus’s pointed “if thou couldst” suggests that it is Elbow’s inability to articulate the crime that has resulted in Pompey being allowed to go free (until such time as Elbow can bring him in on identifiable charges). Elbow himself becomes the object of the entire stage’s laughter at this point, as he does not seem to quite understand yet that Pompey is not actually being punished: he moralises to Pompey, “Thou seest, thou wicked varlet now, what’s come to thee. Thou art to continue” (169-71). Elbow has become the butt of a joke and is pathetic in his inability to realise that he occupies this position. Unaware that he has been outmanoeuvred, he is unable to make further protest that the trial proceed on behalf of his wife. And so Elbow’s “funny” malapropisms ultimately bury the crime of sexual violence under the mockery and laughter of the very men (Angelo and Escalus) who should be judging and punishing those crimes. Moreover, if the audience laughs along with Angelo, Escalus, and Pompey, we too are guilty of being distracted from the serious matter of rape.

Escalus’s distraction from the violence is encouraged by Pompey himself, who employs yet another comic trope, double entendre, to prevent his judges from clearly identifying the sexual violence as violence. Pompey’s double entendres not only work to distract Escalus and Angelo, wearying them of trying to hear the case, but the entendres
also turn the rape into bawdy farcical sex, even inviting the theatre audience to laugh at the sexual doings in Overdone’s brothel. For example, Pompey uses entendre to conflate Mistress Elbow’s desire for “stewed prunes” (83) as a desire for “testicles” (83n) – a joke which invites the audience to see her as complicit in the sexual act (as though a woman’s appetite for food must inevitably be an appetite for sex).\footnote{Aebischer, in her brief commentary on 2.1 notes the way that slut shaming and victim blaming is always already active concerning women’s sexual expressions in the play. In this scene Pompey can easily conflate a pregnant women’s cravings for food with sexual cravings because the pregnancy is clearly the result of a previous sexual craving: “Sex within marriage, which is presumably what led to her pregnancy, is also what makes her always already susceptible to being a whore” (15). The trial in 2.1 is merely one of many instances in the play when women are blamed both for their own sexual desires and for provoking the sexual desires in men (15).} And laugh the audience does: Elbow’s malapropisms and Pompey’s bawdy jokes had the audience of the 2013 Stratford Ontario production in stitches – even though elsewhere in the play, such as when the Duke proposed to the clearly unwilling Isabella, the laughter was much more subdued and uncomfortable. In this production the trial on behalf of Elbow’s wife functioned as comic relief in a serious comedy. As I have demonstrated, critics of the play have tended to follow suit, not so much treating the event as joke against Elbow (whose wife must have been complicit in the sex), but barely commenting on the events that are apparently too trivial to be worth mentioning.

The absence of a body bearing the signs of sexual violence during the scene also makes it possible to tacitly and implicitly reinforce misogynist rape myths, such as the idea (unfortunately still reiterated in the present day) that women lie about sexual violence, transforming any sex they regret into rape. Pompey relies on the well-known double entendres that code “stews” for brothels, “prunes” and “stones” (98) for testicles, and “fruit dish” for vagina, and so is able to construct a version of events by which
Mistress Elbow seems to have a “longing” (82) not just for fruit, but for sex. His narrative implies that Mistress Elbow entered the tapster’s house knowingly. He deploys double entendre expecting that everyone will know the bawdy meanings behind the otherwise innocuous words “prunes” and “fruit dish” (and many productions of the scene have Pompey delivering these lines accompanied by an insinuating chuckle). The sense he conveys is that everyone knows what a woman asking for stewed prunes is really asking for – and that just as well might include Mistress Elbow herself. His assertion that Mistress Elbow was “a more respected person than any of us all” and that “she was respected with [Elbow] before he married her” could just be mockery of Elbow’s misuse of the word “respected” – but it could also suggest (as it seems to do to Elbow) that she is in fact as sexually licentious as everyone else in Vienna, and so her presence in the bawdy house (along with her desire for stewed prunes) should come as no surprise to anyone.

While Pompey never overtly calls Mistress Elbow’s chastity into question, his double entendres and jokes raise the shade of the question of whether Mistress Elbow really is as innocent as Elbow thinks her. And so Pompey’s entendre-laden version of events seems to position Elbow as a patsy – protesting his wife’s innocence and claiming she resisted sexual advances when perhaps sexual advances were what she was looking for all along.

The audience laughter at this scene in performance indicates how easy it is to win audiences over to Pompey’s version of events. Pompey’s version implicitly raises doubt about both the victim’s claim and the victim’s innocence at the same time that it distracts attention from that claim, instead turning the man who brings the rape claim to court into the object of mockery and laughter. With no body on stage supporting Elbow’s story,
Pompey’s story does become the believable alternative. Moreover, the familiar comic elements of double entendre and the malapropism-riddled constable encourage us to laugh at Elbow’s story rather than listen to it. Arguably, the presence of a recognisably violated body on stage might serve to interrupt this laughter, but with Mistress Elbow banished from the stage and Pompey doing his best to conceal the story of sexual violence, this interruption never occurs.

A recurring claim in this entire project has been that when comedy represents sexual violence it does so ways that are not obvious. Often this oblique representation occurs because comedy represents (either unthinkingly or in order to comment on) systemic sexual violence that, since it is both the product of latent misogyny within a patriarchal culture and because early modern culture has accepted it as “normal”, has become the quotidian. But Measure for Measure and Volpone show that even when comedy does wish to talk centrally about more extreme and recognisable forms of sexual violence it tends to do so obliquely. If comedy talks about rape it keeps the body of the raped woman off stage and refers to that body in indirect ways, as with Mistress Elbow. But both Measure for Measure and Volpone also represent sexual violence in forms that while not precisely conforming to the legal definition of rape, are still recognisable as more overt and obviously condemnable forms of physical sexual violence, such as attempted rape (Volpone’s of Celia), marital abuse leading to sexual violence (Corvino’s treatment of Celia), and coercion (Angelo's and Claudio’s of Isabella). These violences do not altogether fit the legal definitions of rape and the bodies against which these violences are directed do not align with the expected spectacle of rape as outlined by rape laws;
consequently, they are in some ways more palatable to the comic frame (whereas a body like Lavinia’s would wreck the comedic frame). These bodies also differ from those of the victims of sexual violence I discussed in the abuse of “whores” and in cuckold plots: in those examples, power inequities informing sexual behaviours are so normalised that it can be difficult to see moments of sexual violence as violence – particularly when the sexual abuse is “just” verbal (as in the case of whorish women) or when wives seem to “consent” to sex within a social framework where the meaningfulness of consent is already severely limited.

Because comedy cannot represent an overtly raped body in the same way that tragedy can, generic constraints might initially seem to force comedy to deny the existence of rape and the psychological, emotional, and physical harm it inflicts on its victims. One of the consequences of not representing rape in clearly recognisable ways can be a reinforcement of rape culture, since the seeming dismissal of sexual violence might suggest that it is appropriate to laugh at or ignore sexual violence. Although the absence of a recognisably violated body does make it initially more difficult to acknowledge sexual violence, however, and though it can enable the trivialisation of that violence through laughter or the concealment of rape, the oblique ways in which Measure for Measure and Volpone represent sexual violence ultimately work to resist and trouble rape-apologist attitudes to sexual violence. The plays make this resistance by exposing the inability of legal procedures to respond to rape, by widening the definitions of sexual violence to include more “innocuous” forms like coercion and marital pressure, and by zooming in on not the body of the raped woman but on the emotional and psychological
terror that women experience before, during, and after sexual violence – terror that is representable but not easily reducible to a symbol that can be appropriated by men within patriarchal narratives. Ultimately, while the moments of sexual violence in both plays may not rupture the comedic structure, they do trouble that structure, refusing to allow those violences to be easily erased by a comedic conclusion that provides inadequate and superficial “closure”.

**Representing (and Critiquing) Rape in Measure for Measure and Volpone**

While critics, audiences, and directors may occasionally equivocate in naming the violences that Isabella and Celia experience as serious instances of sexual violence, there is no doubt that both plays present these violences as condemnable. Angelo’s coercion of Isabella and Volpone’s attempted rape of Celia are clearly reprehensible. If nothing else, Angelo’s ultimatum to Isabella is a sign of his hypocrisy, bad judgment, and moral failure; meanwhile Volpone’s lavish overtures may be aesthetically pleasing – and his framing of Celia in act 4 may be funny in its audaciousness – but the play as a whole does not uphold or allow Volpone’s attempted violence. His actions in the courtroom are so audacious precisely because we recognise how villainous his actions are with the moment of attempted rape. Even if the villains outnumber (and outwit) the virtuous in Volpone’s Venice, and even if the avocatori are unable to weigh character and narrative and deliver justice correctly, the play presents the crime of attempted rape as so heinous that it must be averted – by *deus ex machina* if not by human intervention.
But the plays’ clear condeminations of sexual violence seem to butt up against the comic mechanisms that direct us to laugh: the double entendres and malapropisms in the Elbow’s wife scene, and the brilliant wit and moral disregard of the comic tricksters in Volpone. Historically, critics have had less difficulty condemning Angelo – presumably because he is both humourless and clearly in the wrong. But Volpone, like Pompey, is also clearly in the wrong, yet seems more difficult to condemn outright. While critics have no difficulty labelling the rape attempt itself as bad, as Roston does, noting “rape is certainly reprehensible” (2), they may be willing to forgive or defend his rape-riddled seductions (even though, as I have observed, Celia is neither willing nor receptive to his advances). Certainly Bowers’s dismissal of the rape attempt is a kind of implicit defence of Volpone’s rape speech, while other critics generally label Volpone’s speech as his “great seduction speech” (Greenblatt 97). Hennessey notes that the extreme defender of Volpone is William Empson, who characterised Volpone’s rape attempt as “unproblematically absurd” (that is, too absurd to be truly villainous), and who could not understand “some of his female students’ discomfort with this reading; clearly they aren’t on ‘our’ side” (87). And some critics are happy to admit that Volpone is a trickster or villain,⁷-eight but many others wonder what Celia is doing being so moral in the middle of a gritty urban comedy – or, as Hallett notes, “censure” Celia (along with Bonario) “for their incompetence” – an approach he also identifies as erroneous (66).⁷-nine It has become a

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⁷-eight For example, Redwine frames Volpone’s treatment of Celia as fairly heinous when he notes that “the pleasure of making or at least watching Celia suffer is greater than his seduction of her could ever have been” (309), while Maitra generally identifies Volpone and Mosca as “knaves and frauds” (117).
⁷-nine Hallett’s article begins by wonderfully summarising critical impatience with Celia, noting that they “generally interpret her impeccable virtue as a kind of folly” and “encourage their readers to think of her as a dramatic failure, a flaw that one must overlook” (50). Even critics who understand Celia’s role in the play
critical commonplace, finally, to wonder what Jonson is doing making the final act so harshly judgmental. The frequency with which critics have difficulty making sense of the final act troubles me somewhat, as it does Hennessey, suggesting a desire to exonerate Volpone, to “exculpate old Volp” (87).

Most objectors to act 5 do seem to make sense of its presence as making good Jonson’s promise in the epistle to “put the snaffle in their mouths that cry out we never punish vice in our interludes” (97-8). But I agree (to an extent) with Greenblatt’s interpretation of the play’s conclusion that the importance of act 5 is not just to supply a sort of token moral conclusion but to raise a serious question in the play. (Greenblatt, however, ultimately characterises this question as more existential than moral.) He notes that “the latter half of act IV has the feeling of a finale” (91) which will ultimately be, according to the “inflexible rule of the moral universe”, Volpone’s exposure and condemnation (92). When Jonson ends act four with the sudden victory of “imposture”, and the condemnation of Celia and Bonario instead, the audience must suddenly “ask itself, ‘What would a world be like in which Volpone has triumphed?’ In reply, it wills Volpone’s ultimate downfall” (92). Greenblatt argues that the play asks us this question in order to confront us with the lonely and bored void underlying the modern psyche and the way that that theatricality fills that void – and it reveals the “gap ... between the play’s

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80 Redwine notes that “Jonson ... seems to be worried ... that critics will ... find the plot too darkly didactic for comedy. Historically, critics seem to have been worried most about precisely that” (303). Ralph Nash notes in response to Jonson’s concerns about the severity of the end that “Indeed, the closing scenes of the play have seemed to some critics to be anti-climactic” (30).
moral structure ... and its power to delight” (104). His argument makes sense of why the audience is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by Volpone, but Greenblatt ultimately seems to think we would prefer the illusion of theatre (however empty it may be) to the moral universe and the confrontation of the emptiness of modern existence. I would argue, however, that when the play prompts us to consider what the world would be like if Volpone triumphed, it asks us to address the human costs of Volpone’s delightful trickery – a conclusion that is nearly the same as Greenblatt’s except that I do not see the play’s final punishments as indicative of its “bitter[ness]” that “you cannot stay in the theater forever” (104). Rather, it invites us to reconsider our laughter at the expense of traumatised victims like Celia, pointing to the violence that comic tropes encode. I am not convinced that merely pointing to these things renders the play “bitter”: but the play’s desire to make us see the costs of Volpone’s villainy does explain and justify the punitive ending.

The ending of Volpone would seem unnecessarily harsh to me as well – an uncharacteristic move for Jonson who otherwise tends to celebrate his urban tricksters – were it not for Volpone’s rape attempt. Jonson’s other tricksters may be morally questionable, but generally their victims are equally as morally questionable: greedy and self-indulgent figures like Sir Epicure Mammon, foolish spendthrifts like Dapper who can be robbed without real consequence to his overall status, foolish and abusive husbands like Fitzdottrel, or hypocritical and self-important authority figures like Justice Overdo who fail in their duties to take care of their own households. One can imagine a version of the play in which Volpone does not attempt to rape Celia: if this Volpone were to escape
the play would be merrier – even more like The Alchemist – in tone. One can also imagine a version of the play that does end with Volpone escaping; however, such a play would raise troubling questions about the efficacy of legal systems and individual morality because Volpone would succeed in taking advantage of not only the corrupt but also the innocent. Attempted rape is the crime, then, which makes the idea of Volpone as comic anti-hero untenable and demands that harsh comic justice be meted out to Volpone.\(^{81}\)

Moreover, not including the final scene in which Volpone is brought to justice would necessitate that Celia herself (as well as Bonario) never be vindicated – a fact that would make the play much more misogynist than I believe it is.

Celia, then, represents an infamous case of attempted rape in comedy to which critics have difficulty responding. Most critics agree that Volpone’s threat is violent and immoral; at the same time, Celia is easily forgotten, or even slightly scoffed at as a moral anachronism. We can make sense of this conflicted attitude in a number of ways. First, there is the oddness of having to make moral judgments in a Jonsonian city comedy – a demand that necessitates reading against the grain of both comic and critical traditions. It also necessitates siding with a figure whose morality seems extreme, uncharacteristic for city/commedia drama, and out-dated: current Anglo-American criticism is situated in a culture that cares far less about chastity than early modern England did, and cares very little particularly for chastity maintained because of morality (or religious faith as

\(^{81}\) In making this statement I am agreeing with Hallett, who also notes that “the courtroom scene in act IV is a result of Volpone’s presumptuous attack on virtue” (66) and is therefore the central event which marks Volpone as an overreacher and villain who must be brought to justice. My emphasis, however, is less on Celia’s symbolic role as a figure of heavenly virtue (as Hallett presents her), and more on Celia as a representation of a woman responding to “real” (as opposed to symbolic) sexual violence. In Hallett’s reading the trial in act 4 indicates the way that “goodness [is] ineffectual in the fallible courts of the world” (67); in my reading, the procedures that try to make reparations for sexual violence are similarly ineffectual.
Isabella’s is in *Measure for Measure* – especially when the faith she practices was already suspect in the seventeenth-century protestant England). Additionally, it is difficult and far less fun to interrogate a play on the grounds of sexual violence when both the play and the would-be rapist are otherwise very funny. I suggest that it may be time, however, to carefully examine our disposition to believe the comic villain over the victim, and to impulsively laugh at the comic tropes that may disguise, excuse, or create a context for sexual violence – and I think this precisely because both *Measure for Measure* and *Volpone* are, at heart, about sexual violence, and invite us to explore our assumptions about that violence complexly. Rape troubles both plays in expansive ways that the rest of the chapter explores.

**Violent Comedies**

Sexual violence is a central theme of both Jonson and Shakespeare’s comedies. I have already suggested that Volpone’s rape attempt in act 3 is inextricably connected with the events of act 5 that resolve the play. The presence of both the attempted rape and the harsh judgment of the play’s comic anti-hero suggest to me Volpone’s concern with the problem of sexual violence: it is both the comic catastrophe in the literal middle of the

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82 In her review of arguments condemning Isabella for her refusal to comply with Angelo’s request, Anna Kamaralli also incisively points out that Isabella’s grounds for refusing to have sex with Angelo (besides being understandable on the basis of not wishing to submit to a rapist) are based on “pure principle” (49); the decision is also rational in that she understands compliance with Angelo will result in “public shame, condemnation, ostracism and possible destitution” for having extramarital sex in a culture that overvalues chastity (52). Isabella’s refusal of Angelo’s “bribe” is thus a well-reasoned decision based on principle. But in declaring Isabella’s loyalty to the virtue of chastity either perplexing or an anachronism or unfeeling or an insincere cover-up for a more personally motivated grounds for refusal (claiming that she is afraid of sex), critics adopt a misogynist position that implicitly blames Isabella for “usurp[ing] ... male privilege[s]” including the right to express “anger” in unjust situations (rather than weeping) and the ability to make decisions on rational principles rather than emotion (51).
play and an event that demands final resolution. The final act makes sense of the play generically, because it adds comic closure in the form of justice being correctly administered at last. Celia and Bonario are a crucial part of that closure.

Sexual violence is also one the central problems in Measure for Measure. Rape and sexual violence are themes that haunt the play in their refusal to be resolved. Angelo and Escalus fail to punish the first instance of sexual violence in the play – the rape or attempted rape of Mistress Elbow. Duke Vincentio does punish Angelo for his attempted coercion of Isabella (a scene that occurs, like Volpone’s attempted rape, near the centre of the play) but he does so through further sexual violence: by forcing Angelo (as well as Lucio) to marry someone he does not love.83 Indeed, Pascale Aebischer comments that this conclusion places both men in the position “we are familiar with from Shakespeare’s rape victims”; like Lavinia, they “be[g] for ‘present death’” rather than forced marriage (7). However despicably Angelo has treated Mariana, one must wonder whether a forced marriage is an ideal resolution to her pain at being abandoned: Angelo gives no sign of

83 Vincentio’s use of sexual violence in both the bed trick and the forced marriage as a way of punishing and “correcting” Angelo’s breach of promise is disturbing in a number of ways: the bed-trick and forced marriage makes Angelo a victim of rape in the form of unwanted sex, but also Mariana, who in both the bed trick and in marriage must endure sex with a man who resents her and has proven himself to be abusive when in a position of power. But the ending is also disturbing for its complete forgiveness of Claudio whose marriage seems to represent the only “happy” pairing at the end of the play. But in the actual centre of the play Claudio takes his cue from Angelo, and attempts to coerce Isabella into agreeing to Angelo’s offer. He uses equivocating rhetoric to persuade Isabella that she should have sex with a man who resents her and has proven himself to be abusive: “Sure it is no sin, / Or of the deadly seven it is the least. / ... / If it were damnable, he being so wise, / Why would he for the momentary trick / Be perdurably fined?” (3.1.109-114). Claudio dismisses his sister’s obvious repulsion for Angelo, but also her entire set of values, reducing them to something that can be lost without much regret in a single “trick” (or “trifle”, n.); he fails to consider the consequences the loss of Isabella’s chastity might have in a society that overly values chastity, but also fails to consider what that loss means for his sister who has already promised her chastity to God. Instead, Claudio deploys the same kind of argument Friar Timoteo offers Lucrezia in Machiavelli’s Mandragola – but whereas Timoteo’s reasoning is clearly fallacious and his willingness to pretend that extramarital sex is not a sin is all part of an obvious satire against corrupt clergy, Claudio makes his argument in earnest in order to preserve his own life, and Vincentio barely chides him for it.
making a happy marriage with her, and so the pairing is likely to end up making both partners unhappy. Moreover, as Aebischer argues, forced marriage, with its implicit future of forced sexual duties, is a kind of institutionalising of marital rape. This comedic “resolution” is, as countless critics have noted, severely problematic and merely ensures that sexual violence will have a place in Vienna’s future. Forcing his will on people seems to be a habit of the Duke’s, however, and the products of this habit – the forced marriages and his potential disregard of Isabella’s tacit refusal of his own proposal – trouble the conclusion of the play.

Taken together, these details demonstrate that sexual violence is both an irresolvable problem in *Measure for Measure* and a central problem to which the play wants us to pay attention. It repeatedly hints at the difficulty with which sexual violence is resolved and, indeed, seems to suggest that such violence is likely to continue in future. At the heart of the play is Isabella, not raped, but nearly. The sexual violence she faces is coercion, and therefore not conventional sexual violence in any legal sense. Although in 2.4 Angelo does terrorise her in a sexual way, he does not ultimately rape her (but is himself a rape victim in the bed trick). He also does not leave her body with the signifying marks of rape; consequently, her trial is difficult to process – and is more likely to invoke rape myths than overturn them. Finally, by the end of the play, the presence of sexual violence in Vienna is unresolved, and Isabella herself is threatened with continuing unhappiness as a result. Thus the terror which Angelo inflicts on her in 2.4 threatens to return by the end of the play: if she does find herself coerced into give into the Duke’s proposal, she will be faced with a lifetime of unwanted sex. Aebischer is quite right to
label the proposal as merely “a sanitized equivalent of Angelo’s proposed rape of her” (8). 

Not only is sexual violence a main theme in *Volpone* and *Measure for Measure*, but both plays also present clearly raped bodies, even if they do not *show* these bodies in the same way that *Titus Andronicus* makes a spectacle of Lavinia’s raped and mutilated body. As a first example, I will return to Mistress Elbow who, though she never appears on stage is clearly described as a victim of either rape or attempted rape. The first clue to this fact is the way Pompey refers to the event (repeating Escalus’s phrasing) as something “*done* to Elbow’s wife” (2.1.127 and 128, my emphasis). The passive voice in this instance positions Elbow’s wife as an object acted upon rather than a woman actively complicit in her husband’s cuckolding. The second clue that the act was a potential rape is the fact that Elbow’s wife does not seem to be a frequent customer of the brothel, but was merely a woman who “came in great with child, and longing ... for stewed prunes” (82-3). The desire for food might double as a metaphor for sexual appetite in early modern England, but having an appetite for stewed prunes is, as I observed earlier, not actually the same as having an appetite for illicit sex, however Pompey presents the matter; it is

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84 As Aebischer and Anthony Dawson both point out, productions beginning with John Barton’s 1970 RSC production (where Isabella finally and famously appeared reluctant to accept the Duke’s proposal) have increasingly tended to stress the similarities between Angelo and Duke Vincentio. Notably, Nicholas Hytner’s 1987 production “made sure that the Duke’s sexual advances should be seen as equivalent to Angelo’s (9) with both 2.4 and 5.1 involving a male figure (Angelo and the Duke, respectively) climbing on top of Isabella’s moaning body: Angelo in sexual excitement, the Duke in order to ‘comfort her’” (9-10). Dawson records that the 1985 Stratford, Ontario production similarly drew parallels between the Angelo-Isabella and the Vincentio-Isabella scenes (338-9). Aebischer also records, however, the outrage productions like Barton’s incited in critics, who seem to have difficulty understanding why Isabella would reject both the Duke and the comic resolution (promising “the regeneration of the State”) that his proposal represents (9). These kinds of critical responses reveal the way that comedic resolution is entwined with patriarchal concerns as well as how deeply entrenched critical bias towards reading the plays from a male point of view is.
Pompey, Mistress Overdone, and their customers who confuse the one appetite for the other, and not necessarily Elbow’s wife. A third indicator that she did not enter the brothel expecting to find work as a prostitute is the spontaneous nature of events: Mistress Overdone and Pompey only decide to use Elbow’s wife because they seem to be short one worker and need to supply their customer. In the scenario, Master Froth is clearly a customer – and a loyal one at that: Pompey notes that he always pays for his sex (“Master Froth here ... having eaten the rest, as I said, and, as I said, paying for them very honestly; for, as you know, Master Froth, I could not give you threepence again”, 92-5). Certainly, it is possible that having run out of prostitutes at the moment, Overdone and Pompey simply begin to pair off their customers, but the fact that Elbow’s wife is presented as an object who was acted upon and who resisted Pompey’s machinations (“as she spit in his face so she defied him” 76-7) suggests that she was not a willing customer.\footnote{Between Pompey and Elbow’s stories, it remains unclear whether Elbow’s wife was the victim of rape or attempted rape. Elbow’s assertion that his wife “spit in [Pompey’s] face, so she defied him” suggests that Mistress Elbow may have escaped a rape attempt. But Pompey’s salacious comment that “nothing was done to her once” suggests she was in fact raped, and more than once. In this case, we can interpret Mistress Elbow’s “defiance” as part of the proof that she did not consent to the sexual act, and his earlier remark that “if she had been a woman cardinally given, might have been accused in fornication, adultery, and all uncleanliness there” (72-4) might mean that a rape which otherwise could have been interpreted as consenting adulterous sex is proved to be rape by Mistress Elbow’s defiance in conjunction with her good reputation.} The two remaining “prunes”/testicles to which Pompey refers belong to Froth himself then – who seems to be sitting in the tapster’s house, perhaps waiting for another turn – and Overdone and Pompey seem merely to have capitalised on Mistress Elbow’s unexpected presence in the tapster’s house. That Elbow’s wife happens to enter the tapster’s at this time is their good fortune, and not a plan concocted with Mistress Elbow’s help ahead of time. Finally, if she had entered the tapster’s house looking for sex, it seems unlikely that
Mistress Elbow would have notified her husband of this fact afterwards: first, because the incompetent Elbow is a man who could be easily fooled and cuckolded – repeatedly, if his wife desired; and second, because Mistress Elbow has nothing to gain by lying to her husband about rape in order to cover up extramarital sex. As Breuer notes, rape cases were rarely tried successfully, and rape victims who failed to gain a successful verdict could themselves be tried for slander. Additionally, rape victims were not exactly held up as paragons of chastity, but were more likely to be viewed as sexually suspect – particularly, as Solga points out, if they could not produce the signs that they had clearly resisted a rape attempt. Neither Elbow nor Pompey relates the circumstances under which Elbow discovered the rape or attempted rape – whether his wife reported the event to him after the fact (in other words, he was not present during the sexual encounter) or whether he stumbled upon the scene. If the former, it would only make sense that she tell him about visiting the tapster’s if she really were the victim of sexual violence. Otherwise she might just cuckold him secretly. If the latter, Elbow would have witnessed her resistance first-hand. Possibly Pompey would like Escalus to believe that when Elbow stumbled upon his wife in the brothel she was forced to claim rape to preserve her reputation. But his emphasis that something was done to her and the fact that the scene is presented as a hue and cry/rape hearing suggests that there is at least reasonable doubt that Elbow’s wife consented to the sexual act on trial.

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86 Breuer notes that “as late as 1321, about 49% of rape victims who reported the crime were themselves arrested for false accusations” (12). But as we have seen in the historical criticism on rape, the possibility that women could receive legal and social penalties for being raped continued into the early modern period.
Thus even though her body never appears on stage, the scene hints very heavily that Mistress Elbow was raped, and includes the shadow of a violated body in the form of witness testimony. As I have already pointed out in great detail, as soon as it is invoked, that body is simultaneously buried again under double entendre and malapropisms, but it is nevertheless briefly present and that presence is important. Indeed, given that rape threatens to rupture the comedic frame, and is disruptive to comic laughter, why even gesture towards a raped body – particularly in a “clown” scene – if that body is not important? But of course, Mistress Elbow’s violated body is important precisely because the play is so concerned with sexual violence – and with the way that legal mishandlings of sexual violence have grave consequences for women.

Similarly, *Volpone*, while it does not include an obvious rape spectacle (a la *Titus*), does include that body in a form. How violent the moment of Volpone’s threat of rape is – and how violent the “seduction” scene leading up to the rape is – depends on staging. The text itself does not indicate whether he touches Celia at the moment when he threatens her, “Yield, or I’ll force thee” (3.7.265), and so individual productions must choose to what extent they wish to present the beginnings of a rape spectacle on stage: whether the audience will see the beginnings of a violence which obviously would conclude in the sort of rape spectacle Solga, Bamford, and early modern legal treatises describe, or something that looks less uncomfortably violent – if Volpone is never able to touch Celia before Bonario intervenes, the moment may cause less anxiety for audiences. Similarly, the rest of the scene may involve tactile moments: for example, when Volpone first leaps out of bed and “tries to embrace her” (Ostovich 154sd), or any of the moments
when Volpone is fawning over Celia and outlining his sexual fantasies (attention which is itself a form of sexual violence in that it is unwanted sexual behaviour that Volpone forces on Celia, causing the “humiliation and ... fear” (21) that Doherty and Anderson identify as definitive of sexual violence). Even so, Bonario quickly intervenes and averts the rape. Thus one of the most infamous moments of rape in early modern comedy is a rape that never actually occurs – it is left to directors to decide to what degree the audience perceives the possibility of rape on stage.

Even if a production plays down the attempted rape in 3.7, however, there is no escaping the fact that Volpone does threaten Celia with sexual violence. Thus even if a director chooses to keep the hint of a terrorised and physically abused Celia to the margins of the scene, it is impossible to banish rape from the play entirely. The scene includes not only Volpone’s threat of rape but also an oblique representation of a violated body in the form of the word picture Celia draws and invites us to witness. Consider Celia’s vehement speech to Volpone in response to his invitation to sex:

If you have touch of holy saints – or heaven –
Do me the grace to let me ’scape. – If not,
Be bountiful and kill me. – You do know
I am a creature hither ill betrayed
By one whose shame I would forget it were. –
If you will deign me neither of these graces,
Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust –
...
And punish that unhappy crime of nature,
Which you miscall my beauty – flay my face
Or poison it with ointments, for seducing
Your blood to this rebellion. – Rub these hands
With what may cause an eating leprosy,
E’en to my bones and marrow – anything
That may disfavour me, save in my honour – (242-56) 87

Celia’s speech invokes the rape myth that sexual violence is somehow the fault of female beauty – which incites men in such a way that they cannot control their actions. She frames Volpone’s desire as the effects of a poison or disease with which her beautiful face has infected his “blood”. But although this aspect of her speech would seem to reverse their positions, making Celia the aggressor and Volpone the victim of her unasked-for and desire-raising charms, most of her speech in fact draws attention to the ways in which she is like the victim of rape. Her opening lines (some of which I have not included here), also invoke Bamford’s virgin saints, whom divine guardianship protects when threatened by rape. In these stories, both the goodness of the woman and the divinity protecting her are able to move the sexual aggressor so that he reforms (and also does not rape the chaste woman). The ironic distance between Celia and these female saints is obvious: Celia’s name may imply that she is “heavenly”, but divine intervention does not seem to exist in Volpone’s Venice, and Volpone himself is only moved to anger; he resolves to rape Celia because of her protestations on behalf of her chastity. All irony aside, however, we crucially note that Celia’s speech begins by invoking what are essentially rape narratives and rape myths; whatever critics think of Volpone’s poems and fantasies, she is framing his overtures as belonging to these narratives. Her reminder that she has been betrayed by her husband further insists on her unwillingness to this

87 Ostovich, in her notes to this passage, observes that in the quarto text, the “speech is heavily punctuated with dashes, indicating her near-hysterical terror” (239-59n); Dutton’s edition in the CWBJ clearly follows the quarto’s punctuation.
arrangement, underscoring that she views his bargain with Volpone as sexual violence that brings her “shame”.

Her response also implicitly draws the connection between violence and the unwanted sexual desire Volpone expresses. From Celia’s perspective, to have her face flayed – an extremely painful act – is still a less humiliating and more endurable violence than the unwanted attention Volpone offers her. She clearly indicates that Volpone’s “seductions” are to her a kind of sexual violence – and she wishes herself violently disfigured so that the sexual violence she faces might disappear. The images Celia conjures up invoke a kind of spectre of a mutilated body which I suggest is a version of – or a substitution for – the body that women were expected to show in the hue and cry. Celia’s word-picture invokes blood and torn flesh as the body of the woman who had resisted rape might show blood and torn hair or clothing. Moreover, just as the blood and tears in the hue and cry offer a kind of proof of a woman’s lack of consent, the image of the flayed face to which Celia refers is meant to function as a sign of her resistance and lack of consent to the sexual act Volpone offers: she counter-offers the possibility of her flayed face as a sign of how much she does not want his attentions. The moment in which she makes the plea is an emotional one, as is clear by her frequent exclamations. The violence of the moment is also clear in this scene and the entire theatre audience (in addition to Bonario) are witnesses to that violence, to Celia’s horror, and to the image she conjures for us.

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88 Editors, including Ostovich, commonly substitute exclamation marks in place of the dashes that punctuates her speech in the quarto and in Dutton’s CWBJ edition. Both marks indicate her terror.
The picture she draws is limited in its ability to signal her violence: after all, the avocatori are not present to witness it, and Bonario is as unable to re-describe it, as is Celia herself, in the court room scene in act 4. Even the audience, if critical responses are anything to go by, is capable of forgetting the intensity of the violence when they later question the necessity of Volpone’s punishment. The scene however, also has the potential to dramatise the very thing that Solga suggests Ritter’s Lavinia dramatised: the trauma of rape that extends beyond the visibly marked body. Celia’s real body remains unmarked, but in her anguish she is able to conjure up a body that is horrifically marked. That conjuration, while never physically present on stage, is still powerful, and suggests to me the ways that invisible emotional and psychological wounds may yet remain – even when a body escapes from a rape physically unscathed. The trial scene in act 4 perhaps further dramatises the effects of these psychological marks. In act 2, Celia confronts her husband with forceful and common sense rejoinders about why his reactions to her presence in the window are both are inconsistent and extreme, and in act 3 she firmly reminds him that his plans to leave her with Volpone are against all social propriety (and a means of tarnishing Corvino’s reputation). In 3.7 Celia confronts Volpone with an eloquent and impassioned lament. In 4.5, however, this same woman is suddenly incapable of speaking in defence of herself. At this point in the drama, the men who created the circumstances in which she was nearly raped have ganged together in order to discredit her story – and Celia quickly realises that the avocatori are more inclined to

89 Frances Teague notes that Celia, in fact, talks back to Corvino, “call[ing] his bluff” when he threatens her in act 3, and, despite being his prisoner, maintaining “some power over her jailor” (135). Hallett, too, notes that her responses to Corvino in act 3 are both “resolute” and “perfectly logical”. He also points out that Celia is far more astute than her husband, immediately suspecting Mosca and Volpone’s ruse (58-9).
believe Volpone, Mosca, her husband and the remaining gulls. In fact, the entire scene
dramatises what feminists writing on sexual violence now term the “secondary
victimisation” that commonly occurs in judicial contexts, in which the victim of sexual
violence has her or his experiences called into question, and otherwise mocked and
humiliatingly examined (Doherty and Anderson 18-20). The effects of this secondary
violence are visible when Celia, upon hearing Corvino testify that she is a “whore” (117),
and seeing the avocatori believing his account (claiming “his grief hath made him
frantic”, 131), “swoons” (132 sd). She is temporarily overcome by the cumulative
psychological trauma of having been handed over to a rapist by her own husband and
then disbelieved and herself blamed for promiscuity.\(^90\) This moment, along with the
verbal image of her flayed body in 3.7, represents rape on the comedic stage, and also
attests to the continuing emotional and psychological trauma that rape inflicts beyond the
representable body. Of course acknowledging Celia as capable of having psychological
trauma necessitates reading her as something more than a mere type.

In Measure for Measure, Isabella, too, though not raped, is a clear victim of
sexual violence. As with Celia, the play provides opportunities for the actress playing
Isabella to convey the disgust, horror, and anger at being pushed into having sex with a
man she does not desire. In 2.4, when Angelo proposes that he will pardon her brother if
Isabella will have sex with him, she protests:

\(^{90}\) As Helen Ostovich notes in her introduction to the play, “although the avocatori ... pity her for fainting
(132), they respond to the cumulative attacks on her virtue by registering suspicion: ‘This woman has too
many moods’ (142)” (16). Their inability to comprehend what is happening to Celia when she faints – that
she is distressed because she has been assaulted and then blamed for the attempted rape – or to understand
that the reason she appears to have “too many moods” is because her accusers at the trial are lying when
they blame of her, attests to their ineptitude in understanding sexual violence – both how it is committed
and how women react to that violence.
were I under the terms of death,
Th’impression of keen whips I’d wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed
That longing have been sick for, ere I’d yield
My body up to shame ...
Better it were a brother died at once
Than that a sister, by redeeming him,
Should die for ever.

This speech has been the subject of much critical attention. Many critics, prominently Carolyn E. Brown, have argued that it indicates a kind of unconscious sexual/sadomasochistic desire on Isabella’s part. (Brown goes so far as to suggest that Isabella here tries to provoke Claudio into requesting her to have sex with Angelo as a way of “secretly gratifying her incestuous, abusive desires”, 77.) Reading the play in the context of work on sexual violence and alongside Volpone, however, I find Hallett’s interpretation of the scene far more convincing: he establishes Angelo’s process of asking Isabella to have sex with him as resembling “sexual harassment” (23) that explains her refusal to save her brother as the product of “frustrated rage that sexual harassment evokes in its victim” (26); he also notes that if we read the ruby speech in textual context, we find that far from signalling her desire or acting as a kind of sexual provocation, it expresses “the revulsion Isabella feels for the proposition” (24). Tellingly, Isabella’s response contains a number of similarities to Celia’s: both invoke the idea of shame, which in Isabella’s speech, as in Celia’s, frames the sex Angelo offers as a kind of sexual violence, with its attendant humiliation. (Isabella is, of course, also referring to the shame that attends extramarital sex, but the point is that Isabella would not have to consider the possibility of any kind of sexual or moral shame were it not for Angelo’s coercive offer.) Like Celia, too, Isabella suggests that the physical violence of being whipped to death
(significantly, another form of flaying) is preferable to unwanted sex. Isabella here heightens the extent of the violence she would rather experience, suggesting death would be far less violent than Angelo’s offer of sex, which would be like dying “for ever”.

Again, the connections between sex and violence are clear: Isabella, like Celia, interprets this sex as sexual violence – a violence that Angelo directs against her body and will, as well as the perfect spiritual relationship she imagines herself having with God and which depends upon the preservation of her virginity. And again, Isabella conjures up the image of a torn and bloodied body that similarly serves as proof of her resistance to the sexual violence she encounters.

Additionally, as with 3.7 in Volpone, 2.4 in Measure for Measure allows the possibility of performing the interaction between Angelo and Isabella as a kind of rape. The scene allows Angelo to physically intimidate Isabella, possibly holding her against a wall (or a table, as in both the 1985 and 2013 Stratford productions), grabbing her wrist or body, or drawing her in close as he outlines his demands. Critics may occasionally have difficulty understanding the overvaluation of female chastity that adds to Isabella’s fear of complying. Her response to Angelo that extra-marital sex is like dying an eternal death perhaps made more sense in a less-secular culture, but some members of contemporary audiences who are more used to the idea of pre-marital sex, liberal sexuality, and secular

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91 As Donaldson notes in his discussion of Augustine, however, many religious thinkers in fact believed that a woman who was raped could still claim to be chaste and free of guilt if she did not consent in her will: “One’s body cannot be polluted by another’s act, if one’s mind does not go along with that act; purity is essentially a matter of will, not of the body” (30). Isabella’s attitude seems more reflective of that Donaldson describes as characterising the “early Fathers of the Christian Church” for whom “a woman’s honour is a treasure more precious than life” and who believed that “life should be laid down in order to save this treasure or atone for its loss” (25). Donaldson’s discussion provides an explanation for critics who tend to assume that the play presents Isabella’s attitudes to her chastity as outdated. My argument, however, is that Angelo’s offer is still violence, no matter how outdated Isabella’s reasons for wanting to refuse him are.
codes of conduct may find her logic, at least, difficult to relate to. (I have had students who have responded to her desire to preserve her chastity with puzzlement and scorn.) When the actor playing Angelo is physically violent with Isabella, however – even if that violence is limited to an insistence on physical proximity that Isabella clearly finds uncomfortable – her refusal likely becomes easier to understand. Isabella, like Celia, may protest on moral grounds, but she also protests because she finds the idea of sex with Angelo repugnant. Both 3.7 in *Volpone* and 2.4 in *Measure for Measure* allow the possibility for this kind of performance.

Both plays, then, present sexual violence as a central theme, and both represent sexual violence through verbal descriptions (some oblique, as in the case of Mistress Elbow, and some more overt, as in the case of Celia and Isabella). The plays also hint at the emotional and psychological trauma of sexual violence – including, but not limited to, rape (I will have more to say on this subject momentarily). Finally, both plays show women attempting to perform a sort of hue and cry. I have already briefly noted this point in my discussion of Mistress Elbow, who seems to be following the process of hue and cry by notifying her husband of the violence she suffered. As a constable, Elbow might qualify as a both a “good man” of the town and an (admittedly weak) arm of the legal system, and he in turn brings the case to Angelo and Escalus who function as higher judges. Elbow, Angelo, and Escalus, however, fail in their roles in this legal process: Elbow because of his inability to clearly articulate testimony on behalf of his wife, and Angelo and Escalus because they seem to lack interest in pursuing a case they find tiresome.
Isabella, too, performs a version of a hue and cry, though she follows slightly unconventional procedures – possibly because Angelo attempts “only” to coerce her, and does not try to rape her in the legal sense of the word. Perhaps Isabella is aware that a formal hue and cry cannot make Angelo’s violence actionable, because the hue and cry is not meant to bring coercion to court. As Angelo also reminds her, no one would believe her anyway (155): his “unsoiled name” (155) and “place i’th state” (156) outweigh her own good reputation and lack of power. Precisely because he has not tried to use physical force on her, her body bears no visible proof of a rape attempt. Thus Isabella does not try to raise a hue and cry: when she informs Claudio of Angelo’s offer she does not expect any action to happen at all, and is merely fortunate that Duke Vincentio overhears her confessing the events in a circumstance where she does not know she is being listened to (except by Claudio whose knowledge of Angelo’s actions will end when his own life ends). Isabella can have no reason to lie to her brother in her report of Angelo’s actions – her impassioned plea that he not ask her to sacrifice her spiritual purity is compelling in its sincerity, particularly when she promises him that she would “throw [her life] down for [his] deliverance / As frankly as a pin” (103-5). Thus the Duke can believe her testimony and set in motion the plan to bring Angelo to a sort of public trial where his victims will confront him with his actions in act 5. The play, then, provides a version of legal motions resembling a hue and cry, but not adhering to the process exactly, following Angelo’s coercion of Isabella.

In Volpone, Celia again performs a kind of hue and cry with the help of Bonario who witnesses the attempted rape first hand. Bonario too functions as a “good man”
(indeed, perhaps the only good man of the town), and he helps her bring the case to a higher court. Unfortunately she, like Isabella, has no visible proof of the rape attempt (and in any case, as I suggested, visible proof is unreliable in the courtroom scene in act 4, when Voltore reinterprets Volpone’s performance of age as true and Celia’s tears as feigned). She must rely on her and Bonario’s testimony – which the other men, with their superior speaking abilities, swiftly undermine, themselves quickly becoming more credible in the eyes of the avocatori.

Not only do both plays dramatise the hue and cry, then, but they also ultimately reveal the limitations of the hue and cry. Measure for Measure invites us to consider the breakdown of justice in Vienna when Angelo simply abandons Mistress Elbow’s case before it has been properly heard. When Escalus hears the case he too refuses to listen to Elbow. But a more disturbing comment on the efficacy of the hue and cry is the way Escalus misinterprets the bodies of those involved. Mistress Elbow, because she is not present on the stage, cannot allow her body to speak to the violence she experiences – even if the verbal testimony of the “good man” heavily suggests that such violence occurred. But Froth is present on stage, and as such is able to present his own face for proof of his honesty. Pompey tells Escalus:

I beseech you, sir, look in this gentleman’s face. Good
Master Froth, look upon his honour. ‘Tis for a good purpose.
Doth your honour mark his face?
...
Doth your honour see any harm in his face?
ESCALUS Why, no.
POMPEY I’ll be supposed upon a book his face is the worst thing about him. Good, then – if his face be the worst thing about him, how could Master Froth do the constable’s wife any harm? I would know that of your honour. (132-43)
Here Pompey presents Froth’s body as capable of speaking to his innocence in the same way that the hue and cry supposes a woman’s body can speak to her experiences. The irony in this scene, however, is that there is a disjunction between Froth’s supposedly innocent-looking face and his behaviour and reputation – even Escalus notes that he is likely to run into troubles if he continues associating with tapsters (193-5). As in *Volpone*’s act 4 courtroom scene, this moment begins to reveal some of the fallacies underlying the weight of proof the hue and cry places on bodies, which do not always signify guilt or innocence in clear ways. But Escalus also does not ask whether the absent Mistress Elbow might, like Froth, have an innocent face. The moment emphasises the inequity that results from denying male and female bodies an equal presence in a judicial space. 2.1 also reminds us that male bodies and voices automatically have more credibility than female ones and that wit and an ability to spin words matter more than genuinely good reputation and the truth.

The “trial” in act 5 continues this critique when Duke Vincentio inadvertently demonstrates how easy it would be for the word of a powerful man to nullify the testimony of another woman. When Isabella tells her story he pretends not to believe her, and shows how it is possible for a corrupt man of power to prevent justice from occurring. In response to her account of Angelo’s crimes, he answers, “Away with her. Poor soul, / She speaks this in th’infirmity of sense” (46-7), seeming to side with Angelo in his earlier appraisal that Isabella’s “wits ... are not firm” (33). The audience might believe his earlier promise that he is staging the confrontation in order to help her – though we might also wonder to what degree he constructs the elaborate ruse out of a
narcissistic desire to show up Angelo (and to show off his own cleverness). Regardless, when he does seem to disbelieve Isabella, she has at least been warned that his “speak[ing] against [her] on the adverse side” (4.6.6) is part of his plan to bring Angelo to justice. The moment, however, shows the ease with which the Duke could abuse his position of power to silence victims like Isabella. Throughout the scene she speaks only at his prompting, and is allowed to continue speaking because the Duke seems to find “sense” in her “madness” (61). The Duke has the power to decide whether her words will be accepted as truth or madness, and the rest of his court will follow his lead. While the Duke appears to disbelieve Isabella, demanding corroboration of her story, Escalus refuses to question Angelo’s “worthy” (5.1.301) character, believing rather that “Friar Lodowick” has coerced Isabella and Mariana to make false claims about his coercion (300-1). The audience already knows from 2.1 that Escalus is not always the best judge of character, however, and because we have witnessed Angelo’s coercion of Isabella (and therefore know that she is speaking the truth), we know that his judgment in error here. Escalus is in fact a “good man”, but he demonstrates he is more likely to automatically side with Angelo’s good reputation, and with the Duke’s opinions of both Angelo and Isabella, rather than a woman claiming sexual coercion. The scene reveals the kind of privilege that men of good status and reputation have in a hue and cry – it is Isabella’s testimony, reputation, and motives that are in doubt by default, while Angelo is automatically in a position of innocence. Isabella (the victim) must prove herself innocent and Angelo guilty – a task made much more difficult when the “good” men overseeing the case are either biased towards the sexual aggressor, or capable of deforming the truth.
The emphasis the play generally, and 5.1 in particular, places on the injustice women experience when male law-keepers become lax or corrupt suggests to me that we should not be so hasty in dismissing Mistress Elbow merely because she does not appear on stage; nor should we reduce her to a joke. What this scene indicates is one more consequence for women of the abandonment of just rule: when just rule is abandoned, the process by which women can bring rape to trial fails. Moreover, women cannot raise the hue and cry in a state where men view them as convenient sexual objects that can be bought with money and power and then discarded. Nor can the crime of rape be taken seriously when men – whether those with a great degree of power like Angelo, or those with a little bit of power, like Pompey – cannot control their sexual appetites.

Volpone offers much the same criticism of the efficacy of the hue and cry and related legal processes relating to the prosecution of sexual violence. When Celia tries to report Volpone’s attempted rape she has no visible signs of that violence on her body (a fact which again points to the limitations of relying on the victim’s body to prove sexual violence); additionally, the man she is charging with attempted rape is known to be too “weak” and “feeble” from age to make such an act likely (4.5.14-15); additionally again, the avocatori are unable to see through the signs of age and sickness Volpone performs and he has a host of other men who corroborate his illness. In addition to Mosca’s descriptions of the enfeebled Volpone (quoted above), Voltore points to Volpone’s seemingly aged face, limbs, and hands as a way of testifying to his sexual impotence (4.6.20-9) at the same time that he names Volpone a “good gentleman” (48). Throughout the scene the same men emphasise Celia’s bad character: Corvino names her a “whore”
(4.5.117) and a “jennet” (119), Voltore calls her “a creature of most professed / And prostituted lewdness” (144-5), Lady Would-be, “a chameleon harlot” (4.6.2). They also corroborate her supposed sexual relationship with Bonario, and Mosca recounts how Bonario and Celia laid a plan to “cry out a rape” falsely (4.5.138). Collectively, the men (and Lady Would-be) discredit both Celia’s claim and the reputation of her witness, Bonario, rendering the entire process of the hue and cry inefficacious. At the beginning of the trial the avocatori seem in favour of Celia and Bonario: they point out that Voltore has as little proof as Celia and Bonario, asking him “what proofs have you of this?” (93), following his claims, and repeatedly remind themselves that Bonario and Celia both have good reputations: “The gentlewoman has been ever held / Of unreproved name” (3-4), “So has the youth” (4), “these be strange turns!” (59), “The young man’s fame was ever fair and honest” (60). By the end of the trial, however, the testimony of Voltore, Mosca, Corvino, and Lady Would-be has thoroughly won them over. 4.5 and 4.6 are a worrisome lesson in how rape trials can go very wrong, when duplicitous witnesses with motivation to bury the truth of a rape claim outnumber (or are simply louder than) the victim and the “good men” acting on her behalf. The play does not offer much in the way of resolutions to mishandling of truth in Celia’s trial, but it does seem to diagnose the hue and cry as largely ineffective. Moreover the scenes ultimately seem to suggest that the spectacle of the victim’s violated body, on which much of the hue and cry depends in order to validate a victim’s claims, is inadequate (since it cannot register a wide scope of sexual violences, including attempted rape), and almost pointless when men like Voltore insist on
reinterpreting the signs of distress it does bear – especially when such men have the leading voices in a rape trial.

Thus though at first it may seem that comedy’s inability to overtly dramatise the raped body without violating the comic frame hinders its ability to talk about rape and other sexual violences, I have illustrated that comedy can be particularly effective in exploring issues related to sexual violence. I will go further and suggest that it is precisely because Volpone and Measure for Measure do not represent the sexually violated body in conventional ways that they are able to effectively represent rape and other sexual violences in ways that cannot be reduced to predetermined, easily appropriated, understandable physical symbols.

The efficacy of both plays’ ability to talk about rape hinges on two factors: the first is that in both plays the audience witnesses events that, though they do not culminate in rape, are still clearly instances of reprehensible sexual violence. I have suggested that Elbow and Bonario are both “good men” who witness and try to bring the rapes to justice, but we the audience are also witnesses, and we are equally important in acknowledging and testifying to sexual violence. Even though we cannot affect the outcome of either play with our testimony/knowledge of the events we witness, seeing Angelo’s coercion and Volpone’s rape attempt first-hand should prompt us to read the plays generally with more care, paying close attention to how both dramas respond to these moments of sexual violence. When we see Volpone and Angelo lying about their rape attempts we are in a privileged position to know that they are lying, and this knowledge can qualify or reflect on our responses to the comic tropes that direct us towards laughter. For example, if we
laugh along with the double entendres and malapropisms in 2.1 of Measure for Measure, at the expense of Mistress Elbow, then perhaps by the final act – after we have seen how easily the hue and cry can fail to obtain reparation for women who have been the victims of sexual violence – we might pause and reconsider our earlier laughter, thinking carefully about how comic tropes worked to reproduce a misogynist rape culture in which the hue and cry cannot function. In Volpone, similarly, our witnessing of Volpone’s rape attempt should make us immediately reconsider our opinions of his extravagant poetry, noticing now (if we had not already noted the fact) how his lyrics are laden with rape imagery. We should also perhaps take greater stock of the way that our laughter in the scene is derived from the discrepancy between an unwilling woman and an overly enthusiastic man: perhaps the moment should prompt us to reconsider the dramatic and narrative traditions – including fabliaux and commedia – from which this comic scenario descends. Our knowledge that Celia is the victim of a rape attempt also colours our perceptions of 4.5 and 4.6. Uncomfortably, it is because we know that Celia is telling the truth about Volpone’s rape attempt that these scenes might in fact be funny. The scene is laden with malicious though brilliant irony: Voltore points out to the avocatori that appearances can be deceiving (4.5.61-62) and that they should be wary of trusting someone just because they have a good reputation, or because they seem to be telling the truth. Also funny is the speed with which the fortune hunters are led by Mosca’s asides to tell more and more lies, and the stupidity of the avocatori who are completely taken in by those lies and made completely unable to see the truth. The irony becomes even more hilarious because as the audience we are smugly in the position to see everything and to
know exactly what goes on. But if the scenes are funny, they are uncomfortably funny, I think: the victim of all our laughter in this scene is Celia who is unable to get the justice she in fact deserves. Perhaps we are not laughing directly at her or even thinking in realistic terms that she is a victim of sexual violence who is mocked and derided. We may only be laughing at the sheer bravado of Volpone, Mosca, and the fortune hunters, and the stunning way they spin lies. But the consequence of this laughter is that Celia experiences a secondary rape in a public courtroom. When she faints, among all the laughter on stage, we may even then forget that her fainting is a sign of her overwhelmed feelings at being made a victim of sexual violence a second time – her fainting may even seem absurd in the moment. If we laugh at this scene, however, our laughter returns to shame us in the final act, which firmly punishes Volpone and the other aggressors and vindicates Celia, finally confirming where our sympathies ought to have lain. Ultimately, then, the fact that we know that Volpone and Angelo are sexual aggressors may lead us to pay attention to the ways that both plays interrogate how comic tropes cover up or distract from sexual violence, and may help us think closely about what both plays are saying about how power (particularly patriarchal power) works in legal processes meant to represent women.

The second factor that enables both plays to talk about sexual violence effectively is the way that they represent rape, rape attempts, and coercion as demonstrably reprehensible actions. Since I have discussed this point at length I will merely re-emphasise a few strands of my argument here. In Measure for Measure, Angelo and Escalus dismiss Mistress Elbow’s rape case, but that scene reveals their poor judgment of
character, and their inability to make sound decisions when acting in the role of judges. This poor judgment returns to haunt them in 5.1 when their inability to see the truth because of hypocrisy and selfish motivations (Angelo) and bias in favour of the men who are sexual aggressors (Escalus) is humiliatingly exposed in front of the court – suggesting that the play in the end condemns the qualities which lead to the mishandling of justice in Mistress Elbow’s rape hearing. Angelo is not, in other words, a man to be admired. Even more importantly, the play does not draw much distinction between rape and coercion: even though Angelo does not rape Isabella, he is nevertheless condemnable. In Volpone, similarly, rape is (as I have argued already) the crime that necessitates the severe punishments in the final scene, which firmly positions both the rape attempt and the perversion of justice in act 4 as matters deserving redress.

I hope I have by now demonstrated how both plays raise troubling questions about the validity of rape myths – such as the charge, levelled at both Celia and Isabella, that women make rape false rape claims for personal benefit. In fact the plays show that it is not women who lie about sexual violence, but men, who are willing to disrupt legal processes in order to preserve their good name. Both plays also challenge narrow definitions of rape and sexual violence, by including coercion, marital sexual violence, and attempted rape (which was in fact a crime in early modern England, though the plays point to the difficulty with proving it). Finally, the plays challenge the usefulness of conventional rape spectacles in obtaining justice, and the efficacy of legal processes like the hue and cry.
Instead, both plays point to the psychological anguish of women under threat and the impossibility of closure to rape trauma. *Measure for Measure* introduces the problem of sexual violence in 2.1 in an episode that reveals the obstacles to finding even legal closure to the problem of rape. This difficulty resolving sexual violence is repeated in 5.1, in a scene that suggests again the difficulties of achieving legal closure and reparation to sexual violence, but adds to that the difficulty of finding closure to the emotional and psychological trauma sexual violence inflicts. Duke Vincentio proposes twice to Isabella – and does so, notably, *after* he lies to her about her brother being dead, and then reveals Claudio is still alive:

If he be like your brother, for his sake
Is he pardoned; and for your lovely sake
Give me your hand and say you will be mine.
He is my brother too. But fitter time for that.

(484-7)

The Duke almost appears to be capitalising on Isabella’s relief, and perhaps her gratefulness that Vincentio has saved and pardoned Claudio – and so he uses her affection for her brother and his power over Claudio’s life and death in a way that is akin to how Angelo uses his power over Claudio’s sentence in order to coerce Isabella into sex. That she might be angry with him for manipulating her does not appear to cross his mind until he sees her silence in response to his proposal. The Duke’s rapid change of conversational topics suggests Isabella’s reaction is one of disapproval: in many productions, she is visibly reluctant to entertain such a proposal (and the fact that Vincentio has to ask her twice – the second time at 527-30, which has no textual response – does indicate that she is unenthusiastic). Vincentio seems to have many flaws as a ruler: he is lax about enforcing the laws about sexual promiscuity and then leaves his proxy to rectify the
results of that laxness; he constantly tests his subjects, including Angelo, Escalus, Lucio, and Isabella; in his proposal to her, he seems willing to remind Isabella that she owes him (and his authority) for saving her brother’s life; he forces couples into unwilling marriages. It seems doubtful that he will suddenly reform and become a good, non-coercive leader, and his willingness to abuse his authority makes him no better than Angelo. Thus we might expect Isabella to express the same fear and repulsion she feels at Angelo’s offer in 2.4 – except that there seems to be no one left to intervene on her behalf and help her escape a lifetime of marital sexual violence. Sexual violence has a continuing place in Vienna’s future. Isabella’s silence might just as well speak to her emotional or mental disquiet: even though she is not raped, she is still emotionally distressed because of institutionalised sexual violence in the form of a coerced/forced marriage.

At this point it perhaps goes without saying that we might turn the same dubious eye on the forced marriages between Angelo and Mariana and Lucio and Kate Keepdown. These marriages suggest not only that sexual violence has a place in Vienna’s future, but also that its presence is multiplied. The multiplication of the play’s central problem – sexual violence – in the conclusion makes Measure for Measure an odd and bleak comedy. Marriage is, of course, a common resolution to comedy, and the mechanism for solving problems like social or neighbourly rifts (as in Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday, 1599) or overcoming blocking parent figures (as in Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, c.1613), or reabsorbing promiscuous figures back into the community (as with Tim’s marriage to the Welsh lady in Chaste Maid – or indeed, in Lucio and Kate’s
marriage in *Measure for Measure*). But here the familiar trope of the final marriage troubles the comedic structure to which it nominally offers closure. As I have suggested, Angelo’s marriage to Mariana and Lucio’s to Kate Keepdown promise future unhappiness both to the husbands who do not want to be married and the wives who may end up mistreated because they are not loved. Indeed, Lucio compares a forced marriage with a prostitute to “pressing to death, whip- / ping and hanging” (515-16). Angelo, when the Duke makes him confess to abandoning Mariana and coercing Isabella, tellingly asks for “Immediate sentence ... and sequent death” (365) rather than the chance to repair his relations with Mariana. Following the marriage, Angelo reiterates “I crave death more willingly than mercy. / ‘Tis my deserving, and I do entreat it” (470-1). While the statement could merely reflect the extent of his humiliation and guilt, productions like that of the 2013 Stratford Ontario company hint very strongly that Angelo is asking for death because he finds it preferable to his forced marriage (throughout the scene, he only took Mariana’s hand at her insistence, and followed her around the stage with his head hanging down). Lucio certainly and Angelo probably link their marriages to violence and death in the same way that Isabella earlier linked coerced sex to violence and death. But Angelo and Lucio will have to live with their marriages and all their attendant unhappiness and culturally sanctified sexual violences (in the form of the sexual

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92 Though she does not focus on the problem of sexual violence in the play, Jean Howard argues that the play “deliberately toys with expectations about comedy” as a way of making us notice that there is a typical comedic “framework” in place and as a way of interrogating comic tropes and comedic structure (119). The play presents us with characters (particularly Angelo and Isabella) who are seemingly comic types but end up being faced with complex problems and “emotions of genuinely tragic scope” (120). In light of these problems, the typical comic resolution seems inadequate – “half a lie, a wish, more than a fact” (121), with the result that the play ultimately draws our attention to how the problems of real life are capable of being resolved by a “formula” (125).
obligations one “owes” a partner in a culture where there was no such concept as marital rape). They are also unlikely to treat their wives with kindness or respect in their sexual relations. And as with Isabella, their on-stage reactions to their marriages – disgust, humiliation, and dispirited resignation – suggest they experience strong psychological and emotional anguish in response to this sexual violence. This anguish is not alleviated by the close of the play; the sexual violence that enters the play at 2.1 is an unresolvable wound that the structure of comedy cannot close.  

Similarly, in Volpone, the sexual violence Celia endures continues to haunt the play, refusing to be wholly resolved at the play’s conclusion. She is freed from her abusive husband by the end, with Corvino sentenced to physical punishment and humiliation (5.12.140-2) and Celia “sen[t] ... / Home to her father with her dowry trebled” (42-5), that is, given standard bed and board separation (Ostovich 143n). This separation must be a relief to her, but places her in a liminal position, unable to remarry or use her dowry until her husband dies. She is not entirely free, then, to forget her abusive husband’s role in her life. The liminality of her position might symbolically mirror the way that trauma recurs following sexual violence and domestic abuse. We might also question how happy she is by the play’s resolution: the scene provides very little in the way of verbal responses from her following the avocatori’s pronouncement. Early on in the scene, when the avocatori finally acknowledge that Celia’s story is true because Voltore has finally admitted his role in misleading the avocatori (1-4), Celia exclaims in

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93 Sexual violence arguably enters the play in its very first lines when the Duke proposes to suddenly enforce a law punishing expressions of unmarried sex – a law which immediately threatens to execute Claudio, leave pregnant women like Julia destitute and without a husband to support her, and bawds like Mistress Overdone (as well as her prostitutes) without any immediate source of income.
relief “How ready is heaven to those that pray!” (5), but she does not speak again until the end of the scene when she pleads for mercy for Volpone and Corvino. We must guess at her gestures and expressions throughout the rest of the scene: is she entirely satisfied at the way things turn out? Does she seem to recover her strength or is she exhausted by the culmination of events over the last three acts? Her request for mercy on behalf of her aggressors is slightly puzzling – indeed the avocatori seem irritated by her request which, though an appropriate and expected response from good wives like Othello’s Desdemona and The Changeling’s Isabella, whose unfailing virtue is meant to be celebrated, but seems out of place in a corrupt space like Volpone’s Venice, where seeming virtue and self-sacrifice are inherently suspect. The avocatori remind her “you hurt your innocence, suing for the guilty” (106). Perhaps their response is merely one last opportunity to highlight the ironic distance between the pragmatic avocatori/Venetians and the heavenly Celia: Celia’s request for mercy, of course, need not offend her innocence, and may simply demonstrate the extent of her goodness. The line may also indicate, as Ostovich argues, the avocatori’s black-and-white thinking and tendency to blame victims, suggesting that Celia’s defence of criminals makes her as good as a criminal herself, and thus threatens her hard-won reputation: “Even though Celia is eventually freed from both imprisonment and marriage, the judge’s final warning to her ... smears her good name” (16). Or possibly the moment is a sign of Celia’s emotional and psychological defeat, showing her inability, even now, to fully extricate herself from her aggressors. It may be worth noting that following her swooning in 4.6, the Celia who in acts 2 and 3 is capable of responding forcefully and eloquently to Corvino and Volpone disappears, never to
return in the play: by act 5, although she has recovered her voice, she is only able to speak one and a half sentences: “How ready is heaven to those that pray!” and “And mercy” (105). Her character dwindles over the course of the play as the violence against her increases, and her lack of responses suggests to me that an actress might perform her character in 5.12 as having been affected by sexual violence in a way that is not easily resolved by a court ruling. Such a portrayal surely would not be inconsistent with the infamous severity of the final act.

Ultimately, both Measure for Measure and Volpone are comedies that raise complex questions about how we think about, define, represent, and “resolve” sexual violence. Tragedy is able to absorb rape into its generic structure in a way that is mimetic of how judicial processes like the hue and cry appropriate female rape victim’s experiences of sexual violence, but comedy’s very structure is often troubled when it attempts to represent rape. Moreover, if tragedy closes off the experiences of rape victims by celebrating men’s victories over male rapists in the tragic conclusion, then comedy presents rape and other sexual violences as a problem that resists easy representation and closure. In my next chapter, I will return to Volpone and the cuckold narrative (this time reading the play alongside The Devil Is an Ass) to discuss at greater length how comic tropes encode and normalise sexual violence – and to consider how Jonson’s drama exposes and suggests alternatives to the quotidian of sexual violence in early modern drama and culture.
Chapter Three

Jonson and Coverture Law:

Rewriting the Cuckold Tradition in *Volpone* and *The Devil Is an Ass*

Introduction

As my previous chapter demonstrated, comic tropes that seem initially funny (the entendres concealing the rape of Mistress Elbow) or innocuous (“seductions” that are little more than attempted rape when we examine them from the perspective of the women involved) are often more troubling than they might first appear. This present chapter examines more closely a standard plot introduced in the last chapter – the cuckold plot – and uncovers the manifold ways in which this plot encodes sexual violence within it. The violence inherent in cuckold plots, however, is particularly difficult to see because it depends upon thinking about the trope in context with real laws related to marriage, adultery, and separation/divorce that governed the lives of early modern women. Many of these laws, like those concerning rape, are themselves delimited by the legal commonplace that wives were the property of their husbands rather than equal partners in marriage. The chapter argues that such laws compromised a wife’s ability to make meaningful choices regarding extramarital sex. Thus although critical interpretations of cuckold narratives focus on what those narratives reveal about anxieties men may have had about their ability to control their sexual property and defend their masculine identity, the plot has similarly complex meaning for women that critics have not typically explored.
Many comedies represent women happily capitulating to marriage and related ideas of companionship, chastity, and sexual fidelity. The marriages in plays like Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (c.1613), and Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (c.1598) and *Twelfth Night* (1601), to name just three examples, seem to be particularly modelled on ideals of companionate marriage that arose in the sixteenth century: companionate marriage made husbands and wives spiritual equals, but retained the idea of wifely obedience in legal and household matters. For example, couples like Moll and Touchwood Jr or Master and Mistress Allwit in Middleton’s *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Beatrice and Benedick in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, and Viola and Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night* are couples who are well-matched in terms of their desire for each other, their determination to make their marriage work, and their lively wit; simultaneously, the women in each of these marriages do not overtly challenge their (would-be) husband’s authority (the men in *Chaste Maid* do much of the initial plotting, Beatrice appeals to Benedick to avenge her cousin, and Viola waits until the Duke selects her rather than initiating their relationship). Such comedies, then, at the same time that they tacitly invoke the structures of companionate marriage, do not fully take up the debates in early modern England about marriage law – debates that sometimes challenged the “ideal” of companionate marriage as well as marriage in its other permutations. Some early modern men and women, however, did not take inequality in marriage for granted, but recognised the very real problem women might face when paired with abusive or foolish husbands. The conduct books, pamphlets, and sermons debating how much control such husbands should have over their wife are countless. Comedies about
marriage and family take up aspects of these debates, but often the genre also tries to maintain a comic ending which usually depends on the setting up or restoring of happy marriages based on patriarchal models; many comedies thus sacrifice some of their “feminist” or humanist commentary on the problems inherent in marriage in favour of reiterating its idealistic and fictional norms. I took up this problem in relation to rape and rape hearings in the previous chapter; according to some early modern drama, the sexual violence in rape can be nullified by marriage, which writes over and thus refuses to acknowledge violent and potentially traumatic sexual experiences. These violences, if acknowledged, act as challenges to the comic equation of marriage with happiness and order. In this chapter, I consider the way that women’s responses to cuckoldry reveal – and indeed depend on – the idea of wifely submission to a husband’s authority. Many cuckold plays work to sustain this power dynamic and are responses to the threat that patriarchal authority might collapse under challenge by early modern women. The comic ending to most cuckold plays usually addresses male (rather than female) anxieties, and often celebrates the restitution of a household based on masculine authority – while claiming to satisfy the concerns of both husband and wife. Jonson’s Volpone (1606-7) and The Devil Is an Ass (1616), however, dramatise two marriages that operate fairly overtly under the influence of coverture law – a practice which declares, as Frances Dolan outlines, that “husband and wife should become one legal agent by means of the husband’s subsumption of his wife into himself” (Marriage and Violence 3). Dolan notes further that “while common law did not wholly define married women’s legal status, the fiction that husband and wife achieved ‘unity of person’ had some wide-ranging influence
in the early modern period and beyond” (3). I will argue that in pointing to some of the ways in which coverture law did define women’s legal – and more precisely their lack of legal and economic – autonomy, Jonson’s plays draw out the gendered inequalities that underlie all early modern marriage structures (including companionate marriage) and show how these inequalities oppressively hinder a wife’s ability to actively reform a bad marriage. Without this agency, cuckoldry becomes neither an option to be merrily refused nor a relief from a bad marriage. Celia’s and Frances Fitzdottrel’s refusal of their would-be lovers is in some sense a refusal of the comic and festive environment of city comedy. Most importantly, the moral and economic survival of both women depends upon this refusal. Ultimately Celia’s and Frances’s responses to cuckoldry suggest that the typical comic endings of cuckold plots are not ones which adequately address women’s marital concerns.

**Cuckold Plots in Early Modern Drama**

Central to my argument is the claim that Jonson’s plays are somewhat different in their concerns from other cuckold drama in the period, which tends to be primarily taken up with how cuckoldry affects masculine power. I do not wish to risk claiming that all cuckold dramas are the same, however; therefore it will be helpful to first survey the extensive number and variety of early modern cuckold plays in order to see the different ways that early modern dramatists responded to the threat of cuckoldry. Extensive previously published work informs my thinking about cuckold drama and undergirds my own method of organising this comic trope. In her study of cuckold stories in French
fabliaux, Sheila Nayer proposes that cuckold narratives have “three distinct outcomes” (29). Nayer’s assertion is itself grounded in Phillipe Ménard’s categorisation of cuckold plots in which “a deceived [husband] ... remains ignorant of his cuckolded lot; or ... suspects he’s being deceived but is persuaded otherwise; or ... eventually learns of the deception” (29). Nayer reworks Ménard’s categorisation, extending it in order to account for stories in which no cuckoldry takes place, and to draw a distinction between comic and tragic plots:

what emerges is that there are generally only three outcomes to the tales: (i) an act of infidelity takes place of which the deceived remains ignorant; or (ii) no act of infidelity takes place, and so there is no cause for retribution; or (iii) an act of infidelity takes place of which the deceived becomes aware and, hence, he must exact vengeance. (29)

At the core of Ménard’s and Nayer’s categorisations is the notion of “civic shame” (25), which, according to Nayer, is not just an “imaginative ingredient” as Ménard claims (27), but the “driving force” of French fabliaux. Shame necessitates that the man who knows he has been cuckolded must avenge his honour. Ménard and Nayer’s classificatory systems already point out the masculine-centric concerns of the cuckold plot, and are helpful both in making sense of medieval cuckold narratives, and in beginning to organise my thinking about early modern cuckold plots. Their categorisations, however, do not suitably account for the range of cuckold plots on the early modern English stage. For example, in addition to the outcomes that Nayer lists, my own categorisation of early modern cuckold plays tries to account for plots in which a husband’s foolishness, abuse, or neglect of his wife does not necessarily justify or lead to the wife consenting to cuckoldry, plots in which the absence of cuckoldry does not necessarily indicate the
absence of shame for the husband, those in which the absence of cuckoldry is still followed by retribution on the part of the jealous husband, and finally those plots in which the husband actively suppresses, ignores, or celebrates the knowledge that he has been made a cuckold. In accounting for these plots, I am extending the scope of Nayer and Ménard’s categorisations not only to include plots heavily indebted to the medieval cuckold narrative tradition, but also to account for some of the more prevalent new urban cuckold plots we find on the Jacobean stage. Ultimately, I will also draw connections between Jacobean cuckold plots and the work that has been done on Caroline and Restoration cuckold plays, to draw a trajectory from the medieval to the Restoration periods. I will then turn my attention to discussing the ways that Jonson’s dramas resist the predominant concern with masculine anxieties over cuckoldry that cuckold dramas most frequently represent.

Before delineating between different variations on the trope, I should define what I mean by “cuckold plot”. The body of criticism on cuckoldry is extensive and examines all aspects of the subject, including representations of the cuckoo and capon at the heart of cuckold metaphors,94 cuckoldry as a metaphor for anxieties about phallic mastery in patriarchal culture,95 for the challenges and desires of credit and monetary economies,96

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95 Articles that link cuckoldry and phallic mastery include, Philip D. Collington’s “Sans Wife: Sexual Anxiety and the Old Man in Shakespeare” (2006), Gary Kuchar’s “Rhetoric, Anxiety, and the Pleasures of Cuckoldry in the Drama of Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton” (2001), Millington and Sinclair’s “The Honourable Cuckold: Models of Masculine Desire” (1992), and Douglas Bruster’s “The Horn of Plenty: Cuckoldry and Capital in the Drama of the Age of Shakespeare” (1990).

96 Bruster and Kuchar also connect phallic mastery to early modern credit and capitalist economies.
for class climbing,\textsuperscript{97} for social performances of knowledge,\textsuperscript{98} and, ultimately, as ways of speaking about Whig-Tory politics in the Restoration.\textsuperscript{99} The cuckolded husband is seemingly ubiquitous on the early modern stage. For my purposes here, and in order to limit my focus, I will be working with plays where cuckoldry is one of the central problems of the play, rather than a subplot or a metaphor only. Underlying my reading of all cuckold plays, including \textit{Volpone} and \textit{The Devil Is an Ass}, is the basic premise that the cuckold trope is almost always concerned with the question of what it means to be a good husband and ruler.

Broadly speaking, a cuckold plot is any which introduces cuckoldry as a possibility (even if no cuckoldry actually results), and which wants to examine this possibility in some detail. Broadly again, cuckold plots can be immediately divided into two kinds: those where cuckoldry happens and those where it does not. This division does not follow along clear generic lines; comedies where husbands obsess over cuckoldry that never actually occurs are common, and include Shakespeare’s \textit{The Merry Wives of Windsor} (1597-98), Webster and Dekker’s \textit{Westward Ho!} (c.1605), Chapman’s \textit{The Widow’s Tears} (1605), Jonson’s \textit{The Devil Is an Ass}, Shirley’s \textit{The Gamester} (1633), and Brome’s \textit{The Antipodes} (1638), among others. Tragedies where husbands obsess over cuckoldry that never materialises are less frequent (although \textit{Othello}, 1603-4, is a significant and rare exception). More often cuckoldry (especially accompanied by ravishment) is precisely the catalyst for tragic action. After dividing cuckold plays into

\textsuperscript{97}See, for example, J. Douglas Canfield’s “Tupping Your Rival’s Women: Cit-Cuckolding as Class Warfare in Restoration Comedy” (1996).
\textsuperscript{98}For a late example see Kelleye Corcoran’s “Cuckoldry as Performance, 1675-1715” (2012).
\textsuperscript{99}Both J. Douglas Canfield and Anita Pacheco in “Reading Toryism in Aphra Behn’s Cit-Cuckolding Comedies” are good examples of this common argument (2004).
those where cuckoldry happens (comic or tragic), and those where it does not (mainly comic), I divide the former into plays where cuckoldry – when it happens – is disastrous and irreversible and plays where cuckoldry happens, but can be overlooked, redeemed, or explained away. Here one can divide along generic lines with a greater degree of certainty: amongst plays where cuckoldry happens, comedies tend to resolve the problem of marital infidelity by overlooking or forgiving the act, while tragedies pull the act into the didactic tragic centre of the play.

I will return to consider comic cuckold plots – both those in which cuckoldry actually happens and those in which it does not – in further detail momentarily. First, however, it will be useful to briefly consider tragic cuckold plots in order to outline the sorts of lessons they want to teach, with a view to comparing them to comic plots later. Tragic cuckold plots can be divided into plots in which a man is the central agent of cuckoldry and those in which a woman is. Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622) offers a paradigmatic example of a play in which a female body is predominately the source of domestic tragedy: the play does invite some sympathy for Beatrice-Joanna, whose father (Vermandero) engages her to a man (Alonzo de Piracquo) whom she does not love. Beatrice-Joanna is manipulated by men like her father, her husband (Alsemero), and her father’s serving man (De Flores). The play points to the potential tyranny with which men might rule over women, particularly in the comic subplot where Isabella is confined in a madhouse governed by her old husband’s lustful and corrupt servant. It points to this tyranny again in the Beatrice-Joanna plot to the extent that Vermandero’s choice of a husband is both short-sighted and seemingly more calculated to please himself.
than his daughter. The play’s sympathy for Beatrice-Joanna is limited, however; the first act presents her as too changeable in her passions, and limited in her capacity to make rational decisions. By act 3, De Flores has named her a “whore in [her] affections” (3.2.142), and leaps to the conclusion that her murderous passion thus renders her body available to be raped. Moreover, the play invites the audience to judge Beatrice-Joanna by the standards of the chaste Isabella in the comic plot. *The Changeling*’s dichotomy presents the audience with typically “good” and “bad” women: the latter type of woman attempts to determine her own marriage, defies her husband and father and ends up a lustful, duplicitous, and murderous “creature” (3.4.137), who destroys familial structures. Not only does she have sex with a man – De Flores – who is not her husband, but she also tricks Alsemero into having sex with a woman who is not his wife (her maid Diaphanta); the betrayal and murder of her intended husband Alonzo is also a betrayal of her father (since Vermandero chose Alonzo), and destroys both the relationship between father and daughter and that between father and son-in-law. In contrast, Isabella, though courted by a number of men who have infiltrated her husband’s madhouse, ultimately rejects those suitors, and returns to her husband – even though he keeps her unhappily imprisoned along with the asylum’s inmates. In the final scenes of the play, having proved her fidelity, she does appear alongside him as the pair attempt to capture Alonzo’s murderer; she sees the final spectacle of the dying Beatrice-Joanna, and is, along with the audience, a witness to the fate of disobedient and unfaithful wives. The play, then, challenges the tyranny with which some men rule over female bodies but it also presents the figure of the woman ungoverned by a man as compulsively destructive to the patriarchal unit.
Thomas Heywood’s domestic tragedies *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) and *The English Traveller* (1633) teach similar lessons. In the former, the Frankford household is infiltrated by Wendoll, who seduces Frankford’s wife Anne and, as Lena Cowen Orlin has noted, disorders the gender and class hierarchies of the entire household as a result.\(^{100}\) The play does fault Wendoll for violating both the marriage of Frankford and Anne and the friendship between Wendoll and Frankford; Anne, however, shoulders the majority of both the blame and the punishment: the play shows her willingly dying of starvation to atone for her marital infidelity. While the play’s didactic force is partly levelled at the cuckoldi\(^{g}\) ng Wendoll, the more central lesson is, as in Middleton and Rowley’s tragedy, the need for female bodies and female sexuality to be attentively policed by a male lawgiver.\(^{101}\) *The English Traveller* repeats this pattern, with Dalavill, the man who violates the marriage vows of Wincott and his unnamed wife, escaping on his horse, while Wincott’s wife commits suicide for the same crime. Again, the lesson is that an ungoverned and lusty wife promises to destroy both gender-power hierarchies and the bonds between male friends: tellingly, *The English Traveller* offers narrative consolation for the domestic tragedy in the way of Young Geraldine – also in love with Wincott’s wife but refusing to cuckold him – becoming friends with Wincott, in much the same way that Vermandero ultimately adopts Alsemoro as his son in replacement for his wicked daughter Beatrice-Joanna. The hope at the end of both tragedies is that the bonds between men can be restored. All three plays connect the need to control wifely lust to the

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101 Kim Solga, however, has suggested that this lesson can be challenged in performance, depending on how much and what kind of attention a production gives to Beatrice-Joanna’s violated body (141-75).
success of an ordered patriarchal culture. A woman’s lust threatens not only the order of a single relationship, but all relationships between men and women, masters and servants, fathers and sons, and male friends.\footnote{Arden of Faversham follows a similar trajectory as The Changeling, A Woman Killed with Kindness, and The English Traveller, with a woman’s adulterous desires leading to the destruction of domestic order and happiness.}

Tragic cuckold plots in which a man is the primary agent of cuckoldry are no less suspicious of the need to guard wifely chastity, and predict the same destruction of the political and social relationships that undergird patriarchal culture when women are left to protect their own chastity. In plays like Heywood’s The Rape of Lucrece (1607) and Othello, however, a man (Tarquin and Iago, respectively) is blamed and punished for the destruction of a wife’s chastity (whether that destruction is literal, as in the case of Lucrece, or metaphorical, through defamation, as in the case of Desdemona). Yet these plays still suggest that the female body must be governed, protected, and enclosed within a secure household because it is fundamentally incapable of protecting itself. (Cases like The Changeling’s Isabella, it seems, are rare and lucky flukes.) Tragic cuckold plots present the female body as inherently violable, as is marriage itself. The female body is either too weak to control its own lust (and therefore must be guarded) or too weak to protect itself against the lust of bad men (and, again, must be guarded). When a cuckold plot is the centre of a tragedy the lesson is usually that husbands must defend their wives and households, and thus preserve the patriarchal state as a whole. While the latter narrative is perhaps less overtly misogynist than the former, in that it suggests that not all women go looking for adulterous possibilities, it yet contributes to a quotidian thinking.
whereby men’s right to power over women is justified. Moreover, both tragic cuckold plots place an extreme and undue amount of weight on the preservation of female chastity in marriage – so much so that its violation can easily function as natural catalyst for tragedy – without placing the same amount of weight on husbandly chastity, even though in theory the two are equally important.

When cuckoldry is the subject of tragedy, then, there are two consistent lessons. The first is that a wife’s body must be under her husband’s rule; otherwise the solidity of the patriarchal state is compromised. The second lesson is that the violation of a wife’s chastity – but not a husband’s – is the proper subject of tragedy. Together the two lessons work to affirm the naturalness of laws which police female bodies and deprive them of autonomy: a woman can neither be allowed to choose how to exercise her sexuality nor be left alone in a public space where it can be violated.

The central question of the tragic cuckold play is how the female body ought to be ruled; the anxieties that these plays address, however, are generally ones that concern men. The consequences of failing to govern female sexuality are that a male-ruled state or household is thrown into disorder. Such disorder might affect the female subjects of patriarchal rule but it affects the men who rule (and whose authority is made weak by the violation of female chastity) to a greater degree. The emphasis in these plots is very much on, as in Mark Millington and Alison Sinclair’s reading of the cuckold, the anxiety men have over the consequences of cuckoldry as a threat to their phallic power: according to Milligton and Sinclair, “it is in the portrayal of those [cuckolded] husbands that we can see the centre of patriarchy’s concern with ... the lack of social power and sexual potency
of the man considered to have authority – the husband” (1). Millington and Sinclair explain this loss of sexual potency and authority: “if the man’s wife has been unfaithful to him, then he lacks or has lost some of his potency. Not only does he visibly have no power or authority over her, but his lack of power is linked to an (implied or real) lack of sexual power” (3-4). Millington and Sinclair’s observation is one on which most critics writing on cuckold plays agree, myself included.

Following Millington and Sinclair’s arguments about cuckoldry’s simultaneous challenge to masculine authority and sexual potency (an argument which makes sense of a number of the comic cuckold plays I discuss in this chapter, as well as of tragic cuckold plots), I find it useful to think of comic cuckold plots as following two broad trajectories. The first is a plot which is unambiguously didactic, and which models the consequences of failing as a husband. These plays usually involve a public shaming of the cuckold in the dénouement. The second sort of comic cuckold plot is more ambiguous in its didacticism: these plots present cuckoldry, whether it actually happens or not, as an act with minor consequences, and thus eliminate the need to shame the cuckold.

Furthermore, the plays in which cuckolded husbands are publically shamed for their horns are also the plots in which the thought of cuckoldry is an anathema to the husband. As Millington and Sinclair argue further, and a point to which I will return later on, a correlation exists between a husband’s or culture’s perception of cuckoldry and the degree of humiliation cuckoldry can cause. Delineating between Spanish comic cuckold
plays and “honour drama”, and following Melanie Klein’s ideas about how we react to threatening experiences, they argue that cuckold plots and the communities they represent tend to respond to the threat of cuckoldry in one of two ways. Cuckold narratives may ridicule the husband, albeit within an atmosphere that is “characteristically full of mirth and vitality” and which “present[s] a robust accommodation of the unwelcome facts of cuckoldry, including the attendant features of impotence and ageing in the man”; alternatively, “In literature containing men of honour” (that is, men who avenge cuckoldry) “there is a distinct inability to accommodate unwelcome information or experience” (7). When a community accepts that cuckoldry is a part of life – and implicitly accepts that phallic authority has limitations and weaknesses – cuckoldry becomes less humiliating, and the cuckold can be celebrated with comic laughter. In “honour drama” cuckoldry is not accepted as a natural fact of aging or masculine weakness, but is instead understood as demeaning, and thus cannot end in comic festivity. Millington and Sinclair suggest that comedy and tragedy provide a useful way of distinguishing generically between the two kinds of reactions in Spanish golden age drama, and the generic division certainly does work as a way of distinguishing between tragic and comic reactions to cuckoldry in early modern English drama. Additionally, I think the two possible responses also work as a useful way of distinguishing between didactic and non-didactic comic cuckold plots in early modern English drama. Millington and Sinclair ultimately argue that both the decision to fight against the possibility of cuckoldry and the decision to accept it, however, belong to the same spectrum of possible

103 According to Millington and Sinclair, the “conclusion of the honour drama in blood is one which affirms a return to what, for patriarchy, would be the proper order of things” (5).
responses to male anxiety about cuckoldry’s threat to phallic power, and I think this argument makes good sense of the various comic responses to cuckoldry in early modern drama.

What I think of as “didactic” cuckold plots take up the position which Millington and Sinclair identify as defining of Spanish honour drama: here cuckoldry is an offence to a husband’s masculinity, and a sign that he is an impotent household manager as well as sexually impotent. In didactic cuckold plots, to be made a cuckold is to be dreaded. Not all husbands in didactic cuckold plots actively dread their wife’s infidelity, however; as Nayer observes, one of the common types of cuckold narratives derives its humour from the character of an oblivious cuckold. Thus didactic plots can be further divided into narratives where the husband is constantly aware from the outset of the play of the possibility of cuckoldry, and those in which the husband is more or less oblivious to the fact. The latter, rarely seen in English early modern drama, but common in medieval fabliaux and commedia dell’arte plays, is the butt of the joke throughout the play as the audience laughs at the cuckold’s ignorance. Often the laughter reaches its climax near the end of the narrative where the husband’s position as cuckold is humiliatingly revealed to him, and can serve as a moment of instruction in the necessity of reforming into a more aware, less neglectful husband: one might think of Littlewit and Justice Overdo from Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair*, who are both so caught up in the events of the fair (Littlewit with his puppet show and Overdo with catching “enormities”, 2.1.31), that both fail to notice their own wives have been seduced by fairground appetites and have joined the ranks of Ursula’s whores. Both men are forced to acknowledge publically their neglect of
their wives and households in the play’s final act when Win Littlewit and Alice Overdo appear at the puppet show dressed as prostitutes, with the drunk Mistress Overdo vomiting in front of her husband and nearly the entire cast of characters. Sir Jasper Fidget in Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* and Bartoline in John Crowne’s *City Politiques* are Restoration-age revivals of this same figure, and experience similar (though less grotesque) discoveries that they have been made cuckolds.

If the ignorant cuckold deserves humiliation, so too does his commonly-found opposite, the excessively jealous husband. Master Ford in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Justiniano, Tenter, Honeysuckle, and Wafer in *Westward Ho!*, Harebrain in *A Mad World My Masters* (c.1608), Lysander in *The Widow’s Tears*, Corvino in act 2 of *Volpone*, Fitzdottrel in *The Devil Is an Ass*, Master Joyless in *The Antipodes*, and Pinchwife in *The Country Wife* are all examples of this figure (sexual jealousy is seemingly a terror that haunts most husbands in the early modern comedies). In three of these plays (*Merry Wives, Westward Ho!,* and *The Antipodes*) the husbands are not made cuckolds but are humiliated to varying degrees by being manipulated into a situation in which they must publically admit to their unnecessary jealousy and the damage it has done to their marriage before promising to reform into less paranoid husbands. In both the Jonson plays, the husband’s jealousy (among other foolish behaviours) leads to public shaming and an economic loss (Corvino loses his wife, her dowry, and all hopes of being made an heir, Fitzdottrel loses economic control of his household). In *The Widow’s Tears* and *The Country Wife*, the husband’s humiliation is more private, with each husband more or less possessing the knowledge of his wife’s infidelity, but allowed to pretend that she has
remained chaste. Moreover, each husband is made to realise that his own jealousy directly caused the infidelity. In *The Widow’s Tears* Lysander’s insistence on testing his wife’s fidelity by pretending to be dead gives her the occasion to “cuckold” him – with himself, in disguise! Pinchwife insists on marrying a woman too young for him whom he knows he cannot satisfy and then attempts to keep all sexual knowledge from her – a futile endeavour in Restoration London. *A Mad World*’s Harebrain similarly brings on his own cuckolding: his insistence on teaching his wife moral instruction (specifically, chastity) leads him to blindly invite the corrupting Courtesan into his own home. He is perhaps one of the most impotent cuckolds in Jacobean drama as he is an ignorant object of the audience’s laughter, never learning of his own cuckolding. If his wife reforms along with him, it is because Penitent Brothel, the man who made him a cuckold, is able to convince Mistress Harebrain that she has erred and that chastity is a virtue.

Both the figure of the ignorant cuckold and the husband who is overly fearful of cuckoldry are figures of mockery. Both are bad husbands because they fail to guard their domestic oeconomies.\(^{104}\) The former neglects his home, his wife’s sexual happiness, and (often) the family’s monetary wealth. The latter fears his own impotence and in fearing his masculine weakness will lead to cuckoldry is already defeated by more confident intelligent men. He is overly protective of his wifely property and his possessiveness creates as much domestic and sexual unhappiness as the ignorant and neglectful husband.

\(^{104}\) In *Private Matters and Public Culture*, Orlin draws attention “oeconomic” as denoting “such topics as the structure and governance of the household, the relationship of husband and wife, the education of children, and the supervision of servants” (11). I understand the words “economic” and “economies” in this chapter as bringing the two meanings – domestic order and financial exchange – together. In city comedy especially, but perhaps the early modern period generally, masculinity depended on being able to master both economies.
Both types of men are simply two variants on the same lesson of good husbandry: that while it is important to be careful with one’s wealth, home, and wife, it is also important to enjoy these things. A good husband is watchful, but moderate. The plays might be seen as comforting in that they suggest cuckoldry can in fact be prevented – that the only men who become cuckolds are those who are careless and foolish, and thus deserve cuckoldry. Plays like *Merry Wives*, *Westward Ho!*, *The Antipodes*, and *The Gamester* offer further consolation to male anxieties over cuckoldry: not only does it only happen to deserving men, but often cuckoldry does not even happen. These plays are steeped in a fantastic denial that cuckoldry occurs – even as they obsess about its possibility.

As a side note, *Merry Wives* and *Westward Ho!*, in the process of reassuring men that their anxieties about cuckoldry are unlikely to be realised do challenge misogynist stereotypes exemplified in tragic cuckold plots that wives cannot control their lust or their morality, while allowing these female characters the agency to reform their marriages in a way that makes their lived conditions better. The wives are also admirable for their wit and cleverness, and happily defy notions that chaste women must always be patient Griselda types. Plays like *Merry Wives* and *Westward Ho!* demonstrate that despite cultural discomfort with female sexuality and its possible threat to marriage vows and to patriarchal authority male dramatists often recognised that both marriage vows and patriarchal authority can be oppressive and demeaning to women. But even the plays that represent women sympathetically still tend to focus primarily on *male* anxieties about cuckoldry; the fear of public humiliation attending the realisation that one’s (male) rival
has managed to take control of one’s wifely property. (I will return to discuss the significance of this focus momentarily.)

Not all cuckold plots represent the cuckold as a figure to be humiliated and feared, however; in what I think of as “non-didactic” comic cuckold plots, lessons about cuckoldry are more morally ambivalent than the kinds of lessons found in tragic or didactic comic cuckold plots. Non-didactic cuckold plots do not inevitably end in the public shaming of the cuckold: more often, the husbands in these plays tend to be in on the cuckold plot as encouraging wittols or are willing to forgive and live with cuckoldry.

Wittols, like Middleton’s infamous Master Allwit in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, have something to gain from their wives’ affairs with other men. The Allwit family depends upon the presence of Sir Walter Whorehound – a fertile and wealthy man who enjoys sex and is willing to pay for it – in order to maintain the family’s economic and domestic operations. In this instance, the cuckold is not a figure of humiliation; instead Master Allwit becomes the embodiment of a shrewd businessman and pragmatic manager of his household economy and, as Gary Kuchar observes, “makes his failure a strange kind of personal success as he eventually overcomes his subordination to Whorehound” (26).

Kuchar’s reading of Middleton’s play is part of his larger argument that Jacobean city comedies tend to associate cuckoldry with fears of the urban marketplace’s ability to emasculate men; he ultimately suggests, however, that *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, with Allwit as a clever and gleeful wittal, marks “a transitional moment in the shift from the Jacobean stigmatization of mercantile upstarts to their acceptance and even valorization that begins with the drama of the Restoration” (27-8). We see this shift in the way that the
play rejects Sir Walter’s attempt to recreate a traditional family with Moll, replacing it instead with non-conventional family structures set up by the Kixes, the Touchwood Srs, and the Allwits. Sir Walter thinks, early in the play, that he has humiliated Allwit, and displays his antipathy to him referring to him as “Jack” (2.2.11), the same name he uses to address the household servants; he further derides Allwit for his lack of care about his reputation: “The more slave! / When man turns base, out goes his soul’s pure flame; / The fat of ease o’erthrows the eyes of shame” (2.2.42-4). By the end of the play, however, Sir Walter proves himself the foolish businessman, a “proved villain” (5.4.67), whose stay in debtor’s prison is the subject of public gossip (5.4.77). Meanwhile, the temporary relationship between Sir Walter and the Allwits is replaced by a more permanent and more symbiotic relationship between the Kix and the Touchstone Sr families. In this new relationship, the wealthy Kix family accepts Touchstone Sr as a permanent member of their household, combining their financial resources with his spermatic resources (they get children and his own household is not burdened with more children than he can support; Lady Kix and Touchstone Sr, at least, are both aware that the relationship is based on cuckoldry). In *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, as Kuchar and David Bevington have observed, cuckoldry is revealed to be one of the mechanisms by which the modern economy operates, and thus the old morality and shame attached to the figure of the cuckold, the play argues, no longer need hold.105

105 David Bevington, 1455-6. In “Sex and the Early Modern City: Staging the Bawdy Houses of London” (2007), Jean Howard suggests, in a way of similarly showing how the play reshapes traditional modes of morality, that the city’s economies also depend upon prostitution (131-3).
Plays like Webster, Rowley, and Heywood’s *A Cure for a Cuckold* also suggest, though in a different way, that cuckoldry need not be an event necessitating eternal shame for the cuckolded husband. When Compass, having been away for many years, returns to discover that his wife Urse has taken up with another man – and even borne his children – he decides (on the advice of a gallant) that the matter can be easily resolved by a quick divorce, followed by a remarriage: “Make here a flat divorce between yourselves, / Be you no husband, nor let her be no wife; / Within two hours you may salute again, woo and wed afresh; and then the cuckold’s blotted” (4.1). Compass adds his own innovations to the plan: “I will go hang myself two hours, and so long thou shalt drown thyself ... No, I have devised a better way, I will go drink myself dead for an hour, then when I wake again, I am a fresh new man, and so I go a wooing” (4.1). Compass’s legal sidestepping is of course absurd – presumably he opt for death rather than “a quick divorce” because couples who divorced on charges of adultery were not legally allowed to remarry, though adulterous partners whose infidelity was never legally prosecuted could theoretically remarry following a spouse’s death (Greenberg xxii); however, the couple’s divorce-death-remarriage scheme is a necessary symbolic performance for the community: it turns the ritual public shaming of the cuckold into a denial of the need for shame. One can imagine how the symbolic drinking-into-death might function as a kind of public party (held in a tavern) whereby the community ends up celebrating the fact that the cuckoldry (that everyone knows happened) can be forgiven. Everyone in the community contracts to agree that the husband and wife should be able to go on living just as before Compass left and Compass and Urse’s family and household are made whole and solid again. *A Cure*
for a Cuckold, like A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, points to the fact that the shame around cuckoldry is a matter of communal convention and can be reworked if needed. True, Compass still worries about cuckoldry – indeed, the traces of the stigma of cuckoldry show in his feeling that a ceremony to restore his family’s validity is necessary at all. As soon as the play raises the anxiety over a husband being made a cuckold, however, it happily reassures the audience that cuckoldry need not be a matter of anxiety after all. It can always be rewritten, reversed, or nullified.

Non-didactic comic cuckold plots, although often more cheerful about the subject of cuckoldry than other comic cuckold plays, offer simply another (although perhaps more reassuring) response to the anxieties of cuckoldry. A Chaste Maid in Cheapside and Cure for a Cuckold do not use shame in order to teach men how to be good husbands and heads of household. Rather, they suggest that the cure for cuckoldry is to be shameless, as well as clever. Fitting into Millington and Sinclair’s Kleinian reading of the cuckold narrative, these plays admit that cuckoldry is a likely and mundane aspect of life; rather than attempt to close one’s home to it, a cuckolded husband can turn cuckoldry to his advantage. There will always be cuckoldry, but a clever man can figure out how to profit by it. Thus these plays redeploy the cuckold narrative so that it aligns with the ways that phallic mastery is increasingly tied to one’s ability to use one’s wits to master an urban economic market, as both Donald Bruster and Kuchar have argued. In most cuckold drama, cuckoldry plays out masculine anxieties that involvement with “Interest and

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106 Bruster reads women in cuckold plays as “the literalized, objectified version of what Pierre Bordieu calls ‘symbolic capital’: ‘a transformed and thereby disguised for of physical economic capital.’ ... Yet that which is, in medieval literature, ‘disguised’ capital became for Shakespeare’s London an overwhelmingly explicit doubling of the monetary on the plane of the personal, an articulation on the comedic level of the new intricacies and extensions of the comic” (197).
profit” somehow conflicts with natural procreation and husbandry, as Bruster argues (204). Non-didactic cuckold plots, however, simultaneously defuse anxieties that monetary and credit economies threaten masculinity. These plays work, however, only when men are willing to give up the overvalued prize of female chastity, accepting it as a fantasy that cannot be sustained in an urban market.

Taken together, then, tragic, didactic, and non-didactic cuckold plots all offer different responses to the same anxieties about maintaining patriarchal authority. Tragedies suggest that the proper response to cuckoldry is to eradicate its source: the man who invades the household or the lusty wife who pollutes the home (a metaphor for the state) by inviting another man across the threshold. In violently expelling the external and internal sources of cuckoldry, a man regains control over his household. Comic cuckold plots conversely reassure men that cuckoldry either does not happen because most wives are chaste and respect the household hierarchy of power, or, that it only happens, laughably, to others – to men who are foolish managers of their own households. Non-didactic comic plots suggest that even when cuckoldry happens to an undeserving man, it does not much matter because he can reverse, forgive, or even profit from cuckoldry.

Cuckoldry’s Meaning for Women: Unexplored Perspectives

All of these lessons as I have defined them, however, again point to the cuckold plot’s obsession with the potential wounding of masculinity through the act of cuckoldry. They do not, as I have suggested, account for a wife’s anxieties concerning cuckoldry. These plays may have something to say about women and wives – they might, as in the
tragedies hint towards the failings of lusty duplicitous women like Beatrice-Joanna (who is unfaithful both to her intended husband, Alonzo de Piraquo, and the man she marries in his stead, Alsemero) or the laudable virtues of chaste women like Lucrece (whose rape can be seen as unwilling cuckoldry). Cuckold plays may show wives as eager and active participants in reforming their husbands as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor, Westward Ho!, The Gamester*, but such plays are not primarily told from the wives’ point of view, nor do we necessarily get an extended version of their thoughts. *Chaste Maid*, notably, while representing marriage as a compact between husbands and wives who work together to outwit the rest of the world, provides very little in the way of extended wifely commentary on the subject of their own marriages. *Merry Wives and Westward Ho!* do afford extended space for their female characters to voice their thoughts on marriage and infidelity, as do *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Changeling*. The meditations which Mistresses Page and Ford deliver, however, are already delimited by the play’s opening: the wives are not unfaithful, and are not going to make their husbands cuckolds, as they reveal in their immediate responses to Falstaff’s letter:

MISTRESS FORD ... What doth he think of us?
MISTRESS PAGE Nay, I know not. It makes me almost ready to wrangle with mine own honesty. I’ll entertain myself like one that I am not acquainted withal; for sure, unless he know some strain in me that I know not myself, he would never have boarded me in this fury.
MISTRESS FORD ‘Boarding’ call you it? I’ll be sure to keep him above deck.
MISTRESS PAGE So will I. If he come under my hatches, I’ll never to sea again. Let’s be revenged on him. (2.1.73-82)

The women are witty, clever, and willing to act against the men who threaten them and their marriages. The wives’ agency, however, while considerable, is (the audience is immediately assured) not going to cross into the dangerous territory of adulterous
behaviour. We can enjoy their merry tricks with any fear that either wife will become a meretrix. Though Mistress Page and especially Mistress Ford do talk about their marriages and the difficulties they face, they do not perhaps do so in the way that early modern wives in bad marriages might have – weighing the options of adultery, separation, divorce, and the rights they might gain or lose with each option. *Merry Wives* is a merry cuckold play, but only because the play itself does admit a full range of discussion on the merits and difficulties women gain and lose in marriage (and the same is true of Mistresses Tenter, Honeysuckle, and Wafer’s discussions of marriage in *Westward Ho!*). Both plays raise and allay male fears of being made cuckolds, and do so through the voices of admirable and clever women, but neither play gives us women who consider at length how cuckoldry might affect them. As I intimated above, however, some women in cuckold plots are complex and admirable, but cuckold plays generally do not reflect in a nuanced way the position of the wife as a domestic subject, her rights and limitations under rules of marriage, coverture, and divorce – all reasons that undergird a real wife’s decision to pursue cuckoldry or not. Representations of wives are secondary to the plots’ central concern in both the tragedies and the comedies I have thus far outlined, which is, what are *men* to think and fear about cuckoldry?

Tragedies like *The Changeling*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* perhaps elicit audience sympathy for women who experience rape or the violence potentially inherent in an arranged marriage. As David Atkinson has noted, arranged marriages were different from enforced marriages, which were “the object of widespread contemporary criticism” (Atkinson 486). Marriages were supposed to
consider the feelings of the children; as Atkinson again notes, Vermandero’s neglect in considering Beatrice-Joanna’s feelings in his haste to have Alonso de Piracquo as his son-in-law is in many ways the catalyst for the play’s tragedy (495-6). She is a woman to be pitied; we can perhaps understand the initial attraction in her desire to escape the marriage (even if actually doing so positions her as a kind of unfaithful wife and a “whore in her affections”), just as we might be sympathetic to the difficult situation in which she finds herself in the power of De Flores. Yet, as I suggested above, she is more likely a woman to be reviled as a danger to patriarchal bonds. Moreover, as Roberta Barker and David Nicol outline, critics have regularly condemned Beatrice-Joanna as either a “woman destroyed by her own sin (whose consequences include her rape and eventual murder at the hands of her fated scourge)” or read her as a “well-matched demon lover” (paragraph 1). Either reading presents her as a woman who is unable to govern her passions properly, and whose (rash, lustful, demonic) actions cause destruction and chaos to herself and the men around her. The end of the play, when it arguably restores order, does so by reaffirming the bonds between two men, Vermandero and Alsemero, as Alsemero promises: “Sir, you have yet a son’s duty living; / Please you accept it. Let that your sorrow, / As it goes from your eye, go from your heart” (5.3.127-9), with Vermandero seemingly having forgotten that it was his attempt to forge a bond between himself and Alonzo that set Beatrice-Joanna on her tragic and destructive path. Ultimately, the play’s sympathy seems to lie with Vermandero.

Lucrece, though far less guilty than Beatrice-Joanna, also suffers and dies, but, as I discussed in my introduction and in the previous chapter, the story of her rape, which is
arguably a tragic cuckold narrative in which a wife “betrays” her husband unwillingly, is similarly co-opted to create meaning for men. Indeed, the Lucrece narrative blatantly shows the way that cuckold narratives are centrally about the negotiation of power relations between two men. As Ian Donaldson and Karen Bamford have compellingly argued, Lucrece dies having been reduced to a metaphor that again is co-opted to bolster masculine power: an embodiment of purity whose rape is less a violent and personally traumatic act than a symbol of the Tarquins’ evils. Bamford observes that Shakespeare’s Lucrece specifies that this purification ought to take the form of Tarquin’s execution – an act which would also provide personal retribution for the pain she suffers. But the Romans do not uphold her wish:

The last verse solemnly records the outcome: ‘The Romans plausibly did give consent / To Tarquin’s everlasting banishment’ (1854-55). Since Lucrece had called for Tarquin’s blood (1686), this is both less and more than she asked for. Instead of private revenge the men effect a change to the political constitution. The discrepancy points to the political appropriation of a woman’s violation by men that is a consistent feature of the Lucrece story and its analogues (67-8).

Lucrece’s final speech may be moving, but as Bamford suggests, the outcome of it, what the men of the state interpret her words to mean, does not represent how early modern women themselves might have actually felt about rape and the consequences they should pay for having unwillingly cuckolded their husbands.

Revenge tragedies like Titus Andronicus and The Revenger’s Tragedy follow similar trajectories, where men like Titus and Marcus (Titus) and Vindice, Hippolito, Antonio, and Piero (Revenger’s Tragedy) appropriate the rapes (and murders) of women.

107 “In many versions of the story, the political symbolism is plain: Lucretia is not simply Lucretia, but the figure of violated Rome; the rape epitomizes the wider tyranny of the Tarquins” (Donaldson 9). See my discussion of Donaldson and Bamford on Lucrece’s political significance in pages 20-1 of my general introduction.
like Lavinia and Gloriana/Antonio’s wife, respectively; these women do not have the chance to tell the audience what their experiences of rape/cuckoldry, mutilation, and death mean to them as married women. Instead, they become puppets for the anger and grief of the men who use their mutilated bodies, memories, and even corpses to voice their experience of being cuckolded. In Gloriana’s case Vindice quite literally turns his former lover into a puppet as he carries around her skull having “conversations” with it.\footnote{Although the skull only appears literally in the text of act 3, when Vindice uses it to kill the Duke, he conjures up an image of her skull in his opening address to the audience, “the thought of that ... / ... sallow picture of my poisoned love, / My study’s ornament, thou shell of Death, / Once the bright face of my betrothed lady” (1.1.12-16), allowing the possibility that he might literally carry the object about him at various points throughout the play. Indeed, Alex Cox’s 2011 film production of the play makes exactly this choice, with Christopher Eccleston’s Vindice carrying the skull with him through most of the play, and using it as the audience to which he directs his plotting monologues.}

How do women in the audience respond to the women in these plays? They can perhaps identify with characters like Beatrice-Joanna and Lucrece; they might even accept the plays’ moralising on the rightness or wrongness of each woman’s actions – or accept the imperative of preserving patriarchal power and phallic authority; to do so, however, is a self-alienating act that requires internalising the rightness of a man’s taking control of female sexuality.

**Marriage and Coverture: Understanding Women’s Perspectives**

I am suggesting that representations of women’s responses to cuckoldry and adultery on stage (as well as rape) involve a kind of puppeting of the female voice to address male concerns. This puppeting is perhaps unsurprising given that the laws and social customs supporting early modern marriage themselves bolster the rights of men to have power
over women while often pretending that the arrangement is one to which women have actively consented. Coverture law and social and religious customs that assumed woman were “naturally” subordinate in marriage spoke for women but did not necessarily represent their interests or their thoughts on marriage (and how it ought to be run). Constance Furey notes that women’s subordination to men in marriage was based on related commonplaces that women were “rationally deficient and less capable of self-governance and judicious choice” than men (36) and that marriage (following Augustine) needed to follow a hierarchy based on God’s relationship with his governed subjects (37), meaning that women ought to be subordinate to men. The marriage theories Furey describes were not legally binding, but they tend to undergird a number of the laws – like those governing coverture – that did get formed. R. Valery Lucas notes a similar link between biblically-rooted affirmations of “natural” gender hierarchies and official secular forms like coverture law. She argues that the power dynamics of coverture were rooted in a general “patriarchal model for marriage, based upon biblical authority” (224). The “god-ordained” structure of marriage that Furey and Lucas describe not only supported coverture law, but also tended to persist in marriage even when coverture law was only laxly followed. Thus even companionate marriage is haunted by the same assumptions of inequality that justify the gender hierarchy in coverture law.109

As both Lucas and Frances Dolan have noted, marriages, even when they are nominally companionate, tend to allow only one person in a position of authority. The other partner

109 Lucas points out, too, that ideas of married partnership, such as those outlined in the “Homily of the State of Matrimony” did not have the same meaning of equality as we might now use: the “Homily” creates “the illusion of an equal partnership by defining male authority and female submission [were] complementary duties in marriage. Although souls are all spiritually equal before the Lord, on earth the husband was the controlling force in the partnership” (228-9).
sacrifices his or her identity to that authority. Dolan roots current “legal and popular
depictions of spousal conflict” in “a notion of marriage that American culture has
inherited from early modern England (1550-1800) and colonial America. This notion
assumes that, by entering into marriage, two become one, and the husband subsumes or
‘covers’ the wife. It finds its fullest articulation and most stable institutionalization in the
legal notion of coverture, but it predates and succeeds that legal notion” (“Battered
Women” 251). Dolan notes that “the material constraints imposed on wives by coverture
could be crushingly real” but that the legal hierarchy created by coverture could also be
“a legal fiction to which there were exceptions in both theory and practice” (257). She
quotes Hendrik Hartog, “Lawyers and judges used marital unity as a legal fiction, that is,
as a set of imaginary ‘facts’ created to achieve a legal result. It was a tool, not an
explanation: existing only for particular purposes, to be discarded when no longer useful”,
before adding that “Coverture was never the only way of imagining legal relation
between husband and wife” (257). Wives sometimes had the authority in marriage (this
situation often happens particularly in comedy, a genre which, according to Dolan,
frequently “assigns husband and wife similar claims on wit, desire, authority, and
material resources. Yet it depicts this equality as a source of a conflict because it compels
husband and wife to war for mastery within their marriage and household, mastery
figured as a single pair of pants only one can wear” (Marriage and Violence 3). I would
add to Dolan’s argument the problem that in many early modern comedies the idea of a
wife in charge of her husband connotes hilarious topsy-turvydom. Mistress Otter’s
complete financial and domestic control over her husband Otter in Epicene is an excellent
example of such topsy-turvydom, but however funny and even admirable Mistress Otter and the play’s Collegiate ladies might seem to a contemporary audience, the play does not present the Otters as a couple who ought to be imitated. Dolan also points out, however, that the “legal fiction” of coverture was usually intended to settle marriage conflict “in the husband’s favour” (“Battered Women” 257). In practice as well as theory, most often it was the wife’s identity that got subsumed into her husband’s – with seeming willingness on her part when “In consenting to marriage, a woman conferred many of these [legal] rights and responsibilities onto her husband” (225). Coverture may have been a legal fiction, but it was one that had real effects on cultural attitudes to women as capable and deserving of legal and economic autonomy/agency. It was a legal fiction that deprived women of legal and economic rights on the pretence that these women had given consent to the deprivation, without accounting for the social and legal pressures women who refused to give consent to marriage experienced (Greenberg xx). Finally, it was a practice that affected the lived marriages that women experienced – marriages in which violence to either partner could be a direct consequence, as Dolan outlines. Dolan, while noting the ways that women resisted oppression in marriage, also points out the limitations placed on women who wanted to escape bad marriages:

Marriages could be annulled but only on limited grounds (such as bigamy or non-consummation) ... Church courts could grant separations, but these did not enable the estranged spouses to remarry. Legal separations created a range of financial complications. ... In the 1690s, Parliament granted what were arguably the first true divorces, that is, allowing for remarriage, but this option was available only to peers on grounds of their wives’ adultery (Stone, Road). Desertion was often an unofficial solution to irreconcilable differences, but it was hard on women, especially those with children, since it left them without financial support. As a consequence, men tended to desert their wives, more than wives did their husbands.
Meanwhile Lucas surveys the ways that marriage and coverture law deprived women of their rights, noting, like Dolan, the economic and legal constrictions that marriage law placed on women. She observes that “Once married ... a woman had almost no legal right to hold or dispose of her property” (224), that there was “no legal redress for a battered wife”, and that women who left their husbands “were considered ‘masterless’ and therefore could be prosecuted under the 1572 statute against beggars and vagabonds” (225). Such considerations shed light on the state of self-alienation in which early modern women must have lived their lives. They lived as redoubled subjects, obedient to a king and again to a husband or father. The cultural assumption that women were to be governed by men means that in many ways the consent to give up control over one’s sexuality was always already given. Unsurprisingly then, early modern plays representing marriage and its problems – including cuckoldry – continue to puppet the voices of women so that they speak about cuckoldry in ways that confirm or bolster masculine anxieties and points of view rather than truly exploring the ways that married women might view cuckoldry. *Titus Andronicus*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Changeling*, even more than plays like *Westward Ho!*, *Chaste Maid*, and *Merry Wives*, are not plays which want to fully explore how women are affected by cuckoldry.

In sum, cuckold plays are generally about how to be a good husband and a good head of one’s household or state. They may provide women room to be witty, to participate in the active consolidation or destruction of the patriarchal state and home, they may even allow glimpses of how cuckoldry or marriage affects wives, but rarely do they fully explore the subject of cuckoldry from the wife’s point of view. The two plays
that I will focus on for the rest of this chapter, however, do explore these questions more fully. Jonson’s *Volpone* and *The Devil Is an Ass* rework common plots in the cuckold tradition and in the process of that reworking, move women’s concerns regarding marriage, coverture, divorce, adultery, and legal and economic status, into their dramatic centre. What results are plays that ask difficult questions about a husband’s rights to authority, and which challenge the cuckold plot’s tendency to represent wives as either merry accomplices to masculine competitions of wit and virility, or patient sufferers of male stupidity and cruelty. *Volpone* and *The Devil Is an Ass* call attention to the concerns women have regarding sexuality, marriage, and what it means to be a wife in a culture that punishes women who are sexually active outside of marriage – punishments which become potentially more severe when a marriage operates under the double standards of coverture law. Women may have little motivation to preserve their married chastity, which does not ensure emotional and sexual fulfilment or financial security; simultaneously, however, women may also have little motivation to pursue relief from bad marriages through extramarital affairs.

**Cuckoldry in *Volpone* and *The Devil Is an Ass***

While *Volpone* and *The Devil Is an Ass* draw attention to female anxieties around sex and marriage, they do, however, remain limited in their challenge to wider cultural restraints on how wives may exercise their sexuality. The plays do not defend a wife’s right to choose her sexual partner with impunity. Jonson’s city comedies, which particularly follow the pattern of linking the emasculation of the cuckold with his financial ruin, do
posit a solution to the threat of urban cuckoldry which necessitates affording wives a greater degree of equality with their husbands and agency within their marriage. They suggest that the best way for a husband to allay his anxieties about cuckoldry, emasculation, and economic humiliation is also the best way to allay a wife’s concerns about being trapped in an unfulfilling and potentially abusive marriage: the adoption of truly companionate marriage, rid of the last vestiges of coverture. Jonson’s plays thus maintain at the last the rightness of patriarchal dominance, but also explore the lived situations of wives who are ruled by patriarchal structures.

Fittingly, one of Jonson’s main sources for both Volpone and The Devil Is an Ass, story 3.5 of Boccaccio’s Decameron, seems ripe for adapting to an urban play that explores the positions of wives. What are the relevant elements of this source? Boccaccio’s story shows the phallocentric nature of cuckold plots, at the same time that it (along with the rest of the Decameron) calls attention to the complex situation of married women. The heading to the story sums up the plot: “Zima gives Meisser Francesco Vergellesi a palfrey, and in return is granted permission to talk with his wife. She does not speak, but Zima replies for her, and eventually things turn out in accordance with those replies” (182). In many ways, and unlike a number of the early modern cuckold dramas I have explored above (especially the tragedies), the wife’s thoughts, her sexual and emotional interests, and her motives both for initially refusing and for later accepting her lover, are important to deciding the outcome of the story. We learn that she delays following Zima’s instructions to hang her washing out as a sign that he should visit for several days after her husband leaves the city, while she carefully thinks over his
proposition. The story also provides an extended reproduction of her internal dialogue, revealing how and why she decides to take her lover:

what am I doing? Why should I let my youth drift by? My husband is off to Milan, and he won’t be back for six months. When will he make up the time I have lost? When I am an old woman? And anyway, when will I find another lover such as Zima? I am alone here, and need take nobody else into account. I really don’t know why I don’t take the chance while I have it. I won’t get another opportunity like this.

(187)

Boccaccio’s story reveals the wife’s loneliness, her desire to be loved and valued by her negligent husband, and her motive – not simple lust, but perhaps love ("a lover such as Zima” refers to his seemingly genuine, that is, not lust-driven, love for her). In this cuckold story the wife’s desires are part of the narrative catalyst; she also has a space in which to voice her thoughts on her marriage; as I suggested above, however, the desires of women in cuckold plots can be male-authored fantasies, and are not necessarily indicative of what women actually think. Moreover, having the space to express their thoughts on marriage does not necessarily entail a nuanced exploration of a wife’s anxieties about marriage and cuckoldry, and Boccaccio’s story is no real exception to the early modern examples to which I have pointed. As my inability to refer to this important figure as anything other than “the wife” indicates, the story is not wholly concerned with her – at least not enough to give her name (a privilege which women in other stories in the Decameron – and indeed, which the seven female storytellers in the Decameron’s framing narrative – do have). The wife’s lack of a name in 3.5 means that for much of the story she takes up the position of a possessed object: “Messer Francesco Vergellesi’s wife” (182): an extension of the named husband, and a reflection on his character. Her decision to accept the (also-named) Zima at the end of the story, while unarguably an
expression of agency, is a reactive agency. The wife makes a choice for herself after her husband and her lover have already acted (her husband leaving the city, and Zima thinking up the clever way of arranging the means to carry out their affair). Readers might derive narrative satisfaction from the decision of a woman who refuses to allow herself to be neglected by her ambitious husband; however, most of the comic energy of the story stems from Zima’s cleverness – first in arranging an initial meeting with Messer Francesco Vergellesi’s wife, and then in cleverly outwitting him and managing to arrange a lover’s tryst in the half-hour of “conversation” he rents with the silent wife. Messer Francesco orders his wife not to respond to any of Zima’s questions, and the wife obeys. But Zima cleverly ventriloquises her answers for her, and in so doing lays out the instructions for the signs she must give him when she wants him to pay her a visit:

He replied to himself, as though he were the lady, in this manner: “My dear Zima, it is certainly a long time since I became aware of your profound and perfect love for me, and these words of yours just now have greatly deepened my understanding. ... But now the time is coming when I shall be able to manifest how much I love you ... in a few days Messer Francesco will be going to Milan to be governor; ... within a few days of his departure, we shall be together and bring our mutual love to complete fruition. ... on the day when you see two towels hanging in the window of my bedroom, which overlooks the garden, then you will know that that very evening you must come to me through the garden gate, taking care that you are not seen.” (185-6)

The real source of amusement in the story is the fact that Zima is so clever in opposition to the very foolish husband who does not anticipate his tricks even though he anticipates Zima’s interest. He is willing to deal with a man who he knows is in love with his wife: “[Zima’s] love of Messer Francesco’s wife was common knowledge, and someone or other ventured to remark that if Messer Francesco were to ask for [his] palfrey, he would be given it because of the love which Zima had for his wife” (183); he is also willing to
leave the city while Zima and his wife are still in it. The wife’s decision to pursue her own emotional happiness is a secondary (albeit satisfying) end to a story where the good clever man gets rewarded while the foolish negligent man is deservingly humiliated.

Jonson takes advantage of the brief space Boccaccio’s story offers for the wife to consider the limitations of her marriage, and expands it through the whole of Volpone and The Devil Is an Ass. Frances Fitzdottrel and Celia, the wives in the respective plays, have ample opportunity to think and to voice their concerns to themselves and to other characters in the play. Even when they are not actively pondering the limitations to their married lives, the plays themselves fully dramatise both the hardships in their marriages and the gender inequities in their culture that make it nearly impossible for a woman to respond to an invitation to cuckoldry in a truly agentic way.¹¹⁰

Volpone is admittedly a looser adaptation of Boccaccio’s story, and also has sources in the commedia dell’arte and Reynard the Fox fabliaux traditions generally (Ostovich 10, 61). Both stories, however, involve a foolish husband renting his wife to a potential lover in exchange for financial benefit. In Volpone, Corvino, similarly to Messer Vergellesi, has reason to suspect that his wife is in danger of cuckoldry. The

¹¹⁰ I borrow this term from Carisa Showden, whose work on women’s agency has importantly influenced the way I think about how women like Celia and Frances negotiate the constraints of marriage and the cultural values imposed on women (like chastity and fidelity). Showden’s work “offers a description of agency that ... show[s] how action is possible, though constrained in different ways for different people” (xii). She argues that when women make choices that our culture typifies as failure to express agency (such as the decision to stay in an abusive relationship) these choices are actually complex agentic negotiations of gender, race, class, and social scripts. To dichotimise a woman’s options in such a way that, for example, leaving an abusive relationship is agentic and therefore a mark of success, while staying in such a relationship is non-agentic and therefore a sign of weakness or failure, is a form of victim blaming. Instead we must “Explor[e] the contradictory demands on battered women and the reasons they make the decision they do” in order to “examine not just the actions that individuals take but also the opportunities that are open to them and the multiple identity categories they simultaneously inhabit and navigate” (xvi). See particularly her second chapter, “Should I Stay or Should I Go? Intimate Partner Violence and the Agency in ‘Victim’” (37-92).
possibility that Volpone might try to seduce his wife has crossed his mind, and indeed is
the central argument behind Celia’s objections to going to Volpone’s:

_Corvino_ if you be
Loyal and mine, be won; respect my venture.
_Celia_ Before your honour?
_Corvino_ Honour? Tut, a breath;
There’s no such thing in nature: a mere term
Invented to awe fools. What, is my gold
The worse for touching? Clothes, for being looked on?
Why, this’s no more. An old decrepit wretch
That has no sense, no sinew; takes his meat
With others’ fingers; only knows how to gape
When you do scald his gums; a voice; a shadow;
And what can this man hurt you? (3.7.35-46)

Corvino’s denial that Volpone could have sex with his wife is countered by his
simultaneous insistence that it does not matter if the fox does have sex with his wife – the
thing will not affect his honour. Corvino has to belittle the idea of chaste honour in order
to reassure himself against his own doubts that Volpone is impotent. Ultimately, as
Kuchar has argued, the assertion that Volpone cannot cuckold him is merely a cover for
his preference for money – and his perverse willingness to sacrifice married chastity for
monetary gain (3-12). Volpone’s age and impotence is the reassuring lie he tells himself
to excuse trading his wife’s chastity for financial gain, just as Messer Vergellesi’s wife’s
obedience in the rented conversation serves as a false reassurance that renting his wife has
not cost him any cuckolding. In both Boccaccio’s story and Jonson’s play, both husbands
behave foolishly and thoroughly earn their cuckoldry through their avarice and their
carelessness.

Jonson’s _The Devil Is an Ass_ more directly retells the Zima story. Both husbands,
knowing that other men (Zima in _The Decameron_ and Wittipol in _The Devil Is an Ass_) are
in love with their wives, attempt to profit from the situation by renting out their wives for their own benefit. Messer Vergellesi trades a temporally unconstrained conversation with his wife in exchange for shares in Zima’s palfrey which will enable him to ride to Milan “to be a governor there” (183); Fitzdottrel trades half an hour of conversation for Wittipol’s magnificent cloak which he will wear to the new theatrical production of *The Devil Is an Ass*. The game is a risky one, however, and, despite ordering their wives to remain silent during the rented conversation time, both Zima and Wittipol come up with the ingenious solution of speaking the silent wives’ responses for them: with their voices puppeted, both women thus seem to consent to meet with their lovers and announce the place and time for that meeting.

The difference between Jonson’s adaptations and Boccaccio’s original story, however, is that in Jonson’s plays the wives’ thoughts on being rented out are not an afterthought which only works to confirm for the audience that we ought to side with the clever and earnest lover rather than the inept, careless, greedy, and cruel husband. In both plays the wives Frances Fitzdottrel and Celia (significantly, both have names, in contrast to Messer Vergellesi’s wife) voice their opposition to their husbands’ treatment of them generally, and specifically their oppositions to the husbands’ agreements to rent them out. Another significant departure from the Boccaccio source story is that the wives also reject the proposals of their would-be lovers, instead choosing to explain why they will not assist them in cuckolding their husbands. Celia’s protestations are perhaps less obviously grounded in practical reasons for resisting Volpone’s advances:

> Good sir, these things might move a mind affected
> With such delights; but I, whose innocence
Is all I can think wealthy or worth th’enjoying,
And which, once lost, I have naught to lose beyond it,
Cannot be taken with these sensual baits.
If you have conscience ...
If you have ears that will be pierced – or eyes,
That can be opened – a heart, may be touched –
...
Do me the grace to let me ’scape. – If not,
Be bountiful and kill me.  (3.7.205-44)

Unlike her husband, who is torn between the old-fashioned jealousy of the cuckold and the pleasures of the modern Venetian economy, Celia puts all her faith in her chastity, and the maintenance of her chaste home and marriage. Her defence may be old-fashioned, and out of place in a city comedy – and Volpone is the last person to whom she ought sensibly to be voicing her request. But her alternative – allowing Volpone to seduce her and potentially risking Corvino’s anger if he finds out – is not very attractive. Corvino is not Middleton’s Master Allwit, willing to trade his wife for money and not be jealous afterwards (nor is he clever enough, as Master Allwit is, to work the system, successfully con the foolish out of their money, and escape unharmed). Corvino tries to have things both ways, a chaste wife whom he can also sell for economic profit. In his attempts to master both his home (in which old-fashioned standards of masculinity based on guarding his wife’s chastity reign) and the urban market outside his home (where masculinity is defined by an ability to outwit other men and accumulate economic profit), Corvino fails to master either. He rents his wife and risks her chastity for only the uncertain hope of being made Volpone’s heir and gaining a fortune in the future (should the seemingly elderly and sick fox die). His trade is, of course, a gamble – any one of Voltore, Corbaccio, or Lady Politic Would-be, the other suitors for Volpone’s fortune, might be
named his heir instead of Corvino. The crow, however, does not acknowledge that his investment of Celia in Volpone’s bed is a gamble. Instead he allows Mosca to convince him that it is the sure thing that will raise him in Volpone’s esteem above all other suitors: “make your count, you have cut all their throats. / Why, ‘tis directly taking a possession!” (2.6.84-5). Corvino treats the rental as a sure investment and is, as Mosca and Volpone intend him to be, shocked when the seemingly dead Volpone makes Mosca his heir instead. The discovery is perhaps doubly shaming as Corvino first does not acquire a fortune, and second, in failing to become rich (to gain from his gamble), does not command the respect and loyalty from Volpone’s parasite that he might need to convince Mosca and others to keep their mouths shut. By the end of the play, of course, Corvino’s foolish gamble is exposed before the Avocatori, and he is given a humiliating punishment (to “have [his] eyes beat out with stinking fish, / Bruised fruit and rotten eggs” 5.12.140-1). This sentence perhaps fittingly reflects the social humiliation Corvino has already experience in being discovered both a willing cuckold and an unsavvy investor. This punishment that he himself suggests (perhaps ironically), is also grimly satisfying as a kind of return of the cruelty Corvino plans to inflict on Celia for first being too willing to consort with other men (the window scene) and then not willing enough (when she protests against visiting Volpone, for the precise reason that it will appear unseemly). Through most of the play, however, Celia is an obvious victim of Corvino’s failures, and the object on which he expresses his anger at his own failures. As I will discuss in more detail momentarily, he uses the threat of his rights under coverture and other marriage laws to punish his wife whenever his mood towards her changes. Celia’s resistance to
Volpone, then, is perhaps her way of making the best out of a marriage that seriously limits her actions.

In contrast to Celia’s appeal to her chastity, Frances’s response to Wittipol’s seduction attempts is a more direct request for practical help with her marriage:

\[
\text{such a [friend] I need, but not this way.} \\
\text{... I am a woman} \\
\text{That cannot speak more wretchedness of myself} \\
\text{Than you can read: matched to a mass of folly} \\
\text{That every day makes haste to his own ruin;} \\
\text{The wealthy portion that I have brought him, spent;} \\
\text{And, through my friends’ neglect, no jointure made me.} \\
\text{My fortunes standing in this precipice,} \\
\text{’Tis counsel that I want, and honest aids:} \\
\text{And in this name, I need you for my friend,} \\
\text{Never in any other; for his ill} \\
\text{Must not make me, sir, worse.} \quad (4.6.5-28)
\]

While Frances also clings to chastity as a moral stance (cuckolding her husband and making herself into an adulteress makes her “worse” as a person), she also emphasises the fact that cuckolding her husband will not help her married circumstances in the long term – it will not help her escape the impending poverty into which Fitzdottrel threatens to plunge the couple. Celia and Frances will not apologise for their husbands or defend their actions, but nor will they capitulate to the satisfying comic logic that their husbands’ actions excuse adultery. Instead they explain to their would-be lovers the immorality of adultery, and, in the case of Frances, argue that an affair will not serve their marital needs. What they need is masculine help to overcome the limits that coverture law places on their own agency.

Jonathan’s *The Devil Is an Ass*, like *Volpone*, follows the patterns which Bruster and Kuchar describe, *and* connects socio-economic ambition with a paradoxical economic
foolishness. Fitzdottrel’s renting of his wife is worse than Messer Vergellesi’s because he is not even motivated by the desire to fill a political post with an attached income; instead he trades his wife for a cloak so that he can attend the premier of a play in style. While Messer Vergellesi is guilty only of neglecting his home economy, Fitzdottrel is guilty of neglecting both his home and financial economies. The deal becomes just one more in a series of poor investments that, like Everill’s bad investment schemes and Fitzdottrel’s spending on fashions, waste the couple’s fortune as Fitzdottrel tries to play the wealthy topical wit about town. It is his wasteful habits that Frances wants the most help to fight against. In her understanding that Everill’s schemes are mainly plots to take Fitzdottrel’s money, Frances demonstrates that she has far more business and legal acumen than her husband. Despite Fitzdottrel's stupidity, she cannot divest financial control from him without the help of a man (the aptly-named Manly) – and not because she does not know what to do, but because she does not have the legal right to take action against him. Her limitations when it comes to legal and economic agency are entirely the product of coverture law, and are the clearest example of the way that the play identifies coverture law as potentially influential on Frances’s decisions not to commit adultery as well as the cause of her marital unhappiness.

Indeed, both of Jonson’s plays, I am arguing, deliberately draw attention to these vestiges of coverture. Even though coverture is never explicitly mentioned in either play, the legal and financial rights the husbands assume, and with which they sometimes threaten their wives – and the limitations of the legal and economic rights of Frances and Celia – are symptomatic of the work of coverture law. Frances’s inability to gain control
of her finances without the help of men like Wittipol and Manly, or to have any say over how those finances are spent are indicative that these legal practices are at work. The system of coverture not only legally supports the notion that domestic authority (to make economic and household decisions) ultimately rests in the husband, but also declares that the husband is to act on behalf of his wife in all legal matters that required going to court (Greenberg xxiii-xxvi). Since the wife and the husband are considered a single legal entity, with the husband the recognised head and voice of that entity, a wife could have difficulty taking legal action against her husband. Women did have more freedom in the “ecclesiastical” courts (Greenberg xii), and, as Lucas, Dolan, and Loreen Giese (among others) outline, there are historical cases where wives tried husbands successfully; these were usually for matters of “matrimonial disputes” and “a wide range of moral and sexual offences” (Greenberg xii). Greenberg notes that wives “took advantage of these courts to seek redress in matrimonial and inheritance disputes” (xii), but also observes the courts could work against women as well as for them. Wives often “found themselves called before these courts for moral and sexual infractions” (xii). Moreover, sexual infractions seemed less forgivable when committed by a woman. Greenberg points out that by the mid-seventeenth century, adultery was a “capital offence” but also one “defined ... as sexual intercourse between a married woman and a man not her husband. Intercourse between a married man and an unmarried woman, however, was not deemed adultery for purposes of the Act [against incest and fornication]” (xxiii). Throughout the seventeenth century, couples (either husbands or wives) could sue the ecclesiastical courts for “legal separation from bed and board”, but only “upon proof of adultery or extreme cruelty of
either spouse” (xxii). But again, legal and religious custom more harshly punishes an adulterous wife: if a husband committed adultery or abuse and the couple was legally separated, a wife could obtain “maintenance” (xxii), in order to have a means of financial support after her husband was no longer supporting her. The guilty husband could, presumably, continue to support himself. But “A wife guilty of adultery, elopement, or cruelty had no legal right to maintenance” (xxii). Additionally, she was neither a *feme sole*, a single woman who, of age, commanded “most of the private legal rights held by men” (xix) to own property, inherit, and go to court, nor was she married, and so would have found it difficult to support herself economically (Greenberg xxiv).

More often, a wife with an overbearing/tyrannical husband would be encouraged to avail herself of community intervention. Indeed, Frances’s appeal to a kind of community support in the form of Manly and Wittipol is precisely the socially-sanctioned action she should take against an abusive or foolish husband. But the appeal to community support seems too little too late for some unhappily married early modern wives, and does not seem to make up for their lack of legal and economic autonomy: as Ostovich notes, Frances suffers “both from her husband and from the society that supports legalized injustice between marital partners” (108). Frances indicates clearly one of these legal and economic disparities when, describing her troubles to Wittipol, she tells him that “The wealthy portion that I have brought him, [her husband has] spent; / And, through my friends’ neglect, no jointure made me” (4.6.22-3). As Anthony Parr observes in his notes to the play in the *Cambridge Edition Works of Ben Jonson*, “friend” takes on many meanings in this scene (4.6.26-7n): in this instance, however, Frances uses the word
to point out that her relatives, when arranging her marriage, did not give her a “jointure” or share of either her dowry or her husband’s estates (22n and 23n). The criticism on the play and on early modern marriage law I have been discussing suggests that Frances’s situation is by no means abnormal: men tended to have the majority of the economic control in a marriage. The neglect of her “friends” in ensuring Frances’s financial autonomy, however, contributes to her inability to take Wittipol as her “friend” (as Parr notes, also a euphemism for a “secret or illicit lover”, 26-7n). But rejecting Wittipol as anything but a platonic friend does not ultimately ensure that Frances acquires any of the economic autonomy that legal and social custom have denied her. As Anne Barton observes, by the end of act 5 the laws governing property ownership mean that Frances has obtained no greater financial control: Barton notes that it is Manly who is named owner of the Fitdottrel estates, since, “To insist that Frances herself be designated owner of the estate would be futile. English law in the period allows a married woman no control over her husband’s property” (232). Barton goes on to describe the play’s “happy” ending as an “extremely qualified” one:

Frances Fitzdottrel, although she will no longer be locked up in a windowless room, and deprived of all society, is still bound for life to a selfish fool, her youth and beauty wasting unenjoyed. Wittipol has made the misery of her marriage too plain in the first interview with her for it to be forgotten, either by the lady or the theatre audience. We have been made to care about Mistress Fitzdottrel’s future as we did not care about that of Corvino’s Celia at the end of Volpone. Although her problems have been alleviated, they have certainly not been solved. (232-3)

While I disagree with her assertion that audiences do not care about Celia (who, as I argue here, suffers from a similarly bad marriage), Barton’s observations point out the
ultimate inadequacy of community intervention in a bad marriage when stacked up against the legal customs that fostered husbands’ abuse of their wives to begin with.

Again, at the centre of this cuckold plot is the question of a man’s anxieties over being made a cuckold (and therefore revealing the weakness of his masculine performance). Jonson’s play is simultaneously reassuring (to intelligent men who could never be so foolish as to make the mistakes with wealth and wife that Fitzdottrel does) and disconcerting (as it shows how badly foolish men can fail at masculinity). What sets the play apart from other cuckold plays, however, is that it gives equal importance to the plight of Frances, who lacks any viable options for escaping or truly reforming the tyrannical husband whose foolishness promises to lead her into poverty. The play is about more than the failure of masculinity; it is also about the consequences of that failure for women who have submit to masculine authority, and in part points to the inequity of this situation in a more troubled tone than does a play like *Merry Wives*.

Celia's and Frances’s sensible domestic and economic advice to their husbands, contrasted with the constant displays of stupidity by Corvino and Fitzdottrel, simply exaggerates the men’s foolishness. The contrast invites the audience’s sympathy for the women and seems to want to justify why the women might and possibly should commit adultery. This is especially so in the case of Celia, whose husband is inept at managing his household and his finances, and, as I suggested earlier, is also cruel. Not just a foolish guardian of his wife, Corvino accompanies his foolish demands to her with physical and economic threats. He starts out being intensely miserly with his wife’s body, refusing to
allow her to approach the window, and promising physical and sexual punishment if she fails to obey:

I will have this bawdy light dammed up;
And, till’t be done, some two or three yards off
I’ll chalk a line, o’er which if thou but (chance
To) set thy desp’rate foot, more hell, more horror,
More wild remorseless rage shall seize on thee. 

(2.5.50-4)

Corvino’s jealousy, here, is perhaps understandable insofar as there was a common association with windows and prostitution (Wolfthal 57). Such jealousy might even be more understandable than his later willingness to rent out Celia. Mostly, however, his response marks his distrust of Celia and his inconsistent behaviour; as Celia reasonably points out, “I could not think / My being at the window should more now / Move your impatience than at other times” (2.5.35-7). In 2.6, even if he is only making excuses to permit himself to prostitute his wife for his own gain, Corvino himself acknowledges Celia is chaste and lacking in the dishonest “art” of the courtesan (52) and is thus a reasonable choice to participate in the scheme of playing Volpone’s bedfellow. His shifts from wild jealousy to anger that she refuses to prostitute herself point to his economic grasping; these moments also portray him as a kind of tyrant figure, not in control of his own passions and desires, and suggest that the fault in the marriage is not Celia’s naivety in framing herself in public window, but in his own multifaceted failure as a husband.

His irrational order that she later become Volpone’s bedfellow is similarly accompanied by threats of physical and legal violence. As Martin Andrew observes, Corvino becomes a disturbingly ironic parody of the Lucrece narrative, taking up Sextus Tarquin’s threats to kill his wife and defame her chaste name: “If she does not yield to his
will by satisfying Volpone’s, he will ‘buy some slave / Whom I will kill, and bind thee to him, alive’ ([3.7.]100-101)” (Andrew 101). That Celia’s husband takes the position of the infamous adulterer/rapist reveals the extent of the wrongness of Corvino’s position, and his demands. Corvino’s foolishness accumulates as the play goes on: he fails to recognise his wife’s chastity, fails to recognise that all his own fears of being cuckolded generate reasons why she might want to cuckold him, and fails to recognise that in ordering her to visit Volpone, he gives her the opportunity to commit the adultery he fears. Sending her to the bed of another men is not a logical choice in any way.

Corvino’s failure to safeguard either his money or his wife is perhaps a result of his tragic inability to read a situation properly (a necessary skill for anyone living in a busy and corrupt city). He (perhaps understandably) fails to read Celia’s intentions in the window scene – reading her actions as those of a courtesan advertising her body, and overlooking the more innocent cause behind her public appearance: buying Scoto’s cure for jealousy. He misreads Volpone who is not actually ill and enfeebled; he cannot see through the lies of Mosca, instead trusting his promises of future treasures. Corvino is exactly like Fitzdottrel in his inability to know whom to believe or how to interpret what the other city dwellers are saying and doing; Celia is like Frances Fitzdottrel in that she bears the consequences of her husband’s inability to navigate the city and to protect his household. (She does not, however, as far as we can see, experience the same physical abuse that Frances experiences in 2.7.) And of course, the fact that Fitzdottrel and Corvino are incapable of discerning truth from lies means that they neglect the one source of true advice to which they have access: their wives.
Frances's and Celia’s husbands perhaps give the wives many reasons to want to commit adultery – even as temporary relief from Fitzdottrel's and Corvino’s cruelty, in the same way that Messer Vergellesi’s wife seeks relief from her husband’s emotional abandonment of her through her affair with Zima. Indeed, Jonson’s wives seem to have far more cause for the decision than the wife in the Boccaccio source story. In addition to the mockery and threats referred to earlier, and the threat of poverty, the wives experience further physical and psychological abuse. Frances experiences physical abuse more obviously than Celia. When Fitzdottrel (with the help of Pug) discovers her being fondled by Wittipol, he “strikes” her for it (2.7.16sd). His violence is, like Corvino's threats to Celia, ultimately another sign of his failed masculinity, as it merely replaces the threatened action he offers Wittipol, to “cut [his] throat” (2.7.12); when Wittipol strikes Fitzdottrel for the threat, the latter turns his hand not against his assailant but against Frances. The action seems intended to emphasise Fitzdottrel’s impotence, in the same way that Corvino’s excessive threats to Celia mark his inability to really master his performance of urban masculinity. But Corvino’s horrific threats are at least rendered somewhat palatable by his age (which marks him as the comic type of the impotent old man – physically as well as sexually weak) and by the fact that his threats are more bluster than anything else. The play does not indicate that he strikes Celia in the same way that Fitzdottrel beats his wife. What perhaps makes Fitzdottrel’s violence more disturbing is that he follows it with a string of apologetic endearments and promises:

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111 I am here reading Corvino as a senex figure, following the commedia tradition of plays like La Mandragola. Productions opting to perform Corvino as a young merchant, however, would only emphasise the inherent violence in the Corvino-Celia scenes.
Oh bird!
Could you do this? ‘Gainst me? And at this time now?
When I was employed, wholly for you,
...

to make you peerless? Studying
For footmen for you, fine-paced ushers, pages
To serve you o’the knee; with what knight’s wife
To bear your train, and sit with your four women
In council, and receive intelligences
From foreign parts; to dress you at all pieces!
You’ve almost turned my good affection to you,
Soured my sweet thoughts, all my pure purposes.
I could now find i’my very heart to make
Another lady Duchess, and depose you. (2.7.28-41)

Fitzdottrel’s violence-followed-by-cajoling imitates a typical pattern of violence that abusive husbands in homes outside the theatre mete out to their wives. Fitzdottrel strikes his wife, and then “apologises”, reminding her that he loves her while still blaming her for his angry reaction: contemporary domestic violence and abuse scripts follow this same pattern. His reaction additionally suggests that violence is likely to be Frances’s reward in the event that Fitzdottrel ever does catch his wife in an affair. At the very least, he might, like Corvino, divorce his wife (even if both men are unintelligent, weak bullies, and unlikely to divorce their wives, they do have the legal entitlement to do so). Frances, however, does have the aid of two sympathetic, clever, and (mostly) good Englishmen – in contrast to Celia who only has the aid of Bonario, whose earnest goodness makes him ineffective against the corrupt wits of Venice. Frances at least has the possibility if not of reforming her husband, then at least of limiting the damage he can do to their finances. Of course, the only way she can seemingly get men like Wittipol on her side is by refusing to cuckold her husband. Only then will he reform and commit to the more useful project of
improving her marriage in the long term. By refusing to have an affair, then, Frances escapes both potential punishment and financial devastation.

Celia has less hope of reforming her husband. As I suggested, however, her decision to remain faithful makes sense in terms of an attempt to measure the costs and gains related to committing adultery. Indeed, the costs of adultery are potentially quite great for both women if they are living under a system of coverture, as I suspect both plays hint. Celia’s married circumstances more clearly reveal the extent to which coverture can hamper the ability of wives to relieve a bad marriage. Corvino’s plan to take her dowry from her by claiming she has committed adultery – “I’ll but protest myself a cuckold, / And save your dowry” (2.5.23-4) – indicates that the rules of coverture law are in operation. Although her dowry technically remains her own, Celia, as a wife, has no control over it; Corvino here threatens the last nominal claim she has to it by declaring her an adulteress. He suggests he will go to court to do so, recalling the double standard of coverture which limited a wife’s ability to participate in economic and legal transactions without the presence/orders of her husband (since she was merely an extension of him), but which allowed a husband to prosecute any claim he wished of his own. Celia’s inability to speak in the courtroom in 5.3, while the avocatori and women like Lady Pol interpret her actions (particularly her fainting) as “proof” of Celia’s consenting to the truth of the charges against her, suggests both that Celia has no experience speaking in a courtroom and the extent to which a woman’s voice might be powerless in legal matters when pitted against a male authority. (Lady Pol, helpfully
corroborating Corvino, Bonario, and Corbacio’s story, is significantly able to speak quite
loudly as usual.)

Corvino’s plan to use against Celia his knowledge that a wife who commits
adultery loses her rights to her dowry is especially damning, however; as I outlined
earlier, an adulterous wife under coverture law could lose both her dowry and her right to
regain the status of a feme sole or true single woman (which category all women at the
age of majority and still unmarried fell under). When considering Celia, Greenberg’s
observations that a feme sole was legally allowed to work, to trade, and to deal in other
economic as well as legal matters (xix-xx) are particularly useful to bear in mind; a
woman who committed adultery and was consequently separated or divorced from her
husband was technically considered neither married nor single: she did not have the right
to work or press legal cases; nor was she sanctioned to beg or receive aid. She might end
up with no means to escape penury and starvation. In a historical period where
institutionalised social assistance was scarce, this situation could be fatal.

Even if the consequences of coverture were not always implemented to the full
extent of the law, the possibility that they might be implemented existed. Moreover, such
laws point to the official sanctioning of a culture which denied full civil rights and
autonomy to women: it points to a basic level of misogynist ruling that must have badly
affected the daily lives and experiences of early modern women in a multitude of ways.
Corvino’s threat is haunted by the spectre of all the punishments that could be conferred
upon Celia according to the rules of coverture law. The fact that Celia is actually chaste
points to the way that the male’s greater access to legal and economic power lends easily
to abuse: such access becomes a weapon against women, to frighten and control them.\textsuperscript{112}

The extent to which even foolish husbands have legal and economic control over women might explain both Celia's and Frances’s unwillingness to acquiesce to their would-be “lovers” – and explains why they would rather request help or sympathy from their lovers to renegotiate the power in their marriage (Frances) or to avoid any possible legal, social, and personal recriminations for adultery (Celia). These are reasons that Jonson’s plays stage but which other cuckold narratives rarely show.\textsuperscript{113}

Celia becomes an example of how coverture can hamper female agency, even if the play presents her as a bit of a caricature to make the point. Corvino’s cruelty, though, invites audiences to attend to the break in communication between husband and wife. (Celia gives good advice, but he refuses to listen to her – and because he’s the head of the household he does not have to listen to her.) \textit{Volpone} also invites us to pay attention to the model of power which Corvino is so desperate to maintain (where he is entirely in control of both his finances and his wife). The good and chaste Celia seems both particularly old-fashioned and particularly lonely in the context of Venice, but her loneliness perhaps only makes visible the isolation and economic and legal powerlessness of most wives in cuckold drama. Celia may seem a bit absurd to be so chaste and good in corrupt Venice, a city that offers no rewards to principled characters. (Indeed, her attempts to resist

\textsuperscript{112} Jacqueline Vanhoutte suggests that John Lyly’s plays show the connection between power imbalance and the physical and legal violence women experience in marriage: “in his plays, heterosexual love assumes the shape of violence” (108). Vanhoutte suggests this violence was the central reason behind Elizabeth’s refusal to marry, but points out that her ability to refuse marriage was a privilege not afforded to most early modern women. Lyly’s plays thus register the everyday violence that women experienced.

\textsuperscript{113} Plays like \textit{Chaste Maid} and \textit{The Gamester} do point to this same imbalance of power, but less obviously than Jonson’s plays: in \textit{Chaste Maid}, although wives participate actively in schemes with their husbands, it is tellingly the men who are always the brokers of deals; in \textit{The Gamester}, women are again active participants in schemes, but do so while never leaving their houses (with one exception).
Volpone result in nothing more than his attempted rape of her.) As I reviewed in the previous chapter on rape hearings, critics have had a great deal of trouble trying to make sense of what this outmoded character is doing in a modern urban comedy. And well they might wonder: Celia not only dares to be a chaste anachronism, but also dares to be unmerry in her chasteness. Frances, though she refuses to literally cuckold her husband, at least participates in his public humiliation (which we might read as at least a kind of metaphorical cuckolding). But if Celia is less fun, it is probably because – as the play works so hard to show us – she is more overtly threatened with the legally and culturally sanctioned punishments coverture law can inflict upon her as a punishment for her fun. Of course, she also risks violence – as Corvino’s threats demonstrate:

Heart! I will drag thee hence home by the hair,
Cry thee a strumpet through the streets, rip up
Thy mouth unto thine ears, and slit thy nose,
Like a raw rotchet! ...
I will buy some slave
Whom I will kill, and bind thee to him, alive,
And at my window hang you forth, devising
Some monstrous crime, which I in capital letters
Will eat into thy flesh with aquafortis
And burning cor’ sives on this stubborn breast. (3.7.96-106)

One might argue that Volpone could protect her as a new partner in his schemes, but then Volpone – along with all the other men in the play – is not loyal to or protective of anyone, as the rules of city comedy tricksterism necessitate. Moreover, Corvino lacks Allwit’s ability to forgive adultery. Finally, Celia is not a member of a community like the one we find in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*; most of the couples in Middleton’s play are tolerant and flexible when it comes to standards of marital morality, and (almost) all of the characters in the play are willing to collaborate so that their community thrives as a
whole (another contrast to the individualistic characters who populate Volpone’s Venice). Even if the concerns around cuckoldry in Middleton’s play are still centrally masculine ones, women, whether chaste or not, have a chance at happy domestic lives. Women in Chaste Maid are turned into commodities as sex becomes one more thing that men trade, sell, and deceive each other with, but Middleton’s play world begins to understand that selling sex and commodifying women also requires a letting go of traditional models of masculinity, domesticity, and expectations of chaste wives, and so ends up being less inconsistently and unfairly controlling of the sexuality of its female characters. Volpone’s play world is caught between old and new ways of defining and valuing masculinity, and is a riskier environment for women, who cannot be chaste or unchaste without punishment and mockery (as reactions of the play’s characters and critics to Celia and Lady Pol reveal). One can easily imagine Volpone using Celia and discarding her, betraying her and leaving her in a world that while happy to profit from unchaste women refuses to extend to those women legal and economic rights to survive. Celia seems to request that Volpone leave her chaste because she sincerely values chastity and does not want to participate in the immoral world of Venice’s trickster market; given Corvino’s threats to declare her an adulteress in a law court, however, she may also be cognisant that there are potentially serious legal and physical consequences if she does participate in

114 The play is also happy to humiliate men who are victims of tricksterism and cuckoldry, despite that one imagines everyone in Venice must be such a victim: Celia observes that Corvino’s honour would be ruined by her going to Volpone’s house (unlike Allwit’s honour which isn’t really ruined by the possibility that he might be revealed as a cuckold – he even tries to “out” himself in order to ruin Sir Walter’s marriage prospects!). Despite Corvino’s attempts to diminish the possibility of social humiliation, his concern with his wife as a sexual spectacle at the window an act earlier belies his claim; Venice is more likely to take cuckoldry seriously, and read it as a dishonour against the husband – otherwise it wouldn’t adhere so strictly to laws that allow a husband to divorce his wife for adultery.
Venice’s immoral world. Volpone’s attempts to rape her when she refuses his advances, however, emphasise the fact that she is not really in control of whether she gets to have sex or not. Celia’s situation is lose-lose: in a society where the laws punish women for failing to be chaste, but do not inflict the same legal punishments on the men who destroy female chastity, women are stripped of ability to give consent or denial in a way that is truly meaningful.  

Although Volpone draws more obvious attention to the limiting position women experience under societies which both overvalue female chastity and make the failure of chastity harshly punishable under coverture law, The Devil Is an Ass makes the same point, despite its provisionally “happy” ending. The play, set in London (where men are more likely to be morally reformed), may be merrier in its examination of cuckoldry and coverture law, but there are enough hints in the way that Frances has no legal voice, and in the fact that she has to work through men to wrest power from her husband, that coverture law is still in operation. Fitzdottrel does not threaten his wife with the advantages coverture law affords him in the same way that Corvino does (that is, he does not threaten to declare her an adulteress in courts and deprive her of her remaining legal and economic rights), but the same set of laws that make such an option possible still seem to be in operation in The Devil Is an Ass’s London as much as it is in Volpone’s Venice. And ultimately, as Barton observes, Frances cannot escape the man who physically abuses her, even if transferring control over the couple’s estates from

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115 The avocatori do punish both Volpone and Corvino in the end, but the main cause of their punishment is their cheating. Only after both have proven themselves economic and legal fraudsters do the avocatori take seriously Celia’s complaint about being sexually abused.
Fitzdottrel to her new friend Manly promises to slightly mitigate his abuse in addition to mitigating his wasteful spending.

Ultimately, both Celia and Frances win out against their cruel and foolish husbands, which suggests that both plays are sympathetic to these women and their attempts to resist the daily violence of their circumstances. Their successes are, as I have intimated already, limited. Celia’s attempt to remain chaste and therefore faultless (protecting herself from Corvino’s retribution) results in her near rape, while her and Bonario’s attempts to clear her name in court lead almost to the censuring they want to ward off. Frances, while she succeeds in wresting financial control over the couple’s estates from her husband’s grasp by the end of the play, does not in fact gain control over those finances – and she is still saddled with an incredibly gullible as well as potentially abusive husband. That there are no easy solutions for wives with bad husbands is perhaps the point, however, and in part what makes the plays unique: they foreground the lived experiences of wives who are forced by cultural and legal convention to submit to bad husbands with very few avenues of respite available.

Both of Jonson’s plays point out the difficulty wives might have had submitting to the rule of their husbands while always avoiding abuse by them; at the same time this does not mean that either Volpone or The Devil Is an Ass quite relinquishes the idea that husbands ought to be the heads of their households. Both women improve their married situation by receiving replacements for their husbands: Celia returning to the house of her
father (5.12.143-4),\textsuperscript{116} and Frances has Manly “husbanding” the Fitzdottrel couple’s finances. Neither is fully autonomous by any contemporary standard. The plays, then, are not attacks on patriarchal structures altogether. What they suggest is that women within a patriarchal state require more legal and economic freedoms on a daily level so that their husband’s rule does not become a tyranny.

As I suggested earlier, both of Jonson’s plays are as taken up with masculine anxieties regarding cuckoldry as are any other cuckold plays. But they are equally taken up with the concerns of wives regarding marriage, adultery, and divorce. Fittingly, both plays’ implicit suggestion about the ways that men can “cure” or prevent cuckoldry (and the ensuing attack on the husband’s masculine authority) is one that also tries to respond to the wifely concerns. That is, when wives are given greater legal and economic freedoms, the possibility of cuckoldry becomes a non-issue. Masculine authority is sustained rather than challenged by wives who are companions and partners to their husbands in more than name only. Both plays suggest that wives know the best way of attending to domestic economies (Celia sees the danger in Corvino taking her to Volpone’s home and leaving her there – in the process being seen doing so by Venice’s inhabitants) and financial matters (Frances perceives scams when her husband cannot). This suggestion indicates that in the increasingly commercial and perhaps increasingly disorienting urban environment, a man needs all the help he can get, and should

\textsuperscript{116} Critics have varied considerably in their readings of Celia and her fate. While Barton finds Celia’s fate more benign than that of Frances because Celia escapes her marriage while Frances remains trapped with her foolish abuser, Ostovich points out that she, like Frances, still remains under the control of her father, and thus continues to have “no independent say in her future” (“Ben Jonson and the Dynamics of Misogyny” 108). Both women, though, suffer from the same gender violence that early modern marriage law institutionalised.
especially trust his wife, and listen to her advice. Wives are (the plays might idealistically claim) as concerned with managing a household’s domestic and financial economies – at doing the things that preserve patriarchy – as husbands are. They are more interested in ensuring that they are married to good and reliable husbands (or not married at all) than they are with cuckolding.

The plays implicitly advocate a model companionate marriage that is freer from the vestiges of coverture law which hampers the abilities of wives to manage a good marriage: only when a marriage is not a tyranny does a wife’s submission to a husband’s control mean anything. A good husband should treat his wife as an intelligent and good person; he must stop obsessing about the possibility of being cuckolded, stop policing his wife with humiliation and cruelty, and pay more attention to managing the couple’s domestic and financial economies: a chaste wife – and a happy marriage – will inevitably follow. Jonson’s solutions to the problems of inequality in early modern marriage may seem imperfect by contemporary standards. His plays ultimately stop short of criticising the notion that women must be subordinate to their husbands in the first place – instead they seek to minimise the violence that this built-in inequality can inflict on women. His plays, however, do offer a significant challenge to our unreflective laughter at certain comedic tropes and narratives. Volpone and The Devil Is an Ass invite us to think more critically about the costs of our laughter in our popular entertainment: and this critical thinking, I would argue, is still the means to developing a more ethical theatre (and other media) that refuses to reproduce rape-supportive culture in our own day.
Conclusion:

“[G]ive me that lusty lad”: Ram Alley’s Challenge to Ethical Representation

Throughout my dissertation I have tried to consider comedies that both reiterate sexually violent ideas, tropes, and jokes and also reflect back on those sexual violences in some way. Plays like Volpone, Measure for Measure, and arguably The Dutch Courtesan expose commonplace sexual violences in such a way that the plays’ comedic resolutions seem hollow or even disturbing. The attempted rapes in Volpone and Measure for Measure are echoed in their later scenes – in the “secondary rape” in the courtroom scenes of Volpone which empties Celia of her resistive spirit, in the forced marriages at the conclusion of Measure which ensure a future of sexual violence for Kate Keepdown/Lucio and Angelo/Mariana, and in the Duke’s unwanted proposal which repeats for a third time the distressing coercion Isabella already experienced at the hands of first Angelo and then Claudio. These violences prove only nominally resolvable by the end of both plays. And Franceschina’s angry voice rings in our ears as we see the deceptive Freevill promise himself to Beatrice in Marston’s play.

Bartholomew Fair, The Roaring Girl, and A Trick to Catch the Old One, in contrast, are gentler in their condemnation of the double standards concerning chastity and sexual licence, and the social and legal punishments women receive when they are deemed to “fail” at being chaste. These plays offer more optimistic resolutions that hope for a world in which unruly women are accepted and even celebrated. They also contain incisive moments that invite us to interrogate our assumptions about comedic resolution. Moll’s speech at the end of The Roaring Girl, for example, interrogates marriage’s ability
to safeguard women’s chastity and protect them from verbal violence; in critiquing marriage as a viable comedic conclusion, Middleton and Dekker’s play also critiques marriage’s ability to promise happiness in the world outside the theatre. The main obstacle to happiness, Moll’s speech and the play as a whole clearly points out, is the way that men pander women, leaving them open to whore shaming. Meanwhile, *Bartholomew Fair* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One* satirically reveal the respectable middle-class men of those comedies as hypocrites who fail to control their appetites, while simultaneously presenting the women who feed men’s appetites (sexual, economic, or nutritive) as valuable comic bodies: clever, resourceful, and worthy of celebration. This representation in turn challenges audiences to reconsider the ways we perceive unruly or whorish women as lacking value and open to abuse.

I will conclude by briefly considering a comedy which is less reflective on and interrogative of sexual violence: Lording Barry’s *Ram Alley* (c.1607/8). Barry’s comedy raises difficult questions about how to represent sexual violence ethically when the play itself is not as interrogative of that violence and the comedic structures and culture that supports it. Ultimately I will suggest that ethical representations and interpretations of plays with sexual violence may require reading against the grain of a text, even – or especially – if this shatters the comic mood of a play that wants to write over sexual violence.

*Ram Alley* is unique in its treatment of overt sexual violence – particularly rape. *Volpone* and *Measure for Measure* present attempted rape as a central problem from which these “comedies” only barely manage to recover. These events, like the double
rape of Merione in the more obviously tragicomic *The Queen of Corinth*, may leave us feeling disconcerted. But Barry’s play actually resolves itself in its final act by an act of rape at knifepoint. The actions of the play centre on the wealthy widow Changeable Taffata who has several suitors. William Smallshanks, having already tricked one of these suitors into marrying his “honest Punke” Frances (A3v), proceeds to best his estranged father – who by act 5 is betrothed to Taffata – in courtship. He gains access to Taffata’s window and offers to marry her in place of his father. Taffata declines his offer, reminding him of the disrespect his proposal shows his father (“Would you be capring in your fathers saddle?” H2v). Her refusal also rests on the suspicion that the dissolute William is the sort of man who

> When a poor woman has laid open all  
> Her thoughts to you, then you grow proud, and coy,  
> But when wise maides dissemble, and keepe close,  
> Then you poore snakes come creeping on your bellies,  
> And with all oyled lookes prostrate your selves,  
> Before our beauties sunne, where once but warme,  
> Like hatefull snakes you strike us with your stings,  
> And then forsake us[.] (H2v)

Although Taffata refers to women’s thoughts and feelings being laid open to men who then spurn them, her speech also reminds us of William’s treatment of Frances, a woman who “inioy[ed] a quiet country life, / Spotlesse and free, till [he] corrupted [her]” (A4r). Having corrupted Frances, and turned her into a “whore” (as she is repeatedly named throughout the play), William then discards her, thus proving the truth of Taffata’s words.

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117 Although Taffata’s first name appears only once in the play, Elizabeth Hanson reminds us of the importance of her name in understanding what she represents: she is changeable not only because, as a woman, her affections are not fixed, but also because, like money, she changes hands and in so doing changes men’s fortunes” (225). Her changeability, as I argue below, is the very characteristic that William Smallshanks and the play as a whole use to justify her violent treatment in act 5.
Rather than accept Taffata’s refusal and chastisement, however, William Smallshanks becomes violent:

\[
\text{nay, if you go} \\
\text{You shall leave your smocke behind you widow,} \\
\text{Keep close your womanish weapon, hold your tongue,} \\
\text{Nor speake, cough, sneeze or stampe, for if you doe,} \\
\text{By this good blade ile cut your throte directly,} \\
\text{Peace, stirre not, by Heaven ile cut your throte} \\
\text{If you but stirre; speak not, stand still, go to,} \\
\text{Ile teach coy widowes a new way to wooe,} \\
\text{Come you shall kisse, why so, ile stab by heaven} \\
\text{If you but stirre; now heare, first kisse again,} \\
\text{Why so stirre not, Now come I to the point,} \\
\text{My hopes are past, nor can my present state} \\
\text{Affoord a single half-penny, my father} \\
\text{Hates me deadly; to beg my birth forbids,} \\
\text{To steale, the Law, the hang man, and the Rope} \\
\text{With one consent deny: ...} \\
\text{Therefore my state is desperate, stirre not,} \\
\text{And I by much will rather choose to hang,} \\
\text{Then in a ditch or prison hole to starue,} \\
\text{Resolve, wed me, and take me to your bed,} \\
\text{Or by my soule ile straite cut off your head,} \\
\text{Then kill my selfe, for I had rather dy,} \\
\text{Then in a street live poor and lowsily[.] (H2v)}
\]

This scene, which ends in the pair going to bed, is unarguably rape. William’s repeated directives to “stand still” suggest that Taffata struggles against his violent grasp; his orders both to keep silent and to kiss him reveal his contemptuous efforts to control not just her physical movements but also her voice and sexual expression. Nothing in his demands indicates affection – he frankly admits that his desire to marry her is rooted in his economic desperation (a situation he created for himself by his dissolute lifestyle) and his unwillingness to go to debtor’s prison. He would in fact rather die than go to prison –
but not without killing Taffata first. (Instead of accepting his own fault in his poverty, then, he instead shifts the blame onto Taffata for failing to marry him.118)

He also indicates that his desire to have sex with and marry the widow has much to do with his longing for vengeance against his father, and so he reduces Taffata to an object through which he can enact his revenge. When Sir Oliver Smallshanks arrives at Taffata’s home after the rape, William and his friend Boutcher joke about the act that has put Taffata beyond Sir Oliver’s grasp. William teases that he has “laid [his] knife abord” (I2r) and Boutcher more crudely taunts Sir Oliver that his son has “firkt away the wench, pierc’t the hogshead / And knowes by this the vintage” (I2r). But their jokes at Sir Oliver’s expense also make light of the violence of the act imposed on Taffata, with the references to knives, firking, and piercing referencing both the literal knife with which William persuaded Taffata to submit to the rape and the penis with which he pierced her body. Sex becomes a way of claiming ownership over Sir Oliver’s wifely property – the crime is *raptus* and ravishment at once. The act reduces a woman, her will, and her desire to nothing more than property and a symbol of one man’s mastery over another, even though the brunt of the violence is directed at the raped woman herself. The jokes and laughter following the rape, though spoken towards Sir Oliver, are also a second blow at Taffata, trivialising her experience.

118 Thus while I agree with Hanson’s central argument tracing the connection between female Lucre figures in morality plays and women like Taffata who symbolise “the power of money” (233), I do disagree with her statements that the play “does no disciplinary work at all save for humiliating greedy old men” (231) and that Taffata “gets what she wants” when William rapes her (209). I understand the attractiveness of reading the rape scene as one in which Taffata is in fact in control in that it makes the comic ending more palatable, I think that there is enough textual evidence to the contrary. By not acknowledging that evidence we reproduce misogynist rape myths that suggest women like getting raped.
William, however, seems to think it acceptable to laugh at her rape because Taffa’s own conniving ways have somehow made her deserving of being so violently used. He accuses Taffa of only wanting to marry Sir Oliver for his wealth (ironically at the same time that he admits he wants to marry Taffeta for economic reasons): “Doe not I know you cannot love my father / A widow that has knowne the quid of things, / To dote upon an old and crased man, / ... / Have not you wealth enough?” (H3r). Here he draws upon misogynistic commonplaces about women’s inherent greed as a way of overriding her will and justifying his violent action.

Despite the overt nature of the sexual violence in the final scene of Ram Alley, however, I have intimated that the play is not troubled by sexual violence in the same way The Queen of Corinth or Measure for Measure or Volpone is. The scenes following the rape reveal no silenced broken woman as act 5 of Volpone does; Taffata draws no comparisons between forced marriage to death as Angelo and Lucio do; none of the characters hold any discussion of whether William Smallshanks ought to be put to death.

Instead, Taffata professes:

\[
\text{ile love thee while I live,} \\
\text{For this attempt, give me that lusty lad,} \\
\text{That winnes his widow with his well drawne blade} \\
\text{And not with oaths and words: a widows wooing,} \\
\text{Not in bare words, but should consist in doing[.]}\]  

(H3v)

While we might read her reply as the only possible response a woman in her position might have when given the choice of sex/marriage or death, and her following lines (that seem to praise William’s violence) as sarcastic, her defence of him in the remainder of the scene suggests that play itself invites us to understand her reply as being in earnest.
Taffata’s character sportively plays out the fantasy that women secretly desire rape. When Sir Oliver comes on stage shortly after the rape, for example, she mocks his love along with her new husband, and insinuates the supposed pleasures of “sleeping with” William Smallshanks: “I finde no fault, and I protest Sir Oliver, / I’d not have lost the last two houres sleep, / I had by him, for all the wealth you have” (I2r). Taffata in effect replays the fantasy we saw in the Mandragola, where a woman discovers the joy of sex with her rapist. But Ram Alley tries to make the fantasy more convincing by allowing the rape victim herself to voice her pleasure (in contrast to Callimacho reporting Lucrezia’s enjoyment in Machiavelli’s play).

The myth that women secretly want to be raped is further bolstered by the fact that Taffata is a widow, with all the common conceptions of widows as sexually licentious that we see in plays like A Trick to Catch the Old One. Barry’s play is much cruder about this fact than Middleton’s, however; early in act 1 Taffata ascribes Boutcher’s reluctance to receive her advances to his belief that widows are like leftover food: “you hold us widowes, / But as a pie thrust to the lower end / That hath had many fingers int before, / And is reserv’d for grosse, and hungry stomachs” (B3v). Taffata’s description collapses appetites for sex and food in a coarse way, in the process suggesting that

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119 Hanson discusses this commonplace in relation to Ram Alley when she offers the possibility of reading Taffata as “rich widow ... who was maritally experienced, wealthier, and often older than [her husband]” and the “widow” conceptualised as “lustful and susceptible to sexual aggression” (220). Hanson is citing Jennifer Panek here, who argues that both of these common representations of widows caused anxiety for men who therefore construct fantasies in which these widows submit to masculine authority. But Taffata also represents the power of money, which Hanson ultimately argues is more important than “the duty of women to submit to male authority” in plays like Ram Alley. I think we can add a fourth way of reading her: as a realistic subject. Doing so allows us to see her simultaneously as type, as symbol of power, and as woman for whom sexual violence might be a traumatic experience. The play may ultimately wish to reduce back to a fantasy, but her resistance to William before the rape offers the possibility of challenging the play’s efforts to efface the sexual violence she experiences.
widows are as “grosse” as the men who pursue them. The images of the widow pie being passed from hand to hand until it reaches the end of the table and the reference to stomachs in the plural hint, moreover, at the supposed promiscuity of widows. And Taffata appears to live up to these misogynist conceptions of widows when throughout the play we see her playing her many suitors off one another – she enlists Boutcher to get rid of Captain Puff, promising her favours to the former, but she also promises to marry Sir Oliver Smallshanks. The play thus invites the audience to side with William’s view that her use of her mercenary sexual favours to profit from men like Sir Oliver somehow justifies her rape and humiliation. The play supports this perception further when it allows her to be raped and forced into marriage but refuses to punish William Smallshanks himself, a man who admits, in his first conversation with Boutcher in act 1, that he is an idle and lecherous spendthrift (A3v-A4r), and who seduces and discards women like Frances (whom he also verbally abuses throughout the play) – though not before using her as a means of humiliating his rival, Throte the lawyer, by tricking him into marriage with Francis and in the process gaining back his lands. William Smallshanks ends up being the hero of the play, married to a wealthy widow and outwitting all the men, and is not rebuked for his rape of Taffata.120

Jeremy Lopez, though his argument differs considerably from mine, also reads the play as being ultimately untroubled by William Smallshanks’s sexual violence, arguing that “sexual aggression ... is rerouted into a new generic machine – a lusty widow’s quest for the most sexually aggressive suitor” (213). Lopez figures this recovery of its comedic structure as part of the play’s desire to shy away from “noncomic scenes where the actors are disconcertingly, if fitfully, required to personate the economic desperation that is the social reality trooped and made manageable by their characters’ theatrical types. ... Barry wants the theater to be a means of overcoming – rather than an instrument with which to express – economic desperation” (220). But if the play enacts the shift into a truly comic conclusion by suddenly deploying the trope of the lusty widow then it effaces the sexual violence Taffata experiences in the moments immediately before she becomes the trope of the lusty widow. Lopez’s reading is astute, and supports my own sense that the play invites us to celebrate the hero-rapist William who rises above his economic desperation. I think
Although *Ram Alley* shares similarities with plays like *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, where another prodigal trickster cons a wealthy man into marrying a whore and returning his inheritance, there are several differences between the plays: as I argued in my first chapter, the Courtesan in Middleton’s play is as much a trickster as Witgood, and gains as much by her marriage to Hoard. She speaks eloquently in defence of herself and against Witgood’s initial inclination to shame her. And Witgood may be irresponsible, but he is not a violent rapist. *Ram Alley*, on the contrary, has something of the tone of a “lads” play about it – as Taffata herself suggests when she names her rapist a “lusty lad” before going to bed with him. The play makes occasional and superficial gestures at respectability: Constantia is a token chaste maid and she and Boutcher seem to represent a standard young lovers romance plot with Constantia’s fidelity to her unfaithful lover ultimately rewarded at Boutcher’s return. (Although Boutcher ultimately comes back to her because he loses out on Taffata rather than because he experiences any real reformation or repentance.) But William Smallshanks neither reforms nor reconciles with his father (and he makes no attempt to do either) – and the lusty lad is smugly pleased with this ending.

The laddish tone of the play owes much to the way it derives its comic energy from the crudely but lively sexual. This comic sexual energy includes a lot of female

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we have to be aware, however, that in the process of shifting towards the comic in the way that Lopez describes the play implicitly reiterates rape-supportive ideology. Critics of the play are right to argue that “the lines [Barry] gives to Taffata after the rape demonstrate that the play is above all interested in a conventionalized and generically sanctioned misogyny, which is itself grounded in popular ideas and anxieties about the insatiable widow” (210-11). His correlating argument – that the scene gives the audience “exactly the kind of nonsense it came to the theater to see” (211) is also apt, though disturbing in its suggestion that audiences are willing to overlook sexual violence if they get the comedic conclusions they desire.
sexual expression, such as when the disguised Constantia flirts with Adriana in 1.1 using an extended metaphor about boarding ships laden with entendres about phallic cannons and “too short” linstocks (B2v) or when Taffata hides Sir Oliver under her skirts in act 3, accompanied by Adriana’s direction not to give himself away no matter what he “heare[s], / See[s] or smell[s]” – an unsubtle reference to the workings of Taffata’s genitalia (E2v). Ram Alley is not ultimately a celebration of female sexuality, however; instead the play constantly figures it as something “grosse” (as in the widow/pie metaphor) and worthy of violence: maids are ships to be fired at and boarded, Captain Puff enters Taffata’s room “Ready with a Pike to make [his] entry” (E3r), a promise that William Smallshanks fulfills when he rapes her at knife-point.

The play also presents female sexual expression as that which warrants humiliation: Frances deserves to be used and then turned into a demeaning punishment, Taffata’s flirting can be rewarded with rape. We are, in fact, primed to laugh at female sexuality early on in the play, in Constantia’s story about the woman who visits the baboons:

    the say some of our City dames
    Were much desirous to see the Baboones
    Doe some of their newest tricks, went, saw them, came home,
    Went to bed, slept next morning one of them,
    ...
    gins to thinke
    On the Baboones tricks, and naked in her bed
    Begins to practise some, at last she strove,
    To get her right leg over her head; thus:
    And by her activity she got it
    Crosse her shoulder: but not with all her power,
    Could she reduce it, at last much strugling
    Tumbles quite from the bed upon the floore,
    The maide ...
seeing her mistres as throwne on the ground,
Trust up like a foot-ball, exclaims, calls helpe,
Runnes downe amazd, sweares that her mistris neck
Is broke; up comes her husband, and neighbours,
... she ashamed; her husband amazed,
The neighbours laughing, as none forbare,
She tells them of the fatal accident
To which one answers, that if her husband
Would leave his trade and carry his wife about
To doe this trick in publike, she’d get more gold
Then all the Baboones, Calves with two tales,
Or motions whatsoever.  

(Bv-B2r)

As Andrew Griffin argues, the scene that Constantia describes mocks the “watching female subject” who in attending spectacles inverts gender roles, appropriating the masculine gaze for her own pleasure (93). Over the course of the baboon story, the monstrous female spectator reverts to monstrous spectacle, and gender roles return to normal: “the woman is reduced to the role of ‘Babone’, and like the baboon is figured as an object in search of an audience. ... the female body becomes once again something to discuss and describe, something that must be watched, something that audiences might observe” (94). The story thus presents a naked woman in a vulnerable position as an object for our laughter and a public spectacle, more monstrous than a calf with two tails, more animalistic than the baboons, and generally foolish for getting herself in such a position to begin with. Moreover, Constantia (and the play generally) recites this story for no other reason than entertainment and laughter. She tells the story to Boutcher as gossip

121 In general, I am entirely in agreement with Griffin’s reading of the play. He argues that women in Ram Alley are ultimately made to reveal “the truth of [their] insides” – in the case of Taffata this means admitting that her desire to marry Sir Oliver Smallshanks is entirely mercenary. Griffin’s argument hints at though does not fully explore the misogyny and sexual violence involved in forcing Taffata to reveal herself (for example, he does not comment explicitly on the double standard whereby Taffata’s mercenary motives seem to warrant humiliating exposure and violent control when men like Smallshanks are allowed to possess similarly mercenary motives without punishment).
– the “newes which now supplies, /The City with discourse” – and a trifling distraction from the pair’s errands for Smallshanks, and for which Boucher praises her as “a wag”.

The play thrives on crude sexual humour and for this reason much of its sexual violence against women passes almost unremarkably. That is, the play does not distinguish much between sexual humour and sexual violence, and so incidents of violence are presented as just one more amusing bawdy joke or double entendre. This collapsing of sexual humour and violence is not unique to Barry’s play – we also see it in the poems of John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester and François Villon, in the controversial rape jokes contemporary comics make in the name of subversive humour, and in scenes in cult films like the break-in scene in Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* in which the antihero Alex terrorises a couple with a giant prosthetic penis before beating the husband and raping his wife. Whatever satirical work these pieces are doing (and some are more thoughtful than others), they are all moments in which laughter is to some extent grounded in the sexual violation of women (and men). It may be worth reflecting on the costs of such humour/satire.

It is difficult to argue conclusively how to read a scene like 5.1 of *Ram Alley*, though. I have pointed to a number of ways in which the play seems to invite us to accept the rape as the event which provides comedic closure to the play and of which it does not invite much interrogation. This is not to claim that the scene does not cause discomfort. I am merely arguing that the play provides opportunity in the characters’ reactions to the rape that would enable such a production. One could imagine the rape scene being staged using the same style and techniques Peter Smith suggests directors and actors employed
in the English Shakespeare Company’s 1990 production of *Volpone*, turning the attempted rape into a kind of “comical and lewd indulgence” (76) in order to make it palatable. Even so, audience members are free to respond however they like. Women who have experienced rape and its traumatic effects are unlikely to find such a scene easy to watch, let alone laugh at – indeed, the scene may become more difficult to endure precisely because it sets up the rape of a woman to be laughed at, thus trivialising the pain that rape victims experience.

Performers, directors, critics, and audiences are also free, however, to reflect on and respond to that potential discomfort. Over the course of this dissertation I have shown how both sexual violence and the characters who are victims of sexual violence can be represented in different ways. Thus an attempted rape scene in *Volpone* has been presented as a comical “seduction”, while the Duke’s proposal in *Measure for Measure* had a long history of being treated as earnestly comedic/romantic and an offer Isabella would happily accept. But there are increasingly productions that challenge that fantasy of happiness, seizing upon moments like Isabella’s silence following the proposal to illuminate the violence inherent in jokes, comic tropes, and comedic resolutions – and to invite us to consider how a situation looks from a female perspective. This kind of interrogation is precisely what Solga explores in her examinations of several different productions of plays in which women experience violence and the different strategies productions have used to make that violence visible (or not).

I would like to argue, following Solga, that it is the task of interpreters, working with such materials, to think of ways that sexual violence can be represented
meaningfully, thoughtfully, and ethically. With Ram Alley, for example, we might begin by asking how an actress might perform her submission to William Smallshanks in such a way that the performance resists her seeming pleasure at the event. Might a production emphasise her struggles against William in such a way that the words of her submission ring hollow? And would such performances be enough to break through the “laddish” jocularity of the play, its attempts to foreclose female experience of sexual violence in its comedic conclusion celebrating the hero-rapist William Smallshanks, and its insistence that female sexuality is worthy of laughter, humiliation, and violence?

While I would like to argue that the mere fact of seeing a rape on stage would be enough to shock an audience, prompting us to question the heroic status of William Smallshanks, I am discouraged from such a claim by the long history of eroticised sexual violence in Anglo-American visual culture. As I have explored in the criticism and production histories of Measure for Measure and Volpone, rape has been presented as funny or sexy in contemporary productions of early modern drama – it requires no reach of the imagination to guess that early modern representations of sexual violence may have ranged from unpalatable to erotic; women who experienced sexual violence may have been presented sympathetically but also in ways that trivialised or revelled in their violation. What is more, the tendency to eroticise rape, as Jean Marsden argues, only increased in the Restoration when women took the roles of female parts, when rape “scenes were routine ... and their function was decidedly erotic or pornographic” (185). And the eroticisation of sexual violence is a commonplace in contemporary popular culture. Rape and sexual violence, when not symbolically appropriated to represent men’s
villainy or the loss of female innocence, is often used as titillation, as an enjoyable aesthetic in ways that have little to do with plot (as it routinely is in *Game of Thrones*, to name a recent example among seemingly endless examples) or as a kind of “avant-garde” dark humour. Often these kinds of representations of sexual violence in entertainment do little to explore sexual violence’s reality – its after effects, what it means for women and men who experience it (and we can set this argument against most rape jokes which, unless they are clearly directed against rape culture, can hardly be said to be subversive, or helpful to those who have experienced sexual violence).

Thus while my project has been primarily concerned with the way sexual violence is represented and resisted in early modern comedy, it is also situated in a wider project of thinking carefully about how we represent and discuss sexual violence generally. These representations reflect our cultural attitudes to sexual violence. Ethical representation – like ethical criticism – will always seek to challenge rather than merely reiterate rape culture, to explore what sexual violence means to those who experience it, and to consider, when we laugh at comical representations of sexual violence, at whom exactly, we are laughing.
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