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ABSTRACT

Female Props: Locating the Disappearing Woman on the Renaissance Stage

by

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This study investigates stage props as alternate stage representations of female characters. Since the 1970s, a great deal has been written independently about both stage props and about women on the early modern stage, but the two are seldom discussed together. Recent theater criticism has sought to establish a link between stage props and their broader social utility outside the theater, while gender criticism has investigated the paradoxical position of early modern women as both subject and object, particularly in regard to women as consumers and commodities. This work draws together these two lines of investigation in order to highlight the substitution that often occurs between female characters and “female” stage props. The traditional relationship between character and prop, in which the prop is firmly situated as an extension of character, exists as a specifically masculine relationship seldom available to female characters. I focus on the way in which the frequent disappearance of female characters within plays allows women to be represented by one or another of a small group of “female” props like rings, necklaces and other trinkets. The readings of the plays of Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and Cyril Tourneur suggest that in order to witness female identity in its fullness, attention must be paid not only to interpersonal relationships between gendered subjects, but to the relationships visualized between female subject and object as well. “Female” stage props function as a means of furthering the understanding of how female subjectivity differs from that of male subjectivity on the early modern stage.
Chapter 1

Introduction

"Men act and women appear"

(Ania Loomba 59)

It would be hard to imagine staging Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* without Malvolio’s yellow garters, just as it would be hard to imagine a performance of *The Tempest* without Prospero’s staff. As unimaginable is staging *The Merchant of Venice* without Portia’s lottery chests or Cyril Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* without Gloriana’s skull. Stage properties play a role in character development yet the impact of props on male characters is very different from their impact on female characters. For Malvolio and Prospero the props visually reinforce already-established notions about each man’s behavior and role. Malvolio’s yellow garters reinforce his low-class servant position and his foolish arrogance, while Prospero’s staff reinforces his status as ruler of the island and his attachment to magic. For Portia and Gloriana, the props do more than function as additional commentary on the women’s roles in the plays. For them and for many other female characters in plays from 1580 – 1642, stage properties serve not only as visual reinforcement of character attributes, but also as substitutes for female characters. The substitution of a prop for a female character is made possible by women’s objectification. Furthermore the substitution highlights the difficulties women face when attempting to assert control over their lives and bodies in the male-dominated arenas of marriage, the market and revenge.
Female characters repeatedly vanish on the early modern stage, only to be replaced by props whose physical shape, utility and symbolic connotations link them to absent or disregarded women. These stage props, identified here as "female" props, appear on stage in place of female characters at moments when women are portrayed as objects controlled by men, instead of persons capable of independent action. "Female" props differ from props associated with male characters in that the latter typically function as an additive to male characters, whereas "female" props often stand in for or replace female characters. Stanton Garner describes the typical relationship between stage props and characters as one in which stage props are firmly subordinate to the actor/character. Importantly Garner identifies the "body/object hierarchy" as the primary source of the subordination. But with the female characters in the plays examined, the "body/object hierarchy" collapses. Garner thus describes the relationship between stage props and male characters only.

Andrew Sofer, author of The Stage Life of Props, begins to unravel the "body/object hierarchy" between person and property when he asks: "Is property something we own, or something we are? Can a person become a property, or a property (under special circumstances) become like a person?" (113). What if we were to reword Sofer's questions, asking instead, "Are stage props something characters own, or something that stage characters are? Can a character become a stage prop, or a stage prop (under special circumstances) become like a character?" The answer to both reworded questions is yes when the character in question is female. The repeated disappearances and dismissals of women from the stage, as well as the excessive focus on
women as sexual objects, serve as the “special circumstances” under which female characters and “female” props become interchangeable.

The power differential between male and female characters onstage seems to correspond to early modern social relations between the sexes. While any claims made regarding the apparent connection between the stage life of female characters and the real lives of women beyond the stage are secondary to the larger argument, it is clear that the early modern stage construction of women as objects reflects a cultural belief that posits men as subjects, and women as interchangeable fragments of society, more akin to property than person.¹ Legal history shows that early modern English women had few or no legal rights over material possessions. When a woman married, both she and her goods become her husband’s property, and anything she acquired during the marriage also become his property. Even prior to marriage, women could not claim ownership over their goods. Male relatives, such as fathers and brothers, had legal rights to those goods. Although recent criticism has shown the many ways in which women exerted some control over property, especially through the management of the household,² the ultimate authority was always male. Women may have overseen the buying and selling of household goods and daily expenditures, but their legal rights to own property was non-existent. The situation is similar to that of a high-ranking employee with a great deal of power within a company structure. The employee may buy, sell, hire, fire and run the company on a day-to-day basis, but that employee is always subordinate to the boss. In

¹ Jean Howard refers to women as the “exclusive possession” of a single man, while Juana Green states: “any property a woman owned at marriage or acquired during marriage became her husbands” (261). Others who write about the legal restrictions encountered by real early modern women include Ruth Mazo Karras, Barbara Kreps, Margaret King, Subha Mukherji, and Megan Matchinske to name just a few.

² Juana Green argues that women did hold authority over property regardless of existing laws: “In practice, wives exercised considerable control over property, especially everyday household things...the huswife’s careful management of marital property contributed significantly to the household’s wealth and to her reputation (261-62).
the same way, early modern women, although capable of exerting authority at times, were without any legal authority over the material goods in their households. The omnipresent figure of the husband or father always looms above. The subject/object dichotomy between men and women off-stage is echoed on stage between male and female characters.

Of more interest here are the reasons why female characters can be substituted for by props and the specific ways in which the objectification of female characters is manifested on stage through these props. The representation of women is limited because young male actors performed all female roles. More limiting, though, is the narrow range of identities available to women. Women are almost exclusively identified by their relationships to men. In particular, women's sexual relationships to men stand out as perhaps the most significant marker of identity, often the only one ever discussed in the plays. Women, defined by their sexual relationships with men, are classified as married, widowed, of marriageable age, old maids or whores. Because each character is so narrowly defined, it becomes easier to exchange female characters with stage property. Male characters, on the other hand, may be identified as rulers, merchants, kings, lovers, villains, and accomplices or by any other number of titles. A quick perusal of the list of characters in almost any early modern play will reveal that female characters are almost always listed in accordance to their relationship with a man, usually their sexual relationship, while male characters are listed according to rank, relationships with other men or even moral character. It is true that male characters are "understood first in terms of rank and function," (Hunter 27) but they have a much broader social sphere of identification than female characters. There is no one clear function or rank by which to
categorize all male characters. They can be recognized as married, widowed or of marriageable age, but that classification receives much less direct notice. Prospero and King Lear are both widowers, but their status as widowers is never made an explicit part of the narrative. Male characters do not all fit within the same “mold.” Female characters also do not all fit within the exact same “mold,” but the repeated focus throughout on female sexual identity as a crucial aspect of the narrative creates a wholesale identification of women that does not exist for men. Because women are much more uniformly defined, they take on the look of a mass-produced goods, and as a mass-produced good, they may be exchanged for other material goods, i.e., stage property

Props most often connected with male characters include swords (weapons in general) and crowns, while props more often connected with female characters include jewelry and cloth. But the prop itself – whether associated offstage with men or women or both – does not matter as much as its relation to the character on stage. Props like swords and crowns typically compliment or emphasize a character’s already established role. In 2 Henry IV, for example, the crown is a visually prominent indicator of kingship, yet it does not substitute for the king. Prince Henry, watching his ailing father, the king, sleep, speaks of his father’s crown:

Why doth the crown lie there upon his pillow,

Being so troublesome a bedfellow?

O polish'd perturbation! golden care!

O my poor kingdom, sick with civil blows! (4.4.24-7)

Prince Henry sees the crown as a symbol of the kingdom and by extension the king, yet the crown and king are never interchangeable which becomes clear as the speech
continues: “My gracious lord! my father! / This sleep is sound indeed, this is a sleep / That from this golden rigol hath divorced / So many English kings” (4.4.37-40). And once Prince Henry is forced to return the crown to King Henry, he again reiterates the clear delineation between stage prop and character, saying: “There is your crown” (4.4.146, my emphasis). The crown symbolizes the king’s power yet it is not the king. Prince Hal does not become king when he possesses the crown. Here the crown serves a visual indicator of the role played by King Henry and the role soon to be assumed by Prince Hal, yet the two maintain their identities regardless of the prop’s location on stage. The king, whoever he may be, possesses the crown and remains always superior to it. Asserting possession of stage props remains much more problematic for female characters.

Several bodies of criticism are crucial to understanding the theatrical impact of stage props. Both the symbolic meaning of props and their function have been studied. David Bevington, Jiri Veltrusky, Andrew Gurr and Mariko Ichikawa, for example, argue that props serve a more symbolic than functional purpose. Veltrusky’s claim that “all that is on the stage is a sign” (Bevington 15) is echoed by Gurr and Ichikawa who argue that “[e]verything used to dress and equip the players on the early stages was symbolic...Every object and item of clothing worked as a signifier” (53). Gurr and Ichikawa go on to explain the way in which commonplace stage props can signify location, mood, social status or even intent.3 Bevington emphasizes not only the

3 “Everything used to dress and equip the players on the early stages was symbolic. Because resources at the early venues were unpredictable, all the staging had to be flexible and all the properties had to be portable. Every object and item of clothing worked as a signifier. A cloak signified an outdoor location, riding boots indicated a traveler, a night-cap showed someone roused from his bed. Special signifiers augmented the routine signs. A sword in its scabbard made a gentle-man, velvet cloth a lady, gold lace a nobleman or woman. A ghost wore a recognizable shroud, ‘antics’ or clowns wore their own distinctly incongruous and old-fashioned suits, Hamlet’s funeral black, Malvolio’s yellow stockings, a lover
symbolism of the stage props, but he works to connect the symbolic impact of stage props with the symbolic impact of the language in plays. These symbolic elements of the plays, he argues, overshadow the physical or functional presence of props.

The symbolic prop argument does not take into account the impact gender has on the relationship between character and prop. When a stage prop replaces a female character, it no longer belongs to that character. It stands in for, albeit temporarily, that female character. For those who argue that stage props function as symbols, props only ever exist as characters' possessions. Felix Bossonnet's discussion of props in the plays of Christopher Marlowe is representative of the symbolic argument that focuses more closely on what is said about the props than the physical objects themselves. As he discusses crowns in Tamburlaine, Bossonnet repeatedly quotes the words of the text as his main evidence, as opposed to the material crowns or their physical movement across the stage. After quoting a nine-line speech by Corsoe (2.5.6-14), Bossonnet continues:

At the beginning, it might appear that Corsoe makes some gesture declining the crown and cedes it to Tamburlaine; such an interpretation seems to be indicated not only by the verb “to keep” but also by the following formula in which he names Tamburlaine regent of Persia and high commander of the armed forces. (22)

Bossonnet spends very little time with props as anything other than prompts referred to in the language of the play. Corsoe may appear to make a gesture with the crown, but what is more important for Bossonnet is how Corsoe talks about the crown: “Immediately

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demonstrating his melancholy by sighing and pulling the brim of his hat down over his face, all these were instant signifiers of mood and plan” (53).

4 Bert States warns that “the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects” (9).
after uttering these lines ["to keep," "to guard," "to protect"], he [Corsoe] takes the crown from Tamburlaine, *his action elucidating the meaning of his words* (23). In Bossonnet's scenario, the prop functions strictly as a supplementary tool used to emphasize the spoken word. He creates a hierarchy in which the verbal is privileged over the visual. He also describes how the exchange of crowns in Tamburlaine reflects power moving from character to character: ""the continual changes of the possessor of the crown follow the pattern of the medieval notion of Fortune's Wheel" (27). A sense of ownership is introduced with the phrase "possessor of the crown," yet gender is not considered. The crowns, as symbols of power, become a part of whichever character possesses them.

Francis Teague's argument about stage props and actors is relevant because it discusses props specifically in connection with female characters. In *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*, she incorporates traditional notions about props as symbols even as she complicates that argument by suggesting that the actors themselves sometimes function as stage props: "Shakespeare sometimes uses an actor's body as a property, transforming humans into objects, usually to intensify the audience's sympathy for a character" (143). Teague argues that language leads to the objectification of an actor's body, and furthermore, views objectification as something unique to female characters. Although she does point out the ease with which women are objectified and she does discuss female characters in connection with stage props, she never makes the connection that the objectification leads to a substitution between character and prop. Instead, as with many other critics, she argues that the props are characters' possessions.

While my work makes few claims regarding the offstage lives of women or properties, it is indebted to those that do. Contemporary materialist and gender criticism
that focuses on women's social and economic status as well as the broader social significances of material properties provides a mirror with which to analyze the dramatic relationship between women and props. Critics such as Jonathan Gil Harris, Natasha Korda, Lena Orlin, and Catherine Richardson redirect attention toward the practical, non-theatrical purposes of stage props. Their argument is that audiences can only fully understand a prop's theatrical function if audiences first are aware of its production, reproduction and circulation outside of the theatrical world. Andrew Sofer, meanwhile, argues that a prop's theatrical function can only be fully appreciated if props are understood as "characters in their own right" (115). Gender critics Laurie Osborne, Jean Howard and Karen Newman offer conflicting viewpoints about women's experiences in the theaters and marketplaces. Each of their critiques seeks to identify the extent of women's authority and participation in male-dominated arenas. The criticisms about women and property offstage facilitate an understanding of the equation between women and props onstage.

Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda's edition of Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama is the most comprehensive contemporary collection of materialist stage property criticism. They describe their project as an attempt to explore "the extent to which the objects of the early modern English playhouses participated within larger material networks of property relations off- as well as onstage" (15). In doing so they intend to expand awareness of the complex relationships amongst props, plays, playhouses and the social and economic world in which they were situated. In Harris and Korda's collection, Lena Orlin and Catherine Richardson discuss stage properties as

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5 Other collections, such as Staging the Renaissance (David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass) and Enacting Gender on the Renaissance Stage (Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell), also deal with materialist concerns but not as comprehensively as Harris and Korda's collection.
“household moveables” by first researching historical records related to private property, such as premarital and postmortem household inventories. Orlin attempts to account for the apparent gaps between the props believed to have been used at The Rose and those listed in Henslowe’s inventory by explaining a contemporary distinction that saw household items categorized differently according to whether they were listed as “moveables” or “fittings.” Typically, easily transported items, such as chairs, blankets and cooking pots, were classified as “moveables,” while immovable objects, such as trees, doors and windows, were listed as “fittings.” These categories were by no means static. Orlin’s most important contribution is a realization that theater inventories of props “represent acts of will imposed upon objects.” The category of fittings, although “often an illusion created around moveable goods by social consensus or by the will of their owner,” allowed theaters, such as The Rose, to keep many props off of their inventories and more permanently in their playhouses. By classifying props as fittings, they become fixed features of the playhouse that will remain with the playhouse as long as it continues to stand, regardless of outstanding bills or ownership transfers. Richardson, meanwhile, focuses on the social significance of domestic stage props, in particular, the table in Thomas Heywood’s A Woman Killed With Kindness. What is important for Richardson is how the culturally specific significance of the table helps establish recognizable domestic ritual in A Woman Killed with Kindness, only to disrupt that familiar ritual by crime. She argues “that the introduction of the table and the objects associated with it into a domestic drama offers particular resonances with extratheatrical routines” (133). The repeated appearance of the table in over 1,200 probate inventories created from 1560 to 1590 in Kent leads her to conclude that it was
an integral part of the contemporary domestic spaces. According to Richardson these “resonances” provide the theater the opportunity “to imbue that environment with a time depth that is achieved in a matter of minutes” (148). Therefore the appearance of a single table on stage enables audiences to envision a well-developed domestic arena.

In another essay from *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, Natasha Korda focuses on businesswomen of the theater world. Her discussion of women’s involvement in public commerce gives credence to the notion that women were capable of action, although the plays do not depict women in the same light. She demonstrates women’s visibility in the theater world by citing historical registers, such as Henslowe’s diary, that indicate women’s participation in property-producing guilds as both craftswomen and apprentices. As Korda explains: “the webs of commerce in which the theatres were intertwined were hardly ‘all-male preserves’” (219). She argues that women were active participants in the clothing and mercantile trades where many stage props were produced or acquired. The clothing and mercantile trades were linked to the theater via their connections with more informal businesses such as that of second-hand clothing and pawnbroking. Korda sees the relationship between women and theater as particularly viable because of their shared marginal status in relation to the formal market place. By including costumes, stage-props, and sets as part of stage property, Korda begins to illustrate the extent of women’s commercial activity in and around the theaters. Her analysis emphasizes the extent to which the plays circumscribe the lives of female characters.

In his work *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer begins to combine the functional (materialist) and symbolic theories. He attempts to blur the line between
character and prop by assigning more agency to props in the context of the theatrical performance. "In this period," he argues, "the word property begins to hover between object and attribute; it is both something you own and something you are (or might become)" (113). Reading plays such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Sofer gives life to stage props by identifying not only the active roles taken on by props, but also by emphasizing how props continually acquire different meanings throughout plays. In *Hamlet*, for instance, the skull "becomes a Rorschach skull: now a jawbone, now a politician's pate, now a courtier's, now a lord's, now My Lady Worm's" (96). The life Sofer assigns to stage props becomes, for female characters, a substitute for the life that women either cannot or are not allowed to live.

I see my work as an extension of the extraliterary investigations that seek to uncover the dualism of the early modern women on stage as both subject and object, as both independent agent and victim. Two areas of recent gender investigation are of particular interest to me because they attempt to deal with women's paradoxical position as both subject and object: women as spectators/spectacles and women as consumers/commodities. In the first, women as spectators/spectacles, critics investigate the social and theatrical practices that identify women as alternately the possessors of the gaze and the objects of the gaze. Laurie Osborne argues that the early modern playhouse is one arena in which women are "likely to cross the boundary between spectator and spectacle" (201). According to Osborne women could not be spectators of a play without the threat of becoming spectacles to the male audience around them. She argues that much the same occurs when a female character plays the role of female playgoer. Using *Love Labour's Lost* as her main example, Osborne describes the Princess's interaction
with official theater as silent and vulnerable to the male gaze. The Princess and her women at first demand a pageant be performed, but once their wish has been granted, they are repeatedly silenced by the ensuing sexual banter. Only with the news of her father’s death which “signals the elevation of the Princess to Queen” (208) can the Princess assert authority, similar, she suggests, to Queen Elizabeth’s authority as the exceptional female playgoer at court dramas: “The female playgoer’s ability to resist becoming spectacle or at least control the kind of spectacle she becomes depends on her social status” (214). She connects the Princess’s rise in status with the ladies newfound ability to make demands of their male suitors. According to this argument, women’s status in the theater (excluding the “exceptional” social status enjoyed by the Queen) is precarious, forever threatened by the objectifying male gaze.

Jean Howard questions this stance and provides evidence as to possible reasons for the dramatic restriction of women’s involvement in the male arenas of marriage brokering, market exchange and revenge. She argues that while female spectators’ presence in the theater can be seen as potentially threatening to women’s reputations, it can also be interpreted as potentially threatening to men. When women became involved in theater as paying customers, they found themselves in circulation within “the larger patriarchal economy.” Howard’s argument is twofold. First she argues that the potential damage to women’s reputations reflects a deeper anxiety regarding the supposedly exclusive possession that one man maintains over a woman. When women become the object of many men’s gaze, they become “unanchored from the structures of surveillance and control “normal” to the culture” (71). Howard further contends that female spectators were threatening because they, like male spectators, would have been
"licensed to look." In other words female spectators were just as likely to make spectacles of male spectators, as male spectators were to make spectacles of female ones. Howard asks: "Is it possible that in the theater women were licensed to look...in ways that problematized women's status as object within patriarchy?" (72). Women's appearance in this patriarchal economy signaled a dangerous alteration in the status quo in that it destabilized the traditional relationship that held the gaze as male, the object as female. It is this traditional relationship that the plays seem to reinforce with the substitution of "female" stage prop for female character.

Related to women's status as both spectator and spectacle in the early modern theater is women's status as both consumer and commodity in the Renaissance marketplace. Karen Newman's argument that women's entrance into the marketplace threatened men's domination over property exchange influences how I look at female characters and prostitution. Newman further claims that the threat posed by women was often depicted as a sexualized threat: "She [Woman] is represented in the discourses of Jacobean London as at once consumer and consumed – her supposed desire for goods linked to her sexual availability" (184). Instead of the prostitute, though, she identifies the figure of the talkative woman as a typical representation of women's sexual desire. In Ben Jonson's Epicoene, she argues, talkative women pose such a threat to the male characters, particularly Morose, that they are represented as "monstrously unnatural." Newman suggests that the multiple talkative women in Epicoene, Epicoene, Mistress Otter, the Collegiates, as well as the fishwives and orange women, come to represent not only the over-sexualized city woman, but the city itself as well, particularly its burgeoning market trade. Newman's identification of the talkative woman as equivalent
to the new market suggests the ease with which women can be both scapegoated and objectified.

The argument that the objectification of female characters limits women's actions on stage may be construed as anti-feminist. Eileen Allman, for instance, argues that "[t]o reconstruct female action purely as a function of male power is to deny women the agency that the plays – ventriloquized by men – accord them" (19). Allman, referring specifically to early modern revenge dramas, suggests that to describe female characters' actions as anything other than evidence of women's agency is problematic, yet to overlook the ways in which women's actions are circumscribed or limited is equally problematic. To assign female characters agency when that agency is borrowed, assigned, or dictated by a male character, as is the case in many of the examples I present, assigns false agency to women. When false agency is assigned to women, the economic and social gender disparities that lead to women's objectification are obscured.

Each chapter focuses on female characters engaged in the disparate activities of marriage, prostitution and revenge, respectively. The first chapter uses two of Shakespeare's comedies to illustrate that the substitution of "female" stage props for female characters engaged in the act of courtship or just recently married exposes women's objectification. The real world commodification of early modern women (particularly upper class women) in the marriage arena, reflected through dowry exchanges and unequal property rights, is mirrored on stage. Shakespeare's Cymbeline (1609-10) and The Merchant of Venice (1596-97) provide several examples of women newly engaged or newly married. Innogen, Portia, Jessica, and Nerissa are associated with rings and/or chests that call to mind the marriage dowry. The prominence of these
props, in conjunction with the repeated disappearances and disguises adopted by the women, calls attention to female characters’ loss of control over both props and their own physical person. Both plays suggest that women’s status is revealed through the relationship between female character and prop. The more in possession of their rings or chests the women are, the more in control the women are likely to be. In each instance, though, it is a struggle for the women to establish a space within the male-dominated marital economy.

In Cymbeline Innogen’s early marriage to Posthumus, the gift exchange between husband and wife, and the ensuing wager between Posthumus and Giacomo, confirm the narrow scope in which Innogen is only identified by her role as a sexual object and as her husband’s possession. As the play continues, her disguises and multiple “deaths” deny her stage presence as a woman and allow the play’s most dominate prop, the diamond ring, to stand-in for her. While by the play’s end traditional order has been restored, Innogen remains in an ambiguous state since her identity as a woman is reaffirmed but the connection between her and the “female” stage prop is never fully severed. Therefore her objectification never fully dissolves either. For the women of The Merchant of Venice, the outlook seems slightly more positive. Chests and rings, reminders of the dowry exchange, substitute for the women, but only temporarily. Chests substitute for both Portia and Jessica in the first half of the play. The three lottery chests designed by Portia’s father to determine her husband not only visually eclipse Portia but they also substitute for her. When a suitor selects the correct chest, what they receive in return is Portia. She and the object are interchangeable with one another. The chest that Jessica gives to her Christian lover, Lorenzo, highlights Jessica’s usurpation of Shylock’s
position as father because she, and not Shylock, dictates the betrothal. But the potential power of Jessica’s role in the dowry exchange is mitigated because the exchange occurs when she is dressed as a boy; at that moment it is the chest that stands in for the absent woman. By the play’s end, another set of “female” stage props gain prominence. Once wed Portia and Nerissa provide their husbands with rings and, at first, the women are objectified as before. Through disguise and rejection, the women not only lose their identities as women, but they seem to exist solely as their husband’s possessions. In an interesting move, though, the women regain control of the rings by asserting authority over their sexual identities as women and establishing a distance between themselves as subjects and the rings as objects they control. In the marital economy of these plays, men dominate, yet the potential for women’s authority and presence exists even when the plays do not fully realize it.

Chapter two moves from an exploration of women’s objectification within the realm of marriage to focus on the objectification of women who exist outside of marriage: prostitutes. Thomas Middleton’s *Your Five Gallants* (1607) and Middleton’s and Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore Parts I and II* (1604, 1608) contain at least eight prostitutes who perform in a market economy in which their bodies are just one of the many available commodities in circulation. In these plays prostitutes are important for their potential profitability as merchandise. Their moral salvation appears inconsequential compared with the profits they generate, although *The Honest Whore’s* Bellafront desires salvation for herself. The emphasis on the prostitutes’ worth as marketable objects allows marketable props to substitute for female characters; in *Your Five Gallants* that prop is a string of pearls that repeatedly appears on stage in numerous
characters’ hands, and in *The Honest Whore*, Bellefront’s dress stands in for the prostitute turned wife. While the prostitutes appear to play a significant role in the public economy with the ability to sell their bodies for profit, they ultimately have much less authority than the male characters over the way in which they are circulated due to continuous objectification, both sexual and economic. Neither the prostitutes nor the props possess the authority to manipulate the economic circulation controlled by men, depicted on these stages mostly in pawnshops. In both plays prostitutes become wives, but none of the wives successfully rise above the status of commodifiable object. Instead, the women are simply removed from the larger public market economy and become commodities belonging solely to their husbands.

In Middleton’s seldom read *Your Five Gallants*, a string of pearls circulates amongst a group of ill-behaved gallants in a way that echoes the way in which the prostitutes circulate sexually amongst the gallants. The chain of pearls, initially a symbol of chaste love, becomes a degraded object when it passes around as a commodifiable good that is stolen, pawned and even used as payment. The prostitutes are similarly shared and bought amongst the gallants, even in the play’s final scenes when the prostitutes are married to the gallants. Another important connection between the pearls and prostitutes is their indistinguishability. The prostitutes have no individual identities similar to the way that the pearls on the chain are not distinguished from one another. As the prostitutes and pearls continue to be passed on from person to person, they function not only as commodities but also as commodities whose value degrades with use. In order to contain the chaotic economic circulation epitomized by the repeatedly exchanged chain of pearls, the pearls are ultimately placed in the hands of the play’s only chaste
female, and for the same reason, the prostitutes are married to the gallants. The prostitutes-turned-wives seem firmly disassociated from the string of pearls that substituted for them and highlighted their object status, yet as wives the women remain potentially profitable goods for their less than virtuous gallant husbands. The less comedic drama of Bellefront’s conversion from prostitute to wife in The Honest Whore further exposes female characters as objects, regardless of their marital status. Unlike the women of Your Five Gallants who seem unfazed by the sale of their bodies for and by men, Bellefront struggles to assert authority over her own body, and the sale of her body. After removing herself from the world of prostitution, Bellefront expects to live the life of a chaste wife but is instead sexually affronted by both a previous love and by her husband. Her husband’s lust for economic prosperity and need to control Bellefront leads him to pawn the very garments off of Bellefront’s back even as he suggests her return to prostitution. Both woman and dress are controlled by the dictates of men. The play makes some attempt to mollify Bellefront’s total sexual and economic objectification by reprimanding the husband for his actions, yet ultimately it is Bellefront who pleads for his forgiveness and, in doing so, submits to his control over her body and person.

The final chapter is concerned with women’s role in revenge. In three revenge dramas, Cyril Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy (1607), Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy (1589), and Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus (1594), female characters are at the center of revenge plots, yet they either function as tools for men’s revenge or are linked to props that substitute for them to further men’s revenge plots. The barrier between the women and active revenge stems largely from the sexual objectification each woman faces. Sexual violence, in particular, pushes the women to the periphery of revenge
where props substitute for them. Gloriana’s skull in The Revenger’s Tragedy is the most direct example, while the bloody letter and handkerchief connected with Bel-imperia in The Spanish Tragedy and the staff and basin connected with Lavinia in Titus Andronicus serve as related yet less obvious examples of the substitution of props for women in revenge violence. All three plays limit women’s participation in violent revenge, although they do not deny the possibility of women’s violence. Instead the likelihood that women will commit act of violence correlates to the level of sexual violence directed towards them. The more the women are sexually violated, the more likely men will treat them as sexual objects and use them as weapons in their plots for revenge.

The Revenger’s Tragedy, in which Gloriana’s skull is poisoned by Vindice and used to poison the lecherous Duke, is perhaps the most literal example of the substitution of a “female” stage prop for a female character. Raped and murdered seven years prior to the start of the play, Gloriana can make no appearance as anything other than an object: the skull. Already sexually violated and silenced, she again becomes the victim of assault when Vindice chooses to utilize her skull in his plot to murder the Duke. While the skull begins as merely a body part of the deceased woman, it takes on further significance when Vindice disguises it in women’s clothing, and when male characters begin referring to it (the skull) as she (Gloriana). Gloriana’s offender, the Duke, does die and the poisoned skull is at least in part responsible for the death, yet Gloriana never has a voice to consent with and Vindice controls her body in what is ultimately his revenge, not hers.

Bel-imperia of Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy is not raped nor murdered, as Gloriana and Lavinia are, and the decrease in sexual violence towards her seems linked with her increased participation in the revenge plot. She loses two lovers to violence and
asks first Horatio and then Hieronimo to avenge those deaths. Depicted throughout the entire play as marriageable material, as a sexual object, she can be substituted for by the object that represents her romantic and sexual ties to her lovers, a handkerchief. While imprisoned and removed from the stage for several scenes, she remains peripherally connected to the revenge plot through a letter that substitutes for her and again encourages a male revenger to act. The letter and handkerchief reinforce Bel-imperia’s continued objectification yet she asserts a degree of control in the revenge plot by murdering Balthazar, albeit disguised as Perseda. Her next action, suicide, helps sever the link between her and the stage props that expose Bel-imperia as a weapon in men’s revenge. She removes herself from circulation in a world in which men dominate, asserting final authority over the way in which she is utilized. Her suicide, though, at once a move to control her life, also ends her life thereby ending her ability to act further.

Shakespeare’s Lavinia undergoes violent assaults upon her person like Gloriana, perhaps even greater affronts. Her rape and mutilation at the hands of Chiron and Demetrius leads to Titus’s gruesome revenge plot to murder the boys and feed them to their mother. While Lavinia is central to the revenge plot, as the supposed reason for the revenge, she remains consistently on the periphery because she has been literally silenced and physically handicapped. Unlike the play’s other female character, Tamora, Lavinia plays no role in planning revenge and even when she participates in revenge, she does so as her father’s instrument. Tamora, repeatedly depicted as monstrous and unwomanly, does instigate revenge and even play the role of “Revenge” yet even she relies upon male intermediaries to commit the acts of violence. Through overwhelming sexual assault,
Lavinia exists on stage as little else than a sexual object and therefore can be equally represented by objects. Although Lavinia remains on stage, a staff and the basin serve as alternate representations of her and as tools in Titus' revenge. Lavinia's murder dissolves the close connection between female character and female prop, but at the same time, results in her death, removing her from the revenge action even further.

The relationship between women and props, while not static, is decidedly gendered. As Barbara Freedman writes: "Since the male is traditionally envisioned as the bearer of the gaze and the woman as the fetishized object of the gaze, the staging of any spectacle is always already a matter of sexual difference" (114). My project is an attempt to show how the sexual difference that posits men as active and women as passive leads to the substitution and equation of stage props with female characters. I am not interested in proving that women are objects, but rather in proving that many early modern plays depicted them as such. In doing so the plays limit women's active involvement in everything from marital negotiations to murder.
Chapter 2

The Object of Marriage

"God send me wele to keep"

(inscription on the wedding ring made for Anne of Cleves, fourth wife of Henry VIII)

The inscription on Anne of Cleves’s wedding ring, translated by Diana Scarisbrick, reads: “God grant that I [the ring] be faithfully preserved” (52). Scarisbrick’s translation identifies the “I” as the ring, but the inscription is ambiguous enough to allow readers to connect the “I” with Anne of Cleves own person as well. The fates of Henry VIII’s three previous wives (one divorced, one beheaded, one dead in childbirth) give added credence to the notion that the inscription’s appeal for safekeeping and security performs a double duty to both the ring and Anne of Cleves. The verbal slippage that connects the wedding ring and Anne of Cleves stems from a larger socio-historical construct that identified women as commodifiable objects. In the eyes of the law, early modern women were regarded as men’s possessions rather than independent subjects. The following pages will discuss explorations of that status in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline (1609-10) and The Merchant of Venice (1596-97). These plays illustrate women’s objectification when objects, “female” stage props, are used to represent women on stage.

Women’s object status was particularly apparent in courtship and marriage. The legal issues surrounding marriage in early modern England, in particular property rights and dowries, played a role in creating a social atmosphere in which the wealth women brought into a marriage often mattered more than the woman herself did. John Steadman discusses the financial matters at the heart of many (especially upper class) early modern marriages:
In literature as in life, romantic motives were often inextricably interlinked with economic and political interests: with considerations of family loyalties and (on occasion) of national welfare. The Renaissance suitor was, in effect, espousing not only a wife but also a pedigree: an extended family, a substantial investment in real estate, and (in some instances) a city, a duchy, or a kingdom. (72)

Henry VIII’s marriage to Anne of Cleves, a political match intended to secure an alliance with Cleves against France and Rome, was no exception. The political and financial maneuvers that positioned early modern women as goods exchanged in marriage and courtship are replicated in the early modern dramas centered on courtship and the beginnings of marriage, i.e. romance and comedy.

The close connection between women and material goods offstage invites a deeper look into the close connection between female characters and material goods in the form of stage props. In Cymbeline and The Merchant of Venice, the stage props most closely associated with women in courtship and marriage are rings and chests. Outside the theater, rings and chests were also strongly associated with marriage through the wedding ring and the wedding chest. The rings and chests in the plays, gifts given from the female character to the male suitor (in The Merchant of Venice) or husband (in Cymbeline) resemble the giving of the dowry. In neither of the plays do audiences witness the formal exchange of vows or the presentation of the wedding ring from husband to wife. Instead, the main visual confirmation of the marriages occurs as the women present their male counterparts with material goods in the form of props. As in a dowry exchange where a woman’s worth, or her being, is measured by material goods,
here the female characters are depicted as substitutable with the rings and chests. The close connection between female characters involved in courtship and the ritualized objects of courtship continues throughout each play, most prominently when the female characters disappear from center stage. The split representation of women as both actor and prop underscores women’s status as objects. In Cymbeline and The Merchant of Venice, only a female character’s successful attempts to take possession of the “female” stage prop provide her the ability to assert herself as a woman.

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Shakespeare’s Cymbeline has confused and frustrated critics because of the number of characters, seemingly unconnected plots, and surprisingly abrupt and unexplainably tidy resolutions. The status of the play’s lead female character, Innogen, is similarly complicated. Is she a strong, powerful heroine who escapes beyond the confines of her gender or is she a meek heroine subject to the demands, anxieties and control of men? In truth, Innogen exhibits qualities that range along a spectrum from weak to strong. She begins the play as Posthumus’s wife and the only child and heir to Cymbeline’s throne. Her unauthorized marriage to Posthumus pits her against her father and her wicked stepmother (the Queen) and stepbrother (Cloten). Giacomo, an Italian gentleman of questionable morals and friend to Philario, makes false accusations against Innogen that quickly creates tension between Innogen and Posthumous as well. Throughout the course of the play, Innogen’s identity as faithful daughter and heir, as well as loving wife is turned upside down. Throughout much of the play Innogen is even forced to deny her identity as a woman in order to stay alive. The difficulties Innogen faces in maintaining her identity as faithful wife, loving daughter and sister, as well as
heir to the throne stem from the impossibly narrow categories according to which women were often identified. To be a good daughter and sister, Innogen must separate from Posthumus and renounce her thrown, while to be a good wife and heir, she must go against her father’s wishes and deny her brothers’ inheritance rights. In order to contain Innogen, then, the play objectifies her. As an object, such as a diamond ring, Innogen performs multiple roles for many characters but all without asserting herself as a threateningly powerful woman.

The play, which seems initially to identify Innogen as strong and independent, begins to undermine that same strength and independence within the first scenes. When the play first begins, Innogen has just defied her family, in particular her father, by marrying the man she loves, Posthumus, a man whom her father refers to as “a beggar.” Her father’s tirade fails to cow Innogen. She stands behind her decision and her new husband: “Sir, / It is your fault I have lov’d Posthumus: / You bred him as my playfellow, and he is / A man worth any woman; overbuys me / Almost the sum he pays” (1.1.143-47). Yet her bravado fades as the play continues and Innogen loses Posthumus, her royal identity, her gender identity, her familial identity and, purportedly, her honor. Janet Adelman insists that the play’s conclusion, in fact, depends upon a weak Innogen: “And despite the happy ending of the marriage plot, there is no sign that she will be allowed to regain her own powerful selfhood; indeed, the happy ending is radically contingent on her self-loss” (211). According to Adelman, the Innogen of the play’s beginning who asserts her desires and claims independence must become a figure of traditional womanhood: subservient wife, daughter and sister. In relinquishing her right to the throne, she enables the return of the lost brothers and the restoration of patriarchal
order. Others argue that Innogen’s return to the roles of loving daughter, wife and sister is recuperative for Innogen in that it removes the stain of adultery and betrayal and returns her virtue and honor. Susan Frye locates her argument somewhere between the two extremes. While acknowledging the threat of violence against women that pervades the play, she contends that the play allows for “the possibility of her [Innogen’s] self possession” (245). I maintain that the “possibility” of Innogen’s independence is predicated upon the ways in which Innogen’s presence as a woman (not simply faithful wife, daughter or sister, or heir to the throne) is asserted on stage. And the possibility of Innogen’s independence and ability to take action as a woman is repeatedly thwarted when the diamond ring from Posthumus and Giacomo’s wager stands in to represent Innogen.

Innogen’s reduced status as object is contingent upon the play’s depiction of her relationships with the material objects that reinforce her commodified status, specifically, the ring.6 I am most interested in props that have both a “real world” and theatrical connection with courtship and marriage, as the ring does (and to a lesser degree, the chest). Innogen seems to exert some authority over the ring and the chest. The ring is a gift she voluntarily chooses to give Posthumus and she “willingly” brings the chest into her bedchamber, but the emphasis placed on her recent marriage to Posthumus positions the ring as part of a dowry (a financial exchange made between two men) over which Innogen has no authority. In addition, Giacomo’s hidden presence within the chest and

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6 Susan Frye, who also focuses on Innogen’s relationship to the stage props in Cymbeline, argues the play’s use of textiles serves as the source of her objectification: “[T]he textiles in Cymbeline allow the objectification of the central female character, demonstrating that her body is the possession of men” (245). She also argues: “Because the play’s readings work to circumscribe the relation between subject and object, staged woman and textile, ...women tended to become the cloth rather than its producers and consumers” (221).
bedchamber negates Innogen’s knowing acceptance of the all the chest contains. The wager struck between Posthumus and Giacomo in which Giacomo offers up the “moi’ty of my estate to your [Posthumus’s] ring” (1.4.108) provides a connection between an actual commodity exchange (the estate for the ring, or vice versa) and the symbolic one between the ring and Innogen. Like the estate and the ring, Innogen functions as a commodity. Just as women’s “real world” commodification is made explicit in the terms negotiated for in upper class marriage, so, too is the theatrical commodification of the newlywed Innogen made explicit.

Innogen’s path toward independence is dangerous. After marrying Posthumus without her father’s consent, Innogen presents her husband with a diamond ring, declaring: “This diamond was my mother’s. Take it, heart, / (She gives him the ring) / But keep it till you woo another wife, / When Innogen is dead” (1.1.113-15). Almost as soon as they are married, audiences are given to understand that the ring on Posthumus’s hand exists as a representation of Innogen. While Posthumus keeps the ring, Innogen lives. Posthumus reciprocates with a gift for Innogen, a manacle or bracelet. What is important about the gift exchange between Innogen and Posthumus is the discrepancy between what it means for a female character to give a gift and what it means for a male character to give a gift. When Posthumus presents the manacle, he says: “…For my sake wear this. / (He give her a bracelet) / It is a manacle of love, I’ll place it / Upon this fairest prisoner” (1.1.122-24). Instead of functioning as a transportable visual representation of the male character, this manacle functions as a means of asserting possession, an act that is depicted as decidedly masculine. In exploring the differences between these two props, the ring and the manacle, we can better understand the unique
position "female" stage props perform when connected with the many disenfranchised female characters of the Renaissance stage.

Although the inequality of the gift exchange between Innogen and Posthumus is apparent in the verses spoken at the moment of exchange, the inequality is further emphasized as the wager between Posthumus and Giacomo unfolds. Giacomo, the seedy Italian gentleman friend of Philario, meets Posthumus after his exile from Cymbeline's court and the two men debate the possibility of a truly virtuous woman. Posthumus boasts of Innogen's virtue but Giacomo insists that her virtue could be quickly lost. To prove his point, Giacomo offers a wager. If he successfully seduces Innogen, the diamond ring will belong to him, and if not, Posthumus will keep the ring and earns the right to raise his sword against Giacomo. When Posthumus first hears Giacomo's wager, he stands up for Innogen, refusing to set a price for her: "You are mistaken. The one may be sold or given, or if there were wealth enough for the purchase or merit for the gift. The other is not a thing for sale, and only the gift of the gods" (1.4.78-81). Here Posthumus refuses to identify Innogen as a commercial commodity, but Giacomo's insistent linking together of Innogen and the diamond ring leads Posthumus to contradict himself and agree to the wager posed by Giacomo. It is true that the two men speak only in terms of Innogen's chastity and honor, but according to the laws of early modern English society, a married woman's life was in jeopardy if any infidelity could be proven. Posthumus's response to Innogen's apparent infidelity later in the play reveals a similar dynamic at work within the world of this play. His wish for her violent death ("O that I had her here to tear her limb-meal!" (2.4.147)) is quickly followed up with a written command for Pisanio to carry out Innogen's murder. The loss of Innogen's honor and
chastity (both the real and imagined) is, by the play’s standards, equal to the loss of Innogen herself. To lose control over the sanctity of her body means that Innogen is confronted with the loss of her own life. Dorothea Kehler emphasizes the mortal danger faced by female characters accused of improper sexual relations when she refers to them as “sexually slandered” (80). The wager over Innogen’s sexual body takes on the greater significance of a wager over Innogen’s life. It is not that Innogen is just a sexualized being, but rather that Posthumus and Giacomo fetishize Innogen’s sexualized body as an object that substitutes for Innogen the person. By agreeing to wager Innogen against the diamond ring, Posthumus colludes in Giacomo’s objectification of Innogen.

Innogen’s status as subject begins to dissolve the moment Posthumus agrees to Giacomo’s wager and the ring stands in as substitute for her. When Posthumus boasts, “I fear not my ring,” he boasts that he does not fear the loss of the diamond ring or the loss of his love, Innogen. For Posthumus, the ring and Innogen are one in the same. The importance of the diamond ring in Shakespeare’s Cymbeline stands out in contrast to the appearance of the diamond ring in two of the play’s sources: Giovanni Boccaccio’s Decameron and the English tale Frederyke of Jennen. Only in Shakespeare is the wager made up entirely of the diamond ring. As Steven Doloff says, in the sources:

of the wager story, various amounts of gold are put up on both sides of the bet, and the ring is only one among several items later stolen by the villain from the wife’s bedroom to be presented as part of the contrived “proof” of her infidelity. In Cymbeline, however, the ring is prominently placed on the husband’s finger and constitutes his entire wager. (67)

Because the diamond ring is singled out as the entirety of Posthumus’s wager, it assumes
a privileged status within Shakespeare’s play. The particular emphasis on an individual object encourages audiences to take special note of the ring. The singularity of the ring, as well as its importance to the plot, allows it to stand out as more than an ordinary prop, and function instead as a “female” stage prop, substituting for Innogen and objectifying her.

The uniqueness of the ring stands out when contrasted with the manacle’s less significant position. When Giacomo returns to Posthumus to prove Innogen’s supposed infidelity, he brings along the stolen manacle as merely one of many pieces of falsified evidence, not as the definitive proof. Giacomo first describes Innogen’s bedchamber in great detail as proof of his liaison with her. This description goes on for over fifteen lines, but does not convince Posthumus. Next Giacomo presents Posthumus with the manacle. Posthumus seemingly cannot decide whether or not to believe this physical “proof.” His responses vary widely from disbelief “Maybe she plucked it off / To send to me,” to acceptance “O no, no, no, ‘tis true,” back to disbelief “Render to me some corporeal sign about her / More evident than this; for this was stol’n,” and again, acceptance “Hark you, he swears, by Jupiter he swears...I am sure / She would not lose it” (2.4.104-05,106,119-20,122,123-24). Audiences only see Posthumus stop fluctuating after Giacomo speaks of the mole under Innogen’s breast, but his indecision makes it impossible to identify any one of these pieces of evidence as the pivotal proof. Valerie Wayne insists that in Cymbeline the manacle carries more weight because Shakespeare’s piece is a theatrical work (unlike the two sources) and thus audiences are more likely to be swayed by what they can see – the manacle (295). Although “visible and portable” objects can be of elevated value in a dramatic context compared with a narrative context,
the visual power of this object fails to exceed the power of the description of the room
and mole. The manacle alone, unlike the diamond ring, does not clearly signal Innogen’s
supposed infidelity. Unlike the ring it cannot stand in for the displaced Innogen. Both
the manacle and the ring represent Innogen’s supposed sexual transgression. Although
the manacle does not prove Innogen’s infidelity and ultimately fails as a viable
representation of her, it is more strongly associated with Innogen than with Posthumus.
Audiences are not asked to read Posthumus’s loyalty onto the manacle, as they are asked
to do with Innogen and the ring.

The chest in which Giacomo hides himself to get into Innogen’s bedchamber is
another prop that objectifies Innogen. When Giacomo asks her to receive the chest, she
replies: “Willingly, / And pawn mine honour for their safety” (1.4.193-94). Innogen
offers up the sanctity of her body (“mine honour”) for the safety of the chest and its
contents. The suggestion that her body is of comparable value to the chest allows
Innogen’s objectification to persist. Giacomo uses the chest as a means of entering
Innogen’s inner sanctum when what he would like to do is enter her body. The
information Giacomo gathers upon entering the chest ultimately serves as “proof” of
Innogen’s “infidelity”. Even though Giacomo does not successfully violate Innogen’s
body, the entering and exiting of the chest implies that such a violation has occurred. It
provides a mental picture of her “sin.” Innogen’s own words further the connection
between the chest and the invented sexual transgression upon her body (“pawn mine
honour”). In a world in which women are seen almost exclusively as sexual objects to be
controlled, Innogen’s words and actions are repeatedly misinterpreted as evidence of her
sexual transgressions.
The diamond ring represents Innogen more fully and completely than any of the other props in *Cymbeline*. Its standing as Innogen's substitute hinges on Innogen's disappearance from the stage. Like many of Shakespeare's women, Innogen adopts a disguise. In fact, Innogen adopts two separate alternate identities. She first dresses herself in "A riding-suit no costlier than would fit / A franklin's housewife" (3.3.76-7) in order to escape the court and travel to meet Posthumus at Milford Haven. At this point, Innogen leaves behind her royal identity, but still retains her female identity. She is forced into a more extreme disguise once she reaches Milford Haven and learns of Posthumus's order to have her killed. Although Pisanio refuses to carry out Posthumus's order, Innogen insists that Pisanio obey Posthumus: "Do thou master's bidding. When thou seest him, A little witness my obedience. Look / I draw the sword myself; take it; and hit / The innocent mansion of my love, my heart" (3.4.64-68). Pisanio convinces Innogen to further disguise herself, this time as a man, in order to escape Posthumus's wrath and prove her innocence:

Well then, here's the point.

You must forget to be a woman: change

Command into obedience, fear and niceness –

The handmaids of all women, or more truly

Woman it pretty self – into a waggish courage,

Ready in gibes, quick-answered, saucy and

As quarrelous as the weasel. (3.4.154-60)

Innogen also adopts a new name for herself: Fidele. In disguising herself as a man, Innogen shows that she can no longer function as a woman. The ring, then, becomes the
onstage female presence. Audiences know that Innogen remains innocent and virtuous, but Posthumus’s false belief forces Innogen’s temporary death. The ring, once described as precious and true (like Innogen), must stand in for the slandered Innogen.

Innogen’s double “deaths” as first Innogen and then Fidele erase her existence even more thoroughly. Pisanio falsely reports to Posthumus that Innogen has been murdered. Then Arviragus, Belarius and Guiderius discover Fidele’s lifeless body (Innogen, disguised as Fidele, lies in a death-like state caused by the Queen’s potion, intended for Pisanio). These “deaths” indicate how difficult it will be for Innogen to assert herself as a woman independent of the diamond ring. In other words the severity of Innogen’s disappearances, i.e. her “deaths,” suggests that it may be impossible to disrupt the current equation of Innogen and the ring. The threat of violence toward the disguised Innogen raises the stakes in her attempt to assert her innocence and reclaim her life. The escalating violence Innogen faces confirms the life-threatening nature of the wager struck earlier between Posthumus and Giacomo.

It is tempting to argue that the play applauds Innogen’s supposed death and rebirth because it allows her to assume her “proper” place, as royal sibling, not royal heir to the throne. The proper royal heirs (Innogen’s brothers), Guiderius and Arviragus, stolen as youths by Belarius, return through a series of remarkable accidents, learn of their noble heritage, and remove Innogen from the right of succession. As Cymbeline declares of Guiderius and Arviragus’s miraculous return: “O Innogen, / Thou hast lost by this a kingdom” (5.5.373). Earlier in the play, audiences hear Innogen wish for a social demotion that would bring her closer to Posthumus: “Would it had been so that they / Had been my father’s sons, then had my price / Been less, and so more equal ballasting /
To thee, Posthumus” (3.6.73-76). Although her “wish” is granted, it does not seem to create the equanimity Innogen desired. Susan Frye refers to the play’s trajectory as “the path toward marital bliss” (245). Innogen’s “bliss” may be at risk, though, due to the atmosphere of violence toward women that is never quite erased from the play. Innogen’s two “deaths” and the violent threats of Posthumus are never balanced with life affirming statements about women’s worth. Although Innogen’s rebirth as the younger sister makes her marriage to Posthumus more socially palatable, it furthers the notion that her identity is dependant upon her connection with men and that without a subservient connection to men, Innogen has no place in Britain. In fact, the death and rebirth strip potential future power away from Innogen.

Innogen’s rebirth as woman and loyal sister, daughter and chaste wife does little to undo the fact that a mere ring could replace her. In the final scene, Giacomo returns the ring to center stage, reminding audiences of the link between Innogen and the stage prop. After the ring’s reappearance, Posthumus calls out for his supposedly dead wife: “O Innogen! / My queen, my life, my wife, O Innogen, / Innogen, Innogen! (5.4.225-27). The verbal repetition of Innogen’s name immediately following the reappearance of the ring reinforces the connection between her and it and initializes the reestablishment of Innogen the woman. After Posthumus’s outburst the disguised Innogen runs to comfort him with a hug. Her physical gesture is an attempt to reassert her female status by revealing the shape of her hidden female form. Posthumus, though, violently rejects physical contact and strikes her to the ground, leading Pisanio to insist that Innogen has been killed a third time. Posthumus’s violent behavior toward Innogen echoes his earlier rejection of women: “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?”
(2.4.153-54). His violence against Innogen summons up that earlier desire to eradicate women’s role in creating men. The violence of Posthumus’s rejection shows how difficult it is for Innogen to reestablish her status as a person.

Posthumus’s rejection of Innogen must be seen in the context of her acceptance by both her father and her brothers. As Janet Adelman argues, the play is most concerned with the “recovery of three generations of all male relation” (203); when disguised as the young boy, Fidele, Innogen fits within that all male realm. Adelman continues: “That even Imogen is recovered first as a son underscores the extent to which the renewed family is male.” Innogen’s brothers also first welcome her as a male. In this context Posthumus’s rejection of the female is not surprising. The question the play never conclusively answers, though, is to what degree the female is allowed to return. Audiences are given to believe that her father, brothers and husband all eventually profess their love for Innogen, but there is little evidence to prove that. When Innogen reveals herself to her two brothers, she declares: “You called me brother / When I was but your sister.” The only response Innogen gets is from her brother, Guiderius, who affirms her declaration: “And at first meeting loved, / Continued so until we thought he died” (line numbers?). This is the last line spoken by Guiderius in the play and Avigarius’s only other line is spoken to Posthumus, not Innogen. Neither brother embraces Innogen as a woman. The play never allows Innogen the sister to experience the same acceptance as Fidele the brother.

The only character who accepts Innogen and demands that attention be paid to her as a woman is the soothsayer. His proclamation allows audiences to envision the woman on stage, even though Innogen remains in male disguise. The soothsayer’s verbal
affirmation of Innogen is important both because it occurs after the ring and manacle have been returned to Posthumus, and because the soothsayer places a great deal of emphasis on the term woman7: “(To Cymbeline) The piece of tender air thy virtuous daughter, / Which we call ‘mollis aer’; and ‘mollis aer’ / We term it ‘mulier’, (to Posthumus) which ‘mulier’ I divine / Is this most constant wife” (5.4.447-50). Although the quote begins and ends by identifying Innogen as both a “virtuous daughter” and a “most constant wife,” the Latin translations focus even more on the broader identification of Innogen as a woman. Here Innogen regains the titles of daughter and wife, but even more importantly, she is allowed to reclaim her female identity, although she remains in male disguise. The verbal affirmation of Innogen as a woman is more important than the affirmation of her role as daughter or wife because it works toward identifying her as a person, not a position.

What, though, of the manacle and the diamond ring? Earlier in the play Posthumus gave the manacle to Innogen as an indicator of his ownership of her. But at the play’s end, after Giacomo has returned the manacle to Posthumus and confirmed Innogen’s virtue, the manacle is not returned to Innogen’s wrist. Giacomo simply returns the bracelet to Posthumus saying, “Take that life, beseech you, / Which I so often owe; but your ring first, / And here the bracelet of the truest princess / That ever swore her faith.” (5.4.415-18), and that is the last we see or hear of the manacle. As a result, the ominous lines spoken by Posthumus in the play’s first scene, “It is a manacle of love, I’ll place it / Upon this fairest prisoner,” lose their power. The implication, then, is that Innogen is no longer Posthumus’s “fairest prisoner.” At least one visual indicator of her

7 Roger Warren, ed. Cymbeline. “mollis aer...mulier soft air (Latin), an ancient but erroneous etymology for mulier (woman)” 263.
subjugation has been removed. The diamond ring, though, never fully loses its power to represent Innogen and thus continues to suggest the equation between woman and object. It is only after the “illustrious” diamond ring has returned to the stage that Posthumus declares Innogen virtuous and worthy of life. Still disguised as Fidele, Innogen spies the diamond ring on Giacomo’s finger and, with Cymbeline’s help, demands to know how the ring came into his possession. Giacomo tells how his scandalous behavior enabled him to win the ring from Posthumus. In addition he reveals that Innogen was chaste, publicly clearing her name. The ring and Innogen continue to be connected, though, because Innogen remains in disguise. Until Innogen appears in female form, the ring serves as the visual indicator of womanly purity. When Posthumus declares: “The temple / Of virtue was she; yea, and she herself...O Innogen! / My queen, my life, my wife! O Innogen, / Innogen, Innogen!” (5.5.220-21,225-27), he reasserts Innogen’s status as a person (“[m]y queen...my wife”) but only in the past tense (“was she”). The ring still stands for the absent woman. Furthermore, after Giacomo returns the ring (and manacle) to Posthumus in line 416, audiences hear nothing further from Innogen. Posthumus pardons Giacomo but makes no mention of Innogen and she is given no space for a similar pardon. Although Innogen’s disguise falls away, she continues to be equated with a prop. The ring’s presence continues to emphasize her tenuous position as an objectified woman.

The possibility of Innogen’s self possession remains, but that possibility exists alongside the equally likely possibility of future violence toward women and continuation of women’s silence. The play has little to say about either possibility but instead seems more invested in the restoration of patriarchal order in both family and ruling structure.
In regaining her status as loving daughter and wife (and finding her status as loving sister), Innogen evades the violent threats she has faced throughout the play. Yet the male-dominated space of the play ultimately fails to create a safe space in which Innogen can live as a strong, dominant woman. Her life, like her gift of the diamond ring, is not hers to control. Innogen does not have access to the power structure that determines meaning and “truth.” The fact that the diamond ring is used and manipulated by the men of the play recalls Innogen’s instable position as she loses and regains her status as loving daughter, intended heir and chaste wife. She is still an object living in a world of male subjects who play a large role in determining her status. Shakespeare’s Cymbeline recreates an economy of marriage that demands women’s commodification and negates the possibility of women’s active participation in the rites of courtship and marriage. While the play makes space for women, or rather one woman (Innogen), it does so only by defining woman as object.

* * *

In The Merchant of Venice, “female” stage props are linked with both the female characters on stage and with the play’s multiple courtships. Portia’s and Jessica’s chests of riches, as well as Portia’s and Nerissa’s rings stand as traditional gifts of love but these props also stand in for the female characters who repeatedly “vanish” from the stage. The rings and chests represent women in The Merchant of Venice similar to the way in which the boys acting Portia and Jessica do. When Portia, Jessica and Nerissa “vanish”, audiences must follow the paths of the rings and chests as well as the twice-disguised boy actors in order to fully understand the female characters. Only then can Portia, Nerissa and Jessica escape from categorization as either subservient woman or monstrous female
transgressor.

Within her father’s courtship lottery, Portia is an object to be won rather than a woman to be wooed. Early in the play, Portia is forced to recognize the world in which she lives as one dominated by male authority. Her deceased father controls her choice of husband from beyond the grave via the lottery selection. Portia’s waiting maid, Nerissa, explains the purpose of the three chests of gold, silver and lead:

Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations, – therefore the lott’ry that he hath devised in these three chest of gold, silver, and lead, whereof who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly, but one who you shall rightly love. (1.2.27-32)

Nerissa’s words directly link Portia with the three chests. The suitor who selects the “right” chest wins the contest and wins Portia. Although critics have disagreed about the approximate size and prominence for the chests, none can dispute that the chests appear on stage on at least three separate occasions. Portia is overlooked dramatically each time a suitor moves to select a chest, even though she remains onstage. In these moments the chests displace audience attention from Portia herself. The chests literally represent Portia (or one of them does).

The symbolic link between the chests and Portia’s physical body in the lottery cannot be overlooked, although it is not the only link between the chests and Portia. The obvious link between these chests and Portia’s body is found in the multiple definitions of the word chest. The term chest can refer both to a box or coffer and to breasts. While the term chest may not have been gendered, a related term, breasts, was. The Oxford
English Dictionary reveals that when the term breast was used in reference to women, it referred to women’s ability to produce breast milk. To ignore the second definition in the context of a play so focused on courtship and marriage, and for that reason on women’s bodies, is negligent. But to focus solely on such a narrow link suggests that the reproductive portion of the woman’s body is all there is to Portia’s body and person. Other links, such as the link between chests and caskets that brings death to the forefront or the link between the caskets and marriage for women that highlights the dangers faced by women in marriage must also be taken into account.

Portia’s onstage representation as a stage prop symbolically demotes Portia from subject to object. This demotion is reiterated as Portia laments her inability to choose. Some form of the verb to choose (chooses, chosen) appears three times in the above quote, but it is Portia who first emphasizes the importance of choice: “O me the word “choose”! I may neither choose who I would, nor refuse who I dislike...is it not hard Nerissa, that I cannot choose one, nor refuse none?” (1.2.22-3,25-6). Portia has no power to choose her own life. Yet ultimately, the suitor she admires, Bassanio, chooses the correct chest. This gives Portia what she would choose but does not guarantee Bassanio’s worth. In selecting the chest that bears the inscription “Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath” (2.7.9), Bassanio distinguishes himself as a man in love with Portia rather than her fortune. His willingness to “hazard all he hath” also reflects his rash and potentially reckless nature, previously exhibited both by his loss of personal

8 The OED online defines breast as “Each of the two soft protuberances situated on the thorax in females, in which the milk is secreted for the nourishment of their young” and utilized the following quote from Macbeth (1.5.48) to illustrate the definition: "Come to my Womens Brests And take my Milke for Gall." http://proxy.lib.wayne.edu:2167/cgi/entry/50027057?query_type=word&queryword=breasts&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=9DC2-eKrrT8-11707&hilite=50027057, viewed 05/09/2006.
fortune and by his bold request to his friend Antonio for money to woo Portia. The validity of the inscription becomes more suspect as the play continues, not because of Bassanio’s treatment of Portia, but because of the play’s repeated questioning of the written word and the value of precious metals, most vividly depicted in the debate over Shylock and Antonio’s bond. Shylock’s possession of Antonio’s written promise does him little good in the Venetian court that denies him his pound of flesh in favor of the conflicting written word that protects Christian life. The bond also disrupts the valuation of precious metals because instead of gold or any other precious metal, Antonio’s flesh is used in the financial agreement. The words and metal of the chests initially may ensure Portia is chosen by a man who loves her, but those words do not give her a choice in the selection process. The chests are not dependent upon Portia in the same way that props are typically dependent upon the characters with whom they are associated. Portia’s father is the first male character looming above, controlling her life from beyond the grave. His “game” guarantees that control of Portia will be usurped by another male figure, the suitor who possesses the correct chest. So Portia is objectified when audiences see her represented by a series of chests, and again because she can assume no authority over those chests. She both is the object and cannot control the object.

Shylock’s daughter, Jessica, also must struggle to maintain an independent identity separate from the marital gift chest to which she is connected. She does not seem, at least on the surface, to be as dominated by her father as Portia. Unlike Portia, Jessica seeks her own husband. Audiences first see Jessica with the chest as she is throwing it down to her lover, Lorenzo, with whom she is planning to elope. Therefore, one could argue that she controls the course and direction of this prop. When audiences
first see Jessica, though, she is dressed as a boy. There is little onstage to represent a female presence. In fact, Jessica describes herself as practically invisible:

Here catch this casket, it is worth the pains.

I am glad 'tis night – you do not look on me,

For I am much ashamed of my exchange:

But love is blind, and lovers cannot see

The pretty follies that themselves commit,

For if they could, Cupid himself would blush

To see me thus transformed to a boy. (2.6.33-39)

She tells Lorenzo, “you do not look on me,” reinforcing her temporary absence from the stage. Her “absence” enables the chest to stand in for Jessica.

Jessica, like Portia, is objectified, making the exchange between female character and stage prop more likely. Lorenzo makes an association between the wealth of the chest and Jessica when he recounts “[w]hat gold and jewels she is furnish’d with,” but Shylock takes the connection a step farther when he discovers that Jessica has fled. Solanio recounts Shylock’s rage:

I never heard a passion so variable

As the dog Jew did utter in the streets,

“My daughter! O my ducats! O my daughter!

Fled with a Christian! O my Christian ducats!

Justice, the law, my ducats, and my daughter! (2.8.12-17)

The easy slippage between daughter and ducats works to objectify Jessica. Shylock lumps Jessica together with the ducats (i.e. the chest of riches) without establishing a
hierarchy between the subject and object. The line “Fled with a Christian,” would seem to refer to Jessica, but when followed with “O my Christian ducats,” audiences may find it hard to distinguish between Jessica and the “Christian ducats.” Some may be tempted to discount the importance of Shylock’s equation of Jessica and the chest of ducats due to Shylock’s status as the play’s outcast and representative of a scorned materialist perspective. If those within the world of the play discredit Shylock repeatedly, why should audiences take any stock in his behavior toward Jessica? But Shylock does not objectify all those he identifies as enemies. His failure to distinguish between his daughter and his ducats needs to be seen in direct contrast to his initial refusal to substitute Antonio’s pound of flesh (or rather, his life, as Portia later proves) for any amount of ducats: “If every ducat in six thousand ducats / Were in six parts, and every part a ducat, / I would not draw them, I would have my bond” (4.1.85-87). With Jessica, Shylock erases any boundary between subject and object, but with Antonio, Shylock seems to draw more of a distinction between subject and object. Although Shylock despises Antonio, as is evidenced throughout the play (“How like a fawning publican he looks! / I hate him for he is a Christian” (1.3.36-7)), he initially refuses to accept the money in exchange for Antonio’s flesh. But when faced with the realization that a pound of Antonio’s flesh would mean his life, Shylock begrudging consents to equate the man with the ducats, just as he equates his daughter with ducats. Interestingly that substitution of man for money never occurs and Shylock loses everything. In the world of the play, Antonio, the male subject, is irreplaceable. Jessica, the objectified daughter, is not.

Although Portia has no living male relatives, she still struggles to establish herself in the play’s male dominated world. She is the play’s most powerful female character,
yet in many of her most empowering moments, she is hidden in a male disguise. Immediately prior to Portia’s adoption of a male disguise, she marries Bassanio and her waiting maid, Nerissa, marries Gratiano. Audiences are reminded of Portia’s relationship with the lottery chests when she offers Bassanio gold for Antonio’s release: “You shall have gold / To pay the petty debt twenty times over” (3.2.305-06). He marries Portia, but almost immediately departs, leaving her behind while taking the money that became his the moment he selected the correct casket. The substitution of the chest, and by extension the gold, for Portia acquires added power through Portia’s own demand that the wedding must take place before Bassanio leaves with the riches to free Antonio: “First go with me to church and call me wife, / And then away to Venice to your friend; / For you shall never lie by Portia’s side / With an unquiet soul” (3.2.303-06). In becoming Bassanio’s wife, Portia’s object status becomes clearer. When she becomes wife, he “shall have gold.” In effect, he exchanges the woman for the prop.

Even before the male disguise, Portia’s decision-making abilities seem somewhat undermined. Portia offers Bassanio as much gold as he needs and more, but once the couple is married, that gold becomes Bassanio’s legal property, negating the necessity of Portia’s offer. A similar slippage of power becomes evident when Portia and Nerissa decide to disguise themselves as men in order to join their husbands in Venice. Although the disguises are meant to give them freedom, and therefore power, the disguises actually reflect back upon the female characters as less than men, “lacking”:

Nerissa: Shall they see us?

Portia: They shall Nerissa: but in such a habit,

That they shall think we are accomplished
With that we lack.  (3.4.59-62)

In this passage, Portia’s “[w]ith that we lack” negates the accomplishments that she or Nerissa may achieve while disguised as men, giving all the authority and power to the male disguise instead of the female character. I do not intend to suggest that this play insists upon the powerlessness of women, but rather that this play points out the inconsistencies of a society that cannot acknowledge female power. As William Dunlop argues: “Venice is a male-dominated society in which women will be seen to act (whether action takes the form of legal pleading or of eloping) only under the sanction conferred by masculine disguise” (9). In such a world, female power is repeatedly cloaked as masculine. Although the play’s repeated use of the male disguise fails to depict women as independently capable of action and authority, the play does insist that audiences always remain aware of the female character behind the male disguise. Even as the play maintains the impossibility of women’s power within world of this play and text, it asks those outside of the play, the audience, to acknowledge the possibility of female power. Therefore while the masculine disguises preclude female power and authority, they cannot completely obscure women’s potential power and authority.

Once the disguised women join their husbands, the negation of their power and authority, and even their existence, continues. Both Bassanio and Gratiano erase their wives when they pledge to save Antonio. Bassanio begins by promising Antonio everything:

Antonio, I am married to a wife

Which is as dear to me as life itself,

But life itself, my wife, and all the world,
Are not with me esteem’d above thy life.

I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all

Here to this devil, to deliver you. (4.1.278-83)

Bassanio insists that nothing and no one other than Antonio matter to him. As soon as he speaks of how “dear” Portia is to him, Bassanio writes her out of his life with the words, “I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all…to deliver you.” Gratiano goes even farther when he describes Nerissa as permanently invisible, i.e. dead: “I have a wife who I protest I love, – / I would she were in heaven, so she could / Entreat some power to change this currish Jew” (4.1.286-88). It is within this context that Portia, disguised as Balthazar, doctor of law, provides the legal solution to save Antonio. Gratiano, who repeatedly praises the “learned judge”, unknowingly lauds her triumph. Although audiences are able to recognize Portia (and Nerissa) in their male disguises, none of the other characters, including Bassanio and Gratiano, can. It is hard to assign power to Portia and Nerissa as women when no one within the world of the play is yet capable of comprehending the female presence behind the male disguises. Only in the final moments of the play do Portia’s and Nerissa’s true identities become known to all: “Here is a letter…/ There you shall find that Portia was the doctor, / Nerissa there her clerk” (5.1.267, 269-70). Prior to that revelation, the masculine disguises conceal Portia and Nerissa’s ability to maneuver as women within a male-dominated arena.

The threat of violence toward women that hangs over Cymbeline seems largely absent from The Merchant of Venice. Antonio’s life appears to be the only one at stake. Yet the connection established between the female characters and the chest, more often referred to as caskets, introduces a potential for violence. While the association between
women and death appears only peripherally in the language of the play, it adds to the more prominent connections drawn visual, symbolically and lyrically between women and objects. Caskets can refer to safekeeping boxes or coffins. The Oxford English Dictionary shows that both meanings were in use during the early modern period. Early in the play, Portia compares her lottery chest fate with death. As Nerissa names potential suitors, Portia laments: “I had rather be married to a death’s-head with a bone in his mouth, than to either of these” (1.2.49-51). Although the play never veers far from the comedic when describing Portia’s courtship difficulties, an ominous threat remains. What is to stop a false and unworthy suitor from selecting the correct casket? According to Nerissa, the lottery will not fail because the correct chest “will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love” (1.2.32-4). But Portia’s catalogue of her current suitors implies that unworthy suitors abound. The Neapolitan prince loves his horse too well, the County Palentine is too melancholy, and Monsieur Le Bon “is every man in no man.” These suitors, along with the others, are potential mates for Portia. Marrying any of them, according to Portia, would be her death. A death of sorts also awaits the suitor who selects the incorrect casket and can no longer marry, thereby negating his ability to reproduce legitimately. Shylock adds further weight to the casket as coffin association when he exclaims: “I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear: would she were hears’d at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin” (3.1.80-82). The chest is no longer a source of wealth and riches, but has become instead, a casket of death, specifically Jessica’s death. The link established between these caskets (the women’s “dowries”) and death points toward marriage as a potentially lethal

space for early modern women and men. While Portia and Jessica never face any credible threat of violence, as Innogen does, they nonetheless are depicted as vulnerable, as each repeated disappearance reveals.

Portia and Nerissa are pushed to the edges of the play world on several occasions, but they do ultimately push their way back onto the stage. During the later half of the play, two rings function as replacements for the continually discounted Portia and Nerissa. Although the rings initially reinforce the relationship between female characters and props, the female characters eventually reclaim them as their possessions. In reclaiming the rings, the women achieve a subject status elevated and distinct from the object status they share with the chests and rings throughout much of the play. Just prior to their marriage, Portia gives Bassanio a ring to wear at all times, declaring:

...But now I was the lord

Of this fair mansion, master of my servants,

Queen o'er myself: and even now, but now.

This house, these servants, and this same myself

Are yours, – my lord's! – I given them with this ring. (3.2.167-70)

Audiences never see Nerissa give Gratiano a ring, but learn later in the play that a similar exchange has taken place between the secondary couple. As with Jessica and the chest, Portia seems to be in charge of the ring. She chooses to give Bassanio the ring in order to symbolize her subservience to him, her relinquishing of the titles of “lord” and “master.” The move to embrace subservience diminishes the freedom of choice Portia might claim in giving the ring to Bassanio. Furthermore, Bassanio can make no similar gift to Portia because he has no land, money or titles to share: “when I told you / My state was
nothing, I should then have told you / That I was worse than nothing” (3.2.257-59). So even though Bassanio must “hazard all he hath” according to the inscription on the lead casket, he only risks his right to marry Portia as opposed to material wealth. If Portia and Nerissa give their husbands rings to symbolize their willing subjugation, then audiences are less likely to accept that action as empowering for the women. Furthermore, once the rings are handed over to Bassanio and Gratiano, the women can no longer control or maneuver the rings, even though the rings continue to stand in as their representations.

The rings Portia and Nerissa give their soon-to-be husbands are not wedding rings, but rather informal rings of love and affection, perhaps something similar to posy rings. Wedding rings specifically refer to rings given to the wife by the groom, often rings handed down from mothers and mothers-in-law. Charles Oman explains the difference: “In Britain only the bride receives a ring at the wedding ceremony, but the custom for her to give a ring informally to her husband just before or after the ceremony dates back some centuries” (35). Oman goes on to cite Mary Queen of Scot and Queen Victoria as examples of women who presented their husbands with rings outside of the marriage ceremony. For that reason Portia and Nerissa’s gifts to their husband would not necessarily have been seen as substitutes for the more official wedding rings. Informal gifts, like the rings given by Portia and Nerissa, were at times used in English courts to support claims of marriage. The validity of these informal gifts, however, was questionable and often failed to prove that marital vows had been exchanged.10 In The Merchant of Venice, the women are only in control of the private, non-binding gift of informal rings as opposed to the more public, legal and arguably masculine gift of a

10 Peter Rushton’s article, “The Testament of Gifts: Marriage Tokens and Disputed Contracts in North-East England, 1560-1630,” in Folk Life (v24) details many cases in which gifts, or “tokens,” were used in court in attempts to prove the validity of a marriage contract.
wedding ring. That Portia and Nerissa’s gift giving takes place just beyond the realm of the official wedding further suggests women’s lack of authority even in the private realm of the marriage.

Portia and Nerissa’s decision to test their husbands’ loyalty initially reinforces the women’s invisibility. While disguised, both women convince their husbands to give up the rings, and with little discussion, both men do. Because Portia and Nerissa are disguised at this point, the rings are the only onstage representation of the female characters. Bassanio and Gratiano hand the rings to “men” they barely know. In doing so, the men in effect hand over their wives. When Portia and Nerissa “discover” their husbands’ betrayal, they promote the possible sexual connotation of the ring exchange to the fullest.\footnote{In his \textit{A Glossary of Shakespeare’s Sexual Language}, Gordon Williams reminds us that the ring “symbolizes a woman’s chastity or sexual organ” (260). Eric Partridge also draws the connection between the ring and a woman’s sexual organ: “The pudend – for the semantics cf. circle and O” (175).} Although the symbolic link between the ring and the pudendum is only one aspect of the ring on stage in the same way that Portia’s sexuality is only one aspect of her character, it is what drives Portia’s final deceit. She leads Bassanio to believe she has slept with “the doctor” because he had the ring. First Portia claims she will have sex with the doctor whom Bassanio has given the ring to and then, she claims she already has: “I had it [the ring] of him: pardon me, Bassanio; / For, by this ring, the doctor lay with me” (5.1.273-72). Audiences know the literal truth behind Portia’s claim that she has slept with the doctor while Bassanio does not because audiences know that Portia and the doctor are one in the same. Her reprimand of Bassanio emphasizes that the ring’s exchangeability must mirror Portia’s own exchangeability. As easily as the ring may be exchanged between men, so, too, may Portia be exchanged between men: “Even so void is your false heart of truth, / By heaven I will ne’er come in your bed / Until I see the
ring! (5.1.189-91). She continues to equate her bodily presence with the physical presence of the ring as she declares herself sexually available to the ring’s owner: “I will become as liberal as you, / I’ll not deny him any thing I have, / No, not my body, nor my husband’s bed” (5.1.226-28). Nerissa makes similar declarations, demanding the ring’s return.

At this point in the play, Portia and Nerissa are no longer disguised as men, yet the now missing rings dominate the scene so strongly that the rings still are equated with the women. Consider the following exchange:

Bassanio: If you did know to whom I gave the ring,
If you did know for whom I gave the ring,
And would conceive for what I gave the ring,
And how unwillingly I left the ring,
When nought would be accepted but the ring,
You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

Portia: If you had known the virtue of the ring,
Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
Or your own honour to contain the ring,
You would not have parted with the ring...
I’ll die for’t, but some woman had the ring!

(5.1.193-202,208, *my emphasis*)

The word ring is repeated ten times in the space of fifteen lines. Even though the rings are not visible at this moment in the play, they are present through constant verbal repetition. Portia’s words give prominence to the ring as an equal representation of the
woman speaking because the ring, more so than the female character, is given the human qualities of virtue, worthiness and honour. As audiences have already seen the ease with which the female characters and “female” stage props can be exchanged, they are aware that Portia’s words describe both Portia and the ring itself, but the repeated equation of the ring with the woman continues the objectification of Portia. If she and the ring are still on equal footing, as the above quote implies, then both Portia and the ring remain comparable representations of the woman.

Portia’s independence from the ring and the lottery chests occurs only after she can publicly connect the identity of the ring’s owner with her own person and establish herself, not her father or Bassanio, as the director of her life. First Portia threatens Bassanio that she will allow the ring’s owner to bed her. In this scenario, Portia remains an object that can be given away as freely as a ring, but in this situation, the giving away of the object Portia is done by Portia herself. Portia then produces the ring, claiming to have lain with “the doctor.” Nerissa similarly claims to have slept with “the doctor’s clerk.” I believe this is the crucial moment (absent in Cymbeline) in which the equation between female character and the ring is disrupted. In claiming to have had sex with the doctor and his clerk, Portia and Nerissa effectively merge their male and female identities. In creating a union between the male and female, Portia and Nerissa create a single identity. It is this single identity that Portia and Nerissa have been denied elsewhere in the play, forced to assume two very separate roles as either powerless women or powerful men. Once the two women reveal themselves as the doctor and the clerk, their male and female identities merge. Portia and Nerissa remain on stage as women to claim the newly created, single identity, thereby gaining power and authority
previously denied to them. The rings no longer can be seen as equal counterparts to Portia and Nerissa, instead of their possessions. Earlier in the play, the rings are not labeled as Portia’s ring or Nerissa’s ring. Most often, the rings are referred to individually as “the ring” or “this ring.” But in the last lines of the play, after Portia and Nerissa have unveiled their disguises and claimed an intimate union with themselves, Gratiano declares: “Well, while I live, I’ll fear no other thing / So sore, as keeping safe Nerissa’s ring” (5.1.306-7). Here we see the ring revert back to a typical stage prop, one fully possessed by the character on stage, “Nerissa’s ring.” Portia and Nerissa can no longer be exchanged for the rings because they have come to possess them as a subject possesses an object.

Early modern dramatic manifestations of women’s power, including Portia’s, have often been seen as monstrous, transgressive or disorderly. Karen Newman describes Portia’s usurpation of masculine power in The Merchant of Venice as “unruly.” She argues:

When Portia takes off for Venice dressed as a man, she looses her tongue in public talk on subjects ill-suited to the ladylike conduct she posits as a model and does exactly those things [John] Knox and others violently attacked. She engages, that is, in productive labor reserved for men, and not insignificantly, in linguistic labor, in a profession the successful practice of which depends on a knowledge of history and precedent, on logic and reasoning, and on rhetoric, all areas of education traditionally denied to women. (30)

But two factors contradict Newman’s claims. First of all, no one within the world of the
play criticizes Portia or Nerissa for her behavior. Neither Bassanio nor Gratiano has a harsh word for his wife when they learn of the disguise and deception. After discovering Portia’s actions, Bassanio responds: “Sweet doctor, you shall be my bedfellow, — / When I am absent then lie with my wife” (5.1.284-85). These are the last lines spoken by Bassanio, and they reveal no hidden anger or criticism. More precisely, neither husband decries the women’s lack of feminine virtues. It is true, as Newman suggests, that Portia does give a description of traditional femininity earlier in the play,\(^\text{12}\) but no one else within the world of the play demands this behavior from Portia, nor condemns her for the behavior she exhibits while disguised as a man. A second factor that may explain the play’s lack of internal criticism for Portia’s (and Nerissa’s) “non-feminine” behavior is the realization that Portia’s so-called “unruly” behavior occurs while she is disguised as a man. Her engagement in “productive labor reserved for men” is not transgressive in the way Newman suggests because Portia engages in that labor as a man. It is one thing to argue that Portia’s power as a woman is limited because she can only take action while disguised as a man. But to then argue that the actions taken by Portia while disguised as a man serve as a commentary on her femininity or lack thereof seems unwarranted. The conclusion of The Merchant of Venice allows the female characters to escape from beyond strictures that identify them as either weak or transgressive. They navigate the middle ground between the stereotype that identifies “proper” women as weak, fragile and incapable of action and the stereotype that identifies women of action as monstrous, wild and unfeminine. In navigating the world of men as men, while at the end of the day asserting their female identities, the women of The Merchant of Venice successfully

\(^{12}\) “...for mine own part / I have toward heaven breath’d a secret vow, / To live in prayer and contemplation, / Only attended by Nerissa here, / Until her husband and my lord’s return” (3.4.26-30).
separate themselves from objects in a world reluctant to define them as women and human beings.

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The ring belonging to Anne of Cleves represents both benefits and costs of marriage. She escaped from her marriage to Henry VIII with her life, and lived the rest of her days away from the public eye in the English countryside. According to at least one source, Anne’s divorce allowed her to “live an independent lifestyle denied most women.” The dangers faced by Anne through her marriage to Henry VIII are echoed in the marriage plots of Cymbeline and The Merchant of Venice. Marriage, often cited as the paramount achievement for early modern women, was also the arena in which women confronted the most serious threats to both their lives (whether from childbirth or from a husband’s legally sanctioned physical abuse) and their independence. These two plays represent women’s tenuous position in marriage by manipulating women’s tenuous presence on stage. The repeated substitutions of the dowry related props for recently married and/or newly engaged female characters represents a “real world” in which women were identified as commodifiable goods.

The objectification of women in Cymbeline and The Merchant of Venice limits their voice, presence, authority and action. Only when the distinctions between the women (Innogen, Portia, Jessica and Nerissa) and the properties they bring into their marriages (the “dowries” of rings and chests) can be made clear, can the women be seen as in possession of their properties. The “female” stage props ultimately serve as a mixed blessing for these female characters. At moments in Cymbeline, the diamond ring

13 Marilee Hanson, EnglishHistory.net, http://www.englishhistory.net/tudor/monarchs/cleves.html (12/7/03)
is alone in making known Innogen’s virtues, yet its authoritative presence further reduces her presence on stage. The rings in The Merchant of Venice, while they are ultimately the means through which Portia and Nerissa separate themselves from props and assert rights of ownership, also highlight the ease with women can be exchanged. The rings and chests in these two plays reflect women’s absence from the theater and female characters’ repeated disappearances on stage as reflections of the absence or loss of identity that many women experienced by entering into marriage.
Chapter 3

“City Flesh”: Prostituting the City’s Trade Economy

“What a horrible age do we live in, that a man cannot have a queane to himself.”

(Pursenet, Your Five Gallants, 3.3.1602)\(^{14}\)

In 1600, when Mary Newborough, gentlewoman, wife and prostitute, was carted throughout London for three days as punishment for prostitution, her presence as a human being was obscured by her role as spectacle. Although carting was a punishment imposed upon both male and female sexual offenders, Mary Newborough’s three-day ordeal stands out as excessive and noteworthy.\(^{15}\) Gustav Ungerer describes what typically occurred at such cartings in Smithfield:

> A triangular open space measuring five or six acres, it accommodated a throng of dealers, shoppers, and loiterers who, alerted by the disharmonic performance of the mock musicians, must have swarmed around the cart, possibly a two-wheeled cart, stared at the papers on the victims’ heads, whereon was written their offenses, and listened to the proclamation of their wrongdoings. (177)\(^{16}\)

Ungerer’s recreation positions Mary as a market spectacle, grouped together with the herds of cattle on show. In displaying Mary as an object, the government succeeds not only in controlling the exhibition of her body, but also in temporarily immobilizing


\(^{15}\) Cartings typically lasted only a few hours (Ungerer 176).

\(^{16}\) Ungerer is able to recreate Mary’s punishment by utilizing a letter written by Philip Gawdy, follower of Essex, to his brother in which Mary Newborough’s and Mary Digby’s punishment was described. The rest, according to Ungerer, “is a provisional attempt to recover the humiliations the two women must have gone through, humiliations cast in accordance to age-old scenario and meticulously revised and improved by the civic authorities of the 1590s with a view to letting the Londoners participate in the shaming of unbound female sexuality (175).
Mary’s economic agency as a prostitute who controls the sale of her body. In Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s *Your Five Gallants* (1607) and *The Honest Whore* (Parts I & II, 1604, 1608?), the self-will and economic independence of prostitutes who attempt to control the sale of their bodies are similarly undermined as the prostitutes are equated with commodifiable stage props.

Prostitutes are common in early modern city comedies. In fact prostitutes appear in numerous city comedies by playwrights including Dekker, Middleton, John Webster, William Beaumont, Ben Jonson, Thomas Heywood, John Fletcher, Philip Massinger and Robert Daborne. Prostitution was also a highly visible and amorphous reality in early modern London. Its visibility reflects the large number of prostitutes at work both within the London city limits and in the suburbs. Early modern English includes at least twenty terms for prostitute, ranging from familiar terms such as whore and courtesan to less familiar terms such as punk, meretrix, mermaid and trug (Haselkorn 1). Both Henry VIII and his son, Edward VI, enforced bans against legalized prostitution and brothels, but Mary I repealed all the laws established by her Protestant predecessors, even those outlawing public brothels. Upon taking the throne in 1558, Elizabeth abolished all of Mary’s mandates in favor of her father’s, only to have her successor, James I, throw open the doors to legalized prostitution and its potential revenues for the city and state. The rulings did little to affect the vast amount of prostitution, particularly in private

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establishments, but do help point toward the conflicting approaches to prostitution as either a moral issue or an economic one.

The following pages focus on the prostitutes in Middleton’s *Your Five Gallants* and Dekker’s *The Honest Whore* who are represented on stage not only by male actors in women’s dress, but by stage props. Middleton and Dekker’s plays, as opposed to most other city comedies such as *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) or *The Faire Maide of Bristowe* (1604-05), seem more invested in recuperating the prostitutes as potentially profitable merchandise than rebuilding their moral character through conversion or marriage. Middleton and Dekker represent female prostitutes as commodified objects by eliminating prostitutes’ economic authority as proprietors of their own bodies. These works force visual and symbolic parallels between the prostitutes and already commodified goods, such as jewels and textiles. The equation between the women and props continues even when the prostitutes become wives. The objectification of the women seems to stem, at least in part, from the women’s desire to take action in the male dominated arenas of the market and marital economies. The prostitutes of *Your Five Gallants* circulate in the public market economy, while Bellafront of *The Honest Whore* spends equal time in both the public market and the more private, marital economy. Jean Howard’s explanation of city comedies points towards a possible cultural explanation for the tension depicted between men and women in the plays. She writes of city comedies “as the genre through which Londoners explored their role in a vastly expanding market economy and negotiated the particular class tensions, especially between gentry and merchants, exacerbated by that expansion” (3). What Dekker and Middleton’s plays focus on are not class tensions, but rather gender tensions brought about by this same
expanding market economy. In the world of these plays, women are not permitted to maintain positions of economic authority. The male consumers of Your Five Gallants and The Honest Whore, whether husbands or gallants, maintain economic power while the women, whether wives or prostitutes, remain potential commodities.

The string of pearls that appears and reappears throughout Thomas Middleton’s Your Five Gallants performs a function similar to the “female” stage props seen in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice and Cymbeline. It stands in as an analogous representation of the female prostitutes at moments when they are absent or indistinguishable. In The Merchant of Venice and Cymbeline, the female characters equated with props are “respectable” women preparing to marry or just recently married. While Your Five Gallants contains a similar female character, Katherine, it also presents (and gives more stage time to) four seamy and socially reprehensible prostitutes, or courtesans. The prostitutes and the pearls are repeatedly connected with a bustling London marketplace, represented here largely by the pawnshop business and the sex trade business. The pawnshop business allows the gallants to repeatedly exchange gifts and stolen goods, such as the chain of pearls, as well as clothes for cash. Similar to pawned goods, the play’s prostitutes are interchangeably sold and resold, yet only the prostitution trade is depicted as disruptive. The play’s most important pawn object, the string of pearls, is more closely associated with the prostitutes than the pawn industry (and the men who run the pawn industry), and therefore its devaluation mirrors the prostitutes’ devaluation. Both the prostitutes and the pearls are depicted as disruptive commodities in the marketplace because they have no fixed or reliable value.

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18 "If the plays [Jacobean city comedies] do not analyze economic conditions, they certainly display them, filled as they are with sights and sounds of mercantile practice" (Richard Horwich 255-56).
Furthermore, no one within the world of the play can claim secure ownership over them. The association between the pearls and the prostitutes reveals not only the prostitutes’ status as commodifiable objects, but also emphasizes the play’s attempt to displace the discomfort of the market exchange onto the prostitutes and their business.

*Your Five Gallants* begins and ends with the romantic courtship of Fitsgrave and Katherine, but the bulk of the play depicts the escapades of the five gallants, who are also suitors of Katherine’s, and four courtesans. In the opening scene, Katherine and Fitsgrave exchange gifts, and Fitsgrave’s gift to Katherine, the chain of pearls, remains prominent throughout the play. Katherine banishes all her suitors for a period of one month to allow her to mourn for her father, yet audiences know from the start Fitsgrave is the only true suitor. During the month of forced removal, a disguised Fitsgrave witnesses all the gallants’ indiscretions, which include prostitution, theft and gambling. The chain of pearls is repeatedly stolen, gifted, lost and found amongst the gallants and courtesans. In the end Fitsgrave manipulates the five gallants into revealing their true nature through a masque performed before Katherine. At the masque’s conclusion, Frippery (a gallant) unwittingly returns the pearls to Katherine. As restitution for their disreputable behavior, the gallants are forced into marriage with the four courtesans and Mistress New-cut, the play’s bawdy widow, leaving Katherine and Fitsgrave free to marry one another.

The chain of pearls appears or is referred to in eight scenes, with additional general references to pearls in another three scenes. It is initially a sign of romantic love and chastity, but is ultimately linked with lust, sex and prostitution. To an early modern audience, pearls could signify either a woman’s chastity or her total lack of chastity. From medieval times the pearl was upheld as a symbol of a woman’s chastity, as is
confirmed in the famous Gawain-poet work, *Pearl*, which begins: “Perle plesaunte, to
prynces paye / To clanly clos in golde so clere: / Out of orient, I hardly saye, / Ne proued
I neuer her precios pere...Of pat pryuy perle withouten spot” (1-4,12). Fitsgrave
reinforces the lofty virtues of pearls when he present the chain to Katherine: “Vouchsafe,
eunequall’d virgin, [to] accept / This worthlesse favor from your servant’s arme, / The
hallowed beades, whereon I justly kept, / The true and perfect number of my sighs”
(1.2.364-67). Pearls, however, also had a much more sinister significance, one directly
linked to sex and prostitution. In *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff and Doll disagree over what
“gifts” men receive from whores.

Falstaff: If the cook help to make the gluttony, you help to make the
diseases, Doll. We catch of you, Doll, we catch of you…

Doll: Yea, joy, our chains and jewels.

Falstaff: Your brooches, pearls, and ouches.

(*2 Henry IV*, 2.4.44-48)

In this context Gordon Williams explains, pearls refer to “clear syphilitic pustule[s]”
(231). Pearls, therefore, potentially symbolize chastity and sexually transmitted diseases
associated with prostitution.

 Appropriately, then, the analogous relationship between the pearls and the
courtesans allows the pearls to reinforce the prostitute’s presence when they fail to be
identified or differentiated on the stage. Although the courtesans appear on stage often
throughout the play, they are seldom depicted as having distinguishing characteristics.
The naming of the courtesans in *Your Five Gallants* illustrates this lack of independent
identity. The courtesans are simply known as Novice, First Courtesan, Second
Courtesan, and Third Courtesan. The only distinction made between the four is that Novice is new to prostitution, but the text does little to emphasize even this distinction. Compare the indistinct naming of the prostitutes to the very specific naming of their counterparts, the five gallants: Fripery, Goldstone, Primero, Pursenet and Tailby. Even before the action of the play begins, Middleton points out the distinct characteristics of these five men. In the first stage direction, Middleton labels each of his gallants. Primero is the “Bawde-gallant,” Tailby the “whore-Gallant,” Pursenet the “pocket-Gallant,” Goldstone the “cheating-Gallant,” and Fripery the “Broker-Gallant.” Compared to the gallants, the courtesans are very nearly indistinguishable. The “Bawde-gallant” Tailby draws more attention to the courtesans’ interchangeability when he sequentially swears similar romantic oaths to three out of the four courtesans. First Courtesan, Second Courtesan and Novice all pledge themselves to Tailby, and he returns each of those pledges. He remains on stage throughout the scene but the courtesans rotate into the scene one by one. Tailby continues to swear his undying affection regardless of which courtesan stands in front of him. His failure to differentiate among the three reinforces the poor theatrical individuation of the courtesans. Tailby also draws attention to the courtesans’ sameness when he and Goldstone discover that the same courtesan services them both. Tailby states: “As far as I can see ‘tis all one case, and holds in one Court, wee are both maintaid by the common roade way?” (4.6.2365-66). To the men in the play, the courtesans are nothing more than a “common roade way” that can be used and dismissed by all. The singular chain of pearls, though, is much harder to disregard. It functions as the constant representation of all the indistinguishable courtesans, furthering the lack of uniqueness amongst the courtesans.
The courtesans and the pearls are representative of the play's male-dominated market economy, yet their fluid status reflects the flaws of such an economy. Katherine, meanwhile, represents an older economic structure based on land ownership and traditional patriarchal order. Instead of focusing on the many diverse ways in which the newer market economy was flawed, Your Five Gallants reveals a world in which the disruption and corruption falls largely onto the courtesans. As Jonathan Dollimore explains: "The prostitute was regarded both as one of the most evil of all threats to good order (insatiable temptress), and as functional for that order (cesspool)" (135). The courtesans in the play exist outside of the realm of marriage and defy patriarchal norms that demand women's chastity and depict women as in need of a male authority (father, brother or husband). Similarly, the pearls defy commercial norms that demand commodities have a fixed value. At once both a gift and a commodity exchanged ten times in the course of the play, the string of pearls fail to maintain a static, calculable financial value. Conversely, Katherine's role as the modest young maiden in love reinforces patriarchal norms regarding marriage and property/inheritance rights. The difference between the courtesans and the chaste maiden lies not in different sexual moralities as could be supposed by the play's glorification of Katherine's chastity in contrast to the courtesans' immodesty, but rather in the different economics of exchange. In her marriage to Fitsgrave, Katherine serves as an honorable and permanent addition to Fitsgrave's wealth and social identity. However, in their sexual exchanges with their customers, the courtesans do nothing to advance the gallants' social standing; they only provide evidence that the gallants possess at least some cash. The men of the play do not see the courtesans as products of the new economy, but rather the reason for the flaws of
the new system of exchange. Richard Horwich argues for a similar process in Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore, Part I*: “Marriage throughout the play is seen as the bond of constancy; whoredom thus comes to symbolize the randomness of things shared or held in common, like money or property” (261). The chaste young maid/wife represents a constant, predictable world order (patriarchy) in which ownership can be safely and securely identified. Because she will remain chaste and faithful in her marriage, she aids in the constant world order by guaranteeing paternity and even helping to solidify inheritance rights. The commerce of both the prostitutes and the pearls, on the other hand, is used to exemplify the unruliness of the play’s unpredictable market economy.

The repeated attempts to displace all of commerce’s impurity onto the courtesan’s sex business shifts criticism away from the play’s other main business, the pawn industry. The institution of the pawnshop was a particularly troublesome creation of the new money economy where goods could be exchanged for cash and those same goods could then be lent out over and over again. Pawnshops threatened class and social structures because they allowed anyone with money, regardless of their rank, to purchase or rent goods of the highest station, such as fine clothing and jewels. Although the play does reveal some class disruption through dealing with the pawnbroker, the social disruption caused by women’s sexual indiscretions (whether real or imagined) is far greater. Most of the goods exchanged in the play, especially early on, are women’s clothing. The clothing itself is not the focus, but rather the sexual behavior of the woman from whom those items came. The men in the pawnshop perceive the women’s clothing as proof of women’s loose sexuality. Or more accurately, they perceive the exchange of the women’s clothing as proof of women’s loose sexuality. In the first scene, two men enter
Frippery’s shop in order to pawn women’s clothing. The First Fellow approaches Frippery intent upon pawning “The second part of a Gentlewoman’s gowne...the lower halfe” (1.1.40-1). In just this one sentence, the First Fellow brings to life a sexually active woman, one whose “lower halfe,” her vagina is a product for sale. Because attention is focused on the nameless woman’s sex life, the legitimacy of First Fellow’s attempt to pawn another’s possession for monetary recompense is largely unquestioned. The Second Fellow offers up “a Gentlewomans whole suite,” that has been “Often turnd up and down, but neuer turnd sir” (1.1.84-5). While Second Fellow’s speech ostensibly reassures Frippery that the gown has indeed been worn often but never reversed, it also asks audiences to visualize the woman behind the clothes as sexually active. Frippery continues along a similar vein, complaining about the sorry state of women’s virtue: “tut the worlds chang’d, gentlewomans faules stand upright now, no sinne but has a Bolster, that it may lye at ease” (1.1.92-3). Again Frippery appears to be discussing current fashion trends, but the sexually charged language suggests another target. The method of the exchange, the pawn, never need be questioned or condemned as long as the items themselves and by extension the reprehensible women connected with them, are identified as the root of the problem. The courtesans, the play’s most visibly blameworthy women, are similarly scapegoated.

The chain of pearls equated with the prostitutes eventually reaches the pawnshop. Although it first appears as an invaluable gift between lovers, through the course of the play, it becomes less identifiable as a gift and more identifiable as a commodity subject to the negotiations of the pawnshop. As a commodity the necklace is comparable to community property. The pearls are given as a romantic gift from Fitsgrave to Katherine
but are soon stolen by Pursenet's Boy. The theft makes the pearls open and accessible to all characters, regardless of rank or virtue. The character with the perhaps the lowest rank and questionable virtue, Pursenet's boy, hands the stolen goods over to his master, who hands them over to the First Courtesan as either a romantic gift or payment for services received. First Courtesan gifts the pearls to Tailby, but Pursenet who is disguised as a road bandit robs him of the pearls. Pursenet then loses the pearls and Goldstone finds them. After Pursenet accuses Goldstone of theft, the pearls are returned to him and he then pawns them to Frippery in exchange for the gallants' masking suits. Finally, Frippery presents the necklace back to Katherine as a gift, without realizing he is returning her property. The initial theft of the item temporarily interrupts the intimate and chaste connection shared by Fitsgrave and Katherine. Pursenet describes the relationship between men and courtesans as similarly open:

[W]hat a horrible age do we liue in, that a man cannot haue a queane to himselfe. Let him but turne his back, the best of her is chipt away like a Court loafe...A Lord maintaines her, she maintaines a Knight, he maintaines a Whore, shee maintaines a captaine. So in like manner, the pocket keepes my boye, hee keepes me, I keepe her, shee keepes him.

(3.3.1602-4, 8-11)

His frustration with the "sequence of the world" (Colegrove 36) is that his property, First Courtesan, is not solely his, but is commercially connected to many others as well. If she remains community property, like the pearls, she is a less valuable more unmanageable investment for Pursenet.
When Fitsgrave initially presents Katherine with the string of pearls, he does so in privacy, and their romantic oaths to one another are likewise sworn in private. At the end of the play, though, Frippery, not Fitsgrave presents the pearls to Katherine in full view of all of the characters. With the downfall of the gallants, it becomes even clearer that Katherine will choose Fitsgrave for her husband, but here she must do so publicly. Furthermore, even as Katherine gives herself to Fitsgrave, Fitsgrave is busy arranging marriages between the gallants and the courtesans: "See I haue brought wiues for em" (5.2.2961). Fitsgrave and Katherine’s unique, intimate marriage is almost obscured in the midst of such a chaotic scene. Like the pearls that become the shared commodity of the gallants and courtesans alike, their love now appears open and accessible to all. Yet the final lines spoken by the gallants and Fitsgrave point out the underlying differences between the marriages. Goldstone speaks his final line: “These forc’d marriages do neuer come to good,” to which Tailby adds: “The[y] often prooue the ruine of great houses” (5.2.2995, 97). Fitsgrave, though, closes on this bright note: “I haue all my wishes” (5.2.3004). The play concludes that Fitsgrave and Katherine’s marriage stands out as the union to be admired and sought after while the unions between the gallants and courtesans stand on the verge of collapse from the beginning.

The series of exchanges between Pursenet, First Courtesan and Tailby more clearly illustrates the continued devaluation of the pearls and the prostitutes. Pursenet gives the pearls to First Courtesan and she gives them to Tailby. Like the pearls, First Courtesan passes from man to man. As a gift the pearls remain just outside of the world of commerce. Tailby is the first to directly label the pearls as something other than a gift. Losing at cards, he utters this aside: “I left a faire chaine of pearle at my lodging too, like
an asse and nere remembred it; that would ha bin a good pawn now” (2.3.1138-40). For Tailby the pearls fail to represent romantic love; instead, they are the equivalent of money. And when Pursenet steals the pearls back from Tailby, he is quick to draw a connection between the gift (the chain) he has given First Courtesan and the money he paid her (presumably for her sexual services). By lumping the pearls with the gold given, Pursenet unravels the perception of the necklace as a romantic gift: ‘Tis, Sfoot tis, / The very chaine, oh damnd mistresse, ha; / and this the purse, which not fiue daies before / I sent her fild with faire spur-royalls --- heart; / The very gold?” (3.3.1582-86). According to Pursenet the pearls are not different from the gold given. For both Pursenet and Tailby, then, the pearls and the prostitutes have a financial value. Therefore the string of pearls is removed from the idealized realm of romantic courtship and relocated to the modern commercial world of the courtesans.

“All women are potentially punks.”
(Ingram 26)

Throughout the play the courtesans and their sex trade are repeatedly identified as at the center of the city’s trade-based economy. In depicting the courtesans and the string of pearls as analogous to one another, the play establishes the courtesans as commodifiable objects. The unauthorized and uncontrollable exchanges of string of pearls add to the vilification of the courtesans’ trade activities. The play concludes with what I see as a failed attempt to cleanse the fictional London by removing the prostitutes and returning the pearls into the hands of the “rightful” owner. If, as the play suggests, trade commerce is ugly, reprehensible and unpredictable because of the prostitutes, then one way to remove such stigmas from the marketplace is to remove the prostitutes. The play does that by marrying the four courtesans and the lusty widow, Mistress New-Cut, to
the five gallants. In a similar action, the chain is unwittingly returned to Katherine. Both actions, the marriages and the return of the necklace, suggest a restoration of "proper" order. The women and the necklace now appear to have a fixed, static identity and are the permanent property of their owners. But neither the marriages nor the return of the necklace successfully disrupts the ever-changing and unfixable marketplace at work within the world of the play; it in not prostitution per say that disturbs the male characters, but rather the idea of prostitutes' control over their bodies as products for sale in the marketplace.

The impending marriages do nothing to differentiate the courtesans from one another, nor do the marriages successfully contain the economic threats posed by the new economy as witnessed in prostitution. One of the indicators that the world of prostitution has not been eradicated comes from Goldstone who, upon accepting his impending marriage to a courtesan, declares to his companions: "Since all our shifts are discovered, as farre as I can see tis our best course to marry em: weele make them get our liuings" (5.2.2984-86). Goldstone's declaration, "weele make them get our liuings," implies that the courtesans, although soon to be wives, will not stop practicing their sex trade but will now prostitute themselves according to their husbands' dictates. His suggestion closes the gap between these courtesans and wives, thereby undermining the viability of the courtesans as scapegoats. The hazy barrier between courtesan and wife is blurred even further because audiences never know which gallant each courtesan (and Mistress New-Cut) will marry. Without a specific husband to call her own, the courtesans continue to be the unstable, community property of all the gallants. The failure of the marriages encourages what Angela Ingram calls "a re-evaluation of the figure of the whore" (37).
She contends: "Plays like his [Middleton] both reflect and encourage a re-evaluation of the figure of the whore, of the society which used her while it maintained her methods of commerce, and also condemned her while attaching pious labels to its own exploitative commerce" (37). In utilizing a distinctly commodifiable object, the pearls, as a substitute for the courtesans, this play allows audiences to see the commerce of prostitution as part of a larger commercial marketplace. Yet the play’s emphasis on women’s sexual marketability, both as courtesans and wives, inhibits any true “re-evaluation” of the courtesan or the new economy.

The most insidious aspect of Your Five Gallants, though, may not be the scapegoating of the sexually promiscuous courtesans, but rather, the potential scapegoating of all women, including the virtuous Katherine. By the time the pearls are returned to Katherine, they have become anything but the symbols of purity initially intended. Instead they seem more closely associated with Falstaff’s pearls, i.e. syphilitic pustules. In the same way that a sexually transmitted disease spreads, the pearls pass from one character to another, spreading, if not an actual disease then the taint of sexual licentiousness, as they go. We even see the pearl used a device in the masque to represent the play’s bawde gallant, Primero. “The deuice, an vnualued pearle, hid in a caue” accompanies a Latin phrase translated by Fitgrave as “[o]ne that sells maidenheads by whole-sale” (5.1.2727-28, 30). So while the device depicts an invaluable pearl, the motto contradicts the pearl’s invaluable quality, positioning it as an object for sale. Shortly thereafter, the play’s supposedly invaluable pearl, Katherine the virgin, is re-gifted with the string of pearls. I would argue that when Katherine is re-gifted with the pearls, she becomes tainted, both as a sexual object and a commercial one. She retains
her identification as "the virgin" yet she does so in a world where her very virginity, her "maidenhead" stands out as a potentially commodifiable object. The commercialization of all women, both those in marriages and prostitution, negatively genders the new economic structure as feminine. Not only does this play fail to "save" the courtesans, but it positions women as mass market commodities without independent identities or non-commercial value.

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Thomas Dekker's exploration of one prostitute's conversion from lusty whore to chaste wife in the two-part play The Honest Whore is typically read as a moral condemnation of prostitution and all its trappings. Dekker's work, often associated with Puritan ideals, seems to condemn the amoral activities of prostitutes, bawds, pimps and gallants, yet Dekker also spends a great deal of time depicting the economic power structure of the sex trade as well. The conversion of Bellafront (the play's "honest whore") from prostitute to wife, which should ostensibly be embraced as an act of moral salvation, is instead met with resistance. The play's lack of support for Bellafront's moral conversion centers upon her desire to control the commodification of her body, most controversially by discontinuing the sale of her body. The authority she attempts to exert over her own body and person, over her self as a commodity, undermines the authority of the male consumer. As both prostitute and wife, she is repeatedly confronted by the reality that she has no control over her body or person. She is a product created for and consumed by men.

Dekker's depiction of prostitutes appears, on the surface, to be one of the most believable and sincere attempts made on the Renaissance stage, in part, because he
constructs the most complex prostitute character: Bellafront. Unlike Middleton, whose courtesans resemble stock characters, Dekker presents each of *The Honest Whore* prostitutes, including the three briefly trotted across the stage at the conclusion to Part II, as individuals with names, personalities and voices. Yet, even Dekker’s “unique, in-depth portrait of a whore” (Haselkorn 116) ultimately represents the prostitute as a commodity of flesh, as opposed to a thinking, feeling, and active subject. The central prostitute’s (Bellafront) status as a financial object outweighs her status as a person, particularly in the eyes of her husband and would-be lover. Her commodification is made clearer by the similarity between her and the textiles exchanged in the linen shop, which functions as the pawnshop does in *Your Five Gallants*. In Part I audiences witness Bellafront’s elaborate dressing ritual that includes a long list of textile products: white silk stockings, ruff, poker, fall and petticoat. Candido’s shop also abounds with textiles such as lawns, cambrics and taffetas. In Part II, textiles again are prominent in Candido’s shop and also appear in the form of the blue gowns given to the jailed prostitutes. All of these textiles add to the play’s most important textile prop, which ultimately serves as a substitute for Bellafront: the gown Matheo strips off Bellafront to pawn for cash. The more Bellafront struggles to identify herself as wife who is not for sale in the public marketplace, the more the play focuses on the textile stage props that represent Bellafront as a prostitute.

*The Honest Whore, Parts I & II* were composed between 1604 and 1608, the first play a collaborative work between Dekker and Middleton (although largely Dekker’s work), the second play solely the work of Dekker. Part I, the more lighthearted of the two plays, presents Bellafront’s conversion from whore to wife. Hippolyto’s violent
rejection of the lovelorn prostitute instigates Bellafront’s conversion, and his mourning for the supposedly dead Infelice, whom he marries upon discovering the fabrication of her death, leads Bellafront to demand that her first client, Matheo, marry her and make her an honest woman. He does so, but reluctantly and only after the Duke forces the marriage. The subplot of both plays concentrates on Candido, the ever-patient linen draper, and the attempts made by his wives and the gallants to enrage him out of his peaceful state. The main plot and subplot converge in Part II, the darker play, as Bellafront struggles to stay honest against the machinations of male characters such as her greedy husband Matheo, who seeks to re-prostitute her, and her previous love, the now-married Hippolyto, who attempts to woo Bellafront into adultery. The play concludes with the Duke’s Bridewell judgment scene in which Matheo’s crimes are expunged after Bellafront and her father’s pleas, Hippolyto’s two-facedness is revealed yet apparently unpunished, the city’s prostitutes and bawds are condemned, and Candido is upheld for his patience as the exemplary citizen and role model.

Candido’s linen shop, as the central city location in both plays, is also the first space in which female prostitutes and textile commodities are brought together in the same conversation. The linen shop is also important because its proprietor, Candido, and the play’s main character, Bellafront, both repeatedly have their virtue tested. Although the play is superficially located in Milan, Candido’s shop seems to rise out of the London streets, and the market issues raised are those in the burgeoning English trade market. As Jean Howard explains:

The subplot story of Candido is even more obviously a London tale. At his second wedding, in Part II, Candido gives a long speech in praise of the
flat caps worn by London apprentices; and his shop, where he calls people in by the familiar city cry, "What do you lack?" is unmistakably situated in the linen drapers' district of London." (8)

In this London-esque linen shop, textile wares are repeatedly described as sexually available women. Conventionally clothing helps to define a character, as Hamlet’s all-black clothing shows his melancholy, and as Malvolio’s yellow garters show his folly, yet here clothing and character are utilized almost interchangeably. In The Honest Whore, Candido’s assistant, George, links the sale of textiles to the sale of women. Attempting to make a sale, George boasts of the linen as virginal: “Ay, and the purest she that ever you fingered since you were a gentleman. Look how even she is, look how clean she is — ha? — as even as the brow of Cynthia, and as clean as your sons and heirs when they ha’ spent all” (Part 1, Scene 5).19 In the prostitution trade, Ungerer reminds us, “[v]irgins enjoyed a special status” (167). The value of a prostitute’s virginity, and the re-selling of that virginity, is a theme often touched upon in other plays, as when Mary Faugh defends herself to Franceschina in The Dutch Courtesan: “I ha’ made as much o’your maidenhead; an you had been mine own daughter, I could not ha’ sold your maidenhead oftener that I ha’ done” (2.2.10-12). George’s implicit claim that the material value of pure linen equals the value of a woman’s virginity makes explicit the assumption that women are marketable commodities who can be bought for a price.

The ensuing conversation makes the connection between prostitutes and the cloth even clearer by referring to the pox associated with prostitutes. George and the gallants

19 All citations of The Honest Whore refer to The Honest Whore Parts One and Two edited by Nick de Somogyi. This version does not include act divisions or line numbers. Therefore the internal references to the play list first the part of the play (1 or 2) and the scene number.
banter back and forth, debating the texture of the linen. Castruchio questions the quality of the linen with “Pox on’t, ‘tis rough,” to which George responds: “How? Is she rough? But if you bid pox on’t sir, ‘twill take away the roughness presently.” Fluello adds: “Ha, signore, has he fitted your French curse?” (1.5). The shop banter encourages consumers and audiences to contemplate the potential physical, sexual pleasure to be received from the purchase of textile commodities as equivalent to the potential pleasures (and pains) to be received from the purchase of a prostitute. As George states: “You may see further for your mind, but, trust me, you shall not find better for your body” (1.5.). Both Bellafront’s body and Candido’s linens are pleasures for the body.

By Part II, the subtle association between the linen shop and prostitution has become overt. When Horseleech and Bots, the play’s bawd and pander, need new women to prostitute, they seek them out in Candido’s linen shop. As Bots explains to the gallants upon entering the store: “We want tools, gentlemen, to furnish the trade. They wear out day and night, they wear out till no mettle be left in their back” (2.8). The scene is similar to the first scene of Your Five Gallants, when Frippery and the two fellows construe the wear and tear of clothing as the sexual wear and tear upon a woman’s body. In The Honest Whore, though, the metaphor is made literal because the men are alluding to actual women whom they have prostituted and future ones they plan to prostitute. The scene in the textile shop becomes particularly lurid when the group singles out Candido’s second wife as the next potential prostitute. These men fail to draw any clear distinction between wife and prostitute. Carolo, a gallant, confirms his opinion of the second wife as prostitute material by referring to her as a textile commodity: “I’ll give thee for thy fee twenty crowns, if thou canst but procure me the wearing of yon velvet cap” (2.8). The
second wife, as “yon velvet cap,” has no voice and is adopted by the men as a marketable commodity not contained by marriage.

The Honest Whore plays make use of an off-stage connection between women and textiles, the association between poor female sempsters/laundry women and prostitutes, in order to further the substitutability of Bellefront and the textiles. Bellafront’s father, Orlando, attempts to sway Bellafront against Matheo: “I have heard him [Matheo] say five hundred times, you were as arrant a whore as ever stiffened tiffany neckcloths in water-starch upon a Saturday i’th’ afternoon” (2.4). Orlando points out that Matheo believes there to be no separation between a prostitute and a laundry woman. Such a shift can be seen in other dramas, such as Middleton and Dekker’s The Roaring Girl in which the serving man, Neatfoot, mistakes Mary, disguised as a sempster, for a prostitute. Also, the play’s actual sempster, Openwork, is given a name that ostensibly refers to lace or crochet work, but could also be interpreted as a sign of her sexual availability or openness. Regardless of her title, prostitute, wife or even laundry woman, Bellefront is still thought of by the men in the play as a woman for sale.

The male characters of The Honest Whore are often connected to textiles as well but as textile consumers or proprietors, not as substitutes for the textile. In one of her many attempts to drive her husband to anger, Viola (Candido’s first wife) refuses to unlock the chest that holds his Senate gown. Candido tries to impress upon her the importance of the gown, but he does so without suggesting that the gown represents who he is or affects his sexuality in any way, negative or positive: “Believe me, sweet, none

20 Fionna McNeill suggests the connection between prostitutes and laundry women reveals that the common bond of poverty and potential masterlessness linked early modern sempsters and laundresses with prostitutes.

21 Chris Cleary defines Openwork as “a piece of cloth with a pattern of holes, like lace or crochet, that shows the material underneath.” 26 April 2004 <http://www.tech.org/~cleary/roar.html#OPENWORK>. 
greets the Senate House / Without his robe of reverence – that’s his gown” (1.7). The language immediately distinguishes Candido as a subject separate from this prop. It is “his robe”, “his gown”, and his role. The absence of the gown does not take away or guarantee Candido’s position or his very being, as is evidenced when he substitutes a carpet for the missing gown: “For thus they cannot choose but conter it: / One that is out of health takes no delight / Wears his apparel without appetite, / And puts on heedless raiment without form” (1.7). Candido continues to his meeting at the Senate House, excusing his poor dress on ill health. His ability to maintain his status and perform his role without the aid of the important robe disrupts any possible equation between Candido and the robe. He further disrupts any equation between his person and material objects when he discovers his servant dressed in his gown and chain. Candido simply exits and returns dressed in his apprentice’s clothes, his authority (exhibited most clearly by his refusal to be angered) untouched by the change of clothes. Although Viola eventually uses Candido’s false dress as reason for having him imprisoned as a madman, she fails to usurp his position as master, or even alter his role as peacekeeper. In contrast the plays depict women and textiles as mirror reflections of one another. Women exert no agency in the textile industry\(^\text{22}\) in the same way that the plays refuse Bellafront’s agency as a prostitute.

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\(^{22}\) According to Susan Frye, the relationship between women and textiles in this period was quite different from the way Dekker portrayed it. Women, she argues, played a major role in the production, consumption and circulation of textiles:

In early modern England, women were valued in part through the textiles that they both produced and consumed. Not only did women clothe themselves and their families, women made up the bulk of the laborers who carded and spun wool that was England’s primary export and internal resource... Women’s textile work situated them within networks of exchange because the textiles so often produced by women were central to the household, community barter, the marketplace, and a gift economy through which social alliances were confirmed. (215)
Interestingly the threat posed by Bellafront’s economic authority over a commodity, i.e., her body, is made most clear when Bellafront chooses NOT to sell her body. Bellafront initially meets less resistance when she exerts her self-will in refusing a particular client, as when she refuses the absent Sir Oliver Lollio, but even at this early stage, the gallants do not genuinely accept the authority of her rejection. Although Bellafront’s declaration, “I cannot abide that he should touch me,” seems unambiguous, Pioratto responds: “Plague him! Set him beneath the salt, and let him not touch a bit till everyone has had his full cut” (1.6). His suggestion, lewdly couched in the language of culinary overindulgence, is not that Lollio miss out on the pleasures of Bellafront’s body, but rather that he simply must wait until everyone else “has had his full cut.” The gendered power struggle intensifies when Bellafront refuses the entire gathering of gallants. After the gallants decide upon a gathering spot for the evening festivities, Bellafront informs them she “cannot be there tonight.” Matheo rejects her refusal: “Cannot? By th’Lord, you shall!” In response, Bellafront proclaims, “By the Lady, I will not. ‘Shall’!” (1.6). Matheo’s and Bellafront’s oaths (“By th’Lord” and “By the Lady”) expose the gendered nature of their struggle. The power struggle becomes even more contested when, after Hippolyto’s brutal condemnation of prostitution and Bellafront’s quick conversion, Bellafront faces the men who were previously her clients. She declares to them: “I am not as I was,” yet is willfully misinterpreted by Fluello, who responds, “‘I am not what I was’! No I’ll be sworn thou art not: for thou wert honest at five, and now thou’rt a punk at fifteen. Thou wert yesterday a simple whore, and now thou’rt a cunning, coney-catching baggage today” (1.9). Fluello fails to comprehend that Bellafront’s newfound chastity is anything other than another prostitute trick. To Fluello,
and the other gallants, she remains a prostitute. The gallants’ anger seems to stem from the realization that something they thought of as theirs is no longer theirs. By removing herself from the open market economy, Bellafront incurs the wrath of the gallants who see themselves as possessing more power in the market than she does.

Throughout the entirety of Part II, Bellafront’s position is that of wife and she behaves chastely, yet those within the play, particularly the male characters, continue to think of and treat Bellafront as if she were still a prostitute. The play emphasizes Bellafront’s status as prostitute in the repeated use of the term whore. In The Honest Whore, Part I, “whore” and “wife” appear in equal numbers. In Part II there are twice as many references to whore or the equivalent as there are to wives.23 Furthermore Bellafront’s chastity and loyalty to Matheo are constantly undermined by her past actions as a prostitute. Because the play depicts the repentant Bellafront as so overwhelmingly chaste, she has no middle ground in which to exist. She is either chaste maid or whore, and the play does not convincingly insist she remain a chaste maid. Coppelia Kahn describes the slippery slope faced by women like Bellafront: “But ironically, the opposition of virgin to whore, which was intended to limit and contain women accomplishes the opposite, allowing them to slip from one category to the other and putting them into volatile circulation in the sexual economy” (256). For Bellafront the opposition between chaste maid and whore puts her in “volatile circulation in the sexual economy,” but keeps her trapped in the broader market economy that objectifies her as well.

23 In Part I some form of the term whore is used thirty times while similar terms, such as quean, punk, meretrix, harlot and strumpet appear another nineteen times. The term wife occurs at a comparable rate, appearing forty times. In Part II, which is nearly the same length as Part I, some form of whore is utilized seventy times and equivalent terms occur in at least another thirty-eight instances. Tellingly, though, Part II has less than half that number of references to wife, about forty-three.
Three other prostitutes make a brief, but important, appearance near the end of Part II. These prostitutes, unlike Bellafront, are not repentant and their lack of remorse enables them to stand out on stage as distinct from the props that seem so forcefully linked to them. Dorothea Target, Penelope Whorehound and Catarina Bountinall are all prostitutes who appear before the Duke for sentencing. At moments in the final two scenes, the three prostitutes seem no different than Bellafront in that they are also equated with textile properties and discussed as commodities. The 1 Master and Duke represent these prostitutes with the same language used to describe textiles. After the appearance of the three prostitutes, 1 Master asks the Duke: “Will your grace see more of this bad ware?” The Duke responds: “No, shut up shop, we’ll now break up the fair” (2.13). Instead of being identified as women, the prostitutes are identified as objects, “bad ware,” for sale at the fair. But unlike Bellafront the three prostitutes speak defiantly for themselves in front of the improvised Bridewell court, suggesting that prostitutes can at times successfully struggle against an inferior commodity status. Dorothea asserts her economic independence by refusing state profits (to be gained by spinning thread in Bridewell) in favor of less impressive profits from prostitution: “I had rather get half a crown abroad than ten crowns here” (2.13). Furthermore, when each prostitute is brought before the Duke, they are accompanied not only by two Masters, the Constable and two Beadles, but by a blue dress that presumably represents their forced repentance by the state. If the three prostitutes repent, audiences might expect their silence and meekness, which would in turn facilitate the substitution of the blue dresses for the less prominent women. But, because they embrace their identities as prostitutes and reject the state’s blue dresses, the prostitutes disrupt the equation between themselves and the textiles that
would indicate their objectification. Bellafront’s meager presence in the play’s final three scenes, as well as her fervent and repeated rejection of her former life, distinguishes her from the unrepentant prostitutes, yet her moral superiority fails to provide her with any power or authority over her body, life or marriage.

At the play’s beginning, Bellafront is not so different from Dorothea, Penelope and Catarina. She attempts to use her role as prostitute to maneuver within the play’s market economy, yet her attempts are thwarted. Initially Bellefront and Candido share a connection as shopkeepers. She, like Candido the linen-draper, has a product to sell: her body. The two have been linked together by critics, but most often as martyr figures, not shopkeepers. To focus solely on the play’s spiritual message glosses over the very real and gritty world of gallants, prostitution and trade that constitute the majority of the play. It is in the marketplace, not the spiritual realm, that Bellafront’s status change, from wife to prostitute, is most actively contested. Early in the play, Bellafront attempts to take control over her body by creating it as a product separate from her own person. Both she and Candido are concerned that their products are presented in the best light. For Bellafront this entails extensive cosmetic application and detailed attention to wardrobe. Her toilette allows her control over the product she sells. She uses cosmetics to make her lips redder and her skin whiter, and expensive clothing (textiles) to make her appear of a higher class. To think of it in modern marketing terms, Bellafront controls her product’s image. Importantly, both Bellafront and Candido’s wares are marketed with sexuality as a selling point, specifically women’s sexuality. Candido’s assistant, George, is particularly adept at selling textiles by capitalizing on women’s sexuality, as is

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24 As Anne Haselkorn writes, “...both Candido and Bellafront are exemplars of virtue and forbearance in the face of affliction, the crux of the Christian ethic” (116). For Haselkorn, both characters are Christ-like figures.
evident in his comparisons between linens and virgins, but Candido cannot be seen as above such marketing either. After selling a penny's worth of lawn to Castruchio, Candido explains his keen market sense: "We are set here to please all customers, / Their humours and their fancies, offend none, / We get by many if we leese by one" (1.5). Although Candido's reliance on women's sexuality to sell his product is much more subtle than George or Bellafront's, it is still present. His martyr-like sensibility does not completely overshadow his economic interests. Furthermore, his emphasis on pleasing his customer's presumably heterosexual "humours" and "fancies" allows him to distance himself firmly from his product as separate from his person. Even as Candido's product promotion via women's sexuality reinforces the distinction between seller and product, subject and object, Bellafront's use of women's sexuality closes the gap between seller and product, Bellafront and her body.

As the second play nears to a close, the equation between female character and prop becomes more apparent. Regardless of her status as prostitute or wife, Bellafront is treated as a commodity and can be substituted for by one. In the climatic moment of Part II, Matheo's excessive greed leads him not only to pawn the clothes off his wife's back, but to also reintroduce Bellafront into the public market economy as a prostitute. The moment Matheo strips off her dress, Bellafront the wife all but dissolves. When asked by Lodovico if Bellafront is his wife, Matheo responds: "A poor gentlewoman, sir, whom I make use of a-nights" (2.7). Even her husband uses her sexually as a prostitute instead of as a chaste wife. As Bellafront the wife dissolves, Bellafront the prostitute, now most clearly represented by the pilfered gown, materializes. Her struggle reflects the tenuous position faced by women entering into marriage. In the eyes of the law, a married
woman became the property of her husband. The assumption, then, is that the only man
with access to and control over the married woman’s body is her husband. But in this
play, Matheo does not isolate Bellafront as his wife and his commodity. Instead he
attempts to use her as a commodity for profit in the larger market economy. As he says,
“I’ll pawn you, by th’ Lord, to your very eyebrows” (2.7). Matheo states that he will
pawn “you,” presumably referring to Bellafront, but what he actually pawns is the gown.
For Matheo, Bellefront and the gown are interchangeable.

In the lines that follow, Bellafront pleads with Matheo to allow her to remain safe
and secure in their marital economy, but her pleas are ignored: “but I beseech thee, /
Build not thy mind on me to coin thee more. / To get it wouldst thou have me play the
whore?” (2.7). Bellafront is still able to distinguish between her person and the role of
the whore, but no one else within the play seems able to uphold that distinction. To play
the whore, she indicates, is not to be the whore, or more importantly, to sell the product is
not to be the product. Matheo at first appears to concede that prostitution is a role to be
performed, a profession: “”Twas your profession before I married you,” (2.7) but
Matheo, representative of the men in the play, cannot ultimately accept the distinction
between a woman’s performance and personhood that would allow Bellafront to be
treated as subject as opposed to object. To reaffirm Bellafront’s object status as an
always-for-sale sexual commodity, and thereby further link her with the gown sold for
profit, Matheo declares: “It’s base to steal, it’s base to be a whore: / Thou’lt be more
base; I’ll make thee keep a door.”25 Unlike Bellafront, Matheo does not describe the act
of prostitution as a performance, but rather as a state of being. Bellafront’s marriage to

25 As Nick de Somogyi explains, “keep the door” overtly means “guard against intruders; but the ‘hold-
door trade’ was prostitution” The Honest Whore 220.
Matheo is figuratively dismissed because to acknowledge her as a wife means that the men within the play, specifically Matheo, would no longer be able to utilize her as a sexual commodity in the public market.

Bellafront's greatest sin in the eyes of the play's male characters is not her sexual immorality, but rather her determination to control her own body and person. She tells Hippolyto: "I am in bonds to no man, sir," (1.6) and later she asks Matheo to marry her, not vice versa: "Will you vouchsafe me but due recompense/ To marry with me (1.9). Yet her words have little effect on the men who continue to view her as a commodity that can be bought and exchanged. Even though both Candido and Bellafront begin the play as proprietors, it is only Candido who can maintain control over his wares, even though he is placed both in Bedlam and Bridewell. As he asserts: "Being not mad, / They had me once to Bedlam; now I'm drawn / To Bridewell, loving no whores" (2.11). For Bellafront, true repentance means true submission, mind, body and soul, to one's husband, however bitter the result: "Women shall learn of me / To love their husbands in greatest misery. Then show him pity, or you wreck myself" (2.11). Unlike Candido, who can rest content because he has been placed in a miserable situation unfairly, Bellafront submits to her miserable situation because it is the only viable one remaining for her.

"Instead of coaches, they in carts do ride."
(I Master, The Honest Whore, 2.13)

The public carting of prostitutes such as Mary Newborough dehumanized prostitutes and positioned them as commodities with no authority in or permission to profit from the market economy. Prostitutes were similarly dehumanized in city
comedies. By depicting the prostitutes as equal to the “female” stage props connected with them, the comedies, in effect, remove the prostitutes from their coaches and place them in carts. The plays’ attempt to displace all the failings of the market economy onto the prostitutes by objectifying them seems to stem from the larger cultural discomfort with which early modern English society viewed its burgeoning trade economy. It is this new structure, C. Lee Colegrove explains, that created unrest: “The development of an English economy based on money rather than land was both disrupting and corrupting the traditional social and class structures” (1). If the plays can identify the prostitutes as the source of all the disruption and corruption, than the new money economy need not be critiqued. Igor Kopytoff’s explanation of the morality of commodification suggests why it is possible for the plays to condemn the courtesans and props for having a commercial value:

To be saleable for money or to be exchangeable for a wide array of other things is to have something in common with a large number of exchangeable things that, taken together, partake of a single universe of comparable values. To use an appropriately loaded even if archaic term, to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be “common” – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. (69)

As Kopytoff explains it, things that can be sold or exchanged within a market economy have a somewhat degraded value simply in the fact that they are not priceless or unattainable. By extension, the criticism of commodifiable goods serves as a criticism of the market as a whole because the market is the site of all the commercial exchanges. In
a commercial marketplace, such as the ones in *Your Five Gallants* and *The Honest Whore*, no thing is priceless or unattainable. According to that logic, all material objects for sale or exchange in the market and all people who render services, whether they are prostitutes or bakers, share the same degraded status, but the plays do not acknowledge that. Therefore while the prostitutes and the props that they are equated with are held almost exclusively responsible for tainting the marketplace, it appears as if it is actually the basic structure of the marketplace leads to their condemnation.

The plays may fail to blame all the failings of the market exchange on the prostitutes and the props, but they do succeed in restricting women’s movement within the new market economy. This, too, seems reflective of larger cultural issues stemming from the emerging market economy. As workspaces moved out of the home and into the public, women were increasingly pushed aside. According to Fionna McNeill, the decrease of women’s involvement in mainstream market economies, such as the cloth guilds, forced women into accepting the lowest forms of labor for the lowest wages: “As women were pushed out of the increasingly masculinized division of labor in the clothworking guilds, spinning and working wool were all that was left to women as the lowest class of labor” (227). The, “masculinized division of labor” similarly pushed women into prostitution as well. Both classes of women engaged in a trade economy without authority over either the trade process or the trade products. Women were in fact punished for independently pursuing the financial gains to be garnered by sex for hire. Records indicate that in 1601 Marie Miller was made to pay ten pounds as “recognizances…for being ‘an idle lewd and disorderly person, living out of service at
her own hand” (Middlesex 281). Dekker and Middleton’s plays likewise suggest that women should not be allowed to dictate commercial exchanges.

Like the three unrepentant prostitutes in Dekker’s The Honest Whore, Mary Newborough fought against her identity as a commodifiable object. From March to July of 1602, Newborough asserted control over her own body and any potential profits to be reaped by participating in the conversion of the state prison, Bridewell, into a brothel. As Gustav Ungerer explains: “Instead of being disciplined, the gentlewomen arrogated the right to resume their former trade unhindered and unmolested” (186). The unrepentant prostitute stands out as the exception both in early modern history and on the early modern stage. What audiences typically saw were prostitutes in different stages of repentance, often entering into either marriage or a nunnery. Middleton “saves” prostitutes in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside and A Mad World, My Masters (1605), pushing both the Welsh whore and Frank Gullman, correspondingly, into respectable marriages. In the anonymous plays, The Faire Maide of Bristowe and The Costlie Whore (1620?), Florence and Venetia achieve repentance by entering into religious enclosures. The ambiguously named prostitutes in Middleton’s Your Five Gallants and Bellafront in Middleton and Dekker’s The Honest Whore are similarly “saved” through marriage, yet they leave behind the life of prostitution only to find themselves forever prostituted by their gallant husbands.

While plays such as Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice and Cymbeline show female characters who suffer a loss of identity and reduction to commodity-object status by entering into marriage, the prostitute-turned-wives in Middleton and Dekker’s plays struggle not against identification as a commodity, but rather over who has control of the
flesh commodity. In *Your Five Gallants*, the analogous relationship between the courtesans and the repeatedly transferred pearl necklace is reinforced often and is highly visible, while in *The Honest Whore*, more time is spent developing the connection between Bellafront and the textiles that enables the pilfered gown to substitute for Bellefront. In both plays, though, the marketable stage props are utilized as visual, tactile proof of the prostitutes’ reduction to commodity status. These prostitutes represent a reality in which women are neither welcomed nor accepted as human beings in either the marital economy or the market economy.
Chapter 4

The Gender of Revenge: Her Revenge? / Her Body?

“She is a woman, therefore may be wooed; / She is a woman, therefore may be won”

(Titus Andronicus, 2.1.83-4)

In early modern revenge tragedies, female characters make the most dramatic visual and emotional impact at the moment of their violent deaths. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, serve as physically and dramatically dominant characters through the violent and deadly acts of revenge they commit against others. So while the large body count at the conclusion of most revenge tragedies includes both male and female characters, the theatrical impact of those deaths is gendered. The murdered woman and the murdering man stand out on stage, while the would-be female revenger and male victim are less dominant. The power discrepancy between male and female characters in revenge tragedies stems not only from the typically early deaths of female characters, but also from the increased emphasis placed on women as sexualized objects. In fact, the gendered sexual objectification often leads to the female character’s death much earlier than the male’s, leaving her with much less time for revenge. Women, then, serve almost exclusively as tools for male revengers or are equated with props that substitute for them in men’s acts of revenge. The question is not whether or not actual women are capable of violent acts of revenge, but rather how and why early modern revenge dramas limit and circumscribe women’s involvement in such acts.26

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26Eileen Allman claims that “[g]ender in Jacobean revenge tragedy, then, is not a simple question of male executioners and female victims. In the plays’ violent, sexually conflicted world, characters of both sexes are subjected to and rebel against unprincipled political authority” (36). While her argument has validity, it fails to take into account how the excessive focus on women’s sexuality leads to women’s objectification and creates a barrier between women and violent acts of revenge.
Revenge tragedy changed in many ways from the time of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) to the time of James Shirley’s *The Cardinal* (1641), yet Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and Cyril Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607) follow Kyd in emphasizing both sexual violence and bloody conclusions. The women in these plays struggle to control their bodies in a world of sexual viciousness. As sexual violence towards women increases in the play, women’s role in revenge becomes more peripheral. The latest of the plays, Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1607) makes the connection between sexual violence and powerlessness most literal and most obvious. Gloriana’s rape (as well as her murder) before the play begins foreshadows her role as a sexual object in the play’s main revenge plot. She is reduced to object status in Vindice’s revenge plot, appearing only as a skull that plays a role in poisoning the Duke. Unlike Gloriana, Shakespeare’s Lavinia and Kyd’s Bel-imperia are alive until the plays’ final acts, but their struggles against male aggressors limit their power. Lavinia’s rape and mutilation diminishes her physical ability to exact revenge and her ensuing silence reduces Lavinia from revenger to a tool in Titus’s revenge. Bel-imperia, while never directly assaulted, suffers the unwanted advances of a lover as well as imprisonment by her brother. While she is repeatedly treated as a sexual object, Bel-imperia commits both the murderous revenge (in disguise) as well as her own suicide. Her relative physical safety and security enables her to act more directly than the other two women, yet she, too, never achieves the title of revenger. Ultimately women’s ability to revenge depends upon their ability to exert control over their own bodies, the potential tools of revenge.

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27 Wendy Griswold states that early modern revenge tragedies included: “[m]urder, delayed revenge, a ghost, madness, sexual viciousness, a bloody denouement” (55).
"I have not fashioned this only for show / And useless property"
(Vindice, The Revenger’s Tragedy, 3.5.99-100)

In Cyril Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy the main revenge plot is Vindice’s revenge against the Duke for the murder and rape of his “once-betrothed wife,” Gloriana. The separation between “female” prop and female character is all but non-existent in Tourneur’s play because Gloriana appears only as a skull brought on stage by Vindice. Even though Gloriana has been dead for seven years before the action begins, she becomes the main means of revenge. Because Gloriana’s poisoned skull kills the Duke when he kisses her poisoned mouth, the link between sexuality and revenge, and between “female” stage prop and female character is clearest in this play. The complex sexual relationships in the play as well as the large number of prominent female characters further highlight the connections between women, objectification, sexuality and revenge. The almost obsessive concern with Gloriana and other female characters’ sexuality diminishes Gloriana’s role in the revenge drama and guarantees that she remains a sexualized object used by men for revenge.

While the main revenger, Vindice, is determined to murder the Duke, the Duke’s wife and bastard son, Spurio, engage in an illicit affair that incites the Duchess’s legitimate children to plot the lovers’ murders. Meanwhile, Spurio maneuvers to have the Duchess’s youngest son, who has been imprisoned for rape, put to death against the Duke’s orders. Furthermore, Antonio’s wife, the victim of the youngest son’s sexual assault, commits suicide, opening up the door for a possible revenge attempt by Antonio, although he never acts upon that possibility. A less violent, but equally sexually loaded
subplot involves Vindice’s test of his sister’s and mother’s chastity with a false suit from
the Duke’s only legitimate son, the lecherous Lussurioso. The link between sex and
violence/death culminates in the violent sexual revenge plotted by Vindice and carried
out with Gloriana as the weapon. In this play sex kills with sex.

Although Gloriana exists strictly in the words of Vindice and in the skull, the play
eventually encourages audiences to imagine her alive. When Vindice first discusses
Gloriana, though, she is a nameless figure of love, praised for her virtue and chastity:

Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love,

My study’s ornament, thou shell of death,

Once the bright face of my betrothed lady...then 'twas a face

So far beyond artificial shine

Of any woman’s bought complexion. (1.1.14-16, 20-22)

At this stage the skull is just that – a skull, a “shell of death.” The skull Vindice carries
around in the early stages of the play is the audience’s only visual representation of the
woman Gloriana, but to Vindice the skull merely serves as a reminder of Gloriana. It has
yet to become Gloriana.

The link between the skull and Gloriana as a person is first created when Vindice
plots the Duke’s murder. While disguised as Piato, a faithful servant to the Duke,
Vindice plans to serve the Duke’s lustful desires for a young woman by giving life to
Gloriana’s skull. He dresses the skull in veil and gown and poisons it so that when the
Duke kisses “her”, he will die. Earlier the skull had functioned simply as a body part, a
reminder of Gloriana, but by dressing it, he gives life to the prop. He moves the skull
from metonymy to metaphor. Until the skull becomes the centerpiece of Vindice’s
revenge plot against the Duke, it is simply a lifeless body part. After Vindice’s transformation the skull stands in for the entire absent woman. We see this change take place not only visually, in that the skull now looks like a woman, but also through language. Vindice’s brother, Hippolito, first identifies Gloriana as more than a skull just prior to Vindice’s presentation of her: “Troth, I wonder what lady it should be?...and here she comes” (3.5.35, 42). Although Hippolito mistakes the skull for a woman, Vindice, who knows the truth, continues along a similar vein, addressing the skull as Gloriana herself: “Madam, his grace will not be absent long” (3.5.43). Both men no longer see the skull as only an inanimate object, but as Gloriana as well. It is both prop and woman at the same time. Audiences are again encouraged to accept the skull as Gloriana when Hippolito asks: “Is this the form that, living, shone so bright?” to which Vindice responds, “The very same” (3.5.66-7). Vindice gives Gloriana a “body” and an identity as a woman in order to carry out his murderous sexual assault against the Duke.

Many critics acknowledge the centrality of Gloriana’s skull without identifying it as Gloriana. Karin Coddon argues that the skull has “remarkable spectacular and material efficacy,” but she does not see the skull as a substitute for the woman, Gloriana.28 She does not recognize that the skull takes on a life of its own, a life that can most usefully be described as Gloriana’s life:

...Look you, brother,

I have not fashioned this only for show

And useless property; no, it shall bear a part

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28 Karin Coddon allows that the skull is more than a prop, yet refrains from describing it as Gloriana: “Yet in Cyril Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy (1607), the eroticized body of death is more than a symbolic presence or moody memento mori: Gloriana’s skull is a prop endowed with remarkable spectacular and material efficacy” (1). For Coddon the skull is part of Gloriana but never can fully stand in for her.
E’en in its own revenge. This very skull,
Whose mistress the duke poisoned, with this drug,
The mortal curse of the earth, shall be revenge
In the like strain and kiss his lips to death.
As much as the dumb thing can, he shall feel. (3.5.98-105)

Vindice’s speech confirms the skull’s status as more than a stage prop, more than “useless property” or “spectacular and material efficacy.” He does momentarily distinguish between the skull and its mistress, but the agency he assigns to the skull blurs the boundary between object and subject. The skull “bear[s] a part” in the revenge: Gloriana’s part.

Just what Gloriana’s role in the revenge plot entails remains unclear. While the skull as Gloriana poisons the Duke, this act alone does not assign Gloriana a great deal of direct agency. Vindice, not Gloriana, dictates the parameters of the revenge. The potential power of female revenge in the poisoned kiss between Gloriana and her rapist dissolves due to the sexual objectification she encounters. What is particularly telling, though, is that the poison from Gloriana’s lips is not what finally kills the Duke. The power Vindice assigns to his dead lover disintegrates as Vindice later plunges a dagger into the Duke’s body, killing him without Gloriana’s help before the poison can take full effect. After kissing the skull, the Duke seems to feel the poison working: “My teeth are eaten out...O, my tongue!” (3.5.160, 162). Yet as Vindice prepares to attack the Duke, he identifies himself and his brother as the would-be murderers: “Nay, faith, we’ll have you hushed...if he but gasp he dies...Brother if he but wink, not brooking the foul object,

29 Kathryn Finn writes: “Vindice not only appropriates the female body in his pursuit of revenge, but devises a script which requires an increasing number of erotic offenses” (3) including prostituting the deceased Gloriana and forcing the poisoned Duke to watch his wife and bastard son in the bed together.
Let our two other hands tear up his lids...When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good” (3.5.194, 196, 198-99, 201). So while the poison may have put the Duke in a vulnerable position, it is Vindice who, seventeen lines later, stabs the Duke. This makes the erotic scene between Gloriana and the Duke one in which Gloriana cannot claim the authority of revenge. Vindice recreates the original rape, like the Duke dictating what will happen to Gloriana’s body. Gloriana, then, is still denied the opportunity to say no. Denied both the opportunity to act as the murderer or keep her body beyond the reach of men, she remains always and forever (in life and in death) a tool of men.

Gloriana’s inability to exact revenge seems to mirror the vulnerable position shared by the other female characters in Tourneur’s play, such as Vindice’s mother and sister, Gratiana and Castiza, the adulterous Duchess, and Antonio’s wife. Antonio’s wife, who after being raped by the Duchess’s youngest son commits suicide, is the most obvious parallel to Gloriana. Her objectification, while not presented on the stage like Gloriana’s, positions her as a possible tool in revenge plots against her offender. When discussing Antonio’s wife, Hippolito describes her as an object: ‘Twere pity / The ruins of so fair a monument / Should not be dipped in the defacer’s blood” (2.1.67-69). Like Gloriana, Antonio’s wife never appears as a living woman on stage but her suicide allows her to escape from beyond the violent acts of men and the inaction of women. She enjoys a freedom in death denied Gloriana due to Vindice’s use of the skull in his revenge plot. Antonio, who takes an oath of revenge with Hippolito and Piero yet plays no part in Vindice’s vengeful plots, describes his wife’s suicide as a positive, almost empowering act: “She, her honour forced, / Deemed it a nobler dowry for her name / To die with poison than to live with shame” (2.1.46-8). She accomplishes before the start of the play
a freedom few other female characters ever achieve in revenge tragedies. The “success” of her suicide suggests that Gloriana, raped and murdered by her male aggressor, will not be able to mitigate her own sexual shame or objectification.

The other three prominent female characters, Gratiana, Castiza, and the Duchess, reinforce Gloriana’s objectification because each woman circulates within a sexual economy, the same sexual arena in which Gloriana can be substituted for by a skull. Vindice’s behavior towards his mother and sister as exhibited in his plan to “test” their chaste values suggests something more sinister than the concern of a loving son and brother. In fact his aggressive pursuit of both mother and daughter seems almost incestuous. It is as if Vindice hopes for failure by encouraging lust: “Live wealthy, rightly understand the world / And chide away that foolish country girl / Keeps company with your daughter, Chastity” (2.1.81-83). Even when Vindice seems to fear his success, he continues to push: “I e’en quake to proceed, my spirit turns edge, / I fear me she’s unmothered, yet I’ll venture.../ Thus it said: / ‘The daughter’s fall lifts up the mother’s head’” (110-11, 115). Vindice’s behavior towards his mother and sister, in conjunction with his treatment of Gloriana, positions him as the play’s moral authority but the position is tenuous at best.\(^\text{30}\) As the authority figure, he all but guarantees the women’s sexual downfall. When they do prove themselves chaste, they disappear from the world of the play altogether.

\(^{30}\) Vindice’s role as the play’s fallible ruling authority may reflect the distrust many in early modern England felt towards the contemporary justice system. According to Willis, “Revenge plays became popular in England at a time when Protestant reformers and state authorities were energetically denouncing the private revenges of aristocratic clans and “brawling” at all social levels, while seeking to expand a centralized legal system. Elizabethan dramatists often called into question the effectiveness of this new emphasis on state-centered justice, with central authorities frequently portrayed as too weak, corrupt, or partisan to provide effective third-party mediation or just solutions to quarrels” (23-4).
Only one female character appears in the play’s final act, the Duchess, and she speaks a mere four words “My lord and husband!” (5.1.105). The Duchess engages in illicit sexual behavior, but no more so than her husband or son do. At least with the Duchess, the sexual encounters are consensual. But the emphasis on both Gloriana and Antonio’s wife’s fallen chastity along with Vindice’s “test” of his mother and sister ensure that the Duchess’s sexual behavior is seen as distinct from the lustful behavior of the male characters. Instead of facing death as her husband and son do for their actions, the Duchess speaks one final line that positions her as a loyal wife and then disappears for the remainder of the play. Like the other women in the play, the Duchess reveals the potential for women’s loose sexual behavior, and like the other women, she must be kept from any further sexual activity. But while Gloriana and Antonio’s wife must die to be kept from them from further sexual indiscretions, the Duchess lives and proves her future chastity, like Gratiana and Castiza, with a declaration of loyalty and then silence. The women perform their roles as sexual objects, whether chaste or not, and seem to have limited ability to dictate the course of the play’s revenge. It is as if their roles begin and end in their sexual bodies and the world of men must finish up the chaotic revenge against others. The excessive focus on these women’s sexuality emphasizes Gloriana’s tenuous position as a sexualized weapon of revenge. While she plays a role in avenging her own sexual assault and murder, she does so as a sexual object controlled by men.

“For what’s a play without a woman in it?”

(Hieronimo, The Spanish Tragedy, 4.1.97)

Thomas Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy opens with the ghost of Don Andrea, recently murdered by Balthazar, in conversation with Revenge. By the end of Act 2, Don
Andrea's closest friend, Horatio, has also been murdered. The two men shared a connection in life as close friends and in death because Balthazar participated in both their murders. The link between these two characters that drives the revenge plot, though, is their shared love of one woman: Bel-imperia. She declares her love for both men and stands out as the one character who demands justice for both men's murders. Bel-imperia, twice deprived of a lover, could claim to be the character most justified in seeking revenge. Not only has Balthazar killed her two favored suitors, but he also succeeds in positioning himself as a successful, albeit unwanted, suitor. Yet Bel-imperia turns the reigns of revenge over to the men in the play, first to Horatio and then to Hieronimo. While she is removed from the physical violence throughout most of the play, having actually been sequestered by her brother for most of act three, she indirectly participates as a tool in other's violent revenge. Two stage props can be equated with the often absent or ignored Bel-imperia: a handkerchief and a bloody letter. The repeated appearance of the handkerchief and the mysterious arrival of a letter written in her blood indicate her indirect involvement in the violence as Horatio and Heironimo's tool of revenge. Not until the bloody masque scene at the end of the play does she participate in the violence more directly. To permanently disrupt her role as a tool in men's revenge plots, though, Bel-imperia takes a final violent action: suicide. In doing so she removes herself from the male-centered world of revenge irrevocably.

Bel-imperia's lack of direct action is like that of many other early modern tragic female characters who followed her, such as Shakespeare's Cordelia and Lavinia and Tournier's Gloriana. While Bel-imperia eventually exacts revenge with her own two hands (albeit disguised as Perseda) by murdering Balthazar at Heironimo's masque, it is
her earlier physical engagement with revenge that is of concern here. As soon as Bel-
imperia learns of Andrea’s murder, she begins to speak of revenge. Standing alone in her
first scene on stage, she declares:

    But how can love find harbor in my breast,
    Till I revenge the death of my beloved?
    Yes, second love shall further my revenge.
    I’ll love Horatio, my Andrea’s friend,
    The more to spite the Prince that wrought his end. (1.4.64-8)

Bel-imperia’s revenge plans include a “second love.” Her mission is not to revenge
Andrea’s murder by killing Balthazar, but rather to love a man capable of doing so while
at the same time denying Balthazar access to her body. Bel-imperia laments to Horatio:
“Would thou hadst slain him that so slew my love” (1.4.30). So while Bel-imperia
speaks of revenge from the first act of the play, she distances herself from any direct
action, instead assigning the role of avenger to Horatio. What she does, though, is to use
her body as an indirect means of revenge. In loving Horatio she can spurn Balthazar as a
lover without ever directly confronting him. For Bel-imperia as a woman, the most
available tool of action is her own body. She doesn’t reach for a dagger or poison; she
uses her body as a weapon.

Because Bel-imperia chooses her love as a means to thwart Balthazar, it is
important to note how Kyd makes her love known. One of the most prominent visual
indicators of Bel-imperia’s love for both Andrea and Horatio is the handkerchief (also
referred to as a scarf). This handkerchief appears on stage three times throughout the
play in the hands of Horatio and Hieronimo. Audiences never see Andrea with the handkerchief, although they hear about the moment when Bel-imperia gave it to him:

I know the scarf, would he [Andrea] had kept it still,
For had he lived he would have kept it still,
And worn it for his Bel-imperia’s sake.
For ‘twas my favor at his last depart. (1.4.44-47)

Later in the play, audiences hear that Horatio “plucked” the handkerchief off of Andrea’s dead body. Bel-imperia then tells Horatio that the handkerchief now belongs to him: “But wear thou it both for him and me, / For after him thou hast deserved it best” (1.4.49-50). Her words reveal two important facts. Firstly Bel-imperia’s love for Horatio is inextricably linked to her love for Andrea, joining the threesome in a love triangle of sorts. Secondly the quote reveals a slipperiness of language that enables “it” to represent both the handkerchief and Bel-imperia. When she states, “But wear thou it both for him and me,” the “it” obviously refers back to the handkerchief, as Andrea and Bel-imperia are included as the “him” and “me,” yet in the second half of the quote, the “it” becomes more ambiguous. What has Horatio deserved best? The handkerchief or Bel-imperia? In addition to possibly standing in as the “it,” Bel-imperia also functions as a possession, enforcing her object status. She was once “his [Andrea’s] Bel-imperia” and now presumably is Horatio’s Bel-imperia. The language of the play, combined with the repeated equation of Bel-imperia and stage props, situates her as an object that can be possessed by men. Possession of her transfers from one lover to the next as easily as the handkerchief transfers between lovers. The language of the play suggests that Andrea and Horatio similarly “belong to” Bel-imperia as lovers, yet only Bel-imperia is
repeatedly equated with the handkerchief. The verbal and visual reinforcement of Bel-imperia’s object status through her own words and the handkerchief limits her ability to carry out revenge so that Hieronimo can take center stage as the play’s revenger.

A similar equation between a stage prop and Bel-imperia occurs when Hieronimo receives a letter dropped from the sky:

“For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.
Me hath my hapless brother hid from thee.
Revenge thyself on Balthazar and him,
For these were they that murdered thy son.
Hieronimo, revenge Horatio’s death,
And better fare than Bel-imperia doth.”  (3.2.26-31)

The most obvious referent of “me” is Bel-imperia, but the passage is more complex. At the time the letter arrives, Bel-imperia has been removed from court and from the stage. She is not seen for another seven scenes. In her absence the letter serves as her substitute. The “me” of the letter refers to Bel-imperia, but can, to a lesser extent, also refer to the letter itself. Just prior to the letter’s arrival, Hieronimo calls out for help: “See, search, show, send some man, some mean, that may — ” (3.2.23). He is not sent a man, but instead a letter that seems to have a life of its own. The almost magical appearance of the bloody letter (“a letter falleth”) suggests a surreptitious delivery, as if the letter had escaped capture. The ambiguity of “me”, or perhaps the duality of “me”, is further complicated because the letter is presumably written with Bel-imperia’s blood.

In the bloody letter, which functions both as an object written by Bel-imperia and as her substitute, Balthazar and Lorenzo are named as Horatio’s murderers and
Hieronimo is encouraged, or perhaps commanded, to kill the men in return. While Bel-imperia's blood indicates that her body is engaged in the revenge, she still remains removed from the actual deed of revenge. The contradiction mirrors an argument put forth by Carol Rutter that "women figure in the erotic equation, but don't count." In Kyd's play the bloody letter and handkerchief signify Bel-imperia's place in the erotic revenge triangle, yet these same objects reinforce her status as a mere prop in a male power struggle.

Throughout the play the handkerchief and letter connect Bel-imperia with her deceased lovers. The blood on these props is a reminder of the potential sexual nature of these relationships and calls attention to the indirect revenge Bel-imperia attempts to achieve by withholding her love from Balthazar. With both Andrea and Horatio, Bel-imperia seems to have been ready to "sacrifice" her virgin status. Lamenting the loss of Andrea, Bel-imperia states that he: "was my garland's sweetest flower, / And in his death hath buried my delights (1.2.1-5). Bel-imperia's "delights" disappear with the loss of Andrea. She paints a very physical picture in which Andrea's scent lingers. Furthermore, the idea of burying delights in the sweetest flower brings to mind pollination, and thus sexuality. Horatio and Bel-imperia flirt with physical intimacy in the moments before Horatio's murder:

Bel-imperia: Oh, let me go, for in my troubled eyes
Now may'st thou read that life in passion dies.

Horatio: Oh stay awhile and I will die with thee,

31 "In these triangles, women figure in the erotic equation, but don't count. For what these triangles are actually tracing is a 'calculus of power' that is structured between men, that traffics in women as 'exchangeable, perhaps symbolic, property' whose 'primary purpose' is to 'cement the bond of men with men'" (Rutter 133).
So shalt thou yield and yet have conquered me. (2.4.46-9)

For early modern readers, the link between passion and death alludes to sex and orgasm, also know as the little death. The association is furthered with Horatio’s line “I will die with thee,” because the “death” appears as an act to be shared. Prior to her involvement with Balthazar, then, Bel-imperia seems to be an active partner in romantic, possibly sexual, encounters. Her apparent sexual (sensual) freedom with her first two lovers contrasts sharply with the reticence Bel-imperia shows with Balthazar. When Balthazar complains that her love is lackluster, “New-kindled flames should burn as morning sun,” she replies, “But not too fast, lest heat and all be done” (3.15.103-4). The independence she once held by rejecting him disappears as she submits to a relationship with him. Her sexual objectification, while it does not stop Bel-imperia’s (Perseda’s) murder of Balthazar, does position her as a secondary revenger directed and maneuvered by Hieronimo. The killing of Balthazar, although committed by a female figure, still cannot be publicly proclaimed by Bel-imperia.

Bel-imperia’s most independent action is her suicide. It seems to ensure that the men of the play can no longer use her as a tool for revenge. In an interesting soliloquy, Bel-imperia looks forward to the freedom of heaven: “I must constrain myself / To patience, and apply me to the time, / Till heaven, as I have hoped, shall set me free” (3.10.12-4). With her suicide she seems to find that freedom. When Bel-imperia in her role as Perseda commits suicide in the course of the tragedy performance, audiences are not surprised because they have already heard the plot. But later Hieronimo explains that his plans were altered by Bel-imperia:

Poor Bel-imperia missed her part in this,
For though the story saith she should have died,
Yet I of kindness, and of care to her,
Did otherwise determine of her end.
But love of him whom they did hate too much
Did urge her resolution to be such. (4.4.140-46)

In fact Bel-imperia rewrites Hieronimo’s tragedy, choosing to remove herself from the world of revenge. Similar to the prostitutes in Dekker and Middleton’s plays, she achieves power by denying men access to her person as opposed to direct, violent action against others. For the prostitutes the goal is financial freedom and the path is less perilous. Bel-imperia’s goal, however, is to remove herself from the life and death machinations of the men in the play and she can only make that removal permanent through suicide.

The play’s other suicide by Hieronimo’s wife, Isabella, emphasizes the apparent gendered nature of revenge. Like Bel-imperia Isabella calls for Hieronimo to perform the violent, physical act of revenge. She does so even as she commits a violent action against herself:

Make haste, Hieronimo, to hold excused
Thy negligence in pursuit of their deaths…
And none but I bestir me – to no end.
And as I curse this tree from further fruit,
So shall my womb be cursed for his sake,
And with this weapon will I wound the breast,
The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck. (4.2.29-38)
As with Bel-imperia, Isabella is anxious to see revenge occur and even claims to be willing to exact revenge herself, at least the deferred revenge chosen by many early modern would-be female revengers: “I will revenge myself upon this place / Where thus they murdered my beloved son” (4.2.4-5). Isabella asserts her right to attack both the place where the murder occurred and her own body yet she does not claim authority over the lives of the guilty persons. Both Isabella and Bel-imperia appear unable or unwilling to participate in direct violent acts of revenge against another, i.e., killing Balthazar and Lorenzo. The only bodies the women seem able to attack with authority are their own bodies, an action that paradoxically reveals their ability to control their lives even as it ends their lives.

Immediately after Bel-imperia’s suicide, the handkerchief appears in Hieronimo’s hands again. While the handkerchief may memorialize Bel-imperia’s dead suitors, Andrea and Horatio, its specific appearances within the play do more to represent Bel-imperia. Hieronimo upholds the handkerchief as the object that enabled him to carry out his revenge against Lorenzo and Balthazar. She/It is presented as the stimulus for murder.

And here behold this bloody handkercher,
Which at Horatio’s death I weeping dipped
Within the river of his bleeding wounds.
It as propitious, see, I have reserved,
And never hath it left my bloody heart,
Soliciting remembrance of my vow,
With these, oh, these accursed murderers,
Which now performed, my heart is satisfied. (4.4.122-29)

The impressive powers of this inanimate object suggest its importance as more than a supplemental stage prop. Furthermore, the connection between Bel-imperia as a sexual object and the bloody handkerchief and letter ally those powers of revenge with Bel-imperia. Yet the only blood Bel-imperia can shed as herself is her own blood. Bloody revenge, then, remains a masculine arena into which women figure largely as the tools for violence.

"[T]his object kills me."
(Lucius, Titus Andronicus, 3.1.64)

In William Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus, Romans and Goths seek revenge against one another for a variety of offenses. Titus, the definitive Roman, seeks revenge against the Goths responsible for his daughter Lavinia’s rape and mutilation. Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, seeks revenge against all of Titus’ family for both her capture and the sacrifice of her eldest son. The two women at the center of the revenge dramas, Lavinia and Tamora, play a role in the revenge plots, but to different extents. Together the two women figure as alternate archetypes of woman; in each case the women’s sexuality defines their behavior and capabilities. The female character of most interest here, Lavinia, serves as a silent instrument in her father’s plot to murder Tamora’s sons and feed them to her. Her objectification can be seen both through her rape and mutilation as well as with the props that she is equated with in revenge: the sexually charged staff and basin. Tamora, taken hostage by Roman forces, forced to watch her eldest son murdered, and married off to the Roman emperor Saturninus, achieves revenge against all the Andronici family through the actions of her sons and lover. Her violent
desires and words reflect the darker side of both femininity and Rome, and so do the props that stand in for her: the pits that trap bodies like a tomb, or possibly a womb. While Tamora appears to play a much more active role in revenge than Lavinia, neither woman commits the murderous acts of revenge. The stage props that stand in for the objectified women, though, connect the women to the murderous acts of revenge. The prominence of the women's sexuality, whether virgin or whore, thus provides the women with an access to revenge, even while it objectifies them to such an extent that direct revenge becomes the domain of men.

Audiences of Titus Andronicus might automatically think of Tamora as a revenger and Lavinia as a victim. The two seem wholly unlike one another. Yet Tamora's actions as a revenger are circumscribed by the sexual objectification she encounters throughout the play. Surprisingly she has more in common with Lavinia than with her male counterpart, Titus. Tamora remains on stage for the majority of the play but she is not present for the violent acts she instigates. Instead the bloody pit so prominent in the death of Bassianus and the executions of Quintus and Martius takes center stage. Her seemingly more active role within the revenge drama appears connected to the play's depiction of her as the symbol of abhorrent female sexuality. In the play's first scene, audiences watch Tamora plead with a mother's voice for the life of her son, but by the end of the scene, her "mother's tears" transform into a plan of murderous revenge. She uses Saturninus's lust for her to plot the deaths of Titus and his family: "My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last...I'll find a day to massacre them all / And raze their faction and their family" (1.1.442, 450-51). As soon as Tamora vocalizes this plan, she changes from the pious grieving mother into the beast-like female figure
described throughout the rest of the play. The transformation later enables her performance as Revenge in the mock vision for Titus. Lavinia, in contrast, serves as the play’s ideal representation of chaste femininity. Aaron provides evidence of this when he rebukes Chiron and Demetrius for talking openly about possessing Lavinia: “What, is Lavinia then become so loose...That for her love such quarrels may be broached / Without controlment, justice, or revenge? (2.1.65,67-8). As the ideal chaste woman, Lavinia rails against Tamora’s lack of feminine modesty: “O Tamora, thou bearest a woman’s face...No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name!” (2.3.136,182-3). The depiction of Tamora as beastly never fades. In the play’s final lines, Lucius declares of her: “Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity” (5.3.197-98). Like Lady Macbeth, Tamora’s pathway toward violence seems to include a disavowal of femininity. But unlike Lady Macbeth, Tamora’s drive for violent revenge centers upon a mother’s love for her children that culminates through the bloody pits and Titus’s gruesome final meal. Yet even Tamora, the monstrous woman, does not commit murder. The boundary between Tamora and active revenge is reaffirmed in the play’s final scene when she ingests the bodies of her sons in the pies prepared by Titus. In her final moments, Tamora functions as a receptacle (again, either womb or tomb) in a way that recalls her peripheral role in the bloody pit murders and her monstrous femininity. More importantly, though, Titus’s

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32 Tamora’s ability to commit violent acts recalls Lady Macbeth’s desire for the freedoms of androgyny: “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood; Stop up the access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between / The effect and it!” (Macbeth 1.5., my emphasis).
revenge against Tamora positions her as a sexual object without voice or will, ultimately like Lavinia.

Lavinia, meanwhile, is positioned as a helpless woman throughout the play, a symbol of Saturninus’s overthrow of Rome. Although Lavinia remains onstage after her rape and mutilation, her ability to communicate is severely curtailed. In order to communicate, she must embrace two props: the staff and basin. These objects come to represent Lavinia’s sexual self that has been ruined. The staff, a phallic symbol, reminds audiences of Lavinia’s rape and assaulted vagina while the basin represents her womb, the “receptacle” of her sexuality made worthless due to her rape and her husband’s murder. These “female” props substitute for Lavinia’s sexual body, even as her mute asexual person remains onstage. The temporary substitution of Lavinia’s sexual body for objects that ultimately figure in revenge acknowledges the potential power of female sexuality yet places that power with the male exacting revenge, Titus.

Audiences witness Lavinia’s object status in the play’s opening scene as the men struggle amongst themselves to claim ownership over her. When she is first mentioned, she is labeled “Rome’s rich ornament” (1.1.52). Her object status becomes clearer as Saturninus and then Bassianus claim her as their bride. Saturninus directs his marriage proposal, if it can be called that, towards Titus: “Lavinia will I make my empress, / Rome’s royal mistress, mistress of my heart / And in the sacred Pantheon her espouse” (1.1.240-2). Even as he assigns her social status as empress and mistress, he indicates his possession of her with the words “my empress.” He further states that he will “her espouse,” or in other words, he will marry her, not they will marry. Lavinia exists as an object to be acted upon as opposed to a subject with whom one can interact. Her pawn-
like status continues as Bassianus and Titus’s sons and brother seize Lavinia as Bassianus’s bride. Marcus declares: “This prince in justice seizeth but his own” (1.1.281). Like Saturninus, Bassianus clearly intends to possess Lavinia as “his own.” Lavinia’s response to the struggle surrounding her is vague and forgettable at best. When asked by Saturninus if she is “not displeased with this?” Lavinia responds: “Not I, my lord, sith true nobility / Warrants these words in princely courtesy” (1.1.270-2). With these words Lavinia appears to accept her fate as a voiceless piece of property, although she seems to have little choice in the matter.

The struggles for Lavinia, over which she has no control, begin as a competition between men seeking the authority over a woman conferred by marriage. Although neither Saturninus nor Bassianus overtly discuss Lavinia as a sexual object, their attempts at mastery through marriage automatically draw attention to Lavinia’s sexuality. Her sexuality only takes center stage, though, when Chiron and Demetrius assert their dominance through rape. As one of the main reasons Titus seeks revenge against Tamora and her sons, the rape not only offers a justification for revenge but also dictates that the revenge be focused on female sexuality as well. The emphasis on female sexuality as equal to female identity enables props to stand in for Lavinia even though the actor portraying Lavinia remains clearly visible on stage. The staff, guided by Lavinia to identify the rapists, and the basin, embraced by Lavinia to catch the rapists’ blood, function as tools for revenge, but she does not determine how and why those objects are used. Titus controls her and the props interchangeably as tools for his revenge.

Lavinia, without both her tongue and hands, struggles to communicate with her father, uncle and nephew. In her struggles Lavinia begins to fade as a person.
Immediately after the rape, she becomes an "it" as opposed to a "she." Titus is quick to remind his son and audiences that she is a person, yet when he later uses her to carry his dismembered hand in her mouth and hold the basin for Chiron and Demetrius's blood in her stumps, he seems more comfortable utilizing her as an object. Since she loses the tools to communicate with others after the rape, she must herself become that tool. It becomes the job of Titus, Marcus and the boy to interpret her properly. At first the distinction between Lavinia and the communication tool is visible. When Lavinia turns to the story of Philomel's rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, she utilizes the book as a traditional stage prop. The book is an object outside of or beyond Lavinia's own person. Yet even at this stage she must rely upon others to voice her words: "How now, Lavinia? Marcus what means this? / Some book there is that she desires to see" (4.1.30-1). As Lavinia turns toward the staff to name Chiron and Demetrius, the line between female character and prop blurs. The staff, inserted in Lavinia's mouth and grasped by the two empty wrists, almost becomes part of her body, the only part capable of communication. Unlike the book the staff speaks its own words, Lavinia's words. The text of the book exists outside and beyond Lavinia's person while the text of the staff is contained within her person. Even though the staff stands in for the Lavinia and seems to speak for her, others must still interpret her. It is Titus who utters the damning words scribed in the dirt by Lavinia: "'Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius'" (4.1.77). So although Lavinia does embrace the prop to identify her murderers, audiences cannot actually see the results of her action. This indirection is similar to the disempowerment seen with other female characters who take action only while disguised as men. When Portia brilliantly defends Antonio in the Venetian court, she does so in male disguise. Therefore, any intelligence
she displays arguably appears to be the product of the masculine disguise as opposed to female wit. Lavinia’s silent declaration also visually obscures the power of women’s words. In both instances “men” speak the words that serve as turning points in the plays. Audiences, who already know the identity of the rapists, cannot see the words spelled out by Lavinia; they only hear Titus’s and Ovid’s words. The repeated objectification of Lavinia ensures that she functions in the revenge drama as a tool for men’s revenge, as opposed to an active advocate for her own revenge.

The staff that becomes part of Lavinia’s body figures so prominently not only because of its role in naming the rapists, but because the sexually graphic connection between it and Lavinia. The insertion of the staff in Lavinia’s mouth replicates the rape, the staff substituting for the penis. Conversely, though, the staff functions as the reminder of Lavinia’s mutilated sexuality. So while the staff seems to obviously carry phallic connotations, it is a reminder of the moment of her rape, and also alludes to Lavinia’s assaulted sexual body or, more specifically, her vagina. Lavinia can no longer be depicted as sexually innocent even though her sexual encounters with Chiron and Demetrius were forced. The staff in Lavinia’s mouth, then, depicts the impurity of Lavinia’s vagina; it depicts her sexuality as tainted or flawed. The staff that seems to refer back to the offending penises may well serve as more of a commentary on female sexual behavior than male sexual behavior. The surprising connection between a traditionally phallic object, the staff, and Lavinia actually appears even earlier in the play when, just prior to the rape, Tamora warns her sons: “But when ye have the honey ye desire, / Let not this wasp outlive, us both to sting” (2.3.131-2). In her warning Tamora imaginatively describes Lavinia as a wasp and alludes to her sting. Tamora’s language
not only connects Lavinia to a phallic object, but it also assigns Lavinia a masculine power that she seems unable to exert in the play. The stinger and staff represent Lavinia’s potential power as sexual in nature, yet both seemingly phallic objects confirm that any erotic power Lavinia possesses remains confined to the objects themselves, the substitutes for the nearly invisible Lavinia.

As stated earlier Lavinia remains a visual presence throughout the majority of the play. The substitution of a prop for Lavinia, therefore, is initiated not by an exit, but rather by the figurative dismissal of Lavinia by the characters within the play. In both language and action, those closest to her begin to identify her as an object (“it”), a tool (Titus’ hand bearer), and an animal (“deer”). The metaphoric references to Lavinia take precedence over the woman on stage. Audiences are prepped for the “female” stage prop’s prominence over Lavinia by the reactions of Marcus, Lucius and Titus to her mutilation and assault:

Marcus: I bring consuming sorrow to thine age.

Titus: Will it consume me? Let me see it then.

Marcus: This was thy daughter

Lucius: Ay me! This object kills me. (3.1.61-4)

The men refer to Lavinia as both “it” and “this object.” Marcus even identifies her personhood in the past tense. The language of the play confuses the subject/object status of Lavinia just as strongly as the slippage between actor and prop does. Titus does quickly remember Lavinia’s subject status, demanding of Lucius, “Faint-heart boy, arise, and look upon her” (3.1.65, my emphasis). Yet Lavinia’s ensuing silence and repeated
connection with visually significant props allows audiences to continue to see her as an “it” as well as a “she.”

As Titus prepares his revenge, turning Chiron and Demetrius into a meal for Tamora, he utilizes Lavinia as a receptacle. Lavinia, though, becomes less visible as the basin takes center stage in the revenge plot. The basin, like the staff, reinforces Lavinia’s sexual objectification because of its connection to both the rape and Lavinia’s sexual body. Ania Loomba’s discussion of women’s impossible position as sexual beings suggests a further connection between Lavinia’s sexuality and the basin: “In patriarchal thought, the slide of woman from goddess to whore is premised simultaneously upon her potential for sexual activity, and upon her passivity as a receptacle for sin” (50). As “a receptacle for sin,” the sin being the rape by Chiron and Demetrius, Lavinia passively accepts the men’s sexual assault. The basin that substitutes for her, though, partially mitigates that passivity by depicting Lavinia as part of the revenge against her attackers. Titus says:

Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you:
This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
While that Lavinia ‘tween her stumps doth hold
The basin that receives your guilty blood...Lavinia, come,
Receive the blood... (5.2.180-83, 197)

Although the basin reveals that Lavinia plays a role in the revenge committed largely for her sake, it appears peripheral at best. She does not commit the murders or prepare the gruesome meal, nor does she appear physically capable of such acts. Titus wears the cook’s outfit in the play’s final scene, indicative of his role as conductor or leader of the
revenge drama. When Lavinia holds the basin, meanwhile, she serves as a necessary tool of revenge, or perhaps more accurately in this scene, a receptacle of revenge.

The play has prepared audiences to see Lavinia as a receptacle. Consider, for instance, the conclusion of the scene in which Titus cuts off his hand, thinking that his action will free his sons. The scene links Titus and Lavinia who now both have mutilated hands, but Titus’ mutilation does not affect his subject status as Lavinia’s does, perhaps in part because his sexuality is not involved. As the remaining Andronici family members gather before Titus, pledging to right all wrongs, Titus turns towards Lavinia with these words: “And, Lavinia, thou shalt be employed in this; / Bear thou my hand, sweet wench, between thy teeth” (3.1.280-1). Visually speaking, his demand creates a painfully gruesome scene in which a bloody, silent, tongue-less and handless Lavinia trots across the stage almost dog-like with a severed hand in her mouth. If Titus’s severed hand is placed between Lavinia’s two stumps, the scene loses impact. The placement of the hand in Lavinia’s mouth once again calls to mind the rape while at the same time reinforcing Lavinia’s newfound status as the revenger’s tool. As with the rape, Lavinia functions as the receptacle of male body parts.

The widely varying depictions of Tamora and Lavinia stem from the fact that Lavinia seems to conform to the limits of her gender while Tamora does not. Tamora’s ability to voice her desires is connected to the depiction of her monstrous sexuality; this contrasts with Lavinia’s complete inability to speak for herself and the depiction as her as sexually pure yet sexually violated. Even prior to the mutilation, Lavinia uses her gender as a reason for not voicing her desires. When pleading for death over rape, Lavinia states: “’Tis present death I beg, and one thing more / That womanhood denies my
tongue to tell. / O keep me from their worse-than-killing lust” (2.3.173-75). Lavinia actually begs for her life and chastity but even this act to save her own chastity stretches beyond the limits of appropriate gender behavior. As a woman she may not even speak of sexual activity.

Unlike Bel-imperia’s suicide-death in The Spanish Tragedy, Lavinia’s death comes at the hands of her father, Titus. Titus asks Saturninus: “Was it well done of rash Virginius / To slay his daughter with his own right hand, / Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?” to which Saturninus replies, “It was, Andronicus…Because the girl should not survive her shame / And by her presence still renew his sorrows” (5.3.36-41). Like Bel-imperia, Lavinia reveals the impossible position of female characters who, whether willingly or not, are used as sexual pawns. As Deborah Burks argues: “English custom, which did not valorize suicide, also did not provide any clear, reassuring measure of women’s purity as an alternative” (163). The world in which Lavinia lives, the world that sees her first and foremost as a sexualized object, limits her ability to choose life and death either for herself or for others.

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The women in each of these three plays facilitate revenge against their enemies to some degree but the extent of their ability to act depends upon the degree of their sexual objectification and sexual violation. Bel-imperia navigates the entire play flirting with sexual matters, but appears to always maintain her virgin status. She ultimately asserts a complicated authority over her body and sexual status through her suicide, and performs an only slightly deferred physical revenge against Balthazar when she stabs him as Perseda. Her ability to dictate the use of her body, at least in brief moments, mitigates
her status as object, yet does not entirely erase it, as substitution between character and stage props (the bloody handkerchief and letter) and her suicide reveal. Perhaps Bel-imperia’s increased ability to grasp at the power of violent action can be linked to a claim made by Eileen Allman that “[v]irginity made a woman male” (26). Lavinia’s status as fought-over bride and rape victim positions her more firmly as a sexual object. The play’s revenge plot continues to emphasize her object status as the staff and basin become dominant representations of her and reveal her role as Titus’s tool within the revenge action. Gloriana’s position within the revenge drama is perhaps the most pitiable of all because even in death she continues to be utilized as a sexualized prop for revenge. Her rape and murder, combined with the rape and suicide of Antonio’s wife as well as the testing of Castiza and Gratiana, reveal a play overwhelming concerned with women’s sexual purity, as well as a play unconvinced that such a thing exists.

The fact that suicide and death function as the main means through which the women in these revenge tragedies seem to exert authority over their persons suggests that women’s agency in revenge tragedies must be, at best, always peripheral. To claim death as empowering must always be circumspect. For men, such as Hieronimo, Titus, Vindice or even Hamlet, power stems from one’s capability to commit violence against an enemy. Any power the women in these plays achieve stems from their utility as sexualized objects in men’s revenge dramas. In keeping women at arm’s length from direct involvement in revenge, these revenge dramas create a dramatic world in which women participate in their own revenge dramas as objectified tools of male revengers.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The relationship between female characters and props is not inflexible and female characters do sometimes assume authority over stage property in a manner similar to male characters. Dekker’s and Middleton’s The Roaring Girl (1610) depicts a woman who asserts ownership of props. Moll, the Roaring Girl, walks about the entire play armed with a sword, defending the honor and dignity of the female body. Her control over the props, and over her body and the bodies of other women, seems related to the fact that she keeps herself from all sexual encounters. She is approached as a potential sexual partner, yet never engages in any consensual or forced sexual relations:

Sir, I am so poor to requite you, you must look for nothing but thanks of me. I have no humour to marry: I love to lie a’ both sides a’ th’ bed myself; and again a’ th’ other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey, therefore I'll ne'er go about it. I love you so well, sir, for your good will I'd be loath you should repent your bargain after, and therefore we'll ne'er come together at first. I have the head now of myself and am man enough for a woman; marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i' th’ place (2.2).

In rejecting marriage and the loss of her virginity, Moll disrupts any potential sexual objectification that might circumscribe her actions.

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33 Other potential counterexamples include Shakespeare’s Antony and Cleopatra (1607), Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling (1622), and Philip Massinger’s The Picture (1630)
This and other potential counterexamples are difficult and vexed. As Barbara Freedman cautions: “Any group previously defined by exclusion from and oppression by a social order faces the question of how to redefine itself without destroying itself” (115). If women are described as masculine when they assert their female authority, does that female authority remain artificial and forged? Moll, for instance, is confusingly praised for her “masculine womanhood” (2.1). And she is in male dress throughout, although everyone knows she is a woman. Can a female character be like male character yet be celebrated for her womanliness? And is it possible for a female character to subvert the subject/object hierarchy in a manner unlike the male characters on stage? The substitution between women and props, and the relevant exceptions, highlight how difficult it is to depict female agency on the early modern stage. In these plays power and authority are masculine traits and any usurpation of those traits by women is thus depicted as unnatural. It is only with the increased presence of real women in theaters and the increase in strong female characters, as well as a change in women’s status offstage, that female characters can be depicted as more than props for men to manipulate.

This project looked exclusively at the relationship between women and props on the early modern stage but, in an extension of the project, I hope to explore the relationships between women on props on the modern stage. Does the presence of female actors alter the theatrical depictions of women? Are women’s bodies more or less likely to be fetishized when their presence is tangible? A survey of the relationship between women and objects in modern cinema may prove even more interesting. What replaces the “female” prop on the screen? How do cinematic techniques such as the
camera angle, lighting and even editing create distance or separation between women and objects? Even modern advertising campaigns could be material for further research. Where does the line between product and person fall? The goal in this and any further inquiries into the relationships between women and objects is to find new means to explain the limited actions and agency of fictionalized women.

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"I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is; I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or a prostitute." (Dame Rebecca West)

The above sentiment, expressed by famed English journalist Rebecca West, suggests that the struggles for recognition and authority faced by female characters on the early modern stage are not completely foreign to modern Western women. Written shortly after World War II, West’s words indicate that women still face limits because they are still treated as either passive objects or strictly sexual beings. In beginning this study, I expected to write about the ways in which female characters use stage properties to assert themselves on stage; instead I discovered that the relationship between female characters and “female” stage props often signify women’s lack of individuality, voice, agency and body control. The equation between women and “female” stage props seen with female characters from Innogen to Gloriana highlights the limits placed on women’s actions. If women continue to be depicted as little else than “doormat[s],” then the relationship between women and doormats deserves critical attention.
Works Consulted


Hallet, Charles A. and Elaine S. *The Revenger’s Madness: A Study of Revenge


Osborne, Laurie E. “Staging the Female Playgoer: Gender in Shakespeare’s


Primary Texts


