TOWN/GOWN RELATIONS:
THE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF FEMALE GOSSIP COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS IN EARLY MODERN COMEDY

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ABSTRACT

TOWN/GOWN RELATIONS: THE FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF FEMALE GOSSIP COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS IN EARLY MODERN COMEDY

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This dissertation traces the formation and representation of female gossip communities in early modern literature. It has become conventional wisdom within scholarship to claim a negative teleology for gossip, positing that the gossip was originally a figure with a purely spiritual function (that of a godparent of either sex), but that by the eighteenth century, the office of gossip was associated with the "idle talk" and unruly behavior, a result of unregulated female friendship. This dissertation challenges that developmental model, offering evidence of a both/and dynamic in the representation of gossips, revealing how, from the earliest literary representations through the Restoration, there are recognizable tensions between their socially positive contributory role in reproductive safety and the securing of legitimacy, on the one hand, and the threat posed by women operating autonomously, beyond male control or oversight. I posit that gossip communities actually operated in a number of ways and in a range of venues in the late medieval and early modern eras, and that negative representations of the "good gossip" (the drunken, disorderly woman) are indicative of unease surrounding women's various social roles and unacknowledged importance of female labor to the medieval and early modern culture and economy.

Chapter 1 traces the relationship between medieval and early modern representations of gossip communities, demonstrating through the Noah plays from the York, Wakefield, and Chester mystery cycles that gossips were a central and legitimate element of communities,had real, viable social functions beyond the birth chamber, and represented a much more complex

identity than has generally been identified. Building on this medieval acknowledgment of the complexity of women's gossip functions and interactions, I turn to the Tudor comedy *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, which focuses on the gossip community's relationship to the community at large. To ground the issues of female social participation featured in the play, I trace the shift in the sites and the production of potables in the early modern period, which gradually deprived women of both the social function of ale brewing and the social locus of the alehouse as a viable site for female community.

Chapter 2 explores the traditional social roles of the gossip community – its functions in assisting and celebrating birth and in privately effecting justice for transgressions that disrupt domestic function – and its concomitant spaces, the birth room, alehouse, and tavern. Focusing on Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the chapter explores how these plays are part of the larger conversation surrounding gossips' private functions and the tensions between public spaces and interventions, and unease about gossips' larger circles of influence.

Chapter 3 explores public roles not traditionally associated with the gossip community, and uses two comedies – *Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women* and *The Staple of News* – to track a change in the representation of gossip communities as groups less invested in private function and more devoted to presenting a public intellectual presence in society. Each dramatically stages the competing conceptions of women as gossips and social mediators with an explicitly intellectual, interpretative, interventive function. The Coda examines this continuing trend into the Restoration and examines two female-authored texts, Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* and Manley's *The New Atalantis* to demonstrate how the separation of the intellectual and the physical functions of the gossip community led to its eventual demise.

For Lois Hogston, with love

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"He [is] … the nastiest word in the language: pronoun of the nonperson, it annuls and mortifies its referent; saying 'he' about someone, I always envision a kind of murder by language, whose entire scene, sometimes sumptuous, even ceremonial, is *gossip*."

– Roland Barthes[1]

Barthes' extreme reaction to gossip – that it is "murder by language" – is at its core a reiteration of the pre-modern perception that gossip, in having the potential to undermine social order, inevitably does so. What Barthes describes as a form of murder is actually a kind of castration – the fear that gossip has the power to emasculate (and thus dehumanize) its subject in a situation to which he has no access, a situation that, according to Barthes, can border on the ceremonious. Gossip, for Barthes, reduces a man to a "nonperson."

Barthes' description of gossip's function reproduces nearly three centuries of cultural perception and academic scholarship. Even in scholarship that examines gossip's positive social effects (in promoting group cooperation), gossip is still defined as "communicating negatively about an absent third party in an evaluative manner" (Feinburg et al. 1015). In this particular study, the three psychologists and one sociologist explain that "gossip is typically viewed as trivial or antisocial, and it often is. Even so, we contend that a specific type of gossip helps to solve the problem of cooperation" (1015). This contemporary definition of gossip (the article was published January 2012) effectively illustrates the modern biases toward gossip – the assumption that the activity is "trivial" and "antisocial," without interrogating the meaning of

[1] *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Tr. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. (169).

those terms in context. The result of the general negative perception of gossip results in attempts to create artificial divisions in the practice of gossip. The study cited above is but one example of this – the researchers very specifically state that it is their intent to explore the social effects of "a specific type" of gossip, when gossip is by its very nature amorphous and highly resistant to social classification. Moreover, this line of inquiry contains gossip's possibilities to a form of speech. Further, the recognition that gossip only exists as means to constitute community through speech is actually an unknowing revival of gossip in its nominal form, which is to say, gossips were originally members of a community whose communality produced the idea of trivial speech as a distinct and vilified form.

In the mid-1990s, social scientists, ignorant of the historical irony involved, introduced the term "good gossip"[2] to refer to any act of gossip which does not serve the self-interest of the gossiper. In medieval and early modern England, however, the "good gossip" was an ironic term denoting a woman whose behavior (incontinent speech and a marked preference for ale) not only disrupted the domestic but threatened the stability of the neighborhood in which she lived. With the propensity in the early modern era to treat the domestic as a microcosm of the nation, the gossip's behavior was thought to have the potential to undermine the social stability of the state. That "good gossip" has come to signal a vindication of the practice of gossiping, rather than a term indicating a person negotiating the complex relationship between individuals, community, and knowledge-sharing demonstrates the need for an intervention to provide some historical context for gossips and gossip. If we are ever to truly understand how gossip works, it is vitally important to examine its historical roots.

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[2] The term is first introduced by Aaron Ben-Ze'ev in the 1994 essay collection *Good Gossip*, which utilized several methods of social analysis (sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychology) in order to "vindicate" gossip.

In this dissertation I modify the accepted notion that gossip suffered a negative historical trajectory by positing that "gossip" was a term with multiple concurrent meanings relating to both social functions and modes of speech. Patricia Meyer Spacks' *Gossip* (1985) is the most frequently cited text that posits a negative historical trajectory for gossip; the theory is frequently reproduced by literary scholars and heavily informs their analysis. She writes, "But the word [gossip] undergoes a process of degradation. Dr. Johnson, in the middle of the eighteenth century, offered a second meaning of 'tippling companion' and a third definition for the first time connecting gossip unambiguously and officially with women: 'One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in.' Not until 1811, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, did the noun designate a mode of conversation rather than a kind of person" (25-6). The history she creates for gossip contains at least two crucially important errors, which in turn create two pervasive myths concerning historical gossip. One is that the term "gossip" has undergone a negative transformation over the course of centuries, which assumes that the term was a static identity category in the medieval period – medieval gossips were essentially spiritually authorized birth attendants. The other is that gossip did not designate a form of speech until right before the Industrial Revolution. While Spacks does not officially locate the beginning of the "degradation" in the eighteenth century, her use of Johnson's dictionary strongly suggests that timeline. This timeline compresses the medieval and early modern gossip roles into one neat social category, which creates a gap in historical knowledge. How did medieval birth companions become eighteenth century tippling (and tattling) companions? To marginalize the figure of the early modern gossip not only ignores one of the fundamental ways through which women constituted their social identities, but also perpetuates the system which reduced their

complex ideological stance (simultaneously inside and outside patriarchy) to a simplistic model of stereotypical female excess.

In actuality, an examination of the history of the term shows that if there was such a thing as a "purely spiritual" gossip, it was an extremely short-lived institution. Even from its earliest incarnations in Middle English, "gossip" indicates a complex social structure, one that exists in the intersections of private and public, spiritual and secular, one that simultaneously challenges and reifies social hierarchies. While Spacks is cognizant of gossip's complicated relationship to the larger culture – she describes it as "a phenomenon [that] raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge; it demands answers quite at odds with what we assume as our culture's dominant values" (12) – her province does not extend to the earliest examples of gossip, because "the perception of derogatory talk as mortally destructive continued unchanged from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance …" (27). Her work examines gossip as an action, as a species of "idle talk," that functioned as a mode of resistance, a political action taken by the marginalized and disempowered (usually women). A few recent medieval scholars have nuanced Spacks' arguments about medieval gossip,[3] but gossip in the early modern period is a field largely unexplored, especially in regards to gossip as a marker of identity, rather than to gossip as a verbal action with negative social consequences.

In order to explicate early modern gossips, however, one must begin by orienting the model through a reexamination of the medieval perception of gossip, which is the purpose of Chapter One. The term entered the English language as part of the linguistic inheritance from

[3] Susan E. Phillips with *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* and Karma Lochrie with *Covert Operations: The Medieval Foundations of Secrecy*.

Old English. "Gossip" is a contraction of the Old English "god sib," meaning "related to God,"[4] and originally referred to a godparent of either sex. *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows the first occurrence to be in a sermon in 1014, though given the word's Anglo-Saxon roots, it is safe to assume an earlier common usage. A second definition of the term is given by the *Middle English Dictionary* as "a close friend, companion, pal."[5] It is generally assumed that the former definition is the "first" one, and that the latter one signals the secularization, and the subsequent feminization of the term. Though many scholars point out that both men and women were called "gossips" at this juncture, the term was associated much more with women than with men. Gail McMurray Gibson locates the conclusion of the feminization of gossip in the fifteenth century: "because one primary purpose of those god-siblings was to witness the birth for the purpose of authenticating the parentage of the child, and since social custom usually permitted only women to witness the actual process of birth, the word – originally ungendered – came by the fifteenth century to mean the close female friends and relatives invited to help with a childbirth" (14). The official social role of gossip was joined to a more definitely female, negative stereotype. Consequently, these two definitions coexisted (rather uneasily) in the late medieval and early modern eras. The uneasiness derived from the fact that gossips were acknowledged as having a tremendous amount of social clout – they were a crucial component of the process by which a woman delivered her child, and because of their close relationships they were also privy to domestic wrongs perpetuated by men (usually husbands) under the authority invested in them through patriarchy to maintain the functionality of the domestic. Gossips additionally acted as a localized system of justice, righting domestic dysfunction for those women who met their criteria

[4] Spacks 25, Kartzow 35.

[5] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. "god-sib(be)."

as virtuous women deserving of assistance, as we see in Harman's tale of the walking mort, discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, there was a great deal of male anxiety surrounding the gossips' activities, functioning as they did in what one scholar refers to as "gynocentric spaces,"[6] which were those private, female-controlled sites – such as the birth chamber – situated outside of male surveillance yet deeply implicated in patriarchal social structures, such as assisting in childbirth or working to reintegrate domestic functionality. Fundamentally, then, gossips enjoyed a degree of autonomy that men found troubling, and which probably led to the intensification of negative stereotypes about excesses such as idle talk and drinking that would of course be said to occur among women unsupervised by male authority in such sites. However, the fear was that gossip networks permeated civic spaces, beginning in localized sites such as the birth chamber and alehouse (where gossips would congregate to plan how to right various domestic wrongs) and spreading throughout the topography of England.

Various literary materials reveal a concern with the ubiquity and reach of gossips and gossiping. In 1607, for example, Richard West published a poem entitled "The Court of Conscience, or Dick Whippers[7] Sessions."[8] Among the impressive list of social malefactors[9] to

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[6] see Fiona MacNeill's article, "Gynocentric London Spaces: (Re)Locating Masterless Women in Early Stuart Drama."

[7] "Dick Whipper," West explains, is "mans conscience" (sig. A4r).

[8] The full title of the work is: "The Court of Conscience or Dick VVhippers Sessions. VVith the order of his arraigning and punishing of many notorious, dissembling, wicked, and vitious liuers in this age."

[9] He addresses his poem to twenty-seven distinct groups, although within the poem itself he occasionally adds additional bad characters. For example, he adds "Anabaptists" to the "Atheist and Unbeliever" category. But in the preface, he addresses "all and singullar Backbyters, Slothful teachers, Graceles Truants, Cokring Parents, Cheating theeues and Cutpurses, Drunken Scoundrells, Highway haunters, Shifting Gaimsters, Whoremongers, Gluttenous Epicures, Tiraunts, and merceles Villaines, Couetous Parsons, Proud Knaues, Extortioners, Idle Caterpillers, Profaine Swearers, Athiests, and Vnbeleeuers, Punkes, Baudes, Makebates and

come under scrutiny in West's fantasy court are "make bates & tatling Gossips," who are twentieth on the list, after "Punkes, and shameless Whores" (eighteenth) and "Bawdes" (nineteenth). Gossips are, in West's conception, women who meet in public and, through idle talk, transform public spaces associated with female labor into sites that foment domestic dysfunction:

> You that at Conduicts, and such other places,
> The ale-house, bake-house, or the washing block
> Meet daily, talking with your brazen faces,
> Of peoples matters which concerne you not.
> You sowe such discord twixt the man and wife,
> You set a thousand at debate and strife. (sig. F1r)

In venting his concern that gossips' undermining of public space ultimately destabilizes the domestic and threatens the institution of marriage, West demonstrates the belief that gossips behaved roughly the same throughout England. In city, town, and village, gossips met their friends and acquaintances and exchanged tidbits of news. West advises gossips to narrow their interests to only matters pertaining to the maintenance of their households: "Your minde should onely be about your worke: / To earne your liuing should be all your care, / And not by th'ale-house fire still to lurke" (sig. F1r). Although the premise of the poem is that a jury of twelve virtuous figures arraigns different groups of societal disruptors, the pretense to justice vanishes by the conclusion of the poem. Instead, the poetic speaker engages in a fantasy of violent punishment for the gossip, where he inserts himself into the proceedings and administers the

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Tatling Gossips, Liers, and Applesquiers, Witches, Coniurers, and Enchaunters, Beggers, Idle Roges, and Counterfeit Madmen, Fooles, Flattring Maplefaces, Cruell Maisters and Dames, and Vn-Godly Seruants" (sig. C2v).

punishment of stripping and whipping her: "Ile make your back, your sides and shoulders sweat, / And ierke you till you shed your Gossips fethers. / Turne vp your tippet, Ile teach you to prate, / Your shoulders and my whip are falne at bate" (sig. F1r). The tippet he refers to is a kind of scarf or short cape that covered the shoulders, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that to "turn tippet" was a slang phrase for a turncoat.[10] West's disturbing scenario of whipping a gossip until she renounces her gossiping ways (shedding her "Gossips fethers") aligns the gossip's punishment with the sentence typically doled out to prostitutes.[11] This punishment also places West on the same ideological trajectory as Barthes regarding the threat gossip poses to masculinity. Whereas Barthes imagines gossip as a process that mortifies and annuls men into nonpersons, West creates a response that mortifies the mortifier. However, in doing so, he creates the type of scenario that authorizes the gossip community's intervention. In abjuring juried justice, West inadvertently demonstrates the continued need for gossip communities, who frequently served to enact justice, especially for domestic transgressions that passed beneath the attention of the courts.

West's poem, while memorable for its depiction of gossips, is most useful for the list of sites frequented by gossips. It corroborates the information illustrated in a broadsheet titled "The Severall Places Where You May Hear News"[12] (c. 1603; see figure 1), based on a continental

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[10] "Tippet," 1e.

[11] For more on the punishments specified for sexual crimes, see *Wanton Wenches and Wayward Wives*, especially Chapter 8, "The Consequences of Illicit Sex."

[12] The print is based on a French broadsheet published sometime around 1560. Entitled "Le Caquet des Femmes" ("The Cackling of Women"), the print was apparently quite popular. In addition to its appearance in England, Wenceslas Hollar etched a version to accompany a broadside entitled "Schaw Platz" c. 1628, further proof that the image was circulating throughout Europe well before the middle of the seventeenth century. The English version of the print, though informed by the French original, differs in two crucial ways. One is that there is no devil

original.[13] The print shows groups of women chatting with each other in various spaces of differing levels of publicness, ranging from the private space of the birth room to the very public conduit, where the women would draw their water. It is, in effect, a "gossip map," illustrating the makeup and distribution of a gossip community in specific locales that were at the same time general to population centers (great and small) throughout England. The simultaneity of the images in the "gossip map" alters the terrain of gossip studies by helping to nuance the social function of gossip. The print depicts parallel gossip communities thriving in a single civic space, indicating that in any civic space there exists a gossip community underpinning social, commercial, and religious activities. The marked lack of a devil in the English print (as there was in the French original) indicates the complicated function of early modern English gossips. Though the print depicts these gossips engaging in idle talk while in public spaces of labor (a standard misogynistic complaint leveled at gossips in the period), it also shows women actively engaging with each other and with public spaces, and the sheer ubiquity of the gossip communities, especially in comparison with the few men scattered throughout the print who are engaged in industrious labor, suggests that without the gossips, the town/city would effectively cease to exist. This notion is bolstered by the habit of metaphorically identifying cities and towns as female. My dissertation title, "Town/Gown Relations," gestures toward this tension. The town

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sitting next to the women gossiping in church. The devil, Tutivillus, recorded idle talk on a parchment with the purpose of providing evidence against gossipers on Judgment Day. He was an extremely popular figure throughout medieval Europe, but especially in England, where the naves of several English churches featured busts of women with parchment-wielding devils sitting on or by their heads. Tutivillus' popularity waned in the late medieval period in England, however, and English gossips, instead of being associated with Tutivillus, were increasingly associated with alehouses, which is the second difference between the English and French versions. French gossips are depicted drinking, but in an outdoor garden, not an alehouse.

[13] Natalie Zemon Davis includes a reproduction of the French original, "Le Cacvet Des Femmes" (90-91) in *Fiction in the Archives*.

is undeniably female, structured around female labor and female sociability, but the satirical elements of the print demonstrate just how complicated was the representation of gossips in the period.

Critical consensus is divided on this point. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford interpret the print as a satire wholly aimed at women: "the tableaux are manifestly satirical and moralistic in intent: rather than heeding their housewifely duties or higher concerns such as the preacher's sermon, women are shown idling, eating and drinking, gossiping and arguing, or even assaulting each other" (207). However, Pamela Allen Brown finds a gap in meaning between the visual and the textual. She notes that, "The title above and satiric verse below direct the viewer to condemn every branch of gossiping, but the image does not fully comply. […] When this image is considered without the satiric stanzas at the bottom, it loses much of the point of its lecture, offering a far different set of signs to the curious interpreter" (57). She poses a series of questions: "To anyone who does not read the caption, could the image paradoxically privilege female labor through its detailed representation? Could it engage women by showing them scenes of female leisure?" She concludes that "whatever the woodcut means, certainly that meaning is hermeneutically diffuse and cannot be restricted entirely to the normative masculinist satire of its frame" (60).

I argue that we can extend Brown's questions even further. The tension between the text and the visuals does allow for the possibility that female labor and sociability are privileged (or at least not wholly condemned). But more than that, the ubiquity of the women, combined with the marginalization of the text, which is confined to the very top and bottom of the woodcut, effectively turns the readers (with the era's low female literacy rate, this would be mostly men) into a gossip community – a group of individuals with privileged knowledge inaccessible to

others. This raises the question: who exactly is being satirized? If a readership of men can so easily be made into a community whose constitutive elements closely resemble those of a gossip community, this suggests that gossip communities are not inherently antisocial threats to patriarchal order. Moreover, it raises the possibility that gossip might be the method through which humans constitute their communities at the local level.

Even more important, the print's depictions of multiple gossip communities opens up a new way of conceptualizing historical gossip communities by creating a snapshot of multiplicity. It is unclear whether the print is depicting one gossip group moving through time, or many gossip communities at once. This ambiguity evokes the possibility of concomitant gossip communities, which in turn suggests the possibility of an extended gossip network. With the high rate of mobility in the era, it is logical to assume that gossip communities would regularly add and lose members, and that this fluidity in membership would contribute to a widely distributed network of gossips. Moreover, the print does not specify whether it is a representation of an urban, town, or village scene. Since it could be anywhere in England, it can be read, in effect, as all of England. The representation of gossips utilizing individuated public spaces such as the street, the market, the alehouse, etc. as a kind of community hub suggests a larger gossip network connecting individual gossip communities, because as public sites accessible to all, they provide individual gossip communities not only with meeting spaces, but also with the ability to keep abreast of what was happening in other places.

The simultaneity of gossip communities in the print also emphasizes two important points: gossip communities were ubiquitous, and they had multiple functions. The print shows us that the linear model of community does not apply to gossips – most communities have one reason for why they come together, or have one function to justify their existence, but formations

and functions of gossip communities are more complex. While gossips were sometimes neighbors and friends, the print demonstrates an entire constellation of factors at work in the nature of these communities. Gossip communities had many functions, such as assisting with childbirth, performing social regulation (organizing times of mirth, exchanging news, dispensing local justice), performing social subversion, and giving women the opportunity to express friendship. These functions are typically interpreted as discrete functions, but that leads to the binarization of competing models of gossip communities as either drunk, belligerent women who neglect their responsibilities, or as a group of local activists – vigilantes, in essence. The problem with this construction is that it references the same women for both functions, as suggested by the print and other sources. This suggests that gossip communities were much more important to the makeup of society than has previously been acknowledged. Gossip communities existed in and exploited the tensions not only over ownership of knowledge and dissemination of information, but also over where women owed their loyalties – to their families and private domestic concerns, or to public harmony. Recognizing the complex dynamics and multiple functions of gossip communities shows that such distinctions were, and continue to be, nonviable.

The print represents a variety of situations, and nearly all of them illustrate the complex representation of the gossip. Figure 2 shows the gossip in her role as birth assistant. While talking is foregrounded (even the newly-delivered mother is sitting up in bed, talking to someone), the infant is being well cared for by five women, albeit far in the background. Figure 3 is a disturbingly voyeuristic tableau of women bathing at the hothouse. Though the text tells us that the naked gossips are there "their skins to purify," we see that they have become objects of sexual gratification for the man watching them through a window. They do not seem to be aware

of his presence, but the connection between loose tongues and loose morals is made plain with his presence. Additionally, though the gossips are clearly utilizing the hothouse for bathing purposes, a hot bath was also considered a cure for venereal disease. The print shows the gossip as a vexed figure, both a necessary participant in the perpetuation of society and a constant threat to that same society through her propensity for excesses (in drink, in speech, in sexuality, and in temper). This figure of feminine excess was ironically referred to as a "good gossip," but the term is an unstable one, also applied to women who were actively operating to uphold the social status quo.

We can see this instability existing even in the writings of one of the era's most stringent and puritanical figures. A generation before West's total abjuration of gossip communities as the reason for female idleness, Stephen Gosson wrestles with the benefits and dangers of gossip communities. In the letter to "the *Gentlewomen Citizens* of London," located in *The School of Abuse*, Gosson advises city wives to avoid the theater as a source of emotional consolation: "*Being pensive at home, if you go to Theaters to drive away fancies, it is as good Physic, as for the ache of your head to knock out your brains; or when you are stung with a Wasp, to rub the sore with a Nettle*." Instead, he cautiously recommends that "*when you are grieved, pass the time with your neighbors in sober conference, or, if you can read, let Books be your Comfort.*" As if realizing that his readership could rightly accuse him of advocating gossip, he immediately stresses that "*the best council I can give you, is to stay home & shun all occasion of ill speech*" (31). Gosson's council, while not effective as advice – what constitutes "ill speech"? – is quite effective at illustrating the conflicting opinions surrounding gossip communities. Even Gosson, a master at parsing moral matters, finds himself unable to wholly condemn female community, and instead equivocates on the matter by emphasizing that really the best solution for female

pensiveness is reading, while he simultaneously acknowledges that the solution is an imperfect one, as most women are illiterate. Gosson's reluctance to denigrate the sociability foundational to gossip communities demonstrates how women's relationships and social functions were largely predicated on verbal knowledge.

My dissertation traces the complex formation and vexed representations of female gossip communities in early modern literature and seeks to modify the competing notion that gossip was perceived either wholly negatively (drunk boisterous women) or entirely positively (spiritual birth attendants) in the early modern period. I posit that gossip communities actually operated in a number of ways, and that representations of the "good gossip" (the drunken, disorderly woman) are indicative of unease surrounding women's various social roles and female labor, and exist side-by-side with more positive representations or hints at a more positive function.

Chapter One traces the relationship between medieval and early modern representations of gossip communities. It is conventional wisdom to claim a negative teleology for gossip that begins with gossip as a purely spiritual function (that of a godparent of either sex) and then, by the eighteenth century, associates gossip with female friendship and the "idle talk" that is its result. But the Noah plays from the York, Wakefield, and Chester mystery cycles provide compelling evidence that resists that kind of periodization and demonstrate that gossips were a key element of communities and had real, viable social importance beyond the birth chamber. In each of these plays, the importance of domestic labor of all sorts is made evident, and the devotion of the women to their domestic roles and to their gossip communities, as well as the extent of those communities, suggests a much more complex understanding of the gossip than has generally been identified.

Building on this medieval acknowledgment of the complexity of women's gossip functions and interactions, I turn to the Tudor comedy *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, considered to be the first "English" comedy, which focuses on the gossip community's relationship to the community at large. To ground the issues of female social participation featured in the play, I trace the shift in the sites and the production of potables in the early modern period, which gradually deprived women of both the social function of ale brewing and the social locus of the alehouse as a viable site for female community. The play stages the conflict between the "good" gossip, Gammer Gurton, who is industrious and who, until the loss of her needle, was a competent domestic manager, and the "good gossip" Dame Chat, who runs an alehouse out of her home, though the alehouse has no customers and there are hints throughout the play that she drinks much of her product. These two women, who should be friends, are pitted against each other through a trick involving Gammer Gurton's needle, and the lack of an easy resolution to the dispute (representatives of the law and the church intercede for peace) indicates that if the gossip community is destabilized, the organizations structured to guarantee social function are rendered impotent. Though the needle is eventually recovered and its restoration celebrated at a feast, the reconciliation of Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat is not part of the celebration. This irresolute resolution is symptomatic of the problem in the play's gossip community and serves as a bridge between the late medieval and early modern representations of gossip communities. Where the medieval cycle plays stage tensions between patriarchy and female labor by displaying unease with the superficially "simple solution" of drowning gossip communities, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* shows a gossip community trying to reconcile competing ideologies of female labor and female idleness.

Chapter Two explores the traditional social roles of the gossip community – its functions in assisting and celebrating birth and in privately effecting justice for transgressions that disrupt domestic function – and its concomitant spaces; the birth room, alehouse, and tavern. The chapter begins with Harman's story of the "Walking Mort," which illustrates a transition in the representation of gossip communities in fiction, demonstrating the connection between the seemingly disparate functions of gossips as both birth attendants and private advocates for local justice. To bolster this notion, the chapter examines 16th century gossip carols to provide a grounding of women in their domestic roles in various social spaces. Using the good gossip and the festive side of gossip activities as depicted in these carols to foreground a discussion of the social anxieties surrounding the publicking of domestic roles demonstrates the complex cultural perception of the gossip's multiple social roles.

This introductory analysis frames a more in-depth engagement with the more obvious social tensions inherent in the purpose of gossips' role in the mirth function (the gossips' feast celebrating a successful delivery), as staged in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. The play takes place in London during Lent. The abstemious atmosphere creates a subversive environment throughout the city, with butchers selling illegal meat, and, more importantly, with a gossip community celebrating a birth. While serving a (semi) legitimate social function, holding a gossips' feast during Lent raises questions about tensions between gossips' necessary and accepted social functions and the strictures of patriarchal order.

The chapter concludes with an analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a play that also stages how gossip communities blur the dichotomy between public and private roles for women, especially in situating the importance of the oath of a gossip (Titania's pledge to care for the Indian boy) in direct tension with a wife's obligation to defer to her husband. The play's

restoration of Oberon's dominance in the final scenes comes at the expense of Titania's gossip obligation and her autonomy as a gossip. Though it frames the tension supernaturally, as a conflict within the fairy community, we can see the play is very much concerned with the human – the fairy conflict also destabilizes the human realm, demonstrating that the play is part of the larger conversation surrounding gossips' private functions and the tensions between public spaces and interventions, and unease about gossips' larger circles of influence.

Chapter Three explores public roles not traditionally associated with the gossip community, and tracks a change in the representation of gossip communities as groups less invested in private or domestic function and more devoted to presenting a public intellectual presence in society. The chapter begins with an examination of the anonymous 1620 *Swetnam the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women*. The comedy's subplot stages Joseph Swetnam being brought to trial by a group of women for his offences against women. The women find him guilty and he is made to recant. The play serves as a useful bridge between the earlier emphasis on female physicality (associated with the birthing function of gossips and their putative excesses) and the later move towards larger issues of social justice and women's ability to arraign situations, thus exercising the capacity to balance reason and emotion. The women in *Swetnam Arraigned* advocate for gender equality with a high degree of articulation and sophistication, but the punishment they devise for Swetnam is to stab him offstage with needles until he recants, an apparent return to the low physical comedic representation of gossips.

The intellectual public function of gossips is more explicitly staged in Jonson's *The Staple of News*, where four gossips sit onstage on provide social commentary before and after the first four acts. Since the play's central concern is the production and distribution of knowledge, and exploring the seemingly false distinction between news and gossip, the inclusion of the

gossips' dialogue, I argue, demonstrates the expanding public role of the female community. Whereas the tension between female physicality and intellectuality is resolved in *Swetnam Arraigned* through coming together of women of all classes to form a gossip community that abolishes the rampantly misogynist social system introduced by Swetnam's presence, the gossips in *The Staple of News* are depicted as unable to maintain the wide-ranging focus Jonson deems necessary to intellectualism. The plays dramatically stage the competing conceptions of women as gossips and social mediators with an explicitly intellectual, interpretative, interventive function.

The Coda builds on this sense of the intellectual intervention of gossips. In this closing section, I explore how Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure* seeks to refigure a gossip community by completely divorcing it from patriarchal strictures of heteronormative marriage. Cavendish's main character, Lady Happy, neatly eschews the tensions between the town and the gossip by creating a walled convent located in an amorphous rural setting. The experiment initially seems successful – the men are held at bay by the convent's thick walls, and the women are free to pursue intellectual and sensual pleasures. However, in scripting a series of ten vignettes – a play-within-a-play – that portray the horrors marriage and childbirth hold for women, I argue, Cavendish attempts to preserve the best aspects of the gossip community (female solidarity, a community that fosters the creation and dissemination of knowledge) while simultaneously purging the aspects that hinder it from reaching its full potential (reliance on patriarchy). The attempt ultimately fails, however. The play ends with a return to patriarchy for all the convent's inmates – marriage for Lady Happy, and an unknown future for the rest of the ladies. Though the idealized community did exist, it was only for a brief period, suggesting that gossip communities cannot survive without the patriarchy upon which they depend for identity.

A scene in Delarivier Manley's *The New Atalantis* endorses this. When three women are presented with the opportunity to create a traditional gossip community to assist in the birth of a child, they do not, and instead privilege the private knowledge that is the province of the traditional birth room. Manley's project echoes Cavendish's, insofar as both try to intellectualize the gossip community and thus divide it off from its physical function. Print culture seems to offer an emergent alternative to oral exchange and knowledge circulation that had marked the main roles of the gossip community for centuries. Women's voices themselves become the focus, condemned for their idleness and refigured as politically serviceable when properly deployed, while the necessary support of women in childbirth and of domestic order that ensures the security of the household and the family, as well as the reproductive functions of the family, are negated and critiqued.

By the end of the eighteenth century the multivalent figure of the gossip and the multiple functions of the gossip community had largely disappeared from the public consciousness, the victims of numerous factors, the most obvious of which is the increased preferment of male doctors with university training in medical science over female midwives with centuries of practical knowledge passed down through oral tradition. Another contributing factor, women's public entrance into print culture, meant that non-aristocratic women had unprecedented ability to distribute their thoughts and ideas on the political issues that affected them, such as the notion of women's rights. Women's increased public and political presence is due in large part to the early modern gossip community, though it was most likely the increasing association of gossips with female intellectual capacity that caused the dissolution of the structure of the traditional gossip community. The traditional gossip community was inextricably tied to associations with female physicality, frequently considered a liability in women's goals of achieving intellectual

respect. In a fine bit of historical irony, the traditional gossip is experiencing a comeback. The last twenty years have seen a resurgent interest in female birth attendants to assist a laboring mother. Doulas, as they are called, are certified to provide emotional, physical, and informational support for a woman during the delivery process. And with the rise of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest with all of its attendant anxieties about privacy and control of personal knowledge comes an increased nostalgia for the "traditional" mode of exchanging personal and private information – gossip, which assures a human and personal interaction. That these modes of gossip still exist as disparate cultural threads suggests not only the social and cultural need for gossips but also the extreme necessity to reconstruct their historical importance.

CHAPTER 1

A Flood of Gossip: The Birth of Stage Representations of Female Community

When trying to reconstruct the form and function of early modern gossip communities, it is immensely tempting to imbue them with a negative teleology – that the term "gossip" went from being a respected spiritual duty performed by persons of either sex to signaling a type of communal female speech that perpetuated "idle talk" detrimental to the community at large. As a way to reexamine historical gossip communities, many early modern scholars have taken their views of female gossip communities from Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford's magisterial *Women in Early Modern England*, which paints a picture of an organized yet classless female utopia that existed in concert with, and served an ancillary function for, the larger social order. For Mendelson and Crawford, gossip communities "had a respected function in the community as a means of enforcing canons of morality and neighbourliness," and moreover, a gossip community was the primary policing force at the local level: "In a pre-industrial society of honour and shame, gossip rather than the judiciary was one of the most effective agencies for policing the community" (215). These communities incorporated wives, servants, and laborers in overlapping networks. These networks linked women in the household, between households, and extended outward to the community at large. The function of these communities was to "expos[e] the gulf between society's ideals and the individual's violation of those ideals" through a process Mendelson and Crawford describe as a "modification" – essentially, they argue gossips existed to provide social critique of male-perpetrated breakdowns of the domestic by providing social correction through public exposure, with the intent of shaming the men into compliance: "One way women modified male behaviour was by broadcasting men's covert acts. In so doing, they also established a context of excessive male violence or immorality that might

persuade the judiciary to act. Thus female discourse constructed a collective view whereby accusations became a 'public' concern of which formal authorities were compelled to take notice" (215-16).

But within Mendelson and Crawford's description of the gossip community is a paradox that goes unaddressed: if the policing function of the gossip community was so respected by the authorities, then why did they have to work so hard to persuade the judiciary to act? Mendelson and Crawford elide some crucial details, including the fact that only a limited number of women even appeared in court, and those who testified had to produce evidence of good character.[1] Also of concern is the lack of acknowledgment of the negative representations of gossip communities, which greatly outnumber the positive representations. Further, the depiction of gossip communities related above does nothing to challenge the assumption that gossip communities existed as a function of patriarchy that existed to police men, and the legal system vindicated their occasionally disruptive and unorthodox methods by successfully convicting some of the men brought to trial through the efforts of the gossip community.

How, then, are we to think historically about gossip communities? The only available models have been at opposite ends of the social spectrum: either as a clutch of talkative unruly women, and therefore antisocial, or as a group of neighborhood vigilantes, and therefore hyper-social. Remarkably, both of these models share the same negative teleological trajectory: that the gossip, in its prelapsarian form, performed a positive social function as a spiritual sponsor at a baptism, but through an unexplained change, the gossip eroded into a woman who drank too much and engaged in idle talk. I argue there was no golden age of gossip, and that from the beginning, gossip was consistently both/and throughout the medieval and early modern periods.

[1] See Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London*, 48-54.

It is in the both/and model that the gossip community derived its viability. By creating or exploiting situations where it was unclear whether they were serving or undermining patriarchal social order, gossip communities exploited the slippage between theory and practice regarding the social status quo. For instance, in the traditional gossip space of the birth room, the women participated in promulgating patriarchy by assisting in childbirth while simultaneously destabilizing it by insisting on the primacy (and privacy) of "female knowledge" in effecting a safe delivery for the mother and child. In another traditional gossip space, the alehouse, gossips are frequently depicted as complaining about their husbands' neglect or abuse. While this can be construed as challenging the domestic hierarchy, the defiance inherent in the complaint is framed as a desire for a return to the social order that dictates the wife's lesser status and obedience to her husband. This complex social stance can best be explored by pursuing a "both/and" reading of gossip communities.

To answer the question of how to think about gossip communities, we have to begin at the beginning. The earliest foremothers of Mendelson and Crawford's early modern gossip vigilantes were the "good gossips" of the late medieval period. It is in the late medieval period that both versions of the gossip emerge in literature, and as this chapter will show, gossip communities have never had just one function. Indeed, as the Corpus Christi cycles and *Gammer Gurton's Needle* demonstrate, the gossip community, in its function as policing the community and as unruly and disruptive, occur conjointly, and underpin the social structure of the entire village, making it a community simultaneously central and liminal.

Many theorists overlook this multivalent condition when examining historical gossip communities, with the result that most discussions center upon how the community is constituted through the way its members communicate – as secret, idle talk. The best-known medieval

example of this is Chaucer's Wife of Bath, who relates that her *godsib* Alisoun alone "knew myn herte, and eek my privetee / Bet than oure parisshe preest, so moot I thee!"[2] For Karma Lochrie, the Wife's revelation of her dependence on her gossip community "allows us a brief glimpse of the network of secrecy that she maintains under cover of her verbosity and apparent openness. More importantly, she makes explicit the way in which gossip mimics confessional secrecy, ultimately surpassing it to the point where her priest is left out of the loop" (59). The Wife's declaration typifies the "problem" of the gossip community: as an action, gossip is perceived as ubiquitous, but as an identity category, it is perceived as simultaneously ubiquitous and secretive – a threatening phantom. To claim that the Wife of Bath and her gossip "mimic" the action of the confessional booth begins to get to the heart of what is so threatening about gossip communities. What they do is "secret" insofar as the gossip acts as a kind of female confessor, thus threatening to make the Church's mechanics of confession and salvation obsolete by exposing how useless, even dangerous, they are for women. A woman was supposed to confess her sins to a man, be absolved by that same man, who was authorized by a man, who was also God, who died for the sins of all mankind. There's not much there for women to identify with, especially when the penances for women were typically more stringent than they were for men. This is in part why Lochrie's use of the term "mimicking" is so problematic. Mimicking implies that the gossips are using the social framework of the confessional as a model, which is not the case. In order to curtail gossip's function, it was frequently cast as a subversive mimicry of masculine discourse, thus making it eligible for suppression. Alisoun knows more about the Wife of Bath than the parish priest does in part because of their commonality – there is a much greater social divide between the Wife and the priest than between her and Alisoun. Moreover, the gossip model

[2] "knew my heart, and also my secret / Better than our parish priest, so might I thrive!" III 530-531.

explicated by the Wife is not predicated on absolution. In this way, it can be seen as subversive: she is refusing to participate in the processes of the Church. But subversion is not necessarily predicated on inversion. The Wife is discussing the understanding between the two women that arises from shared non-public information (secrets) that society dictates should be the province of the parish priest and which should come under the formal structure of disclosure leading to absolution. The gossip model as explained by the Wife promotes a discourse of understanding/identification, not a model of private confession and forgiveness, with penance as the public signifier of compliance.

Though social and religious structures worked tirelessly to maintain the distance between the sexes, the existence of gossip communities, in their function as sites of disruptive idle talk, especially secret talk, demonstrates the failure of the Church to either contain its flock or to properly serve it. So the Church used existent discourses of female excess to extend and foreground the increasing perception of a "problem" with idle talk. Church Fathers claimed St. Paul's famous injunction against women who talked in church[3] and throughout the medieval period, women increasingly became exclusively associated with idle talk. There was even a special devil of idle talk (known alternately as Titivillus or Tutivillus) who was frequently depicted either near a group of women or occasionally perched on a woman's shoulder.[4] As the association between women and idle talk intensified, the "threat" it posed became exponentially

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[3] 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 (Geneva Bible, 1587): "Let your women keepe silence in the Churches: for it is not permitted vnto them to speake: but they ought to be subiect, as also the Lawe sayth. And if they will learne any thing, let them aske their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speake in the Church." For more on the scriptural treatment of women and gossiping in the New Testament, see Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles*.

[4] See Kathy Cawsey, "Tutivillus and the 'Kyrkchaterars': Strategies of Control in the Middle Ages."

greater. By the late medieval period, women were perceived as a disruptive influence regardless of their location: in church, where they talked loudly and played cards while sitting in the pews, at the market, at home. They even threatened to contaminate the Church's tools for salvation: the sermon and the confessional booth. Susan Phillips elucidates the Church's position: "For ecclesiastical authorities, idle talk poses both a practical problem and an institutional threat; two of the Church's most important tools of instruction and social control – confession and sermon – are both contaminated by and implicated in idle talk" (8). The Church's problem, which went officially unacknowledged, is that in insisting simultaneously on the paradox of idle talk's dangerous frivolity and its gendered associations, it gave gossip communities an official identity, as those women who talk with each other. In other words, the Church aided in making all women members of gossip communities. As Karma Lochrie notes, "… the Middle Ages assigned gossip its place among the Seven Deadly Sins and generally elevated it as a female vice of extraordinary power" (60).

One of major issues at stake is the idea of a female privacy. In private – that is, away from male surveillance – women formed communities for a number of reasons. Some were socially sanctioned (to attend a birth), and some were not (to share experiences, to drink together, to get advice about an abusive situation). Fundamentally, though, gossip communities exposed how nebulous was the distinction between private and public. In this way, gossip and its supposedly idle talk forged an interpretative community that rivaled and interrogated the social status quo.

In terms of actual social power, however, gossip as a rival interpretative community has limitations. In this vein, Lochrie argues, "If 'the gossip' and 'gossiping' are primary cultural representations of women and their speech in the Middle Ages, then the adoption of these

positions and modes by actual women is necessarily limited" (62). While Patricia Meyer Spacks claims that gossip has the power to "rais[e] questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge" and to "deman[d] answers quite at odds with what we assume as our cultures dominant values" (12), Lochrie argues that, in the medieval period at least, gossip's power "is an oblique one – one that never directly repudiates the dominant culture or institutions it iterates" (62-3). It is important to point out that any social power has limits, and the active, almost anxious representation of gossip communities demonstrates that limited effect does not necessarily indicate the impact of a community.

Indeed, the anxieties surrounding gossips stems from the fact that they did not stay confined to the birthing chamber – they spilled out into the street, the alehouse, the market. The problem, from the male perspective, is that these women explode closed spaces, both aurally with their speech and physically, demonstrating in many respects the Foucauldian idea of an inherently unstable social structure. In *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, Foucault claims there is no grand Resistance to the power inherent in social structure, but rather a series of localized resistances that "can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (96). These resistance points, through their mobility and transitory nature, initiate a force that creates a network of power relations which "ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities" (96). The cleavages and disunity inherent in social relations simultaneously allows for and dictates that modes of resistance represent a broad social spectrum, which is one of the features of the gossip community.

The Foucauldian model is also useful for introducing a way of conceptualizing gossip communities that resists both teleologies and binaries. Through providing a model that posits the

idea of localized resistance that crops up with the power structure, Foucault's theories allow us to begin creating an alternative model for examining historical gossip communities that moves away from the restrictive binary interpretation of gossips as either "recalcitrant" or "vigilante" by opening up the possibility that gossip is a non-linear network, a concept much more in line with literary and historical evidence. Adopting the theoretical approach of Foucauldian power networks enmeshed within the dominant discourse restores mobility to the study of gossip communities, and aids in creating the important distinction that gossip communities demonstrate that women are viable in different spheres simultaneously. This can be seen in the earliest representations of gossips, in the Noah plays of the York, Wakefield, and Chester mystery cycles, where Noah's wife is identified as a gossip in the York and Chester plays and coded as a gossip in the Wakefield. In all the plays, Noah's wife is forcibly brought aboard the ark and isolated from her home, her social networks, and her labor.

Noah's Wife and the Foundation of the Gossip Tradition

Women are key characters in the mystery play representations of Noah's Flood, and in light of this, it is significant that the plays display the first extensive treatment of the gossip's social role through a series of meditations that curtail them by the elimination of all spaces but the domestic space of the immediate family.

Though definitive dating is impossible, it is important to note that the plays in the cycles were not preserved in manuscript until well after the cycles began – one to two hundred years for the York and Wakefield cycles, though for the Chester cycle, there is a difference of about three hundred years between initial performance and preservation in manuscript. This presents something of a dilemma. While medieval scholars can confidently date the York cycle manuscript at around 1467, the Wakefield c. 1500, and the Chester after 1575, the initial

performances date much earlier, between the mid-fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. This makes tracking the origin of the gossip extremely difficult. Did she exist in the earliest performances? If not, when was she inserted into the plot?[5] If so, to what extent did her characterization remain static? While these questions must for this time remain unanswerable conundrums, compelling evidence suggests that the transformation or insertion (if there was one) would have been an easy one – there exists a long tradition of negative representations of Noah's wife throughout Europe and in the Islamic east.

In his edition of *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*, A.C. Cawley claims that "the comic tradition of the perverse and cantankerous Noah's wife, although it does not appear in medieval drama outside of England, is widespread in European art and folklore. Further, it is an old tradition, as least as old as the picture of Noah's ark in the Junius manuscript (*c.* 1000), which shows the wife standing at the foot of the gangway, and one of her sons trying to persuade her to go on board" (33). Some scholars urge caution in assuming the solitary woman standing by the ladder to the ark to be Noah's wife, claiming that to do so may be "reading the medieval cycle Uxor into the illustration"(Mill 614), but literary evidence[6] indicates that Noah's shrewish wife was a familiar character to English audiences before the Norman Conquest.[7] Alfred David traces out representations of Noah's wife in what he calls "a matrix of apocryphal stories about the flood": the Gnostic gospels, where she aids the devil in his attempt to sink the ark and foil God's plan, in the Qur'an, where she, along with Lot's wife, is held up as an example of an unbeliever, and in early fourteenth century manuscripts, which depict the devil perched on the

[5] Gossip figures were inserted into a number of translated texts at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

[6] Mill's article provides a number of useful if somewhat dated sources on this subject.

[7] ibid. 614

Uxor's shoulder before the flood and after the flood, the devil leaving the ark and swimming away (99-104). It is not such a logical leap to go from a devil on the Uxor's shoulder to the mystery cycles' representations of a wife reluctant to enter the ark. Indeed, one of the illuminated panels in the *Ramsey Abbey Psalter* (c. 1286-1316) depicts Noah's wife, devil perched on her back, standing waist-deep in water filled with drowned corpses, Noah's right hand firmly clamped to her left wrist.[8] Noah's wife is clearly recalcitrant, but for her to act so while standing in the flood represents a departure from earlier iconography, as does the effort to represent distinctly male and female corpses. Although Diane Wolfthal claims that the illustration "make[s] clear her reluctance to leave her friends" (129), the drowned corpses are both male and female, which problematizes Wolfthal's claim. While some of the female corpses could ostensibly have been Uxor's gossips, the presence of male corpses complicates her reading, suggesting instead that the corpses are meant to represent humanity, and that the gossip community is part of the community at large. The reason for her reluctance, though, has received little attention, and is worth exploring. The playwrights expanded Uxor Noah's role from its biblical antecedent to make a point, but the nature of the gossip community makes a monolithic, static interpretation impossible to produce. In the depiction of the gossip as the synecdoche of humanity, the playwrights create the gossip, not as a stable signifier, but as a figure filled with potential meanings.

This is especially true in the York and Chester Noah plays. Although the figure of the gossip is used to represent humanity so lost to sin so as to merit total destruction, her deserved death seems to be undercut by the staging, in both plays, of the Uxor's lament. The destruction of the gossips can be understood to represent to the audience the destruction of the community; of a

[8] The illustration is located in Appendix A of Wolfthal's article.

way of life; of humanity itself. By framing the destruction of most of the human population as the death of Uxor's gossips, the plays underscore the spiritual seriousness of the flood for the audience, but there is an unintended consequence: by specifically singling out the gossips for destruction, it shows the power of the gossip community. And in a nice bit of irony, the plays end up having the opposite effect of what appears to be their authors' didactic aims: if depicting the destruction of the gossips is intended to purge them from the social order as symbolic of human perversity and unruliness, it actually preserves them for posterity. So although, as Kathy Cawsey claims, the death of the gossips shows the audience that "their sympathy for the drowned women is wrong and that such sympathies testify to their own fallen natures" (444), the pathos of the depiction also gives us a small space in which to doubt that.

Though V.A. Kolve's sweeping claim for the cycle plays, that they "staged the largest action ever attempted by any drama in the West … though some fifteen hours were required to play the story out, its audiences came to watch it again and again. It held the stage for more than two hundred years, the most truly popular drama England has ever known" (1) is somewhat problematic insofar as it tacitly assumes that medieval England had a professional stage (by proclaiming that the plays "held the stage"), his assertion of the cycles' popularity is borne out by both civic and literary records. As they are a key component of medieval popular culture, they are key to understanding the roots of the good gossip tradition.

This understanding goes further than the fact that several of the cycles contain the earliest representations of gossips. The mystery cycles were to the Latin mass what the gossip communities were to the practice of confession in church. "If," Sarah Beckwith speculates, "the mass was a clerically controlled Latin theophany, the mystery plays were produced and performed by lay people in the vernacular at a time when translation of the Vulgate into Latin

was a controversial undertaking. But the plays are not so much translations of the Vulgate as engagements with the very modes of presencing of the divine. […] It is a form of theater that explores theology through the very logic of performance" (85). Both the mystery cycles and gossip communities operated through an appropriation of language deemed by the Church to be part of its theological province, but the difference comes with intent. The mystery cycles co-opted Christian teachings and translated them into the vernacular and into performance in order to edify audiences through the performances of important Biblical events while gossips resisted pastoral oversight by compartmentalizing language and information that the Church designated for the confessional booth only. Still, the depiction of the gossip within the mystery play serves to highlight the similarities between the two. Just as the Wife of Bath's claim that her gossip is a better repository for her heart than the parish priest serves as a tacit commentary of the Church's particular brand of paternalism, so too does Noah's wife in her role as a gossip lamenting the destruction of her fellows draw attention to the wanton quality of the nearly total destruction of humanity. Through the gossip's plight, each example subtly underscores the failure of social institutions to care for those they are ostensibly supposed to foster, and the cruelty that results from that failure.

The fact that these plays were performed for hundreds of years, well into the early modern period (the York and Wakefield cycles were performed until the 1550s, the Chester plays until the early seventeenth century) certainly demonstrates that they had a crucial role in codifying the traditional representation of the gossip as a vexed site of competing ideologies: a subversive figure who simultaneously upholds and undercuts patriarchal social structures.

An examination of the three Noah plays illustrates the formation of the gossip. All three plays follow the same broad structure: God comes to Noah and tells him that He's going to

destroy humanity because of its sinfulness, but that because of his piety, Noah and his family are to be spared. Noah rejoices and then begins building the ark. The family pitches in, but when the time comes to board the ark, Uxor resists. Fisticuffs ensue, but ultimately she is forcibly made to enter. The ark comes to rest on land after forty days afloat, God promises never to do that again, and symbolizes his covenant with Noah with a rainbow.

The York and Wakefield Uxors are introduced as combative, existing in nearly complete isolation from Noah. In the Wakefield play of *Noah and his Sons*, Noah indicates this with his rueful admission to the audience that "… she is full tethee, / For litill oft anger; / If any thyng wrang be, / Soyne is she wroth" (ll. 270-74).[9] After he greets her and asks after her, she begins a litany of complaints centering on the fact that Noah is absent and thus not fulfilling his husbandly duty to provide for his household: "Where has thou thus long be? / To dede may we dryfe, / Or lif, for the, / For want. / When we swete or swynk, / Thou dos what thou thynk; / Yit of mete and of drynk / Haue we veray skant" (ll. 279-86). The York Noah has also been an absent husband, and as in the Wakefield play, it has had negative consequences. After Noah reveals God's plan to her, the York Uxor chides him, saying, "Noah, thou might have let me wit. / Early and late thou went thereout, / And ay at home thou let me sit / To look that nowhere were well about" (ll. 113-16).[10] Noah's absence has forced his wife into idleness and suspicion, two markers of a shrewish wife. Noah tacitly validates her accusation by deflecting responsibility for his actions onto God: "Dame, thou hold me excused of it, / It was God's will without doubt" (ll. 117-18). This not only demonstrates Noah's lack of care for domestic duties, but also highlights

[9] All quotes from the Wakefield play are from *The Towneley Plays*, ed. Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley

[10] All quotes from the York play are from *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. Richard Beadle and Pamela King. Line 16 roughly translates to "wasting time." Noah's unexplained absences caused her to sit at home with nothing to do.

the disturbing idea that God, not Noah, is primarily responsible for creating the domestic dysfunction. Both plays show Noah's divine duty in direct conflict with the necessities of daily existence, transforming him into a prototype of the transgressive husband and an ideal target of gossip "retraining." While Noah's obedience to God cannot be constructed as transgression, his single-minded devotion to fulfilling God's command comes at the expense of his domestic duties.

These wifely complaints – that Noah is a terrible husband responsible for the dysfunction of the domestic – are often read as justifications for labeling Uxor Noah a shrewish wife.[11] This leads to more problematic justifications, such as the comic portrayal of domestic violence that figures in all three of these play cycles. There are two problems with the staging of violence between Noah and his wife. The first is that the conflict between the couple stands in stark contrast to Noah's relationship with God. Noah is chosen by God as the most righteous man alive, and thus merits exclusion from God's punishment. In this construction, Uxor's rebelliousness is symptomatic of humankind's sinfulness, and so just as God has declared that he needs to regain control over humankind, so must Noah master his wife. Humanity's sin is a disregard for social order, as both V.A. Kolve and Phillip Zarrilli argue. Kolve says, "Just as fallen man is rebellious to his master, God, so too is the wife rebellious to her husband, and only when the proper human relationship is re-established does the universal order begin to construct itself" (150). Zarrilli echoes Kolve's sentiment, emphasizing that Uxor's disobedience is the result of a breakdown in order: "… the fray between Noah and his wife plays out in human

[11] V.A. Kolve calls her "the root-form of the shrewish wife" (144) and Jeffrey Helterman in *Symbolic Action in the Plays of the Wakefield Master* believes her contrariness to be deliberately "malicious" (64).

dramatic terms the misplaced obedience of the social order. Noah's wife's disobedience to her husband parallels the disobedience of the human world to God's sovereignty" (207).[12]

But to interpret the discord between Noah and Mrs. Noah in this way, Katie Normington argues, is to set up a troubling connotation for God's actions. She claims, "This hierarchical model provides difficulty in interpreting Noah and God. The violence that Noah shows towards his wife … forces uneasy implications onto God's treatment of humankind." She concludes with an understatement: "The inconsistency between Noah's treatment of his wife and his behaviour towards God is problematic" (123-4).

Though it is an understatement, drawing attention to the problem at least serves to provide a possible explanation for why the N-Town Uxor is so conformable when none of the other representations of Noah's wife are – it makes the social and theological rationale of obedience to divine and secular authority much less awkward. Though Kolve and Zarrilli posit a teleological reading that restores universal order by the end of the play, Normington's suggestion that the relationships between God, Noah, and Uxor fit no kind of linear model of sin, punishment, and forgiveness refuses to elide over the disturbing possibility that comes of paralleling Noah and God. If Noah is an absentee husband, then to read a deliberate parallel between Noah and God is to suggest that the sins of humankind are the result of inadequate divine husbandry. And exacerbating the negligence that has resulted in human sin, Noah, like God, resorts to violence against the transgressor when the transgression is arguably his own fault.

The second problem with staging violence between Noah and his wife is the fact that Uxor's accusations towards Noah seem to her perfectly reasonable, and indeed, without the comic distraction of violence, they are. All three plays note that Noah has been building the ark

[12] Though Zarrilli's comment is in the context of the Chester cycle, it is equally applicable to the figure of Mrs. Noah in all the cycle plays.

for a hundred years, and during this century, Uxor, by her admission, had no idea what he was doing. This has created a distance between the spouses, and so the Uxor's recalcitrance, Jane Tolmie notes, "hints at some painful exclusions – of wives from the inner lives of husbands, of persons from life itself and from salvation as well" (12). The Uxor's resistance to Noah in this way calls into question a system of sin, confession, and forgiveness by demonstrating its origins in domestic dysfunction and a refusal to admit the possibility of rational objection.

The other versions of this dramatic enactment also emphasize the distance between Noah and his wife. In the York play *The Flood*,[13] the emotional distance between spouses is physically indicated by the fact that Noah designates one of his sons as a go-between. When the ark is ready, Noah sends a message to Uxor, telling her to "hasten with all your main / Unto him, that nothing you mar" (ll. 59-60). The second line is somewhat ambiguous, further indicating the fraught quality of the marital relationship. It can be interpreted as either "so that nothing harms you," or as "so that you don't ruin anything," but as we see, either interpretation is irritating to Mrs. Noah. She goes to the ark to confront him and though initially resistant to Noah's claim that "All that has bone or blood / Shall be over flowed with the flood"[14] (ll. 95-6), she is ultimately convinced of the existence of impending catastrophe through the unified assertions of all three of her sons and her husband. This isn't the typical behavior of a shrewish wife and indicates an open-minded woman capable of making logical decisions.

The Wakefield play takes the depiction of a good but besieged woman a step further. Whereas the York play has the audience watching an estranged couple operating independently

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[13] The York cycle divides the Noah story into two distinct plays, *The Building of the Ark* and *The Flood*. Since Uxor doesn't make an appearance until *The Flood*, I do not discuss the first play.

[14] She tells him he is "near wood," a euphemism for insanity.

of each other, the Wakefield Uxor is in an extremely physically abusive relationship, and calls on the female audience members to witness the severity of her situation. Before Noah can reveal that a flood is coming, Uxor turns to address the female members of the audience:

> We women may wary
> All ill husbandys;
> I have oone, bi Mary,
> That lowsyd me of my bandys!
> If he teyn, I must tary,
> Howsoeuer it standys,
> With seymland full sory,
> Wryngand both my handys
> For drede;
> Bot yit otherwhile,
> What with gam and with gyle,
> I shall smyte and smyle,
> And qwite hym his mede. (ll. 300-12)

With this monologue, the Wakefield Uxor indoctrinates the female audience members into her gossip group by giving them privileged information usually depicted as being the preserve of gossips: she reveals that she is the subject of domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, but that she does not meekly accept Noah's blows as punishment, and in fact casts the action of returning blow for blow as a kind of justice. The conclusion of her monologue paints a grim picture; she will strike Noah and smile as she requites him "his mede" or what is justly due him. With this direct address to the women, she is also attempting to create a feeling of compassion, both for

her immediate situation and also for those other unnamed women (perhaps in the audience) for whom the onstage depiction of a dysfunctional marriage is all too real. In this way, Uxor's addresses subvert the notion that dissatisfaction with one's husband is never justifiable by allowing the wife to speak out against her victimization, not once, but twice, and further, to return blow for blow.

The Wakefield Uxor sees her domestic situation as a binary where she can either be passive or assertive; she can either "wryngand bothe my handys / For drede" or can attempt to "qwite him his mede." She chooses the latter and pays dearly for it. There are two places in the text where blows are exchanged and, following them, a brawl so violent that Noah claims his "bak is nere in two" and Uxor says she is "bet so blo / That I may not thryfe" (ll. 596-98). But this violence is rooted in a contest centered on female labor: the reason for Uxor's refusal to enter the ark until the rains begin is because she has not finished her spinning. All of her daughters-in-law call to her to enter the ark, but Uxor is firm: "In fayth, yit will I spyn/ All in vayn ye carp" (ll. 519-20). In this light, she mobilizes domestic integrity and huswifery as a means of thwarting her husband's authority and privileging her own responsibilities over his demands. Laura F. Hodges argues that the Wakefield Uxor's emphasis on the importance of her spinning allies her with sympathetic remembrance of the human cost of the flood: "Here the distaff represents Uxor's way of life and in this signification it serves the same function as that served by her chatting with her 'gossips' and drinking in the Chester play, of providing a sociological context. In the refusal to stop spinning, the Wakefield Master indicates Uxor's human concern with leaving a familiar environment and activities and her desire to perpetuate her former life as long as possible" (33). The comic violence directed toward her is an attempt to denigrate female labor, a fact made even more obvious when the second round of beatings occur

while Uxor is spinning. The play puts female labor in tension with female obedience, and that tension instigates Noah's attempts to discipline her, attempts that ultimately fail, as the play concludes with tensions still high between the pair.

The denigration of female labor is pervasive throughout the *Noah* plays and even in some criticism. Josie P. Campbell writes of the Wakefield Uxor, "Uxor is a materialist although we are not quite sure how valid her complaint is that Noah is a poor provider … Like the Wife of Bath, Uxor delights in asserting herself over Noah … Uxor, like her sister, the Wife of Bath, is interested in material comfort, and Noah's tale of an ark is bothersome if it means she has to leave what she knows for what is unknown" (80). While it is extremely problematic to equate a fear/skepticism of the unknown or a display of dominance over one's husband with a materialistic nature, these comments on the Wakefield Uxor's motivations further cement her tacit connection to the gossip tradition. The same accusations and assumptions about gossips' behaviors (that they are lazy, even while depicting them at work) are frequent. Further, the desire for material comfort is not inherently immoral, especially when the desire stems from an expressed fear of starvation and destitution. For Campbell to equate a gossip in conflict with her husband over the function of the domestic with the Wife of Bath's excessive love of luxury is not only a fundamental misreading of both texts, but also a denigration of female labor.

The Wakefield Uxor is not the only wife of Noah's who labors, or whose labor is held in some contempt. Part of the York Uxor's defiance of Noah's orders to immediately board the ark is because she wants to go home to get her tools. When Noah and his sons convince Uxor that a flood is coming, she still resists going on the ark: "Nay, needlings home me bus, / For I have tools to truss" (ll. 109-10). Noah remonstrates with her, accusing her of acting in such a way as to imperil the entire family. As with the Wakefield Uxor, the York Uxor accuses her husband of

being the lacking spouse in their unequal domestic partnership; of deliberately leaving her in the dark about his whereabouts while building the ark, of leaving early in the morning and coming home late at night, giving her the impression that he wasted the entire day. In other words, that she had been laboring while he was not. This of course is untrue; the ark is evidence of Noah's labor in providing for his family, standing in comic contrast to the Uxor's complaints of domestic abandonment. Andreea Boboc explains, "Noah's tools are instrumental in fulfilling God's plan. In contrast, when Noah's wife wishes to go home to gather her tools … her intention is rebuked as plain mischief. The problem does not lie in the gendering of tools (men's versus women's) but in their service in the divine scheme. The dramatic tension arises from the discrepancy between *acting according to* God's will, and *acting against* it. Only the tools employed for a spiritual purpose are deemed valuable" (251). Although I disagree with the notion that the gendering of tools is not at the heart of the distance between Uxor and Noah (and by extension, God), Andreea Boboc still raises a valuable point about the "spiritual purpose" that Uxor serves. The Flood is dramatized as a second creation, with Noah as Adam and Uxor as Eve, the mother of the renewed humanity. The problem with this typology is that the Flood is a very different event from the expulsion from Paradise. With Adam and Eve, the theological message is clear, but not so for the Flood. This unease with the theological and moral consequences gets played out in Uxor's recalcitrance and in her devotion to her gossip community. For Alfred David, the pat endings of the plays, which all feature enforced harmony (of a sort) between Uxor and Noah, ring false:

> To be sure, in all the plays she has to be dragged aboard the ark, after which she has little to say in York and Chester, and in [Wakefield] she becomes an active collaborator with the scheme of salvation. But the questions her rebellion raises

> never receive a satisfactory answer, certainly not in the Flood plays, nor perhaps even in the Corpus Christi cycle as a whole. […] If God, as he freely admits in the Bible and in the plays, repents of having created humankind, why did he botch the job so badly, especially if his providence told him all along how it was bound to turn out? The Great Flood is the event posing the most severe test of the doctrine of the *felix culpa*. (98)

Uxor and her gossip community then do more than merely represent human vulnerability – they symbolize the uneasy idea that the Flood was a mistake, that even the most sinful humans (gossips) were unjustly punished. It is in the Flood plays that the gossip becomes a social category in its own right, able to interrogate social hierarchies. The staging of their deaths allows for the ultimate social critique: calling into question God's perfection. What is the audience to make of the fact that God and Noah essentially co-opt the function of gossip by having the revelation of the coming Flood as a secret shared only by two, and moreover, a secret that, like gossip, is an immediate threat to the domestic? It is possible, of course, to make the argument that in building the ark, Noah is fulfilling his function as the head of the household because he not only preserves his family but allows for the continuance of animal life on Earth by preserving a male and a female of each species. But at what cost? He preserves the outward show of the domestic at God's explicit command, but the depiction of family dysfunction (the matriarch at odds with the patriarch) coupled with Noah's apparent disregard for the destruction of humanity leaves the audience with a troubling question: what is the value and place of blind faith and obedience? The plays finally reconcile the domestic discord, but the resolution is unsatisfactory; their inability to tame rebellion in any meaningful way seems to insist on an inevitable tension between doctrine and action, faith and lived experience.

This tension is present in the York play, where Uxor's lament for the dead is a requiem for her kin and her gossips, but it is most directly addressed in the Chester cycle. The Chester Uxor seems initially conformable to Noah's commands and even promotes an uneven division of labor in building the ark. After Noah relates to his family that God has told him to build an ark, everyone declares their support, even Uxor, who outlines the wives' role in the construction of the ship: "And wee shall bringe tymber to, / for wee mon nothinge ells doe – / women bynne weake to underfoe / any great travell" (ll. 65-68).[15] She and her sons' wives all obediently do their parts to aid in the building of the ark, but thirty lines later Uxor resists the notion of boarding the ark. When Noah tells her that their family will live aboard the vessel, she tells him, "In fayth, Noe, I had as leeve thou slepte. / For all thy Frenyshe fare, / I will not doe after thy reade" (ll. 99-101). Richard J. Daniels claims that her refusal "is apparently unmotivated, and preceding and following it she has freely helped Noah construct the ark and then load it with animals" (25). But as R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills point out, "The Wife's rebellion may seem ill-motivated in view of her co-operation … and her awareness of God's injunction. But Noah's words … suggest that he does not know when the rains will come; he therefore suggests that they all enter the Ark before the rain begins. The Wife responds that she will enter only when need arises."[16] In the Chester cycle, as in the York and Wakefield cycles, Uxor demonstrates, if not dispassionate logical behavior, at least a rational interpretation of the little information that she is able to glean from Noah.

The introduction of the gossips into the Flood narrative gives the audience a sense of the stakes, turning the story from a typology of the fall and redemption into a concrete human story

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[15] All quotes from the Chester Noah play come from *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills.

[16] *The Chester Mystery Cycle vol II: Commentary and Glossary*, p.37 n. 97-8

of destruction and loss. In the York play, Boboc says, "Noah's wife is the only character in the play who thinks about the fate of her community … her version of domesticity stretches beyond the limitations of her own family" (252). The representation of gossip community, along with their explicit destruction, challenges hierarchies. Her primary concern, in both the York and Chester plays, is for her gossips. In the York Uxor expresses concern for her gossips first and then for extended family:

> WIFE: Nowe certes, and we should escape from scathe
>
> And so be saved as ye say here,
>
> My co-mothers and my cousins both,
>
> Them would I went with us in fere.
>
> NOAH: To wend in the water it were wothe,
>
> Look in and look without were.
>
> WIFE: Alas, my life me is full loath;
>
> I live over-long this lore to lere.
>
> 1 DAU: Dear mother, mend your mood,
>
> for we shall wend you with.
>
> WIFE: My friends that I from yode
>
> Are over flowed with flood.
>
> 2 DAU: Now thank we God all good
>
> that us has granted grith (ll. 141-154).

Uxor's concern stands in stark contrast to that of her family, whose unconcern for those who perished in the flood borders on the chilling. When Uxor says that she has lived too long (implying that to outlive her gossips is to live too long), the first daughter is at least marginally

comforting, offering the company of herself and the other wives as a substitute. The second daughter, however, ignores the substance of the conversation to what amounts to a whitewashing of the situation, telling both women that they should be grateful for God's protection.

But Uxor remains troubled. After the Flood, Noah and his sons sing a song of praise and thanksgiving for their safe delivery, but she asks, "But Noah, where are now all our kin / And company we knew before?" To which an irritated Noah tersely replies, "Dame, all are drowned, let be thy din, / And soon they bought their sins sore. / Good living let us begin, / So that we grieve our God no more …"(ll. 269-72). Kathy Cawsey observes that, "Uxor's lament is an implicit criticism of an unmerciful God – an unorthodox, female commentary on the Flood story" (444), and her compassion is in stark contrast to the marked absence of pity on the part of Noah.

The Chester play is even more explicit in Uxor's relationship with her gossips. She refuses to board the ark after the animals are all loaded, telling Noah to leave without her: "Yea, syr, sett up your seale / and rowe for the with evell hayle; / for withowten any fayle / I will not owt of this towne." After a suitable pause, she reveals that this is less an ultimatum than it is the opening gambit for a negotiation. She demands the safe passage of her gossips: "But I have my gossips everyechone, / One foote further I will not gone. / They shall not drowne, by sayncte John, and I may save there life. // The loved me full well, by Christe. / But thou wilte lett them into thy chiste, / elles rowe for the, Noe, when thy liste / and gett thee a newe wyfe" (ll. 197-208). This passage suggests a number of qualities of late medieval gossip communities. Most obviously, it reaffirms the strong bond between gossips, echoing the intimacy that Chaucer's Wife of Bath declared when she claimed that her gossip knew her secrets better than their parish priest. Here, Uxor makes clear that her loyalties lie primarily with her gossips, not her family.

She even declares that the duty she owes to her gossips supersedes the duty she owes to Noah as his wife when, in the last two lines of her speech, she delivers the ultimatum that either Noah allow the gossips to board the ark, or he will be without a wife. Mary Wack notes,

> Noah's wife repudiates his authority, and marriage itself, unless he accepts her gossips into the ark – that is, incorporates her community of women into the larger social body. In other words, in a salvific act she will form a new community, a women's community, outside the control of this aged patriarch, and she makes explicit that the formation of such a community involves the denial of the hierarchical bond of marriage. It is a challenge to religious *and* civic authority, a challenge that expresses both a longing for community and a sense of community divided. (44)

This passage also suggests something about the size and importance of the gossip community. Mrs. Noah declares "I will not owt of this towne," which not only implies that the network of gossips is spread throughout the settlement, but also establishes the gossip community as a public, civic entity that supersedes the notion of the town as a civic structure: the gossip community is the town. In this tension between family and community, the family is made to look like a poor substitution.

While the family bickers, a group of gossips[17] enters with information that the flood is coming:

> The fludd comes fleetinge in full faste,
>
> one everye syde that spredeth full farre.
>
> For fere of drowninge I am agaste;

[17] Lumiansky and Mills posit that line 224, "The Good Gossips," is the title of a drinking song and indicates that several gossips would be onstage (39).

good gossippe, lett us drawe nere.

And lett us drinke or wee departe,
for oftetymes wee have done soe.
For at one draught thou drinke a quarte,
and soe will I doe or I goe.

Here is a pottel full of malnesaye good and stronge;
yt will rejoyse both harte and tonge.
Though Noe thinke us never so longe,
Yet wee wyll drinke atyte (ll. 224-235).

One of the most remarkable aspects of this scene is the fact that the gossips acknowledge their "fere of drowning," but still insist on fulfilling the communal ritual of drinking upon departure. That it is communal and ritualistic is signaled by the frequency with which they meet and the assertion that drinking malmsey (malnesaye) is a restorative act that will strengthen and invigorate both the spiritual and physical (the heart and tongue).

One of Uxor's sons, Japhett, recognizes the communal ritual before him, and so he frames his appeal to his mother not just as an abstract familial obligation, but more importantly, as an appeal from the entire family community. He calls out from the ark, "Mother, wee praye you all together – / for we are here, your own childer – / come into the shippe for feare of the wedder, / for his love that [you] bought" (ll. 236-39). She refuses to acknowledge the primacy of the family obligation over that of her gossips', and repurposes Japhett's use of "all" as representative of the entire family unit to emphasize that the gossip community, not her family,

must remain whole: "That will I not for all your call / but I have my gosseppes all" (ll. 240-41). The standoff is only resolved when Sem (Shem) physically drags her aboard the ark, telling her curtly, "In fayth, mother, yett thow shall, / whether thou will or nought" (ll. 242-44). That it is one of her sons and not her husband who brings her aboard is telling. It indicates that Japhett's appeal to join a unified family is a fantasy. In reality, the family is extremely fractured, so much so that the son must do the father's duty, as Noah is not present in this scene. Further proof of the family dysfunction is the fact that it is impossible to determine if Ham, the third son, is even in the scene, as he has no lines during this exchange.[18] Presented with the alternative, Uxor's preference for her gossips is unsurprising.

The gossips scene is filled with quiet courage. They appear to be under no illusions of being saved, and the gossip tells Uxor that this is a leave-taking, something that they have done frequently in the past: "And lett us drinke or wee departe, / for oftetymes wee have done soe." For Mary Wack, the appearance and disappearance of the gossip community symbolizes the polysemy of women's social roles: "The formation and dissolution of the gossips' community addresses ambivalent feelings about women's place within the social body" (45). While this is

[18] There are some manuscript variations that have Noah reacting to his wife's declaration to remain with her gossips. David Mills, co-editor of the Chester cycle with R.M. Lumiansky for the Early English Text Society, published a modernized edition of the cycle that includes textual variations. This edition has Noah present in the scene, and he calls on Shem to witness Uxor's behavior. After her declaration that if he doesn't bring her gossips on board, he should look for a new wife, Shem promises Noah to "fetch her in, I trow, / withouten any fail" (ll. 211-212). He then calls to Uxor, "Mother, my father after thee send / and bids thee into yonder ship wend. / Look up and see the wind, / for we been ready to sail" (ll. 213-16). She refuses, and like the York play, uses her son as a go-between: "Son, go again to him and say / I will not come therein today" (ll. 217-18). At this sign of defiance, Noah himself calls down to her, "Come in, wife, in twenty devils' way! / – or else stand there without" (ll. 219-20). When Ham asks, "Shall we all fetch her in?" Noah assents, "Yea, sons, in Christ's blessing and mine! / I would ye hied you betime / for of this flood I stand in doubt" (ll. 221-24). The gossips immediately have their song after this, and the scene proceeds as related above. Though the scene portrays Noah acknowledging that his wife's behavior is a problem, there is still the matter of Shem bringing Uxor on board the ark instead of Noah.

true, she does not address what is actually being staged: an implicit celebration marking the rebirth of humanity. The scene dramatically shows the tension between the cyclic time associated with women because of their reproductive capacity and the linear model that posits a divine teleology with history as a series of traceable events from Creation to the Last Judgment. With their song, the gossips fulfill their spiritual function by celebrating the propagation of the species. Though it remains a deeply unsettling scene, as it requires their deaths to usher in the rebirth of humanity, the gossips' song evokes the model of cyclic time, thus creating positive possibility in what is otherwise a tragedy. The song, performed as the Flood closes in, demonstrates that the gossip community belongs to the two trajectories at once. While the majority of the gossips perish, Uxor survives to establish a gossip community after the Flood.

The abjuration of her sons' pleas to acknowledge "her own childer" is a dramatic representation of a gossip's priorities (the community requires as much maintenance as the family) and signals her commitment to the gossip tradition. Although she is forcibly brought on board the ark by her son Shem, and is thus, as Gail McMurry Gibson writes, "dragged into the patriarchal order of the ark" (15), and though no more is said about gossips or female communities, nor is there any mourning for those killed by the flood, the fact of Uxor's survival ensures the survival of the gossip tradition.

The song of the good gossips is provocative. It bears a remarkable resemblance to the good gossip carols that appeared at the end of the 15th century. The Chester manuscript dates from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, well after the gossip tradition was established. It is difficult to say with any certainty if the song in the mystery play is native to the play. Given the evidence of the York and Wakefield plays, neither of which contain speaking roles for gossips, let alone a song, it is probable that the song is a later addition, making the

Chester Noah play an exemplum of the gossip-insertion craze at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Of course, it is equally likely that the gossip song in the play is the one that started it all.

Although representations of gossips in the mystery cycles are largely confined to the Noah pageants, the gossip appears in one play outside of the Noah plays. In the Chester cycle, she also appears in the Harrowing of Hell. In an uncomfortable echo of a God who drowned a group of gossips in the Flood, we discover that Christ has rescued all of humanity except for a gossip. "Mulier" steps forward to speak:

> Sometyme I was a taverner,
> a gentle gossippe and a tapster,
> of wyne and ale a trustie bruer,
> which woe hath me wrought.
> Of kannes I kept no trewe measure.
> My cuppes I sould at my pleasure,
> deceavinge manye a creature,
> thoe my ale were nought.
>
> And when I was a bruer longe,
> with hopes I made my alle stronge;
> esshes and hearbes I blend amonge
> and marred so good malt.
> Therfore I may my handes wringe,
> shake my cuppes and kannes ringe.
> Sorrowfull maye I syke and singe

that ever I so dalt (ll. 185-300).[19]

The gossip goes on to say that she will be joined by all taverners and tapsters of the city for "hurtinge the commonwealth" (l. 304) by brewing under-strength ale, by adulterating wine and ale, and by under-pouring their brews. She is not completely alone though, because Satan remains, as do two other demons, all of whom welcome her. Satan tells her, "Though Jesu be gonne with our meanye, / yet shalt thou abyde here still with mee / in payne withowt ende" (ll. 326-28). The second demon calls her "sweete ladye" and tells her that they are to be married in a parody of a Christian marriage because her adulterated ale caused many to be "brougt to bedd / farre worse then anye beaste" (ll. 331-32). The third demon parodies both the wedding feast and the gossip feast by telling her that because of "Usynge cardes, dyce, and cuppes smale, / nowe thou shall have a feaste!"(ll. 334-36).

This scene, like the gossips' song in the Noah play, is unique to the Chester cycle and anachronistically link the plays to contemporary Chester. Though some scholars have contended that both scenes are irrelevant or unnecessary (especially the gossip in Hell), a persuasive case has been made[20] that both scenes are relevant to the plays, even if they do not date to the original performance. Both scenes point to an issue at the heart of gossip representation: women's place in the public sphere.

This was an especially thorny issue in Chester, though it was popping up all over the kingdom. In 1540, the town fathers of Chester passed a law making it illegal for women between the ages of fourteen and forty to keep an alehouse or tavern. Although young women had

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[19] Though only titled "Play XVII" in the Chester manuscript, the editors have titled it "Harrowing of Hell."

[20] R.M. Lumiansky examines this issue in "Comedy and Theme in the Chester *Harrowing of Hell*." *Tulane Studies in English*, 10 (1960): 5-12.

previously done so, the mayor and aldermen claimed that in doing so, Chester alewives and tavernesses were going against the custom of "any other places of this realm" (Clark 79). Marjorie Keniston McIntosh writes, "Cultural evidence suggests resistance on the part of Chester's unusually powerful female brewers and sellers of ale against this order" (159). In fact, Mary Wack points out, "alewives in Chester took their place along with other crafts in the Corpus Christi procession. Women's participation in the ale trades was thus a long-standing part of their identity in public life and civic ritual" (38).

Wack also demonstrates that the ban on women running alehouses and taverns was just the culmination of a series of limitations placed on women's public roles in the 1530s: the cap legislation of 1533 required that singlewomen be made distinguishable from married women through the use of regulated headgear. More troubling was the law curtailing the gossips' feast that was used to celebrate a woman's successful childbirth. The law forbade all food and alcohol to be used to celebrate either the birth or the churching, and also restricted the women in the birth chamber to female kin only: friends were not allowed access to the birth. "The law thus privatized a woman's reproductive labor by excluding her friends' presence during birth (again dividing woman from woman). It furthermore withdrew public recognition of that labor's contribution to the community through restricting the money spent on ceremonial display" (Wack 40). Given the importance of the birth ritual, these moves on the part of the Chester town government exist only to curtail women's public roles. They also provide vital context for interpreting the reason for the gossips in the Chester cycle.

Given the fact that ale production was not only a woman's domestic responsibility but also one of the ways in which she could legitimately earn money, the move to curtail women's associations with alehouses was a reaction against the idea of women's social and financial

mobility. The most obvious representative of this is the gossip, a woman who not only brewed ale but also patronized alehouses with her fellow gossips, critiquing their husband's transgressions in a convivial atmosphere outside of masculine supervision. These "gossips' meetings" became increasingly associated with idle, destructive talk. The attacks on the Chester women, the feminization of idle talk, and the exclusive association of that idle talk with gossips came just as ale was being replaced by beer as the national drink of England. The association of women with ale was of long standing: until the late medieval period women brewed ale as part of their domestic duties. Judith Bennett notes that "*Brewster* once had a clear and unequivocal meaning: a female brewer. In the fourteenth century, when women did most of the brewing in most places, their presence was signified in the various languages of the time: *braciatrices* and *pandoxatrices* in Latin texts, *braceresses* in Anglo-Norman, and *brewsters* in the English that was being used with more and more frequency. […] By 1500, however, the neat gender distinction of *brewster* and *brewer* was fading away" (3). Women, who had until the fifteenth century been largely responsible for the brewing and distribution of ale to the household (and even the occasional selling to other households), gradually fell out of the trade as it became increasingly more profitable and male-oriented. By 1615, Gervase Markham was able to delimit the female role of brewing to a strictly domestic activity while simultaneously expounding on its international importance as a valuable trade commodity. When discussing the importance of malt, a component of both beer and ale, he writes,

> from it is made the drink, by which the household is nourished and sustained, so to the fruitful husbandman … it is an excellent merchandise, and a commodity of so great trade, that not alone especial towns and counties are maintained thereby, but also the whole kingdom, and divers others of our neighbouring nations. This

> office or place of knowledge belongeth particularly to the housewife; and though we have many excellent men maltsters, yet it is properly the work and care of the woman, for it is a house work, and done altogether within doors, where generally lieth her charge. (180)

Markham deftly provides malt with a public and domestic presence. Though it is most properly to be found in the domestic space being produced by women, when it enters the public sphere as a marketable commodity it becomes the substance that sustains the kingdom. Women, though not allowed to actively engage in malt's public presence, nevertheless are publicly acknowledged as nurturing the nation. Markham's construction of the proper housewifely behavior does not allow for any action where a woman attempts to engage in a public performance of labor, even if that labor can be directly connected to her domestic labors. The reasons behind this shift from female brewing to male brewing are complex, but suffice it to say that historical factors that resulted from the Black Death, such as an increased immigrant population as well as a spike in urban population as people left the countryside for the higher wages of the cities, as well as technological innovations (immigrants from Flanders and Germany introduced hops and beer [Monckton 11]), and commercial/regulatory[21] factors all conspired to shift the English national

[21] Because beer was brewed with hops, it had a longer shelf life, thus making it easier to transport and distribute. This greatly added to beer's commercial appeal over ale, and coupled with the fact that brewed beverages were strictly regulated, and that the regulatory body was almost exclusively male, beer gradually became the beverage of choice for most English people. It was more popular in the south of England than the North, where it was viewed with suspicion as a "foreign" drink. Judith Bennett relates the tensions between "native" drinkers of ale and the "alien" brewers of beer, and declares that, "only in the eighteenth century did the distinction between English ale and Dutch beer finally pass out of common currency" (80).

drink from the largely female-produced ale to the male-produced beer and male-imported sweet wine.[22]

Marjorie Keniston McIntosh states that in the later fourteenth and into the fifteenth centuries, women perceived as respectable could engage in the brewing and selling of ale without the overview of their husbands, but that this was merely a temporary situation, "vulnerable to ongoing increases in the scale of production, the introduction of beer and sweet wines, and growing discomfort about women's roles as keepers of public houses" (181). While this records the systematic exclusion of women from the brewing and distribution of ale, it leaves unanswered the question of why ale became associated with women and beer with men. After all, women brewed beer, and were even among the first to sell it (Bennett 95). But, as Judith Bennett relates, the culture strongly favored men: "women more often than men encountered a complex web of factors – legal, economic, social, political, ideological – that made them less able than men to respond to the opportunities presented by brewing beer instead of ale. These factors … ensured that beerbrewing as it developed in late medieval England was a trade of men" (97). And so by the sixteenth century, the time when gender distinctions between *brewster* and *brewer* were collapsing, ale was being brewed with the hops that had originally been associated with beer: "some time in the sixteenth century, each of the two drinks was being brewed with hops. After this it becomes difficult to draw a clear distinction between them" (Monckton 71). Ale, always political in its identity as the English national beverage, became increasingly associated in the sixteenth century with gender and class as the perception of it as the beverage of women and the lower classes intensified. In the middle of the century, *Gammer*

[22] Marjorie Keniston McIntosh notes that the sixteenth century saw an increase in the consumption of sweet wines: "Served normally in taverns or inns and increasingly attractive to men of middling as well as higher social status, sweet wine's popularity helped to restrict the clientele of alehouses by the Elizabethan period" (167).

Gurton's Needle was staged at Cambridge University lampooning rustic gossip communities and alehouse culture, a play that synthesizes gossips of the late medieval and the early modern periods.

Gammer Gurton: The "Good" Gossip vs. the "Good Gossip"

Where the medieval cycle plays stage tensions between patriarchy and female labor by staging unease with the superficially "simple solution" of drowning gossip communities, *Gammer Gurton's Needle* shows a gossip community trying to reconcile competing ideologies of female labor and female idleness. *Gammer Gurton's Needle* is in many ways an extension of the Corpus Christi plays (and indeed, the Chester plays were not written down until after *Gammer Gurton* appeared onstage, perhaps tantalizingly suggesting that the play had some influence on the Chester cycle) and serves as a transition piece between the late medieval and early modern representations of gossip communities. The play is most frequently cited as a contextualizing tool for histories of the English stage – it was written sometime around 1550 for the undergraduates at Cambridge, it is often called "the first English comedy"[23] because it is quite

[23] This honor has also been awarded to *Ralph Roister Doister*, c. 1554. For a not too painful discussion of the process by which *Gammer Gurton's Needle* is dated, see Whitworth, *Three Sixteenth-Century Comedies*, p. xxxii. In *Four Tudor Comedies*, William Tydeman suggests an original date of 1552, but notes that "several references to the 'queen' in the present text suggest that it was revised during the reign of Mary I or Elizabeth I" (97). Howard B. Norland contends that "because the border on the title page is the same as that for Thomas Ingelend's *Disobedient Child*, printed by Colwell in 1560 in his first year as an independent printer, and because the border does not appear on any extant printings by Colwell in the latter years of his career, it appears likely that at least the title page of the play was set in print much earlier than its publication date of 1575" (*Drama in Early Tudor Britain, 1485-1558*, p. 280). Douglas Duncan refreshingly contends that the dates of the plays matter much less than the content, and since, as he posits, *Gammer* "is the less indebted to Roman models, Stevenson [one of the candidates for the play's author "Mr. S"] is credited with having pushed English comedy a step of two closer toward independence" ("*Gammer Gurton's Needle* and the Concept of Humanist Parody," pp. 177-8).

possibly the first example of a vernacular secular comedy that divided the action up by acts and scenes and respected the classical unities of time and place.[24]

Surprisingly little critical attention has been given to the play, especially considering its position as the earliest English comedy. This gets wryly acknowledged by a number of its critics, who describe the critical atmosphere surrounding the play as "grudgingly appreciative criticism" (Ingram 257) and describe those who study the play as an outcast critical community: "Even today one finds it jokingly used as a touchstone of unsophistication, and its title alone can raise condescending smiles, as anyone who has worked on it knows" (Duncan 177). What is so fascinating about this critical reception of the play is how much it unwittingly reproduces the discourse surrounding gossip communities and female labor: the critical community of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* is a meta-community under siege whose work on the play is undervalued by the scholarly community at large, and that *Gammer Gurton's Needle* exists as an important but ultimately unacknowledged comedy. United by a knowledge shared by very few (that the play is intrinsically valuable), the critical commentators of the play have adopted a rhetorical stance very like that of late medieval gossip communities: they begin by relating the abuses the play has suffered (misunderstanding the function of the play's scatology,[25] trivialization of the play's plot) at the hands of the rest of the academy, much as the good gossips begin their sessions together by relating the domestic abuses perpetuated by their husbands. Then there is generally a move toward restoring the play to the dramatic community, which ultimately fails in its

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[24] See R.W. Ingram, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle:* Comedy Not Quite of the Lowest Order?" (259-260), Altman, *The Tudor Play of Mind* (especially 152-161), Duncan (177), J.W. Robinson, (46), and Norland (280).

[25] See Duncan, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle* and the Concept of Humanist Parody," R.W. Ingram, Robinson, "The Art and Meaning of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*," William B. Toole, "*Gammer Gurton's Needle*: Comedy Not Quite of the Lowest Order?" and John. W. Veltz, "Scatology and Moral Meaning in Two English Renaissance Plays."

objective. The reason for this failure is the play, much like historical gossip communities, is a victim of false historical teleology. Even though the play was a huge success, performed, printed, and reprinted numerous times (even earning two mentions in the Martin Marprelate debate[26]), it is largely treated now (with a distinct note of apology) as an example of the early Tudor taste for farcical bawdiness, though, as one of its critics contends, at least its "crudeness" is not as bad as that of *Mankind*: "Crudity can be a club with which to beat a certain frank bawdiness that is nonetheless much less to be maligned than the distasteful smut of such Tudor pieces as *Mankynd*" (Ingram 267).

This move, which smacks of scholarly anxiety, frequently leads to introductions that include a declaration of the play's triviality.[27] The perception of a taint in working on this play is curious, and extremely telling. Though the plot can be pithily outlined as the loss and eventual recovery of a needle, to judge the play's merits thus not only demonstrates a serious misreading of the play's importance to women's history and the history of the English stage, but it does so by conflating triviality and simplicity. Simplicity of plot is one of the Aristotelian accusations leveled at comedy when critics want to highlight tragedy's primacy over comedy. To deploy the Aristotelian concept of magnitude in this instance shows the level of masculine privilege at work in this history of this play's scholarship, and causes most scholars to overlook the point of the

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[26] *The Martin Marprelate Tracts: A Modernized and Annotated Edition*, ed. Joseph L. Black, pp. 67 and 83. The tracts allude to the author of *Gammer Gurton's Needle* as John Bridges, but, as Howard B. Norland contends, it is extremely unlikely that Bridges is the playwright because "Bridges had no connection with Christ's College, where the title page indicates the play was performed, and his name does not begin with 'S'" (281).

[27] Frank Ardolino says the play's characters are "overly concerned with the whereabouts of the small and trivial, the physical needle" (23); R.W. Ingram states that "the humor of the play resides in the tangle of quarrels and misunderstandings caused by such a trivial thing as the loss of a needle" (258); Curtis Perry claims "the play is ostentatiously trivial at the level of plot (a needle is lost, lamented, and found)" (217).

satire[28] – the "trivial" needle, that female instrument of the domestic, is a symbol of the gossip community's relationship to the rest of the village society. As one recent critic states, the needle has an "unexpectedly primary if precarious role in stabilizing social, sexual, and gendered relations" (Wall 68). This is also how community is constructed – trivial, insofar as it is common, and yet precious in the maintenance of peaceful civic order.

To focus on the triviality of the plot is to miss the importance of this play to the English gossip tradition. Wendy Wall finds it "provocative … that when a playwright chose to introduce the very first English play to undergraduates steeped in Latin, he chose the topic of a housewife's mischances" (60). Like Wall, I also find this provocative, but where her agenda is to demonstrate how the play locates emergent English nationalism in the vernacular and domestic female space, thereby troubling the male dominated Latinate space of the university, my project takes a different tack. *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, the first English comedy, is also, crucially, a comedy about gossips, specifically, about the symbiotic relationship of the gossip community to the community at large. This is crystallized in the play's title: the Gammer's surname, Gurton, was also an actual village located just outside Cambridge.[29] Metaphorically, then, as was evinced in the Chester *Noah* play, the gossip *is* the town, and the chaos caused by the loss of Gammer Gurton's needle and the subsequent conflict that arises between Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat

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[28] In his recent article on the play, Frank Ardolino claims that Gammer Gurton's joy at the discovery of the needle is "disproportionate": "She … has regained her most valuable possession, which is, in fact, only a needle. The emphasis she puts on its restoration is disproportionate to its actual value …" (26). Ardolino believes the needle's only value is as a religious metaphor; Protestant propaganda that equates the trivial needle with Catholicism.

[29] J.W. Robinson observes, "Like Trumpington, Girton (the place-name from which the surname 'Gurton' – unique in English drama – comes) is a village just outside Cambridge, and the members of Christ's College are about to witness something taking place in their own backyard – a fair assumption, I think, especially since the action in *The Two Angry Women of Abington* takes place just outside Oxford" (50-51).

suggests that even in a sleepy rural area, the female community of gossips was the prop that allowed the entire community to function. Instability in the gossip community (caused by the fight between Gurton and Chat) threatens the stability of the community as a whole. That the trigger for the events of the play is the gossip's loss of a needle, the metonymic object of female labor, demonstrates *Gammer Gurton*'s ties to the medieval gossip tradition. The proverbially trivial needle, like the York Uxor's "tools" or the Wakefield Uxor's spinning, are rendered comic, mitigating the importance of female labor and the unity of the gossip community to the functioning of both the domestic and the larger village community. Much in the same way that the gossip communities in the medieval *Noah* plays represent humanity as a whole, so too does the gossip community of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. Moreover, the fact that gossips are the subject of the first English comedy indicates the importance of the gossip community to English social identity.

The play opens with Gammer Gurton mending her servant Hodge's leather breeches so that he can court the maid Kirstian Clack in style. Kirstian has apparently given him encouragement: "She smiled on me the last Sunday, when ich put off my cap," he relates to Diccon "the Bedlam," who is the source of all the mischief in the play (2.1.344).[30] While chasing the cat away from the milk, Gammer Gurton loses her needle, which puts the household into an uproar. Diccon enters into the scene of disorder, and as a bit of mischief, tells Gammer Gurton that her neighbor – fellow gossip, and proprietress of the village alehouse, Dame Chat – had found it. Chat, of course, knows nothing about this, but Diccon pays her a visit and tells her

[30] All quotes from the play come from the edition reproduced in *Four Tudor Comedies* and edited by William Tydeman. Tydeman's edition retains original spelling and punctuation, but continues line numbers throughout the play instead of resetting them with each act. This makes it difficult to negotiate between the other modern edition of the play, located in *Three Sixteenth-Century Comedies*, edited by Charles W. Whitworth, who chooses to modernize spelling and line numbers.

that Gammer Gurton has been stealing her chickens. In the meantime, Diccon causes Hodge to soil himself with fear when he convinces Hodge that he can call up the devil to help with the search for the needle. In most farces, causing a character to soil himself and then taunting him with the question, "be thine arse-strings brusten?" (2.1.387) is the height of entertainment. In *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, however, the climax of the play comes later, in a brawl between the two gossips. The law is called, as is the curate, but no one discovers the needle's location. The curate, Dr. Rat, is subjected to a large share of the play's humiliation, but his disgrace does not aid in finding the elusive needle. It is found at the end of the play when Diccon swats Hodge's buttock and Hodge cries out in pain: "Chwas almost undone, 'twas so far in my buttock!" (5.2.1254). Presumably, Hodge changed his breeches when he soiled himself, allowing for the discovery at the play's dénouement.

The prologue establishes this play as a gossip comedy. Gammer Gurton's neighbor, Dame Chat, is introduced to us as "her deare gossyp" (l. 7). The prologue then goes on to describe the conflict Diccon creates between the two women: "Hereof there ensued so fearfull a fraye, / Mas Doctor was sent for these gossyps to staye, / Because he was Curate and estemed full wyse, / Who found that he sought not, by Diccon's device" (ll. 11-14). That the prologue describes the gossips' contention as being beyond the reach of the curate demonstrates the scope of the disruption: the Church mediated most of the petty legal problems of its parishioners, and the fact that the gossips' fight proves to be beyond mediation by both the curate and the magistrate reveals both the inadequacy of religious and legal institutions to mediate even a "trivial" dispute, and the gossip community's crucial role in the maintenance of communal order.

The gossip community is fractured because it is out of balance. Gammer Gurton, though she is in many ways figured as ridiculous, is a "good" gossip: she is industrious, mindful of her

servants and invested in the proper functioning of her household. Since there is no "Gaffer" Gurton, it is to be assumed that she is the head of the house, so the staging of the household as functional at the beginning of the play indicates her overall competence. Dame Chat, however, is a "good gossip": though she runs an alehouse, her business is slow, and there are indications in the play that she drinks a good deal of her product. Her surname is more definite proof of her negative characterization. A perusal of *The Oxford English Dictionary* shows that "chat" had its modern meaning of "idle talk" by the early sixteenth century. The pitting of these two women against each other, and the failure of formal institutions to immediately or satisfactorily rectify the dispute, demonstrates that if the gossip community is thrown into disorder, the organizations structured to ensure social function lose their efficacy. There is nothing in the play that is not affected by the gossip community, including Diccon, the supposedly placeless vagrant.

Diccon is frequently interpreted as the central figure of the play due to his obvious theatrical heritage as a Vice figure – it is he who sets the events of the play in motion. Interestingly, though, because of his social label of "the Bedlam," he is also most frequently interpreted as existing outside of any community. This is in part because "the Bedlam" is one of the criminal types described by Thomas Harman.[31]

Douglas Duncan thinks Diccon's status as a Bedlam carries with it no class stigma, and in fact, allows him the freedom to indulge in mischievous pranks that demonstrate the instability of

[31] In "A Caveat for Common Cursitors," Harman describes the behavior of "Abraham men," who are "those that feign themselves to have been mad, and have been kept either in Bedlam or in some other prison a good time, and not one amongst twenty that ever came in prison for any such cause; yet will they say how piteously and most extremely they have been beaten and dealt withal. Some of these be merry and very pleasant; they will dance and sing; some others be as cold and reasonable to talk withal. These beg money; either when they come at Farmers' houses they will demand Bacon, either cheese or wool, or anything that is worth money. And if they espy small company within, they will with fierce countenance demand somewhat. Where for fear the maids will give them largely to be rid of them. If they may conveniently come by any cheat, they will pick and steal, as the upright man or Rogue, poultry or linen" (Kinney 127).

social hierarchies: “Lacking a place of his own in society, he is thereby licensed to perpetrate mischief, as Bailly’s indulgent treatment of him shows, and to invert the hierarchies of birth and education …” (186). Carol Thomas Neely agrees, and intensifies Duncan’s claim by positing that Diccon “controls” the play: “Diccon’s characterization as ‘the Bedlam’ does not signify that he has been in Bedlam or that he himself is mad; indeed he is in control of the play. It is a metonymy for his capacity to trigger excess, folly, and loss of control in others and disrupt the social order – which he does freely because, as a vagabond, beggar, thief, and trouble-maker outside of social hierarchies, he has no allegiances or rules” (29). And because of this “outsider” status, Joel Altman claims that Diccon’s “control” allows him to “[orchestrate] the search [for the needle] into a series of confrontations between town and country that begins with a conjuration and ends with a formal legal inquiry” (152-3). These critics, disparate though they are in other respects, all agree that Diccon is socially without place, and that gives him a kind of freedom to create social disruptions. To use the term “disruption” is perhaps too slight. Diccon effects a rupture in the social fabric, but how is he, the placeless Bedlam and social outsider, able to orchestrate these confrontations between Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat?

In fact, Diccon is not outside of social hierarchies. He enters the play and immediately announces his relationship to the community by constructing it through gossips: “Many a myle have I walked, divers and sundry waies, / And many a good man’s house have I bin at in my daies; / Many a gossip’s cup in my tyme have I tasted …” (1.1.1-3). He may not be settled, but he has the ability to enter into gossip networks and taste their cups, a reference to the alehouses where he would presumably get his free meals. His rootlessness does not invert social hierarchies as much as it exposes the fact that the hierarchies fail to impose any meaningful social order on the community. Social equanimity for the community at large is only to be found when the

gossip community is reconciled. This is borne out by the play's conclusion, when Bayly turns to the curate Dr. Rat, who has previously threatened legal action on Dame Chat for her physical assault, and tells him that he will waive his customary fee if Rat will drop the case:

> Wel, Master Rat, you must both learne and teach us to forgeve:
> Since Diccon hath confession made and is so cleane shreve.
> If ye to me conscent to amend this heavie chaunce,
> I wil injoyne him here with some open kind of penaunce:
> Of this condition, where ye know my fee is twenty pence
> For the bloodshed, I am agreed with you here to dispence.
> Ye shall go quite, so that ye graunt the matter now to run,
> To end with mirth emong us al, even as it was begun. (5.2.1201-7)

Bayly's offer to waive the legal fee in exchange for Rat's decision to allow communal restoration to continue reflects the fact that the play's conflict and its resolution happen in the community, not within official social structures. This is further emphasized when Diccon, as part of his penance, slaps Hodge's buttock, thus discovering the needle, which suggests that it is not through direct intervention of Church or State that social order is restored, but through the restoration of the gossip community, a community based on interpersonal relations, not economic or legal ones.

But what is Diccon's motivation in the play? Why lie to Gurton, Chat, and Hodge? It is possible to say, as many critics have, that it's simply a function of his rootlessness, and that his lack of a social place is signaled through mischievous behavior, as if a social outsider has no choice but to disrupt a community of which he is not a member. One possible explanation lies in the fact that the community he disrupts is largely matriarchal, which as Diccon's disruptive lies

demonstrate is a precarious social arrangement. Gail Kern Paster observes that " … the two households organizing the social world of the play are both female headed. In both households the symbolic reciprocity of domestic and bodily thresholds as sites of social interference, exposure, and perilous change is evident" (116). Diccon's deception works, not because Gammer Gurton and Dame Chat have an inherent distrust of each other, but because he takes one of the qualities of the gossip community, that it is an ad-hoc institution, arising as needed, and uses it against the women of the play. Gossip communities had no centralized locus of power and depended on unverified/unverifiable information, the truth of which was seldom questioned because the character of the gossip was considered to be verification enough. (This might account for Joel Altman's otherwise puzzling assertion that the play has a "morally neutral atmosphere"[154].)

That this play is about the relationship between the gossip community and the village community at large is also evident in the characterization of Gurton and Chat, or more precisely, in the lack of character depth. Howard B. Norland describes Gammer Gurton as "little more than a foolish housewife who places a ridiculously high value on a tiny household tool" and Chat as "an alehouse keeper quick to protect her name and her property." He then goes on to claim, "Both are gullible victims of Diccon's manipulation because of their basic mistrust of each other" (286). Certainly there is very little psychological complexity in the play, but that is both beside the point and beyond the scope of the play. The comedy is a commentary on the fragility of community, not the individual psyche. Furthermore, there is no evidence within the play text to suggest that the women have an inherent mistrust of each other, other than perhaps the alacrity with which they believe Diccon's lies, which can be attributed just as easily to the comic form of the play.

Carol Neely has a slightly different take on the women's hostility toward each other, asserting that Diccon's actions "[bring] to the surface the rivalry, anger, and fear that underlie the village community's fragile status hierarchies" (29). Her proof of this is a list of insults the women fling at each other during their fight, which "reveal how each's authority can be dangerously threatened by bodily and economic vulnerability" (29). Gammer's vulnerability is more obvious: she is the elder of the women, and it is her household that collapses during the needle's absence. But Dame Chat, though the proprietress of an alehouse, is also susceptible to economic vicissitude. After the women's altercation, Gammer sends her boy Cocke to fetch Dr. Rat to settle their dispute, telling the boy that the curate will be reasonably easy to find: "Shalt have him at his chamber, or els at Mother Bee's; / Els seeke him at Hob Fylcher's shop, for as charde it reported, / There is the best ale in al the towne, and now is most resorted" (3.3.675-79). It is possible to read Gammer's claim that Hob Fylcher has the best ale as another of her insults to Chat, but the lack of clientele in Chat's alehouse during the course of the play (Diccon is the only person to enter the alehouse for the purpose of consuming ale) suggests that there is at least some truth to Gammer's declaration.

The lack of clientele in the alehouse is not because alehouses were unpopular in the early modern period. Though ale was experiencing a decline in elite quaffers, alehouses began to proliferate in the sixteenth century, much to the chagrin of town officials. Twenty years after the play was first produced, Elizabeth I's Privy Council circulated a letter to local magistrates inquiring about the number of inns, taverns, and alehouses in every shire with an eye to raising revenue for the repair of Dover harbor, used extensively in the war against Spain (Clark 41). 30

counties reported, and the results are as startling now as they were to officials in 1577: England, with a population around 4 million, had over 15,000 alehouses, a 1:267 ratio.[32]

Given the proliferation of alehouses in the period, the lack of clientele in Dame Chat's alehouse suggests that the gossip-as-alewife is an untenable model, signaling a shift in the popular representation of gossip communities as discretely female and solely associated with the alehouse. The play's events seem to suggest that in order for the gossip community to survive, it has to reintegrate with the community at large. Chat's alehouse is located at the sleepy end of town, as indicated by Chat herself when she castigates Dr. Rat for trying to enter her alehouse through a hole in the wall: "… ye have other minions, in the other end of the towne, / Where ye were liker to catch such a blow, / Than anywhere els, as farre as I know" (5.2.958-60). Those minions are presumably located in and around Hob Fylcher's alehouse, since Chat, Gammer, and Hodge each independently claim in separate conversations through the course of the play that Rat frequents Fylcher's. In locating Fylcher's alehouse at the other end of town, the play implies that Chat and Gammer are a gossip community largely out of touch with the village community, making them vulnerable to threats from within and without, an implication made obvious with the sprawling battle between Chat and Gurton in 3.3.

That the brawl occurs on the steps of Dame Chat's alehouse is highly symbolic – between the alehouse and the street, both traditional sites of the gossip community,[33] the

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[32] Peter Clark provides a table breaking down the information by county. The actual number of alehouses was 15,095, but such specificity is problematic given the fact that three counties (Suffolk, Worcestershire, and Northumberland) did not make distinctions between alehouses, inns, and taverns. Suffolk reported 480 "inns and alehouses," Worcestershire reported a total of 447, and Northumberland reported 354. These numbers were not qualified in any other way (42).

[33] Numerous "good gossip" ballads of the late medieval/early Tudor period take place in the street, where the gossips meet, and then the alehouse where they go to get drunk. The most famous instance of this is John Skelton's "The Tunning of Elinor Rumming."

misunderstanding between the two leading gossips comes to a head. This misunderstanding is predicated upon the keeping of secrets, a practice at odds with the custom of gossip communities. When Diccon arrives at Chat's alehouse, she confirms a previous acquaintance by identifying him and inviting him to a card game: "What, Diccon? Come nere, ye be no straunger; / We be fast set at Trumpe, man, hard by the fyre; / Thou shalt set on the king, if thou come a little nyer" (2.2.413-15). This invitation, in addition to establishing Diccon as a de facto member of the gossip community, also demonstrates how empty is her alehouse: Chat is interrupted playing cards with "Sim Glover's wife" (l. 421) rather than drawing ale or waiting on customers. This indicates a gossip community that has lost its vitality, a point further emphasized by the alacrity with which Chat both believes Diccon's lies and promises to keep his tale "As secret as mine owne thought, by God and the devil two!" (l. 428).

The state of Chat's alehouse, like the loss of Gammer Gurton's needle, signals a dysfunctional gossip community. The loss of Gammer's needle does not just stop the functioning of the household, it indicates a breakdown in the system by which knowledge is produced and distributed. The loss of the needle signals the disappearance of the gossip network. Needles, Wendy Wall explains, are "identified so clearly as a specifically female knowledge and practice … early modern plays and poems often represent needles as the tools of aggressive or resistant women" (65). When the needle is lost, however, Gammer's aggression becomes unfocused, directed at everyone with whom she comes into contact.

Like a needle, the alehouse was also an important tool of aggressive or resistant women. Resistance is only effective, however, when in the presence of society. Chat's alehouse exists on the faded social fringe of the village, outside of any sites of power, a detail reinforced by the fact that Chat is only able to get information about the state of Gammer Gurton's household from

Diccon. If the prologue did not establish at the outset that the two were gossips, it would be difficult to ascertain that from their behavior toward each other, which is diffident at best – the two women do not meet until halfway through the play, on the steps of Chat's alehouse, when they engage in an impressive bout of name-calling, hitting, biting, and scratching. The animosity between the two is not resolved until the truth is revealed, not by the curate Dr. Rat, whom Gammer Gurton sends for, but by Master Bayly.

Why is Bayly able to resolve the dispute, but not Rat? Unlike the ale-swilling, minion-loving curate, Bayly represents the legitimate, respectable part of village society, and thus it is he who has the ability to reintegrate the gossip community because he, unlike Rat, does not become embroiled in the gossips' brawl. When trying to get to the root of the matter, Bayly states the matter to Gammer Gurton thus: "This is the case: you lost your needle about the dores, / And she answeres againe, she hase no cocke of your's; / Thus in your talke and action, from that you do intend / She is five mile wide, from that she doth defend" (5.2.1101-4). Bayly identifies the problem in the gossip community as one of disjunction: there is a fundamental disconnect between intention and action, centered around the privileging of information. A free flow of information between its members is vital for a gossip community. Diccon's lies do derail the gossip community, but only because of its unusual vulnerability. Once Bayly discovers the problem, the repair to the community comes swiftly. A few lines before Bayly's revelation, Gammer disdainfully calls Chat a "drunken gossip" (l. 1086). Soon after Bayly's observation, Diccon discovers the needle in Hodge's breeches, and after Hodge gives it to a triumphant Gammer, Chat tells her, "By my troth, Gossyp Gurton, I am even as glad / As though I mine owne selfe as good a turne had!" (ll. 1259-60). This marks the first time that the women use the term "gossip" without any negative qualifiers, and the play concludes with everyone going "*into*

the ale-house," according to the stage directions, ostensibly to celebrate the restoration of Gammer's needle, but also to commemorate the reestablishment of the gossip community. The needle's recovery signals, among other things,[34] the restoration of the potential for the assertion of female will, and the use of the alehouse as the site of the disintegration and reintegration of the gossip community, as well as its use as a festive space to celebrate the event, demonstrates the shifting role of the gossip community. Ultimately, though, the move to the alehouse is a sly wink to the audience. The gossip network was restored but not repaired, which is indicated by the celebration at the finding of the needle, but no acknowledgment made, either between the women, or by anyone else, of the restoration of female friendship. While it is possible to attribute the friction between the gossips as indicative of the disruption of reproductive order – the needle's loss means that Gammer can't repair Hodge's breeches, which means that he cannot go courting, which means that no one will need the services of gossips in the birth chamber – the fact is that the reproductive order is restored but the underlying tension between the two gossips remains unresolved. Without a declared renewal of female friendship, the audience is left to assume that the knowledge network that should exist in a gossip community will remain weak and open to exploitation from those with mischievous inclinations. Gossips should know every particular of each other's business, otherwise the community becomes dangerously vulnerable.

[34] Wall describes the events as a masculine reauthorization of female domestic authority: "When Diccon slaps Hodge's rear end and brings to light the lost needle, the female authority on which the domestic economy depends is righted, and the surrogate masters – both Diccon and the academics – playfully surrender their carnivalesque power back to the fantasized household" (69). Paster maintains that since the needle was in Hodge's breeches the entire time, "the needle was never really lost, then the phallus and the sex-gender system it maintains – we are relieved to know retrospectively – were never really in danger!" (119). Although both these analyses provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics of the play, they each ignore the gossip network. The phallic signifier is restored, but its return overshadows the other restoration of the play – the reconciliation of the gossips.

The move to the alehouse, still absent of customers and still located on the other end of town from the popular alehouse, suggests that this will all happen again. That Chat's alehouse is chosen as the site of a feast indicates that the restorative power of the feast is being denied to the gossips. Feasts are highly ritualized events intended to formally resolve tensions, and early modern alehouses frequently served a festive function similar to that of the pre-Reformation church, as they were frequently the sites of wakes, bridal celebrations, and holiday gatherings. But the alehouse, though similar to a gossip community in providing what Patricia Fumerton describes as "an alternative community" (494), achieves this community by creating a fantasy. Many alehouses, including that of Dame Chat, were run out of private homes. Fumerton argues that the collapse between the distinctions of the private domestic space and the public world of business creates "a kind of grunge Disneyland simulation of community and home … Unlike a 'real' house, the fantasyland ale-'house' made few demands on its frequenters; its community and home experience require no obligations other than financial ones. One could thus happily taste there of community and family without surfeit" (497). In the case of Chat's alehouse, however, the fantasy of community never existed. Her alehouse is devoid of patrons, and through the course of the play, its only useful purpose is as an arena for fighting, both between Dame Chat and Gammer Gurton, but also between Chat and Rat. This signals the extreme unsuitability of her alehouse as a recuperative site. To have the feast there not only undermines the traditional purpose of the feast, but also throws into question the efficacy of the community that is represented as existing alongside it: the gossip community, a community that can barely be called such, having only two members represented, and the younger of those, Chat, demonstrating none of the traditional respect for the elder Gammer Gurton.

The play's irresolute resolution is a symptom of the tension in the gossip community, and serves as a bridge between the late medieval and early modern representations of gossip communities. The play explores the tension between the "good" gossip and the "good gossip," and its uneasy resolution of a feast at Chat's alehouse is the early modern equivalent of a "flood" solution: rather than dealing with the tensions in gossip community, the play's characters focus on the restoration of the needle. But the needle, like the gossip community in the play, might not exist except in name: it is entirely possible to stage the play with an imaginary needle. It is the symbolic function of the needle that matters, and while the importance of its physical presence is continuously emphasized by Gammer Gurton, it is actually the *idea* of the needle that has such an impact on the play's characters. The needle has the capacity to suture the social relationships that otherwise fray, granting power and function to an otherwise disconnected gossip who has no community in which to function. Just as the needle exists in a space both imaginary and real, so too do gossip communities, and like the needle, their function is material and symbolic.

CHAPTER 2

The Creation of Gossip Networks and the Appropriation of the Gossip Function

This chapter examines representations of gossips in the literatures of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by exploring the gossip community's traditional social roles – its purposes in assisting and celebrating birth and in privately effecting justice for transgressions that disrupt domestic function – and its concomitant spaces, the birth room, alehouse, and tavern. Bernard Capp observes that "female social interaction within the home took many forms and had a multiple significance. Its most important and symbolic manifestation was the gathering of neighbors around the bedside of a woman in childbirth" (50). This chapter traces the link between the festive function of gossip activities and the anxiety surrounding the perceived breakdown of the boundaries between the domestic and the public. The festive function of gossip (that is, the celebratory activities that accompanied a pregnant mother's successful labor and delivery) was perceived to be the avenue women used to degrade the social purpose of gossiping. Gossips, given the duty to aid a mother in bringing a child into the world (a necessarily social activity), use the occasion as an opportunity to indulge in all forms of idleness and gluttony. Of course, the men who frequently perpetuated this stereotype were not allowed access to the birth chamber during delivery, and so rarely witnessed the gossips at work. Thus gossips are often portrayed as drunken women incontinent in bladder and speech. But the representations are not absolute – there are depictions of gossips performing their social roles during festive moments, and through these representations, we can discover that gossips elided boundaries between festivity and everyday lived existence to achieve their ends. We also see that gossip communities are networked in more and various ways than being neighbors, friends, and drinking companions. Though this chapter examines the invocation of gossips in their festive role – how

they both uphold the festive function necessary to society, and how they simultaneously threaten society through the perceived misappropriation of that festive function – it also demonstrates how a female community organizes and deploys itself.

The chapter addresses the issues surrounding the gossips' rights to ritual, and the social instability those rights potentially entail, through an examination of how gossips blur the line between what society wants and what it needs – between the socially sanctioned and the socially necessary. I begin with Thomas Harman's tale of the Walking Mort. The story showcases the expansion of the gossip community beyond its supposed immediate domestic bounds, illustrating the strength, scope, and effects of the gossip network. This depiction is countered by the representation of a failing gossip community in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, a community exploited and misused to affirm disruptions to patriarchal order perpetrated by men. This exploitation simultaneously recognizes the scope, power, and implications of the gossip network's influence and function, a concern also vital to the final text explored in the chapter, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which depicts the denaturing and subsequent displacement of the gossip community, a move that ultimately raises questions about the viability of the reproductive order.

The Walking Mort and the Gossip Network

When examining literary representations of gossip communities in early modern England, the story of the Walking Mort featured in Thomas Harman's 1566 pamphlet, *A Caveat for Common Cursitors* is a common point of departure. Though it is an "often-cited instance of collective action" (Brown 121), as one scholar asserts, the story is typically treated as little more

than anecdotal.[1] However, the story is key in establishing a historical perception of gossip communities in the period because not only because its portrayal of a gossip community is one of the earliest in English prose, but also because it does not include any of the representative behaviors of "good gossips" in the period, such as drunken belligerence or disruptive speech. An examination of the story of the Walking Mort shows women throughout the country actively engaged in their gossip communities and networked together in ways imperceptible to men. Though previously unacknowledged by scholars, the notion of a gossip community networked across several geographic locales is a crucial component to the success of the gossip community in Harman's tale. Harman tropes the figure of the Walking Mort as a woman untethered from the domestic (as a locatable and local space organized by hierarchical kinship ties), but who in spite of her wanderings still maintains the form and function of the domestic. Though "these walking Morts be not married" (138),[2] the Mort's story illustrates several possibilities heretofore unexplored in representations of previous configurations of gossip communities: 1) that married status was not necessarily a precondition of membership in a gossip community; 2) that a gossip community could at any time have active and inactive members; and 3) that a gossip community could in fact be part of a larger network of gossip communities, one that spread throughout England. The mort does not merely engage with the domestic on a superficial level; she actually constitutes the network through her movement, providing opportunities for settled women to

[1] In "New Historicism, Historical Context, and the Literature of Roguery: The Case of Thomas Harman Reopened," A.L. Beier calls the story an "anecdote" (103), as does Linda Woodbridge in *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Culture* (47).

[2] All references from Harman's story are taken from *Rogues, Vagabonds, and Sturdy Beggars*, ed. Arthur Kinney. The walking mort is one of two categories of mort identified by Harman, the other being the "autem-mort," a married woman who leaves her domestic space to wander. Harman introduces the walking mort as "these for their unhappy years doth go as an Autem-Mort, and will say their husbands died either at Newhaven, Ireland, or in some service of the Prince" (138-9).

connect with someone from outside their local circle, possibly exchanging news and connections among them. Harman's discomfort with the Walking Mort is thus twofold. Not only do the Morts insist that their itinerant lifestyle is a kind of domesticity – they claim to be married and they have children for whose welfare they labor (Harman tells us they "make laces upon staves and purses that they carry in their hands, and white valances for beds" [139]) – but they also demonstrate that legitimate social bonds transcend the male purview and the male-controlled domestic space.

The Walking Morts' attempts to maintain domesticity are in stark contrast to the environment in which they live. Harman describes how they are subject to frequent predation by "upright men," who steal their "money or apparel." In order to prevent this, Harman informs us, the Walking Morts "leave their money now with one and then with another trusty householder, either with the goodman or goodwife, sometimes in one shire, and then in another, as they travel" (139). They thus travel on a circuit. Harman asserts that, "four or five shillings, yea, ten shillings left in a place and the same will they come for again within one quarter of a year, or sometimes not in half a year" (139). Walking Morts make their rounds every three to six months, establishing and maintaining relationships throughout the country, showing that Harman's discomfort arises not only from their unbridled sexuality, but also because they represent unbridled domesticity that, while operating largely outside of male surveillance, replicates the domestic and performs a vital social function. The cyclical quality of their perambulations replicates the cyclicality of a domestic space confined to the home: retrieving one's money or goods from the home of a "trusty householder" is a domestic chore, albeit written large. Instead of retrieving money from one's own household coffers in order to perform acts or purchase goods that will ensure the preservation of the domestic space (such as going to the market),

Walking Morts create a domestic network wherein they store various amounts of money in several different domiciles, and then periodically visit the homes as needed. The idea of domestic space as confined to the house, the street, and the neighborhood is exploded by the story of the Walking Mort – the domestic is potentially any home within walking distance, and a single house can operate as multiple domestic sites (the incomes of two or more households can be stored in one house).

Cyclicality is central to the Walking Mort's story. In the summer of 1565, she relates that she was pregnant the previous summer and, craving oysters and mussels (she describes herself as having "lusted marvelously" after them), she makes her way to the Kentish seacoast. While harvesting the mollusks, she falls into a hole up to the waist, a predicament that highlights the symbolic nature of her condition as a woman entrapped by her own desires. A pregnant woman's "longings" for certain foods had to be indulged for the safety of the fetus and mother, and Gail Paster argues that "a desired pregnancy could open up a space within the confines of patriarchal marriage for the expansion or even momentary hegemony of female desire" (181-2).[3] In the case of the Walking Mort, however, her body is not subject to the strictures of traditional marriage, and it is unclear if her pregnancy is desired. She is in this moment the stereotype that haunts patriarchy: a woman free to follow her lusts. Her resultant confinement to her waist occludes everything below the waist – she is trapped by those objects (sex organs, pregnancy) that cause her lustful cravings. She is saved by a man who offers to free her in exchange for sex. The offer causes a conundrum because not only is she well acquainted with the man, but he also "had a very honest woman to his wife and was of some wealth." She admits that those considerations were tempered by her immediate situation, claiming that, "if I were not helped out, I should have

[3] This is a common theme of the period, seen in such various plays as *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

perished," which constructs the situation as a choice between compromising the female bond or death.

The Walking Mort's collapse of the man's honest wife and the wealth they possess echoes Harman's earlier description of the mort's type, who leaves money with trusty householders in an attempt to foil the upright men. Harman asserts that the economic system used by the Walking Mort is flawed because the mort does not maintain an enclosed domesticity: "And all this is to little purpose, for all their peevish policy," Harman informs us, "for when they buy them linen or garments, it is taken away from them and worse given them, or none at all" (139). Harman blames the Mort for the thefts to which she is subject, but the way the thefts are described read more like wanton destruction of a legitimate domestic economy than the result of ineptitude on the part of the Walking Mort. Harman rails against the futility of her actions, not her impulse to maintain herself. The Mort's economic resources can be protected within the confines of the homes in which she keeps her money, but the woman and her goods cannot, because her itinerant lifestyle leaves her vulnerable.

However much the Walking Mort's goods are stolen, though, the networks she crafts remain in place, as the story illustrates. The Walking Mort with whom Harman purportedly interacts, unlike her stereotypical counterpart outlined at the beginning of the story, is not victimized. Instead, she agrees to his terms for her release, but stalls the husband by telling him that she must clean herself up, and they agree to meet at his barn at nine o'clock that evening. Because of his wife's past kindnesses to her, she seeks out the wife and discloses the story. Just what the nature of the kindness shown by the wife goes unmentioned, but the wife does admit to a previous relationship with the walking mort: she recognizes the mort and remembers that she last came to the house two years earlier (141). This is a considerably longer amount of time than

the three-to-six-month cycle described by Harman, which suggests several possibilities: perhaps the gossip network is more far-flung than Harman acknowledges within the specific mort's story, or maybe the mort spends a significant period of time with various householders. Ultimately, these are mere suppositions, but they suggest a bond between women in which proximity is much less of a factor than has previously been considered; a bond simultaneously more permanent and more imperceptible than has been credited.[4]

The domestic situation created by the walking mort reflects the larger social and economic issues of the time.[5] This model of intermittent domesticity could trace its origins to the increased migration from rural to urban situations – with the flow of people into the City,[6] the separation of family members was becoming more the norm. Thus the traditional idea of localized family of the rural regions must have been gradually transforming into the idea of a diasporic family, and this new model was represented, at least in part, through the figure of the unmarried itinerant woman – like the walking mort. As Amy Froide asserts, "people who did not

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[4] In the only book-length treatment of gossips, *When Gossips Meet*, Bernard Capp examines the relationships between gossips mostly at the level of the neighborhood, though his study does dilate to encompass various parishes, though not in tandem.

[5] For social histories of the late sixteenth century, see Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680*, Alan Macfarlane, *Reconstructing Historical Communities*, Ian Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability*, Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: Structures of Life in Sixteenth-Century London*, and Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society*. For studies of early modern vagrancy, see Linda Woodbridge, *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature* and Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England*.

[6] In *English Society, 1580-1680*, Keith Wrightson writes that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the population of England doubled. Although cautioning that "national population estimates are difficult to obtain, based as they are upon incomplete taxation, military and ecclesiastical surveys," he still posits that "it seems likely that a population of approximately 2.5 million in the 1520s had risen to one of perhaps 5 million by 1680" (122). The numbers for London's population explosion are even more startling. Jean Howard relates that "in 1600 the population of London included approximately 200,000 people, up from 55,000 just fifty years before" (1).

live in a nuclear household – singlewomen and men, orphans, widows and widowers, and abandoned or separated spouses – by necessity relied upon the material and emotional support of siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces." Though her work does not address non-kinship relationships such as gossip communities, instead of foreclosing the possibility, it in fact encourages it: "Once we cease to view married adults as the norm and realize that a great proportion of people in early modern England were unmarried we find that spouses and children did not always form the most important connections in people's lives" (7). Unmarried, unmoored women like the walking mort were the subject of much negative scrutiny not only because frequently they were poor, but, as Froide writes, they were also "young, female, and of an anomalous marital status in a society that privileged the marital state. Singlewomen might well have been the early modern patriarch's worst nightmare – encompassing multiple characteristics of disorder all at once" (22). Such anxieties emerge in connection with the walking mort, who, despite her itinerant, unmarried status, is not without resources, as quickly becomes apparent.

Having been informed of her husband's duplicity, the wife immediately goes to her gossips and relates the whole of the problem, which stretches beyond the immediate situation. She tells the women "what a naughty, lewd, lecherous husband she had, and how that she could not have his company for harlots, and that she was in fear to take some filthy disease of him …." (140). She frames her appeal to her gossips in a number of ways: she calls on their "love" of her (which carries with it the implicit threat that she will not act for her gossips in the future if they do not act for her now), and reminds them that both her health and her husband's spiritual wellbeing are at stake: "as you love me and as you would have help at my hand another time, devise some remedy to make my husband a good man, that I may live in some surety without disease, and that he may save his soul that God so dearly bought" (140). After a brief conference,

they agree to help her, not only because of her "honest behavior" despite "the insatiable carnality of [her] faithless husband" (140), but also because they learn, in a somewhat shocking disclosure, that her husband had attempted to rape one of the other gossips, who reveals that if it had not been for a "marvelous chance," she would have been one of his victims (141).

The plan is swiftly drawn up after this disclosure. The five gossips instruct the wife to tell the walking mort to meet the husband, and when his hose are down around his ankles, to shout the watchword, "fie, for shame, fie," whereupon the five gossips, "muffled for knowing," will appear and beat the husband with birch rods. This is exactly what happens. The gossips bind the husband and tie a handkerchief over his eyes so that he will not be able to identify them later. The gossips "laid on him until they were windless" (142), including the walking mort, who Harman describes as crying out, "'Be good … unto my master, for the passion of god!' and laid on as fast as the rest, and still ceased not to cry upon them to be merciful unto him, and yet laid on apace" (142). After the beating is administered and subsequent threats against further action issued, the gossips make sure to get the walking mort safely out of town, and the husband seeks no retribution. In fact, the mort relates that, "I hear a very good report of him now, that he loveth his wife and useth himself very honestly" (142). When, at the close of her tale, she asks Harman to agree that it was a good act, Harman allows that "it was prettily handled" (142), but provides no further comment. Why is he not more overtly condemnatory of the walking mort or the gossips? Why does he express no censure toward the transgressive man?

The abrupt end of Harman's tale seems at odds with William Carroll's assertion that the story shows what he perceives as Harman's typical "voyeuristic moralism" (91). Jodi Mikalachki posits that Harman is silenced because the "prurient assumptions about his examinant's sexuality receive an implied reprimand in the recounted fate" of the man who attempted to take advantage

of the walking mort (131); nevertheless, she argues, Harman still offers a "concluding spectacle of a naked man duped and beaten by women" which she contends "offers its own titillation" (131-2). But A.L. Beier disagrees with the notion that the tale is about female sexuality, claiming that it is instead "a negative example of *male* sexuality" (102), and that the terms used by Harman to describe the husband – he is a "naughty, lewd and lecherous husband" who commits acts of "insatiable carnality" – are "the same moralistic terms he used for female vagrants" (103). Beier asserts that "the evidence does not square with an interpretation that Harman treated vagrant women purely as sexual objects. Even when he discussed their sexuality, it was not always in terms of sex per se or titillation. Rather his discourse was mainly moralistic and wholly consistent with prevailing views about marriage and fidelity" (103). The problem with this is that Harman does treat the vagrant woman as a sexual object – his interruptions to clarify her sexual status indicate he considers her to be a sexual object, and the mort allows herself to be used by the gossips as a sexual object to titillate the husband. Although Beier identifies a double register in Harman's tale – that of normative marital fidelity, and in the context of the appeal of an apparently 'loose' woman, transgressive male behavior that far exceeds any transgression by the women – he neglects to acknowledge the social disruption signaled at the conclusion of the story when the mort asks Harman, "And was not this a good act?" (142). Any one of several incidents would serve as an equally plausible candidate for the act referred to by the mort. One might ask where the social upheaval occurs in this tale, and the answer is, everywhere. Yet it is not, as Beier seems to recognize, that women's sexual transgressiveness undermines domesticity, but rather that disrupted domesticity (in its simple form) instigates sexual transgressiveness, even when female sexuality itself is not the obvious cause. The gossips exploit the sexual potential of the desirous and mobile female body to make a point, but that doesn't seem to be the point of the

story. If it were, as Carroll and Mikalachiki contend, Harman, at all times vociferous in his condemnation of sexual deviance, would hardly have been silenced at the conclusion of the mort's tale.

Beier seems to posit that Harman's silence is due to the gossips' fulfillment of Harman's moralistic agenda – in other words, there's nothing left to say after the mort concludes her story because the husband has been appropriately punished and the social status quo is restored. Beier claims that gossip communities, "as represented in Harman's tract … gave women a focus for loyalty and collective actions" (104) while simultaneously avoiding threatening patriarchal structures. While this is true, he then goes on to describe typical early modern gossips as women who "spread rumors and hurled insults, especially of a sexual nature, engaged in the shunning of alleged offenders, and even attacked their homes." He generally parallels this stereotype to Harman's gossips, noting that, "As in Harman's tale, they defended wives wronged by husbands" (104). However, he distinguishes those in Harman from the usual action of gossips, who, he argues, rectify wrongs "usually by publicly denouncing and sometimes inflicting beatings on the women with whom the men were consorting" (104). For Beier, the important distinction to be made is that, "By picking on the offending female parties, of course, the gossips did not directly threaten patriarchal authority, and in this respect Harman's story of a man being beaten may stretch the bounds of credibility" (104). He allows that there are enough examples of gossips targeting men from fictional and non-fictional accounts in the period, so the basis of this incredibility is difficult to decipher, but what is most curious about the above definition is that it is blatantly irrelevant to the gossip community within Harman's text. It accurately describes the gossips of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, but is ultimately an uncritical reproduction of negative stereotypes that doesn't satisfactorily reflect what is happening in Harman's text.

One possible answer for Harman's silence lies in the idea that his story is a species of joke. First proposed by Linda Woodbridge,[7] the idea has gained momentum. Pamela Allen Brown claims Harman "ends the disturbing story as if it were an entertaining tale of tit-for-tat" (121), and Patricia Fumerton conjectures that "Harman gets caught up in the fun of the events, despite his moral condemnation of the Mort, and fails to think deeply about her close ties to the other housewives in his tale – a connection to an economy of unsettledness that his tract works so hard throughout to suppress. Women on the move in Harman are funny, immoral, and enticing; they are not particularly threatening" (39). Such arguments take Harman's relationship to his account at face value, assuming that he is capturing both unmediated tales and his own unmediated response to those tales. While Beier recognizes that mediation, he misreads the events and implications of the tale, particularly concerning how the tale defines gossips.

One aspect of his tale that is pertinent to the question of his "silence," and which has so far gone unexplored, is that the story of the walking mort occurs within a larger section of the pamphlet that examines the women of rogues. The anecdote occurs within a discourse about women and rogues, and its placement suggests that one of Harman's objectives is to disrupt this extended economy by revealing the women's attachments to the various species of dishonest men. These relationships constitute a domestic space untethered from the spaces of home or community. In Harman's presentation, the rogue world remains a male-dominated social order, an alternate-domestic realm in which 'upright men' (rogues and vagabonds) abuse and take advantage of itinerant women, victimizing them by taking their money and clothing, but dealing with them like wives, as he describes in the section entitled "Their usage in the night." He relates that morts and doxies (young women and girls despoiled by the upright men) are responsible for

[7] In *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Culture*, she describes Harman's text as "a subspecies of the Tudor jest book" (39).

creating makeshift beds every evening they are able to do so because "the men never trouble themselves with the thing, but take the same to be the duty of the wife" (144). He then describes how once the women are settled, "If the upright man comes in where they lie, he hath his choice, and creepeth in close by his Doxy; the Rogue hath his leavings" (145). If the women are fortunate enough to secure lodgings in an edifice with a door that can be barred, they are spared this nighttime ritual. In other words, as Harman presents it, the world of rogues replicates the gender disparities of mainstream society, but the walking mort tale conflicts with this normative gender order in some ways, while reinforcing it in others.

This tale aligns with the normative gender order in situating women as subject to men's authority and victimized by their actions, but it provides them recourse in the form of gossip-circle response and correction. This response utilizes actions and objects coded as "domestic," or within the accepted province of women, to correct male behavior and render the legitimate domestic space stable and supportive for the wife. While it is impossible to definitively judge whether it is Harman's enjoyment of the tale that distracts him from recognizing the significance of the mort's connection to a group of women, it seems plausible to attribute his silence at the end of the story to the tension between his larger aims of depicting the alternate-domestic space of rogue culture, and the tale's depiction of the far-flung nature of female social networks and their efficacy in correcting the flaws of the domestic introduced by rampant male libido. His silence would then indicate that the "economy of unsettledness" is in fact an inextricable (and to men, also unrecognizable) part of the domestic economy.[8]

[8] It must also be noted that Harman is a storyteller himself, and that his persona of a country-magistrate-turned-reporter could very well be fictional. His direct personal examples might be actual interviews, but more likely they are the product of gossip, or invented from hearsay.

The purity of the wife's motivations reinforces this interpretation. Instead of a retributive outburst, the wife asks her gossips to "devise some remedy to make my husband a good man, that I may live in some surety without disease," framing her request as a medical intervention, thus ensuring its eligibility for female action. Housewives were expected to provide basic medical care for both her household and neighborhood, and that treatment was not merely confined to creating and administering "simple remedies" (herbs or recipes concocted specifically to treat a medical condition), but also could include setting bones, treating burns, and occasionally, surgical intervention.[9] Though Wendy Wall's *Staging Domesticity* deals primarily with theatrical representations that display the discourses of domesticity being intertwined with emergent English nationalism, we can see a kernel of Wall's theories[10] at work in Harman's tract, when the wife uses the rhetoric of sickness and healing to invoke her gossips' aid, which they justify through the emphasis on the wife's goodness – because she has been patient, tolerant, and morally pure, she *should* be helped.

The gossips locate the punishment of the husband in the realm of medicine and domesticity, but Harman tropes it as a gossips' feast: he describes the gossips as preparing the husband a "banquet" (141). Through the invocation of the gossips' banquet, a ritualized feast initially enacted as a celebration of a successful birth, Harman links the corrective of male transgression to the negative stereotype of the gossip community already well established by the

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[9] A particularly memorable occasion of a housewife performing surgery is recorded in Lady Margaret Hoby's diary, when in the midst of the record of prayers, conversations with her parish vicar, playing midwife to the parish women and administering herbal remedies to her husband's tenants, she relates how one of the tenant families brought her their infant child, born without an anus. She performed surgery to create one, but the child died. (From *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby*, ed. Meads, 184).

[10] See especially "Tending to bodies and boys: queer physic in *Knight of the Burning Pestle*," pp. 161-88.

middle of the sixteenth century – the gossips' feast as a stereotypical site of disorder, in which gossips congregated for drinking and merriment at any time and for any occasion. What began as a joyful ritual was eventually used as a satirical weapon against the perceived threat of the expansion of domestic space that the gossip community represented. Though Harman's gossips are careful to act and deliberative in their actions, he invokes the general depiction of gossips as women with huge appetites for food and drink who illicitly appropriated public spaces and turned them into sites of idleness and potential rebellion against patriarchal strictures. His oblique references to such stereotypes, and his inclusion of the walking mort as the catalyst of the events, implicitly situates this circle of women as disruptive of lawful and appropriate norms, even in the context of a necessary correction of social and domestic transgression by a husband. The frequent association of alcohol, medicine, and festivity with gossip communities suggests that gossips did not necessarily function in a carnivalesque capacity, as is frequently assumed. The carnivalesque presupposes a discrete metaphorical space that exists in opposition to the everyday,[11] but the ubiquity of gossip communities and their numerous functions suggests that the social binary of a "woman on top" model doesn't allow for the social reality of gossips as depicted in literature.

Gossip carols serve as one widely available source that reveals the gossip community not only creating a space that collapses the domestic and the festive in the everyday, but also, as in Harman's tale, negating the perceived boundaries between localized domesticity and the larger

[11] Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as a cyclical "second life" (11) that exists to critique hierarchical rank and privileges through the celebration of the grotesque body, which is "the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (21). The carnivalesque grotesque functions "to consecrate inventive freedome, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truthes, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (34).

outside world; between town and country. Alcohol, the production and application of which had been the province of women, became increasingly produced by and associated with men, and the continued association of gossips with wine and with ale's medicinal/festive properties, though troped as a source of satire, is actually a source of political defiance, which also gets expressed in the women's attitudes to abusive husbands.

For example, a sixteenth century carol preserved in manuscript[12] describes a tavern scene where the gossips are eating and drinking. Much as the gossips' carol in the Chester Noah play, the gossips drink because it "chereth the hart *and* co*m*forteth the blod" (l. 66). The gossip Anne calls for some muscatel because "Swet wynes kepe my body i*n* hele" (l. 72). While this is an assertion that the occasional drinking of wine promotes bodily health, "hele" is also a homophone that recalls the popular conception in the late medieval period of gossips chattering and drinking in hell, as I discuss in Chapter One. In the middle of the carol, one of the gossips tries to excuse herself to go home and make sure her husband isn't there, because, as she says, "A strype or ii God myght send me / Yf my husbond myght here see me" (ll. 46-7). This is met with contempt by the gossip Alis, who retorts, "'She th*a*t is aferde, lett her flee … I dred no man" (ll. 48-50). After the killjoy is banished, merriment commences until someone notices the gossip at the end of the table. When they bid her to be merry, she asks for advice on what to do with her abusive husband: "Wold God I had do*n* aft*er* yo*ur* covnsell, / For my husband is so fell / He betith me lyke the devill of hell, / And the more I crye, / The less m*er*cy, / Good gossippis myn-

[12] The carol is transcribed in *The Early English Carols*, edited by R.L. Greene. All quotations from the text are from this edition. The collection also contains a few other carols from the 15th and 16th centuries, pp. 249-253. They generally feature gossips gathering in a tavern and issuing various defiant statements against their husbands, though in one 15th century carol, after their conviviality, the gossips each go home and explain the loss of the six pence spent in the tavern by telling "her husband anone / Shee had been at the chyrche" (252).

a" (ll. 82-7). A chorus of derision against the husband ensues: Alis cries out "God geve him short lyfe" (l. 92) and Margaret declares, "I know no ma*n* th*a*t is alive / Th*a*t gevith me ii strok*es* but he haue v!" (ll. 95-6). But before any useful advice can be delivered, everyone is distracted by the realization that a gossip just left without paying her full portion of the bill. Elynore dismisses her from the group: "'what dide she pay? / Not but a peny? Loo, th*er*for I say / She shall no more / Be of owr lore …" (ll. 101-4). They try to determine who brought the woman, but to no avail. The event seemingly sours the convivial atmosphere, because the gossips swiftly reckon the bill and depart, declaring within two stanzas, "Whatsoeu*er* any man thynk, / We co*m* for nowght but for good drynk" (ll. 124-5), a statement that on the surface reads like an abjuration of political or social motive. In fact, it serves as a public assertion of unbounded domesticity – "good drynk" promotes emotional balance and physical well-being, and the conviviality of sharing a drink with gossips can also provide solace or solutions to domestic problems. The non-communal action of the gossip who didn't pay her share undermines these effects in this instance, but leaves their function visible as a generalization.

The gossip community depicted in Harman's pamphlet calls on this tradition, but Harman's gossips have been largely tamed – they no longer consume alcohol in public taverns, nor do they fantasize aloud about beating their husbands. Though the propensities for drunkenness and fantasizing are purged from Harman's gossips, the invocation of the medical and the festive remains, as does the community's composition of women from disparate domestic situations. Harman introduces to public discourse the representation of a gossip community totally unbounded by locale that still utilizes much of traditional gossip discourse, one that is committed to the public interest rather than pleasure-seeking behaviors and periodic reflexes against domestic abuse.

A Chaste Maid in Cheapside

Fifty years later, Thomas Middleton introduces an additional complication to Harman's vexed portrayal of the unbounded gossip community by staging a gossip community that seemingly rejects the status quo instead of enforcing it by embracing the radical social and religious threat of Puritanism. *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) stages an infant baptism and christening feast during the season of Lent. The abstemious atmosphere creates a subversive response throughout the city, with butchers selling illegal meat, and, more importantly, with a gossip community celebrating a birth. While serving a (semi) legitimate social function, holding a gossips' feast during Lent raises questions about tensions between gossips' necessary and accepted social functions and the strictures of patriarchal and monarchical order.

The last and frequently considered the best of Middleton's city comedies, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* displays many of Harman's concerns (anxiety surrounding mobile [upwardly and downwardly] women and the effect of mobility on female chastity, centered around the notion of "honesty") in its four plots. In the first plot, Moll Yellowhammer, the eponymous "chaste maid"[13] of the play, is desperately in love with Touchwood Junior, a suitor of whom her parents strongly disapprove. Their suitor of choice for Moll is Sir Walter Whorehound, whose supposed Welsh "niece" is the Yellowhammers' candidate to marry their son Tim, a student at Cambridge.

[13] In "Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnivalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy," Shannon Miller points out that it is the character of Mistress Touchstone who most embodies chastity within the play, but that even she "re-inforces the characteristics of the grotesque womb" (83) of the carnivalesque woman through her excessive fertility. Miller claims that the play constructs chastity in part through a woman's value. She points out that Mistress Touchstone is the only woman whose "value does not vary. Women are associated with gold throughout the play, but they are shown to be debasable commodities, objects that cannot hold their value" (84).

Their wooing and marriage[14] comprises the second plot. In the third plot, we learn of another of Whorehound's mistresses, the married and very pregnant Mistress Allwit, who has had a decade-long relationship with Whorehound with her husband's complicity. She gives birth during the course of the play, and it is the christening of her daughter that provides the play's infamous scene in 3.2. The fourth plot is also about excessive fertility and cuckoldry. Touchwood Senior (Touchwood Junior's elder brother) and his wife agree to temporarily separate because of their excessive fertility (Touchwood Senior speaks of "every year a child, and some years two" [2.1.15]).[15] He decides to put his fertility to good use when he meets Sir Oliver and Lady Kix, relatives of Sir Walter Whorehound, who have been married seven years and have been unable to conceive a child. While Sir Oliver is paying Touchstone Senior to cure his infertility (cuckolding him), Touchwood Junior and Moll attempt to elope, are foiled, and pretend to die. The Allwits hear that Lady Kix is pregnant, and so discard Whorehound before he can be disinherited. The play concludes with Sir Oliver's triumphant confirmation that his wife is pregnant, and in his delight, he offers to set up Touchwood Senior and his family for life. Touchwood Junior and Moll resurrect themselves in the middle of their funeral in order to be married, but are interrupted by the Yellowhammers, who are not as angry with Moll as they might normally have been, since it was revealed that Tim's wife isn't Whorehound's niece but actually his whore. Tim attempts to use his Cambridge training to prove that a whore is an honest woman. Stymied by the attempt, his wife has to step in, saying, "Sir, if your logic cannot prove me honest, / There's a

[14] Karen Newman observes that "the play actually ends with Tim's marriage, not Touchwood Junior and Moll's" (110), which she sees as a symptom of the play's obsession with substitution and equivalence.

[15] All references to the play come from the Revels edition, ed. R.B. Parker.

thing call'd marriage, and that makes me honest" (5.4.105-6). Everyone accepts this bit of chop logic, and the play ends with the conventional comic conclusion of a feast at Goldsmiths' Hall.

The scholarship of the play, particularly of the christening feast in 3.2, is a tangle of contentious claims. Though declared by Ruby Chatterji to be "the best scenes [sic] of the play" (111) and "deservedly famous" (179) by Joanne Altieri, it has also been more famously derided by L.C. Knights, who claims that, in general, Middleton "betrays something like a positive animus against the citizens" of London, citing as proof the christening feast from *Chaste Maid*, which he claims is "presented with an imperfectly controlled disgust" (269).[16] M.C. Bradbrook declares the scene is "the rankest in all Elizabethan drama, with the Puritan gossips and complacent mother exchanging compliments and filching sweetmeats" (162), but paradoxically goes on to assert the scene's realism: "the underlying morality structure is self-evident; the London scene is here more detailed, and the effect is far closer to an image of the times …" (162). Alan Brissenden, an editor of the play, is more explicit than Bradbrook in his assertion that the play's insistence on representing historically verifiable London locales indicates a correspondent verisimilitude regarding representation of the play's characters: "The reality of the setting gives greater credibility to the characters and their actions" (xxvi). Brian Gibbons describes the dialogue of the christening feast as "vulgar and meandering" (165), but suggests that this ultimately has a satiric, revelatory effect: "… to strip every character and reveal their rapaciously selfish desires, masked as they are by cant about religion, family affection, the joys of birth" (167). While he does not explicitly state that the christening feast is realistic, the violent (and sexualized) metaphor of stripping the women to reveal the truth about their natures can be

[16] For a nuanced discussion of Middleton's attitudes towards the City, see Gail Paster's *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare*, where she posits that Middleton's city comedies and civic pageants respectively exemplify *vituperatio* (blame) and *laus* (praise), each equally hyperbolic.

understood as an extension of the "realism" argument. By uncritically reproducing the play's idea that the invocation of recognizable city locales has corollary moral slippages, Gibson reproduces the play's gender politics.

Arthur Marotti and Theodore Leinwand make similar sexualized assumptions about the gossips. Marotti paints the scene as a display of class pretentions that decays into the animalization of the gossips. What "begins as a display of bourgeois pseudo-politeness" ends, he argues, as "an image of comic animality" (71). The women are not just stripped of their false bourgeois veneer, but also of their equally false humanity, revealing their animal natures. Theodore Leinwand makes a neo-Bradbrookian argument and extrapolates from the christening scene that the gossips are alcoholics, hypocrites, and lechers (168). The critics are noticing the way the play mediates the representation of the gossips through its presentation of class politics, but they ultimately end up reproducing the play's politics in their own analyses. Indeed, the critical derision and voyeuristic tone is very much in line with early modern gossip pamphlets.[17] The scholarly insistence on the scene's realism was reassessed by feminist scholars Gail Paster and Linda Woodbridge, and today the scene is typically acknowledged as a treatment of the stereotypical "gossips' meeting" and recognized as an example of leaky women – females whose moral incontinence is literalized with physical symptoms.[18]

Though the christening scene's realism has been largely debunked, there is still a critical problem with the play, specifically, with the placement of the scene. Given that the christening

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[17] See Samuel Rowland's "A Whole Crew of Gossips, All Met to be Merry" (1609), especially the second half, where the husbands of the gossips "give their Wives the lye." An edition of the pamphlet is in "*Custome is an Idiot": Jacobean Pamphlet Literature on Women*.

[18] In her edition of the play (located in the Oxford Middleton), Woodbridge identifies the scene as a "fine example of the 'gossips' meeting' genre" (910) explicated in her *Women and the English Renaissance*. Curiously, neither the christening feast nor the play is mentioned in that particular volume.

scene occurs in the structural center of the plot, and given that the play is, as its editor R.B. Parker notes, "remarkable for the number of its female roles" (xxix) – there are eighteen women in the play, most of whom are in the scene in 3.2 – then what is the significance of enmeshing nearly every female character in a stereotypical scene at what is arguably the Aristotelian climax of the action? After all, it does hardly anything to advance the plot. Richard Levin goes so far as to argue that the scene is "only tenuously connected to the plot" (14). An interesting clue lies in Levin's article, in a seemingly inadvertent contradiction. Levin begins his article by asserting that the scene's relevance to the play is ambiguous, but he returns to the christening again toward the end of the article, where he states that the scene, which he describes as "realistic" (23), functions "to bring the characters of the various plots together at a moment of stasis, after the exposition has been completed and before the unraveling begins …" (23-4), which indicates both that the scene is the climax to the action, and yet seems to exist outside of the action of the rest of the play.

Levin does not further expound on what exactly he means by the scene existing as a moment of dramatic stasis, nor does he address how the scene is simultaneously trivial and vital to the plot. This apparent contradiction indicates the importance of the scene as well as the difficulty in delineating its importance, both within the play and culturally. Middleton's placement of the christening scene in the center of the play, and his depiction of the event as a site stereotypical of "women behaving badly," indicates not only the symbolic place of gossips in society, but also the attendant anxiety surrounding that place.

To understand the importance of the christening scene, both for the play and for early modern culture, one must take into account the factors shaping its articulation. The first is that Middleton stages his infamous scene in an atmosphere of Lenten austerity that echoes similar,

intensified austerity conditions in London at the time the play was written.[19] The main feature of this strictness was that the usual exemptions were done away with, so that "not even the few butchers normally allowed to sell meat to invalids and pregnant women were granted a license, and the Privy Council (to the Lord Mayor's annoyance) went to the length of appointing its own 'messengers' to spy out abuses" (xxx).[20] Allwit describes these "messengers" (listed as "Promoters" in the cast of characters) as "these that stand so close / At the street-corner, pricking up their ears / And snuffing up their noses, like rich men's dogs / When the first course goes in" (2.2.53-6). He is powerless to do anything except taunt them with: "Sheep-biting mongrels, hand-basket freebooters! / My wife lies in – a foutra for promoters," to which the First Promoter replies, "That shall not serve your turn" (ll. 94-5). Allwit is able to mock them, but their authority, superficially at least, remains intact.

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[19] Editors of the play use the characters of the promoters – men who wander around the city looking for violators of the royal edict forbidding the selling of meat – to date the play to 1613. The austerity measures depicted within the play are especially severe. R.B. Parker relates that King James I had been increasing the stringency of Lenten regulations forbidding the sale of meat since 1608, but that the restrictions "were made extra strict for 1613 because a bad harvest in 1612 had left the cattle without winter feed" (xxx).

[20] In "Butchers and Fishmongers: Their Historical Contribution to London's Festivity," Sandra Billington describes the social processes by which Lenten abstinence became increasingly enforced in the Jacobean period, and how butchers became associated with carnivalesque excesses. She argues that "fishmongers were seen as leaders of order" and butchers, increasingly marginalized in part because of the socially unpleasant side of their trade, were cast "into a more disordered role" (98), giving historical evidence of the fishmongers' presence in government and their wares being preferred over the butchers' selling of flesh. Billington claims that the increasing demand for meat led to regulations strictly controlling the market. "By the 1580s the week was almost halved in favor of fish. Butchers were not officially allowed to sell on Wednesday, Friday or Saturday, or, by 1603, on Sunday between morning and evening prayers. And though they had a market on Monday, by 1605 they were not allowed to kill or dress carcasses on Sunday" (98). Though Billington does mention *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* in passing, she does so merely to note that the play "uses the Butchers' quarter as the place where Lent is defied" (101), which isn't strictly true.

The original function of the Promoters was to prevent abuses of Lenten austerity, but in the City depicted by Middleton, they are notoriously corrupt – their original purpose as a moral policing force has been corrupted to the point where they are essentially state-licensed thieves who seize citizens' illegally possessed meat in order to sell it for profit. The degradation of their original function of maintaining Lenten observance through regulation resonates with the idea of carnality that is rampant in the play, especially the swapping of legitimate and illegitimate carnal interaction that produces legitimated illegitimate offspring. This is exemplified by their behavior in the scenes where they appear, as when, soon after their interaction with Allwit, they encounter a country wench. She exploits their greed for her own personal ends by hiding her illegitimate infant in a basket under a loin of mutton. When the Promoters take the basket from her by reminding her of "the time of the year" (2.2.133), she cannily maneuvers them into promising to keep the basket until her return. When she exits and they discover the child, they are predictably infuriated, but they feel they are bound by their vow, and so they exit with the child, grumbling about how "half our gettings / Must run in sugar-sops and nurses' wages now …" (ll. 161-2).

By a combination of creating secret knowledge networks and exploiting established knowledge networks, the promoters destabilize established networks of knowledge and commerce. In fact, their secret knowledge network, their "spying," yields an illegitimate child. The country wench, having previously declared that her illegitimate child would no longer be profitable ("This is the fifth; if e'er I venture more, / Where I now go for a maid, may I ride for a whore" [2.1.104-5]), dupes the promoters into vowing to keep the contents of her basket for her. This scene clearly parallels the events of the christening scene, which celebrates and thus socially legitimates the birth of a daughter technically legitimate because Mistress Allwit is married, but whom everyone – except, notably, the gossips – knows is Whorehound's child.

The play is frequently read as staging the tensions between the carnivalesque and Lent,[21] with the promoters symbolizing Lenten austerity and the gossips signifying carnivalesque excess. But given their corruption, the Promoters seem to mobilize and support the very excesses they appear to limit and police, which parallels the gossips at the christening feast. Gail Paster, however, sees the christening scene as "less the communal carnivalism than a demarcation of gender even sharper than what we have seen in *Bartholomew Fair*, as the men band together in vocal disgust at the women's gluttony, drunkenness, reeking wet kisses, and finally incontinence" (55). Because "Allwit seems to see [the gossips] in a sisterly collusion with his prolific wife," Paster explains, "the threat posed by a collective, hence Amazonian female appetite and female fertility is so catastrophic that it supplants the male rivalry, virtually normative in plays of the period, which Middleton's city comedies, with their obsessive feuding of merchant and gallant, usually lay bare" (56). The question of female unity in this scene is worth addressing, however. As Jennifer Panek points out, "various admiring comments by the Gossips in the christening scene … suggest that they – as representatives of Allwit's neighbors – know nothing of the Whorehound affair" (83).[22] This suggests that the knowledge network

[21] See Rick Bowers, *Radical Comedy in Early Modern England*, chapter 7 for a carnivalesque reading of the play, as well as a good overview of the critical discourse on carnivalesque and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Shannon Miller's article, "Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnivalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy" reads the play through the lens of feminism and the carnivalesque.

[22] Panek does allow for the possibility that the gossips' comments could in performance be made to sound ironic, as if they were in on the secret of the Allwit birth. She ultimately comes to the conclusion that "any such equivocations, though, are tonal rather than textual, and the fact that Yellowhammer is obviously unaware of the Allwit/Whorehound ménage until Allwit tells him about it in 4.1 would argue for similar ignorance among the gossips" (89).

which should be in place is, in the case of this gossip community, not functioning properly.[23] The staging of a christening feast during Lent also signals a malfunction in the gossip community and its ritual role, but not in the way Allwit decries in his explication of their excesses in the consumption of food and drink. Lay christening had long been performed by midwives in emergency situations to secure the soul of the child – a rite that would otherwise have to wait for the next public church baptism ritual, which was historically held only twice per year.[24] This practice was, however, becoming a point of increasing contention in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Prior to the accession of James I, laypersons (frequently women) were allowed to administer the rites of baptism in cases of emergency. As Cressy notes, "since childbirth was a largely female affair, attended by gatherings of women, it might fall to one of them, most likely the midwife, to perform some kind of baptism *in extremis*" (118). The Elizabethan church harbored mixed opinions on the matter, but "the general line of the Elizabethan church was that baptism by women was undesirable, but not absolutely intolerable" (Cressy 119). However, the 1604 Hampton Court Conference reflected an increasing Puritan

[23] A similar lapse occurs in the Walking Mort's story, in which a wife has kept it secret that another wife's husband has attempted to rape or seduce her.

[24] *The Book of Common Prayer* explains that historically, baptism was "not commonly Ministred, but at two times in the yeare, at Easter, and Whytsontide, at which tymes it was openly ministred in the presence of al the congregacion: which custome (now being growen out of use) although it can not for many consideracions bee well restored agayne, yet it is thought good to folow the same as nere as conveniently may be" (141). However, as Brian Cummings notes, "the order for Baptism was one of the most controversial in the late Tudor and early Stuart periods" (734). All quotes from *The Book of Common Prayer* are from *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662*, ed. Brian Cummings. The excerpts are from the 1559 edition unless noted otherwise.

influence.[25] King James "gave his view that he 'utterly disliked' baptism by those who were not ministers, and when the subject of women performing the act was broached, 'his highness grew somewhat earnest.' An ape, he said, was as likely to be able to baptize as a woman" (Cummings 737). The result was that the 1604 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* added a clause establishing that private baptism could only be performed by a minister, not by a layperson.

The new prohibition against women fulfilling their traditional ritual responsibilities is signaled in the play by a Lenten christening, the ambivalence of which is indicated in the language of *The Book of Common Prayer*. This signals not only a breakdown in the functionality of the church (also indicated by the presence of Puritans at the christening), but that the gossips are not privy to the secrets of the birth room, such as the parentage of the child whom they helped to deliver, suggesting the unsettling ease with which the regulatory bodies of society (such as gossips) can be exploited, as well as revealing the corruption at the center of the city and city life.

The vexed representation of gossips in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* show a play obsessed with fertility but also seemingly critical of the rituals surrounding childbirth. At the beginning of the play, Allwit describes his wife's advanced pregnancy to his servant: "My wife's as great as she can wallow, Davy, and longs / For nothing but pickled cucumbers and his [Whorehound's] coming" (1.2.6-7). The "longings" experienced by a pregnant woman were to be indulged to ensure the safety of the fetus, and it typically fell to the husband to discharge this duty, though in the case of Harman's walking mort, we see this was not a hard and fast rule. Although Allwit

[25] Cummings states that, "Puritans usually rejected lay baptism as unnecessary and illogical" (736.)

seems to revel[26] in his wittol status (a contented cuckold), he still lodges a complaint about the elaborate nature and expense of Mistress Allwit's lying-in, though Whorehound is paying for it, not he:

> When she lies in,
>
> As now she's even upon the point of grunting,
>
> A lady lies not in like her; there's her embossings,
>
> Embroid'rings, spanglings, and I know not what,
>
> As if she lay with all the gaudy-shops
>
> In Gresham's Burse about her; then her restoratives,
>
> Able to set up a young pothecary,
>
> And richly stock the foreman of a drug-shop;
>
> Her sugar by whole loaves, her wines by runlets" (1.2.30-38).

Although Allwit's status as wittol largely robs him of the right to complain about the expenses accrued in creating a lying-in chamber, his tirade gives insight into the process of lying-in.

The lying-in mentioned by Allwit is not just the physical act of giving birth. It was in fact a series of rituals, of which childbirth was only one phase. The first stage was preparing for labor. This involved the mother-to-be gathering together her childbed linen, tapestries, and

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[26] He tells Davy, perhaps with some irony, that he's grateful to Whorehound: "I thank him, 'has maintain'd my house this ten years, / Not only keeps my wife, but a keeps me / And all my family: I am at his table; / He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse / Monthly or weekly; puts me to nothing … The happiest state that ever man was born to!" (ll. 15-21). Linda Woodbridge suggests that Allwit's exchange with the Second Gossip, when he asks, "how dost thou?", and she tells him that she "wants nothing but such getting, sir, as thine," to which he replies, "My gettings, wench? They are poor" (2.3.28), he is "either deceptively speaking the truth (he has begotten no children), knowing it will be taken for modesty, or (if Sir Walter was right in suspecting him of sleeping with Allwit's wife) lying to prevent word getting back to Sir Walter that he *is* the father of his own children" (929). The possibility that at least one if not all the children are Allwit's would add an extra tinge of irony to the declaration and to the Allwit-Whorehound ménage in general.

provisions (food and drink) for her midwife and gossips. Though there are indications in the play that pregnancy is not necessarily a desired state,[27] the majority of the action is centered upon characters attempting to enter or control a reproductive state, and the objections to pregnancy are purely financial. In lived experience, there appears to have been a great deal of trepidation surrounding pregnancy, in part because it was "viewed through the prism of miscarriage: as a difficult, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous condition which, unless tended with care, was destined to end prematurely" (Pollack "Experience," 59). There was in fact a substantial amount of literature devoted to supporting the emotional and spiritual states of pregnant women. Thomas Bentley's *The Monument of Matrones* (1582), as assessed by Colin B. Atkinson and William P. Stoneman, includes a significant component of prayers for safety in childbirth, as well as prayers for mercy when the birth goes awry.[28] Prayer 50, which has "the ring of firsthand experience," according to Atkinson and Stoneman, helps to explain why at least one early modern woman purchased extra linen for a winding shroud in case her delivery was

[27] The wife of Touchwood Senior has so many children that the couple must part to preserve something of the family finances. There's also the Country Wench, but she profits from her pregnancy handsomely, as she discloses after she extorts some money from Touchwood Senior for fathering her child: "This is the fifth; if e'er I venture more, / Where I now go for a maid, may I ride for a whore" (2.1.104-5). When she declares "this is the fifth" she is either claiming that this infant is her fifth child out of wedlock, or that this is the fifth time she has used the child to extort money from a man (Woodbridge, footnote to 2.1.105).

[28] The book is divided into seven "lamps." In Lamp Five, "roughly one third of the material in the lamp (38 of the 115 prayers or 62 of the 213 pages) is devoted to the subject of childbirth" (196). Atkinson and Stoneman quote fairly extensively from prayer 50, which has an unsettlingly personal sense of anguish that sets it apart from other examples of early modern prayers: "The babe is come vnto the place of the birth, and lo, it seemeth that thou for my sins hast shut vp the dores of my wombe, and caused the babe to stand still like to be stiffled … How long Lord shall my bowels thus sound like an harpe, my bones and sinews be racked asunder, and mine inward parts be thus greeuouslie tormented for my sins … Shall I be the graue of my child: Shall I giue death the fruit of my bodie, for the sins of my soule; and my first (second, or third) borne for the transgressions of my youth? […] Has thou shut vp the doores of my wombe in thy displeasure, and couered me with the shadowe of death, that the birth may not come out" (197).

unsuccessful.[29] The prayer suggests that possibility of the infant and/or mother dying during delivery constituted a serious concern and a major preoccupation for women approaching childbirth.

The fear of death is glossed over in Allwit's description of the birthroom, and the sense that it is an ostentatious, celebratory space is reinforced. The enbossings, embroid'rings, and spanglings described by Allwit are the tapestries or drapes that were hung around the space designated as the birth chamber. In the early modern period, childbirth occurred in an enclosed and communal gendered space. The birth room was prepared well in advance of labor, as we see in Allwit's description. The space was supposed to be darkened and airless – windows and keyholes were covered, and candles were the only means of illumination (Wilson "Making" 26) – but there were still plenty of opportunities to display class status (or aspirations), as Allwit's description of his wife's lying-in chamber suggests. Janelle Jenstad demonstrates that kinship structures and courtly hierarchies were reflected in the social meanings created by borrowing from friends, family, and social betters, which "conferred status … by locating them in the community through temporary possession of an object" (392).[30] While aristocratic women probably had a freer hand, most women were operating within budget constraints, so it is safe to assume that borrowing was the general practice among women of all classes. For Mistress Allwit to purchase her furniture indicates that she is "linked not to a community of friends but to the

[29] In "The Approbation" of her 1624 pamphlet *The Mother's Legacy to her Unborn Child*, Elizabeth Joceline relates that "when she had not finished the 27. yeere of her age, nor was oppressed by any disease, or danger, other than the common lot of child-birth, within some months approaching. Accordingly when she first felt her selfe quicke with childe (as then travelling with death it selfe) she secretly tooke order for the buying of a new winding-sheet."

[30] She argues that childbed furnishings among aristocratic women "were not customarily purchased; rather they were shared … no woman had a complete set of hangings and linens, and what she did own was used until it had no quantitative value" (374).

shop itself" (391), Jenstad declares. While it is impossible to ascertain whether or not the gossips who populate her lying-in are understood as her friends or merely in attendance out of financial obligation, the fact is that Mistress Allwit is attended by a gossip circle, which indicates the cultural importance of the ritual, whatever might have been the relationships within it.

The next stage of lying-in was labor and delivery. Although the birth chamber was enclosed, it was hardly private. During the birth and for a month afterward, the chamber would be filled with midwives, gossips, and family. Once labor began, the women who had been previously asked to attend the birth were summoned and began getting the lying-in chamber in order, which included such tasks as putting up the hangings and brewing the caudle.[31] The sugar and wines mentioned in Allwit's description were for the caudle,[32] which was prepared only after labor began and the gossips and midwife had been summoned by either the husband or the servant. The mother was to drink the caudle throughout delivery and recovery to gain physical and emotional sustenance, and the midwife and gossips shared in it as well.[33] Childbirth in the early modern period was a social occasion for women, but it is important to note that men were peripherally involved as well,[34] as is the case of the Allwit birth in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*,

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[31] Wilson, "Participant or Patient?" 134.

[32] A warm drink made of gruel mixed with wine or ale, sweetened and flavored with various spices. Sometimes an egg was added for additional nourishment. Cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "caudle."

[33] It is likely that the "gossips' cup" mentioned by Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a caudle.

[34] Patricia Crawford notes that men were not excluded from the processes of childbirth ("Construction and Experience of Maternity" 21), as does Adrian Wilson (*The Making of Man-Midwifery* 25) and Linda Pollock amplifies this claim, stating that "men could not be kept entirely out of pregnancy and childbirth since the birth of a child, especially a son, was more than a domestic matter" (294). Husbands were also involved in their wives' pregnancies and births on the Continent: see especially Ulinka Rublack's "Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Female Body in Early Modern Germany," *Past & Present*, 150 (Feb. 1996), 84-110.

where the audience sees Allwit on his way to invite the gossips to the christening and sees Sir Walter stand as gossip to his own child.

That Allwit is unsure of whom to induce to serve in his wife's birth chamber suggests a less formal arrangement than has been suggested by some scholars. Certainly those invited would be friends, family, and neighbors of the delivering woman, but there is some scholarly contention as to how ritualized was their role.[35] The ad-hoc nature of the lying-in arrangements in the play aligns with Linda Pollock's contention that there would not necessarily have been close ties between the mother and her gossips, and that typically "women were not invited beforehand or individually selected by the mother, but were rounded up when the labor was sufficiently progressed to ensure that a birth would occur" ("Female Bonding" 297). We get a hint of this at the beginning of 3.2, when Mistress Allwit greets her gossips as "good neighbors" (l. 6). This indicates that she doesn't have a set group of gossips selected, and her interest in ostentatious display is not merely class performativity but also an effort to impress those who would be present – a materialistic perception of social relations, and birthing as a means of defining one's relative status.

As evidence of this ad hoc approach to gossiping Pollock cites as her example the 1624 statute against infanticide, which required that several women be present at a birth to ensure that nothing untoward occurred. She posits, "if women were there as witnesses or to learn about childbirth, their relationship with the woman giving birth was incidental, or even unimportant" and hazards that "it is also possible that gatherings of women were not something desired by the participants themselves but were imposed upon women by the community and/or authorities"

[35] Adrian Wilson asserts that the decision of whom to choose as a gossip was "no mere random selection. The mother had specifically invited each of them; to issue such an invitation was a compliment, to neglect it was a slight …" ("Participant" 134).

(298). While the statute suggests that gossips should serve a policing function rather than providing social, emotional, and physical support for the mother, it also nevertheless retroactively legitimates gossiping by sanctioning it as a legal necessity, and endeavors to legally reframe the purposes that gossips served. The larger implications for gossips are significant. Perhaps in response to shifting practices, the statute takes the already-in-place practices (women voluntarily gathering to assist in the safe delivery of mother and child), and asserts a new function, in which the State dictates that gossips must police the midwife rather than assist her, an attitude that potentially destabilizes the traditional function of gossips by destroying both birth room privacy and trust. The statute aims to create internal divisions in the community of women, and suggests legal pressure upon women to testify against the group and the mother if anything untoward should occur, and it also recognizes that women might have strategies for reducing the pressure of procreation by means that would be considered nefarious and illegal. One of the concerns behind the statute is that sometimes midwives were engaged to deliver the mother from the child. Ultimately, it endeavors to divide the community and introduces an element of suspicion among the participants.

The play's relationship to gossiping is a complicated one. This isn't surprising, because Middleton's handling of gender issues is notoriously vexed.[36] The play doesn't stage the birth chamber, but while that is significant, it is hardly surprising. Gail Paster claims this is because of a veil of cultural association of birth with other bodily excretory processes: "childbirth is especially invisible in dramatic representation, where the act of giving birth has been an offstage

[36] For an examination of women in the Middleton canon, see Caroline Lockett Cherry's *The Most Unvaluedst Purchase: Women in the Plays of Thomas Middleton*. Though Cherry declares that "it is clear that Middleton, while not as profound as Shakespeare, had a sympathetic understanding of the minds and emotions of women which was unusual in his time" (viii), the book does a thorough job of contextualizing the women of Middleton's plays.

event, as un-stageable as the other forms of bodily evacuation it so embarrassingly resembles" (163). However, Janelle Jenstad argues, the reluctance to stage the events of the birth room could be due to a lack of knowledge: "the male playwright is simply unlikely to know what transpires" in the birthing chamber, and thus what the audience sees on stage "tends to be only what a man would know of the event from his status as an outsider: the father's fetching of the midwife (who later functions to confirm or conceal paternity), the general marginalization of men from the hustle and bustle of preparations and the apparent female solidarity in the press of women who gather to witness the birth and celebrate the lying-in and christening" ('Smock Secrets' 90). These two different interpretations have very different implications: Paster's reading ties the christening scene to shame, while Jenstad's links it to modes of knowledge. It comes down to this: the scene is filled with stereotypical misogynistic stereotypes, which makes it seem like Middleton is engaging in a shaming strategy, but the satire of the scene is not solely directed toward the women – Allwit, Whorehound, and Tim are all made to be as ridiculous as any of the gossips.[37]

While the play skips over two of the next three stages in the childbirth process, that of birth itself and of the lying-in, the recovery period that lasted anywhere between three to four

[37] Allwit complains about the expense of the feast and the voraciousness of the gossips: "Had this been / All my cost now, I had been beggar'd; / These women have no consciences at sweetmeats …" (3.2.59-61) and later, when Mistress Allwit pledges the gossips' health, Allwit grumbles, "Now the cups troll about / To wet the gossips' whistles. It pours down, i'faith; / They never think of payment" (ll. 77-9). Sir Walter, who stands chief gossip to his own child because "it prevents suspicion; / 'Tis good to play with rumor at all weapons" (2.2.32-3), is, with Allwit, supposedly driven out by the women's behavior. Tim perhaps is the least ridiculous figure in this scene, but only because he is the only man who has no agency within the play – he is a pawn used by nearly every character with whom he interacts. I do not go so far as Ingrid Hotz-Davies in declaring that "we see our sympathies being shifted to Tim, and this is particularly painful as this is truly the only time were are asked to side with him in the whole play" (32), because a lack of intelligence, within the world of city comedy, is not a pitiable state.

weeks after birth,[38] it does stage the phase between birth and lying-in: that of the baptism. Act 2 scene 4 is a small scene, comprising only fifteen lines. Despite its seemingly minor status, 2.4 shows the baptism party returning from the child's christening. The astute reader will notice that Mistress Allwit is not in the party. This was normal, according to Adrian Wilson: "the mother could not attend the baptism of her child, which took place in church about a week after the delivery; instead, the midwife was prominent at this ceremony" ("Participant" 138). What we get in 2.4, however, is a midwife who enters with the child and immediately exits without speaking a line. There is no sense within the world of the play that the midwife has any importance, or indeed, that she can be distinguished from any other female character. Also missing are Allwit and Whorehound. David Cressy notes that "law and custom made it the man's responsibility to arrange for his child's baptism" (150), and that he was typically present at the sacrament. More important, Whorehound, though the actual father of the Allwit baby, was one of the godparents[39] in order to deflect suspicions. He validates his decision by claiming that it throws off suspicion by allowing him to control knowledge: "'Tis good to play with rumor at all weapons" (2.2.33). Essentially, he claims that by becoming a gossip, he can control any potential idle talk. His

[38] Adrian Wilson describes the process in detail in "Participant or Patient?": After birth, "for about a week, the mother kept to her bed and could be visited only by women; and these women drank the caudle left over from the delivery. Then she 'made her upsitting': the bedclothes were changed for the first time, and she could now move freely about the room, but for a further period of some days she could not leave the lying-in room. A third stage followed, when she could move about the house but was not permitted to go outdoors; according to the proper form, she could now receive male visitors provided that these men were her relatives" (138).

[39] "Custom called for two godfathers and a godmother for a boy, two godmothers and a godfather for a girl" (Cressy 150).

exclusion from the presentation of the christened baby in 2.4 is a mute testimonial to how little the men of the play can manipulate gossip networks or female knowledge.[40]

2.4 instead shows the gossips bickering over social precedence. It begins with Maudline Yellowhammer and the 1st Gossip, each of whom offers precedence to the other. Maudline wins the argument by claiming that the 1st Gossip's obstinacy "will let the child / Go without company, and make me forsworn" (ll. 3-4). The 2nd and 3rd Gossip have the inverse argument – each wishes to take precedence, and so they briefly bicker over whether the 2nd Gossip (an apothecary's wife) or the 3rd Gossip (a comfit-maker's wife) has superior social prominence. The 2nd Gossip ultimately yields, but with bad grace. The two Puritans enter together "in unity," and the second Puritan humbly remarks, "I love lowliness" (l. 12) as she and her sister enter. This provides fodder for the satirical comments of the 4th and 5th Gossips, who unite in agreement that the Puritans are as proud as any of the other gossips: " … though they strive more, / There comes as proud behind as goes before" (l. 14). Though this is made to seem ridiculous, their bickering indicates instability within the gossip community. The speech tags indicate the women in the group are either "gossip" or "Puritan," two culturally opposed groups.

[40] That Sir Walter is unable to do this is not necessarily bad. Female knowledge is constantly denigrated throughout the period, and gossip communities who make a point of flaunting their knowledge are famously lampooned in Jonson's *Epicoene*. But even Jonson has a complicated relationship to gossip communities and female knowledge. Jenstad makes an interesting argument for Jonson usurping the midwife function in *The Magnetic Lady* in her article "'Smock Secrets': Birth and Women's Mysteries on the Early Modern Stage."

Another possible source of the instability might be because they are united only through the Allwits' conspicuous spending, and they have no ties of friendship with Mistress Allwit.

When we see the gossips again, the midwife is not among them. The stage direction reads: "*A bed thrust out upon the stage, Allwits's Wife in it. Enter all the Gossips*." There is no mention of the midwife, nor does she have any speaking lines. A nurse (who has lines) ensures that the child is onstage and present for the feast, but the midwife's absence is noteworthy, since early modern midwives had a central role to play in the childbirth ritual. Adrian Wilson argues that "the popular ceremony of childbirth both reflected and helped to maintain a *collective culture of women*. That culture conferred on the midwife her authority over the birth; conversely, in exercising her office she confirmed and maintained women's collective control over this, the pivotal event in their lives" ("Man-Midwife" 38). But the midwife, Jenstad asserts, has a larger role as the chief regulator of the knowledge of birth room events, a role that ensures that she is ultimately the "agent of patriarchy," because despite her obligation to ensure a safe delivery and healthy baby, she also had an obligation to the Church to discover or confirm the child's paternity: "The midwife was a dual figure, responsible for keeping secret what actually happened within the gynocentric space,[41] yet also given a testamentary function in ensuring the mother's truth about the paternity of her child" ("Smock Secrets" 89). To exclude the midwife from the christening celebration is significant – arguably it is her absence that allows for the gossips' misattribution of the child's paternity,[42] but it also signals a marked absence of church/state

[41] Jenstad borrows the concept of "gynocentric space" from Fiona McNeill's article of the same name. "McNeill's argument concerns unmarried women, but her point that 'gynocentric scenes more often constitute the imaginary borders of the action' applies well to the unseen lying-in chamber" (90).

[42] Midwives were required by law to take an oath, which was administered by a representative of the Church of England. It is unclear when exactly the church began requiring midwives to take

authority or legitimation, and a banishing of the birth ritual: midwives were supposed to receive generous gifts from the guests at a baptism feast as thanks for their services (Evenden 33; 127).

Ultimately, the problems within the gossip community are representative of the tension at the heart of the city comedy genre, according to Leonard Tennenhouse: the friction between patriarchy and paternalism.[43] Arguing that "the plays make clear that these exist as separate notions and represent opposing forms of political organization," Tennenhouse posits that this difference is marked by representing incompetent male guardians who attempt to block marriages of their female wards to worthy suitors, and he observes that the phenomenon of "paternal characters unable to fill the role of patriarch when they act as the head of household" occurs throughout Middleton's plays, among others (168). *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* certainly features several patriarchs unable to fulfill their paternal obligations, but Tennenhouse's analysis of how women are used to enforce the rights of an aristocratic model of patriarchy that favors genealogical precedence is incomplete. Although he points out that women in city comedy do operate to right the wrongs perpetuated by incompetent patriarchs in order to restore the marriage

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oaths, but Doreen Evenden suggests that it was well before Henry VIII's 1512 legislation regulating the practice of medicine and surgery, but she is quick to point out that "midwives were not mentioned in the act and the date when the church first began to issue midwifery licences, and by what authority, remains uncertain" (25). The only examples of the midwife's oath are from the 16th-18th centuries, but they have the same general stipulations: the midwife vows to aid both the poor and rich, discover the name of the father of the child, not to deliver a child in secret, not to use sorcery, not to kill the child, not unnecessarily harm the mother, to properly bury the child if dead, and to consult with other midwives if necessary. To read examples of oaths, see the Appendices of Doreen Evenden's *The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London* or Thomas Forbes' *The Midwife and the Witch*.

[43] Tennenhouse writes, "City comedies ask us to tolerate all manner of questionable sexual practices in the name of genealogy … Aside from the seeming excesses and follies usually cited, the satirist aims his attack in these plays at fathers, uncles, nephews, or grandsons who attempt either to divert a patrimony or to seize it prematurely. This ideological matrix informs all the Jacobean dramatic genres. It unites city comedy and absent monarch plays with dramatic romance in a common strategic intention: to authorize patriarchalism over and against paternalism" (171).

imperative that signals the successful conclusion of a comedy, his analysis focuses only on single non-aristocratic women. He claims that "the women in city comedy who take on this patriarchal prerogative are never aristocratic women … [and] because these women are not aristocratic, they, unlike the women of romantic comedy and Jacobean tragedy, are not in fact usurping the prerogative of the aristocratic male" (169). He uses Moll Yellowhammer as an example of this and says that her marriage does not "present a direct challenge to patriarchal power" because it is a correction of the inability of a bourgeois paternal figure to "properly oversee the exchange of women in his family" (170). However, in his analysis of the play, he overlooks the gossips and their cultural importance to the functioning of patriarchy. Part of the gossips' function is to know the father of the child they help to deliver, which, in this play, they do not. Their celebration inadvertently undermines patriarchy, as does the exclamation made by one of the gossips, who admires the extravagance of Mistress Allwit's lying in: "See, gossip, and she lies not in like a countess" (3.2.89). The entire scene underscores the reliance of patriarchy on the gossip community and the midwife, so the portrayal of the failure depicted in this scene makes some fairly explicit challenges to the overall dynamics of gossiping.

The gossip's promotion of the boundary-blurring between aristocratic and bourgeois in the matter of the furnishings in the lying-in chamber also tacitly promotes the subversion Whorehound and the Allwits are practicing through their unusual domestic arrangement. Thus the gossips' ostensibly "normal" christening feast behavior becomes satirical through the manipulations of Whorehound and the Allwits, who exploit the social legitimation that gossiping rituals grant to a family by paradoxically utilizing the stereotypical "weaknesses" of the gossip community – namely, conspicuous consumption. Thus we see a christening feast go off the tracks.

The christening feast begins routinely, with the gossips admiring the baby. The First Puritan is proud of the fact that she is "well kursen'd, i'the right way, / Without idolatry or superstition …" (3.2.3-4), but the other gossips admire her physical characteristics. The Second Gossip calls her "a chopping girl" who is "so like the father" (l. 9). The Third Gossip agrees: "As if it had been spit out of his mouth! / Ey'd, nos'd, and brow'd as like as girl can be, / Only indeed it has the mother's mouth" (ll. 10-12). Then, continuing the tension between the women that was introduced at the baptism in 2.4, the gossips bicker over whether she is a large or small child, and whether Mistress Allwit had a brief labor or a long one. They all agree though that she is "a most cheerful daughter" (l. 23), but the subjective nature of their observations undermines the validity of their legitimating function – they read the visible signs of legitimacy ineffectually, if agreement is a necessary tenet of acknowledging legal paternity. The communal quality of the ritual suggests that it is supposed to be acknowledged, but without the midwife to provide an official verdict, the gossips' observations are reduced to inane chatter.

Whorehound, as chief gossip, enters with his gift of two apostle spoons[44] and a cup and presents them to Mistress Allwit. The nurse, who had exited with the baby as Whorehound entered, now returns with wine and comfits. The gossips partake heartily of both, much to Allwit's horror: "Had this been / All my cost now, I had been beggar'd; / These women have no consciences at sweetmeats," he declares, and relates a story of a citizen who complained "that his wife's belly only broke his back" (ll. 60-61; 66).[45] When his wife pledges a toast to her gossips

[44] R.B. Parker describes them as "silver spoons with the figure of an apostle on the handle" and states that they were "the usual christening gifts at this time" (57).

[45] This was a stereotypical husbandly complain. In *The Bachelor's Banquet*, in the chapter entitled, "The humor of a woman lying in childbed," the husband complains bitterly about "play[ing] both the husband and housewife" (61), being made to wait upon his wife's abusive gossips as they consume great quantities of expensive food and wine.

for their efforts in the lying in chamber, Allwit becomes so enraged at the scene – "Now the cups troll about / To wet the gossips' whistles. It pours down, i'faith; / They never think of payment" (ll. 77-79) – that he asks Whorehound if he would like to leave the women, a proposal to which Sir Walter heartily assents.

What takes place after the men remove themselves is a different kind of gossip stereotype from the boozing christening where drinks and supposed idle talk are exchanged, although that is certainly present: as the gossips get steadily more drunk, one of them reveals that her nineteen-year-old daughter "cannot lie dry in her bed" (l. 97). It is interesting to note that after the men leave, the scene shifts from birthing celebration to incorporate the educative function of a gossip community, though again, the function is not completely effective. When the nurse enters to tell Maudline Yellowhammer that her son Tim wishes to see her, she tells her, "prithee, call him up / Among the women, 'twill embolden him well, / For he wants nothing but audacity" (ll. 101-03). She attempts to teach him how to act around his fiancée, and bemoans the fact that university education is functionally useless when it comes to practical matters pertaining to relations between men and women: "He's so bashful, that's the spoil of youth: / In the university they're kept still to men, / And ne'er train'd up to women's company" (ll. 112-14). And though what ensues has engendered much critical derision (the gossips are, to use the parlance of the times, "sloppy drunk," reeling around, falling down, and planting wet kisses on Tim), it demonstrates a gossip community stripped of any efficacy and made totally ineffectual: they cannot distinguish between a legitimate and an illegitimate infant, nor can they teach Tim of "women's company," ensuring his inability to distinguish that Whorehound's Welch niece is a whore. The centrality of this episode, typically considered an anomaly within the play, actually highlights its importance: the gossip community is the social barometer of the play. The community is supposed to have a

normative function, but in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, while the gossips follow the general form of gossiping, their function is repeatedly repressed or subverted. The gossips' ineffectiveness highlights the already problematic ending of the play, when Moll Yellowhammer rises from her coffin to marry Touchwood Junior, and his elder brother, Touchwood Senior (who marries them), encourages them to use her winding sheets as their wedding linen (5.4.43). This repurposing of funeral linens for the celebratory reproductive moment of the wedding night blurs the distinction between wedding, birth, and funeral,[46] and suggests that, because the reproductive order is misaligned and the gossip community cannot perform its corrective function, Moll's wedding linen will again be used funereally, perhaps after a childbed tragedy. The play's collapse of form and function regarding the gossip community shows the darker side of comic interchangeability. A gossip community that can be manipulated and modified to the point of irrelevance hints at the fact that Touchstone Senior's joke about the economical use of linen has more than a grain of truth to it. This is the early modern anxiety about social structure at its most basic – without the vital services and structure provided by functional gossip communities, young brides like Moll will be buried in their wedding linen because the community created to ensure their safe delivery from childbed is unable to do anything to prevent it. Troubling comedic endings thus point us toward the very serious social repercussions at the heart of the unstable and nonfunctional gossip community.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

[46] For another example of the juxtaposition of wedding sheets and winding shrouds, cf. *Othello* 4.3. In this scene, Emilia is preparing Desdemona for her bath, and she tells her mistress, "I have laid those sheets you bade me on the bed." Desdemona's replies, "All's one. Good faith, how foolish are our minds! / If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of these same sheets" (ll. 20-23).

Though this theme of reproduction without gossips is treated in one of the subplots of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Shakespeare makes it one of the central concerns of his most beloved comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the absence of gossips becomes a critical element for both the human world and the fairy realm.

It has become critical commonplace to consider a discussion of gender politics in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the lens of female recalcitrance, and to assume that the play treats female recalcitrance as the kind of social inversion that is a staple of the comedic genre. It is a seductive idea – after all, the play begins with Theseus, Duke of Athens, informing the audience of his upcoming marriage to Hippolyta, the defeated Amazon queen. (Might he also be informing his fiancée of the event?) That Hippolyta has no reason to be pleased with this turn of events Theseus acknowledges: "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword, / And won thy love doing thee injuries. / But I will wed thee in another key – / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling" (1.1.16-19). One can observe here that Theseus speaks of marriage as an action he does *to* Hippolyta, and that he tropes it in a way that makes it indistinguishable from the event prior to the play's beginning, of her defeat, capture, and transport to Athens.

Into this problematic atmosphere of jumbled private and public concerns comes Egeus, an aggrieved father whose daughter has the audacity to desire to choose her husband. It is a bizarre scene: a furious father drags his daughter and her two suitors before the duke and his captured Amazon fiancée, demanding a resolution to the matter. It's superficially unclear why Egeus thinks this is an issue to be resolved by the Duke, and why the Duke concerns himself with this seemingly minor matter. But the juxtaposition of these events suggests that for Shakespeare, there is a connection, and a brief examination reveals the reason, which is to reinforce the play's obsession with the destruction of female community through the isolation of

its women, a tactic begun even before the events of the play with Theseus' capture of Hippolyta, an action that effectively destroys Amazonian society through the abduction of its head of state.

It is possible to argue that there is a legal justification for Egeus to seek out Theseus. Because Egeus wishes to invoke archaic Athenian law (the application of the death penalty for daughterly disobedience) to coerce his daughter into marrying his preferred suitor, Demetrius, the Duke must sanction this unusual action. But Theseus' response to Hermia makes it sound as if he has less power in the situation than does Egeus, in this matter at least. He tells her, "to you your father should be as a god" (l. 47), and he concludes, in an attempt to be conciliatory, by telling her, "Demetrius is a worthy gentleman" (l. 52). She immediately fires back with, "So is Lysander." Theseus' reply is remarkable – instead of chastising Hermia for contradicting him and/or speaking out of turn, he tacitly agrees with her that each man is an equally good candidate for marriage: "In himself he is; / But in this kind, wanting your father's voice, / The other must be held the worthier" (ll. 53-55). This exchange demonstrates Theseus' privileging of Egeus' rights to exercise paternal autocracy despite his agreement with Hermia – that by Egeus' standards, the suitors are interchangeable, so that it doesn't make sense to obstinately prefer Demetrius to Lysander. But as Theseus cannot undermine a father's rights (as the domestic is a microcosm of the state), he does change Egeus' conditions slightly, by offering her a chance at life: if she will not marry Demetrius, her options are "either to die the death, or to abjure / For ever the society of men" (ll. 65-6). It is unclear if Theseus makes this change, or if this is a condition of the law that Egeus failed to mention during his attempt to wrest obedience from his daughter. In his edition of the play, Peter Holland speculates that Theseus introduces an alternative as a way to "[alter] the mood of the scene – Hippolyta, who belonged to a race that had abjured 'the society of men,' might well respond strongly to this option" (136-7). Holland

positively imbues Theseus' motivation in giving Hermia a non-fatal non-marriage option, but it is a reading neither supported by Theseus' treatment of Hippolyta in the play nor the language that both he and Hermia use to represent the choice of life without men.

Louis Montrose discusses the possibility that Theseus uses Hermia's situation to demonstrate to Hippolyta his intentions toward her. For Montrose, Theseus' motivation is far from benign: "… Hermia wishes the limited privilege of giving herself. Theseus appropriates the source of Hermia's fragile power: her ability to deny men access to her body. He usurps the power of virginity by imposing upon Hermia his own power to deny her the use of her body" (67-8). Montrose sees in Theseus' punishment of Hermia an appropriation and parody of "the very condition Amazons sought to enjoy […] The separatism of the Amazons is a repudiation of men's claims to have property in women. But if the Amazonian myth figures the inversionary claims of matriarchy, sisterhood, and the autonomy of women, it also figures the *repudiation* of those claims in the act of Amazonimachy" (68). However, Montrose does not make clear the point that the audience witnesses neither the matriarchal Amazonian society nor the repudiation of female autonomy that accompanies Hippolyta's defeat by Theseus, as these events occur prior to the play. We are treated to a captured and docile Amazon queen who makes no overt complaint against her forcible integration into patriarchy, but who is largely silent, a state that can be construed as its own form of protest. By staging a silent figure of female autonomy and the absolute refusal to allow women even to negotiate the terms of their own marriage, the stark take on gender politics is evident early in the play. Hippolyta's situation at the play's outset begins to frame the situation: in the social imaginary, the reproductive order is legitimated and supported through marriage, while the play challenges the validity of that conjunction. The

comic resolution presupposes reproductive outcomes, but the conclusion of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* throws that assumption into question.

Scholars of early modern comedy frequently collapse conjugal order with reproductive order. And while many comedies conclude with the reification of patriarchal order through the creation of heteronormative reproductive couples who are integrated into society through the ritual of marriage, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* problematizes that conclusion, though it superficially appears to uphold the idea that comedies are supposed to promote reproductive life cycles. Montrose speaks for the general critical consensus when he describes the play as "[focusing] upon different crucial transitions in the male and female life cycles," and argues that the focus of the fairy plot is to take "a little changeling boy" from "childhood into youth, from the world of the mother into the world of the father" (66). He sees the Athenian plot as "taking a maiden from youth into maturity, from the world of the father into the world of the husband" (66-7), a transformation that "restores the inverted Amazonian system of gender and nurture to a patriarchal norm" (67), initiated when Theseus captures Hippolyta and culminating in the celebration of their marriage. But as I will argue, *Midsummer* is less concerned with righting an inverted gender system to create social balance than it is with purging of anything associated with the domestic.

Instead of reading the gender situation of the play in light of a binary centered around an Amazonian inversion paradigm, a fruitful avenue of exploration can be found in linking Hermia's situation with that of the fairy queen, Titania. Hermia's desire to broker the terms of her marriage, her subsequent punishments from patriarchy, and the problematic "restoration" of social order that results in what Montrose describes as "the marital couplings [that] dissolve the bonds of sisterhood at the same time that they forge the bonds of brotherhood" (69) parallel

Titania's attempts to keep the changeling boy, her subsequent punishment, and the problematic "restoration" of social order that is the result of giving Oberon the boy. It is not so much an inversion of gender as it is an insistence of one's rights (or perhaps, the insistence that one has rights) within the system that leads both women into trouble, and although the play ends with the creation of the domestic in the Athenian plot and the restoration of the domestic in the fairy plot, these are severely bounded domestic spheres, devoid of any outside resources for its women. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fulfills generic expectations by restoring social order through marriage, but it does so by abolishing any sort of female relationships, from simple friendships to the more complex and socially important gossip community, thereby undermining the reproductive futures of the play's couples.

Hippolyta's capture happens offstage, but the opening salvo in the struggle over the control of the domestic occurs in the first interaction between Oberon and Titania. In the interactions between the two, the domestic is literally everywhere – Titania has "foresworn his bed and company" (2.1.62), but she avers that it is not because of their mutual interference in the romantic pursuits of Theseus and Hippolyta, as Oberon would have it. The exchange reveals that Oberon abandoned his duties as King of the Fairies. Titania relates,

> I know
> When thou hast stol'n away from fairy land,
> And in the shape of Corin, sat all day
> Playing on pipes of corn, and versing love
> To amorous Phillida. Why art thou here,
> Come from the farthest step of India,
> But that, forsooth, the bouncing Amazon,

Your buskin'd mistress and your warrior love,

To Theseus must be wedded, and you come

To give their bed joy and prosperity?" (2.1.64-73).

His subsequent vengeful treatment of Titania in regards to the matter of the changeling boy suggests that his return to fairy land to perform a blessing on Hippolyta's bridal bed might not be motivated out of a magnanimous desire for Hippolyta's future health and happiness. His rejoinder to Titania's accusations, that she has compelled Theseus to a life of womanizing ("Didst not thou lead him through the glimmering night / From Perigouna, whom he ravished; / And make him with fair Aegles break his faith, / With Ariadne and Antiopa?" [ll. 77-80]), is rejected by her as "the forgeries of jealousy" (l. 81), but it does foreshadow his decision to punish her with an uncontrollable desire for Bottom.

Oberon's abandonment of his duties is compounded by Titania's next accusation: that he actively works to undermine her attempts to fulfill her duties, which include creating a fairy ring. But she relates that she and her fairies cannot find any place where they can congregate to perform their rituals that Oberon does not find them. She describes many attempts "to dance our ringlets to the whistling wind, / But with thy brawls thou hast disturbed our sport" (ll. 86-7). Because of his usurpation of that space, the rituals that Titania and her fairies perform – rituals with productive and reproductive capacity – remain unperformed, and everything suffers as a consequence. Titania relates the devastating effects Oberon's interference has wrought in the human realm: "The fold stands empty in the drowned field, / And crows are fatted with the murrion flock" (2.1.96-7). The disruption is totalizing – not only is the human world thrown into disorder by the conflict in the fairy realm, but the conflict extends even to the heavenly bodies governing the earth's climate. She describes the moon, "pale in her anger" (l.104), causing the

disruption of the normal patterns of the seasons: "the spring, the summer, / The chiding autumn, angry winter, change / Their wonted liveries; and the mazed world, / By their increase, now knows not which is which" (ll. 111-14). Titania attempts to make Oberon accept his part in the devastation of the human world by employing a metaphor of generation, where Oberon shares the role of progenitor with Titania in creating what she calls the "progeny of evils" (l. 115). She concludes by reemphasizing that they each must acknowledge that although they no longer share a bed, their relationship still has generative capacity – their conflict (or friction, as Greenblatt has it) breeds unnatural natural activity. "We are their parents and original," (l.117) insists Titania, stressing Oberon's equal responsibility.

Oberon refuses to acknowledge his destructive role, choosing instead to lay the blame all with Titania, telling her, "Do you amend it then: it lies in you. / Why should Titania cross her Oberon?" (ll. 118-9). He then abruptly asks for a changeling boy who has until this point not been mentioned as the condition for her capitulation, which had also not been an issue until this point in the exchange. Oberon's demand of Titania for the changeling boy becomes the focus for the most concerted attack on female community in the play. He is a child, we hear from Titania, born to an Indian mother with the Queen of Fairies as her gossip, and raised by her in fairy land when the mother dies after bearing him. As Puck, Oberon's fairy minion, describes the situation, Oberon "is passing fell and wrath" because Titania "as her attendant hath / A lovely boy, stol'n from an Indian king" and "jealous Oberon would have the child / Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild: / But she perforce withholds the loved boy, / Crowns him with flowers, and makes him all her joy" (2.1.20-7). Puck frames Oberon's right to the boy in two ways: the first is to nullify Titania's claim to the boy by describing him as "stol'n" from his father. This reframes the conversation surrounding the changeling boy and makes it about restoring him to his rightful

place in a male-controlled environment, as Puck's second point makes clear. He describes Oberon's plans for the Indian boy, which are to make him into a knight, but those plans are foiled by Titania's supposed infantilization, and thus the feminization of the boy (he wears a flower crown and is doted upon).[47] Therefore, although the boy is "stol'n," Oberon, via Puck, frames the situation in a way that reinforces patriarchal privilege – he will foster the boy to manhood instead of allowing him to stagnate in feminine affection. Oberon's tacit argument is that Titania's affection for the boy threatens, paradoxically, to change him through her artificial arrest of his normal social development. His title as a "changeling boy" could be an indication of his susceptibility to the threat Titania poses to his indoctrination into the masculine sphere, and thus a possible justification for Oberon's intervention on his behalf.

Montrose thinks Oberon's ultimate goal is "to gain possession, not only of the boy but of the woman's desire and obedience" (71), and others offer critical consensus: David Marshall says "Oberon and Titania are divided because Titania will not part with the changeling boy" (557) Margo Hendricks calls the boy "the source of tension between the fairy queen and king" (51-2) and agrees with Montrose's assessment that Oberon's motives are rooted in marital or patriarchal possessiveness when she concludes that "Oberon's desire for the boy seems very much connected to desire for dominion over Titania" (53). I shall demonstrate that while the linchpin of the play is the changeling boy, the real source of the conflict centers upon the rights of a gossip, a reading that problematizes the putative aims of comedy: to depict the fostering or restoration of reproductive viability through marriage.

The play's troubling of marital and reproductive outcomes takes its most explicit form in Titania's description of her relationship with the mother of the changeling boy, with whom, she

[47] This as a trope of feminization is evident in the Bower of Bliss episode in Book II of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

explains, "in the spiced Indian air, by night, / Full often … gossip'd by my side" and who, "Being mortal, of that boy did die; / And for her sake do I rear up her boy; / And for her sake I will not part with him" (ll. 124-5; 135-37). Most critics attribute Titania's declared intention to raise the boy for the sake of his mother as a demonstration of affection for the dead woman. The fostering of the boy is taken as a demonstration of the maternal role of the gossip, who functions here like a godmother in spite of the lack of a christening. Montrose avoids paternalistic judgment of Titania's connection to the boy, but still posits that her attachment to the boy is a form of mourning for his mother: "Titania's attachment to the changeling boy embodies her attachment to the memory of his mother" (71). Margo Hendricks goes a bit further in assigning a deathbed promise the boy's mother extracted from the queen: "Titania's interest in the boy is sentimental, linked to her relationship with his mother and the promise the fairy queen made" (53). However, while affection is almost certainly a strong component in Titania's attachment to the boy, we are also given compelling evidence for a bond that goes deeper than affection when, early in her speech, she describes her activities with the boy's mother as "gossiping."

Scholars and editors of the play have failed to account effectively for the use of the term in the play. In the second Arden edition of the play, Brooks glosses "gossip'd" as "been my gossip, woman friend" and then includes parenthetically, "(strictly, 'gossips' were godfathers and godmothers, relatives as god-sibs)" (35), a definition that at least gestures toward the fuller functions of the role. Neither Anne Barton in the second edition of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Greenblatt in *The Norton Shakespeare*, nor Holland in the Oxford edition of the play annotate the word as having a specific meaning in this context, missing an opportunity to explicate the complexities of the term beyond its modern sense of idle talk. The term appears in the play for the first time approximately 120 lines earlier, when Puck reveals that "sometime lurk I in a

gossip's bowl, / In very likeness of a roasted crab, / And when she drinks, against her lips I bob, / And on her withered dewlap pour the ale" (2.1.47-50). In this instance, the annotations for the term "gossip" take up other aspects of the early modern definition, focusing on negative stereotypes rather than on the role of supporting childbirth and maternal safety. The Riverside glosses "gossip" as "a garrulous old woman," the Norton edition glosses it as "an old woman" and the Arden notes, "here, a gossip has the modern sense: a tattling woman." But Holland, in the Oxford edition of the play, footnotes the "gossip's cup" as "Strictly a godmother's christening cup, though gossip may mean simply 'a chattering woman' here" (155). In a play so obsessed with change, these disjointed definitions provide commentary on the changing social role of gossips.

In addition, once a term has been glossed in the notes, it is usually expected that the definition stands when the term appears again. Thus, "old woman" or "idle chatterer" are definitionally being applied to Titania, through inattention or because of a lack of understanding of the complexity of the term. Recognizing the complexity of the social roles of gossiping opens up not only some important elements of the play's treatment of women, but its bleak view of reproduction. Though Puck's description of his activities comes before Titania's story of gossiping with the changeling boy's mother, I will first examine the concept of gossiping and Titania's use of the term, since she self-identifies as a gossip. The implications of this reciprocal gossip relationship not only help to shed a richer light on Puck's supposedly random mischief, but also reveal the depth of destruction to pleasurable and beneficial female relationships that results from Oberon's campaign against Titania.

Titania describes her activities with the changeling boy's mother as mirthful and frequent: "Full often hath she gossiped by my side" (2.1.125), she says. Though Titania describes

a positive and pleasurable female relationship here, she also couples that with the eventually tragic tale of the pregnancy, birth, and consequent death of the boy's mother. She thereby explicates the significance of this relationship, and solidifies her superior claim to the boy. A gossip is a female friend, but also a great deal more than that, as Shakespeare's audience would have known. Women who agreed to be gossips for an expectant mother had a range of social and religious obligations to fulfill, which, as Susan Phillips points out, were not limited to birthing chamber rituals: "Gossips accepted responsibility for the child's spiritual and physical well-being … At the same time, they forged a mutually beneficial alliance with the child's mother, establishing a 'formal state of friendship' that had financial, social, and political benefits" (154). However, as she acknowledges, the obligations of protecting the child and creating new network alliances was regarded with a great deal of anxiety. "These multiple duties were not just licensed but often were required by both secular and religious authorities, yet they became the source of the gossips' ill repute" (154). David Cressy obliquely acknowledges this anxiety surrounding the gossip's role by gingerly positing that "godparents, *if properly cultivated*, could be called upon to act the part of a kinsman" (160, emphasis added).[48] *Midsummer* dramatically stages this lack of codification by creating two significant "soft spots" to Titania's claim to the boy through her rights as his mother's gossip.

The first of these problems is that the boy's age is indeterminate. If he is under the age of seven, then Titania does appear to have some right to "rear up" the boy, because, as Phillips points out, "the godparent's responsibility for the child's safety lasts until she reaches seven years of age" (154). In the human realm, boys began the process of maturation to manhood

[48] What that cultivation is, or how it was achieved, Cressy leaves to future investigations: "The dynamics of this relationship are still in need of research, but the available evidence suggests that baptismal ties, though weak, were susceptible to being pulled" (160).

starting at the age of seven.[49] The conflicting views of the boy's provenance – stolen from the Indian King or adopted when his mother dies, or both – foregrounds anxieties about the intervention of women in the birth room, and raises questions about Titania's right to raise the child. Regardless of Titania's right, Oberon is neither gossip nor foster-father, and he identifies the father as the wronged party. His claims to the boy seem to rest solely in patriarchal privilege, but the play emphasizes that such privilege hinges upon the effective support of maternity by gossips, and offers no history of Oberon's interaction with human kings that would indicate a basis for his claim.

The birth-room role of the gossip, which functions to secure both patriarchal stability and maternal survival, is transformed into a god-sib function (that of a godparent) when, as Titania reports, the boy's mother has died in childbirth: "she, being mortal, of that boy did die" (l. 135).[50] Though the fairy realm intersects with the human realm in certain ways, it is not parallel to it. Titania is a god-sib but she is not able to fulfill that role in Christian terms. However, the play does not situate any of these characters as Christian, and thus the role seems to be linked to earlier or alternative models of fostering. Recognizing Titania's role as gossip bolsters Mary

[49] In "The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England," Patricia Crawford explains that a mother was responsible for the care of children until the age of seven, and notes that "even bastards were usually kept with their mothers until that age. The justices preferred not to send children to the house of correction with their mothers unless they were sucking, but in practice there was usually no choice" (12). Her next observation has a great deal of relevance for the situation of the changeling boy in the play: "However, the law authorized anyone to take vagrant children of about 4 or 5 years of age from their mothers, 'whether they be willing or not.' Once the child had been bound before the justices or certain witnesses, neither mother, father, nor nurse was allowed to steal the child back." While the changeling boy is the son of an Indian king, it is interesting that the legal obligation of the Elizabethan state mimics the practices of the fairies.

[50] Because of the boy's indeterminate age, it is possible to read the votress' death as a result of Oberon's interference with Titania's attempts to create the fairy circles that ensure the proper functioning of nature (i.e., mothers that don't die in childbed).

Ellen Lamb's assertion that the world of the fairies is evoked in the play as an allegory for popular culture and a site to deploy subversive strategies. "When considered in isolation," she writes, "the forest episodes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* stage meanings for the fairies and for Robin Goodfellow which are not substantially different from their meanings within a common culture. The play literalizes the strategic use of fairy allusions as a cover for acts regarded as illicit by the dominant culture" (303). Though she is discussing Bottom's illicit relationship with Titania, the idea applies equally to the roles of the gossip community within society. Titania both assists in birth and fosters the child, but disrupts human patriarchal order in the process, removing a male heir from the succession. Seen simultaneously as illicit and a necessary component for the continuance of culture, the situation of the changeling boy and Titania is an embodiment of the social ambiguities of the gossip.

In her lush and poignant narrative of her relationship with the boy's mother, Titania is at once a "good gossip," focused on sensual pleasures and merriment, and a "good" gossip, one who takes her obligations for the boy's well-being quite seriously. Her willingness to face Oberon's displeasure rather than submit to his request to give up the boy is strong proof that she believes the gossip's vow to be privileged over the demands of patriarchy and even monarchy. Taken from this angle, the boy's age is immaterial, even detrimental to the stakes of the argument. The tension the boy embodies (gossip vs. patriarchy) is not meant to have an easy resolution. The ambiguity makes for social instability, which in turn, from a patriarchal perspective, justifies the modification/eradication of female community in the play.

This leads to the second problem with Titania's claim to the boy, which is that he is nameless within the space of the play. One of the primary functions of a gossip in her capacity as a spiritual sponsor was to name the child whom she was sponsoring. Cressy explains that, "after

offering to renounce the devil, the godparents' most important ceremonial task was to supply the child with a name," and emphasizing that the naming ritual "was a serious business, securing legal, social, religious, and semantic identity" (161). To be a gossip and not name the boy suggests, at least superficially, that Titania's assertion that she has the right to raise the boy is disputable. However, this second problem is complicated by fairy lore, which dictates that an unchristened baby was "particularly liable to be carried off" by fairies (Briggs 115). Ultimately, though, both the boy's namelessness and more importantly, the fact that he's never embodied onstage, suggest that Titania's defiance, rooted as it is in male perceptions of the female body and female excess has but one inevitable outcome: shame and eventual capitulation to patriarchal strictures. As Paster notes, "childbirth is especially invisible in dramatic representation, where the act of giving birth has been an offstage event, as unstageable as the other forms of bodily evacuation it so embarrassingly resembles" (163). In the particular instance of Titania and her votress, there is no indication in the play that the votress was married to the father of her child, a situation which, coupled with the boy's complete lack of embodiment, indicates that if these circumstances were translated into the human realm, she would be made to feel the shame of the situation. Oberon does this later in the play by punishing Titania with Bottom.

In translating this issue into the fairy realm, Shakespeare continues the tradition of suspicion regarding the social efficacy of the gossip community's rights to ritual. Additionally, the rights to ritual are undermined in a variety of ways through the specific representation of fairies in the play, representations that transform and diminish the threatening nature of these creatures. In the medieval and early modern periods, fairies were regarded as almost entirely negative. M. W. Latham observes that "with the exception of the fairies of Shakespeare's mythology, and the fairies of Spenser, the fairies as a race are never referred to as good spirits,

except when this adjective is applied to them as a matter of propitiation or of fear, or to single out some particular member of the race who is pleased, for some reason or other, to show a favor to mortals" (34-5). Shakespeare is credited by multiple scholars[51] for creating a new, more diminutive race of fairies, one from which all signs of evil and maliciousness is purged, as Latham explains: "No longer do they function as the mischievous and dangerous beings they were believed to be … instead, they become, in actuality, the Good Neighbours which, in flattery and fear, they had been dubbed by mortals trembling before the idea of their advent." Shakespeare's fairies, though made tiny, embody domestic perfection: "the period of their earthly materialization is devoted to making the world happier and more beautiful, without any of the usual impositions of taboos and without any of the usual demand for worship or payment" (Latham 182). Regina Buccola posits that the domestication of the fairies "were imaginative responses to the stresses of life in a rapidly changing world" and that "the socially significant fairy attributes most often invoked in early modern drama and popular lore are their erratic oscillation between benevolent and malevolent treatment of humans … their penchant for intruding into human love affairs, and their abduction of humans as brides (or paramours), midwives, and changeling infants" (10). These descriptions of fairies, their paradoxical unplacedness that nevertheless focused on the domestic, their unasked-for intervention in human

[51] Margaret Murray in *The God of the Witches* and Minor Latham in *The Elizabethan Fairies* both provide extensive textual evidence demonstrating that representations of the size of fairies before Shakespeare varied from the size of human adults to human children, but it was not until Shakespeare that fairies became excessively diminutive.

affairs, and their association with moments in life centered around reproduction,[52] all signal that the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are functioning as a gossip community.[53]

In aligning the gossip and fairy communities in the play, and then modifying them in specific ways, *Midsummer* creates an interpretative fantasy that aligns the gossip with the social fantasy of an idealized domestic space. Mischievous, willful entities not bounded by spatial considerations or social conventions are restructured into "good neighbors"—obedient, eager to serve and please without demand for compensation. Even the miniaturizing of their physical bodies augments this fantasy.[54]

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[52] Diane Purkiss claims that "the moments in life when a fairy encounter is most likely are infancy, puberty, and childbirth for women" (94).

[53] In her article, "Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*" Mary Ellen Lamb relates a story told by Robert Willis of his near death experience as an infant: "if I had not cryed in that manner as I did, our gossips had a conceit that I had been quite carried away by the Fairies they know not whither, and some elfe or changeling (as they call it) laid in my room." Lamb asserts that "his use of the word 'conceit' indicates his perception that the women or 'gossips' attending his mother after childbirth were well aware that his near death had nothing at all to do with fairies. If Willis had died, the fairy narrative would have deflected blame for a terrible accident from the mother and her attendants" (293). While it is impossible to tell to what extent fairies were used as a way to divert blame for birth-room accidents, the example illustrates not only the way in which gossips and fairies were associated in the popular imagination, but also demonstrates the women uniting around their story for mutual preservation in a way that the 1624 statute against infanticide (discussed in the *Chaste Maid* section above) seems to discourage. The statute highlights the incompetence or failures of medical practice, accident, and other factors, wherein the women might be encouraged not to unite in their story of what has occurred, but Willis's anecdote suggests that they do unite.

[54] The elimination of the gossips' physicality is in stark contrast to the very physical descriptions of the pregnant body of the changeling's mother, whom Titania compares to the merchant ships that they watch sailing by: "… we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind; / Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait / Following (her womb then rich with my young squire), / Would imitate …" (2.1.128-32). The pregnant body was often negatively compared to a merchant ship in the period. One sixteenth-century treatise about reproduction claimed, "Mothers afford very little to the generation of the child, but onely are at trouble to carry it, … as if the womb were hired by men, as Merchant Ships are to be striated by them; and to discharge their burden …" (Lemnius, qtd. in Crawford, p. 7). A late seventeenth-century French medical treatise described pregnancy thus: "Going with child is as it were a

In aligning the gossip and fairy communities in the play, and then modifying them in specific ways, *Midsummer* creates an interpretative fantasy that aligns the gossip with the social fantasy of an idealized domestic space. Mischievous, willful entities not bounded by spatial considerations or social conventions are restructured into "good neighbors"—obedient, eager to serve and please without demand for compensation. Even the miniaturizing of their physical bodies augments this fantasy.[55]

In eliminating their physicality, the play simultaneously erases their gender[56] and every association with the physical, making them suitable tools for advancing Titania's plan to

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rough sea, on which a big-belly'd woman and her infant floats the space of nine months: and labour, which is the only port, is so full of dangerous rocks, that very often both the one and the other, after they are arriv'd and disembark'd, have yet need of much help to defend them against divers inconveniences which usually follow the pains and travail they have undergone in it" (qtd. in Pollock, "Experience of Pregnancy," p. 39). Titania's comparison of the pregnant body to a ship thus reproduces the metaphor of the period, signaling to the audience that it was not an entirely successful delivery even before she reveals that the boy's mother died in delivery. (It also provides an interesting glimpse into the social attitude towards merchant ventures.)

[55] The elimination of the gossips' physicality is in stark contrast to the very physical descriptions of the pregnant body of the changeling's mother, whom Titania compares to the merchant ships that they watch sailing by: "… we have laugh'd to see the sails conceive / And grow big-bellied with the wanton wind; / Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait / Following (her womb then rich with my young squire), / Would imitate …" (2.1.128-32). The pregnant body was often negatively compared to a merchant ship in the period. One sixteenth-century treatise about reproduction claimed, "Mothers afford very little to the generation of the child, but onely are at trouble to carry it, … as if the womb were hired by men, as Merchant Ships are to be striated by them; and to discharge their burden …" (Lemnius, qtd. in Crawford, p. 7). A late seventeenth-century French medical treatise described pregnancy thus: "Going with child is as it were a rough sea, on which a big-belly'd woman and her infant floats the space of nine months: and labour, which is the only port, is so full of dangerous rocks, that very often both the one and the other, after they are arriv'd and disembark'd, have yet need of much help to defend them against divers inconveniences which usually follow the pains and travail they have undergone in it" (qtd. in Pollock, "Experience of Pregnancy," p. 39). Titania's comparison of the pregnant body to a ship thus reproduces the metaphor of the period, signaling to the audience that it was not an entirely successful delivery even before she reveals that the boy's mother died in delivery. (It also provides an interesting glimpse into the social attitude towards merchant ventures.)

[56] Though Bottom identifies Titania's fairies as male when they present themselves to him beginning at 3.1.168, the miniaturizing of their bodies renders them effectively androgynous

rehabilitate Bottom. When she declares to him her intention to "purge thy mortal grossness so, / That thou shalt like an airy spirit go" (3.1.153-4), she calls on her fairies, indistinguishable except for their names: Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth, and Mustardseed. It is important to note that the androgyny of the fairies does not signal an actual degendering of gossips or of a "real" gossip community. Rather, androgyny evacuates from Titania's fairy community the typical social perception of the female gossip community's negative gender associations (as displayed in Puck's description of the gossip in Act 2). The fairies figure gossips innocuously in fairyland through a lack of negative femaleness, and end up serving as a failed corrective to the perceived threat to patriarchal order posed by Titania and her votress. That the audience only sees one self-identified gossip – Titania – also signals a community under duress, since a community of one hardly merits the appellation.

The play shows one gossip and a group of figures that through the metaphoric meanings of their names superficially conform to one of the functions of a gossip community – that of ensuring domestic regulation. The fairies' names not only indicate their diminutive size but also their domestic usefulness. As Lou Agnes Reynolds and Paul Sawyer observe, plants were harvested the night of the summer solstice in the belief that their medicinal properties were at their most potent, and so, "because each of these fairy servants represents an item used in household remedies and would thus be affected by the superstitions of Midsummer's Night, it seems possible that the four fairies find their origin in folk medicine" (513). While they are somewhat reticent in asserting their claim, Reynolds and Sawyer's identification of the fairies' names with medicinal herbs that would have been administered as part of the gossip's household

(emphasized by the fact that the fairies were most likely played by boys). This androgyny would also allow for the ease with which Oberon subsequently appropriates their services at the end of the play. In any case, Bottom has the eyes of an ass at this juncture, so a comic misreading of gender would not be inappropriate for the scene.

medical role indicates, again, that they are linked to gossips' medicinal function, but made diminutive and even genderless, cleansed of negative connotations. Gossips' names were frequently satirical (an example of this is "Dame Chat" of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*), emphasizing their domestic unsuitability. But through their names, Titania's fairies signal the opposite: they are the embodiments of domestic items[57] that ensure the wellbeing of the inhabitants of the household. Their role in the play, in Titania's service, is to aid her in purging Bottom's "mortal grossness," to make him more suitable as her lover. The need to purge Bottom's mortal grossness stems from his embodiment of many of the stereotypical shameful attributes of the gossip – women unable to control their tongues, bladders, or tempers. This is not to say that Bottom is feminized here, but rather that his behavior recalls the "unsuitable" or "unfeminine" behavior of the stereotypical gossip. The fairies' willing participation in the attempted purging signals their successful realignment as nonthreatening domestic helpers instead of comprising an unruly autonomous network of women. This causes them to be no longer in control of the realm in which they are supposed to function, and the resultant ineffectiveness is the source of the threat to reproduction. They seek to cure the very attributes that are normally ascribed to the circle they seem to represent.

This circle is literalized in the fairy ring. Titania's disclosure that Oberon hunts out and destroys the fairy rings necessary for the functionality of both the human and fairy realms is equally a revelation that Oberon destroys communities where a female figurehead is responsible for the performance of rituals that guarantee the continuance of life. While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is often troped as a battle of the sexes, its message is much more insidious. It is a play

[57] The medical origin of the fairies' names also links them to the medical/festive function of the gossips discussed earlier in the chapter, which further bolsters the theory that Titania's fairies are gossips.

where all forms of female community are destroyed for the purposes of male authority and desire. Hippolyta, like Titania, is forcibly separated from her female community. While Hippolyta's separation is fairly straightforward (Theseus' defeat of the Amazon nation), Titania's is more complicated and troubling. Not only does Shakespeare have Titania's human-gossip die as a result of childbirth, but also he deliberately manipulates the gender expectations associated with gossips and renders the fairy-gossips powerless in their androgyny so that they are no longer in control of the realm in which they are supposed to function, which is the source of the threat to reproduction.

The representation of the gossip that is allowed to stand is the one invoked by Puck and sanctioned by Oberon. The figure of the drunken gossip is introduced at the beginning of Act 2 when Puck reveals that one of the disruptive acts he performs for Oberon to "make him smile" (l. 44) is to come between a gossip and her ale (ll. 47-50). The gossip here is either a woman at a gossips' feast, celebrating the successful delivery of a child, or she is a woman gathered with the rest of her gossip community to share some ale and stories. Ultimately it is impossible to know what kind of gossip is depicted here, and the ambiguity is the point. Puck, like his literary forbear Diccon in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, disrupts female community by creating situations wherein negative stereotypes about women are "proved." In order to amuse Oberon (therefore having his tacit permission), he takes on the appearance of a crabapple to cause the old gossip to pour ale all over herself. Thus, as Paster notes, Puck's mischief "isolates the interchangeable thresholds of female appetite and vulnerability …" (126) by exposing the gossip as a ridiculous figure of excess. But stripping them of their excesses, Shakespeare seems to suggest, renders gossip communities unable to fulfill their important social functions.

Puck's[58] story prefigures what happens to Titania. Instead of causing her to pour ale over herself for Oberon's amusement, he instead fetches for Oberon the flower identified as "love in idleness" so that Oberon can apply it to the sleeping Titania's eyelids. Oberon's punishment for Titania is sexual incontinence, frequently linked in popular imagination with gossips' excesses, which invokes what Paster calls "the comic specter of incontinent women and the gluttonous world of the gossips' meeting" (127). A further connection with the idea that Oberon's punishment is a punishment of a gossip is the name of his chosen punishment – idleness was a charge frequently leveled at gossip communities. His attack on the gossip community works. That she awakens and falls in love with Bottom serves as a distraction from her duties as a gossip towards the changeling boy, and her inattention to the boy, coupled with the demonstration of her excesses, undermines her rights as a gossip. In Act 4, Oberon finally acquires control of the boy through humiliation and the manipulation of Titania's behavior, comportment, even perhaps her identity itself, operating as so many early modern male critics of the female gossip function did, to undercut the value of their duties and challenge their virtue and capacity for self-management. Oberon's proud description of her subjugation provides only his view of the outcome: "I did upbraid her and fall out with her […] When I had at my pleasure taunted her, / And she in mild terms begg'd my patience, / I then did ask of her her changeling child; / Which straight she gave me, and her fairy sent / To bear him to my bower in fairy land. / And now I have the boy, I will undo / This hateful imperfection of her eyes" (4.1.49, 56-60). Titania's capitulation is not staged and is instead mediated to the audience through Oberon's demonstration that the rights of the gossip have been truly demolished, and with it, Titania's

[58] Puck/Robin Goodfellow was traditionally not a fairy, but rather, as Keith Thomas describes, "a guardian spirit … who performed domestic chores for mortals" (606). His deployment by Oberon to undermine the gossip community in the play is thus highly symbolic.

right to represent her opposition. This is reinforced by the fact that one of her own fairies is used to "bear" (a highly evocative word in this context, with its connotations of labor and delivery) the boy to Oberon's bower. The choice to have Oberon relate Titania's capitulation may also function as a further means of manipulating her social image, aligning her degradation with the censure of gossips in human society.

The play ends on an extremely uneasy note; Titania's repudiation of the gossip community has repercussions for the women in the human world. The "rude mechanicals" – a troupe of city laborers who perform the story of Pyramus and Thisbe for the wedding entertainment of the Duke and his bride, Hippolyta, choose to stage a tragic play featuring the death of the two young lovers. Theseus grants them the opportunity to perform because they will likely be so ridiculous as to help "wear away this long age of three hours / Between our after-supper and bedtime" (5.1.33-34). The result is that the death of these lovers is performed during a celebration of reproductive capacity. Even more striking, the internal play destroys reproductive order, both onstage and off. Theseus terminates the play before the closing epilogue can be recited, truncating the play and eliminating the closure this epilogue would offer. As Jenstad observes, "the secrets of laboring women are comparable to the secrets of playmaking. The tiring house is the space where the off-stage birth is imagined to have taken place, but it is also the womb where new characters are born, a protean imaginative space that is feminine in that it 'bodies forth … things unknown' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.14-15)" ("Smock Secrets," 97). If theatrical production and reproduction are parallel, as Jenstad suggests, then Theseus' termination of the play before the performance of the epilogue is a highly symbolic gesture, the significance of which is highlighted by his exordium to the couples: "The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve. / Lovers, to bed, 'tis almost fairy time" (5.1.349-50).

Though the "iron tongue" is sometimes glossed as "the bell's clapper," figurative representations of iron are not generally positive. Metaphorical invocations of iron in the Bible (an authoritative source for meaning-making in the period) include representations of barrenness, slavery, and tyranny. Even more problematic for this situation, folklore holds that fairies are repelled by iron, as well as by bells.[59] For Theseus to invoke an iron bell as the signal for "fairy time" introduces a profound disjunction at what should be a moment of union at the play's end.

Puck's concluding speech further signals this social rupture by utilizing images of death and destruction, which Montrose describes as an evocation of an "uncomic world of labor, fear, pain and death" (74). Puck begins, "Now the hungry lion roars" (5.1.57), which hardly sets the mood for a wedding night, since the audience just saw a lion serve as the source of misunderstanding that leads to the deaths of Pyramus and Thisbe. He continues with death metaphors, describing how "the screech-owl, screeching loud, / Puts the wretch that lies in woe / In remembrance of a shroud." As the lovers come together, Puck reminds us that "Now it is the time of night / That the graves, all gaping wide, / Every one lets forth his sprite / In the church-way paths to glide" (ll. 362-68). There is no romantic flowery language; only ill-omened owls and gaping graves.

Equally troubling is the blessing of the bride bed, given not by Titania but by Oberon. The blessing itself is unobjectionable, but its subject matter is explicitly domestic and normally the province of women. Instead, the play closes with Oberon guaranteeing that "all couples three / Ever true in loving be, / And the blots of nature's hand / Shall not in their issue stand" (ll. 398-401), and it is he who deploys the fairies with "field-dew consecrate" (l. 406) to grant "this

[59] In *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, Katherine Briggs explains that iron "repels fairies. A knife, or cross of iron, are sovereign protections against witchcraft and evil magic of all kinds" (234). In the entry "Protection against fairies," she claims that "bells were protective; church bells, the bells worn by morris dancers and the bells round the necks of sheep and oxen" (335).

palace with sweet peace" (l. 409). Though the text is not explicit here, there is a strong probability that the fairies used by Oberon are the same ones we've seen throughout the play – Titania's fairies. In Oberon's appropriation of the bridal bed blessing and of Titania's fairies lies a dark possibility at the end of the play: generation without gossips. In a world where a gossip cannot drink her ale without spilling it, Titania cannot keep her changeling boy, Hippolyta is taken from the Amazons, and Hermia and Helena's friendship is sacrificed to reproductive imperatives, no female community survives the play. Though Oberon's blessing extends over the health of future offspring, it does nothing to protect or celebrate the mothers who birth them, suggesting that even if the reproductive order is restored and births follow matrimony, the gaping graves described by Puck will not be long vacant.

Though the chapter examines a relatively few number of texts, they are enough to suggest a larger trend of the expansion of the role of the gossip community into public discourse. The representations are largely negative, portraying gossips as drunken pugnacious women incapable of calculating a tavern bill, let alone delivering a child, but the representations are not universally disapproving, and even in the negative representations, we can see larger systemic pressures acting to repress gossip communities. The recognition of these pressures, as well as the recognition of the portrayal of the results of the gossips' repression (death; the breakdown of reproductive order), signals simultaneously the gossips' vital contribution to society and their precarious position within it.

CHAPTER 3

The Intellectualizing of the Gossip

This chapter explores public roles not traditionally associated with the gossip community and tracks a change in the representation of gossip communities as groups less invested in private function and more devoted to presenting a public intellectual presence in society. The chapter begins with an examination of the anonymous 1620 *Swetnam the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women*. The comedy's subplot stages Joseph Swetnam being brought to trial by a group of women for his slanderous offences against women. The women find him guilty and he is made to recant. The play serves as a useful bridge between the emphasis on female physicality that is such a part of the earlier representation of gossip communities and the later move towards larger issues of social justice. The women in *Swetnam Arraigned* advocate for gender equality with a high degree of articulation and sophistication, but the punishment they devise for Swetnam is to stab him offstage with needles until he recants, an apparent return to the low physical comedic representation of gossips. The chapter then explores Ben Jonson's 1625 comedy, *The Staple of News*, which features four gossips, who, by declaring their intent to "arraign" the play by providing commentary at the beginning and end of each of the play's acts, police social and cultural mores in a non-physical way. The two plays stage the dramatic tension between women's physicality and their increasing demand for an intellectual public role, one of the major arguments in the *querelle des femmes*, or "the woman question," a genre of writing (usually pamphlet) in which the superiority of one sex or the other is debated. Gossips, with their ability to function both inside and outside patriarchy, and their concomitant representations as the embodiments of physical excess and the preservers of domestic order, are uniquely suited to explore this tension.

In 1615, Joseph Swetnam published the infamous pamphlet *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Women* under the pseudonym "Thomas Tel-Troth,"[1] reigniting the never wholly dormant literary battle between the sexes known as the *querelle des femmes*. It was an instant success, reprinted nine times in the first twenty years.[2] It sparked a number of rebuttals,[3] many of them written under female pseudonyms, and in the instance of Rachel Speght, one authenticated female author. Though there is some critical debate as to the level of popularity of Swetnam's pamphlet (Van Heertum speculates that the pamphlet's "impact was probably exaggerated by the respondents" [55]), it was popular enough to spark not only several pamphlets, but also a stage play, *Swetnam the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women*, produced at the Red Bull theatre c. 1617 and published in1620. The Red Bull catered to popular tastes, and at the end of the century was disdainfully described by James Wright in the *Historica Histrionica* as, "mostly frequented by Citizens, and the meaner sort of people."[4] Andrew Gurr relates that the

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[1] The pseudonym was a popular one in the period. In what is surely a coincidence, given the evidence of literary ability and wit presented in Swetnam's tract, the character of Thomas Tel-Troth was frequently accompanied by Puck/Robin Goodfellow, who, as Robert Weimann relates, "became something of a folk hero, well-known in Renaissance literature – especially in the Elizabethan pamphlet *Tell-Trothes New-Years Gift* (1593), for example, was subtitled, *Being Robin Good-fellowes news out of those Countries, where inhabites neither Charity nor honesty*" (193-4). Because Robin was "well-traveled and familiar with hell" and his experiences "offered a cure for real-life maladies," he was, Weimann posits, "a logical companion and friend to the soothsayer Tell-Troth" (194).
Francisca Van Heertum suggests that "the pseudonym chosen by Swetnam was probably also intended to give *The Arraignment of Women* the hallmark of truth, and fits in well with his professed moral indignation in the dedicatory epistles" (13).

[2] Van Heertum makes this claim, citing a publication window of 1615-1637 (54). However, it is important to note that Swetnam's pamphlet was published well into the eighteenth century.

[3] Most of the pamphlets – Rachel Speght's *A Muzzle for Melastomus*, Ester Sowernam's *Ester hath hang'd Haman*, and Constantia Munda's *The Worming of a mad Dogge* can be found (with their spelling and punctuation modernized) in *The Women's Sharp Revenge*, edited by Simon Shepherd.

[4] Quoted in Gurr 217.

players at the Red Bull had "developed a reputation as 'terrible teare-throats,' speaking and strutting more vigorously than their rivals," and that the general perception of the various playhouses of the second decade of the seventeenth century were that "the Bull played the man while the Globe and Blackfriars told tricks of love" (174). The staging of *Swetnam the Woman-Hater* represents a shift in the theater's offerings, in that the play quite obviously (and, one must admit, somewhat clunkily) strives to appeal to both tastes. Gurr writes that the play was "designed in part to please the sort of ladies who wrote pamphlets challenging Joseph Swetnam's misogyny" (174), but that observation does not begin to capture the importance of the play for understanding communities of women. Amidst all of its dizzying array of spectacle – two separate trial scenes, a prince who cross-dresses as an Amazon, lovers who fake their deaths, a sword fight, and the concluding display of Swetnam entering the stage to deliver his epilogue while wearing a muzzle – the play also depicts a gossip community coalescing to effect social justice with no negative consequences for the female participants or their community. While there are examples of this freedom from repercussions that predate the play,[5] they have all been

[5] The female community in Fletcher's *The Tamer Tamed*, the sequel/protofeminist response to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, stages an all-female charivari who protest Petruccio's misogyny. An even earlier example is in Robert Greene's *A Notable Discovery of Cozenage* (1591), in which he relates a "merry jest" of a suburban flaxwife who had been "cozened" (cheated) by a collier. When she discovered that he had cheated her of two sacks of coal, she brought in her neighbors to witness the theft, and they related to her that they had all been cheated as well. The flaxwife "desired their aid in tormenting the collier, which they promised to perform" (Kinney 185). The following ensued, and is worth related in full: "she conveyed [the neighbors] into a back room (some sixteen of them), every one having a good cudgel under her apron. Straight comes the collier and saith, 'Mistress, here be your coals.' 'Welcome, good collier,' quoth she, 'I pray thee, follow me into the backside, and shoot them in another room.' The collier was content, and went with her, but as soon as he was in, the goodwife locked the door, and the collier, seeing such a troop of wives in the room, was amazed; yet said, 'God speed you all, shrews.' 'Welcome,' quoth one jolly dame, being appointed by them all to give sentence against him, who, as soon as the collier had shot his sacks, said, 'Sirrah, collier, know that we are here all assembled as a grand Jury, to determine of thy villainies, for selling us false sacks of coals, and know that thou are here indicted upon cozenage. Therefore, hold up thy hand at the

localized incidents, swiftly resolved. But in *Swetnam the Woman-hater*, the gossips band together to avenge womankind, signaling an expansion of their role from the domestic to the political. Their representation in the play troubles the patriarchal fantasy of discrete public and private spheres.

Scholars have established that female theatergoers represented a substantial portion of theater audiences,[6] and that, as Jean Howard has observed, the presence of the women in the audience of a public playhouse was considered ideologically unsettling, especially to one of the era's most adamant critics of the theater, Stephen Gosson:

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bar, and either say 'guilty' or 'not guilty,' and by whom thou wilt be tried, for thou must receive condign punishment for the same ere thou depart.' The collier, who though they had but jested, smiled, and said, 'Come on, which of you all shall be my Judge?' 'Marry, sir,' quoth one jolly dame, 'that is I, and, by God, you knave, you shall find I will pronounce sentence against you severely if you be found guilty.' When the Collier saw they were in earnest, he said 'Come, come, open the door and let me go.' With that, five or six wives started up and fell upon the Collier, and gave untim him a half score of sound *lambeaks* with their cudgels, and bad him speak more reverently to their Principal" (185-6). Greene's collier becomes afraid at this point and decides that "mirth and courtesy" would endear him to the irate women. He then asks to be tried "by the verdict of the smock" (186). The women create a jury, the flaxwife gives evidence, and the collier is found guilty. The Principal gives him her judgment: "Collier, thou art condemned here, by proof, of flat cozenage, and I am now appointed in conscience to give sentence against thee, being not only moved thereunto because of this poor woman, but also for the general commodity of my country, and therefore this is my sentence. We have no pillory for thee, nor cart to whip thee at, but here do I award that thou shalt have as many bastinados as thy bones will bear, and then to be turned out of doors without sacks or money.'" This is what happens, but the collier does attempt to fight back, and though the women "beat him extremely," he also "lent them some lusty buffets" (186). Ultimately, however, the women's justice triumphs, and Greene ends with a pious (and satirical) exhortation: "I pray God all such colliers be so served …" (186).

[6] Richard Levin cautions against making forceful claims about women in the theater audience, but says that with the meager available evidence, "we are justified in concluding that during the Renaissance women were generally regarded as a significant component of the theatre audience, and that their interests and feelings seem to have been taken into account by at least some of the playwrights of the period" (174). Andrew Gurr claims there were a "high proportion of women at the playhouses" (55), and that "there are almost as many references to women playgoers as to the artisan and apprentice class" (59), but describes feeling "a mildly despairing effort to establish something like a statistical basis for this analysis of the social composition of playgoers" (59).

> Even when this theater, through its fictions, invited women to take up the subordinate positions masculine ideology defined as proper for them, the very practice of playgoing put women in positions potentially unsettling to patriarchal control. To be part of urban public life as spectator, consumer, and judge moved the gentlewoman citizen outside of that domestic enclosure to which Gossen would return her. (91)

The tacit invitation to self-subordination identified by Howard is complicated by her reproduction of Gossen's target group, the "gentlewoman citizen." While women from the gentry and aristocracy might have been in attendance at a "popular" theater such as the Red Bull, the typical female audience was composed of "fishwives or apple-wives" (Gurr 60). Moreover, women of the lower classes had a different relationship to patriarchy than their better-born and wealthier sisters. While Gossen's primary concern is for the virtue of his gentlewoman citizen, virtue was an attribute of class distinction beyond the attainability of the prototypical fishwife, who, with her complicated relationship between the domestic and emergent capitalism, existed as a threatening liminal figure to female virtue.[7] Furthermore, as discussed in the introduction, Gosson problematically advocates for women to prefer their gossip communities to a visit to the theater. He is not so much advocating for the domestic enclosure of gentlewomen citizens, as Howard posits, as he is choosing between the lesser of two evils.

Although we ultimately cannot make any definitive claims regarding the intended audience of *Swetnam the Woman-hater*, its staging and eventual publication reveal a number of important clues about gender relations in the second decade of the seventeenth century: 1) that in

[7] For more on this topic, see Natasha Korda's article, "Gender at Work in the Cries of London," located in *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts*, edited by Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford.

having a play created to specifically appeal to "their" interests, women were considered to be a desirable target demographic, 2) that this desirability probably had a great deal to do with the fact that women must have had disposable income in order to attend the theater, and 3) the play most likely had a male author,[8] and there were undoubtedly men in the audience, both of which indicate an interest in the topic that was not necessarily gender-specific. Given the copious literary evidence of the period, the topic of putting the sexes on trial had a great deal of widespread appeal. The genre of drama was often trial-like in its staging of social issues, providing distinct, often conflicting views of critical issues, and condemning those with "morally unacceptable" perspectives through correction or death. *The Changeling* typifies this approach, staging male transgression in both its plot and subplot, and resolving the issues raised in distinctive ways. The staged trial makes explicit what is frequently present in drama at a more subliminal level.

The publication of *Swetnam the Woman-hater*, and more specifically, the intricate woodcut that was produced expressly for its publication, indicates not only a literate public with an interest in reading the play, but also the publisher's confidence in recovering the money spent on the outlay. The popularity and marketability of the phenomenon is most obviously seen in the

[8] While the author of *Swetnam the Woman-Hater* is unknown, there is some evidence to suggest Thomas Heywood. Heywood was the Red Bull's resident author/playwright during the period in which the play was staged (Gurr 113), but as Coryl Crandall notes, there is also evidence to suggest Thomas Dekker or Thomas Drewe, both associated at various times with the Red Bull. However, as Crandall admits, the Heywood hypothesis is seductive because of the playwright's history of engagement with women's issues. Ultimately, as Crandall concludes, "in light of the little evidence, about all one can do is agree with the hesitant suggestions of the Rev. Mr. Grosart and Professor Wright: there is circumstantial evidence that Heywood had a hand in writing *Swetnam the Woman-hater*. He was with the company at the time, and it is the kind of play he could have written and the kind of play of which he most likely would have approved" (30). Lynda Boose, however, claims the play was written by a group of women (200), and though she provides no evidence to prove her claim, the notion of a female community producing a concerted theatrical attack on Swetnam is an interesting one, even if it can never rise above the point of conjecture.

evolution of the Swetnam pamphlet's title page illustration and its eventual alignment with the play that was written as a response to it. The first edition of the pamphlet, from 1615, features a woman of the type roundly condemned by Swetnam in his pamphlet (fig. 4). She is dressed at the height of fashion, with a ruff, elaborate hairpiece, jewelry, fan, and hoops. Swetnam warns his audience against this type of woman, whose predilection for expensive clothing inevitably leads to dishonor, not so much for herself as for the foolish man duped into taking responsibility for her: "if she be deckt up in gorgeous apparell, then a thousand to one but she will love to walke where she may get acquaintance, and acquaintance bringeth familiarity, and familiarity setteth all follies abroch, and twenty to one that if a woman love gadding but that she will paune hir honour to please hir fantasie" (15).

By 1634, however, the image of the ruinously expensive woman was replaced with a man acting as judge, seated at a table, before him an open book, inkpot, and quill, calmly exhorting one of the four women kept at bay by the court railings. The women are obviously angry – the one in the upper-left corner is brandishing her fist, while the woman in the upper-right corner is wielding either a quill or distaff. The woman in the lower-left corner is gesticulating, while the woman in the lower-right corner, scowling with one fist planted on her hip, remonstrates with the man. The woodcut clearly invokes the illustration on the title page of the 1620 play *Swetnam the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women*, which depicts Swetnam during his arraignment by the female council (fig. 5). In that woodcut, he stands at the bar (his name is printed alongside the figure) before a female judge – the Queen, Aurelia. Atlanta, the female prosecutor, reads his indictment. A large group of women, all dressed as citizen wives, crowd against the bar. In spite of their sartorial uniformity, effort was made to create facial individualization: some are smiling, some talking, others scowling, depicting the boisterousness of the gossips in the play's

arraignment scene. Coryl Crandall declares that "a more likely title for *Swetnam the Woman-hater* would be *Lisandro and Leonida*, the names of the noble lovers whose story is the main plot" (11), but the woodcut on the play's title page, as well as the title itself, suggests that the lovers are merely the vehicle for creating a situation in which early modern gender relations are explored. Gerald Bentley concurs, stating, "the name of the play, the most sensational part of the action, and no doubt its principal appeal were derived from Joseph Swetnam's notorious pamphlet, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*, to which there are many direct references in the play" (1417).

The 1634 edition of Swetnam's pamphlet coincided with a revival of the play,[9] and the evolution of the woodcuts on the title pages of each text provides evidence suggesting the two – the pamphlet and the play – became inextricably associated in the popular imagination. This in turn suggests a certain amount of comfort (or at least interest) with the idea of publicly retributive gossip communities avenging the ultimate domestic wrong – punishing the man whose vociferous condemnation of women not only threatens the functionality of the domestic, but also that of the nation. His arguments against the female sex condemn a princess to death, threatening not only the monarchy (the princess' two brothers are presumed dead in battles against the Spanish, and she is the last surviving child of royal Sicilian blood), but by extension the ability of the monarchy to deal with the encroaching Ottoman Empire. The play tropes Swetnam's particularly virulent brand of misogyny and its resultant destabilization of the family

[9] Bentley writes, "The play was not immediately forgotten. About fifteen years after it was first performed Thomas Nabbes referred to it in his *Tottenham Court*, acted at the Salisbury Court theatre in 1633. In this play the Wife makes a clear reference in II.2 to the women's big arraignment scene in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater*: 'Let's get him arraign'd, as one was in a play. Let me alone to aggravate his indictment to the Jury; which shall be twelve Midwives of my acquaintance.' […] This allusion, Bentley writes, "suggest[s] that in 1633 it may have been recently performed, perhaps at the Salisbury Court" (1417-18).

as a global threat, and remarkably, it depicts a gossip community coming together to effectively deal with the problem and restore social and political stability. What makes the choice of gossips as administrators of social correction so interesting in this particular instance is that gossips barely register in Swetnam's pamphlet. In a text that enthusiastically, if scathingly and injudiciously, excoriates nearly every aspect of women and their behavior, his criticism of gossips is confined to two pages – approximately 3% of the pamphlet. Given that gossip communities in the period were accused of every one of the epithets Swetnam deploys in the title of his work (lewdness, idleness, frowardness, and inconstancy), this is a significant reorientation of the argument for women's inferiority, one which moves away from one of its usual targets.

Swetnam's criticism of gossip is centered upon the power of the female tongue, which he describes in terms of fear and invisibility. He writes that a woman's tongue "is but a small thing and seldome seene, but it is often heard, to the terror and utter confusion of many a man" (40). This somewhat phallic description is evidence of the phenomenon noted by Lisa Jardine, who writes that in the period, a woman's tongue was perceptually aligned with "the ever-present threat of female dominion in the home …" (104), particularly because it was perceived as "the female weapon," which, she argues, makes the tongue "the female counterpart of the penis" (121). Lynda Boose agrees that the patriarchal discourse surrounding the female tongue "situates female speech as a symbolic relocation of the male organ," but she insists that patriarchy creates its own paradox, and that "the obsession must directly acknowledge, even as it attempts to suppress, the presence in woman of the primary signifier of an authority presumed to be masculine" (204). It is in this paradox that gossips can negotiate the terms of the status quo, and though Swetnam's pamphlet does not link female sexual incontinence to women's excessive speech, *Swetnam Arraigned by Women* acknowledges the paradox of the female tongue through

the figure of the women's advocate Atlanta, who, as the cross-dressed Lorenzo, figures a female phallus.

In fact, Swetnam's pamphlet refuses to link sexual incontinence with the tongue, instead choosing to link sexual transgressions primarily with the female habit of draining the domestic economy for personal aggrandizement. This is significant because the female tongue in Swetnam's pamphlet is allotted a great deal of power – in the two passages explored below, Swetnam tells his readers a woman's tongue is able to construct knowledge networks quite apart from anything outside of men's purview, and that assertion is neither challenged nor undermined, as is usual in misogynistic tirades against women. Even more significantly, while he argues that women's tongues undermine domestic harmony by destroying the possibility of trust between a husband and wife, he ultimately advises men to confide in their wives, because the value of their advice outweighs the threat to the trust bond between spouses. Left unmentioned is the possibility that a wife's wise council might have originated in a gossips' meeting.

He instead recites the typical complaint against gossips, that the gossip community encourages women to undermine male primacy by sharing information outside of the male purview. Swetnam informs his male readers that "if thou unfoldest any thing of secret to a woman the more thou chargest her to keepe it close the more she will seeme as it were to be with childe till she have revealed it amongst her gossips" (41). His use of trope of pregnancy as a metaphor for secret knowledge was certainly not new (it is, in fact, one of the overwhelming number of examples of his use of cliché), but his deployment in this particular instance is, punning aside, quite telling. Swetnam uses a metaphor of childbirth, the cultural mode through which gossips derived their power, to describe how women create and maintain female relationships. He insists on the prevalence of this practice, exhorting his readership not to be

persuaded by women's protestations that they do not share secrets amongst each other, because "every woman hath one especiall gossip at the least which she doth love and affect above all the rest, and unto her she runneth with all the secrets she knoweth" (41). This assertion is complicated by his recommendation later in the text that a husband should, as proof of his spousal devotion, "impart his secrets and counsell unto his wife, for many have found much comfort and profit by taking their wives counsell" (53). This seeming contradiction is indicative not only of Swetnam's characteristic style, which Rachel Speght, addressing Swetnam directly, identifies as the "excrement of your roaving cogitations" (7), but also of the form and distribution of the gossip community. Within Swetnam's seeming contradiction we see that the gossip community's strength lies in its resistance to social attacks. Swetnam does not devote many pages to attacking gossips simply because he cannot. They were women who shared secrets with each other, but they were also wives to whom husbands turned for advice and counsel. It is this fact, vexing but undeniable, that gives gossip communities a social advantage, and, to a certain extent, provides social immunity. Swetnam takes a few swipes at gossips, but ultimately leaves them out of his condemnation of women, and this general omission sets the stage for the play *Swetnam the Woman-hater Arraigned by Women*. In the play, it is his underestimation of gossips, especially of their social function, that leads to his downfall and the restoration of social order.

Swetnam Arraigned

Much of the critical attention of the anonymous 1620 play *Swetnam the Woman Hater Arraigned by Women* exists in the footnotes of broader discussions about the gender controversy in England. Prior to the play's production, direct engagements with the debate had been largely confined to pamphlets. *Swetnam Arraigned* is commonly presented as the culmination of the

early modern iteration of the ancient *querelle des femmes* creating a space in which the turmoil of the pamphlet debates was enacted onstage.

Although the play's title and woodcut are concerned with Swetnam, he appears in the play's subplot. The main plot begins in the devastated kingdom of Sicily, where the king, Atticus, is grieving the death of his heir in the recently concluded war against Spain. Additionally, his younger son Lorenzo "hath beene missing almost eighteene moneths, / And none can tell whether aliue or dead" (1.1.11-12).[10] He becomes obsessed with the continuance of his line, and his fixation leads, predictably, to tyranny. He locks away his only surviving child, the princess Leonora, to prevent her from marrying Lisandro, the Prince of Naples and heir to a rival kingdom. Atticus decrees that any unauthorized access to the princess will result in death, and when the lovers are discovered, they are tried for treason. Using the misogynistic discourse that bears a suspicious similarity to the sort circulating in England, the lovers each try to implicate themselves for the crime in order to save the other (by claiming themselves to be victims of the faults of their gender). The tactic results in a hung jury. In despair, the first judge suggests a retrial where the sexes are called to account: "Let there be publique Proclamation made / Throughout the Kingdome, that there may be found / Two Aduocates, to pleade this difference / In publique disputation, Man and Woman …" (3.2.161-4). The turn to the comic becomes apparent in the judge's next lines, which outline the necessary qualifications to be an advocate: "The wisest, and the best experience'd / That can be found, or heard of in the Land: / Or any such will proffer of themselues / To vndertake the plea …" (ll. 165-8). The court dissolves, and the scene shifts to introduce the audience to the women's advocate, the presumed-dead Lorenzo, who has up to this point been wandering around the Sicilian countryside covertly

[10] All references from the play are from the edition edited by Coryl Crandall.

surveying the faults of the kingdom disguised as an Amazon. When Lorenzo asks Iago (apparently the only uncorrupted nobleman at court) if "my poore Sister then withstood a triall?" (3.2.1), Iago relates the substance of what passed in the courtroom. He admits that he was "so vext" by the poor treatment of Leonida during the proceedings that he "could not stay for a full conclusion" (ll. 13-14). He then quite reasonably asks Lorenzo why he is dressed as an Amazon, to which Lorenzo replies, "To visit the sicke Court, / And free my Sister from captiuitie, / With that good Prince *Lisandro*" (ll. 18-20).

Lorenzo's choice of disguise has a great deal of allegorical significance for a play so concerned with the issue of gendered access to justice. Not only is Atlanta the female phallus, as has been discussed above, but Linda Woodbridge imbues the character with neo-platonic attributes, positing that Lorenzo-as-Atlanta is "the all-sided human being, the union of male and female" (316). That s/he becomes the female advocate during the gender trial indicates a shift in the depiction of gossip communities. While it can be considered problematic to have a cross-dressed man voicing the women's arguments, it also signals a shift in focus from private domestic concerns to larger social issues. The shift from a trial of two individuals to two sexes initiates this refocus on the broader social question. Lorenzo's presence sanctions this shift. He is specifically troped as the only member of the royal court who both recognizes Atticus' tyranny and is in a position to correct the breakdown in social order signaled by the forced imprisonment of Leonora. His disguise is crucial to granting him mobility (something impossible for a prince, but possible for both an Amazon and a gossip), and the figure of an Amazon and choice of the name "Atlanta" gestures to his role. It comes from the Greek for "balanced," and so is ideal for a character trying to achieve justice. It also, as Woodbridge notes, is a reference to his cross-dressing, which she suggests is a political gesture, one made by the playwright to challenge the

common attribution of justice to men and mercy to women.[11] Woodbridge writes, "Lorenzo is an intellectual hermaphrodite. He makes no false distinctions between 'masculine' valor and justice and 'feminine' amiability and mercy" (316). Lorenzo's disguise allows him to draw attention not just to the overall corruption of the Sicilian system of justice, but to the form of its corruption: it is fundamentally misogynistic.

The men's advocate is quite literally the embodiment of misogyny: Joseph Swetnam, who is depicted as being forced to flee England and take the alias Misogynos after the controversial reception of his pamphlet. He enters the play in Act 1 fantasizing about the amount of power his tract has given him over women:

> I know't will startle all our Citie Dames,
> Worse then the roring Lyons, or the sound
> Of a huge double Canon; *Swetnams* name,
> Will be more terrible in womens eares,
> Then euer *Misogenysts* hath beene. (1.2.3-9)

Given the fears raised in his pamphlet about the inability of husbands to control their wives' tongues, the stated desire to dominate women's aural capacity through the production of excessive noise reveals that there is not going to be much in the way of psychological depth to his characterization. This notion is enforced by his gloating recitation of the reception of his pamphlet in England:

> How my Bookes tooke effect! how greedily
> The credulous people swallowed downe my hookes
> How rife debate sprang betwixt man and wife!

[11] This was not a particularly new challenge – Shakespeare had challenged the ascription years earlier with Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The little Infant that could hardly speake,

Would call his Mother Whore. O, it was rare! (1.2.45-49)

He takes credit for destabilizing the domestic situations of families across England, not only causing schisms between wives and husbands but also breaking the bond between mothers and their children. The comment also suggests that his pamphlet banks upon emotionally-driven condemnations that have little or no basis in reality, and that women are being vilified for fulfilling their normal and nearly inevitable biological roles – motherhood in particular. The character's description of his objectives and his glee indicate that he is himself aware that his accusations are not legitimate or accurate. It is this last admission that implicitly authorizes the gossip community to bring him to justice, an authorization that occurs because Swetnam's pamphlet imperils the maternal bond and disrupts female community.

He bumbles through the play, spewing various excerpts from his infamous pamphlet. He is in the midst of this activity when a herald interrupts him to announce the public proclamation on behalf of the king that the court seeks a male and a female advocate to take up the question of "whether the Man or the Woman in loue, stand guilty of the greatest offence" (3.3.100-1). Swetnam immediately volunteers because, as he tells the audience, "'tis a prize / Will make me euer famous" (l. 109-10). He vows to the herald to shame womankind so greatly that it will "make their painted cheeks looke red" (l. 114). Loretta, Leonora's maid, reads the proclamation on behalf of the queen to the women, and Lorenzo as Atlanta accepts, not to shame men, but because "tis a cause so iust, / In equitie and vertue, in defence / Of wronged women, whose distressed fames / Lye buried in contempt …" (ll. 132-5). The two sides are not trying to achieve the same objective. The men seek to increase social injustice where it is less rationally and

behaviorally supportable, and the women attempt to create social justice where it is limited by bias and misperception.

The court reconvenes, but it is obviously heavily biased toward the men. When Atlanta addresses her preliminary remarks to the all-male judges (who refused to allow a woman to join their ranks), s/he expresses the expected false modesty of claiming to feel "Dumbe feare and bashfulnesse to speake before / Bold Orators of State, men graue and wise, That can at euery breathing pause, correct / The slipp'ry passages of a womans speech" (ll. 48-51), which one judge lecherously observes is "A quaint insinuation," further stressing not only the extreme deterioration of the State, but also the difficulty the women of the play face in being heard in a fair and unbiased way. S/he is flattering the judges as well as framing herself as modest, and it is at least a little ironic that this one judge comments in such a way as to accept the flattery but not the modesty.

This exchange foreshadows the ultimate outcome of the gender debate. The women lose, but the debate between Atlanta and Misogynos, and the subsequent action taken by women, encapsulates gender relations in the period, and highlights the importance of the social role of the gossip. Atlanta's opening remarks are rehearsals of the standard defense of women utilized in the *querelle des femmes*: that women are helpless victims of men's predatory and corrupting natures, and that courtship is merely pretense for lust. S/he relates that if women are not persuaded by men's "fained languishment" (3.3.112), they turn to more extreme measures, meant to destroy the woman's defenses by exploiting her tender heart:

> They stalke into the presence of their Mistris,
> Fold vp their armes, hang downe their wanton heads,
> Cast loue-sicke glances, and as wofull Commas,

In this dumbe Oratorie, now and then they breathe
A passionate sigh, whereat the gentle nature
Of milde compassionate woman once relenting,
Straight they fall out into such sweet complaints
Of their sad suffrings, tuning words of Art,
Able to melt a gentle Eye in teares,
As they do speake. (3.3.119-28)

Atlanta concludes the argument by positing that although women are susceptible to these tactics, it is through the fault of men and their exploitative methods, not any inherent defect in women.

Misogynos/Swetnam's counterargument, equally stereotypical, is that women deliberately encourage men's advances, and that far from being men's victims, they are in fact men's seducers. Though the extreme bias of the all-male court makes the outcome inevitable (the women lose their argument), Misogynos' rant against the female sex has an important deviation from the original presented in the pamphlet. The stage character Misogynos philosophically departs from his real-life counterpart in arguing that the female propensity to victimize men has its source in the gossip community. He argues that gossip communities, which purport to fulfill religious and social rituals, are actually sites for the clandestine teaching of illicit knowledge. He says,

from their Cradles you shall see them take
Delight in making Babies, deuising Christnings,
Bidding of Gossips, calling to Vp-sittings,
And then to Festiuals, and solemne Churchings,
In imitation of the wanton ends

Their riper yeeres will ayme at. (ll. 165-70)

Much of Swetnam's arguments about how women cultivate their beauty in order to ensnare men is taken verbatim from the pamphlet, but his tracing the source of female corruption to gossip rituals is unique to the play.

I propose that the reason for this shift of blame from "all women" to "gossips" is done by the playwright in order to utilize a productive space where an actual reconciliation between the sexes could be achieved. The gossip community, demonstrated in Greene's "trial of the smock" and Harman's story of the walking mort, could, in certain unique and dire situations, convene an unofficial court whose ruling and punishment was socially accepted. By invoking the methods utilized by the gossip community (methods sanctioned by society, albeit uneasily) to provide an alternative answer to the gender debates of the *querelle des femmes*, the playwright not only corrects the social injustice perpetuated against women, but also demonstrates an important step forward in the depiction of the gossip – the gossip community can capably participate in an intellectual and theoretical debate.

Woodbridge reads Swetnam's defeat of Atlanta as an allegory of the failure of humanistic ideals represented by his/her hermaphroditic body. If we are to accept this interpretation, then the implication is that when humanism fails, a different social value system asserts itself. In place of elite and exclusionary knowledge that is the purview of men, the women coalesce in a social formation that evades the hierarchical structures enforced even by the well-meaning Atlanta. The social composition of the gossip community is more expansive than is usually portrayed – every woman from the queen to the scold joins the cause. They capture Swetnam, drag him offstage to stick him with pins, and bring him back alive to deliver the epilogue in a muzzle. The gossips' forcible achievement of justice demonstrates that both advocates were wrong about women.

Though Swetnam is more obviously wrong about the nature of women, Atlanta's defense of women portrays the female gender as helpless victims of masculine persecution. The gossips demonstrate not only that women are not merely objects to be acted upon, but also that they are agents that can act for the common good. In doing so, they fulfill their educative function by "teaching" Atlanta/Lorenzo about the nature of women.

Simon Shepherd notes that during the period when *Swetnam Arraigned by Women* was written, "there is a currency of things Elizabethan as a political reference point" (212). This is most strongly signaled in the person of Atlanta. One of the stock figures of Elizabethan literature, the Amazon was an antiquated character by the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century. Shepherd posits that this is a very deliberate invocation of the nostalgia for the Elizabethan era in the latter half of the second decade. He claims that Lorenzo's decision to assume the disguise of an Amazon is to demonstrate how he "becomes the embodiment of a desirable political alternative" (214) through the deliberate invocation of Elizabeth I.[12] Atlanta's loss to Swetnam thus indicates a perceptual shift from "traditional" (read: Elizabethan) ideas of justice as the province of the court, dispensed by a single, virtuous figurehead, to justice as an action performed by a group centered in the local and domestic – justice becomes a communal activity. It is also important to note that Atlanta has a part in the proceedings, but she is a member of the gossip community and defers to her sisters at various points during the

[12] Shepherd's claim is that the character of Lorenzo is to be interpreted as a surrogate for Prince Henry, son and heir to James I, and who Shepherd claims "might have been seen as a spiritual heir to Elizabeth I." Henry died in 1612, around five years before the play was staged, and Shepherd argues that Lorenzo is "a Henry-surrogate [who] dresses as an Elizabethan-type Amazon to fulfill his political role. On Lorenzo are focused the sort of hopes that were associated with Henry, the restoration of justice and the blessing of true love, and at the same time he wears clothes that look back to Sidney. The dead Henry returns, as it were, to oversee the world and to do so wears attire drawn from the available tradition of classical warrior women" (215).

proceedings, further cementing the idea that Lorenzo, the heir apparent, is learning how to govern in part through the gossips' proceedings.

However, Shepherd also posits that it was always impossible for Lorenzo/Atlanta to win the debate: "In a male court, Lorenzo, the male spokesman for women, can do nothing to help the case of women. What needs to happen in the interests of true justice is for the action to step outside the court, to enter into the 'other' world where women are anonymous and violent" (216). While I agree Lorenzo/Atlanta loses because justice cannot exist within the corrupted space of the court, I find his claim that justice is delivered by violent women operating anonymously within an "other" space existing antithetically to the court to problematically elide several of the key issues surrounding the idea of a gendered access to justice.

Although Shepherd argues that the play emphasizes shared governance and deference to the public, associated (he suggests) with Queen Elizabeth, rather than autonomous tyranny associated with King James, his claim that women can only achieve justice in the play through violent and anonymous acts not only is factually erroneous (the group includes the queen Aurelia), but also acts to undermine the basic female claim of the *querrelle des femmes*, that women are capable of rationality and thus ultimately deserving of justice.[13] In a scene that emphasizes the women's interest in following the accepted social forms of justice, Swetnam is captured[14] and brought before the assembled group of women, given a trial and found guilty. Aurelia then addresses him with the rhetorical question, "How, thou inhumane wretch, what

[13] This assumption of a mob mentality among the women of the play is also problematic if one gives any credence to Lynda Boose's notion that the play was written by women (200). It is hardly in a female author's best interest to portray a mindless mob of women out for revenge.

[14] Although I do not have the luxury of exploring all of the gender implications of this plot twist at length, Swetnam is captured during his failed attempt to lure Atlanta into meeting him alone (so that he can capture her) by pretending to be in love with her. Atlanta defeats him, proving that Swetnam is no fencer. (A fencing manual was his other publication.)

punishment / Shall we inuent sufficient to inflict, / According to the height of our reuenge?" (5.2.156-58). The women's answers, all extremely violent, were accepted state punishments for treason in Tudor England. One cries, "let's teare his limmes in pieces, ioynt from ioynt" (l. 159), another suggests, "three or foure paire of Pincers, now red hot, / Were excellent" (ll. 160-1).

While the women's initial suggestions are extraordinarily brutal, they eventually decide on something more ignominious. When Aurelia exclaims, "Hang him, Slave, shall he dye as noble a death as *Caesar* did? No, no: pinch him, pricke him"; a "small boy," according to the speech tag, cries out, "I have small Pins enow to serve us all" (l. 165). These homely implements, along with the presence[15] of the boy,[16] indicate that justice has moved from the impersonal chaos of the court to the more immediate structure of the domestic. This decentralization of justice occurs because justice cannot be administered, and so revenge acts become the only way by which social justice can be achieved. The gossips depicted in Harman's tale of the walking mort enact this on a very small scale; in this play, the participation of women from all walks of life – the queen, old women, a scold – demonstrates that the gossip community

[15] I do not subscribe to Crandall's editorial decision to change the speech tag from "A boy" in the original text to "Young Woman." Her justification is twofold. The first is that "besides Misogynos and Swash, only women are present according to a previous stage direction, and *A Boy* might well be referring to the actual boy who would be playing a woman's part." The second is that "*Old Woman* and *Scold* seem carefully differentiated from *A Boy*; therefore, the latter is probably not just a redundant reference to one of the men playing those women" (152). While this change does have some logic to it, it nevertheless elides the various domestic configurations that are represented by the gossips all being from visibly different classes and social situations.

[16] The boy is possibly an apprentice, but his membership in the group of women indicates that he is at the very least too young to have a permanent presence in among adult men, which aligns him with the situation of the changeling boy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In any case, his presence and enthusiastic contributions to the proceedings suggest the possibility that the new generation of men will be more sympathetic to the situation of women in society.

has moved from private rooms and local streets to become an openly politicized body that addresses systemic flaws.

As Gail Paster has noted, shameful acts involving women are frequently enacted offstage. However, in this play, Swetnam is twice shamed by women: he is first tied to a post and stabbed with pins while onstage, and then he is taken offstage, where Atlanta delivers his sentence:

> First, he shall weare this Mouzell, to expresse
> His barking humour against women-kind.
> And he shall be led, and publike showne,
> In every Street I'the Citie, and be bound
> In certaine places to a Post or Stake,
> And bayted by all the honest women. (5.3.328-33)

Swetnam interrupts the sentence to mockingly observe that no honest women can be found "in all the Citie" (l. 335) … "Then he shal be whipt quite through the Land, / Till he come to the Sea-Coast, and then be shipt, / And sent to live amongst the Infidels" (ll. 337-339). His books are also to be confiscated and burned. The gossips' punishments of muzzling and public humiliation are, as Boose points out, "the standard humiliations involved in the bridling of a scold" (201). She posits that the play "seeks poetic parity through condemning Swetnam to endure precisely the kinds of humiliation that women were sentenced to undergo based on nothing more than the kinds of stereotyped accusations Swetnam's pamphlet produces" (201). The gossips, those stereotypical promulgators of idle talk, ironically use the muzzle to halt the volubility of Swetnam's harmful diatribes in order to preserve domestic tranquility. He is, in effect, silenced through this punishment, and in broader cultural terms, his critical voice is eliminated through the destruction of his misogynistic works.

This two-fold punishment, staged and recited, serves to ironically legitimate the women's actions by staging the trial (where, it must be noted, Swetnam is allowed to defend himself) and then administering a "fair" punishment, which, though begun onstage, can only be completed offstage. This is because off-stage punishment provides a necessary distance for an effective interrogation of culture and ideological practices, becoming what Steven Mullaney terms a "place of cultural commentary" (58). The invisible punishment of Swetnam does not then occur in an "other" space, but rather in a community intimately implicated in the everyday – in going from town to town, the women's justice demonstrates its egalitarian, mobile quality: it is an accessible, reproducible space to which all wronged persons have access. In this way, the actions of the gossip community in this play resonate with Harman's tale of the walking mort. The mort is able to ally herself with a gossip community in order to achieve justice in spite of the fact that she has no fixed abode, and this gossip community has the wherewithal to display Swetnam's punishment throughout the kingdom. The expansion of the punishment across the realm suggests the linkage of the gossip community beyond the local.

The play concludes with Atlanta throwing off her Amazonian costume to reassume the identity and duties of Lorenzo. The alliance of Amazons and gossips, so vital to the plot, was not a completely unusual one, and was in fact, as Kristen McDermott observes, utilized by Ben Jonson in *The Masque of Queens* and *Epicoene*. In both, a "comic 'chorus' of androgynous women … threaten[s] traditional values while satirically functioning as gossips, attending and assisting a powerful female who more directly threatens the peace and stability of a male authority figure" (63). She concludes that "both groups of 'gossips' are ultimately silenced and subdued by an Amazonian figure who is nominally female, but who embodies male virtues consistent with the world of the text" (63), a feature of *Swetnam Arraigned*, which concludes

with the disbanding of the gossips and the destruction of the character of Atlanta so that Lorenzo can assume his rightful place as heir to the kingdom.

Whereas McDermott sees Jonson's treatment of gossips and their Amazon leaders as an attempt to "frustrat[e] the alliance between the gossips and their androgynous leader" in order to "[set] a form of feminized disruptive speech against a male-directed model of productive discourse," (64) I argue that despite the dissolution of Atlanta's presence and androgyny into a more simple division between genders, the outcome supports the idea of more equitable justice for male and female transgressors. The play also expands the scope of female influence and justice, representing gossips not just has having heretofore unrepresented intellectual potential, but also in having that potential be fulfilled without patriarchal reprisal. Lorenzo's time as Atlanta, as well as his participation in the gossips' punishment of Misogynos/Swetnam, suggests an expansion of the gossips' role from locally interrogating social infractions to arraigning larger cultural imbalances.

The Staple of News

The trend of expanding the gossip's role of cultural arraignment is explored more directly in Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News*. Though *The Masque of Queens* and *Epicoene* portray gossips as the producers of disruptive speech as diametrically opposed to a male-centered model of productive discourse, Jonson's later comedies complicate his earlier depictions of gossips' social roles. *The Staple of News*, which appeared nine years after *The Devil is an Ass*, features four gossips used as a framing device to provide commentary on the action of the play. The gossips represent the knowledge network that the Staple of News (the distribution center through which news was produced and disseminated) intends to supplant.

The Staple of News is not an easy play. Richard Levin calls it "the most admirable of Jonson's later works" (Levin, *Multiple Plot*, 184). Jonson, always interested in challenging his audiences, offers a morality plot involving the adventures of Pennyboy Junior, who turns twenty-one as the play begins, inheriting £60,000. His path from prodigality to virtue is the substance of the action, as he meets various figures trying to steal his inheritance and corrupt his morals. Jonson also satirizes emergent capitalism (specifically, the abuse of wealth) in the figure of Lady Aurelia Clara Pecunia and her servants: her nurse, Mortgage, her waiting women, Statute and Band (Bond), and her chambermaid, Wax. Pecunia and Pennyboy Junior's romance is frequently disrupted by her other suitors, all of whom are vying for her substantial wealth. Devra Rowland Kifer ambitiously describes the play as "topical satire, morality-allegory, satirical-romantic festive comedy," and while she claims this extraordinary generic hybridity is "the source of the play's richness," she also admits that it is "the source of its diffuseness, which is its weakness" (329). One scholar recently described it as "a dispersed and fragmented work – rambling, paratactic, odd" (Rockwood 135), but recognizes that the play "was bound to leave audiences unsettled" because "its capitulation to the naïve pleasures of the conventional prodigal play is balanced uneasily against a sophisticated attack on the corrosive effects of contemporary political propaganda" (135-6), which is the "staple" of news referred to in the title.

Perhaps the most anomalous quality of this unusual play is the characters who frame the play's action in the intermeans between each act. They are four self-identified gossips, Tattle, Expectation, Censure, and the de facto leader of the group, Mirth, who tells the Prologue that they are "persons of quality … and women of fashion" whose purpose in attending the theater is

"to see and be seen" (Induction, ll. 8-9).[17] When the gossips demand to sit onstage, the Prologue expresses some apprehension: "But what will the noblemen think, or the grave wits here, to see you seated on the bench thus?" to which Mirth replies, "Why, what should they think, but that they had mothers, as we had, and those mothers had gossips (if their children were christen'd) as we are, and such as had a longing to see plays and sit upon them, as we do, and arraign both them and their poets?" (ll. 15-21). This portrayal of gossips marks a turning point for Jonson in his representations of autonomous women. His previous portrayals of gossips, in *Epicoene* and *The Masque of Queens*,[18] are hardly commendatory of women's birth room rituals or social roles. For his next comedy, *The Magnetic Lady*, Jonson actually stages a lying-in chamber (highly unusual in the period), and ultimately usurps the midwife function of conferring identity onto the characters of the play.[19] Jonson's gossips in *Staple*, then, are much more important to understanding the representational shift in the cultural importance of the gossip than has previously been acknowledged. Previous representations of gossips' arraignments focus on correcting damaging acts and attitudes toward women's domestic roles. Even the gossip

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[17] All quotations from the play are taken from the Regents edition, edited by Devra Rowland Kifer.

[18] Few scholars have examined Jonson's treatment of gossips or his portrayal of birth room rituals. For an examination of how Jonson used gossips as the locus of female disruptive speech that needs to be conquered by male regulation in *The Masque of Queens* and *Epicoene*, see Kristen McDermott, "Jonson's Gossips and the Stuart Family Drama." In *Early Theatre* 9.1 (2006): 61-83. Jonson's attack on gossips was specifically tailored to appeal to James I, who had been extremely critical of women's public roles and birthing rituals. See Chapter 2 for a discussion of James's curtailment of women's right to perform lay baptism.

[19] For an examination of Jonson's usurpation of the midwife function in order to conceal and reveal important birth room secrets about characters' parentage in his comedy *The Magnetic Lady*, see Janelle Jenstad, "'Smock-secrets': Birth and Women's Mysteries on the Early Modern Stage," in *Performing Maternity in Early Modern England*. Eds. Kathryn M. Moncrief and Kathryn R. McPherson. *The Magnetic Lady* is one of the few early modern plays to depict the lying-in chamber onstage, suggesting perhaps Jonson's fascination with the female space of the birth room was greater than most.

community in *Swetnam Arraigned by Women* has this threat as its impetus to action. The gossips in *Staple*, however, have no direct stake in the play's content, as it provides no overt denigration of women's social roles and perpetuates relatively few (for Jonson) female stereotypes.

According to the majority of the play's scholarship, Jonson stages a gossip community who provides commentary on the play in order to provide a proxy audience. Devra Rowland Kifer describes the gossips as "the most lively characters of the play," and suggests that their portrayal is a form of theatrical realism, providing "a credible and vivid depiction of unsophisticated theater-goers, speaking forever in the colloquial forms and rhythms of early seventeenth-century Londoners" (337). Paradoxically, though, Kifer posits that the supposedly-realistic gossips exist in a moment of "holiday license," and that "on an ordinary day, their behavior would be intolerable. On this occasion, though, despite their lack of knowledge, morality, and taste, they are free to arraign both poet and play" (338). They do this, Kifer argues, in order for Jonson to "control the audience's responses indirectly and to forestall criticism" (338). However, Kifer does not address the problem of asserting the realism of the theatrical gossips when the gossip Mirth early in the Induction declares her parentage as "the daughter of Christmas and the spirit of Shrovetide" (ll.11-12). Jonson, like Middleton in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, deploys the festive function of gossips, and in doing so paradoxically both undercuts and reinforces their social efficacy. Each recognizes the social power of the gossip – Middleton puts his gossips in the middle of the action, and Jonson uses his to frame the action.

Robert Jones suggests that Jonson's decision to use the gossips as a framing device is part of his attempt to revive the morality tradition. He argues the gossips are a "weapon in the onslaught with which he attempted to jolt his audience into the proper stance toward the vices and virtues in his play" (75). Though Jones does not directly invoke the concept of shame as the

"weapon" by which Jonson secures his audience's compliance, he clearly sees the gossips as tools created by Jonson to shame his audience: "He simply has the gossips who form the frame audience on stage make all the wrong responses, so that if we are inclined to cavil at the play for being dull or object to the spoilsport tone of its moral spokesman Pennyboy Canter we are inevitably associating ourselves with the blatantly foolish and malicious gossips" (76). Though the gossips do eventually misinterpret the play's events (during the Third Intermean), the assumption that the gossips exist solely to serve as a constant negative reminder to the audience to police their internal responses to the play does not acknowledge that many of their responses to the play are accurate and insightful. Thus, a more nuanced understanding of their function is called for. They cannot simply be seen as a surrogate audience who are being shamed for their ignorance.

Catherine Rockwood provides the most nuanced reading of the gossips' role to date. She agrees with previous scholars that the gossips are on some level a surrogate audience, but she argues that the gossips are educative, and not in a manner intended to be wholly negative. First, she claims, they represent "a particular type of popular entitlement; they stand for spectators who feel it is their right to openly critique public stage drama," (136) a claim that, although Rockwood does not say so, highlights the appropriateness of gossips for this role. Though the gossips sitting onstage remind scholars of Nell, *The Burning Pestle*'s citizen wife who commandeers the play in order to hear her ideal play,[20] the gossips state that their purpose is to be visible, and to be seen "arraigning" the play, a term that by 1625 (when *Staple* was first staged) had very specific connotations where groups of women were concerned, thanks in large

[20] Richard Levin compares the gossips to Nell insofar as they all have comments that "are determined primarily by class rather than gender" ("Women" 169). Kifer observes that the gossips are similar to "Beaumont's Citizen and his Wife" because they all constitute a "credible and vivid depiction of unsophisticated theater-goers" (337).

part to *Swetnam Arraigned*. Indeed, *Staple* was produced shortly after *Swetnam Arraigned*, and its eventual publication five years later was preceded just a few years earlier by *Swetnam*'s revival, suggesting that the two plays were tapping into a larger cultural phenomenon. In using four gossips as his framing device, Jonson capitalizes on the multiple roles of the gossip: educative, festive, and the creators and maintainers of a sizeable communication network. Rockwood argues that the gossips function as "an indigenous English dramatic tradition in the talkative vein of Thomas Nashe's Will Summer. They exhibit an undesirable preference for squibs and slapstick characters […] but, on the other hand, their conversation evolves into a useful capsule history of native English morality drama up to and including the production of *The Staple of News*" (136). Since dramatic representations of gossips predate Nashe's character, it is important to emphasize that the gossips actually form a distinct dramatic tradition, and it is that specific tradition that Jonson utilizes. The gossips represent a knowledge distribution network considerably older and arguably more controversial than the emergent news agencies Jonson is satirizing in his play. From this angle, Jonson's decision to use gossips as a framing device is logical, because gossips would be considered the arbiters of effective news creation and distribution (ironically, for the most part).

Jonson first uses the gossips in their traditional capacity as birth room attendants. When they are startled by the flaming torches brought onstage by the tiremen, the Prologue soothes them, explaining the torches are to light the stage to begin the play, not to set off fireworks. He then discloses to them the backstage dilemma, troping it as a difficult labor: "The truth is, there are a set of gamesters within in travail of a thing call'd a play and would fain be deliver'd of it, and they have entreated me to be their man-midwife, the Prologue, for they are like to have a hard labor on't" (ll. 52-56). Though he does not explicitly call on the gossips to assist him in

birthing the play, the metaphor of the tiring-house as a birthing chamber was a familiar one in the period, and additionally, the gossips do not object to the symbolism, further indicating its familiarity. Moreover, their commentary exists to create and foster audience response, much as the real life gossip's role was to assist in a successful delivery and foster a child through its early years.

Further emphasizing the role of gossips in assisting the birth of the play, Tattle responds to the Prologue's description of the production of the play as a difficult labor by blaming the playwright, saying that if the production is difficult, "then the poet has abus'd himself, like an ass, as he is" (l. 56). Mirth, the apparent leader of the gossips (it is she who brings the gossips onstage and demands stools for their comfort), intervenes to defend the absent playwright, placing the difficulty with the actors: "no, his actors will abuse him enough, or I am deceiv'd," and as evidence of the playwright's faultlessness, she reveals she has been in the tiring-room, her description of the playwright resembling a woman in labor:

> Yonder he is within (I was i'the tiring house awhile to see the actors dressed) rolling himself up and down like a tun i'the midst of 'em, and spurges. Never did vessel of wort or wine work so! His sweating put me in mind of a good Shroving-dish (and I believe would be taken up for a service of state somewhere, an't were known), a stew'd poet! He doth sit like an unbrac'd drum with one of his heads beaten out. For that you must note, a poet hath two heads as a drum has (one for making, the other repeating), and his repeating head is all to pieces. They may gather it up i'the tiring-house, for he hath torn the book in a poetical fury and put himself to silence in dead sack, which, were there no other vexation, were sufficient to make him the most miserable emblem of patience. (ll. 51-73)

Not only does Jonson portray himself as a feminized leaky vessel who profusely sweats and spurges (froths), but he also identifies poets as parent/creators, which he had done before *Staple*.[21] Ernst Robert Curtius notes that the metaphor of the poem as offspring can be traced to Plato's *Symposium*, where art (such as poetry) is considered more pure than human children because it is generated in the soul rather than the body.[22] Curtius then traces the metaphor through the classical and medieval periods, and makes note of the frequency of the metaphor in the early modern (133). Shakespeare, Sidney, and Jonson all use childbearing metaphors, as do many others. Terry Castle observes, "The English Renaissance poets are at ease with the metaphor: they employ it in highly self-referential contexts," but she posits that they "do not link it with any aesthetic or epistemological theory, it remains for them an obviously natural psychologically convenient mode for designating the act of versifying" (196). Castle reads a shift occurring with the rise of the neoclassical movement, specifically in Dryden's satiric poem *MacFlecknoe*, which, she claims, features "a distinct transformation first of all of the values associated with the figure and, strikingly, an imminent rejection of the image [of the pregnant poet] as a metaphor for the poet's own creativity" (197). In this particular instance, Castle considers drama and poetry to be discrete genres, so her claim that "*MacFlecknoe* represents … the first appearance of the childbirth metaphor in English poetry in a relentlessly satiric context" (198), may be correct by some standards, but it does not take into account the fact that many poets were also playwrights. While she may not find evidence of a destabilization of the birth

[21] In the short lyric poem "On My First Son," he calls his son his "best piece of *poetrie*" (l.10).

[22] He locates it in "Plato's doctrine of Eros," when "Diotima sets forth that all men are governed by a strong love of fame and immortality. Many seek to immortalize themselves by begetting children, but others 'beget more in soul than in the body.'" The pursuit of the beautiful creates a spiritual begetting, and so, Curtius concludes, "the works of the poets … are their children" (132-3).

metaphor in poetry until Dryden, I argue the metaphor was being challenged in drama much earlier than the Restoration, and one example of that is located in the Prologue of *The Staple of News*. The prologue's use of gossips to problematize the birth metaphor not only gestures toward the increased intellectual role of the gossip in this period, but also highlights their continuing multiple social functions.

The multiplicity of their social functions does not guarantee their wholehearted social acceptance or integration, however, which Jonson signals even before the play properly begins. The play's opening shows that the gossips' presence onstage has created instability and dissent throughout the playhouse. The Prologue, who had been interrupted when the gossips inserted themselves onstage, begins again, but his opening is slightly different after the gossips come onstage. Before the gossips situate themselves onstage, the Prologue had begun with, "For your own sake, not ours –," but after the gossips, the Prologue resumes, but with a difference. He begins, "For your own sakes, not his," and the subsequent lines reveal that not only has a schism been created between playwright and actors, but also between the playwright and the audience, apparently caused by the gossips' onstage presence. This would seem to undermine the purpose of staging gossips to assist in staging the play, but the Prologue continues, revealing that the gossips are there to embody a new female audience member: "… he bade me say, / Would you were come to hear, not see, a play. / Though we his actors must provide for those / Who are our guests here in the way of shows, / The maker hath not so; he'ld have you wise / Much rather by your ears then by your eyes" (ll. 1-6). Here, the Prologue reveals that the schism between playwright and actor is a reiteration of the debate over where the most important content of a play lies: in its words or in its visual interpretation.

It is fitting to have gossips at the center of this debate, because the perception of their function encompasses both modes of presentation. As women, they were thought to be particularly susceptible to spectacle, and as gossips, they were considered exceptionally attuned to aural/oral methods of communication. Also, as I argue in Chapter Two, one of the main roles of gossips is interpretative. Thus the acknowledgment of their capacity to listen, not just to speak, and to learn and disseminate knowledge through listening (rather than being fooled or influenced only by the visual, which is used as the source of the physical humor to which their representations are susceptible) is in parallel to their role as arbiters of legitimacy in the birth room. If Jonson is satirically representing the gossips, then his exhortation is a demand for them to be more attentive onstage then they are typically wont to be in the birth room – a stance that reinforces the depiction of gossips in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

The Prologue then goes on to forestall stereotypical gossips' behavior by stating the playwright "prays you'll not prejudge his play for ill" because of inattentiveness:

> Because you mark it not and sit not still,
> But have a longing to salute or talk
> With such a female and from her to walk
> With your discourse,
> to what is done and where,
> How, and by whom, in all the town but here. (ll. 7-12)

This rebuke is not only directed at earlier city comedies, but also at the gossips, whose names – mirth, tattle, expectation, and censure – are characteristics condemned by the prologue in this passage.

The Prologue's answer to the threat of disruption through female inattention and obsession with local town matters is to urge engagement with the new potential Jonson's play brings to the stage: "But yet the stage might stand as well / if it did neither hear these things nor tell. / Great noble wits, be good unto yourselves / And make a difference 'twixt poetic elves and poets …" (ll. 17-21). The difference between the two, according to the Prologue, is that the poet is educative, and "can instruct your youth / And keep your acme in the state of truth" (ll. 25-6).

There are several interesting points to make about this passage. Jonson's prologue is addressing a female audience – the gossips, yes, but also the women the prologue urges to hear the play. Moreover, though there is a strong vein of satire in the prologue's speech, such as calling the women "great noble wits," Jonson is still urging the women to exercise their capacity for reason and judgment, which gestures towards gossips' increasing social and legal visibility/responsibilities. Just as women were being increasingly depicted as "arraigning" cultural threats to womanhood, so too were they increasingly a legal presence. Tim Stretton observes that the early modern period "was an intensely legal age" in England, and that "litigation touched the lives of a greater proportion than ever before, whether as suitors, jurors, witnesses or deponents, and not just in London but elsewhere as well. And despite the best efforts of moralists it touched the lives of women as well as men …" (65). Scholars have demonstrated that women were involved in the legal process at several levels,[23] and that phenomenon would have helped to naturalize and legitimate the idea of women's abilities to act in the complex systems of justice.

[23] Stretton's text, *Women Waging Law in Elizabethan England*, is an excellent reference point for the topic, as is Amy Erickson's *Women and Property in Early Modern England* and *Women, Property, and Letters of the Law*, a collection edited by Nancy Wright, Margaret W. Ferguson, and A.R. Buck.

In addition to addressing a female audience and having gossips arraigning the play, the gossips do not enact the stereotypes described by the Prologue. They reserve their commentary for the intermeans between the acts, and despite the opinion of some scholars, their commentary shows they engage with the play and evaluate it on its own merits, even going so far as to judge it against other plays. However, they are not able to maintain this judicious perspective, and by the third intermean, they disinvest from the mode of information exchange being depicted. When Mirth asks Censure how she likes the news exchange onstage, Censure replies, "Oh, they are monstrous, scurvy, and stale! And too exotic, ill cook'd, and ill dish'd!" (ll. 14-15). Rockwood believes the shift in the gossips' capacity for perception is merely a revelation of their inherently insular attitudes: "The parochial outlook of the four London ladies becomes increasingly evident as the play goes on, and so in a sense it is inevitable they would be repelled by news that is not concerned with the world they know" (138). She believes that the gossips' rejection of foreign news as too exotic is part of Jonson's project to force the audience into agreeing with his personal politics, which is that the corontos, the newssheets relating foreign news, are dangerous because they have the potential to stir political unrest in England. Rockland argues that Jonson's gossips represent an opposing opinion to the corontos, but that it is the wrong one. She writes that Jonson "has set up a depiction of the News Office that appalls the narrow imagination of the gossips. He has, however, depicted their alienation from the Office in such a way that a genuine audience cannot simply agree with them (as we cannot simply agree with anything that they say, at all). Their commentary necessitates a careful look at what is being vended out of the Office, and a precise identification of what is wrong with it" (140). While Rockwood believes the gossips to be instrumental in Jonson's ideological project to persuade audiences to reject foreign corontos, it is not within her scope to take up the question of why Jonson uses gossips. The easy

answer is, of course, that gossips represent a form of knowledge distribution Jonson wishes to discredit, and so he aligns them with corontos as equally meriting satiric treatment, though from opposite ends of the spectrum. Just as the corontos are too obsessed with foreign and potentially politically destructive news, so too is gossip overly obsessed with localized particulars that are also potentially politically destructive.

However, that explanation does not engage with the importance of Jonson's depiction. Though he is using the gossips to urge the audience to take a middle ground, the gossips also signal a nostalgia for an Anglicized knowledge network that has nothing to do with "foreign" corontos. The gossips' rejection of the "foreign" exoticized news is significant in part because of its complexity. Previous representations (even within the Jonsonian canon) depict gossips as voraciously absorbing anything newfangled and foreign.[24] Although they do show themselves to be most concerned with "who kiss'd the butcher's wife with the cow's breath, and what bets won and lost; how much grist went to the mill, and what besides" (3rd Intermean, ll. 25-28), the play also demonstrates the gossips' civic engagement amidst the satire. The play's representation of gossips gestures toward an increased public, intellectual presence for gossips, but in typical Jonsonian fashion, he undercuts that presence with satire. He allows the gossips' heightened presence, but ridicules the intellectual gesture of their onstage arraignment of the play by making one of the gossips' strengths, a wide-ranging and engaged local network, seem provincial. However, if the gossips had been actively interested and engaged with foreign news, this too would have been a source of ridicule and held up as an example of women extending themselves beyond their capacities. Jonson's complex treatment of the gossips suggests they are not just

[24] The most famous example is from *Epicoene*, where a husband of one of the gossips describes his wife: "A most vile face! And yet she spends me forty pound a year in mercury and hogs' bones. All her teeth were made i'the Blackfriars, both her eyebrows i'the Strand, and her hair in Silver Street. Every part o' the gown owns a piece of her" (4.2.83-86).

being used to represent women's behavior and public roles, but rather the behavior of the general public toward news and information.

The English were notoriously interested in news, so much that it became a marker of national identity. In 1591, John Florio wrote that inquiring after the news was always "the first question of an Englishman," and Adam Fox, citing numerous examples of early modern pamphlets, claims that, "it was the customary greeting, the opening conversational gambit for everyone" (341). The desire for news was so pervasive, Fox argues, that it was even lamented from the pulpit. He quotes a Portsmouth preacher who complained that his parishioners "reherse and tell nothing but gossips tales, and newes, that love to have their tongues to runne through the world, and to be medling in other mans matters … but if any question shall be put as concerning religion, they grow as mute as fishes" (341). The preacher's complaint suggests the two terms (gossip and news) were aligned in the English imagination (as does the woodcut "The Severall Places You May Hear News," which is explored in the Introduction). While the preacher vociferously complained about the chattiness of his flock, apparently not all members of the clergy felt that way, as evinced by the country vicar mentioned in Act 1 scene 4. In this extremely brief scene (20 lines), a woman from the country comes to the Staple office for "a groatsworth of any news, I care not what, / To carry down this Saturday to our vicar" (ll. 11-12). Although it is such a short scene, it reveals an important shift in the gossip network. While the gossip community retains the capacity to bridge town and country, the country woman goes to the Staple to obtain her news, rather than to the traditional sites of gossiping, such as the bakehouse, the alehouse, or the market.

Thus Jonson's gossips embody not just the female penchant for irrelevant conversation, but a mode of knowledge-sharing that was coded as distinctly "English." The play sets up a shift

in knowledge networks from traditional gossiping to the professionalized, masculinized site of the Staple, but it gets overwhelmed by the play's insistent focus on the romantic resolution between Pennyboy Junior and Pecunia. The gossips complain bitterly about this, creating a petition to "censure" the playwright to protest what they interpret as the grave flaws in the play's structure. They all affix their names to the censure, which, after an exhaustive list of recommendations for ways in which the playwright can properly punish the play's transgressors, concludes with the desire to have "two large sheets of paper" or "a skin of parchment" be "dedicated to the sustaining of the Staple – / Which their poet hath let fall most abruptly!" (ll. 69-74). After they have submitted their censure, they disappear, along with the Staple. The last act is devoted to the restoration of social equilibrium (the reformation of Pennyboy Junior and his marriage to Pecunia).

The disappearance of the play's framing device as well as its central set piece is a drastic and puzzling move. Kifer explains their disappearance through their link to the social license granted with the invocation of the festive: "the holiday license of the characters, in the play proper and in the framing scenes, is at an end. […] For just a moment at the play's end, Jonson's ideal society is realized. Having learned to shun the extremities of Shrovetide self-indulgence and Lenten abnegation, the characters in the last scene give promise of rational, temperate lives and decorous behavior" (343-4). While this is one possibility, I argue another: that much like ale production and distribution a century earlier, the gossips are edged out by the masculinizing/professionalizing of one of their primary modes of identity, and that their representation as misunderstanding the play indicates their inability to maintain a "good" knowledge network. Jonson walks a very fine line in this play, as fine as the line between news and gossip. He represents the practice of gossip as not wholly bad, and the gossips as reasonably

intelligent, engaged individuals who do not disrupt the play with their talk. They are, however, limited in their capacity to understand what is presented to them, and so are portrayed as incapable of maintaining a knowledge network. While *Staple*'s gossips are not as incapable as the gossips of *Chaste Maid*, who are portrayed as unable to even correctly identify an infant's paternity, Jonson refuses to show his audience anything further of the gossips or the Staple, as if he is reluctant to play out their roles to their logical conclusions. While the gossips are able to outline the problems plaguing the Staple of News, they are not allowed to enact their proposed solutions. This indirectly contrasts with the agenda of the playwright of *Swetnam Arraigned*, who actively promotes the view that women (specifically gossips) can effectively enact social judgment and implement social justice, which suggests that the expanding intellectual role of the gossip was not an enterprise wholeheartedly embraced by all. Still, their critiques serve to modify the Staple, showing that a new knowledge network has been created, one that appropriates their modes of exchanging information (as is seen with the country woman preferring the Staple as a news source), providing the Staple with a new opportunity to begin again, and properly this time, with an appropriately nationalistic, but not localized, focus.

This chapter explores two very different trajectories for intellectualization of the gossip. *Swetnam Arraigned* is an overtly political piece that trusts gossips to police society. While the physical community is symbolically disbanded at the end of the play, its efficacy as a network and as a social corrective remains firmly in place. *The Staple of News*, on the other hand, is much more reluctant to let gossips fully engage with their culture, allowing them to arraign what they see and hear, but disappearing them before they act on their judgments. While the physical gossip community of *Staple* remains intact – insofar as they vanish as a unit – they could be thought to have failed in their effort to extend the place and pertinence of their judgments beyond

the local. The two plays provide a contrast between a community whose intellectual and social roles demonstrate sweeping civic engagement and a community that remains relatively local and insular. This might provide an answer as to why their protests against the global nature of news fails to be enacted, despite the efforts they make to offer a corrective, and why they disappear at the end.

Of the two models examined in this chapter, Jonson's proves to be the one that endures. The Coda explores how Margaret Cavendish takes up the gossip community's potential as a site in which women can foster their capacity for intellectual development later in the century, but it proves to be an unsustainable model. The gossips' movement toward the intellectual comes at the cost of their physical community. The intellectualization of the gossip is the end of the gossip as a cultural actor with multivalent roles.

CODA

A Parting of Ways

"Ladies, Gentlewomen, and other Inferiours, but not Less Worthy, I have been Industrious to Assemble you together, and wish I were so Fortunate, as to perswade you to make a Frequentation, Association, and Combination amongst our Sex, that we may unite in Prudent Counsels, to make our Selves as Free, Happy, and Famous as Men, whereas now we Live and Dye, as if we were Produced from Beast rather than from Men; for Men are Happy, and we Women are Miserable, they Possess all the Ease, Rest, Pleasure, Wealth, Power, and Fame, whereas Women are Restless with Labour, Easeless with Pain, Melancholy for want of Pleasures, Helpless for want of Power, and Dye in Oblivion for want of Fame; Nevertheless, Men are so Unconscionable and Cruel against us, as they Indeavour to Barr us of all Sorts or Kinds of Liberty, as not to Suffer us Freely to Associate amongst our Own Sex, but would fain Bury us in their Houses or Beds, as in a Grave; the truth is, we Live like Bats or Owls, Labour like Beasts, and Dye like Worms."

(Cavendish, *Female Orations* I, From *Orations of Divers Sorts* [1662])[1]

Given Margaret Cavendish's current status as proto-feminist icon, it may come as a surprise to discover that the ardent champion of women's pursuit of freedom and happiness – a goal which she specifically states can be achieved through "a Frequentation, Association, and Combination amongst our Sex" – had a strong dislike for gossips. As this dissertation has demonstrated, gossip communities negotiated the complex and frequently contradictory social rules dictating "proper" female behavior by maintaining multiple social roles. In so doing, they offered women a mode of expressing friendship and solidarity, exchanging information that was

[1] Reproduced in *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, edited by Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (143).

not just of personal interest but also important to the functioning of the community, resolving domestic injustices, and pursuing pleasure. Superficially, a gossip community has the potential to offer nearly everything Cavendish wants for women. At the very least, the community offered some protection to women to prevent them from what she sees as their relentlessly inescapable condition of being "Restless with Labour, Easeless with Pain, Melancholy for want of Pleasures, Helpless for want of Power." Yet she has a history of depicting gossips negatively, especially in her letters. However, her plays complicate the female condition and relationship that seem to be so simplistically negative in her letters, and in fact, in *The Convent of Pleasure*, she utilizes the communal rituals she derides in her letters in order to create a space dedicated to intellectual autonomy and the pursuit of pleasure.

Before turning to the play, let us examine Cavendish's representation of an "actual" gossip community. She describes her harrowing experience in Letter 103 of the *Sociable Letters* (1664). Though there is a strong vein of irony throughout the piece, one gets the sense of how disappointing and discomfiting the situation is for her. She writes that she was invited "to Name the Lady B.Rs. Child" and expresses some light contempt because the affair turns out to be essentially a rehearsal of stereotypical gossiping behavior at a lying-in: "being most Married Women, as is Usual at such Gossiping Meetings, their Discourse was most of Labours and Child-beds, Children and Nurses, and Houshold Servants, and of Preserving, and such like Discourses as Married Women and Mistresses of Families usually have" (112).[2] Cavendish is slightly bored with the proceedings until the women begin to relate their marital misfortunes. One has a stupid husband; another has married an inveterate gambler. Yet another complains that her husband is "the greatest Whoremaster in the City, and Corrupted all her Maids, for if they

[2] All quotes from Cavendish's letters are from *Sociable Letters*, ed. James Fitzmaurice.

came Maids into her service, they went away none;" still another complains that her husband begrudges the money needed to raise a family, and finally, the last gossip complains that her husband "had so many Faults, … [they] did Surpass all Account." Cavendish relates that she finally could sit still no longer, and so she chides the gossips for their marital disloyalty: "I wonder'd to hear them Rail at their Husbands, and Publickly Dispraise them, for if they had Faults, it was the Wives Duty to Wink at them, at least not to Divulge them." She then turns the table on the ladies, telling them that "if their Husbands would Speak of them, and Tell their Faults, it was likely they would Equal their Husbands Faults, if not Surpass them." This opinion, predictably, does not go over well with the women, and Cavendish ruefully relates, "the Ladies being before Heated with Wine, and then at my Words, with Anger fell into such a Fury with me, as they fell upon me, not with Blows, but with Words, and their Tongues as their Swords, did endeavour to Wound me." She then "became as Silent as if I had been Dead, onely I did Move to shew I was Alive, for I took a Silent Leave, as with a Curtsie, and came away." She concludes, "it hath so Frighted me; as I shall not hastily go to a Gossiping meeting again" (112).

The tale of her experience as a gossip to Lady B.R. is evocative. She reveals that not only did the practices of gossiping survive the Civil War intact, but so too did the criticism of the practice as encouraging women's tendencies to excess. Her criticism of the role of the gossip in the birth room mirrors male-authored complaints circulating before the Restoration. What makes her complaint about gossiping unique and important is that she is the first identifiably female author to criticize the practice, and it is a crucial part of her larger cultural criticisms of marriage and childbirth that are central to her writings. Though James Fitzmaurice, one of Cavendish's modern editors, implies that Cavendish wrote for her own entertainment and not to engage in cultural criticism (he calls the *Sociable Letters* "an enormously readable description of life as she

and her audience saw it" [xxi]), her censure of the gossips in the lying-in chamber and her disapproval of the practice of gossip as idle talk indicates that at least part of her project involved scrutinizing female behaviors, especially as regards their public roles. Her objection to the gossips' behavior in the lying-in chamber centers upon the question of whether the lying-in chamber is a public or private space. She argues that it is a public space, and that the gossips are violating the codes of "proper" behavior that dictate that women must be supportive, or at least not actively hostile, towards their husbands.

Cavendish's assertion of the public nature of the birth room conflicts with both centuries of practice and traditional representations of the area as a space representable only through the repetition of a narrow set of stereotypes. This raises questions, not only about Cavendish's personal politics, but also how the gossip community is inadequate for her ideals of female community. So while it is initially troubling to see a vocal proponent of female community denying her fellow gossips one of the primary ways women constituted female solidarity (through mutual experience and confidential revelation), it is important to understand why. Her reasons for doing so also form the foundation of the female community in *The Convent of Pleasure*.

Instead of celebrating the communal female experience, she undermines the community by suggesting the possibility that it is the women's faults, not those of their husbands, which are responsible for their various negative domestic situations. Her perspective bears a marked resemblance to the end of *The Taming of the Shrew*,[3] where the newly tamed Kate champions

[3] Cavendish was an unabashedly vociferous admirer of Shakespeare, and she is credited by *The Riverside Shakespeare* as "the first to give a general prose assessment of Shakespeare as a dramatist" (2nd edn. p. 1973). In Letter 123 of *Sociable Letters*, she writes that Shakespeare has, "a Clear Judgment, a Quick Wit, a Spreading Fancy, a Subtil Observation, a Deep Apprehension, and a most Eloquent Elocution," and she concludes with a rousing validation of Shakespeare's

her husband's rights to rule her and forces the women around her to also conform to that domestic model. Though Shakespeare's play does not directly address the issue of gossips in the play, Cavendish applies the logic of the conformable wife onto one of the most persistent examples of female community in the period. Gossip communities do insist on conformity, but usually on their own terms, which are not necessarily in line with patriarchal goals. But in this example, Cavendish insists on adherence to patriarchal strictures even within the traditionally "safe" space of the birth room. This initially seems inconsistent with her opinions regarding women's general powerlessness.

One possible explanation for Cavendish's lecture on adherence to wifely conformity lies in the second Female Oration, where the speaker argues that women "may Complain, and Bewail our Condition, yet that will not Free us; we may Murmer and Rail against Men, yet they Regard not what we say." Cavendish's female speaker declares that the normal methods of female complaint, such as those on display during the gossiping, do nothing to advance the cause of women, and in fact hinder it: "In short, our Words to Men are as Empty Sounds, our Sighs as Puffs of Wind, and our Tears as Fruitless Showres, and our Power is so Inconsiderable, as Men Laugh at our Weakness" (144). For Cavendish, then, wifely complaints are displays of weakness, accomplishing nothing to advance the cause of women. It is better to fulfill one's domestic duty (including obedience) and find other ways to fight that do not compromise one's personal integrity. Of course, Cavendish was speaking from an extraordinarily (and uniquely) privileged position. Her husband, the Duke of Newcastle, gave her a great deal of latitude to pursue her

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universalism and complete originality: "so much he had above others, that those, who Writ after him, were Forced to Borrow of him, or rather to Steal from him" (131). Cavendish had deep feelings about Shakespeare from an early age. Valerie Traub relates that Cavendish "had dreamed of marrying" Shakespeare when she was a girl (177).

numerous and varied interests, and he actively fostered her interest literature and science.[4] Most women, even in Cavendish's own social milieu, were not so fortunate.

The actions identified by Cavendish as weakness of character – the complaining, drunkenness, and quickness to anger – are all stereotypical attributes of gossip behavior. In applying them to a group of women largely composed of what Cavendish identifies as "ladies and gentlewomen" (112), she invokes the traditional depiction of gossips as women from the lower classes as a shaming tactic in order to encourage women who consider themselves to be "ladies" to conform to her revised model of female behavior at a gossiping. While Cavendish came to fulfill one basic gossip function, that of naming Lady B.R.'s child, she ended up deploying another – the educative role of the gossip – against her fellow women. Just as in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, the educative function spectacularly fails, and for similar reasons – the gossip community proves to be fundamentally unable to live up to its own potential because it has become a caricature of itself, weakening itself and opening it up to the possibility of exploitation and attack.

She is equally condemnatory of gossiping as a practice outside of the lying-in chamber. In letter 122, she advises a female friend that in order to avoid the practice of gossip as idle talk, a woman must "fall to Brag of her self, and tell what Fine things she would have, or had," whereupon the gossips would become "Inwardly Spiteful or Angry, and then would soon take their Leaves and be Gone." Cavendish tells her correspondent that this is the only way to avoid gossiping women, "or else you must learn to Gossip, and to Entertain Gossips, although I believe

[4] Anne Shaver notes that Cavendish's marriage to the Duke (who was then a Marquess) "enabled her to become a serious writer. [He] encouraged her to write and apparently underwrote the cost of her publications" (3). Bowerbank and Mendelson claim that her interest in science was "encouraged by a close friendship with her brother-in-law Sir Charles Cavendish, an avid mathematician who was conversant with the latest scientific discoveries and speculations" (10).

you will be but a Dull, Untoward Scholar to Learn …" (129). Here again we see Cavendish promulgating traditional negative stereotypes about the gossip, particularly excessive/idle speech and anger, as well as the idea that the type of female community represented by gossip is one founded on selfish impulses that are destructive, not only to the self but also to the idea of a viable female community.

Despite (or perhaps because of) her negative views of gossips and gossiping, Cavendish creates a gossip community in *The Convent of Pleasure* that eliminates the physical excess associated with gossips while preserving the outward structure of the gossip function as a community simultaneously inside/outside of society. Most significantly, she preserves the gossip's right to arraign social practices. Judith Haber observes that while Cavendish "repeatedly complains about women's propensity to gossip in her *Sociable Letters*, she also … presents gossip as a positive feminine tool in many of her plays, and uses it as the predominant mode of some" (121), most notably in *Convent*, the last play in her second collection of drama, 1668's *Plays, Never Before Printed.* It is a comedy described by its editor Anne Shaver as "one highly original blending of pastoral and masque that challenges even the possibility of a good marriage" (7). Its plot revolves around the basic and revolutionary idea that marriage is unequivocally bad for women. This is complicated, however, by the marriage of Lady Happy, the central female character, who remains, until her marriage at the end of the play, strongly opposed to marriage. Shaver argues that the play's strictures against marriage are "sustained even in the face of the conventional comic denouement: although Lady Happy does marry the Prince in the last act, she never recants her declaration that marriage is generally bad for women" (12).

At the play's beginning, Lady Happy inherits a fortune as a result of her father's death. The increased wealth brings increased visibility, especially where male suitors are concerned.

Exasperated by the "folly, vanity and falshood in Men" (218),[5] Lady Happy declares her intention to "live retired from their Company." This does not appear to be one of the unaccountable feminine whims that are a staple of male-authored and male-oriented comedy. Rather, Lady Happy presents her plan in great detail. She proclaims that she

> will take so many Noble persons of my own Sex, as my Estate will plentifully maintain, such whose Births are greater than their Fortunes, and are resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginity: with these I mean to live incloister'd with all the delights and pleasures that are allowable and lawful; My Cloister shall not be a Cloister of restraint, but a place for freedom, not to vex the Senses but to please them. (220)

Lady Happy's declaration neatly avoids the problematic aspects of the traditionally constituted gossip community – the emphasis on virginity and nobility ensures that this community of women will not be tempted by excesses, despite Lady Happy's insistence on material comfort,[6] because men are barred from entry. The convent, as the play keeps insisting, has absolutely no need of men. Madam Mediator informs Lady Happy's frustrated suitors that the house that contains the cloister "is so big and convenient, and so strong, as it needs no addition or repair,"

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[5] All quotes from the play are taken from *The Convent of Pleasure and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Shaver.

[6] Lady Happy's description of the convent occurs early in Act 2 scene 2. She avers that "I have such things as are for our Ease and Conveniency; next for Pleasure, and Delight" (224). Every woman's chambers are changed to accommodate seasonal changes, but the emphasis is on beauty. For instance, spring decorations include "a great Looking-Glass in each chamber, that we may view our selves and take pleasure in our own Beauties, whilst they are fresh and young." The emphasis on conventionally beautiful women who are both young and noble renders problematic Katherine R. Kellett's argument that Lady Happy's utopic experiment "bring[s] those at the cultural margins – virginal women who refuse to marry – to the cultural center" (425). For an insightful analysis of the prevalence and importance of unmarried women in early modern society, see Amy Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England*.

and that in addition to vast grounds ("Gardens, Orchards, Walks, Groves, Bowers, Arbours, Ponds, Fountains, Springs, and the like") there are "a numerous Company of Female Servants," which Madam Mediator explains is so "there is no occasion for Men" (223).

The emphasis on material comfort is key, Erin Lang Bonin argues, because part of the way the play "reconfigures the relationship between women and property" is through the elaborate fantasy of material comfort that signals "women are no longer mere appendages to their dowries, the means through which men transfer land, goods, and cash. Instead women manage these commodities themselves in a community that eschews marriage" (347). Most notably, it is a community that, as Bonin notes, is "inaccessible, and even inconceivable to those positioned within the patriarchy," and this ban not only applies to men, but to wives as well (348). The community thus situates itself as an idealized gossip community. As Nicole Pohl notes, "By creating a social and economic enclave within the walls of a convent, the women of *The Convent of Pleasure* create an intentional community. This community supports and enhances the fundamental principle of female friendship" (103). Lady Happy's insistence on the physical innocence of the ladies renders the community impervious to any applications of previous stereotypes. Even the insistence on material enjoyments is rendered acceptable because of the inmates' choice to embrace chastity, because in stereotypical depictions of women and the desire for luxury items (an example of this phenomenon can be seen above, in Swetnam's pamphlet), women's "longings" for material goods eventually lead to prostitution. It is important to note this choice does not necessarily imply that there is no sexual tension in the convent. On the contrary, as Valerie Traub and others have pointed out, the convent is a sexually charged atmosphere, and not just between Lady Happy and the Princess: some of the women choose to dress as men. When the Princess arrives at the beginning of Act 3, she observes some of the

ladies "accoutre Themselves in Masculine-Habits, and act Lovers-parts" (229). The play suggests sexuality as a part of the women's interaction, whether or not it is consummated. In addition, the play-within-the-play emphasizes the woes of marriage, so there is an insistent awareness of the worldly included as a part of the knowledge base of the convent. In the instance of the convent, then, chastity is not a denial of female sexuality, but rather a denial of the assumption that men should have uncontested access to and control over that sexuality.

This control is limited, however. Not only is the convent explicitly elitist, but remarkably, Lady Happy seems content to allow patriarchy to abuse those women too poor to escape it. When she first declares her intent to create the convent, she says, "those Women that are poor, and have not means to buy delights, and maintain pleasures, are only fit for Men; for having not means to please themselves, they must serve only to please others" (230). Her insistence on well-bred and unmarried women (whether single or widowed) who voluntarily choose[7] to enter the convent signals that the convent is what Julie Sanders terms "a potentially empowering locale" (135) because it is a site devoted to the renunciation of patriarchy. However, poor women, with little access to money and power, have no means of escape. Lady Happy does not forget them, though, and in Act 3 she gives those women a voice and a presence within the convent walls. Though it is a heavily mediated experience (all the women depicted in the play-within-a-play are played by the well-born ladies of the convent), it still represents an important milestone for the ways in which it represents the gossip community.

[7] An objection could feasibly be made to the idea that the ladies are there voluntarily, since they are economically disadvantaged, or, as Lady Happy discreetly describes them, "such whose Births are greater then their Fortunes" (220). However, she deflects this notion through the revelation that she chooses for community inclusion only those who have previously "resolv'd to live a single life, and vow Virginity."

Gweno Williams describes the play-within-a-play as "a concise, episodic, female-theatre-of-the-world in which a succession of female bodies of all ages" (142) is presented to the audience in quick progression. One of the most striking features of the ten vignettes, and the theme common to them all, is the idea of a mutually supportive and nurturing community of women. Williams suggests that "the distinctive colloquial and contemporary tone, language and setting of these scenes, which consistently show women conferring together and supporting each other in misery and difficulties" demonstrates that Cavendish is staging a gossips' meeting. She concludes, "[I]n my view, the inner play draws very heavily and wittily on this tradition, and may in fact be the very first staging of a gossips' meeting by a woman dramatist" (143). Pamela Allen Brown also associates the scenes with the gossips' meeting, calling it "a high-toned gossips' feast" (67).

What is also of vital importance is the fact that this gossips' meeting occurs at the structural center of the play (the beginning of Act 3). Though this fact has not incurred critical notice, it provides an important clue to Cavendish's motives. Within the elite space of the convent, Lady Happy stages a masque challenging the cultural pressures that encourage women to marry. It portrays the horrors of marriage, including abusive and neglectful husbands, but the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth are emphasized. Scene 7's stage direction reads: "*Enter a Lady big with Child, groaning as in labour, and a Company of Women with her*." The pregnant woman complains of back pain, but the midwife is busy delivering a different mother. Scene 9 depicts three gossips fretting over a midwife's absence. One gossip tells another that the midwife has "been with a Lady that hath been in strong labour these three days of a dead child, and 'tis thought she cannot be delivered" (232). A third gossip enters to say that the midwife has come, but that she was unable to save her previous client. The other two gossips hush her, urging her

not to disturb the laboring woman, because "the very fright of not being able to bring forth a Child will kill her" (232). It is unclear if these two separate scenes are intended to be depictions of the same lying-in chamber, but the effect is the same in either case, because the emphasis is upon the universality of the female experience and the universal threat posed to women by heterosexual marriage.

Cavendish's decision to place these vignettes at the beginning of Act 3 initially seems to echo Middleton's choice to stage a stereotypical gossips' meeting at the structural center of *Chaste Maid*. Both renditions of gossips offer up purportedly "true" gossip behavior. Much as the depiction of gossips in the center of Middleton's play indicates the centrality of the cultural roles played by gossips and the anxiety surrounding the mysterious implementation of those roles (mysterious to men, anyway), so too does Cavendish's centralizing depiction of gossips reveal the social significance of their roles and the anxiety enshrouding them. There is an important difference between the two. Middleton creates a highly comical situation where the absence of the midwife and their own gluttonous tendencies leads to a comic duping of the gossips, emphasizing their inability to fulfill their duty by correctly identifying the paternity of Mistress Allwit's child. Cavendish, using a similar situation, produces a stark tragedy: the absent midwife in Lady Happy's masque leads to death for the delivering mother.

The central placement of this tragic treatment of the gossip role simultaneously highlights the gossips' ineffectiveness and the necessity of Lady Happy's intervention in creating the convent. By barring traditional gossips from entrance (the poor women who cannot afford to refuse participation in patriarchy) while yet invoking their miserable status outside the convent walls, Cavendish is attempting to preserve the best aspects of the gossip community (female solidarity, a community that fosters the creation and dissemination of knowledge) while

simultaneously purging the aspects that hinder it from reaching its full potential (reliance on patriarchy). Still, the overall result is remarkable: the first female-authored depiction of a gossips' meeting shows gossips unable to perform their social functions of bringing women safely through childbirth or providing support for women with domestic problems.

This message is repeated throughout the vignettes. Gossips are shown as victims of patriarchy, unable to effectively react to the dangers of marriage and childbirth. Some of the gossips' complaints echo those made by the women in Cavendish's letter, complaints that date back to Noah's wife in the medieval mystery plays of the Flood. Scene 2 depicts "two mean women" complaining about the damage caused by their drunken husbands. One woman complains that her husband "lies all day drinking in an Alehouse, like a drunken Rogue as he is, and when he comes home, he beats me all black and blew, when I and my Children are almost starved for want" (229), and the other is in a similarly abusive situation. Scene 4 depicts "Two Ladies" who are crying because of their husbands' inveterate gambling. The first lady's husband spends all his money on whores, but worse, he has brought them home, where they "must rule as chief Mistresses." The second lady was threatened by her husband until she gave him her jointure, with the result that she "must beg for [her] living" (230). The difference between the two very different treatments of identical situations – contemptuous in the *Sociable Letters*, sympathetic in *The Convent of Pleasure* – seems to arise because the convent itself provides a solution to patriarchy that has the potential to improve the situation of women. Whereas the gossips in Letter 103 aimlessly complain about their various domestic problems, the gossips in *Convent* are used as examples to justify the elimination of patriarchy, which is the message that concludes the play-within-a-play: "*Marriage is a Curse we find, / Especially to Women kind: / From the Cobler's Wife we see, / To Ladies, they unhappie be*" (233). Much as Jonson uses

gossips to enable his project of reframing the modes through which news is created and distributed, Cavendish uses the plight of gossips to reframe the modes through which women experience the world.

This experience – the heteronormative paradigm – recognizes only the physicality of the female body (specifically, their reproductive capacity) and routinely denies women access to the life of the mind. It is in Act 4 where we see the attempt to live the intellectual ideals of the convent. There are surprisingly few scenes that take place within the lived space of the convent – the first two acts all take place outside of the convent, and the third act, while it technically takes place within the convent, is not *of* the convent but rather of the world outside. The community is then largely composed of talk and privileged knowledge – gossip, in other words, but in an idealized form. Instead of discussing local concerns, it deals with lofty political goals (the intellectualization of women and the pursuit of pleasure through the renunciation of patriarchy). In Act 4 we see the lived experience of the convent. It is still highly stylized – it is a pastoral scene, and Lady Happy and the Princess enter as a shepherdess and shepherd, respectively – but it still provides a rehearsal of Lady Happy's ambitious intellectual project. The Princess, who is foreign, comes to the convent after learning of its existence (presumably through gossip) and strikes up an immediate and ardent friendship with Lady Happy. So ardent is it that Lady Happy becomes melancholic. She relates that she had been happy until she "saw this Princess; but now I am like to be the most unhappy Maid alive: But why may not I love a Woman with the same affection as I could a Man?" (234). The question imperils her intellectual project by reintroducing that which the convent's members have rejected: sexual attraction. Specifically, it is the kind that women are supposed to associate with men. This situation threatens to undermine Lady Happy's state by granting physicality primacy over intellectuality. She refuses to entertain

this thought for more than a moment, however, and overcomes her lapse by insisting, "No, no, Nature is Nature, and still will be / The same she was from all Eternity" (234). Her courtship with the Princess reinforces this. While the pair exchange kisses, the courtship itself is a series of intellectual exchanges that border on the metaphysical, which highlights the tensions facing women, not only between intellectuality and physicality, but also between reason and emotion. This tension is treated in two different ways in *Swetnam Arraigned* and *The Staple of News*, with the former showing gossips capable of balancing rationality and physicality, and the latter casting doubt upon the idea.

Cavendish's own contribution to this debate is to make temporary her model of intellectualized pursuit of pleasure through resistance to patriarchy. Act 5 begins with the knowledge that a man has entered the convent. Paranoia sets in, with the women all suspecting each other to be the infiltrator. The stage direction reads that the women "*all skip from each other, as afraid of each other*" (243). Only Lady Happy and the Princess remain at each other's side. An ambassador then enters and kneels at the Princess' feet, revealing that the Princess is actually a Prince who has been neglecting his kingdom in order to spend time at the convent. The Prince declares that he will return, with Lady Happy as his "Soveraigness" (243). The play then concludes with the nuptials of Lady Happy and the Prince, who declares that the convent will be divided into two equal parts "for Virgins and Widows" (246). Mimick, the man who first asked the Prince to divide the convent, interprets this decision rather lewdly: "That will prove a *Convent of Pleasure* indeed; but they will never agree, especially if there be some disguised Prince amongst them; but you had better bestow it on old decrepit and bed-rid Matrons, and then it may be call'd the *Convent of Charity*, if it cannot possibly be named the *Convent of Chastity*" (246). Lady Happy is silent about the fate of her convent, and her attempts to utilize the form of

the gossip community while divorcing it from its function ultimately leaves the convent's inmates open to the same vulgar innuendo applied to the impoverished women who had no access to the convent in the first place. Trapped in an indeterminate state between charity and chastity when the men appropriate the convent, Lady Happy's gossips disappear, much as Jonson's gossips do at the end of *Staple*, which signals that they have served their purpose. Lady Happy's marriage has elevated her social status, but it significantly lowers that of her gossips, who are now the objects of coarse sexual humor that directly stems from Lady Happy's attempt to restructure the gossip community, suggesting that the ten vignettes staged at the beginning of Act 3 are an inevitability for everyone in the play except perhaps Lady Happy and the Prince.

Most of the scholars who study the play's complicated gender dynamics concern themselves with the implications of the marriage at the end, rather than with the fate of the gossips. Theodora Jankowski argues that the revelation of the Princess as a Prince does not stabilize or contain the gender explorations of the play, but rather that "what it really does is destabilize the play even more" (182). While she does acknowledge that the convent is still located within the patriarchal culture it purports to challenge, she maintains that despite the fact that

> an actual separation cannot occur, the physical isolation of the convent – symbolized by its walls – does invoke the attempt at ideological separation its inmates undergo. So, if patriarchal society depends upon various sorts of female sexual slavery and pain, the queer resistance represented in these plays images a recategorization of virgins as their own subjects within their own economics of pleasure. (184)

Valerie Traub sees the play's conclusion as the inevitable outcome of cultural pressures on Cavendish's play: "However far away from men her imagination can roam in pursuit of female pleasures, Cavendish returns to men as the apparent price of formal closure" (180). Shaver suggests Cavendish's husband wrote the second half of Act 4 and all of Act 5, including the scene when the Princess is revealed to be a Prince. She observes that Newcastle "is credited with his contributions on printed strips pasted into the text of both *Playes* (1662) and *Plays, Never Before Printed* (1668) … since no terminus is given, it seems that he is the author of the final two scenes and the epilogue" (238). Valerie Billing sees Newcastle's probable involvement in authorial production not as a potential impediment to Cavendish's artistic integrity, but rather as critical to the central concern of the play, which is whether marriage is an inherently unjust institution for women. Billing reads the second half of the play as "revealing a complex authorial relationship in which two voices work both together and in tension to produce the ending," and the Duke of Newcastle's "presence in the text ensures the heterosexual marriage at the end and creates a tension that challenges the radical ideas about marriage Cavendish explores elsewhere in the play." Billing concludes that the marital authorial friction is actually a "literary collaboration between a husband and a wife" which "becomes both a joint production and a competition over the form of the marriage ending and over the definition of marriage itself" (108).

Ultimately, the play leads us to the extraordinarily problematic conclusion that gossips cannot exist without patriarchy. Not only do Lady Happy's efforts to reconfigure the gossip community eventually fail, but more troubling, the endeavor leaves the convent's inmates more vulnerable than they were before, with the women reliant upon men who find their situation both titillating and humorous. The attempt's failure may suggest the futility of the project, implying

that the effort to intellectualize the gossip community comes at the price of the community itself, but the fact remains that even though the project was only temporarily sustainable, it was conceptualized as viable, however briefly. It was, however, the last moment of brilliance in an overall decline. By the late seventeenth century, the gossip community and midwifery had become largely detached from any positive social associations, in spite of the fact that both were circulating widely through the public sphere and print culture. As Paula McDowell has observed, there was a "nexus of associations in this period between women, publishing, midwifery, and politics" (253). She observes the same associations at work in 1688 during the "warming-pan scandal," which alleged that the son born to Mary of Modina, the presumptive Prince of Wales, had actually been smuggled into the Queen's bedchamber in a warming-pan. McDowell relates, "Childbirth became a political even of national importance and the subject of endless rumours and 'gossip,' and the oral testimony of midwives was enrolled in Chancery and published by royal authority" (253). Consequently, the end of the seventeenth century was peppered with accounts of murderous midwives, as the interest in sordid tales of midwives remained high. 1680 saw the publication of "A New Ballad of The Midwifes Ghost," which relates the purportedly true story of a dead midwife who appeared in the home she occupied while she was living and told the housemaid that if she "took up two Tiles by the Fire-side, they should find the Bones of Bastard-Children that the said Midwife had 15 years ago Murthered, and that she desired that her Kinswoman Mary should see them decently Buried."[8] "The Midwife of Poplar's Sorrowful Lamentation in Newgate" was published after the 1693 execution of Mary Compton, who was convicted of murdering several children through neglect and starvation. The ballad is quite specific in its recitation of the horrors on display in the Compton house when neighbors are

[8] "A New Ballad of The Midwifes Ghost," Pepys 2.145.

alerted by one of the children in Compton's care. There are "Young Infants in a basket dead, / Upon a shelf," two or three infants buried in the cellar, and as for the infant whose crying initially raised neighbors' suspicions, when it was taken and given to a nurse for care, "And as she took the Linnen off / To dress it unto bed, / The very Ears were rotted off / From this poor Infants head."[9] A key component of the dramatic effect of these tales is the secrecy involved – these midwives have all violated their oaths as well as the trust placed in them by committing their crimes and exploiting the gossip networks that traditionally granted them leeway/control. The midwife becomes the embodiment of social corruption, the keeper of secrets and lies whose practice runs counter to free and open public discourse.

Mrs. Nightwork, a midwife in Delarivier Manley's *The New Atalantis* (1709) is just such a figure. *The New Atalantis* is a satirical roman à clef revealing the private scandalous lives of prominent Whig politicians. The premise of the work is that the goddess of Justice, Astrea, returns to earth to gather information about the lives of the inhabitants of the island of Atalantis. She is reunited with her mother, Virtue, and together they are guided around the island by Lady Intelligence. The work shares with *The Convent of Pleasure* both generic hybridity and a complicated relationship to the social function of the gossip. At the beginning of Book Two, Astrea, Virtue, and Lady Intelligence (Manley's avatar) are wandering through "a remote place" by moonlight when a coach enters and a pregnant woman is deposited at the base of a tree. She is in a great deal of pain, and she tells the Prince (the Prince of Majorca, who was driving the coach) to "haste and fetch the midwife. I'm surrounded with horror, the rack of nature is upon me, and no kind assisting hand to relieve me. Bury me unknown. Oh could you but annihilate

[9] "The Midwife of Poplar's Sorrowful Confession and Lamentation in Newgate," Pepys 2.192.

me, to preserve my fame!" (136).[10] The pain of her labor is minimal compared to the potential damage to her reputation. However, this does not weigh with the embodiments of virtue and justice, both of whom advocate assisting her regardless of her morals, thereby demonstrating that they are operating within a traditional gossip paradigm. Virtue offers, "Shall we not appeare and offer her our assistance in her misery? Her cries and groans pierce the heart –," and her daughter Astrea concurs: "Oh Lucina, be propitious! Well did the unhappy fair term it the rack of nature? Can any thing be more exquisite? Oh! how piercing are her cries!" (137). Lady Intelligence, however, prefers to hide and gather information. The midwife then enters and Intelligence recognizes her as Mrs. Nightwork. Astrea, Virtue, and Intelligence stand aside and Mrs. Nightwork delivers the child.

McDowell asserts that, "it is here, in Manley's careful differentiation between her characters Lady Intelligence and Mrs. Nightwork, and her depiction of their testy relationship, that her simultaneous deployment and rejection of the figure of the gossip – and, by extension, the oral political culture to which her fictions are indebted – becomes most clear," that

> Manley recognized that strict distinctions between 'gossip,' 'intelligence,' and 'news' were ideological rather than objective ones, and that she made this recognition a foundation of her political writing career. At the same time, however, Manley took care to define herself *against* traditional representations of the gossip as a mere chatterer – a retailer of stories for their own sake. By including in *The New Atalantis* a dramatic face-to-face encounter between a traditional gossip and her own politicized brand of 'female intelligencer,' she attempts at once to draw on female oral political traditions and to define herself

[10] All quotations from the text are taken from the edition edited by Rosalind Ballister.

> away from those traditions deemed unrelated to or beneath the concerns of 'high' politics. (254-55)

Manley's goal is similar to that of both Jonson and Cavendish in that each author endeavors to simultaneously employ and establish distance from the defining female stereotype of the age. As McDowell observes, "But if Mrs. Nightwork's methods are similar to Lady Intelligence's, the ends to which she puts her news are different. The traditional gossip's stories are malicious and told merely to entertain. The female 'intelligencer,' by way of contrast, does not circulate titillating stories for their own sake, but rather deploys them for worthy political ends" (256). The problem with this, however, is that using a gossip as a kind of straw woman sets up a serious paradox regarding female nature, as Marcie Frank notes:

> Manley associates her critical authority with her female nature, which conditions the disavowals of referentiality and precedent upon which her texts, at the same time, openly rely. The complexity of this double stance, however, also distances her from any straightforward evocation of femininity. She exploits her access as a woman writer to the sexual scandals associated with female power (casting her talents, in the figure of Mrs. Nightwork, as a form of midwifery), at the same time as she deplores them. (131)

This privileging of the knowledge network created by the gossip community comes at the expense of the community itself. When presented with the opportunity to coalesce into a gossip community to assist in Harriat's birth, Astrea, Virtue, and Lady Intelligence choose not to. Much as Lady Happy's attempt to intellectualize the gossip community renders the community unviable, so too does Lady Intelligence's privileging of information over action. Both Cavendish and Manley's depictions of gossip communities demonstrates that the complex ideological

stance – both inside and outside patriarchy – that was responsible for the gossip community's survival throughout the medieval and early modern eras was in decline by the eighteenth century. However, all was not lost for gossips. As the publication of Cavendish's plays and Manley's book demonstrates, the burgeoning expansion of women into the publishing industry suggests that print became the new medium through which women could stage the same kinds of ideological interrogations of patriarchy. Astrea, Virtue, and Intelligence's choice not to participate in the creation of a traditional gossip community signals both the end of a very particular kind of female community and the beginning of a publicly political presence for women in the traditionally male world of print.

Change is not always good, however. "Gossip" became a wholly pejorative term, thanks in large part to women like Cavendish and Manley who separated the entwined modes of gossiping to advance their own personal agendas. While the gossip was scapegoated in order for individual women to exercise the right to intellectual participation in the public sphere, it also meant that female friendship and community lost recognition, and the rituals that bound together women, and by extension, the community, came to be thought of as provincial and antiquated. Gossip came to exclusively mean that private information which destroys a community, instead of that which creates it.

Throughout the early modern period gossip communities and networks were able to maintain their complex ideological relationship to patriarchy, but after the Restoration became increasingly associated with "antiquated" rituals and gendered stereotypes about women's propensity to promulgate idle talk, a tendency that was considered to be more pronounced depending on the woman's social status and level of education. The communities could only exist in a society that allowed for the mobility of the average woman. This mobility refers to both

the physical space of the city, town, village, or countryside in which she lived and also socially – to dictate the terms of her acquaintance, whether friends or business. The gossip communities also relied on access to spaces in which to congregate. Those spaces became increasingly restricted throughout the early modern period – the alehouse and the birth room gradually became the province of men, and women's presence in those spaces was suffered only grudgingly. Still, as the primary mode of communal identity, the role of the gossip played a vital role in the construction of identity for early modern Englishwomen.

APPENDIX

Figures & Illustrations

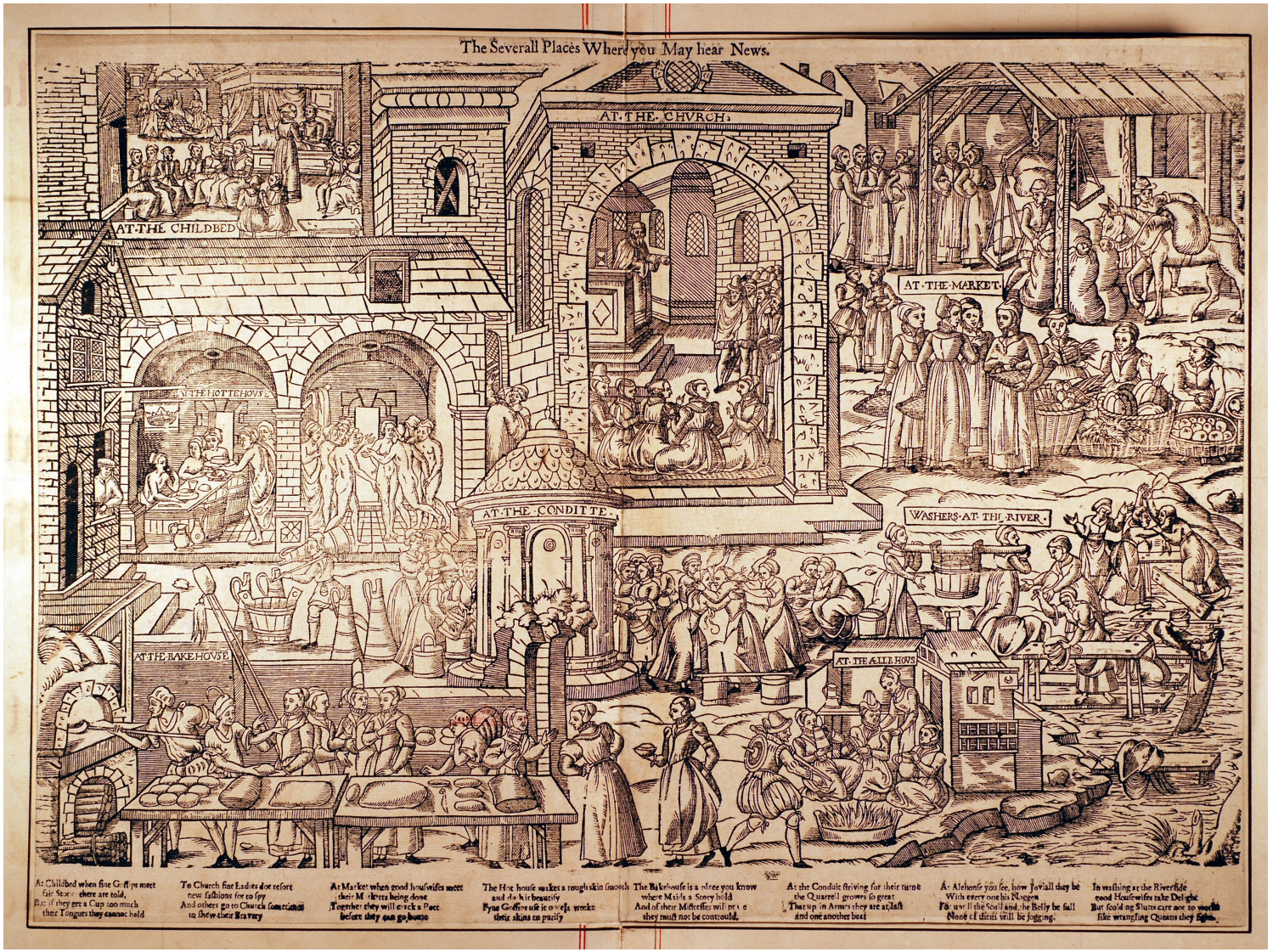
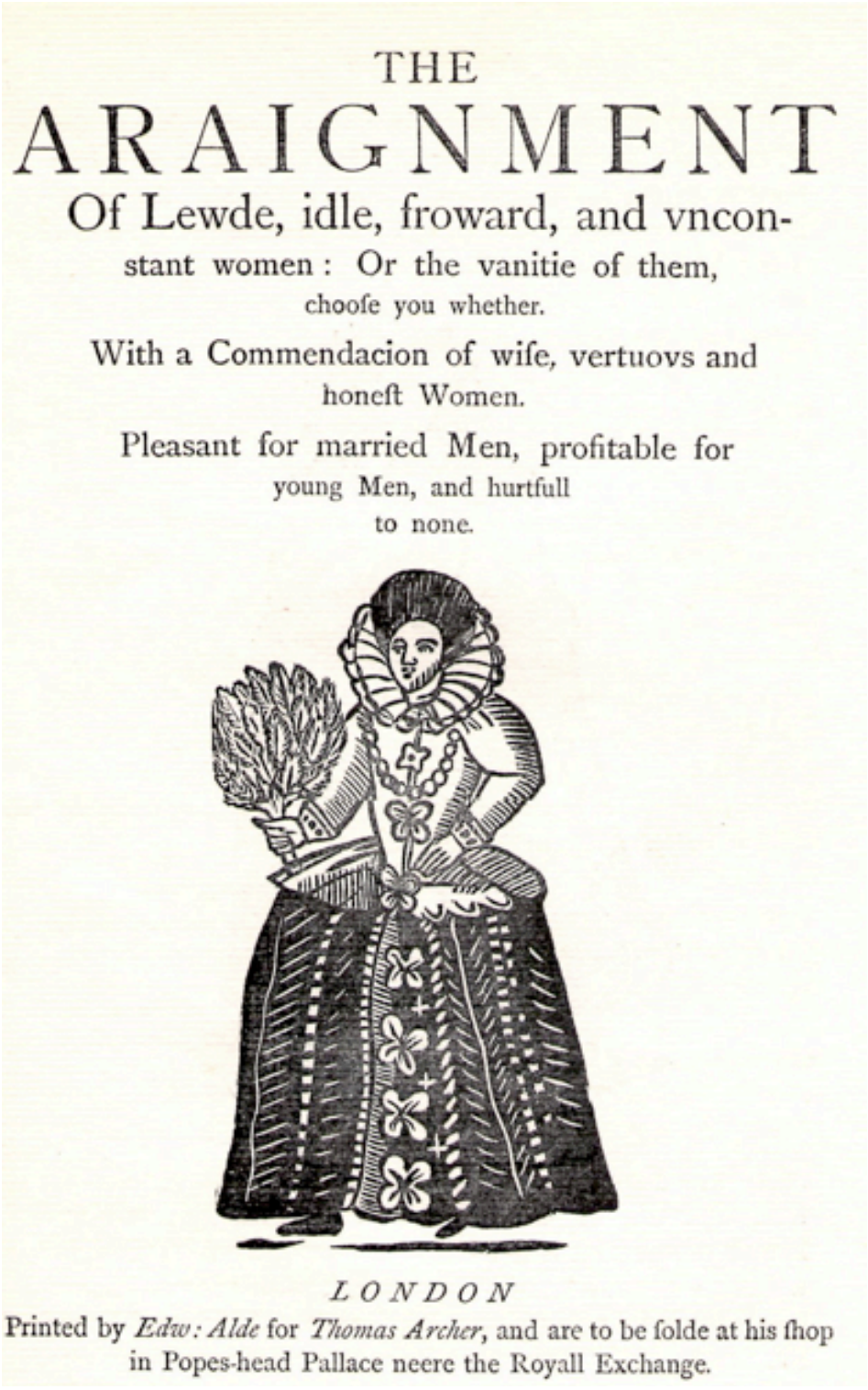


Fig 1. "The Severall Places Where you May hear News," c. 1600. Courtesy of the Pepys Library and used with permission. For interpretation of the references in color in this and all other figures, the reader is referred to the electronic version of this dissertation.

Fig 2. "At the Childbed." Detail from "The Severall Places Where you May hear News."

Fig 3. "At the Hottehovse." Detail from "The Severall Places Where you May hear News."



THE
ARAIGNMENT
Of Lewde, idle, froward, and vncon-
stant women: Or the vanitie of them,
chooſe you whether.
With a Commendacion of wiſe, vertuovs and
honeſt Women.
Pleaſant for married Men, profitable for
young Men, and hurtfull
to none.

LONDON
Printed by *Edw: Alde* for *Thomas Archer*, and are to be ſolde at his ſhop
in Popes-head Pallace neere the Royall Exchange.

Fig 4. 1615 title page of Swetnam's *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Vnconstant Women*. Reproduced in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women (1620)*, ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart.

SWETNAM,

THE

VVoman-hater,

ARRAIGNED BY

WOMEN.

A new Comedie,

Acted at the *Red Bull*, by the late
Queenes Seruants.

LONDON,
Printed for *Richard Meighen*, and are to be ſold at his Shops
at Saint *Clements* Church, ouer-againſt *Eſſex* Houſe, and
at *Weſtminſter* Hall. 1620.

Fig 5. Title Page to 1620 play *Swetnam the Woman-Hater, Arraigned by Women*. Reproduced in *Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women (1620)*, ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart.

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