

“She that hath wit may shift anywhere”:

WOMEN AND WIT IN THOMAS MIDDLETON’S *A MAD WORLD, MY*

MASTERS AND NO WIT NO HELP LIKE A WOMAN’S

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Early Modern Attitudes Towards Women's Intelligence	16
Chapter 2: Living By One's Wits in <i>A Mad World, My Masters</i>	48
Chapter 3: Secret Scheming and a Subversive Suitor in <i>No Wit No Help Like a Woman's</i>	71
Conclusion: Disruptive Potential in the Reformed Female Tricksters	93
Bibliography	105

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers Middleton's female trickster figures using *A Mad World, My Masters*, and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman's* as example plays. I argue that by having his female characters successfully live by their wits, using their wit to manipulate custom in their intrigues, Middleton allots his women, who are not formally educated, a sophisticated understanding of social and gender politics. This level of understanding requires the women to possess a substantial amount of inherent intelligence and reason, offering a view of women's capacity for intelligence that diverges considerably from traditional early modern English views.

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INTRODUCTION

TRICKSTER FIGURES AND THE CONVENTIONS OF CITY COMEDY

In Thomas Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Witgood contemplates, "how should a man live now, that has no living? Hum? Why, are there not a million of men in the world, that only sojourn upon their brain, and make their wits their mercers?" (1.1.23-6). In Middleton's comedies, living by one's wits requires characters to construct and execute schemes, or intrigues, intended to result in economic and social advancement. These schemes generally involve at least one constructed identity or persona which schemers take on in order to manipulate their way into better social and economic standing. As the Mother of the Courtesan Frank Gullman reminds the audience in *A Mad World, My Masters*, living by one's wits and trickery is common in the world: "Every part of the world shoots up daily into more subtlety: the very spider weaves her cauls with more art and cunning to entrap the fly" (1.1.153-5). In the world that the Mother describes, trickery is so common that even "the shallow ploughman can distinguish now / 'Twixt simple truth and a dissembling brow. / Your base mechanic fellow can spy out / A weakness in a lord and learns to flout" (1.1.143-6). While the Mother describes what Robert Bell refers to as a "world of cultural flux, in which established hierarchies are challenged by previously subordinate classes of people" (60), she also reveals that even the simplest of people are aware of the commonness of "subtlety" in the world and can distinguish between "simple truth and a dissembling brow." Therefore, successful trickery takes an exceptional trickster, luck, or an incredibly foolish target when such subtlety is so common. Witgood states that living by one's wits will

invariably require characters to “sojourn upon their brain.” Thus, in order to successfully live by one’s wits in an age so full of “subtlety,” one’s brain must be capable of constructing and executing schemes, which, like the spider seeking to entrap the fly, are full of “more art and cunning” than their target. Many of Middleton’s city comedies contain male and/or female tricksters who use their wit—both as minor and major characters.¹ Richard Horowich observes that Middleton’s comedies depict “a world in which wit is prized above all else” (306). Central to my thesis are the female tricksters in Middleton’s comedies who also “sojourn upon their brain[s]” and live by their wits, outwitting their targets. These female schemers are often important figures in Middleton’s comedies and drive the plot with their involvement in intrigues. Through these female figures Middleton foregrounds his interest in women’s wit, which is further suggested by plays with women and wit in their titles such as *More Dissemblers Besides Women*, *No Wit No Help Like a Woman’s*, and Middleton and Rowley’s collaborative work *Wit at Several Weapons*. In *A Mad World, My Masters* and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman’s* Middleton explores women’s wit in his tricksters more fully than in any of his other city comedies. Therefore, using *A Mad World* and *No Wit* as examples, my argument is that by having his female characters successfully live by their wits, using their wit to manipulate gender and/or social order in their intrigues, Middleton allots his women, who are not formally educated, a sophisticated understanding of social and gender politics. This level of understanding requires the women to possess a substantial amount of inherent intelligence and reason, offering a view of women’s capacity for intelligence that diverges considerably from traditional early modern English views.

Middleton addresses the female trickster's understanding of social and gender politics in many of the major and minor characters of his city comedies; however, these explorations are relatively brief in comparison to the extensive exploration that Middleton conducts in *A Mad World, My Masters* and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman's*. For instance, the Courtesan in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Thomasine in *Michaelmas Term*, Sib Knavesbe in *Anything for a Quiet Life*, and the Wench in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, all to some extent use their wit to manipulate cultural stereotypes and deceive men, revealing intelligence that often rivals men's intelligence.

Jane, the courtesan in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, plays an integral part in the schemes of the play's main trickster, Witgood; her wit, combined with her understanding of the cultural assumptions about women, enables her to successfully perform various roles throughout the play. While it is her co-conspirator, Witgood, whose wit concocts the schemes, Jane uses her own wit to help turn his plans into action: "though you beget, 'tis I must help to breed" (1.1.61). Jane must convincingly adopt the persona of a rich country widow:

What lies within the power of my performance

Shall be commanded of thee

.....

There shall want nothing in me, either in behaviour, discourse, or fashion,
that shall discredit your intended purpose.

I will so artfully disguise my wants,

And set so good a courage on my state,

That I will be believed. (1.1.53-4, 77-82)

Jane's successful performance of the role of the Widow Meddler and her eventual marriage rely on her use of the cultural stereotypes surrounding widows. She claims, "I am a widow and, alas, you know, / Soon overthrown; 'tis a very small thing / That we withstand, our weakness is so great" (3.1.151-3). As Valerie Wayne asserts in her footnotes to the text, "Jane parodies the stereotype of widows as generally weak and vulnerable because of their sexual needs, thereby manipulating Hoard by appearing to confirm to his assumptions of her" (3.1.151-153 n.). Hoard and Jane marry and Jane is ultimately exposed as a whore. However, she repents, renouncing her sins and vowing to be a faithful wife to her husband: "Lo, gentlemen, before you all, / In true reclaimed form I fall. / Henceforth forever I defy / The glances of a sinful eye" (5.2.164-7). As Wayne observes, "if a woman can play the role of rich widow so well that she actually becomes a wife, then the difference between the two collapses and the very men who insisted on it, having taken the one for the other, become the means by which this difference is undone" (376). When considering Jane's previous manipulation of the stereotypes of a widow's lust (a stereotype which serves the interests of men), it is possible to believe that Jane's vow of faithfulness may be intended as a further performance intended to convince her husband of her chastity. Middleton's exploration of Jane's wit, and her successful performances as widow and wife, reveal the potential for women to use the cultural assumptions about women to their own advantages.

Thomasine in *Michaelmas Term* also performs the role of the widow in order to land herself a new husband shortly after her husband Quomodo is said to have died. Thomasine exclaims, "I do account myself the happiest widow that ever counterfeited weeping, in that I

have the leisure now, both to do that gentleman good, and do myself a pleasure; but I must seem like a hanging moon, a little waterish awhile” (4.3.40-44). Thomasine proceeds to send a secret letter to a love interest, and then swoons and plays the part of the mourning widow, after which she quickly marries a new husband, and then learns her old husband was only feigning death. The husband and wife tricksters scheme against one another, but are ultimately reunited by marriage laws. While Middleton has Thomasine scheme, he does not give this character the same degree of attention as some of his other minor female tricksters.

In Middleton and Webster’s *Anything for a Quiet Life*, Sib Knavesbe schemes in order to preserve some semblance of her virtue and her plots involve actions that the play endorses as generally befitting of a man. In the play, Knavesbe agrees to prostitute his own wife Sib to the Lord Beaufort in exchange for “A hundred mark a year” (4.1.214). While she appears to agree with the men’s deal, Sib secretly plots to thwart Lord Beaufort’s attempts to sleep with her:

I’ll go to him

.....

And what I’ll do there, o’ my troth, yet I know not.

Women though puzzled with these subtle deeds,

May, as i’th’ spring, pick physic out of weeds. (2.1.187, 191-3)

Once in the home of Lord Beaufort, Sib pretends to be in love with Selenger, Beaufort’s page, and tells Beaufort she will only sleep with him after she has slept with his page.

Beaufort is offended at the thought of enjoying Sib’s company second and decides not to follow through with his deal with her husband. Sib explains to the audience, “This trick hath

kept mine honesty secure. / Best soldiers use policy. The lion's skin / Becomes not the body when 'tis too great, / But then the fox's may sit close and neat" (3.1.168-71). Sib equates herself with a soldier who uses "policy," which the footnotes define as dissimulation (3.1.168-71 n.). The best of soldiers are, according to Sib, those who are able to use their wit to deceive and secretly plot, rather than those who use outright brute strength. In the play's conclusion Middleton and Webster uphold the similarities between Sib Knavesbe and men by aligning her with Cressingham and George Camlet, the two other husbands in the play. In the final scene Knavesbe kneels and pledges obedience to his wife, imitating the language and actions of two other wives who pledge obedience to their husbands in the same scene. In this play, the female trickster is responsible for using her wit to restore order and dissolve the chaos constructed by men.

While the Country Wench in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* only has a brief appearance on the stage, her trickery leaves the lasting impression that even uneducated women can possess and use the type of wit necessary to deceive men. The Wench enters the scene carrying a basket with a loin of mutton, a prohibited item during the period of Lent in which the play takes place. The Wench encounters two Promoters who discover the loin of mutton and insist on confiscating it. She begs them to let her go because she is "a poor servant" who is bringing the mutton to her wealthy master:

O, you shall undo me, sir!

'Tis for a wealthy gentlewoman that takes physic, sir;

The doctor does allow my mistress mutton

.....

I shall bring my master to you; he shall show you
 True authority from the higher powers,
 And I'll run every foot. (2.2.144, 146-52)

Upon the Wench's insistence, the Promoters swear to keep the basket until her return with her master: "will you swear then to me / To keep it till I come?" (2.2.155-6). Once the Wench departs the Promoters discover a baby beneath the loin of mutton and realize that they have been tricked into swearing to care for the Wench's baby:

FIRST PROMOTER. The quean made us swear to keep it too.
 SECOND PROMOTER. We might leave it else. (2.2.170-1)

While this woman appeals to the authority of men (her master and the Promoters), it is on her authority that the child is left in the care of the Promoters. Moreover, without her wit, the Wench would be stuck with an illegitimate child to raise, reducing her own chances of having any legitimate marital relationship in the future.

As this selection of female tricksters reveals, Middleton is very interested in female tricksters. However briefly, in each of the plays summarized above, Middleton explores the quality, effects, and superiority of women's wit, specifically through their understanding of their cultural positions as women. However, *No Wit No Help like a Woman's* and *A Mad World, My Masters*, Middleton's scheming women, Kate Low-water and Frank Gullman, are, to use William Dynes' term, truly "protean" tricksters (371), not only donning disguises in their schemes, but convincingly adopting whole new personas, incorporating the appropriate signifiers of gender and/or social rank in their disguises so that they are entirely believable in their new roles. In the process of their deceptions, they outwit nearly everyone

around them, including the male tricksters in the plays. Middleton's more extensive examination of these two female tricksters, their methods of deception, and the outcomes of their schemes, ultimately reveals significant intelligence in women on a much larger scale than in any of his other city comedies.

Tricksters are recurring figures in early modern comedies and generally disguise their voices, bodies, or genders to "take advantage of what they see as a social mobility limited only by their wit and creativity" (Dynes 366). William Dynes describes the main characteristics of the trickster predominant in Jacobean comedies as "He or she is intelligent, although usually displaying that intelligence as craft or guile, and demonstrably capable of out-thinking most of the other characters in the play. With the exercise of this intelligence comes the trickster's ability to motivate much of the action of the play . . . and do so for private reasons" (366). This trickster of the seventeenth century stage emerged during the 1590s from a combination of the "crafty servant" of Roman New Comedy and the figure of the "Vice" of the English morality play" (366).² Renaissance dramatists combined these two traditions and incorporated a new element: "an unrelenting distrust of the economic imperatives by which society was organized. These intriguers operate for personal reasons, but their actions have social ramifications that their forebears rarely demonstrated" (366). The ambitious trickster ultimately challenges the "customs and beliefs that bind together the community of the play" (367). Dynes observes that through the trickster, the "most fundamental relationships—between parents and children, husbands and wives, merchants and customers—are examined, threatened, and ultimately healed" (367). In Middleton's plays, relationships are often presented as "healed" by the restoration of order in the

plot—where the trickster returns to the social position assigned to him or her at the beginning of the play, or is contained within a new social position, usually through marriage, in the play’s conclusion. In addition to exploring the “fundamental relationships” listed above, many of Middleton’s female tricksters also challenge the notion of fixed social and gender identities; these tricksters recognize that inherent nature is often confused with custom, and are able to manipulate this assumption for their own ends, thereby challenging the ways in which people identified themselves and others in the period. The tensions between fixed and fluid identity were a part of what Jean-Christophe Agnew describes as the early modern period’s “crisis of representation” (97). Agnew explains that “beneath all the pseudoscientific anatomies and inventories of the self, the popular handbooks acknowledged the onset of a national, if not global, crisis of representation, one wherein traditional social signs and symbols had metamorphosed into detached and manipulable commodities” (97). Playwrights, Agnew argues, further add to this crisis of representation because they “seize upon the problem of social representation and misrepresentation as the theme and touchstone of their drama” (97). Dynes also acknowledges that in the plays of the period, “the trickster is the character most able to revel in the fluidity of identity implied by the metamorphosis Agnew describes” (366). Dynes calls the Jacobean trickster a “protean man” taken to extremes to challenge “the audience’s confidence in an orderly world” (371). As Dynes mentions, Jacobean tricksters are able to outthink their targets, and Middleton’s female tricksters are no exception. Frank Gullman and Kate Low-water are able to outthink not only their targets, but also the male tricksters that Middleton sets in direct opposition to the female tricksters, suggesting that on some level the female tricksters are capable of a

stronger wit and intellect than their male counterparts, an idea which departs from traditional attitudes toward women's intelligence.

Darryll Grantley, examining the type of wit found in intriguers, or tricksters, in early modern drama, aims to distinguish the different forms of wit present in tricksters on the early modern stage, yet his analysis is limited to male characters. Grantley examines scheming figures in early modern drama and identifies the traditional views of the relationship between intelligence, wit, and social status in early modern England. His investigations conclude that in most works of early modern drama, wit differs between the classes (168). According to Grantley's observations, "the intelligence of the low-born 'secular wits' is essentially pragmatic, and even at times (especially where intrigue is involved) cunning" (169). Grantley accepts the definition of "secular wit" initially mentioned in Thomas Nashe's prefatory letter to Robert Greene's *Menaphon* (1589) as a general definition of secular wit in lower born characters in early modern English drama. Nashe states " ' Oft haue I obserued what I now set downe: a secular (i.e. uneducated) wit that hath liued all days of his life by What doe you lacke?'" (qtd. in Grantley 169). Secular wit, according to Nashe, is uneducated and the use of this wit is governed and limited by the spirit of "what doe you lacke?" (in other words, one uses wit to achieve what one lacks). In contrast, a more developed wit is possible in men of a higher social rank who have been privileged with a theoretical education. Grantley observes that in educated intriguers, the closest resemblance to secular wit is "the *savoir faire* born of a developed intelligence, involving a practical capacity to plot and manipulate, and to understand social politics. However, in elite intriguers, this forms part of an urbane and commanding social identity; knowingness is represented as an

appropriate quality of the gentle town wit” (179). In his investigations of wit Grantley reduces his analysis to these two types of wit (“secular” and a more educated formal wit), and as a result, Grantley fails to account for lower born characters who are uneducated, yet are granted qualities befitting his definitions of the elite intriguers. For instance, in *A Mad World, My Masters*, the Courtesan is clearly a lower born character and has not been formally educated. While she does use her wit to resolve the issue of “what doe you lacke,” as will be examined later in this thesis, the Courtesan does not merely wish to gain tangible possessions such as money, as is generally the case for uneducated or secular wits, but she also strives for honour and virtue. In addition, Grantley’s definitions of elite intriguer qualities of “knowingness” and capacity to plot and manipulate are precisely the qualities that Middleton attributes to his scheming women. Knowingness, or understanding is what enables the women to manipulate social hierarchies and gender stereotypes to achieve what they lack.

Critics analyzing female tricksters in Middleton’s comedies have tended to focus on scheming and disguise as a means of economic gain. For these critics, the characters are more of a convention—a means to an end—to point out a greater issue of early modern economic anxieties. Aaron Kitch’s article, “The Character of Credit and the Problem of Belief in Middleton’s City Comedies” reveals that it is the “self-conscious deceivers who achieve credit, measured less by their honesty or their ability to repay outstanding debt than by their potential to create believable fictions around themselves” (403). Referring to the “double meaning of credit as both an economic relationship and a form of belief,” Kitch observes that characters in a play like *A Mad World* suggest to the audience “an opportunity

to cultivate personas necessary for success in financial transactions” (405). Kitch’s argument focuses on financial transactions. For instance, Kitch states that *A Mad World* showcases “characters who create believable fictions in order to survive in an expanding credit economy in early modern England (404). Kitch’s argument that “Middleton's plays examine some of the many ways that commercial exchange shapes subjectivity” is indeed valid (411). However, this article does not examine the kind of knowledge that enables the schemers to so successfully take on believable personas, nor does it explore what it is about their knowledge or understanding of the personas that they become that allows them to convince others of their credibility. On the topic of women’s relationship to the economy, Jean Howard argues that “the genre of city comedy focused on the figure of woman and the language of gender to express and manage the anxieties occasioned by new market practices” (164). Howard states that women in the comedies represent “over-stimulated sexual desire and the vendibility of everything, including sex,” and embody the problems of and solutions to the burgeoning marketplace (164). While Howard asserts that gendered language was used to “express and manage the anxieties of a commercializing culture,” for instance characterizing consumer desire as feminine (173), she only examines how playwrights use female gender as a symbol of the economy, but not how they may address gender as a construct of the society.

Theodore Leinwand recognizes that the playwrights of city comedy, including Middleton, use independent female characters on the stage to explore the cultural assumptions surrounding women. Leinwand examines the independent woman of city comedy, who is “witty, able and self-sufficient” (148), but not necessarily a female trickster

outwitting other men and women in the play. The independent woman Leinwand describes is usually a “brainchild of the stage gallant or stage merchant” and most importantly, this new figure represents a “role model that was not utterly contingent on men” (148). Leinwand’s analysis of the independent woman is applicable to Middleton’s particular brand of scheming women, who are also independent, witty, and influential in the plot. Moreover, Leinwand’s descriptions of independent women’s use of role-play relate to Middleton’s scheming women because they employ their wits in disguises—performing various stereotypical women’s roles—in order to outwit their targets. Leinwand explains that for women, the term “role” was the “alternative structuring principle” that governed the way women were viewed both in culture and in representations on the stage: “Women were anatomized as virgins wives, widows, and whores. And each role had economic, moral, and social implications” (140). Leinwand observes,

When the stage woman confirms her power and her own needs, she simultaneously breaks free of conventional whore/virgin typecasting and acquires enough security to play the same roles that were formerly imposed on her. Middleton’s or Jonson’s women are not Shakespearian heroines; but they do dramatize the constrained roles made available to them by male typecasters. (140)

Middleton’s trickster women, who are independently living by their wits, recognize the conventional typecasting imposed by culture and are able to successfully perform different typecast roles in their schemes. As a result, many of these tricksters elude classification in the plays’ conclusions. However, in Leinwand’s analysis, Kate Low-water and Frank Gullman do not elude classification and are examined under separate headings as “City

Wives”, and “Plain Punks,” respectively. Since the independent women that Leinwand describes are liminal figures able to exist on the margins of culture because they can perform various typecast roles, it would be better to examine them without regrouping them into the role of wife, maid, widow, or whore in which they begin the play. For instance, Leinwand says of the scheming city whore, “when she manipulates appearances she exercises the unique power available to her. . . . she measures the deludedness (and the delusions) of those before whom she plays. The actor on the stage and the whore in the comedy gauge the follies, the fears, and the desires of their respective audiences” (171). Leinwand’s descriptions of the conventions of the whore of city comedy are actually more applicable, and appropriately titled, under a new heading—female trickster—because, especially in the case of Middleton’s city comedies, they apply to scheming female characters in varying estates of life—from wench to wife.

The Wench’s first lines in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* echo the underlying tensions that surround Frank Gullman’s and Kate Low-water’s exceptional wit in *A Mad World, My Masters* and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman’s*. In an aside, the Wench states that women with substantial wit are able to achieve more than they are allotted by their culture, “Women had need of wit, if they’ll shift here, / And she that hath wit may shift anywhere” (2.2.137-8). According to the *OED*, in these lines the term shift means, “To manage to effect one’s purposes, or to make a living, by one’s own devices; to succeed, get on (well or ill)” (Shift, n.I.5a.). An additional definition applicable to these lines is “To employ shifts or evasions; to practise or use indirect methods; to practise or live by fraud, or temporary expedients” (*OED* Shift, n.I.6). As the Wench explains, in order to be able to successfully live by deception and

trickery (“shift here”) they must have substantial wit. Those women that are capable of that form of wit may “shift” anywhere, suggesting that they may employ their wits in any location, and use their wit to shift into different economic or social positions otherwise out of their reach. In *A Mad World, My Masters* and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman’s*, it is precisely this “shift[ing]” that Middleton foregrounds in his female tricksters Kate Lowwater and Frank Gullman, revealing a more thorough exploration of women’s intelligence through their exceptional wit than in any of his other comedies.

CHAPTER 1

I. EARLY MODERN ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S INTELLIGENCE

This chapter will provide a general overview of the early modern debate about the nature of women's intelligence in order to contextualize later chapters on the particular brand of wit employed by many of Thomas Middleton's witty women. The overview will primarily centre on print sources written, or still circulating, during Middleton's lifetime (1580 to 1627). Women's wit plays a significant, though often overlooked, role in the debates about women's supposed mentally and physically inferior status in early modern culture. Defined by both sex and gender, wit is directly related to conceptions of women's capacity for intelligence. While there are no early modern texts that deal specifically with women's wit, references to women's wit in documents on other subjects reveal significant details about both the authors' own positions on women's intelligence, and the larger discourse on women's capacity for intelligence. Wit, often mentioned in drama, literature, and culture in early modern England, has definitions ranging from practical or shallow cleverness and ingenuity, to "the faculty of thinking and reasoning in general; mental capacity, understanding, intellect, reason" (*OED* "Wit" n. 2a.arch). This last broad definition encompasses many other terms, namely reason, intellect, and mental capacity. Most early modern discussions about women's capacity for wit inevitably end up as discussions of women's capacity for intelligence. In general, those authors who view women as capable of intelligence tend to believe women may possess a well developed wit that is the result of reasoned thinking. For those authors who believe women have a lesser capacity for intelligence than men, wit remains defined as a shallow form of cleverness; an instinctive

and reactionary response rather than a reasoned one.

Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), an influential manual reprinted throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contains a dialogue that aptly encapsulates the debate about women's capacity for intelligence, a point of contestation that carries throughout the early modern period. In the text, Lord Julian is a fierce advocate for women and disputes the traditional misogynist views presented by Lord Gasparo Pallavicino. Lord Gasparo claims women and men are physically and mentally unequal: "nature, because she is always set and bent to make things most perfect, if she could, would continually bring forth men, and when a woman is borne, it is a slacknesse or default of nature, and contrarie to that she would doe" (196). Therefore, women are inherently flawed from creation, an Aristotelian view widely accepted by Renaissance culture prior to the seventeenth century (Maclean 33). As flawed beings, women cannot be elevated to equal status with men because doing so would disrupt and subvert the natural order of the world. Lord Julian argues that women cannot be created imperfect beings because, as members of the same species, they must be created equally perfect:

according to the truth, that substance in what ever thing it be, can not receive into it more or less: for as no stone can bee more perfectly a stone than an other, as touching the being of a stone: nor one blocke more perfectly a blocke, than an other: no more can one man be more perfectly a man than an other: and consequently the male kinde shall not be more perfect, than the female, as touching his formall substance, for both the one and the other is conteined under the Species of Homo, and that wherein they differ is an

Accidentall matter and no Essentiall. (Castiglione 197)

For Lord Julian, since women are fundamentally equal beings to men, their minds are formed with equal capacity for knowledge: “whatever things men can understand, the selfe same can women understand also: and where it pearceth the capacitie of the one, it may in likewise pearce the others” (197). As Constance Jordan remarks, “the entire exchange has revealed that even within the work of a single author the idea of woman is controversial. And therefore, authorities, insofar as they are supposed to provide certain and definitive truths, are not invariably authoritative” (80). Castiglione’s debate about women’s equality with men in body and mind rages on in print sources throughout the remainder of the Renaissance. As Hilda Smith points out, “women, or ‘woman’ to use language more familiar to sixteenth and seventeenth century authors, composed a group that early modern writers felt obliged both to define and to advise. Women existed more clearly as a category in the minds of Renaissance authors than as disparate individuals” (9). Traditional attitudes toward the status of women, predominant in published religious, legal, and medical discourses, tended to figure women as mentally and physically inferior by nature and thus the “weaker vessel” (Ostovich 47). Religion and theology were central factors affecting women’s cultural, public, and individual identities in early modern England. As Kate Aughterson observes, “the emphasis on the New Testament, particularly the Pauline epistles . . . advocated a spiritual life and spiritual equality between men and women, both in the eyes of God and in terms of their eventual salvation. But depending on the exegesis of preachers or commentators, they also advocated womanly submission and bodily inferiority” (9). Women’s bodily inferiority was also combined with mental inferiority. In religious doctrine,

women were considered the temptation-prone daughters of Eve and expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient, advised by fathers, husbands, and pastors. In both Canon and Civil Law women were branded “ ‘lunata levitas’, ‘inconstantia metis’ and ‘consilii incertitude et imbecillitas,’” revealing their presumed mental and physical inferiority (Maclean 72). In medicine, the prevailing belief was that women’s psychological states were mirrored by their physical states; they were considered to be both mentally and physically weaker than their male counterparts (Maclean 42). Conduct literature also maintained women’s natural inferiority in both body and mind and encouraged women to moderate their passions to be obedient daughters and wives.

The accession of Elizabeth I drew even more attention to the debates concerning women’s intellectual capacity. As Kate Aughterson observes, “the most public political debate about women during the Renaissance was the legal and constitutional debate about women monarchs” (133). Pamela Benson explains, “to turn from the popular defense of women to the defense of rule by women during the reign of Elizabeth I is to turn from jest and play and a very traditional notion of woman to deepest seriousness in tone and in method of presentation and a confrontation with the independent woman of humanist thought” (231). Those arguing against women’s rule argued that women were inherently less capable of rule because of their intellectual and physical failings. Calvinist John Knox, who openly argued against Mary Queen of Scots’ ascension, also wrote *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous regiment of women* (1558), which was written to be a part of the Scottish debate about women rulers, and simultaneously intended to discredit Queen Mary in England (Aughterson 138). The text, which challenges a woman’s inherent and

social right to rule, was published shortly before Elizabeth I ascended the throne in England. In his controversial tract, Knox claims, “To promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion or empire aboue any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to nature, contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reueled will and approued ordinance, and finallie it is the subuersion of good order, of all equitie and iustice” (9). For Knox, women’s rule is “a thing repugnant to nature” because of the inherent “imperfections of women, of the naturall weaknes, and inordinate appetites” (9, 12). Women are considered inherently inferior to men: “Nature I say, doth paynt them further to be weake, fraile, im[p]acient, feble and foolishe: and experience hath declared them to be vnconstant, variable, cruell and lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment” (10). Knox further continues that compared to men’s ability to rule wisely, in women “their sight in ciuile regiment, is but blindnes: their strength, weaknes: their counsel, foolishnes: and iudgement, phrensie, if it be rightlie considered” (10). However, Knox allows that some women may be specially ordained by God the “singular priuiledge . . . [to be] exempted from the common ranke of women” to rule for “certain causes knowen onlie to him selfe” (9-10). As Paula Benson illuminates, “the Queen’s sex was perceived as a weakness in need of defense throughout most of her reign and, even when no written attack on her right to rule was made or when the attack was aimed not at herself but at Mary Stuart, supporters from various parties produced defenses in her right” (231-2).

After Elizabeth I was crowned Queen, John Aylmer published *An Harborow for Faithful and True Subjects* (1559), a defence of women’s right to rule, which refutes many of Knox’s arguments against women’s inability to rule. Aylmer notably argues against

Knox's assertion that it is against nature for women to rule. He refutes Knox's belief in natural law as a "hierarchy of absolutes" (Aughterson 134) in which women are incapable of authority over man, and instead suggests that natural law exists on a "continuum" (134). Aylmer believes that Knox takes nature to encompass too much: "You take this word nature too largely, you deceive yourself wittingly, thinking that because it is not so convenient, so profitable, or meet, therefore it is unnatural. But that is too large a scope (142). In order to explain Knox's inaccurate definitions of natural law, Aylmer draws the following comparisons:

Wherefore that we may understand how far you stretch this word nature, I will ask you whether you take it as it is for the most part; or all together, that is universal. If you take it as it is in order of nature, for the most part (as it is natural for an old man to have white hairs in his age, or for a woman to bring forth one child at a burden) and then reason is against nature for an old man to have black hairs, or against nature for a woman to bring forth two children or three at a burden: no man would allow your reasoning. For though one be according to nature as it is for the most part, yet it is not the other, that happeneth sometime, utterly against nature. In like manner, though it be for the most part seen that men and not women do rule commonwealths, yet when it happeneth sometime by the ordinance of God and course of inheritance that they bear rule, it is not to be concluded that it repugneth against nature. (qtd. in Aughterson 141-2)

Kate Aughterson accurately observes that Aylmer rejects Aristotle's hierarchical description

of natural law in which woman is born inherently inferior to men, and “on the basis of psychological inferiority, is denied rights and placed under male subjection” (134). While Aylmer accords women a theoretical natural equality with men, he still maintains that the cases in which women do rule are select, and ordained by God as exceptions, rather than a regular occurrence (140). In most of these exceptional cases willed by God, women inherit the right to rule and so Aylmer asks, “if nature hath given it them by birth: how dare we pull it from them by violence? If God hath called them to it either to save or to spill, why should we repine at that which is God’s will and order? If he able women, shall we unable them?” (140-1). Aylmer “initiates a public political discourse in which women (or one woman) are seen to have political and legal rights. Nevertheless, he does so by reinstating and reasserting the dichotomy of the ordinary weak woman (‘feeble in body’ and politically subject to a husband) and the extraordinary woman, fit for magistracy through the word of God” (Aughterson 133). Moreover, by emphasizing that women, while theoretically equal to men, rule far less frequently than they are ruled, Aylmer reinforces the traditional attitudes of women’s inferior cultural status.

Traditional attitudes towards women’s intellectual capacity have grounds in the scientific view of women as the biologically inferior sex. The medical theories circulating in early modern England reveal the tendencies to equate biological difference with inferior and superior status. Medical documents in the sixteenth century relied on Aristotle’s theories on sexual difference in *De Generatione Animalium*. Thomas Laqueur explains that Aristotle believes that male and female are two separate sexes and that each body is adapted for different functions (28). For reproduction, the male is the immaterial cause of life: “To

Aristotle being male meant the capacity to supply the sensitive soul without which ‘it is impossible for face, hand, flesh, or any other part to exist’ . . . One sex was able to concoct food to its highest, life-engendering stage, into true sperma; the other was not” (30). Laqueur observes, “what we would take to be ideologically charged social constructions of gender—that males are active and females passive, males contribute the form and females the matter to generation—were for Aristotle indubitable facts, ‘natural truths’” (28). Some of these “natural truths” referred directly to women’s mental faculties. According to Aristotle, women’s physical bodies directly affect their psychological states. Aristotle explains,

in all general in which the distinction of male and female is found, Nature makes a similar distinction in the mental characteristics of the sexes [. . .] the female is less spirited than the male, . . . softer in disposition, more mischievous, less simple, more impulsive, and more attentive to the nurture of the young . . . Hence woman is more compassionate than man, more easily moved to tears, at the same time more jealous, more querulous, more apt to scold and to strike. She is, furthermore, more prone to despondency and less hopeful than man, more void of shame or self-respect, more false of speech, more deceptive, and of more retentive memory. She is also more wakeful, more shrinking, more difficult to rouse to action, and requires a smaller quantity of nutriment.” (qtd. in Maclean 42)

However, by the seventeenth century, doctors reject Aristotle’s theory of women as underdeveloped men in favour of the Galenic model, on the grounds that both sexes are required for reproduction, and therefore it is biologically necessary for male and female

organs to be physiologically different (33).

The Galenic “one-sex body” model, a dominant biological model during the early modern period, depicted women as inverted men (Laqueur 26). Thomas Laqueur describes Galen’s argument: “you could not find in a single male part left over that had not simply changed its position’(Galen). Instead of being divided by their reproductive anatomies, the sexes are linked by a common one. Women, in other words, are inverted They have exactly the same organs but in exactly the wrong places” (26). However, as Laqueur notes, it is important to be aware that while the one-sex model comprised both male and female,

in a public world that was overwhelmingly male, the one-sex model displayed what was already massively evident in culture more generally: man is the measure of all things, and woman does not exist as an ontologically distinct category. Not all males are masculine, potent, honourable, or hold power, and some women exceed men in each of these categories. But the standard of the human body and its representations is the male body. (62)

Furthermore, Galenic humoral theory claimed that the four humors (hot, dry, moist and cold) in the body defined both gender and temperament: “women’s wetter, colder bodies made them more melancholy, and men’s hotter, drier ones made them more prone to anger” (Gowing 2). Therefore, although male and female physical differences were now considered equally biologically developed, Aristotle’s belief that women and men’s physiological differences were mirrored in their psychological differences continued to be upheld because of the humoral theories. For instance, some early modern medical documents specifically blame the uterus and the ovaries for weakened rationality, and increased incidence of

extreme passions in women (Maclean 42). These psychological implications inevitably affect the cultural status of woman. As Gail Kern Paster argues, “humoral theory was instrumental in the production and maintenance of gender and class difference” (7). Moreover, women’s supposed weaker emotional and mental states make them less rational and more reactionary, excluding them from the public sphere and relegating them to the domestic one.

Critics such as Janet Adelman believe that the dominance of the one-sex model has been over-emphasized.³ Adelman suggests that “the model may not in fact be entirely historically accurate, or not accurate in quite the hegemonic way that its proponents suppose” (25). Adelman asserts that it is difficult to confirm that “our notions of our bodies are more indebted to medicine and science, than, say, to our religious doctrine or to all the cultural and individual practices—and accompanying psychic fantasies—that teach us who we are in a bodily sense from birth onward” (25). While Adelman questions the hegemony of the one-sex model, citing a lack of evidence, she does agree that “there’s no question that the medical discourses assumed certain similarities between male and female bodies . . . There’s also little question that the male body remains the gold standard, that against which the female must be defined” (26).

However, even if the one-sex model was not the dominant theory during the seventeenth century, the abundant references to gender distinctions between male and female in various early modern sources indicate that these were still categories that were associated with nature. Laqueur refers to gender distinctions as “social sexes” (134). He asserts that there were “at least two social sexes with radically different rights and obligations, somehow

corresponding to ranges or bands, social or biological” (134). These sexes “could be viewed as foundational or primary, although gender divisions—the categories of social sex—were certainly construed as natural” (134). The one-sex model dominating the medical field made this tendency to equate gender and sex all the more possible. In fact, Thomas Laqueur reveals that “in the world of one-sex, it was precisely when talk seemed to be most directly about the biology of two sexes that it was most embedded in the politics of gender, in culture. To be a man or woman was to hold a special rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other or two incommensurable sexes” (8). Therefore, “what we call sex and gender are in the Renaissance bound up in a circle of meanings from which escape to a supposed biological substratum is impossible” (128). Laqueur describes the “corporeal theatrics of a world where at least two genders correspond to but one sex, where the boundaries between male and female are of degree and not of kind, and where the reproductive organs are but one sign among many of the body’s place in a cosmic and cultural order that transcends biology” (25). Kate Aughterson asserts that the prevailing early modern medical theories “privilege gender (that is, the characteristics associated culturally and socially with a biological sex), over biological sex. The humours are descriptions of socialised characteristics, which were sexualised” (43). This naturalization of socialised characteristics has implications for the definitions of women’s intelligence because the definitions are clearly the result of the combined cultural and biological perceptions of women as less rational and subject to their passions. Writers define wit by sexualizing gender; they attribute wit innate characteristics that are considered the result of natural differences in sex, when they are in actuality a cultural construction.

While traditional views of women's wit circulating in early modern culture are often inconsistent and overlapping, women's wit is generally conceived of as a shallow cleverness and an instinctive response that is ruled by the passions rather than ruled by reason because women are considered to have a weak intellectual capacity and to possess little wisdom. Traditional attitudes toward men's wit reveal that men are supposedly more inclined to possess a stronger potential for intelligence (which is why they are allowed more education than women). Furthermore, because men have a potentially developed and educated intellect, men are also considered to be capable of possessing a form of wit that is derived from wisdom. In contrast, women's wit is traditionally believed to be an undeveloped and instinctual response because of their inferior intellectual capacity, and is often depicted as diametrically opposed to wisdom.

An extreme and misogynist view of a women's intelligence is that of Joseph Swetnam, author of *The Arraignment of Lewde, Idle, Forward and Unconstant Women: Or the Vanitie of Them, Choose You Whether* (1616), who conceives of female wit as shallow craftiness. He claims, "they haue wit, but it is all in craft" (18). Swetnam's definition of wit in women is craftiness devoid of reason, and therefore of wisdom. He claims, "they are always tempering their wits, as Fiddlers do their strings, who wrest them so high, that many times they stretch them beyond time, tune, and reason" (19). For Swetnam, women's wit is superficial, or shallow, and he compares it to women's looks: "for the most part thou shalt find them dissembling in their deeds, and in all their actions subtill and dangerous for men to deale withal: their faces are lures, their beauties are baytes, their looks are nettes, and their wordes charmes, and all to bring men to ruine" (5). Swetnam's crude debasement of women

suggests that women's wit is stretched beyond what they are capable of, so it should be ineffective if "stretched beyond time, tune, and reason" (19). Swetnam claims women's wit is superficial since they cannot possess wit resulting from reason. However, Swetnam contradicts himself because while he claims women's wit to be lacking reason he is still threatened by their crafty wit ("their actions subtill and dangerous").

In many texts that deal with women's intelligence the term wit is synonymous with intelligence, and the quality of this wit cannot be judged without putting gender into the equation. For instance, Thomas Elyot's *The Defence of Good Women*, although written in 1538, considerably earlier than the years this project focuses on, draws an explicit relationship between the quality of a woman's wit and her gender, a representation of traditional attitudes toward women's capacity for intelligence that is still valid at the turn of the seventeenth century. In the text, two gentleman, Caninius and Candidus, debate the nature of women. As Elyot states, "Caninius, like a cur, at women's conditions is always barking, but Candidus, which may be interpreted, benign or gentle, judgeth ever well, and reproveth but seldom" (F2r). On the subject of a woman's wit Caninius argues,

The wit that they have is not substantial but apish, never flourishing but in ungraciousness, or in trimming themselves with pretty devices, or excusing their faults with unstudied answers, or in pretty mocks or scornful dalliance, or to invent mischiefs to satiate their malice . . . In the parts of wisdom and civil policy, they be founden unapt and have little capacity. (F15r-16v)

Perhaps unintentionally, Caninius' descriptions of wit differentiate it by gender. Women's wit is gendered because the wit is silly or trifling; it is responsible for those feminine wiles,

mischievous, and pretty mocks generally attributed by early modern culture to the female gender. Furthermore, by gendering wit, Caninius also sexualizes this wit—making women’s weaker wit a natural quality specifically found in women—and insinuates that it is inferior to men’s wit because women’s witty responses are “unstudied answers” and therefore not well thought out, as women do not have the innate capacity for possessing wisdom necessary for a substantial wit. The Anglican sermon, *A Homily on the State of Matrimony* (1562), reprinted over forty times before the mid-seventeenth century, also contains a clear distinction between male and female intelligence based on gender stereotypes: “the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind; therefore, they [women] be the sooner disquieted, and they be the more prone to weak affections and dispositions of the mind, more than men be; and lighter they be, and more vain in their fantasies and opinions” (qtd. in Dolan 174).

For some authors, such as William Heale, William Whately, and Richard Mulcaster, women’s wit is explicitly compared, and opposed, to men’s wisdom, revealing a belief that women are unable to think in the same way as men. William Heale’s *An Apologie for Women* (1609), intended to be a defense of women, also describes wit as an innate difference between the sexes. In his description of the nature of men and women, Heale states,

wherefore they were made both like, & yet dislike. Like in specifical nature, their bodies of the like feature, their soules of the same essence. Dislike in the Individual, the one hotter and drier, th’other colder & moister . . . The one stronger, the other weaker . . . The one valiant & laborious in the fields; the other milde and dilige[n]t within the doores. . . .The one more deeply wise, the

other of a more pregnant wit. (23)

When Heale refers to how humankind is of one species, yet “dislike in the Individual,” what he really means is dissimilarity between man and woman. The final line differentiates between male and female intelligence. For women, having a pregnant wit is comparable to being deeply wise in men. Pregnant wit is defined in the OED as “quick, [or] sharp” (“Pregnant wit” adj. and n. 2.a.). If quick wit is women’s equivalent to being deeply wise, then it is most likely to be an inherently shallow wit (quick and reactionary) rather than a deeper and well developed wit derived from wisdom, because according to Heale’s definition, women have less capacity for wisdom. Similar to Heale’s description of a woman’s pregnant wit as opposed to man’s wisdom, in other texts women’s wit is depicted as an innate instinctive response opposed to wisdom. In his sermon, *A Bride-Bush*, Puritan preacher William Whately describes female wit as a shallow cleverness, for “there is suddenesse of wit and scarcity of wisdom (as in most of this sex comparatiuely)” (41). For Whately, women’s wit is shallow and instinctive because women are not ruled by reason and wisdom. In contrast, wisdom is the first of three principal virtues that men use to rule both in government and in the “domestical kingdome” (22). Whately’s descriptions of wit suggest that women have a shallow intellectual capacity that prevents them from being capable of wisdom, whereas men have a well developed intellect that enables them to rule with wisdom. Protestant humanist Richard Mulcaster’s *Positions* (1581), a text outlining a curriculum for the education of young boys, grants that as rational beings, women have the capacity for learning and intelligence, yet he includes only one chapter (of forty five chapters) on the education of women (Smith 20). As Hilda Smith observes, “Mulcaster

contended that most attention should go to males as learning was ‘first framed for their use and most properly belonging to them.’ Women should not be omitted, but responsibility for educating them evolved ‘only out of courtesy and kindness’” (20). Similarly to Heale and Whately, Mulcaster also describes quick-wittedness as a shallow quality prevalent in the female gender. However, in Mulcaster’s text, this wit can be present in both men and women who are lacking extensive learning:

though girls seem commonly to have a quicker ripening wit than boys have, for all that seeming, yet it is not so. Their natural weakness which cannot hold long, delivers very soon . . . Besides their brains be not so much charged, neither with weight nor with multitude of matters, as boys’ heads be: and therefore like empty casks they make the greater noise. As those men which seem to be very quick witted by some sudden pretty answer, or some sharp reply, be not always most burning, neither with letters nor learning. (qtd. in Aughterson 179)

For Mulcaster, biological sex limits women’s capacity for intelligence (and wit) because they possess a “natural weakness” (179). Even if women’s gender did not limit their educational upbringing, the wit they use would only ever appear superficially “quick witted,” and would never overcome a man with a wit developed by learning, because men do not have an inherent weakness of intellect.

In contrast, in Thomas Smith’s political work, *The Commonwealth of England, and Manner of Government Thereof*, to have wit at all is to possess some degree of reason and wisdom, regardless of gender. In the text, Smith describes the joint rule of men and women

within the family, which he describes as the most natural kind of commonwealth. Smith allots women wit, reason, and wisdom insofar as they relate to domestic duties. He asserts,

so nature hath forged each part to his office[within the family]: the man stern, strong, bold, adventurous, negligent of his beauty and spending; the woman weak, fearful, fair, curious of her beauty and saving. Either of them excelling other in wit and wisdom, to conduct those things which appertain to their office[within the family], and therefore where their wisdom doth excel, therein it is reason that each should govern. (qtd. in Aughterson 144)

Although Smith admits women have the capacity for wit derived from reason and wisdom when it comes to women's roles within the family, overall he still maintains that men possess more wit and more wisdom than women when he claims, "God hath given to the man great wit, bigger strength, and more courage to compel the woman to obey by reason, or force" (144). In spite of man's ability to out-reason his wife, Smith still maintains that each partner "obeyeth and commandeth other, and they two rule together the house" (144). Contrary to the reason and wit that a husband may use to make his wife obey, the wife uses her "beauty, fair countenance, and sweet words to make the man to obey her again for love" (144). Therefore, although the woman may have some reason, revealed when she governs beneath her husband, she does not have enough to ever outwit her husband using intellect alone and must rely on her feminine wiles for power.

Some Christian humanists, such as Thomas More and Juan Luis Vives, believed women to be capable of learning, understanding, and reasoning. They promote some theoretical education for women (rather than just a practical domestic education) on the

grounds that “they [men and women] both have the name of human being whose nature reason differentiates from that of the beasts; both . . . are equally suited for the knowledge of learning by which reason is cultivated” (More qtd. in Charlton 19). Spanish Humanist Juan Luis Vives’ conduct book, *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (1524), details the ideal curriculum for the education of young girls. The volume’s popularity continued in seventeenth-century England because of the continued relevance of the chapters on girls’ education and upbringing, which re-emphasize gender roles. Vives believes that women should be allowed to engage in “learning” for “of mayds, some be but little ment for learning: likewise as some men bee unapt, againe some been even borne unto it, or at least not unfit for it. Therefore they that be dull are not to be discouraged, and those that bee apt should bee harted and encouraged” (29). Although women, like men, should be encouraged to learn if they show a natural capacity for it, Vives recommends learning that is focussed on preparing women for their roles as wives, mothers, and pious Christians, rather than encouraging any complicated philosophical intellectual pursuits (Smith 16). Vives states,

I put no limit either on male or female save that it is reasonable that the man be equipped with the knowledge of many and varied subjects, which will be of profit to himself and to the state, and that he be endowed with experience and learning, which will be diffused and transmitted to others. I wish the woman to be totally given over to that part of philosophy that has assumed as its task the formation and improvement of morals. (qtd. in Fantazzi 72)

However, Vives’ encouragement of a more practical education does not necessarily emerge out of a belief that women are lacking the intellectual capacity to learn on the same plane as

men. In fact, as Hilda Smith brings to attention, “Vives revealed that he advocated educating women because he feared their learning: women’s education must be closely supervised so that it would not encourage their raising questions beyond their capabilities or take them out of the home into unseemly public discourse” (17). Therefore, humanists ultimately view the goal of women’s education as the development and preservation of a woman’s virtue, and more specifically, her chastity (Wayne “Some” 19). Therefore, although men and women could possess similar potential for intellectual capacity, women were not encouraged to develop their potential. As Kenneth Charlton observes, “those . . . who acknowledged the possibility, even desirability, of nurture nevertheless recommend only a limited and in the end limiting curriculum, one aimed at curbing the ‘natural’ tendencies of women as with a bridle, confining them to the limited sphere of the home, where once again they would carry out their ‘natural’ function in society” (24). Women’s responsibilities as wives, Hilda Smith maintains, “proved the single most important restriction on what they should learn and how they could use that learning” (13).

In summary, most traditional views of women’s wit hold wit to be instinctual and defined by feminine gendered distinctions that have been imposed on biological sex. Often this instinctual wit is considered to be shallow because women are believed to have a lesser capacity for intelligence than men; therefore, women’s wit is weak, reactionary and lacking reason. However, in instances where authors, such as Vives, do accord men and women equal mental faculties, women are not encouraged to develop their intellectual faculties through the same theoretical education that men are given, and instead are expected to focus any learning on that which will improve their ability to perform their roles in early modern

culture, namely those of daughter, wife, mother, and Christian.

Thomas Walkington's *The Optick Glasse of Humors* (1607) and Christopher Newstead's *An Apology for Women; or, Women's Defence* (1620), both examine quick wittedness (which is reactionary); however Walkington and Newstead disagree over whether men or women are endowed with this particular form of wit. Walkington's text includes a chapter on the "Diversities of wit: and most according to tempers" wherein he defines and describes nine different forms of wit because "as diuers and the most are indowed with wits; so most wits are diuers in nature" (43). Contrary to other authors who accord women quick and clever wit as a shallow attribute in comparison to man's wisdom, it is the "smirk quick and *dexterical* wit" that Walkington masculinizes and deems to be present in only "the purest tempered body of all that rich veine that is mixed with true learning" and possible only in men (47). This quick wit is as "sudden as a flash of lightening to dazel the eyes of a wished object, & yet premeditating in matters of moment, wherein grauity and sagesnes is to bee respected: this is a true wit euer pistol proof . . . it neuer wants variety in causing any subject" (47). This "hie straine of wit" is a quick response, yet at the same time it is premeditated and the person uttering the witty response must be wise enough to be able to use it in any situation and respond with wit to any subject matter (47). For Walkington, this form of wit is clearly possible in men who have been well educated. Moreover, it is possible for the educated men who are capable of this dexterical wit to inadvertently dull it by over contemplation (47). Although Walkington attributes this wit to learned men, he also accords these men a "pureness of the temperature, for where there is a good wit there is usually, [. . .] the sense of feeling most exact, a soft temperate flesh, which indicate also an abundance of

spirits not turbulent and drossy, but pure and refined, which also do euer insinuate no leaden, but a golden temperature” (48-9). This “golden temperature” is also depicted as fiery because these “great wits are ignea of a fiery nature, fiery things are euer actiue in motion: motion bringeth innouation” (48). While these great wits are pure and refined in temperature, this temperature is fiery and golden, suggesting that only men, who are considered fiery by humoral theory, are pure and refined. The supposed cold, passionate, and more turbulent nature of women does not allow them to possess the golden temperature and fiery nature required for the innovative qualities in great wit to manifest. In contrast, however, Christopher Newstead believes that women are the ones that possess the “pureness of the temperature of the body . . . the most exact sense of feeling . . . [and] soft temperate flesh, [is] where there is a smirke and quicke wit” because “women (being they are most commonly imbued with those corporall favours) should by a consequent bee the best . . . have the most active, and excelling wits” (131). Contrary to Walkington, Newstead reasons that women are more likely to possess great wit because they, rather than men, are the ones that possess the “pureness of temperature,” feeling, and soft flesh. Newstead uses Walkington’s own language to explain that this quickness of wit is visceral because it results from the body and emotion and not intellect. However, Newstead also attributes the natural wit of a woman with wisdom: “wisdome is nothing but a perfected wit, it being onely necessary by nature: the other parts got by experience” (132). Newstead’s defence of women argues that women possess two forms of wit: the “prae-wit” and the “post-wit” (131). As Susan Gushee O’Malley notes, “‘prae-wit’ probably means one’s first response; ‘post-wit,’ one’s response after deliberation” (155). Newstead refers to “prae-wit” as the

quick and “dextericall” form of wit (131). While Newstead allots women wisdom when they exercise their “post-wit” in “affaires where there is time for deliberation . . . [for] it doth search the corners of the brainnes, for the oyles of inventions,” he concludes that “otherwaies the prae-wit excels the post-wit” (131). Newstead breaks down Walkington’s definition of the highest form of wit as “smirk quick and *dextericall* wit . . . [and] mixed with true learning” (Walkington 47) into the Prae-wit (quick and dexterical) and Post-wit (the result of wisdom, deliberation and ingenuity), and claims that women most likely “excel men in the activenessse of wit” (Newstead 132). Whereas Walkington makes no reference to women’s wit, Newstead’s approach simultaneously combines traditional attitudes towards women’s reactionary wit (prae-wit) and more progressive attitudes as displayed in his descriptions of the post-wit, which he draws from Walkington and applies to women rather than men.

The female polemicist Rachel Speght, and anonymous authors writing under the female pseudonyms of Jane Anger, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda all counter depictions of wit as merely intrinsic cleverness, which generally implies that women lack the capacity for intelligence. Instead, these authors enter the debate about women by playing a rhetorical or scholastic game in which they highlight their own capacity for logic and reason in order to demonstrate that women’s wit can be comparable, or superior to, men’s wit.

Jane Anger’s pamphlet, *Jane Anger Her Protection for Women* (1589), responds using logical reasoning to a misogynistic text entitled *Boke, His Surfeit in Love*, of which no extant copy exists (Vecchi 63). Anger argues that women naturally possess greater wisdom and wit than men and are therefore their superiors. She states, “give me leave like a scoller to

prove our wisdom more excellent than theirs, though I never knew what sophistry meant” (13). Anger’s remark about not knowing the meaning of sophistry is carefully placed to emphasize that although she has not had the formal education of a scholar, the lines to come will still successfully prove that women are wiser than men by nature and not by learning. Anger continues, “there is no wisdom but it comes by grace, this is a principle, & *Contra principiu non est disputandu*: but grace was first given to a woman, because to our lady: which premises conclude that women are wise. Now *Primu est optimu*, & therefore women are wiser than men. That we are more witty which comes by nature, it cannot better be proved, than that by our answers” (13). Although Anger claims she never knew the meaning of sophistry, her argument is a sophism; she refutes the misogynist text using logic, and aims to impress by employing biblical and classical references. Anger’s pamphlet plays into the rhetoric involved in the debate about women’s intelligence and is intended to be an answer whose rhetoric proves that her wisdom and wit excel above the misogynist opposition.

In Ester Sovernam’s response to Joseph Swetnam’s misogynist pamphlet, *Ester Hath Hanged Haman; or, An Answer to a Lewd Pamphlet Entitled The Arraignment of Women*, Sovernam acknowledges that wit is often controlled by the passions, but it can be controlled by reason in anyone who has developed wit through experience: “albeit Reason of itself may be blinded by passion, yet when she is joined with Experience, she is known to be absolute and without compare. As for Experience, she is known of herself to be admirable excellent in her courses . . . she will whip the fool to learn him more wit” (Henderson and McManus 233). As the embodiment of a woman whose Reason is joined with experience (and thus not blinded by passion like women are expected to be), Sovernam can use her wit to “whip the

fool” that is Swetnam. As Henderson and McManus argue, “Sowernam has written the most tightly organized, logical, and cogent of our defence treatises, proving in the process a concrete demonstration of the reasoning power of a woman” (39).

Constantia Munda’s *The Worming of a Mad Dogge* is an equally convincing response to Joseph Swetnam that reveals reason and logic in women through both its author’s style and the content of the pamphlet. Munda uses a wealth of knowledge of classical culture to defend women in her pamphlet, often displaying her linguistic skills by quoting in Greek, French, Hebrew, Italian, and Latin (Henderson and MacManus 36). Munda argues that women possess great wit, but generally choose to conceal it from the public because of modesty. She claims, “though feminine modesty hath confined our rarest and ripest wits to silence, we acknowledge it our greatest ornament” (249). Although Munda is likely referring to modesty as women’s greatest ornament, she still acknowledges that while women may not always appear to have wit, they may be concealing their strong wit for the sake of “feminine modesty.” Munda overtly attempts to show her superior logic when she employs syllogisms to discredit Swetnam as an author:

Whereas you say ’tis ‘a great discredit for a man to be accounted as a scold,’ and that you deal ‘after the manner of a shrew, which cannot ease her curst heart but by her unhappy tongue,’ observe but what conclusion demonstratively follows these premises: A man that is accounted a scold hath great discredit. Joseph Swetnam is accounted a scold. *Ergo*, Joseph hath great discredit.” (258-9)

As Matthew Steggle observes, this form of logical reasoning is full of “university-style

logical propositions . . . and the gender bending she inflicts upon Swetnam is made more piquant by the fact that she is using the methods of male-only university education to do it. (Swetnam himself had no university education)” (“Constantia” 56). In addition, Munda indirectly asserts that Swetnam’s lack of education is visible in his treatise, and it discredits his work: “woman . . . is most shamefully blurred and derogatively erased by scribbling pens of savage and uncouth monsters” (248). Henderson and MacManus state, “Munda’s display of learning is neither pretentious nor stultifying; by subtly integrating her knowledge into the fabric of her treatise, she effectively demonstrates that women are indeed capable and worthy of a “generous and liberal Education” (36). Munda, being provoked by the “arraignments, baitings, and rancorous impeachments of the reputation of our whole sex” (249), uses her educated and civilized hand to defend women.

Rachel Speght, the first known woman to participate in the debates about women’s nature, and consequently intelligence, also foregrounds her own education and intelligence in a response to Swetnam in her tract *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617) (Luckyj, “Rachel” 58). Speght’s reply to Swetnam is more subtle compared to the explicit rhetorical games employed in Munda, Sowernam, and Anger’s responses. As Christina Luckyj observes, “Speght’s *Mouzell for Melastomus* accepts the traditional view that “the Man is the Womans Head’ (16) but supplements it with a vision of mutual responsibility and practical equality” (62). Although her pamphlet is intended to be a response to Swetnam, Speght uses the central portion of her tract to present a “sober and carefully logical argument based on Scripture that ignores Swetnam’s own tract” (58). However, Speght does frame the argument with a direct address to Swetnam, and a section intended to counter many of

Swetnam's main points (58). In her address "To the Reader," Speght uses a "standard humility topos" (58) and apologetically claims her own inadequacies as being "young in years, and more defectiue in knowledge, that little smattering in Learning, which I haue obtained, being only the fruit of such vacant hours, as I could spare from affaires befitting my Sex" ("To the Reader," F1r-F2v). According to Speght, the cultural constraints of her gender have limited her opportunities to develop her learning (Luckyj 58). However, Speght is still able to recognize the structural failings of Swetnam's argument and apologizes for having to structure her own response in such a way that is best fit to refute his claims, and not necessarily formatted as a "literate Responsarie" should be structured. As she explains,

yet am I not altogether ignorant of that Analogie which ought to be vsed in a literate Responsarie: But the Beare-bayting of Women, vnto which I haue framed my Apologeticall answere, beeing altogether without methode, irregular, without Grammaticall Concordance, and a promiscuous mingle mangle, it would admit no such order to bee obserued in the answering thereof, as a regular Responsarie requireth. ("To the Reader," F1r-F2v)

Although Speght does not actually create a "promiscuous mingle mangle" of a response entirely lacking method, her address to the reader is an effective "reductive strategy [which] works to increase the readers' estimation of Speght as author, who would have been capable of greater things given a worthier model" (Luckyj 58).

The pamphlet wars reveal that traditional attitudes toward women's intelligence impose inherently shallow or weak intellect on women. Women's wit is generally

considered the quality in women that is comparable to a man's wisdom because women are not allotted significant capacity for intelligence. Allotting women a similar capacity for knowledge as men could affect the structure of early modern society because it allows for women to have the potential, even if not realized, for mental equality or superiority. Therefore, to avoid this potential for subversion, most early modern male writers aim to squelch the potential by imposing restrictions or weaknesses on women's intellectual capacity, and wit. As Henderson and MacManus establish, "on the question of women's mental capacity, most [defenders of women] take the position that women's minds are either equal to or better than men's. . . . Sowernam, Munda, and the female speaker of *Haec Vir* all offer themselves—their learning, their reasoned argumentation—as refutation of the charge of mental incapacity" (27). The female responses reveal that although many of the traditional attitudes towards women depict ideals of women as chaste, silent, obedient, and capable of little reason, the reality of the situation for women in early modern England was that they, of course, were capable of reason and wisdom, and some women, such as Rachel Speght, did employ them in public spheres. Sowernam, Munda and Speght all use logic and reason in their responses to refute the misogynists and Speght is an educated woman. These authors' discussions of wit in women are predicated on the fact that this wit emerges from an obvious capacity for intelligence in women; however, this wit is likely to be further developed through experience and formal learning as demonstrated by the authors' own use of wit.

II. "CUSTOME IS AN IDIOT": FEMALE STEREOTYPES AND CITY COMEDY

While the anonymous author of the pamphlet *Haec Vir; or, the Womanish Man* does not

directly enter into the debate about women's intelligence, the speaker's initial rejection of "Custome" challenges the traditional cultural attitudes towards women. In the context of this particular text, the term "Custome" refers to the cultural assumptions that prescribe the roles and behaviours deemed fitting for the female gender. The speaker's rejection of custom reveals that there was a space for people to challenge the authority and validity of custom in defining women in early modern England. The pamphlet is a response to *Hic Mulier; or the Man-Woman* in which the speaker accuses women who dress in masculine apparel of defying nature: "this deformitie [cross dressing] hath no agreement with goodnesses, nor no difference against the weakest reason: it is all base, all barbarous. Base, in respect it offends man in the example, and God in the most unnaturall use: Barbarous, in that it is exorbitant from Nature, and an Antithesis to kinde" (267). In *Haec Vir*, the speaker, Hic Mulier, defends herself and all those women like her, claiming that she in no way alters her natural form. To alter her natural form, she says, would be "to walke on my hands with my heeles upward, to feed my self with my feet, or to forsake the sweet sound of words, for the hissing noise of the Serpent: but I walk with a face erected, with a body cloathed, with a mind busied, & with a heart full of reasonable and devout cogitations; onely offensive in attire . . . as anemie to Custome" (290). The speaker continues to denounce the author of *Hic-Mulier*, observing that in society there are many things judged appropriate by custom in other countries that would be considered offensive to custom in England. For instance, she states, "it is a fashion or custome with us to mourne in Blacke: yet the *Aegian* and *Romane* Ladies ever mourned in White" (291). The speaker concludes her examples of differing customs by denouncing "Custome" altogether: "I might instance in a thousand things that

onely Custome and not Reason hath approved. To conclude *Custome* is an Idiot; and whosoever dependeth wholly upon him, without the discourse of Reason, will take from him his pyde coat, and become a slave indeed to contempt and censure” (291). As Hic Mulier is well aware, “Custome” confers strict distinctions between what is considered masculine and feminine, and these distinctions are imposed on biological sex. O’Malley accurately asserts that “What Hic Mulier objects to . . . is the transformation of custom into the so-called natural, or that which is God-given” (1). Charlton observes, “this period was also one in which tradition – custom – was powerfully influential, its presence celebrated by some as a matter of considered judgement (after appropriate scrutiny) but by others as a matter of unthinking acceptance” (2). Although the pamphlet challenges “Custome,” ultimately Hic Mulier consents to adhere to it (O’Malley 2). Haec Vir warns Hic Mulier of the dangers of continuing to defy custom: “if you will walke without difference, you shall live without reverence: if you will contemne order, you must endure the shame of disorder; and if you have no rulers but your wills, you must have no reward but disdaine and disgrace” (294). Even though Hic Mulier firmly believes that her sex is female regardless of her choice to dress in masculine clothing, at the end of the pamphlet she too surrenders to “Custome” and exchanges clothing with Haec Vir, agreeing to behave more like a woman if he acts more like a man. While the text does not explicitly mention wit, it is relevant to the debate about wit and women’s intelligence. Hic Mulier’s denouncement of “Custome,” however short lived it may have been, reveals that a space was available for people to question “Custome[’s]” authority over the cultural and biological status of women.

In *No Wit No Help Like a Woman's* and *A Mad World, My Masters*, Middleton uses his female tricksters to explore the tensions surrounding “Custome,” particularly the extent to which identity is fluid or fixed when custom is so dominant that it dictates social and gender hierarchies. Kathleen Henderson and Barbara McManus observe,

The drama was in Shakespeare's day what the cinema is today, a truly popular art form which both shaped and reflected popular modes of perceiving women. The presence of both stereotypes and antistereotypes of women in this art form suggest both a universal awareness of the stereotypes and a trenchant challenge to their validity on the part of dramatists of the stature of Dekker, Middleton, and Shakespeare. (127)

Middleton explores the stereotypes of women in the city comedies, *A Mad World, My Masters* and *No Wit No Help Like a Woman's*, and suggests alternative ways for women to navigate through and around the customary roles designated for women. City comedies, as defined by Brian Gibbons, are characterized by their “critical and satiric design, their urban settings, their exclusion of material appropriate to romance, fairy-tale, sentimental legend or patriotic chronicle” (11). As Gibbons suggests,

the dramatists of city comedy articulated a radical critique of their age. . . .
But there is a distinction between dramatizing conflicting *forces* and merely reflecting *manners*. When Middleton presents the situation of a merchant ambitious to become a country gentleman, on the level of comedy of manners this is completely conventional; what makes it serious and significant is that the conventions also have metaphoric richness: the merchant embodies forces

of appetite and materialist opportunism which Middleton represents as dominant in Jacobean society. The realism of the . . . plays . . . is essentially in transforming typical elements of city life into significant patterns, expressing consciously satiric criticism but also suggesting deeper sources of conflict and change. (4)

While, superficially, Kate Low-water and Frank Gullman are the conventional tricksters of city comedy, they, like Hic Mulier, recognize that “Custome is an idiot.” Frank Gullman and Kate Low-water are aware that “Custome” is not always an adequate indication of the realities of identity in early modern England. Since they have this understanding, Frank and Kate are able to manipulate their way into better financial and social positions by taking advantage of the fact that people readily accept custom. As Angela Stock and Anne-Julia Zwierlein assert in their Introduction to *Plotting Early Modern London*, “A second traditional aspect of the genre [of city comedy], which has likewise gained fresh relevance through new critical approaches, is the perennial theme of role play, embodied and acted out on the stage as surprisingly sharp-sighted social diagnosis” (9). The female tricksters’ constant role-play in these two plays illuminates Middleton’s exploration of “Custome” and its relation to reality. I will argue that by using female tricksters for this exploration—where these characters understand that “Custome” is a social construct and as a result are able to manipulate early modern “Custome[s]” of certain gender and social stereotypes for their own ends—Middleton indicates that women are capable of more intellectual capacity than generally suggested by “Custome.” Furthermore, in the cases of Frank Gullman and Kate Low-water, their intelligence is depicted as rivalling, or excelling, men’s intelligence. By

creating female characters with strong wit who constantly challenge custom's validity in their words and actions on the stage, Middleton further exposes both that it is a custom to denigrate women's intelligence and that it is a custom to consider women to be intellectually weak and inferior to men.

CHAPTER 2

LIVING BY ONE'S WITS IN *A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS*

In *A Mad World, My Masters* the Mother and Courtesan consider themselves “deep scholar[s] grown” in the art of trickery and deception. The Mother states, “Every part of the world shoots up daily into more subtlety: the very spider weaves her cauls with more art and cunning to entrap the fly. / The shallow ploughman can distinguish now / ’Twixt simple truth and a dissembling brow” (1.1.153-7). In spite of the widespread deception rampant in the realm of *Mad World*, the Courtesan and the Mother are still able to successfully deceive over and over again. These are “golden days” for the mother and daughter, where they can continue to resell the Courtesan’s maidenhead countless times because of they are able to have their “wits wound up to their stretched height,” a height that must surpass the rest of the population (1.1.161). Since the world has begun to centre on deception, it requires an exceptional trickster-artist who uses “more art and cunning” than the rest to be able to deceive a world already aware of the frequency of deception. In spite of the attention the play gives to the trickster figures, and especially to the Courtesan, critics writing on *A Mad World* have generally dismissed the Courtesan as a secondary character and focussed on the male figures—Penitent Brothel, Sir Bounteous, Harebrain, and the play’s other trickster, Follywit⁴. However, some critics have focussed on the Courtesan and praised her ingenuity in her scheming. For instance, in her article on Middleton’s sympathetic depiction of promiscuous women, Celia Daileader argues that the Courtesan is the “queen of craft” (228). Critics such as Daileader, Anne Haselkorn, Robert Bell, Fumiko Takase, and Leanore Lieblein view the Courtesan as a deceiver who manipulates appearances. In “The Mother as

Bawd in *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *A Mad World, My Masters*," Jennifer Panek acknowledges that critics have generally viewed the Courtesan and her Mother "merely as deceivers, as adept disguisers who skilfully manipulate their knowledge that 'in a corrupt society appearances loom larger than reality'" (427). In this chapter, I will focus on the figure of the Courtesan and argue that Middleton gives her a sophisticated understanding of custom's role in gender and social politics that allows her to manipulate stereotypes of women in her schemes, revealing a representation of a woman with significant intellectual capacity.

Frank Gullman, a Courtesan with an eye for social mobility, understands and consequently manipulates the limited spaces made available to women because of cultural stereotypes of gender in early modern England. The Courtesan exploits the stereotypical roles available to women in her schemes, easily shifting into different roles. The Courtesan is, of course, a prostitute, and her mother essentially her pimp. She is the mistress of Sir Bounteous Progress, a wealthy country Knight, although she admits that she is not faithful to him: "Sir Bounteous Progress. He's my keeper indeed, but there's many a piece of venison stolen that my keeper wots not on" (1.1.154). To Follywit, Inesse, and Possibility she is an eternally pious virgin, and yet, to other suitors her maidenhead is repeatedly sold off to the highest bidder and the money earned from these encounters saved up to form her dowry for her eventual marriage:

How does't behove us then that live by sleight?

To have our wits wound up to their stretched height?

Fifteen times thou know'st I have sold thy maidenhead

To make up a dowry for thy marriage, and yet there's
 maidenhead enough for old Sir Bounteous still. (1.1.160-164)

Furthermore, the Courtesan is also simultaneously enlisted by Harebrain as a spiritual director for his wife, and by Penitent Brothel as a conspirator, to gain the confidence of Harebrain's wife, visit with her regularly, and "with tried art corrupt and loosen her most constant powers" so that she will be more inclined to commit adultery with Penitent (1.1.115). Frank's intrigues involve adopting roles without actual disguises. Instead, she relies on her acting skills and knowledge of the stereotypical roles men impose on women to deceive and beguile her unwitting targets. She has the capacity to grasp that "traditional social signs and symbols" of gender have "metamorphosed into detached and manipulable commodities" (Agnew 97). For instance, in order for the Courtesan to present herself as a desirable young maid (so that she can repeatedly sell her virginity to the highest bidder) she must recognize that gender is constructed by culture and abide by the traditional signs and symbols that signify the position: "nothing but a politic conveyance, / A sincere carriage, a religious eyebrow / That throws their charms over the worldlings' senses" (1.1.172-5). For the Courtesan to adopt these new identities or personas she must be able to understand the stereotypes of women imposed by men so that she can perform the signifiers of women's culturally ascribed gender.

Middleton emphasizes the Courtesan's understanding of gender politics and how to use them to her advantage in the language she uses when constructing her plan to facilitate Mistress Harebrain and Penitent's sexual rendezvous. The Courtesan tells Penitent that she will "counterfeit a fit of violent sickness" so that Harebrain's wife will visit her, and while

she is visiting the Courtesan, the wife can see Penitent (who will be disguised as a Physician) (2.5.23-4). The Courtesan also encourages Penitent to make it known that she is ill so that her suitors will visit her and offer the physician the funds required to secure all the necessities to cure the Courtesan, which she plans to pocket after they have gone. The Courtesan's plan to help Penitent Brothel see Harebrain's wife relies on the Courtesan's awareness, and subsequent manipulation, of female gender stereotypes. When Penitent asks the Courtesan whether it will look suspicious if she becomes ill so suddenly she responds,

Puh, all the world knows women are soon down. We can be sick when we have a mind to't, catch an ague with the wind of our fans. . . . We're likest ourselves when we're down. 'Tis the easiest art and cunning for our sect to counterfeit sick, that are always full of fits when we are well, for since we were made for a weak imperfect creature, we can fit that best that we are made for. (2.5.31-9)

The term "likest ourselves" leads to two possible interpretations of the lines that follow. As Daileader observes, "likest ourselves" can mean both that women are most feminine when they are "down," or they are most "like" the stereotypes when they are down (227), meaning that they are either most like their natural selves when they are down, or most like the stereotypes of women. The double meaning of these lines reveals that the Courtesan understands the uncertainties over whether gender is a result of custom or nature. With this sophisticated understanding of the tensions surrounding naturalized stereotypical female characteristics, the Courtesan is able to take on the personas of maid and wife in subsequent scenes. The Courtesan masks the subtext that reveals her understanding of gender politics,

allowing for a simple interpretation of the lines as merely implying that women are most like themselves when they are ill because women are weak and therefore frequently ill. Similar to the way that the Courtesan is able to superficially (and successfully) act like a maid even though she is not a maid, the Courtesan is able to conceal the more subversive subtext in the double meanings of her language. In this speech, the lines “since we were made for a weak and imperfect creature” also have multiple layers of meaning. As Daileader explains, “‘made for’ could mean ‘made as’ (that is, by nature), or ‘made out to be’ (that is, by men)” (227). Thus, with the Courtesan’s understanding of cultural constructions of gender, the subtext of the lines “since we were made for a weak imperfect creature, we can fit that best that we are made for” can be interpreted to mean that since women are considered to be weak and imperfect, it is easy to fit into or pretend to fit into these stereotypical roles. The easiest way for the Courtesan to avoid detection in her schemes is to perform the different stereotypes: the mistress, maid, and later, wife. The most obvious of the double entendres in this speech are the lines “women are soon down” and “we’re likest ourselves when we’re down,” which imply both down as ill, or down as in lying down horizontally (with sexual connotations) (2.5.31-9 n.), both of which allude to the scene in which the Courtesan pretends to be down (ill) while Mistress Harebrain is down (sexually) in her rendezvous with Penitent. This speech reveals the Courtesan’s awareness and understanding of men’s stereotypes about women and the numerous double entendres in her language reflect how she is able to manipulate language, and consequently these stereotypes, to her own advantage.

In the play, Middleton refers to tricksters as artists in order to further illuminate the

Courtesan's recognition that, like art, customs concerning women's nature can be manipulated if the artist is able to understand that cultural assumptions form stereotypes about women. The tricksters in the play are constantly referring to themselves as artists, and their trickery as their art. Leanore Lieblein draws attention to the frequent references to art and life, for instance, the moment in the play where Penitent applauds the Courtesan's sick scene pronouncing, "Art of Ladies!" (3.2.44), which is directly followed by the scene in which Follywit hoodwinks Sir Bounteous and exclaims, "Was't not well manag'd, you necessary mischiefs? Did the plot want either life or art" (3.2.1-2) (30). Follywit, Penitent, and the Courtesan also refer to themselves as artists. For example, Follywit refers to his schemes in artistic terms " 'tis I must cast your plots into form still" (1.1.5-6). The plot can be manipulated, and moulded into whatever shape Follywit, the artist, selects for it. Similarly, the Courtesan tells Penitent Brothel "there wants but opportunity and she's wax of your own fashioning. She had wrought herself into the form of your love before my art set finger to her" (1.1.126-7). Although the Courtesan admits that Harebrain's wife needed no convincing by the Courtesan's "tried art" to corrupt and loosen "her most constant powers" to convince her to fall for Penitent Brothel (1.1.114-5), these lines reveal that both the Courtesan and Penitent's "art" is their trickery. Moreover, the art of the truly successful trickster is not merely deception, but the ability to mould the world to his or her own purposes. The Courtesan recognizes that custom itself is more artifice than reality (as art, like custom, is constructed by people). In her schemes, the Courtesan is able to mould custom for her own purposes by performing the role of a maid, and her art as a trickster will be to successfully take advantage of the fact that others believe custom to be true.

Middleton's *Mad World* presents a system of women teaching women how to manipulate custom to their own benefit, beginning with the Mother's instructions to her daughter. The Mother, who actively participates in the schemes to sell her daughter's maidenhead and, later, to marry her to Follywit, recognizes the artifice surrounding stereotypes about women and also the importance of appearances in a society that places such emphasis on the validity of these stereotypes. The Mother aims to share her wisdom with her daughter in lectures on the importance of appearances. She tells her daughter that once she is able to elevate her social status in a good marriage she will be cleansed of her former transgressions:

When thou spi'st a fool that truly pities
 The false springs of thine eyes
 And honourably dotes upon thy love,
 If he be rich, set him by for a husband.
 Be wisely tempered and learn this, my wench:
 Who gets th' opinion for a virtuous name
 May sin at pleasure, and ne'er think of shame. (1.1.176-182)

According to the Mother, having a good husband is enough to make the Courtesan appear to be a virtuous wife, regardless of any sins she has committed in the past, or may commit in the future. Anne Haselkorn remarks, "Frank's mother's final tutelage embraces the wisdom that in a corrupt society appearances loom larger than reality. . . . While society requires chastity as the price of marriage for the female, Middleton's mad world knows the truth—the appearance is sufficient" (87). However, when the mother instructs her on appearances,

the Courtesan replies, “Mother I am too deep a scholar grown / To learn my first rules now” and the Mother responds, “’Twill be thy own. / I say no more” (1.1.183-5). The Courtesan’s wit has surpassed the need for these basic lessons in feigning; however, the Mother’s lectures on the importance of honour and virtue, at least in appearance, are heeded by the Courtesan.

As a result of the teachings of the Mother, the mother-daughter pair deceive with the intentions of gaining and maintaining the appearance of virtue and honour, while still swindling for money and status. Fumiko Takase believes that “antifeminist sentiment pervades Thomas Middleton’s play *A Mad World, My Masters*” (19). Takase claims, “for Middleton, the Courtesan is the embodiment of lust, greed, and vanity, epitomizing the pit of hell into which all other characters are enticed to fall” (21). However, the Courtesan does not act on any lust (in fact she does not engage in any sexual behaviour throughout the course of the play), nor is the Courtesan particularly greedy, seeking to swindle only wealthy men, and heirs, and only to make up the cost of a dowry. In her article, “The Courtesan Revisited: Thomas Middleton, Pietro Aretino, and Sex-phobic Criticism,” Celia Daileader takes issue with Takase’s interpretation of the play and states, “This essay reduces a delicious comedy like *Mad World* . . . to ‘an extended morality play’ in which characters seek personal gain ‘at the peril of their eternal souls’” (225). Daileader reveals the frequency of male vice in the play, which Takase overlooks in her essay. Daileader further takes notice of the Courtesan’s “coolly pragmatic manipulation of misogynist stereotypes” (227) and remarks, “In Middleton’s ‘mad world’ there are two kinds of people: tricksters and dupes. It is not the dupes but the tricksters we admire and the Courtesan is the play’s queen of craft” (228).

Daileader uses the term “craft” in her praise of the Courtesan’s successful trickery because her craft gives her the freedom to succeed in the realm of the play. In contrast, in early modern England, the term “craft” can also imply definitions of women’s wit like those of misogynist Joseph Swetnam: “they haue wit, but it is all in craft” (18). This craft limits women to schemes involving their use of their sexual wiles in order to “bring men to ruine” and swindle them out of their money. This form of craft does not define the Courtesan’s scheming. Although the Courtesan and her mother reveal that their schemes are concerned with making the money for a dowry, their quest for wealth is also a quest for virtue, which they believe can be attained through an honourable marriage to a worthy man. The quest for virtue is truly at odds with Swetnam’s depictions of a woman’s crafty wit intended to swindle men out of all their money and ruin them. Moreover, the Courtesan only extracts money from wealthy knights, and elder brothers, revealing a desire to take only from those who have money to spare. In addition, as Jennifer Panek points out, “the fifteen sales of Frank’s maidenhead occur outside of, and prior to the world of the play: within the play, Frank’s occupation as a professional virgin consists almost entirely of having her mother *guard* her virginity rather than sell it” (“The Mother” 428). Although they do swindle men to save for a dowry, it is interesting to note that they do save for that dowry, rather than tricking another suitor into marriage with a penniless woman (429). Panek observes that “for a whore and bawd, Frank and her mother have a peculiarly honest attitude toward money: the dowry is not only conscientiously amassed, but is also actually bestowed in the proper manner” (429). By allotting the Mother a fairly ordinary interest in wealth,

Middleton strips her of one of the defining characteristics of the bawd; since

she is not prostituting her daughter's virginity for selfish gain, the grounds from which to pass judgement on her *as* a bawd become less clear. The Mother, in fact, combines the cynical language of a bawd with a number of the values proper to a "virtuous matron," accomplishing her daughter's marriage through a mixture of deceit and honesty: the successful bawd is here inextricable from the "good" mother. (430)

Similarly, in the Courtesan's involvement with Penitent Brothel's wooing of Mistress Harebrain, there is evidence that the Courtesan is concerned with her own honour, not merely with making money. When Penitent is fearful that Harebrain could suspect something, she responds, "Sigh not, Master Penitent. Trust the managing of the business with me; 'tis for my credit now to see't well finished. If I do you no good, sir, you shall give me no money, sir" (1.1.134-6). The Courtesan suggests a fair exchange wherein she will only receive funds if she is able to achieve her side of the bargain. For the Courtesan to see the business "well finished" is for her to ensure that Penitent and Mistress Harebrain are able to sleep together. Penitent praises the Courtesan for her honourable dealings with him, likening her to a Lawyer dealing with a case: "I am arrived at the court of conscience. A courtesan! O admirable times! Honesty is removed to the common place." (1.138-40). Daileader's annotations to the play reveal that the pun on "common place" likens one of the major courts of law, the Court of Common Pleas, to the common place: a publicly owned piece of land and a metaphor for a whore (1.138-40 n.). The Courtesan encourages an honest exchange of services for money that is reminiscent of her mother, the honourable bawd, and suggests that she has followed her mother's teachings on the importance of appearing

honourable.

The Courtesan passes on the wisdom learned from her mother to Mistress Harebrain, thereby perpetuating the cycle of educating women on the arts of deception and the artifice of custom. When the Courtesan advises Mistress Harebrain on how to best beguile her husband by acting as the ideal wife—chaste, silent and obedient—while she commits adultery on the side, she explicitly instructs the wife on how to use, in her own trickery, the very cultural assumptions about women which Harebrain perceives to be true. Harebrain, who believes the Courtesan to be a “pure virgin” and ideal companion for his wife (1.2.64), tells her that he has taken measures to ensure his wife’s virtue. He asks the Courtesan, “Do labour her, prithee. I have conveyed away all her wanton pamphlets, as *Hero and Leander*, *Venus and Adonis*, O two lascivious mary-bone pies for a young married wife! Here, here prithee take the *Resolution* and read to her a little” (1.2.46-50). Harebrain hopes to frighten his wife into obedience, and expel any dangerous thoughts of adultery from her mind: “terrify her, terrify her, go, read to her the horrible punishments of itching wantonness, the pains allotted for adultery” (1.2.54-6)⁵. The Courtesan then tells Harebrain’s wife that the best way to gull her husband is to use these markers of chaste and virtuous women that Harebrain lays out to the Courtesan. She tells her,

if he chance steal upon you, let him find
Some book lie open to an unchaste mind
And coted Scriptures, though for your own pleasure
You read some stirring pamphlet, and convey it
Under your skirt, the fittest place to lay it. (1.2.93-7)

The Courtesan then proceeds to instruct the wife to keep to herself, avoid socializing with strangers, leave out books warning the dangers of unchaste thoughts, and to pretend to read scriptures, so that it looks as though she is chaste and well behaved. The Courtesan advises,

When our husbands in their rank'st suspicions dwell,
 Then 'tis our best art to dissemble well.
 Put but these notes in use, that I'll direct you,
 He'll curse himself that e'er he did suspect you. (1.2.81-4)

The “best art” for women is to create what is fittingly described by Aaron Kitch as completely “believable fictions” (403) around themselves, the most believable personas being those that are based on men's stereotypical views of women, like those Harebrain wishes to impose on his wife to keep her virtuous. If Mistress Harebrain is able to perform her role as a chaste wife, appearing to abhor all unchaste behaviour, then she will be in a good position to be able to commit adultery without suspicion:

This is the course, my wench, to enjoy thy wishes.
 Here you perform best, when you most neglect:
 The way to daunt is to outvie suspect
 Manage these principles but with art and life:
 Welcome all nations, thou'rt an honest wife. (1.2.98-102)

According to the Courtesan, who learned from her Mother, if the Mistress Harebrain is able to believably act like an honest woman, then she is as good as honest. Frank's discussions of stereotypes with Penitent, her mother, and Mistress Harebrain imply that women are more clever than men give them credit for, and that the inferior status imposed on women is a

result of custom. Moreover, the Courtesan's instructions to Harebrain's wife remind the audience that she has been slyly succeeding by manipulating and working within the limitations men and society place on women and that "it is actually men who are being gulled and held in low esteem by women" (Haselkorn 90).

Mistress Harebrain is able to convince her husband that she is a virtuous wife by following the Courtesan's instructions on how to act like an honest wife; however, she still relies on the Courtesan's wit to complete her impersonation. Upon planning to visit the "sick" Courtesan, Mistress Harebrain tells her husband she feels that it is inappropriate for her to be accompanied by any man, including a servant, other than her own husband:

The world's condition is itself so vile, sir,
 'Tis apt to judge the worst of those deserve not

 This censure flies from one, that from another;
 'That man's her squire', says he; 'Her pimp', the t'other

 Then our attires are taxed, our very gait
 Is called in question, where a husband's presence
 Scatters such thoughts. (3.1.108-118).

The audience is aware that the Mistress Harebrain is pretending to be concerned about her honour because she has already told the Courtesan of her interest in meeting Penitent: "I would as gladly to enjoy his sight" (1.2.77-8). However, the husband is taken in by her acting: "Thou'rt such a wife! . . . With me or no man! Incomparable such a woman!"

(3.2.124, 131-2). While Mistress Harebrain is able to follow the Courtesan's instructions on how to pretend to be an honest wife, she does not have the wit to scheme any further and relies instead on the Courtesan. Upon arriving at the Courtesan's bedside where Mistress Harebrain will meet Penitent, she tells the Courtesan "My husband himself brought me to th'door, walks below for my return. Jealousy is prick-eared, and will hear the wagging of a hair" (3.2.185-7). The Courtesan replies, "Pish, you're a faint liver. Trust yourself with your pleasure and me with your security. Go" (3.2.188-9). It is by the Courtesan's wit, where she pretends to have a conversation with Mistress Harebrain, that the wife's façade of chastity is upheld so that Harebrain will not hear Penitent and Mistress Harebrain's sexual encounter. Middleton's supporting female characters rely on the Courtesan to use her wit to improve their situations because they are not able to do it themselves. While the Mother is involved in perpetuating the suitors' views of her "chaste" maid of a daughter, the Courtesan is ultimately the one who will convince them of her chastity, and likewise, while Mistress Harebrain can appear chaste, the Courtesan is the one that ensures the promulgation of that image.

The male tricksters in the play, Follywit and Penitent Brothel, are only capable of believing in the very stereotypes the Courtesan, Mother, and Mistress Harebrain recognize to be false depictions of women. Follywit's commentary on his disguise in act three, scene three reveals his limited understanding of women. In this farcical dressing scene Follywit quickly disguises himself as the Courtesan, all the while commenting on how women in their present age "do against kind," or their true nature, by being sexually promiscuous, using prosthetic beauty products, and acting like masculine women. He asks, "to lie with their

horsekeeper, is that not against kind? To wear half-moons made of another's hair, is that not against kind? To drink down a man—she that set him up—pray, is that not monstrously against kind now?" (3.3.101-5), and later comments, "'Tis an Amazonian time" (3.3.118). According to Follywit, to be promiscuous, to dress with artifice to conceal one's real self, or to behave or dress in a masculine manner, is against woman's nature. Follywit perceives all these activities to be against women's "kind," yet he does not ever offer a description of women's real "kind," which suggests that Follywit does not understand women's true "kind" at all. One can assume that perhaps the opposite of Follywit's perceived travesties of women's "kind" would be being chaste and "natural" in the sense of lacking prosthetic enhancements. However, as the Courtesan reveals in her speeches, to be feminine or chaste in the realm of *A Mad World* is to also act out gender stereotypes, which are not natural. Follywit further contradicts himself because in spite of his comments about women's "kind," he believes that his quick disguise—"come, thou shalt see a woman quickly made up here" (3.3.96-7)—dressing in a doublet, complete with a gentlewoman's gown, mask, and chin-clout will be more than enough for him to imitate the very nature of woman: "the most musty visage critic shall not except against me" (3.3.123-4). Yet the very process of dressing quickly is against what Follywit and his companions perceive to be a woman's nature: "but that's against kind, captain, for they are always long a-making ready" (3.3.98-9). When this scene is viewed in relation to the scene that follows with Penitent's encounter with a succubus, male characters' inability to comprehend woman's nature become even more apparent. As Lieblein accurately asserts, "this scene, I believe, should be viewed in the light of Follywit's disguising which immediately precedes it. Its effectiveness in performance

depends in part on a visual echo in the two scenes and enables us to interpret the subplot in relation to the main plot” (26-7). Penitent repents his adultery stating,

Nay, I that knew the price of life and sin,

 The end of man and glory of that end,

 To dote on weakness, slime, corruption, woman?
 What is she, took asunder from her clothes?
 Being ready, she consists of hundred pieces,
 Much like your German clock, and near allied:
 Both are so nice they cannot go for pride.
 Beside a greater fault, but too well known,
 They'll strike to ten when they should stop at one. (4.1.14-24)

According to Penitent, women are “weakness, slime, [and] corruption” and cannot control their sexual desires. Like Follywit, Penitent has trouble recognizing woman’s true nature beneath the “hundred pieces” of artifice that make up her outward appearance. He reduces her to nothing but artifice by relating her to a clock and thereby “travesties her humanity” (Lieblein 28). As a result of his inability to discern true woman from artificial appearance, Penitent cannot distinguish the succubus from Mistress Harebrain. When recounting the appearance of the succubus to Mistress Harebrain in the next scene, Penitent can only describe parallels in their outward appearance, again revealing his lack of understanding about the nature of women. Penitent says,

The very devil assumed thee formally:
 That face, that voice, that gesture, that attire
 E'en as it sits on thee, not a pleat altered,
 That beaver band, the colour of that periwig,
 The farthingale above the navel, all
 As if fashion were his own invention. (4.5.26-31)

Since there is “not a pleat altered” and, thus, exactly the same external features as Mistress Harebrain, Penitent initially has difficulty determining whether that the succubus is not Mistress Harebrain because he does not understand what lies beneath these external elements. Lieblein asserts that this failure to recognize illusion is a punishment for Penitent’s inhuman view of women (28). She states, “He [Penitent] is appropriately punished by an illusion which grotesquely reflects his own views of the woman he has seduced. Like Sir Bounteous who fails to see in Lord Owemuch his own grandson and kisses the disguised Follywit believing himself to be embracing his formerly ill mistress, Penitent cannot tell the difference between a devil and his lover” (28). Thus, the men and women of *A Mad World* have completely different perspectives on women. As Leinwand remarks, “there was a wide divergence of opinion on the status of women in the late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century London. Women were alternately praised and damned. They were either virgins or they were whores. . . [and] women in Jacobean comedy were not all of one sort” (137-8). Follywit believes that women are naturally chaste, whereas Penitent believes they are naturally promiscuous. The Mother, Courtesan, and Mistress Harebrain recognize that custom’s vision of women places them in stereotypical roles, and instead of being chaste,

perform the role of the chaste woman.

Although Middleton does not endorse a particular nature for women in the play, Penitent remarks on the tricksters' "madness" in a way that draws explicit distinctions between male and female wit. Starting with the play's title, *A Mad World, My Masters*, the notion of madness is brought to the attention of the audience and raises the question of what it means, in the realm of the play, to be mad. Penitent refers to both Follywit and the Courtesan as mad because of their wit and scheming. In Penitent's first speech he refers to Follywit as "a mad-brain o'th'first, whose pranks scorn to have precedents, to be second to any, or walk beneath any madcap's inventions" (1.1.92-4). According to Penitent, Follywit is a "mad-brain," but capable of only youthful pranks so his madness in wit will be short lived. His wit is merely "youth of common receiv'd riot / Time's comic flashes, and the fruits of blood" (1.1.92-4). In his Introduction to the play, Standish Henning observes,

When Penitent Brothel excuses Follywit's roistering as the 'common receiv'd riot' of youth, 'Time's comic flashes, and the fruits of blood' (I.i.92-93), he identifies for the audience its expected response: Follywit's success is to be measured by the brilliance of his inventive tricks, of which he himself is very proud, rather than by the more sober standards of right and wrong. 'Time's comic flashes' is a phrase which urges that no lasting harm can come of the grand larceny just plotted before our eyes, the robbing of his grandfather. Boys will be boys, and the implication is clear that with the passing of time and cooling of the blood, Follywit will become a sensible citizen. (xi)

Penitent further distinguishes between Follywit's short-lived male wit that results in a temporary madness: the "fruits of blood" in a "mad-brain" and the Courtesan's long term female wit, which is the "Art of ladies" (3.2.267). Penitent praises the Courtesan's wit: "Let me admire thee. / The wit of man wanes and decreases soon, / But women's wit is ever at full moon" (3.2.174-6). As Penitent has already made clear, the wit of Follywit will wane and decrease with maturity and cooling down; however, a woman with wit, in this case the Courtesan, does not lose her wit because it is "ever at full moon." These lines also have implicit sexual innuendoes in them, which further suggest a difference between male and female wit. As Alan Brissenden has pointed out in the plays of Shakespeare, Middleton and their contemporaries, the term "wit" can also refer to sexual organs, as "this was an accepted meaning of the period, and was used particularly in the context of bawdy jokes" ("Appendix A" 229). Thus, "women's wit is ever at full moon" implies that a woman's sexual organs are gaping holes and ever open and ready for sexual encounters, in contrast to a man's which "waned and decreases soon." Therefore, as a result of the Courtesan's implied insatiable passions, which will never cool like Follywit's, her wit will be constant. Middleton's description of women's wit and its sexual implications suggest that women's intelligence can coexist with their sexual and passionate selves; thus the Courtesan can still be capable of intelligent and rational plotting, even though she is full of sexual passion. Penitent reveals that in the Courtesan and Follywit passion is directly related to their wit, an idea that diverges from the cultural assumption that women's passionate natures overrule their ability to think rationally.

As the two main tricksters in the play, the Courtesan and Follywit are juxtaposed so

that the audience may compare the quality of their wit and trickery. The comparison is nowhere more clear than in the marriage of the two tricksters. Observing that the Courtesan guides the actions of the subplot just as Follywit drives the main plot, Lieblein calls attention to the similar language used by both characters when speaking of their respective schemes: “the two are linked by their insistence on the combination of art and life in their activities. . . . This juxtaposed appreciation of their artistry reinforces the connection between Follywit and the Courtesan” (30). In a play whose characters are all either tricksters or dupes the audience is left wondering after the two tricksters marry which of the two is the dupe and whose trickery prevails. Follywit is gulled into believing that the Courtesan lacks the artificial exterior he claims to be against women’s “kind:” “Give me a woman as she was made a first, simple of herself, without sophistication, like this wench. I cannot abide them when they have tricks, set speeches and artful entertainments” (4.5.62-5). Follywit perceives the Courtesan to be a sweet virgin because he does not really understand what a “perfect maid” is aside from the stereotypes of the maid as a “bashful maiden” who appears to “stand upon stricter points,” or principles, than most other women because she seems fearful of losing her honour, shy, and frightened of men (a role reminiscent of the advice she previously gave Mistress Harebrain) (4.5.59, 6). Although Follywit rails against women for going against their “kind” or true nature, since he is unable to distinguish women’s true “kind,” he cannot see beyond the very contrived artifice that he denounces as concealing “kind.” Therefore, he inadvertently “lets a quean gull” him (5.2.301). Although Lieblein believes that the Courtesan and Follywit are equally gulled because the Courtesan exclaims in dismay “O destiny! Have I married a thief, mother?” realizing that she was duped into

marrying another trickster, these lines do not place the gulling on equal footing. While Frank intentionally gulls Follywit, he does not intentionally beguile her. As P.K. Ayers argues, “the Courtesan, in certain respects the cleverest intriguer of them all, escapes almost entirely from retribution—although there is some slight irony in her expression of dismay at discovering that she has married a ‘thief’ “ (7). While Follywit is punished for his misunderstanding of women by marrying one whom he perceives to be a “perfect maid” (4.6.77) but who is really a courtesan and his Grandfather’s whore, the Courtesan achieves the marriage to a wealthy man that she sought out from the beginning of the play. With his inaccurate pretensions to understanding women’s “kind,” Follywit is unable to distinguish between a quean and a maid. Follywit, the gull, is punished for this act of misjudging external character for inward essence—mistaking the appearance of a maid for the heart and nature of a maid. Since neither Penitent nor Follywit is able to define kind, and the Courtesan, the main female figure in the play, is always playing a role, Middleton suggests that there may be no identifiable “kind” of nature for women.

The final moments of the play endorse the Courtesan as the most successful trickster because the ambiguities of whether to believe in her honesty at the conclusion of the play leave the audience questioning whether they, too, have been taken in by the Courtesan’s trickery. Lieblein asks, “*Is Follywit a thief or is he merely, as Sir Bounteous had earlier expansively suggested, a youth who has been guilty of ‘some comic pranks’ but after all ‘an honest trusty bosom’?* (II, i.122-3). *Is the Courtesan a whore, or does she, as she asserts, have ‘a soul true both to thee and heaven’?* (V.ii.260)” (30). Sir Bounteous gives Follywit a thousand marks so that he need not resort to thieving any longer. Follywit is able to accept

whom he has married: “by my troth, she is as good a cup of nectar as any bachelor needs to sip at” (5.2.309-10). In remaining married, the Courtesan is “made honest” (4.5.139), and states, “what I have been is past. Be that forgiven, / And have a soul true both to thee and heaven” (5.2.303-4). As Lieblein states, “given the role of ‘wife’ to play, she ceases to be a whore” (31). The play leaves it to the audience to determine whether or not the Courtesan is truly made honest⁶. Robert Root observes, “*A Mad World My Masters* is in no way a didactic play positing a moral exemplum. Its ironies and equivalencies, rather than offering answers, thrust the questions which require judgement back into the audience” (88). Middleton’s *A Mad World* is a place where both trickster and dupe are susceptible to deceptions.⁷ Root asserts that the conclusion of the play—where Follywit, accepting having been gulled, marries the Courtesan, and the Courtesan in turn becomes honest—is the play’s final irony: “the order which is ruffled by the deceptions of these figures is re-established through their own agencies, as the circle of deception comes closed. Rather than a well-ordered world to which all digressions must return, the abounding ironies of the play suggest that our mad world is madder than we knew” (90). Robert Bell points out that Sir Bounteous probably still believes that the Courtesan is pregnant with his child (63). Thus, in giving Follywit a thousand marks, Sir Bounteous dupes his own “grandson into raising a child who will, Bounteous believes, usurp Follywit’s birthright” (63). Of course, the Courtesan is not pregnant and therefore Sir Bounteous is also gulled in the play’s conclusion. Bell asserts that “this final deception in the play’s conclusion related to Gullman’s anticipated maternity signals a continuation of, rather than a termination to, the cycle of deception and duping with which *A Mad World* began” (63). Even the audience is not distanced from Middleton’s mad

world. As Brissenden states, “if the genial endings of the plays seem to soften the satire, that impression that this is so is only temporary” (“Middletonian” 39). Likewise, the end of *A Mad World* does seem light-hearted: Follywit realizes he has married a whore and accepts his wife anyway; the Courtesan is dismayed to find that her husband is a thief, but is still made wealthier by the marriage, and Sir Bounteous happily gives his grandson a thousand marks, amused that his grandson has been gulled by his quean. However, the audience is left with the uncertainty that they cannot know for sure whether the Courtesan is made honest, believes she can be made honest, or continues the cycle of deceit and pretends she is honest. Recalling William Dynes’ description of the Jacobean trickster who is “demonstrably capable of out-thinking most of the other characters in the play” (366), Middleton’s ambiguous conclusion allows for the possibility that the Courtesan is able to out-think and dupe the audience as well as the characters in the play, suggesting that her intelligence is truly superior to all others. Furthermore, the recurrent trend of tricksters and dupes in the play implies that, by the conclusion of the play, the audience too will either possess the understanding of the trickster, or be in the position of the dupe. The ambiguous ending implies that whether or not the audience believes that the Courtesan is made honest, they may be duped, and are therefore more closely related to Middleton’s mad world than they may realize.

CHAPTER 3

SECRET SCHEMING AND A SUBVERSIVE SUITOR IN *NO WIT NO HELP**LIKE A WOMAN'S*

Kate Low-water, in *No Wit No Help like a Woman's*, is another example of a woman who successfully lives by her wits, artfully achieving economic gain by impersonating a male suitor in her schemes. *No Wit* continues to be one of Middleton's lesser known plays and according to Jowett, "Middleton's play . . . fell by the wayside, and it evidently remained unperformed for over three hundred years" (779). An MLA Bibliography search on *No Wit* reveals only thirteen critical sources which focus on the play. Those critics who have examined the play have tended to focus on the history of the play's performance (e.g. John Jowett's "Middleton's No Wit at the Fortune" and David Bergeron's "Middleton's *No Wit, No Help* and Civic Pageantry"), the role of the Dutch Emissary (Marianne Montgomery), or Kate Low-water and transvestitism and desire (Susan Zimmerman)⁸. Jennifer Panek's *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* has a more relevant and extensive examination of the play, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Jowett's Introduction to the play asserts, "Mistress Low-water stands out as a character who, though disadvantaged by misfortune and by the social expectations of gender, is able to succeed remarkably well through her own resourceful wit. . . . The comic plot-machine of *No Wit* rewards those who wittily help themselves" (779, 782). Like the Courtesan's wit in *A Mad World, My Masters*, in this play, Kate Low-water's wit is considered by other characters to be exceptionally strong for a woman. Middleton reveals that she is known for having an unusually strong wit when Jane entreats Kate's assistance in a plot of her own:

I am come to you,
 Beside my visitation, to request you
 To lay your wit to mine, which is but simple
 for my wit has not the strength
 Nor cunning to unloose 'em. (2.32-37)

However, even though Kate is the only successful trickster in this city comedy, no critic has conducted a thorough examination of Kate Low-water's intelligence in her witty schemes. Like the Courtesan in *A Mad World*, Middleton portrays Kate as a woman who understands that gender is based on cultural assumptions which are adopted as customs. Whereas the Courtesan manipulates these assumptions for her own ends, working within the confines of stereotypes of women, Kate chooses to depart from the stereotypical roles allotted to women altogether in her schemes and adopt the identity of a suitor by performing the cultural assumptions associated with men. Moreover, while Follywit is the male trickster counterpart to the Courtesan in *A Mad World*, in *No Wit* Kate outsmarts the play's male trickster, Sir Gilbert, and takes on her male identity so wholly and successfully that she is simultaneously a witty male and a female trickster in the play.

In her first appearance onstage Kate assesses the traditional roles for women in early modern society to determine whether it is possible for a woman to maintain her proper role while also recovering a fortune that was unlawfully stolen from her. In the plot that revolves around Kate, the audience learns that Kate's husband, Master Low-water, has been previously swindled out of his wealth by the usurer and extortionist Sir Avarice

Goldenfleece. After Goldenfleece's death, the Low-waters' wealth is passed on to Goldenfleece's widow. Kate believes that the Widow's fortune is primarily made up of the Low-water's stolen wealth:

Is't not injustice that a widow laughs,
And lay her mourning part upon a wife;
That she should have the garment, I the heart?

My wealth her husband left her, and me her grief. (2.16-19)

Although in these lines Kate does not explicitly express her wishes to exact revenge on the widow, she alludes to the fact that she is poor because the Widow has all her money.

Therefore, by recovering the Low-water fortune, Kate's and the Widow's positions would be reversed, leaving the Widow in the same destitute situation in which Kate finds herself in the beginning of the play. Later in the play, both Kate and the Widow refer to one another as sworn enemies (2.102, 108, 4.354, 384), which further suggests that Kate's plans to recover her wealth are also vengeful. Kate deliberates whether there are appropriate ways for a gentlewoman to personally retrieve her wealth from her enemy: "is there no saving means, no help religious / For a distressed gentlewoman to live by? / Has virtue no revenue?" (2.1-25). Kate begins to realize she may be hopeless without action and exclaims,

Twixt two extremes runs there no blessed mean,
No comfortable strain, that I may kiss it?
Must I to whoredom or to beggary lean?
My mind being so sound? Is there no way to miss it? (2.12-15)

Middleton presents a female character that considers all the possible ways to regain the Low-water fortune from the Widow, and finds that there are no solutions in her present female form that would allow her to maintain her virtue and also appear virtuous to others while scheming. Kate places great importance on her own actual virtue, and also on the appearance of virtue: “Horror nor splendour, shadows fair nor foul, / Should force me to shame my husband, wound my soul” (2.25-6). As a gentlewoman, it would not be fitting for Kate to actively seek out to recover the Low-water fortune; thus, Kate must find an alternative—a “blessed mean” —that allows her to preserve virtue while regaining her wealth from the Widow. Kate will determine later in the play that the “blessed mean” is to use her own wit and scheme her way into wealth by temporarily forsaking her husband and her sex. This speech indirectly reveals that Kate’s motivation to cross-dress in her scheme is because she believes that cross-dressing will keep her virtue intact since it will have been encased within her male identity. Therefore, Kate’s virtue will be protected by a man (that man being herself in disguise).

While Kate’s first speech determines that her best method of regaining the Low-water fortune is to find a “blessed mean,” which will later be revealed to be dressing as a man, she never asks what her husband should do to restore their money, foreshadowing that Kate is going to be a better man than her male husband. In fact, in the first seventeen lines of her first speech there is no mention that she is even married. It is only once Kate determines that she will not compromise her virtue and turn to whoredom, beggary or any other means of ill repute to regain her wealth that there is mention of her own husband: “horror nor splendour, shadows fair nor foul, / Should force me shame my husband, wound my soul”

(2.25-6). Kate's language implies that the Goldenfleeces' money has been taken from her and not from Master Low-water: "is't not injustice that a widow laughs / And lays her mourning part upon a wife?"(1.2.16-7). Kate even refers to the money as "my wealth her husband [Goldenfleece] left her" (2.19). However, in the previous scene the servant Saviourwit mentions to the audience that Sir Goldenfleece is "second to none for usury and extortion, / As too well it appears on a poor gentleman, / One Master Low-Water, from whose estate / He pulled that fleece that makes his widow weight" (1.165-8). Saviourwit refers to the fortune as Master Low-water's, yet Kate refers to the fortune as her own. Either Kate's dowry was stolen by Sir Goldenfleece, which can account for both Kate's assertion that the stolen money was her own and Saviourwit's contention that the fortune was Master Low-water's, or the stolen fortune is Master Low-water's wealth, which Kate claims as her own equal property because they are married. Kate's assertion of the wealth as her own, and her omission of her husband in her plans to recover the Low-water fortune, reveal Kate's self-reliance and allude to her husband's incompetence.

Contrary to Kate's wit, which guides the actions of the plot from the beginning of the play, Middleton introduces men as being of weak wit, ineffectual, passive, and incapable of resolving their problems. The first lines of the play reveal that Philip, Sir Oliver Twilight's son and a key character in the subplot, is already at his wit's end even though the play has hardly begun, and his father's man Saviourwit is not far behind:

PHILIP. I am at my wit's ends, Saviourwit

SAVOURWIT. And I am e'en following after you as fast as I can, sir.

PHILIP. My wife will be forced from me, my pleasure!

SAVOURWIT. Talk no more on't, sir. How can there be any hope
 i'th' middle when we're both at our wits' end in the beginning? My
 invention was ne'er so gravelled since I first set out upon't. (1.1.1-8)

Philip's scheming has left him entirely at his wit's end, and he resorts not to scheming but to truth to resolve his situation. The audience learns that ten years prior, Philip's mother and sister were thought to be lost at sea. When his father learned that they survived and were being held for ransom by pirates, he sent his son to pay the ransom and retrieve his wife and daughter. However, instead of paying the ransom, Philip used the money for his own devices and married a woman he met at an inn on the way to rescue his mother and sister. The play commences when Philip returns home without ransom money or family, Philip tells his father that his new wife is actually his sister, and that Philip's mother has died. Later in the play, Philip's mother, who is alive and well, returns to the city and Philip is at a loss as to how to resolve his tangled web of lies. In spite of his name, Saviourwit encourages Philip to resort to truth rather than more trickery to solve his problems:

Confess your follies, and ask pardon for 'em.
 Tell her [the Mother] the state of all things

 Deal plainly; heaven will bless thee. Turn out all,
 And shake your pockets after it. (5.90-1, 94-5)

Theodore Levinwand points out that Philip, who is the "play's wealthy heir, is so beaten down by his troubles that he approaches suicide no less than three times" (163). Rather than wit,

Philip's situation is resolved with honesty and reliance on his mother to take control of the situation.

In the main plot, Kate's husband is equally ineffectual and does not contrive any schemes in the play. As Jowett asserts in his Introduction to the play, "*No Wit* might be described as a female-oriented continuation of male-oriented city comedy. The rapacious Goldenfleece has defrauded Low-water of his fortune; now Mistress Low-water pursues a new kind of confrontation with Goldenfleece's widow. The key men are dead (Goldenfleece), ineffectual (Low-water) or contemptible (the Widow's suitors)" (779). Kate determines it is her responsibility to regain this wealth by posing as a male suitor to the Widow Goldenfleece with the intention of marrying her and reclaiming the Low-water fortune, and her husband is merely her assistant. In addition to failing to reclaim the fortune that is rightfully his own, Kate's husband is also a passive pawn in Kate's scheme. Moreover, as a passive pawn, Low-water is also deprived of the knowledge of Kate's entire plot, and yet blindly complies by participating. When the audience is introduced to Master Low-water, Kate has already decided to take on the persona of the suitor to the Widow Goldenfleece. She entreats her husband to consent to blindly support her plot without telling him her plan: "will you but second / The purpose I intend, I'll be the first forward. / I crave no more of thee but a following spirit. / Will you but grant me that?" (2.162-6). The secondary role her husband will play as her servant is only alluded to in these lines, but Kate fully intends to take control as the orchestrator and leader in this plot. Once Kate is dressed as suitor, Middleton again reveals that Kate is in charge, and her husband passively participates without details: Kate tells her husband "I'll have a trick for 'em; look you

second me well now” (6.17). Even in a private exchange between the disguised Kate and Master Low-water, Kate chooses to withhold her plans:

MISTRESS LOW-WATER. I have sent one to th’ widow.

MASTER LOW-WATER. Well said, Kate.

 Thou ply’st thy business close. The coast is clear yet.

MISTRESS LOW-WATER. Let me but have warning

 I shall make pretty shift with them.

MASTER LOW-WATER. That thou shalt, wench. (6.1-4)

Master Low-Water recognizes that Kate “ply’st thy business close,” meaning she keeps her plan, or business secret, and he happily accepts his secondary role, secrets and all, confident that his wife will successfully pull off her plan. Furthermore, Master Low-water is quick to praise his wife’s ingenuity: “Faith, I’m glad I’m alive to commend thee, Kate. I shall be sure now to see my commendations delivered” (6.97-9). Leinwand argues that while Kate is empowered by acting as a man, “she does not succeed by acting just like any man. . . . The sort of man who provides Mistress Low-water with a viable role model, and so the ability to have her way in the City, is the clever, witty town gallant” (163). However, while Kate is inspired by the failed trickery of Sir Gilbert, there is no successful witty gallant for Kate to model herself after, and this lack of a successful male schemer suggests that Kate’s inherent intelligence is what allows her to take on the role of the witty male trickster. Kate’s secrecy from her husband, and desire to lead the scheme with him as her servant, further suggest that Kate’s wit is superior to that of her husband as well as the other men in the play.

Once Kate is dressed as a suitor, Middleton foregrounds Kate's understanding that the rules of obedience in marriage are merely a result of custom rather than because women are by nature intended to obey. She reminds her husband that in her new garb, she is no longer bound by the rules of marriage to be obedient to him. Kate tells him,

I must seem very imperious, I can tell you;

Therefore if I should use you roughly,

Pray forgive me beforehand.

.....

You must look for no obedience in these clothes;

That lies in the pocket of my gown. (6.19-21, 23-4)

These lines reinforce the idea that gender is bound to custom; there is no intrinsic biological femaleness that denotes subservience to men, but the dictates of gender and custom. Kate is fully aware that dressed as a man she can be in a position superior to her husband. Kate's husband praises Kate for what he perceives to be her reluctance to take a position over her husband. At one point, when other servants enter the room, a disguised Kate tells Master Low-water, "Take you your ease, sir; / Here are those now more fit to be commanded" and Master Low-Water responds in an aside, "How few women are of thy mind! She thinks it too much to keep me in subjection for one day, whereas some wives would be glad to keep their husbands in awe all the days of their lives, and think it the best bargain that e'er they made" (6.214-221). However, interestingly, Kate has already disregarded some marriage customs before she outwardly rejects them by dressing as a man, because Kate is already acting as the head of their relationship. With his consent, Kate rules over her husband, requesting only

his obedience, but not granting him the knowledge to justify or understand why he must be obedient. While Master Low-Water is not literally in a place of subjection when undisguised, Kate's secrecy about the details of her plan to dupe the widow, does already grant her a power over her husband, and he accepts it wholeheartedly, never even asking Kate about her plan.

Middleton sets Sir Gilbert up as Kate's adversary in courting the widow, inviting a comparison of who is the better and more able-minded man and trickster. In their first scene together, when Kate is still dressed as a woman and Sir Gilbert offers to return the Low-water fortune to her through a plot to woo and marry the widow, Sir Gilbert's plan inspires Kate to woo the widow herself. In the letter, Sir Gilbert offers Kate a lofty yearly sum that he plans to obtain by marrying the widow Goldenfleece and taking all her money, which will be rightfully his after their marriage. The money would then be transferred to Kate on the condition that she fulfill Sir Gilbert's amorous desires. Sir Gilbert's strategy to woo the widow is made perfectly clear: "I'll empty your enemy's bags to maintain you" (2.87-8). While hearing Sir Gilbert's offer, Kate begins to concoct her own scheme to woo the widow. Unlike Sir Gilbert, who exposes his plan at length, Kate's scheme remains a secret. Although the audience is not privy to any explicit explanations of Kate's plot, Middleton subtly integrates quick glimpses into this scene. In spite of Kate's disdain for Sir Gilbert's offer—"so foul a monster does this wrong appear / That I give pity to mine enemy here" (2.100-1)—it is when reading the letter from Sir Gilbert that she begins to secretly hatch her plan, refraining from revealing it to anyone, including the audience. At first Mistress Low-water refers to the letter as full of "treacherous perjury and adulterous lust!" (2.101).

However, it soon becomes clear that it is the adultery, “to wed rich widows only to keep queans” (2.105), that Mistress Low-water finds appalling and not the swindling. The change of heart and beginnings of her plan begin to emerge when Kate states,

What a strange path he takes to my affection,
 And thinks't the nearest way—twill never be—
 Goes through mine enemy's ground to come to me.
 This letter is most welcome. I repent now
 That my last anger threw thee at my feet.
 My bosom shall receive thee. (2.106-11)

Presumably Kate pauses to muse before she changes her mind to find the letter “most welcome.” Aside from the pause and change in feeling towards the letter, the only indication the audience receives of Kate’s plot surfaces when she states, “you men have th’art to overcome poor women” (2.144). As her previous speech made clear, Mistress Low-water feels there is little she can do to regain her wealth when she is a woman that is not injurious to her virtue; however, as a man, she can “overcome poor women” (those poor women being herself, and also the soon to be swindled widow) and achieve her desired ends. In addition, Kate’s comments imply that she believes that she can possess “th’art to overcome poor women,” even if she is only feigning being a man. Furthermore, Kate can also use this “art” to overcome Sir Gilbert. She tells him “Pray give my thoughts the freedom of one day, / And all the rest take you” (3.143-4), and Sir Gilbert is already gulled into believing her art and exclaims in an aside “this bird’s my own” (3.145). Later in the play, using the very letter Sir Gilbert wrote to Kate, Kate the suitor discredits him in front of the Widow, thereby

removing him from the competition to win over the Widow. Later in the play when Weatherwise, Overdone, Pepperton, and Sir Gilbert discuss how they lost the Widow to Kate, Weatherwise comments, “Why, I tell you, Sir Gilbert we were all out of our wits in’t” (7.18-9). In contrast to the real men in the play, who, like Philip and Saviourwit in the subplot, are lacking wit when they need it most, or Sir Gilbert whose wit is dull, Kate’s wit does not fail her, and instead allows her to prevail in her performance of a suitor wooing the Widow. When the Clown walks in to a scene with the four failed suitors onstage he remarks, “Here are all the old shooters that have lost the game at pricks. What a fair mark had Sir Gilbert on’t if he had shot home before the last arrow came in!” (7.81-4). Of all the suitors, Kate is the one that wins at the game of pricks. As Jowett’s footnote explains, “at pricks” means “(a) to hit the bull’s eye (b) with penises” (811). Thus, not only does Kate have superior wit, which leads to winning the widow, but the Clown also implies that Kate’s penis is also responsible for this success, which further emphasizes that Kate is better at being a man than the actual men in the play.

Kate’s immersion in the role of the male suitor is so complete that she not only rules over her husband, and wins the Widow, but also internalizes the stereotype of the lusty widow and the forward suitor.⁹ Kate intends to woo the widow by pretending to be a shy younger brother with a voracious sexual appetite. Although she believes “nothing kills a widow’s heart so much / As a faint bashful wooer” (6.92-3), she also claims that to woo a widow one must appeal to more than just the widow’s heart. Before Kate begins her wooing her husband warns her, “But soft ye, Kate. / How an she should accept of your bold kindness?” and Kate responds, “A chief point to be thought on, by my faith. / Marry,

therefore, sir, be you sure to step in, for fear I should shame myself, and spoil all” (6.100-104). Kate intends to use “bold kindness” and be sexually forward, thinking that the widow will be receptive to her sexual advances, and begs her husband to step in before she is exposed as a woman. The stereotypes of the lusty widow and the forward suitor are previously introduced during the banquet scene and Kate’s wooing manner in this scene is reminiscent of Pepperton’s earlier description of contemporary courting: “Saucy courting has brought all modest wooing clean out of fashion. You shall have few maids nowadays got without rough handling, all the town’s so used to’t; and most commonly too they’re joined before they’re married, because they’ll be sure to be fast enough” (4.43-8).

Pepperton’s description of the sexual advances involved in contemporary courting appears to serve the interests of men (Leinwand 163). As Leinwand observes, “Gallants in *No Wit No Help Like a Woman*’s desire a woman only when she is ‘made as a man would wish to have her’ (2.2.168)” (163). Kate’s wooing scene proves that women do not enjoy the “rough handling” which Pepperton describes. In fact, in this scene where Kate acts out similar “rough handling,” attempting to embrace the Widow, this method of wooing is proven to be ineffective, and possibly damages the chances of a successful match. Kate exclaims, “Come, make but short service, widow: a kiss and to bed. I’m very hungry, I’faith, wench” (6.130-2). Kate then boldly embraces the widow until Master Low-water, disguised as a servant, interrupts the scene and the embrace, for Kate would be exposed as a woman if she were to follow through with her sexual demands: “he came in a good time, I thank him for’t” (6.171). Kate exclaims in an aside, “I’ve lost my way again. / there’s but two paths that leads to widows beds; / That’s wealth or forwardness; and I’ve took the wrong one” (6.182-5).

These lines suggest that even though Kate's stereotype of the lusty widow has proved to be untrue in this case, it is not disproven as a stereotype. Since there are "but two paths" that lead to "widows' beds," Kate believes this particular widow needs to be wooed by wealth. For a character that has previously shown some insight into how culture constructs gender identities, it is noteworthy that Middleton has Kate so immersed in her impersonation of a man that she views these stereotypes about women from a male perspective, believing that women will respond best if men act out their stereotypical roles (e.g. the aggressive suitor).

In addition, when Kate the suitor is married to the Widow, she begins to construct the very gender stereotype of the lustful widow that the Widow has proven to be false, proving that stereotypes may serve the interests of men. When the Widow kisses her new husband, Kate exclaims, "Do you think you've married only a cock sparrow, / And fit but for one business, like a fool?" (9.217-8). Although the Widow admits "I chose you for love" (9.244), Kate claims the Widow is too anxious for sex and not love: "I like you worse / For this fond heat, and drink in more suspicion of you. / You high-fed widows are too cunning people / For a poor gentleman to come simply to" (9.263-7). As Panek asserts, "the word 'love' for her [the widow] . . . is not merely a euphemism for sex (181). Although the Widow has just remarried, Kate still implies that the Widow married for lust not love, and that her lust continues to rule her. In this scene Kate's escape from her marriage to the Widow relies on convincing the other men in the scene of the Widow's adulterous lust. Since Kate is aware that men customarily associate lust with widows, she assumes that her accusations will be believable. She tells the wedding guests that on returning to the Widow's chamber later in the evening, "I found the door / Warded suspiciously, and I hear a noise / such as fear makes,

and guiltiness at th'approaching/ Of an unlooked-for husband" (9.354-7). The guests respond, "this is strange, sir" and on Kate's request ("If you be sons of honour, follow me") the men help break open the door and rush into the Widow's bedchamber. (9.358, 60). Kate manipulates how readily men accept the lusty widow stereotype to her advantage, and also simultaneously encourages its continuation within the realm of the play. Using Kate's male persona as an example, Middleton demonstrates how culture, and specifically men, are responsible for constructing the stereotypical roles allotted to women.

Throughout the play, the details of Kate's scheming have remained secret, and this secrecy highlights Kate's strategy as a self-reliant trickster. Believing that her plan is best kept secret, Kate states,

There is no happiness but has her season
Wherein the brightness of her virtue shines.
The husk falls off in time that long shuts up
The fruit in a dark prison; so sweeps by
The cloud of miseries from wretches' eyes,
That yet, though fall'n, at length they see to rise.

The secret powers work wonderous, and duly. (my emphasis 2.146-52)

Like the husk of the fruit, which slowly falls off of its own accord, Kate's plan unravels in due course, without any forced removal of husk, or admission of details of her scheme. In the next scene when Kate is dressed as a suitor and attends Weatherwise's zodiac dinner to expose Sir Gilbert's insincere wooing, Master Low-water echoes her lines: "this is the bit I watched for all this while; / But it comes duly" (4.321-2). Master Low-water is not privy to

his wife's secret plan and must watch and wait for it to unfold knowing only that the letter will be used in some way. He states that he has waited for her to reveal the letter element of her secret scheme and that it "comes duly." The similar language suggests that although Kate is subtle and secret in her scheming, Middleton wants the audience to be aware that it is intentional secrecy, which her husband patiently waits to be revealed. Kate's secrecy is part of her strategy. Like a chess player trying to out manoeuvre an opponent, Kate reveals little so that she may gain a lot. Thus, by keeping her plan secret, and taking care to act out each successive move, Kate has a better chance of winning. In the moments after Kate's plan completes its course Sir Gilbert comments, "Like quarrelling actors that have passionate fits; / We submit always to the writer's wits" (8.314-5). Similarly, the characters in the play become, unbeknownst to them, actors in her witty plot. By making Kate secretive about her plot, Middleton gives her the power of the playwright; she slowly unfolds her plan as Middleton slowly unfolds the course of action in the play.

Through Kate's secrecy, Middleton depicts a form of silence in women that diverges from traditional cultural attitudes towards women's silence. Christina Luckyj observes that there is an "astonishing semantic elasticity of the English word 'silence', as it glosses terms ranging from consent to secrecy, from impotence to shame," which may be partially due to the "diverse etymological origins of its Latin roots" (2). Kate's silence is her omission or withholding of crucial information, rather than a literally silent woman. As Luckyj suggests, "Because it is dynamic and interactive, the early modern drama is a particularly fertile site for an exploration of silence. On the stage we see silence in action, embodied by the actor and framed reactively by his onstage and offstage audiences" (78). In a play, actors'

gestures, language, and actions are all on display, and as a result, each gesture, speech, and action is intended to convey particular meaning. Kate's secrecy has meaning because within the system of a play, speech generally guides the plot, not silence. This idea is particularly striking since her silence diverges from custom's representation of women's silence as passive. For instance, Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*, reveals attitudes toward women's silence and subjection that are representative of most traditional attitudes toward silence in early modern England (Luckyj 43). He states, "What becometh a woman best, and first of al? Silence. What seconde? Silence. What third? Silence. What fourth? Silence" (qtd. in Luckyj 43). In early modern England, while feminine silence was seen as a sign of a lack of intellect or deprivation of knowledge, masculine silence was "often invested with the active qualities of speech . . . becoming a form of eloquence or resistance. . . . Masculine silence was presence and possession, rather than deprivation or lack" (45). Kate's silence is reminiscent of masculine silence because it is intentional and strategic, revealing her self-reliance in her scheme, and a degree of intelligence that is generally allotted to men. In the play, speech is not the best manifestation of rational thought; rather, silence and secrecy lead to action, revealing the intricacies of a rational plan. Kate repeatedly refrains from revealing her plan both publicly (to other characters) and privately (in an aside), which suggests that Kate's power lies in her secrecy. This idea is further highlighted by the ineffectiveness of the plots of the men who do confess their plans to the audience.

Middleton juxtaposes Kate's effective and secret scheming with the ineffective schemes of the suitors, who do not keep their schemes secret from other characters in the play, or from the audience. Sir Gilbert, who the audience learns has repeatedly attempted to

seduce Kate in the past, lays out a plan which he believes will lead him to Kate's bed; however, because he exposes his whole plan, his scheme fails. Sir Gilbert's plan to wed the Widow and give Kate the Widow's wealth in exchange for sexual favours relies on the assumption that Kate will be a willing participant because of her hatred for the Widow. He states in an aside,

'Tis good policy, too,
 To keep one that so mortally hates the widow.
 She'll have more care to keep it close herself;
 And look what wind her revenge goes withal,
 The self-same gale whisks up the sails of love.

I shall loose much good sport by that. (2.110-16)

However, in disclosing his whole plan and begging Kate, "only consent to my desires, and the widow's notch shall lie open to you," Sir Gilbert's plan fails because he reveals too much to Kate (2.93-4). She is disgusted with his plans: "what a strange path he takes to my affection, / An thinks't the nearest way— 'twill never be—/ Goes through mine enemy's ground to come to me" (2.106-8). While the scheme of the four rejected suitors, Sir Gilbert, Weatherwise, Pepperton, and Overdone, is not rendered ineffective by their openness, their open plotting builds audience expectations that their final scheme will be successful, and makes them look more foolish when their plans fail. Similar to Kate, who initially reveals to the audience her desire to seek revenge on the Widow to the audience, the suitors make a "black oath" onstage to have their revenge on the Widow (7.37). They spend a scene openly plotting to have their revenge on the disguised Kate during the wedding masque by

disgracing the Widow and breaking up her marriage to Kate. Sir Gilbert, speaking for the group, announces to the audience their oath,

By all means sland'rous, in every place,
 And in all companies, to disgrace the widow,
 No matter in what rank so it be spiteful
 And worthy your revenges.

.....

. . . this in time

May grow so general, as disgrace will spread,

That wild dissension may divide the bed. (7.40-3, 51-3)

However, unlike Kate, who keeps secret the remaining details of how to conduct her plot, the suitors discuss possible plans in front of the audience. For instance Weatherwise suggests, "I'll give it out abroad that I have lain with the widow myself" (7.62-3). Sir Gilbert praises this plan: "This will do excellent, sir!" (7.70). The suitors ultimately decide to disguise themselves as earth, air, fire, and water in "a device at the wedding" (7.143). They deceive Beveril, the scholar who initially planned the performance for the wedding, into believing that their interest in performing is sincere:

Here are four of us gentlemen her friends,
 Both lovers of her honour and your art,
 That would be glad so to express ourselves,
 And think our service worthily placed. (7.219-22)

As their initial plan to disgrace the Widow with rumours of her promiscuity makes clear to the audience, these suitors are insincere when speaking to Beveril. Although the audience does not know exactly what the suitors plan to say during their performances, it is implied that these parts require each element to speak, and each speech will most likely deviate from Beveril's script to in some way disgrace the widow. The suitors' speeches aim to disgrace widows in various ways, primarily railing against "libidinous widows" (9.72) for their lustiness and promiscuity. Their final plan is ineffective, however, because as Jowett asserts, "their actual speeches are calculatedly nasty, though the sheer absurdity of the suitors' transformations [into costumes of the elements earth, air, fire, and water] ensures that they cannot be taken seriously" ("Introduction" 782). Moreover, the suitors are made to look even more ludicrous by the by the very costumes they wear because two of the elements were intended to be female roles: "Air and Fire should be by men presented, / But the other two in the forms of women" (8.250-1). After the performance ends, the Widow asks the four suitors, "Was this the plot now your poor envy works out? I do revenge myself with pity on you" (9.87-9). While the men are poor schemers and have little effective wit, Kate's secretive scheming is full of wit.¹⁰

Middleton ultimately returns Kate to her role as woman and wife, yet he still rewards Kate for her wit. Once Kate unmask herself in the final scene, her onstage audience is filled with awe that she was the "jealous cuckold all this coil's about" (9.565). Master Low-water also removes his disguise and acknowledges that he has played the "right worshipful servingman" to Kate's suitor because he is "a poor wronged gentleman glad to serve for his own" (9.566-7). Although Sir Oliver praises the husband and wife as a trickster team—"By

my faith you've served the widow a fine trick between you!" (9.568)— it is specifically Kate's wit that is rewarded in the play's conclusion. Master Beveril, in his gratitude, offers his sister access to the Widow's wealth:

Ne'er was a poor gentleman so bound to a sister
 As I am, for the neatness of thy mind!
 Not only that thy due, but all our wealth
 Shall lie as open as the sun to man
 For thy employments. (9.679-84)

The Widow, however, takes her gratitude a step further and grants Kate full control of the Goldenfleece fortune: "Ha! Worthy sister! / The government of all I bless thee with" (9.687-8). Jowett states, "Mistress Low-water doesn't get a wife, but she does get a dowry. . . . The Widow not only gives Mistress Low-water access to her wealth but puts her fully in control of it. She thus establishes an alliance between the women that strips her future husband of his potential rights" ("Introduction" 782). This "woman-to-woman financial exchange" (782) certainly complicates the sense of order restored by Kate's return to her position as woman and wife in the conclusion. Like the ambiguity surrounding Kate's marriage status in her first speech in the play, where her husband is only mentioned as an afterthought, Kate's married position in the conclusion of the play is also riddled with ambiguity. Kate previously acknowledged that as a wife she is expected to be obedient to her husband: "you must look for no obedience in these clothes; that lies in the pocket of my gown" (6.23-4). While she is no longer playing a role superior to her husband because she is back in her place as his wife, Kate is the one granted the control over the Goldenfleece fortune, not her husband. After

Kate and her husband reveal their true identities, Low-water remains a silent figure onstage for the rest of the scene, which is close to two hundred lines. While Middleton previously depicted Kate's secrecy as an active form of silence, a quality generally found in men, her husband ends the scene in passive silence as an onlooker to the praise and rewards bestowed on his wife for her ingenuity. Master Low-water's passivity further emphasizes that Kate's return to her position as woman and wife is not a stable form of containment, and suggests that Kate continues to possess the authority of a male, even back in her female form, as a reward for her exceptional wit.

CONCLUSION

DISRUPTIVE POTENTIAL IN THE “REFORMED” FEMALE TRICKSTERS

Sir Bounteous Progress concludes *A Mad World, My Masters* with the following comment on tricksters: “Who lives by cunning, mark it, his fate’s cast: / When he has gulled all, then is himself the last” (5.2.313-6). Although Sir Bounteous intends these lines to mean that the trickster will be the final gull, they do not apply to Middleton’s female tricksters, who both end up with exactly what they set out to achieve in the beginning of the plays. However, if the term “last” is taken to mean that the trickster will be the last person who remains standing after all others have been gulled, then it can apply to the Courtesan and Kate because these tricksters are rewarded for their wit rather than punished. In these two plays, standing last involves a return to abiding by the rules of custom, which during the play have been undermined and manipulated. While the Courtesan schemes using the stereotypical roles allotted to women as her method of deception, in the end she wants to, at the very least, appear to fit into the figure of the honourable wife. Kate Low-water chooses to depart from her position as woman and wife in her scheme to woo the Widow Goldenfleece dressed as a male suitor, and at the end of the play returns to her position as wife. However, in spite of the return to order, there is no way of knowing whether these former tricksters will ever scheme and challenge social order and custom again, or if they are reformed.

Since order appears to be restored in the conclusion of both plays, Middleton is able to explore progressive attitudes towards women’s intelligence in his female tricksters while still superficially crafting plays that work on the level of conventional city comedies with

trickster figures. In his Prologue to *No Wit No Help Like a Woman's* Middleton addresses the challenges of appealing to a diverse audience:

How is it possible to suffice
 So many ears, so many eyes?
 Some in wit, some in shows
 Take delight, and some in clothes;
 Some for mirth they chiefly come,
 Some for passion, for both some

 How is't possible to please
 Opinion tossed in such wild seas?
 Yet I doubt not, if attention
 Seize you above, and apprehension
 You below, to take things quickly,
 We shall both make you sad and tickle ye. (1-14)

Since the theatre was so popular (if all nine public theatres were open, 10% of the population of London could potentially attend), it drew diverse crowds, including women (Henderson and McManus 127). Middleton's Prologue to *No Wit* reveals the diversity of people in the audience and their varying interests in attending the theatre.¹¹ Tim Harris' Introduction to *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850* suggests that "men and women experienced popular culture in different ways and . . . did not occupy the culture of their class in the same way" (10). Moreover, as Kenneth Charlton observes about representations of men, women,

and children on the stage, “the dramatist provides only *clues* about their characters, clues which he knows full well will be interpreted in quite different ways by different members of his audience; indeed, it is part of his art to so arrange his clues that such reactions are produced” (6-7). Middleton can explore more progressive attitudes towards women’s capacity for intelligence best in a city comedy following the conventions of the trickster figure because the audience is so diverse and different people will take interest in different aspects of the play. In *No Wit* and *A Mad World*, Middleton provides clues to his exploration of women’s intelligence in his female tricksters’ language and scheming, and their contrasts to male tricksters and to other females.

If the audience is able to recognize these clues, they may identify that the intelligence that Middleton allots the Courtesan and Kate Low-water diverges from the conventional depictions of female wit as instinctual and ruled by the passions. Middleton’s depictions of women’s wit suggest that it is more than shallow craftiness; rather, it is based on intelligence and reason that are not developed through theoretical education, but are the result of individual inherent intellectual capacity. Furthermore, in portraying women with wit as controlled by reason rather than the passions, their wit is comparable to or better than men’s wit. Middleton recognizes that early modern conceptions of custom dictate the nature of gender and identity and is able to distance himself from traditional depictions of women’s intelligence.

Moreover, like the pamphlet *Haec Vir*, which has the effect of denouncing custom even though custom is ultimately endorsed in the pamphlet’s conclusion, these plays have

the potential to affect early modern perceptions of custom, even though they end with a seeming acceptance of it. Leinwand emphasizes that,

the women on stage were the creations of male playwrights only, and they were played by boys and young men. . . . Even within the freedom of the theatre, women were liable to discover that their fantasies were, if not fully censored, then mediated by the competing fantasies of men. . . . It proved impossible to fashion an independent woman without first making room for her amidst the strictures, the fears, and the desires of men. (149)

However, in *A Mad World, My Masters*, and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, Middleton retains a space for women's independence in the uncertainties that pervade the plays' conclusions. When an intelligent woman like the Courtesan or Kate Low-water is the trickster, even if there is a semblance of restoration of order in the last scene of the play, there remains a sense of uneasiness in knowing how easy it is for women to subvert and then return to their proper social and gendered positions. According to William Dynes, after the trickster figure has completed his or her scheme, "the play's hierarchy sees the energy of the rogue as subversive until it is either brought back into the community or summarily expunged from it; in either case, the end result is a comic restoration of the 'proper' bonds between social beings" (367). For the Courtesan, a return to order through marriage is not true containment. The uncertainty over whether the Courtesan is believably turned honest, or remains a trickster in the conclusion, highlights that her intelligence remains a threat to society because of how easily she evades categorization. Kate Low-water's return to her married position is equally ambiguous because while Kate is once again in the position of

the wife, she is granted a substantial amount of power, both in stage speech (while her husband remains silent) and by financial control. Containment is not a stable state for either of these former tricksters because, just as they had the potential to scheme out of their “contained positions” as wife, prostitute, mistress, and / or maid, they both still have the potential to rebel from their restored containment as wives. Dynes acknowledges that “the trickster may be expelled or subsumed back into the society, but his or her disruptive energy is always a potential threat” (383). The Courtesan’s and Kate Low-water’s understanding of gender politics does not disappear just because they return to the “‘proper’ bonds between social beings” and are therefore “contained.” If anything, there is even more of a potential threat for such an intelligent schemer after she is “contained” at the end of the play because the audience already knows how easy it is to elude containment within fixed social roles with “nothing but a politic conveyance”(1.1.172). Leinwand proposes that “if women are merely actresses, filling roles without commitment, or if they blur distinctions between roles (like the adulteress, who is both wife and whore), then orderliness, and the control that it allows, is threatened” (140). As Valerie Wayne suggests, such a malleability of gender and identity surely threatens early modern social institutions of marriage, property, and inheritance (“Introduction” 376). Perhaps even more threatening to these institutions is that the Mother predicts that the Courtesan’s behaviour is indicative of how all women will conduct themselves in the future: “She will e’en be a precedent for all married wives, / How to direct their actions and their lives” (4.6.52-3).

NOTES

1 Critics are in agreement that *A Mad World, My Masters, Michaelmas Term*, and *a Trick to Catch the Old One* are all city comedies, having appeared between 1604 and 1606, a period in which satiric comedy was prevalent (Taylor xvi). However, *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* was written between 1611-1612 and is generally grouped in with *More Dissemblers Besides Women* and *The Widow* as part of the tragicomedy tradition (xvi). As Michael Taylor suggests, this grouping is superficial at best because *No Wit* does contain many of the characteristics of satiric city comedy (xvi). Taylor does grant that "it might be best seen as a transitional piece between satire and romance, rendering the fugitive expressions of romantic feeling in the earlier city comedies in a much more expansive and celebratory manner" (xvi). However, of the three tragicomedies, *No Wit* clearly stands out as distinctly related to the city comedy tradition, incorporating numerous characteristics of city comedy including satire and trickster figures. As *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside's* emergence only a year or two after *No Wit* (1613) reveals, Middleton's interest in city comedy did not appear to diminish after those first city comedies of 1604-1606. Therefore, for the purpose of this thesis, *No Wit* will be characterized as an extension of the city comedy tradition that later continued with plays such as *A Chaste Maid*.

2 William Slights provides a comprehensive examination of Richard Follywit, the play's lead male trickster, and the Roman comedy and English stage traditions that Middleton draws upon in the play. Also, William Dynes analyzes the paradoxes surrounding the Jacobean trickster figure and the trickster's symbolic portrayal of the anxieties between the individual and the community.

3 Also see Christian Billing, who believes that the one-sex model has been over-emphasized (14).

4 For more on Harebrain in the play see Derek Alwes; For more on Penitent Brothel's encounter with the succubus, and the believability of his repentance see Alwes, Robert Root and P.K. Ayers.

5 See Gary Kuchar for a detailed examination of Harebrain's anxieties over his wife's honesty, Penitent Brothel's scheming, and cuckoldry.

6 Fumiko Takase believes that after hearing the Courtesan's advice to Mistress Harebrain, the audience will undoubtedly find the Courtesan's language at the end of the play about becoming honest insincere. She claims her advice to Mistress Harebrain sets the audience up to disbelieve that any conversion from whore to wife will lead to a change in her virtue. Takase states, "when we remember the artful dissembling she has taught to Mistress Harebrain and her mother's assurance that she will be the precedent for all wives, none of us can believe in the Courtesan's instant conversion" (23).

7 Derek Alwes delves into the significance of performance in the play's conclusion. He asserts, "Follywit, by accepting the universality of performance, finds a secure place within the world of the play, while Harebrain, looking for 'truth' remains deceived and essentially excluded from the festive conclusion. Those who misunderstand the purpose of playing are punished" (109). Characters like Harebrain, or Penitent, who seek truth and cannot see through illusions—be it a chaste wife or succubus in the form of that same wife—are limited by what they see superficially as the truth, which is why they are left out of the conclusion of the play (109).

8 See Susan Zimmerman, who explores Kate Low-water's function in the play, and deems "Kate's chief function . . . is to orchestrate the erotic responses inspired by her cross-dressed status" (48). Keeping in line with this analysis of Kate's function within the play is Zimmerman's contention that the play as a whole is centred around a "preoccupation with sexual deviance" (48).

9 For more on the lusty widow motif see Jennifer Panek.

10 Although Kate's secret plan is never fully revealed, and the final outcome of her scheme is partially a result of chance, Middleton still endorses Kate's intelligence as a trickster in the conclusion of the play. Once Kate's brother Beveril arrives, the original plan, although never exposed, is altered to include him. Of the original plan, Panek observes that the audience is left wondering "once Kate woos, wins, and weds the widow, *then* what will she do with her?" (174). Panek notes that "Kate seems to have worked herself into a thoroughly untenable situation, for her legal title to the widow's property through marriage depends on a disguise which the marriage itself will render difficult, if not impossible to maintain" (174). While her plan to marry the widow may seem impossible to uphold, the audience may only speculate on the impossibility because Kate's full plan is never revealed. Kate's actions begin to rely on a coincidence with the arrival of her scholar brother. Upon hearing that he has feelings for the widow, Kate reflects, "I like this music well . . . Nay, now we know your mind, brother, we'll provide for you" (8.3325, 329-30). Panek observes that "the trick as it unfolds from here on is dependent upon a string of coincidences which keeps the audience in uncertainty to the very end" (174). Kate's intentions appear to shift from gaining back the Low-water fortune from the Widow to providing for her brother. However, while indeed it is coincidence that Kate's brother appears in the play, it is a calculated risk to aim to have the widow fall for Beveril. Panek asserts, "she [Kate] has no way of knowing that Lady Goldenfleece will choose Beveril for her husband after Kate uses him to procure her separation" (174). It is possible, however, that Kate believes the widow will be angry and vengeful enough that she will choose the

very man with whom Kate accused her of committing adultery. In her feigned rage Kate tells the Widow,

I hate her sight; I'll leave her though I lose by't

 You shall have free leave now, without all fear.
 You shall not need oiled hinges, privy passages,
 Watchings, and whisperings. Take him boldly to you. (9.452, 456-8)

Kate's assumption that the Widow will choose Beveril out of spite is not out of line with her own actions throughout the play because Kate is already an example of the depths a woman will go to, to exact revenge on another. Her assumption is correct and the Widow exclaims,

O that I had that freedom, since my shame
 Puts by all other fortunes, and owns him
 A worthy gentleman! If this cloud were passed him
 I'd marry him, were't but to spite thee only,
 So much I hate thee now. (9.459-63)

Moments later Kate tells the Widow that she has resolved to "see you honestly joined ere I release you" and releases her from their marriage claiming she is already married to another (9.512-13). The Widow responds,

Married to another?
 Then in revenge to thee,
 To vex thine eyes, 'cause thou hast mocked my heart
 And with such treachery repaid my love,
 This is the gentleman I embrace and choose. (9.524-8)

The Widow tells Kate that she has chosen Beveril solely out of revenge: "'Tis done to quit thee. / Thou that wrong'st woman's love, her hate can fit thee" (9.532-4). Kate's final plan to "provide" for Beveril in a marriage to the Widow relies not on coincidence, but her assumption that the Widow, like Kate, will be after vengeance.

¹¹ Also see Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin for more on the Elizabethan theatre experience and the "cultural conditions of pleasure" (I).

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