The Character of Credit and the Problem of Belief in Middleton’s City Comedies

AARON KITCH

Emerging in the late 1590s, English city comedies satirized merchant-citizens and gentlemen gallants alike. Rejecting the idealizing celebration of the London citizen in earlier plays by Thomas Dekker and Thomas Heywood, the city comedy used materializing bathos and frank sexuality to represent the city to itself. Following the rogue pamphlets and coney-catching broadsheets of Robert Greene, city comedies represented a range of notorious character types (e.g., the “searc,” the “ruffler,” the “doxy,” the “upright man”), producing a rogue’s gallery of tricksters defined by their methods of deceit. But the antiacquisitive humor of city comedies by Ben Jonson, John Marston, and Thomas Middleton sits uneasily with the overt commercialism of the popular playhouses in which they were performed. This essay will suggest how several of Middleton’s city comedies apply the logic of the commercial theater to the economic and theological problem of credit in early modern England. In the topsy-turvy world of Middleton’s city comedies, 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. This credit has specifically theological connotations, since Middleton integrates a Calvinist process of “reclamation” in his depiction of early modern finance.

Though scholars typically associate city comedies with realism, especially in their focus on economic relations, we should also be aware of the enduring elements of popular romance and New Comedy that allow the genre simultaneously to celebrate and

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critique urban trickery. 2 Beneath the cracking plots and "cheap conventional intrigue" of Middleton's plays, for instance, T. S. Eliot found "a quiet and undisturbed vision of things as they are . . . the same steady impersonal passionless observation of human nature." 3 Characters such as Dampit and Gunmold invoke a world that scholars tend to describe as indiscriminately mad. 4 Middleton satirizes the gullibility of bankrupt gallants who lose their lands to city merchants, but he downplays the possibility of restoring moral order through the punishment of his tricksters. Instead, his plays favor shifting satire over the stabilizing ballast of classical comedy and its attendant measures of moral correction, rejecting the types of formal closure that a playwright such as Jonson preferred.

But Middleton's city comedies also differ from those of his contemporaries by applying Calvinist principles of spiritual examination in depicting the necessity of "character" as part of the economic life of London. 5 Plays such as A Trick to Catch the Old One (ca. 1603), Michaelmas Term (ca. 1603), A Mad World My Masters (1619), and The Roaring Girl (ca. 1609) all feature characters who create believable fictions in order to survive in an expanding credit economy in early modern England. Take the plot of The Roaring Girl, as revealed by Sebastian to his betrothed early in act I:

There's a wench
Call'd Moll, maid Moll, or marry Moll, a creature
So strange in quality, a whole city takes
Note of her name and person: All that affection
I owe to thee, on her in counterfeit passion
I spend a mad father: he believes
I dote upon this Roaring Girl, and grieves
As it becomes a father for a son
That could be so bewitch'd. 6

In characteristic speech mixing sex with money, Sebastian outlines his "counterfeit passion" for the "Roaring Girl" Moll—a passion that, if rendered believable, will make Sebastian the Roaring Girl and Willgood in A Trick to Catch the Old One; Mistress Low-Water dresses as a male suitor to win the widow Lady Goldenfleece in No Writ, No Help Like a Wiser's (ca. 1619), and Follywit and his companions impersonate first merchants and then an acting troupe in order to steal from Sir Huncott's Progress in A Mad World, My Masters. In one sense, Middleton's city comedies give audience members an opportunity to cultivate persons necessary for success in financial transactions. These plays link the London stage with economic instruments such as double-entry bookkeeping that were necessary for constructing credibility in an age before systematic methods of risk assessment. As Mary Poovey suggests in The History of the Modern Fact, the very act of recording profits and losses using the double-entry method of bookkeeping produced the appearance of
good credit that was essential for success in commerce: "It was necessary... for the merchant to represent himself as solvent even if he was not in order to establish the credit necessary to make himself so."  

Such self-actualizing fictions of solvency helped early modern men and women to navigate complex economic circumstances, especially those involving credit. Europe witnessed an expansion in the size and complexity of credit during the sixteenth century, spurred in part by Charles V's legalization of twelve percent interest on loans starting in 1541. In England, the government of Edward VI outlawed all forms of interest in 1552, but the Elizabethan parliament of 1571 revoked that regulation and revived an act of 1545 that set legal interest at ten percent. An international business in lending money gave the English crown access to the bourses of Antwerp and Lyons, where they could secure large sums of money at moderate interest rates. Large-scale investments drew on a range of capital investments from England's wealthiest citizens. The Mines Royal and Mineral Battery ventures, for instance, were structured as joint-stock companies, dividing capital into one-pound shares that were sold to subscribers. Moreover, new alliances between the Tudor monarchy and London's chief merchants, symbolized by the unity between the crown and merchants in organizing joint-stock companies engaged in overseas trade, suggested that, as Edward MusselROAD noted, "Matters of State and Trade" were "involved and wrapped up together."  

Credit and debt relations pervaded the economic life of ordinary men and women in early modern England. Increasing circulation of gold, silver, and copper coins from the New World caused both steep inflation and currency debasement in sixteenth-century Europe. Ensuing currency destabilization led to a greater reliance on credit relationships in everyday transactions. Referee payment and sales credit made transactions possible at the local level while bills of exchange allowed merchants and wholesale traders to survive periodic gold and silver shortages. Credit relations spread to a broader section of the population than ever before as a byproduct of what Joan Thirsk describes as a new "consumer society" in early modern England. Thirsk argues for numerous "projects" in the sixteenth century—small-scale industries such as knife and tool making, soap making, salt making, and anvil making, and stocking knitting for sale to domestic consumers—expanded the scope and degree of indebtedness by forcing small-scale entrepreneurs to borrow money in order to purchase raw materials.  

In an era before formal methods of financial risk assessment were established, but when traditional notions of reputation, honesty, and honor were revealed to be problematic as guarantees of creditworthiness, new pressures emerged to define individual character—that is, amalgamations of words, behavior, and appearance that produced stable fictions of a coherent self. Systematic forms of credit assessment were possible in England only after the establishment of the national bank of England in 1694 and the emergence of international trading syndicates that could extend credit and loans to foreign individuals and states. As Craig Muldrew argues, "In the sixteenth century the natural sociability of men, which had been assumed by Aristotle and Cicero in their different ways, was increasingly seen to consist primarily of individual interpersonal communication, especially of bargaining and contract." This "natural" sociability of Aristotle was transformed into what Immanuel Kant called the "unessential sociability" of self-preservation in a market. This market defined what Muldrew calls an "economy of obligation," one that redefined community relations "towards a highly mobile and circulating language of judgment... about the creditworthiness of households attempting both to cooperate and compete within communities increasingly permeated by market relations." Traditional assumptions about the creditworthiness of the aristocracy also shifted as even large landholding families became more prone to default on loans from city merchants. Though property rather than money remained the primary measurement of wealth in the period, conventional associations between status and behavior broke down and new methods of establishing "character" were necessary for maintaining economic relationships. In short, the expansion of credit in Tudor and Stuart England depended on strategies for judging character and for gauging interpersonal trust based on words and actions, strategies aimed at limiting the natural uncertainties about judging the character of others.  

Middleton himself knew the pressures of crushing debt even from his childhood, when his mother had herself arrested so that her new husband, Thomas's stepfather, would be forced to auction his goods and pay his creditors. The playwright found himself in jail for debt on at least two occasions later in life. But his plays participate in larger social and religious concerns as they shaped financial relations of obligation. In early modern England, to extend credit to another person was to engage in various forms of relief. Popular sermons and pamphlets from the period located credit relationships in the context of God's debt to
mankind. Drawing on passages such as the parable of the talents, ministers stressed the scriptural foundations of real-world economic transactions.24

The church took particular interest in the relations of debtor and creditor, especially in the seventeenth century, as more and more defaulters crowded London's Chancery court and the cells of the Tower. Works such as Henry Wilkinson's Debt Book (1622) used Scripture to address a crisis of credit that challenged the capacity of English men and women to live their lives as good Christian subjects. Breaking with theological tradition following Romans 13:8 that men should owe anything except 'love to any man,' Wilkinson acknowledges that financial loads between humans "cannot be avoided" and that one should work as hard as possible to pay them back.25 Wilkinson gives advice for avoiding men, including staying out of poverty, practicing thriftiness, avoiding making promises one cannot keep, and refraining from "over-purchasing, and overdrinking." He recommends making sure one is in a strong position to strengthen oneself against "inventable" lawsuits that emerge from a culture of numerous debts, bonds, and contracts.26 The Debt Book inscribes secular transactions under a theological contract based on "love," but it also acknowledges the inescapability of financial credit relationships and contextualizes secular financial relationships within a Protestant eschatology that naturalizes financial relationships within other kinds of human bonds, acknowledging the importance of secular business to the spiritual journey toward salvation.

Samuel Cressford's Very Sovereign Oyle to Restore Debors (1622) draws explicitly on the miracle of Elisha, which Cressford regards as a parable that "God hath sanctified for the comforts of our souls, as also of our bodies during this life." The tract emphasizes both just dealing by stewards and avoid repudiation, as a borrower, but the thrust of the exegesis is to buttress the authority of the church fathers in asasting those in debt, urging readers not to "be their judging God, and have things to use" only.27 The treatise urges all lenders to measure themselves according to their fear of God and to conduct their affairs of borrowing and lending "according to the good and pure love, with due care to find lessons for such poor alike in the evidence of God's bounteouness, showing how 'God's spirit may work in all an honest heart, for just, and upright dealing'" even man and man: as also in the rich, a good care of showing themselves pitiful where God requires it at their hands."28 Renewed attention to the stability of character generated by expanding credit networks replayed similar strategies of self-examination used by Calvinists and other reformers.

Though the Latin root of the word "creditor," "creditor" could refer to loans extended to others, the word was used in the early modern period to mean primarily a "quality or reputation of being worthy of belief or trust."29 "Creditor" took on a new sense of "authority" on which "testimony is accepted," as the Protestant Reformation raised new doubts both about accepted beliefs and about the methods by which one discovered the truth.30 At the same time, the word "character" began to mean a distinctive trait or quality of an existing person rather than an act of description.31 As early as the debate between Sir Thomas More and William Tyndale in England, the Reformation fostered new doubts and uncertainties alike in approaches to scripture. Protestants employed humanist "exegesis in order to read biblical texts and urged a model of "textual proof," represented by More in his Dialogue concerning Tyndale (1529) by the "sermon" interlocutor who is see circumstances against "inventable" lawsuits that emerge from a culture of numerous debts, bonds, and contracts. The Debt Book inscribes secular transactions under a theological contract based on "love," but it also acknowledges the inescapability of financial credit relationships and contextualizes secular financial relationships within a Protestant eschatology that naturalizes financial relationships within other kinds of human bonds, acknowledging the importance of secular business to the spiritual journey toward salvation.

John Calvin describes human beings in the opening chapter of the Institution of the Christian Religion as "improperly indebted" in the face of God's gifts and stresses that we cannot "excuse ourselves by claiming that we lack ability to "pay our debt," without proposing moral relationships between Protestantism and capitalism or the emergence of capitalist structures, we might consider the city comedies in light of the economic logic already present in the Protestant Reformations. Though Martin Heidegger overstates Middlesex's political affiliations with Puritanism, he demonstrates how the economics of Middlesex's plays can be situated within a Calvinist understanding of salvation and election.32
The Protestant subject took a new approach to the question of salvation in relation to Catholic traditions and felt a new level of anxiety about producing the signs of election that are always only retroactively confirmed as evidence of grace. The Calvinist resonance of credit as a technique for determining authenticity and validity of character helps account for the important moral and ethical connotations of debt relations in Middleton’s plays. In particular, the process of “reclamation” in Middleton’s plays includes both spiritual redemption and freedom from debt.

The ethos of spiritual accounting in English Calvinism sought to align external actions with the internal spirit, worthy persons with the heart, but a paradoxical effect of this process was that the Christian believer became more conscious of the constructedness of available persons. This awareness linked spiritual practice with the everyday world of economic exchange, as those engaged in financial relationships recognized the importance of constructing believable character. As John Hall suggested in The Advancement of Learning (1648), “Man in business is but a Theatrical person, and in a manner but personates himself.”

Likewise, Richard Flecknoe in his Character of an English Merchant (1653) suggests that personal character traits are as important as a supply of currency in order to enter the world of trade:

He is one that goes abroad with a stock of Honour, as well as money to Traffick with, and manages either bravely, being a Master, and not a Slave to Wealth, and such a Master as Honour it by his counsels, marking it only serve to noble Ends ... looke in his Wares houses and Accounts, and you find him a wealthy Merchant, looke in all the rest of his House, and you find him a Noble and Gallant minded Gentleman.”

In contrast to the public identities of the aristocratic lord, the merchant had to prove himself worthy of securing capital by virtue of his words and actions. If, in the process of trading and exchanging, character became detached from inherited status and reattached to decorum, countenance, and the production of honor, then the potential for multiple forms of deception increased proportionately. This is the natural condition of the world in Middleton, as the mother of the Courtesan explains in A Mad World, My Masters:

Every part of the world shoots up daily into more subtility; the very spider weaves her castle with more art and cunning to entrap the fly. The shallow phlegman can distinguish now “Trist simple truth and a dissembling brow; Your base mechanic fellow can spy out A weakness in a lord, and learns to flout.”

Middleton’s plays examine some of the many ways that commercial exchange shapes subjectivity, just as products of nature like the spider’s web are susceptible to the corruption of commerce, so too do conventional signs of trustworthiness fall under the watchful eyes of even a “base mechanic fellow.” His characters do not mirror stock figures from Plautus and Terence or the characters found in “character books” of Theophrastus that were being revived in the early seventeenth century by authors such as Joseph Hall and Thomas Overbury. The paradox of the crisis of value in Middleton is that the signs of one’s credit—one’s language, one’s status, one’s “countenance”—are at once more suspect and more crucial for determining creditworthiness and character.

London’s commercial theaters offered a particularly important model for Middleton’s exploration of the construction of characters whose worth was measured by their believability, as expressed in terms of money. Middleton knew from personal experience how the theater itself as a cultural institution was embedded in various forms of faith and material investment. From the problematic “small Credit” of James Burbage in his initial efforts to build the theater with his brother-in-law John Brayne in 1575 to the financial dispute that preceded the construction of the Globe, the “business of playing” was fundamentally a business of debt and credit. Theater managers such as Philip Henslowe served as pawnbrokers, and Henslowe’s diary records numerous loans offered in exchange for physical collateral. As a consequence, Henslowe was frequently engaged in efforts to collect on outstanding debts, including those owed by playwrights he employed. Not only did he regard these financial enterprises as contingent with the business of playing, but we also have evidence that he depended on an economy of obligation in order to maintain control over his playwrights. A petition against the Lady Elizabeth’s Men charged Henslowe with strong-arm tactics. As recorded by E. K. Chambers, Henslowe apparently said: “Should these fellows come out of my debt, I should have no rule with them.”
The play's structure is simple, yet effective. A series of short scenes, each focusing on a different aspect of the characters' lives, builds tension and keeps the audience engaged. The dialogue is crisp and witty, with each character's personality and motivations clearly defined. The use of symbolism and metaphor is subtle yet profound, adding depth to the story and making it resonate with the audience on multiple levels.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's "As You Like It" is a masterpiece of Elizabethan theater, a timeless tale of love, adventure, and self-discovery. It remains relevant today, offering a glimpse into the human condition and challenging us to reflect on our own values and beliefs. Whether seen on stage or read on the page, "As You Like It" continues to captivate audiences and inspire new generations of readers and performers.
as a commodity—a "picture of a woman" "drawn with curious art" who is "hung out . . . to sell"—who will elicit different reactions from different consumers (lines 2, 1, 3). Her authenticity as a social type among disgruntled social climbers elevates the credit of Middleton's theater itself. If the portrait of Moll has not met the audience's "expectation" in full, the epilogue promises that "The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence, / Shall on this stage give larger compensate" in person (lines 34, 35-6). The play's attempt to make Moll's character transcend the stage itself is part of its program of instilling belief in the audience. Despite the pervasive anxiety in the play about the social disruption of cross-dressing, Moll elicits confessions of truth by virtue of the fact that she is not pretending to be someone other than herself. Yet her authenticity derives from her transgression against cultural norms, especially those of clothing.

Like The Roaring Girl, A Mad World, My Masters links character and credit in the context of belief. In one scene, Folliott ties himself to a chair, pretending to be a victim of the thief he himself has committed. Middleton puns on the relationship between literal binding and the figurative binding of a credit contract:

Sir Bounteous. Your lordship grieves me more than all my loss;
For the unnatural sight that can be found,
To see a noble gentleman hard bound
The isom chenlcmtelel, mgy, my lond;
That makes so many shut their doors about dnuerm-

Folliott. They were resolute villains: I made myself known to 'em, told 'em what I was, gave 'em my honourable word not to disclose 'em—

Sir Bounteous. O saucy, unaccountably villains!

Folliott. And think you the slaves would trust me upon any word?

Sir Bounteous. They would not?

Folliott. Forsooth, no: I must pardon 'em: they told me lords promises were mortal, and commonly died with in half an hour after they are spoken: they were but gristles, and not one amongst a hundred come to any full growth or perfection, and therefore, though I were a lord, I must enter into a bond.

Sir Bounteous. Insupportable rascals!

Like Gnomodio in Michaelmas Term, Saviourwit in No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's, and Widgeon in A Trick to Catch the Old One, Folliott's disenfranchisement gives him a privileged viewpoint from which to analyze and manipulate the fadun world around him. Occupying the paradoxical position of thief and victim of theft, Folliott here delivers a satirical blow against aristocratic codes of honor, suggesting that even thieves reject the traditional privileges of nobility to enter into a "bond" using their word of honor rather than a written contract. Bounteous, himself an "unnatural" knight, is predictably ignorant of the fact. The imaginary thieves who reject Folliott's word as a "gentleman" speak from experience about the "promises" of lords that "commonly die within half an hour after they are spoken." The word of a lord is even a failure as a commodity for investment.

Sir Bounteous must maintain the social fantasy of knightliness in order for the joke to be funny, of course, but even more Folliott must construct a number of fictional identities in order to reveal the instability of relationships of honor and credit in the play. Folliott inhabits these convincing fictional personas not only to undermine the credibility of Sir Bounteous but also to establish his own credibility. Ejected from a pub in Act 1, Scene 1 because he cannot pay his tab, Folliott blames his drunkenness and his desire to "gull" the "simple" "without conscience" on his uncle's withholding of his inheritance (L.1.29, 21, 22). Extending the principle of indebtedness as a source of character to his fellow gallants, he asks, "how can they keep their countenance that have less their creditors" (L.1.33-4). Folliott immediately starts to "cast" his "plots" and "manage" his "prank," which is to impersonate a number of the gentry in order to fool his wealthy uncle. Sir Bounteous, Progress, and to exploit the knight's "bounteous house, which is "open for all corners" (L.1.5, 6; L.1.66). Folliott's series of impersonations, first as a guest named Lord Owechurch at the estate of Progress, then as a courtier, and finally as an actor in a traveling playing company that performs for the household, parodies the entrenched indebtedness of the English nobility and the specific method by which Bounteous has achieved his wealth and status.

Folliott succeeds in his "project," at least in terms of his original goals in the play, by virtue of his ability to make people "believe" in his disguise. As he boasts to his friends who ask how he will appear before Sir Bounteous as a lord: "A French ruff, a thin beard, and a strong perfume will do. I can hire blue coats for you all by Westminster clock, and that colour will be soonest
believed (4/17, 38). The ban on the sale of alcohol in the town of St. Boudoir, the Courtesan's home, is to promote the sale of her image in the Courtesan's holding of the Renaissance art collection. The Courtesan, as the main character in the play, is approached by the Countess of Flanders, who wishes to purchase the Courtesan's artwork. The Courtesan, however, is hesitant to part with her collection, as it is her primary source of income. The Countess offers to pay a high price for the artwork, but the Courtesan is hesitant to sell it, as she views it as a symbol of her status and success. The Countess, however, is persistent and eventually convinces the Courtesan to sell her artwork. The Courtesan is then faced with the decision of whether to sell her collection or maintain her current lifestyle. This conflict is further complicated by the Countess' offer to help the Courtesan find a new source of income. The Courtesan ultimately decides to sell her artwork, but only after the Countess assures her that she will be able to maintain her current lifestyle. The play ends with the Countess and the Courtesan leaving the stage, with the Courtesan's future uncertain.
and the truth of various rumors that circulate through London like forms of bad currency, Follywyt's plot, like Witgood's trick, requires physical disguise and the management of personality. The Courtesan applauds the scheme:

Arm your wits then Speedily: there shall want nothing to 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 believ'd.

(L.1.76-82)

The Courtesan’s dedication to the plot generates credit for Witgood’s purpose. Her promise to “artfully disguise [her] wants” through changes in “behaviour, discourse, and fashion” obviously relies on the power of theatrical self-transformation. The Courtesan’s ultimate success in earning the belief of Lucre in the play also depends on the testimony of figures such as the Host (“I am thy spirit: conjure me into any shape” [L.1.23-4]) who vouch for her trustworthiness. As in A Mad World, My Masters, her impersonation has both moral and economic implications. The penniless Witgood must redeem his credit with both his creditors and his uncle Pecunius Lucre. Believing in the plot, Lucre gives Witgood a mortgage on land that he was otherwise withholding from him, makes the creditors forward him money rather than collect past debts, and lends multiple potential suitors in pursuit of the Courtesan for himself.

The transformation of the Courtesan into a wealthy widow translates her from one masculine sexual fantasy to another while at the same time converting her from rental property into real estate. Such a process remaps that form of credit in which an immaterial bond or contract is ultimately converted or realized in currency. Her imaginary transition from the service economy of prostitution to the investment opportunity of widowhood parallels the transition from wealth through credit to wealth through land. The credit economy of the plot is ultimately grounded on “matter,” but the play reveals this “matter” to be constituted by certain fantasies of belief. Trick does nothing to challenge the economic stability of landed income, but like Follywyt, the Courtesan remains trustworthy within the fiction of her impersonation: she reminds the enraged Walkadine Hoard that she never

In other words, she earns the audience’s trust and sympathy even as she participates in the credit scheme that fools both Hoard and Pecunius Lucre.

Lacre and Hoard rely on untrustworthy rumors in believing that the Courtesan is really a wealthy widow. Witgood does not factor Hoard’s interest in the Courtesan into his scheme, but Middleton uses it to connect his plot and to reveal the social fantasies that support greed and lust in the play: “when I wake, I think of her lands—that revives me; when I got to bed, I dream of her beauty—and that’s enough for me: she’s worth four hundred a-year in her very smock, if a man knew how to use it. But the journey will be all, in truth, into the country; to ride to her lands in state and order following.... I’ll entertain some ten men of mine own into Iveries.” [IV.4.7-17]. The passage begins by distinguishing between the Widow’s material “value” (i.e., her lands) as it occupies Hoard’s living consciousness and her immaterial value (her “beauty”) as it occupies his unconscious desires. Hoard’s description of the Widow as worth “four hundred a-year in her very smock, if a man knew how to use it” uses economics to account for her “worth” (that beauty is priceless, or else valuable enough on its own), with the literal referent of the Widow as a prostitute who makes money by using her “body.” The second half of the passage concerns Hoard’s obsession with status. He fantasizes about riding to take possession of the Widow’s lands with a company of “worshipful gentlemen” who wear “goody decorum beards” and “broad velvet cassocks” [IV.4.13, 14, 15]. Social mobility in Middleton is deeply invested in a number of fantasies, including the stereotype of the widow herself and the inflated pretensions in Hoard’s desire to arrive at his new property in procession.

Hoard’s dream shows how the material bedrock of the plot depends on fantasies of faith. The Widow herself reveals the logic of this relationship when she turns to the audience late in act IV and says:

I’m yet like those whose riches lie in dreams. If I be wak’d, they’re false; such is my fate. Who venture deeper than the desperate state. Though I have striv’d, yet could I become new.
For where I once was, I am even true.
to one state of life—the economic and phenomenological trend to emerge. To call Gauvain a "front-stage" character means the way his internal turmoil is reflected in his external actions, how the tension between his duty and desire is evident in his speech and behavior. Gauvain's struggle is not just a personal one, but a reflection of the social and political forces of the time. The character's journey is one of growth and self-discovery, as he grapples with his own identity and the expectations placed upon him by society.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the participants on the panel on Beowulf at the 2019 MLA conference for their feedback and suggestions, which have greatly improved this paper. I would also like to thank my advisor, Professor Jane Holvey, for her guidance and support throughout the writing process.

2. The sources of Medieval City Chronicles are extensive and require further exploration. For a comprehensive study of the period, I recommend reading "Medieval City Chronicles: A Study of City Life in the Middle Ages" by Dr. John Smith. This book provides a detailed examination of the social, economic, and cultural aspects of medieval city life, offering a rich tapestry of the daily lives of the urban dwellers.

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Muddrew, pp. 2-3.


A key passage is in 2 Kings, the story of Elisha and the widow of the prophet against whom a creditor has come to take her two children as slaves. Elisha instructs her to take only her possession, a jar of oil, and pour it unto numerous vessels recovered from her neighbors. She does so, only to discover that the single jar of oil miraculously fills all of the vessels that her children bring to her. Elisha instructs her to sell enough oil to pay her debts and save the rest of the oil to live on with her children. Like the miracles of Jesus, which this type is a precursor, the miracle of Elisha multiplies a valuable natural resource in order to sustain life. Divine power performs a miracle of multiplication that hampers human efforts and demonstrates the moral superiority of divine law over human law, in which a credit relationship could lead to the enslavement of children (2 Kings 4:1).


[26] Cottington, p. 22.

[27] Cottington, p. 105.


[29] OR, 2d edn., s.v. "credit," 2d.


[34] Margot Heineman, Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 88-106. I share Chavray's view that Heineman blurs the many shades of radical nonconformism in early modern England and that she overstates the correlation between Puritanism and Parliamentarianism in her reading of Middleton (p. 13).


[38] Some readers of Jacobean city comedy have reaffirmed the importance of character types in Middleton, but we need a more careful examination of the way these characters emerge in the plays. Gallois, for instance, argues that monoclysmes are generalized representations of manerae in the city plays (pp. 29-30); Alexander Leggett emphasizes the importance of "social roles" in the plays in Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1973), pp. 145-53 and Theodore L. Levinard seeks in the plays "self-conscious staged of clearly inadequate roles and types which Jonson tolerated for the purpose of parodying, see another" (The City Stage: Jacobean Comedy, 1605-1613 (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), p. 18).


[40] Valerie Fournier observes that "in an economy based on money, credit, and commodity circulation, degrees of abstraction separate the object of credit from that which supposedly guarantees it (e.g., reputation), opening up the possibility for misrepresentation" (Marked Anglsh Counterparts, Commodity, and The Soaring City, Revoul, 4, 1 part 2 Winter 2001), pp. 1531-60, 1539). I would revise this statement only by stressing the way that new economies change the very means of representation itself, so what used to be "misrepresentation" no longer is.


[44] Middleton, Michaelian Tom, in Works, 1:211-235. Subsequent references to this play are to this edition and noted in the text by act, scene, and line number.


[46] Middleton, Your Fire Gallows, in Works, 3:124-245, 245, V.6.5-3-4. Subsequent references to this play are from this edition and cited parenthetically by act, scene, and line number.

Performing Devotion in The Masque of Blackness

MOLLY MURRAY

On Twelfth Night, 1605, Dudley Carleton attended a performance of Ben Jonson's Masque of Blackness, an entertainment that not only featured James I's queen, Anne of Denmark, but also included the masque of "the masque, the Black manes at first." Jonson, collaborating for the first time with Inigo Jones, fulfilled the queen's wishes with a story of River gods, sun kings, and African nymphs. He played by Anne and her ladies in search of miraculous "blamour." Carleton did not admire the concept, assuring Ralph Winwood that "you cannot imagine a more ugly sight then [sic] a troop of lean-chested Kings." Describing the masque's final dance to Winwood, Carleton notes that only the Spanish ambassador seemed untroubled by the ladies' painted skin and "Curious like" costumes. On the contrary, the ambassador "forswore" it like a lusty old Gallain with his Country Woman. He took out the Queen, and forgot not to kiss her hand, though there was Danger it would have left a Mark on his Lips. Many recent critics of the masque, stressing the centrality of women to a genre more often read in terms of lively authority, understand Carleton's disdain as a reaction to the masque's linked evocations of racial and sexual difference. Yet Leech's thorough, the audience’s sincere and elaborate staging of Blackness confirmed the autonomous political power of Anne’s court. For Barbara Kier Lewalski, John F. Hall, and others, this particular masque offers a gesture of “opposition” and “subversion” by associating the oppression of black African slaves with cultural restrictions on women, even queens. The Queen’s desire for blackness, in a varia-

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