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The Gendered Spatiology of Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

Manuela Rossini

*A successful revolution must
effect changes in space*
Henri Lefebvre

This reading of Thomas Middleton's city comedy is informed by an understanding of space which combines a static, topographical notion of "place" with a conceptual one that insists on the material dimension of identity formation as theorized most prominently by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. Based on his spatiology and focusing on two specific urban locales – the public theatre and the private shop – this essay contends that new buildings produced new subjectivities and orientations that are inevitably gendered and closely connected to the imperatives of the centralized nation-state and its nascent capitalism. Yet while the play participates in the construction of the private/public divide and of a "closeted womanhood," it also shows the precariousness of supposedly fixed boundaries, as well as the fluidity and openness of all categories.

Early seventeenth-century London, the setting of Thomas Middleton's celebrated city comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* and hundreds of other plays belonging to this newly created genre, could already be regarded as a kind of "global village" in so far as it drew numerous travellers to itself and located many of its inhabitants as globetrotters. In fact, as Crystal Bartolovich claims in her reading of *The Tempest*, the view of London as a modern "world city" seemed to have slowly established itself from the late medieval period onwards, receiving a strong boost during the late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century by "the proliferation of joint-stock companies, a substantial influx of Protestant refugees from the Continent, expanding exploration, trade and colonization, as well as

the official opening of the Royal Exchange in 1570" (14). We may add to this list the rapid population growth due to high immigration from rural Britain as well as the inauguration of a second "shopping mall," the New Exchange, in 1609. The idea that London was in the world is expressed, for example, in the travel diary of Swiss medical student Thomas Platter during his visit to England's capital in 1599: "Most of the inhabitants are employed in commerce; they buy, sell and trade in all corners of the globe" (Peck 269). Conversely, the growing perception that the world was in London (as the metonym of England) can be detected in John Llyl's play *Midas*, performed in 1590 to celebrate the defeat of the Spanish Amada two years before: "traffike and travel hath woven the nature of all Nations into ours" (in Bartolovich 16). The traffic in this "world-wide-web" included not only the exchange of money and goods, but also the exchange of people, labour, languages, news, values and ideas. (Needless to say, it also contained the blood and other bodily fluids of the indigenous population, of men and women sexually (ab)used and exploited in gold and silver mines or on plantations.)

While such interweaving installed Britain as the leading nation of commerce and empire, it also produced a fear of pollution, moral corruption, contamination and disease by foreigners and a concomitant obsession with keeping the domestic space – the English nation and the individual English home – pure, impenetrable and thus healthy, resulting in material and symbolic "enclosure acts" of bodies cast as potentially contagious because more fluid, and open. The bodies targeted by various disciplinary regimes were mainly those of the working class, of children and of women as a group who were all said to be unable to master themselves. This discourse marked the bodies of such groups as subject to greater physical flux, and thus legitimated the building of an institution like Bridewell, a workhouse for vagrants and the unemployed, and later a house of correction for prostitutes. It also consolidated the authority and dominance of bourgeois men in the state, in the city and in the family. In this essay, I will not be concerned with the efficiency of these constructions in terms of establishing and maintaining class difference, but will instead concentrate on how gender difference helped society to come to terms with an expanding system of capital formation and commodity exchange. I will call attention to the coexistence of, on the one hand, a troubling sense of dissolution of forms caused by the emerging principles of liquidity and exchangeability, and, on the other

hand, the sharpening of gender boundaries as a response to the anxieties caused by the very experience of openness and fluidity brought about by the intensive traffic in, to and from London. I will conclude, however, that bodies that are thought to be safely at home, in the place of the *heimlich*, turn out to be *unheimlich*, disrupting the borders of the domestic and other supposedly clear-cut categories from within, a phenomenon which signals that the sex/gender system itself was under considerable strain precisely because of the possibilities for enjoying themselves outside their confines which capitalism and its newly created spaces offered to women.

When gender relations mediate wider social relations and when London is perceived as the centre of a growing traffic in things and human beings, it is hardly surprising that controversies about the capital's function within the nation-state were often acted out through observations on female nature. Pro-civic and anti-civic voices alike personified the metropolis as a woman: the former spoke of London as a chaste wife and mother, obedient to the crown and nursing the country; the latter compared London's commercial transactions to prostitution and considered its nature to be essentially fallen, like that of all daughters of Eve. In a pamphlet of 1606, the playwright Thomas Dekker addresses London as both fair and foul, as both a "chaste maid" and a seductive prostitute:

Thou art the goodliest of thy neighbours, but the proudest; the welthiest, but most wanton. Thou hast all things in thee to make thee fairest, and all things in thee to make thee foulest; for thou art attir'd like a Bride, drawing all that loke upon thee, to be in love with thee, but there is much harlot in thine eyes. (in Archer 43)

Both ways of feminizing the City¹ are not only framed by the already familiar discourse of gender difference, but they also construct the figure of the prostitute as the defining other of the good Protestant wife and nurturing mother of the nation. Since all women are potential "harlots" in the minds of misogynists, marriage is conceptualized as the means to contain their libido. Like *The Book of Common Prayer* (1549) which elevated married life over celibacy and praised marriage as "a

¹ "London" referred to the metropolitan area generally, while "City" meant the parts under the authority of the aldermen and Lord Mayor, limited first to the area within the old city walls but then extended to other areas, especially in the direction of Westminster and the court (Dillon 9).

remedie agaynst sinne, and to avoide fornicacion," city comedies often end with the celebration of a romantic love match which is supposed to bring back purity and order into the city. As a former prostitute says in *A Chaste Maid*: "There's a thing call'd marriage, and that makes me honest" (V.iv.106). Constructed as a private institution of "true love" in religious and moral discourse, marriage appears as the opposite of the brothel, a public institution of "false love" or "lust." Marriage also increasingly comes to be seen as standing outside the cash nexus – "can't buy me love" – while prostitution, by embodying "the raw liquidity of commercial relations," becomes "a resource for the displacement of all kinds of anxieties associated with trade" (Twyning 14). When, as a result of new economic relations, (male) identity is defined in proprietary terms, there must be a structure that guarantees the possession of a woman by one man only as the lawful owner of her body and not, as in the case of the prostitute, the ware that freely (but paid for) circulates among male buyers. The bourgeois home seems to be such a container and, more significantly, a generator of specific identities and ways of being for those living within it.

My emphasis on the spatial dimensions of human existence draws on Henri Lefebvre's spatiology, as outlined in his *The Production of Space*. His most general point is that every space is the product of a specific society and hence of a specific mode of production (31). With regard to the early modern period, we can say that the emerging capitalist relations of production and the growing dominance of the middle class which accompanied this development not only produced new localities, but also redefined and reorganized the already existing space of the individual household by investing it with specific, and inevitably gendered, meanings. This ideological or representational activity, Lefebvre postulates, cannot be understood apart from its practical operations in historically-specific *social space*. *Social space* brings together physical space (real places, as generated and used) and *mental* space (imagined spatial constructs). Lefebvre thus offers a theory which combines materialism and idealism, seeing material reality and discursive constructions as equal determinants of identity and behaviour.

Following Lefebvre, *social space* operates on two main levels:

[s]ocial space contains – and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to – (1) *the social relations of reproduction*, i.e. the bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family; and (2) *the relations of production*, i.e. the division of labour and its

organization in the form of hierarchical social functions. (32; original emphasis)

Social space thus segregates and differentiates between what I would like to term “family space” and “work space.” It produces two separate spheres in order to locate gender difference, to “spatialize” sexual difference in a bounded map as “embodied sexual difference” and thus to install male sovereignty in opposition to a “closeted womanhood” on the basis of women’s capacity for reproduction.

No place is *a priori* gendered or an exclusive place of either production or heterosexual reproduction; there is nothing essentially masculine or feminine or fair and foul about any place. Rather, it is the *spatial practice* of a given social formation which defines it as such. Moreover, *spatial practice* designates specific spaces “as desirable or undesirable, benevolent or malevolent, sanctioned or forbidden to particular groups” (288). Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the bourgeois ideal of womanhood turned the private household into a woman’s proper sphere, forbidding her to frequent the theatre and other public spaces on her own, lest she be taken for a prostitute or “free-woman.”

The private shop and the public theatre were two important new types of urban locales produced by nascent capitalism and intimately involved in the formation of new subjectivities. Yet at the same time these places showed the precariousness of apparently fixed identities.

As profit-oriented institutions, the theatres (along with the writers, players – some of them being shareholders – and spectators), were part of the kind of economic, social and cultural exchanges that characterized the urban and commercial space of London. To use words by Dekker again: “The theatre is your poets’ Royal Exchange” (in Evans 22). Early modern drama – and city comedy in particular, I would argue – not only reflected change but participated in the transformation of the market from “a specific *place*” to “an abstracted and generalized *process* of exchange,” a shift in the course of which the market developed into “a condition of existence” (Bartolovich 18). Hence, when we compare the theatre to the market, the theatrical institution emerges as an urban space where not only commodities of words are exchanged, but spectators are encouraged to reconceptualize social status as an exchangeable and performatively acquired commodity rather than as an unchangeable, God-given position. However, while England’s transformation from feudalism to capitalism allowed for more individual agency and upward social mobility, it also made the individual experience himself or herself

as a commodity. Jean-Christophe Agnew introduces the term *commodity self* for this emergent sense of identity, which he nicely describes as “a mercurial exchange value or ‘bubble’ floating on the tides of what attention others were disposed to invest” (13). Unsurprisingly, “this disturbing weightless image of the self remained as suspect as the figure of the actor with whom it was most closely identified” (13). Suspicions were most loudly articulated by anti-theatricalists who identified such fluid and (ex)changeable figures, on and off the stage, as signs of a destabilized social order in which it became increasingly difficult to discern “who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a gentleman, who is not,” as Puritan Philip Stubbes complains.

My concern here, however, is less with the uncertainties about who is who in terms of *class*. Rather, I would like to propose that such a pre-occupation reflected a fear about the dissolution of the differentiated spatial structures which guaranteed the *gender* hierarchy. When all human beings are bound up in what Douglas Bruster calls “the commodification of the personal” or “commercial inscription” (42), then women *and* men become objects. In city comedies, men appear as objectified as women in so far as their value is by necessity determined by the market. How, then, to retain the subject-object relation that has hitherto structured the sex/gender system inside and outside the stage-play world? Furthermore, one of the fundamental principles of this genre is that a man has either financial power *or* sexual potency.² How, then, to be able to afford luxuries and still be virile? The solution in many of these plays and other cultural discourses is to make female objects more “objectified” than male ones by linking women more closely to consumption – as consumers *and* as things to be consumed. A second, related ideological move is to displace the unease evoked by the fluctuation of the commodity form and commercial relations onto women by emphasizing their dangerous liquidity and openness. As Gail Kern Paster has elaborately demonstrated, there emerges from the middle of the sixteenth century onwards, a “symptomatological discourse” in which the female body, the weaker vessel, is articulated as the “leaky vessel” (24).

² In *A Chaste Maid*, the potent Touchwood Senior summarizes the situation in the following way: “Some only can get riches and no children, / We only can get children and no riches!” (2.1.11-12). Mr Touchwood is opposed to the impotent Mr Kix and to Mr Allwit for whom sex is a waste of resources. Swapan Chakravorty calls this the “sex-money calculus” (46).

Only a husband, says the mother of the “chaste maid” in Cheapside, can “solder up” this leakage (I.i.37). The relegation of women to the “family space” and their accompanying subjection to the authority of their husbands follows the capitalist demand for “economic efficiency” which was also indispensable to the acquisitive goals of the middle class (Davis 126). Along with domesticity, thrift becomes a crucial characteristic of the bourgeoisie. The obsession not to waste anything is related to the deepening necessity for (en)closing the female body. In the words of Peter Stallybrass: “Soldered or covered up, the covert [i.e. married] woman becomes her husband’s symbolic capital; ‘free,’ she is the opening through which that capital disappears” (128). In a number of city comedies, the voracious appetite of female characters, their hunger for food, clothes and – via the analogy between open mouth and open vagina – their hunger for sex, is staged as essential and irrefutable trait of women, an inevitable “cash flow.”

In order to illustrate both the greater objectification of women as well as their figuration as “leaky vessels,” I want to come to the second urban place which played an important role in the production of commodity selves, and which is the main setting of Middleton’s play: the private shop.

In early modern London the most fashionable shops were situated in the wide and long street of Cheapside or West Cheap, which extended from the north-east corner of St Paul’s churchyard to an area called the Poultry. The goldsmith shops were concentrated in one of its street blocks, Goldsmiths Row. Not at all cheap, this shopping area offered great treasures not only in the shape of jewels but also in the shape of young virgins, as a character in *A Chaste Maid* announces:

A goldsmith’s shop sets out a city maid. (I.i.102)

Opening with the discovery of this very goldsmith shop by Mrs Yellowhammer and her daughter Moll, Middleton’s play also sets out a city maid and displays the meaning of “Woman” as both spectacle and available for consumption as well as chaste. We have seen how, in Dekker’s address to London, the city is made over into the simulacrum of the female body. Here, the female body, in turn, is transformed, “citified” as it were, into a metropolitan body, both fair and foul.

But the commercial setting also fulfils a more general structural and allegorical function in Middleton’s play: once “discovered,” even before

the first word is spoken, it stands for and acts throughout the play as an emblem of the brave new world of commerce, in which not only mercantile exchange is ruled by the desire for profit, but also people give monetary concerns priority in their private relations. Like the Yellow-hammers, who market their daughter's chastity, other characters turn sex and sexuality into a commodity, into something for sale.³ Potentially available for circulation among men, their work in the shop transforms the citizen's wife or daughter into a "thing." Displaying their wives or daughters as if they were also wares for sale was one strategy (apparently successful) in the ruthless competition for attracting clients. In city comedy, husbands who use their wives' sexual favours to other men for financial gain figure as so-called "wittols," that is, knowing cuckolds who, like Mr Allwit in *A Chaste Maid*, are willing to renounce their rights over their wives in exchange for money. These cases of pimping one's own wife, whether or not they reflect historical reality, represent the most explicit commodification of the female body.

As the central setting of *A Chaste Maid*, the shop focuses the staging and, as Kathleen McLuskie observes, "ensures the audience's attention while the dialogue moves more widely to make the symbolic as well as the narrative meaning clear." The shop as stage set transforms the stage "into a symbolic as well as physical location" and, together with the language, "physical meaning into moral meaning" (10-11). Applying Lefebvre's theory, we can say more generally that a performance is a manifold spatial practice which, by means of staging and the written word, represents the social relations of (re)production.

Replacing the medieval marketplace, Cheapside (like the bourses) represents the shift in the meaning and function of the market noted earlier on, a shift whereby a former gathering place for the people, governed by the idea of communal exchange, is turned into a location for individual retailers driven by the desire to accumulate and make private profit.

This change also affected the place of woman in the domestic economy. Although city wives were probably more independent than women living in the countryside – helping in the shops, going to the market, running alehouses, etc. – their involvement in family enterprises was

³ According to the online *OED*, the term "commodity" experienced an epistemic shift at the beginning of the seventeenth century, changing from being "a thing of 'commodity,' a thing of use or advantage to mankind" to "a kind of thing produced for use or sale, an article of commerce, an object of trade."

continually reduced. No longer producing food and other goods themselves or supervising the labour, wives became busy with selling merchandise. From what I observe in today's shops and in many advertisements, I can say that the task of persuading consumers fosters a certain performance in which the woman's body is equated with the object she sells. With regard to the wives of Cheapside merchants in early modern London, we are told in Dorothy Davis's *History of Shopping* that they used their legendary "wit and beauty" to allure the largely elite clientele (cf. Cahn 61).

Again, as with the theatres and London's other commercial places of exchange, the shop also disrupts the dichotomies of outside/inside, public/private, and prostitute/wife. The activities of saleswomen, however, blurred the boundaries between honest wife and wily courtesan, a distinction on which city comedy and contemporary domestic handbooks, marital treatises and sermons were often based. As John Twynning describes the similarity between the two types of tradeswoman:

Like the prostitutes who stood on the threshold of brothels to attract business, in the front of the shop the shopkeepers [sic] wives and daughters occupied a similarly hybrid realm between public space, the street, and the increasingly demarcated and privatized interiors of commercial activity in the city. (60)

If we accept Lefebvre's theory that space is a powerful shaper of gender identity, we can claim that as a "hybrid realm," the shop also produced "hybrid" female subjectivities or bodies: the *chaste* body of the wife or wife-to-be, conceptualized as belonging to one proprietor only, combined with the *chased* body, potentially available to everyone with enough (pur)chasing power. As R.B. Parker informs us in his note to the play's title, "chased" women is a reference to the prostitutes who were "whipped through [Cheapside] at a cart's tail" in a shaming ritual (xlvii). We can assume that the play on words would have been recognized by the original audience. It is one which, according to Parker, suggests "the paradox or hypocrisy, rather, of a society which tries to make chastity a marketable commodity like everything else" while condemning and punishing the prostitute's selling of her body (xlvii).

The breakdown of the juxtaposition between prostitute and "bawdy house," on the one hand, and wife and home, on the other, exposes the instability of socially constructed identities and the porosity of the social spaces within which they arise. Many city comedies stage what Jean

Howard observes in relation to *Westward Ho* (co-written by Dekker and Webster in 1604), namely an “insistent focus on the penetrability of supposedly impenetrable [sic] spaces,” mostly from without, by foreigners of all sorts, including class enemies (154). In one of the subplots of *A Chaste Maid*, Sir Walter Whorehound, a knight from the Welsh countryside, literally penetrates the bourgeois home of the citizen Allwit. (Whorehound keeps Mrs Allwit as his mistress while she and her husband pretend that the offspring of her sexual encounters with Whorehound are Allwit’s. They also let Whorehound be the master in their house in exchange for maintaining them in a properly bourgeois style). But the transgression of boundaries also occurs from *within*. In the main plot around the Yellowhammer family, the daughter, the “chaste maid,” manages to escape into the arms of her young lover even though her father has locked the doors of their house and her brother Tim is watching outside with “Harry the Fifth’s sword” (IV.iv.46) to make sure that she marries the suitor of parental choice. Asked by the knight how his promised bride got out, Mr Yellowhammer responds that “[t]here was a little hole look’d into the gutter” (IV.ii.42). This particular way of transgressing the boundaries of the home through a hole and along the water channel of the house further associates the female character with openness and fluidity.

But dramatic conventions demand closure and an end to such free and fluid transactions. In *A Chaste Maid*, this closure is the rather artificial construction of the bourgeois household, unlike the feudal household, as a space walled off from the rest of society which is now defined as dangerous, violent and boundless. Characteristically, the older medieval value of hospitality becomes a foreign word and Mr Allwit feels suddenly disturbed by the presence of Sir Walter and his “vassals”:

I wonder what he makes here with his consorts?
 Cannot our house be private to ourselves
 But must have such guests? (V.i.135-7)

Since the knight from Wales undermines the very concept of marriage as an enclosed and private institution by intruding into the family space and sexually expropriating the place of the husband, he has to be thrown out. The Allwits estrange themselves from the “stranger” who was once a welcome guest.⁴

⁴ “Stranger” was synonymous with “guest” or “visitor.”

In the main plot as well, notions of fluidity are controlled and redirected into the institutions of marriage and housekeeping. In one of the final speeches, the brother of the bridegroom addresses the wife-to-be in the following way:

Sister, delight will silence
Any woman, but you'll find your tongue again
Among maid servants now you keep house, sister. (5.4.45-49)

No longer opening her mouth, the “leaky vessel” is “soldered up” for good with respect to the outside world, her intercourse now limited to the household itself. Or so the patriarchal community hopes.

Throughout the play, the audience has been watching scenes which weaken the containing power of the home. Such plot lines show that “fictions of purity and impermeability” that support the idea of “domesticity” in the familial as well as national discourse of the early modern period (Howard 154) are very difficult to uphold, above all when commerce demands exchange across national borders and, as in the case of the Allwits’ arrangement with Whorehound, the opening of one’s doors to the outside world. Or when saleswomen, positioned at the threshold between inside and outside, step into the street and speak to potential customers. The newly created capitalist places also invited women out of their homes into the space of consumption and thus of formerly forbidden spaces, to shop or to watch a play. City comedy embraces the performative, discursive, open-ended nature of social arrangements and points to the contingent foundations of identity – be it sexual identity, gender identity or national identity.

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