

Realism, Desire and Reification: Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*.

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City Comedy and the Limits of Mimesis

Characteristically, traditional literary criticism has read Thomas Middleton's comedies as quasi-naturalistic representations of the social changes engendered by the early modern processes of urbanisation, the decline of the aristocracy, the concomitant rise to economic and social power of the citizen classes of London and the transformations in moral and social norms that these brought about. In T. S. Eliot's words, Middleton 'has no message; he is merely a great recorder'. As such, he is the greatest 'realist' in Jacobean comedy, in that his drama 'introduces us to the low life of the time better than anything in the comedy of Shakespeare or the comedy of Jonson, better than anything except the pamphlets of Dekker and Greene and Nashe' (169).¹ In turn, in L.C. Knights's revision of this argument, the notion of Middleton's realism as mimesis or accurate reflection of social life is underscored by the deployment of something like a basic notion of typification. The background that Middleton, with his stylised characterisations, 'implicitly asks his audience to accept', Knights argues, 'is a world of thriving citizens, needy gallants and landed gentlemen', a world which finds its privileged historical referent in 'a major social movement—the transference of land from the older gentry to the citizen middle class' (261–62).

Conversely, in more recent criticism, Middleton's plays such as *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605), *A Mad World, My Masters* (1606), *Michaelmas Term* (1606), or *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) have been associated with a series of formal traits that have been put under the heading of a generic marker embracing a whole set of dramatic conventions. Hence the canonisation of Middleton, as well as Jonson, Marston and Massinger's comedies as the core of a posthumous subgenre, city comedy, which 'may be distinguished from other

kinds of Jacobean comedy by their critical and satiric design, their urban setting, their exclusion of material appropriate to romance, fairy tale, sentimental legend or patriotic chronicle' (Gibbons 11). According to this generic definition, the label city comedy is identified with the coalescence of a well defined set of dramatic and literary influences—verse satire, social pamphlet, comedy of humours, the Morality Play, Roman New Comedy and *commedia dell'arte*—and an empirical concern, as the label itself is of course there to suggest, with the geographical and social referent of the object of representation.

Within this context, then, to earlier definitions of Middleton's comedies based on their referential topicality has also been added an emphasis on the cultural and ideological work that their dramatic genre performs. According to Leonard Tennenhouse, 'Jacobean city comedy acquires its peculiar character by virtue of the fact that it excludes the courtly figures found in romantic comedy and absent monarch plays, as well as the rural poor of the pastorals'. And so, with its focus on urban merchants, artisans and lower classes, it intervenes in contemporary ideological struggles by confronting the 'dominant class' with the representation 'of various practices which authorized a different basis for political authority' (171). The relevant historical and ideological contexts of city comedy are thus identified with the materialistic ideology of the capital during the early modern phase of expansion of the market economy (Leinwand; Manley; Leggatt; Bruster; and Griswold), the emergence of the marketplace as a 'central urban institution of the preindustrial city' (Wells 37), and its displacement of the 'the feudal order and the moral values that uphold it' (Venuti 136). In addition, feminist readings have detected in city comedy the salient traits of a dominant early modern discourse that constructs women as naturally incontinent and inconstant (Paster 43–65). From this perspective, the characterising feature of city comedy turns out to be its treatment of gender and sexuality. As Mary Beth Rose notes, while Elizabethan, and particularly Shakespearean, romantic comedy 'concentrates on the complexities of eros, dramatized as sexual desire seeking and finding fulfilment in the heroes' successful resolution of the process of courtship', by contrast 'Jacobean city comedy brings into the light of representation precisely those dissociations of Renaissance sexual ideology which romantic comedy evokes but seeks to reconcile and constrain' (43).

Thus, city comedy is now designated as the privileged dramatic genre through which early modern dramatists represented and variously responded to the social transformations thrown up by the emergence of a post-traditional urban environment whose life world was marked by a whole new ensemble of class and

gender relations and oppositions. Accordingly, this generic marker has come to be identified with the referent of a disenchanting, conflict-ridden and irredeemably secularised metropolitan new world that has displaced not only the romantic, festive, pastoral or courtly scenarios of Shakespearean comedy, but also the idealised urban landscape depicted in earlier plays such as Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599). If the emphasis on the referential dimension that the label suggests might seem to remind us once more of the old categories of realism or mimesis, contemporary critics have taken care to inflect them with redefinitions of this genre's mode of representation such as 'the first instance of "representation" in the modern sense of the term', in that it determines 'the way an entire field of economic and social relations will come to be understood and evaluated' (Tennenhouse 165); 'a response to specific contradictions within the hegemonic ideology concerning the City of London' (Wells 37); a dramatisation of 'the complex process of conducting economic and social relations in a newly forming urban environment' (Rose 43).

Each of these formulations represents what seems to me a valid and productive way of rethinking the relationship between the drama and specific aspects of the social formation in early modern England. The reading presented in this essay, therefore, finds much in these approaches with which to concur, although, if much recent Anglo-American neo historicist criticism has been characterised by a concern with the historical, social and political conditions of literary and dramatic production, I move in a somewhat different direction, namely from history back to the text itself.² That is to say that the guiding assumption here is that the imprint of the specific historical circumstances from which the drama sprang is, to use a semiotic parlance, encoded onto the textual surface of the plays, and can therefore be decoded by reading the context within the text, as well as the other way round.

There is of course no doubt that in Middleton's city comedies the extra- and con-textual socioeconomic reality of Jacobean London fully saturates the content of the plays. The world that they represent is the very setting in which they were originally written and performed: the metropolitan landscape of early modern London, with its streets, shops, brothels, marketplaces and houses; its citizen estates and complex layers of social strata; the topical events—Lent or Michaelmas Term, the beginning of the legal year—marking the scansion of its life. Still, by focusing too closely on the historical and social 'referent', we risk allowing it to overshadow the form of expression of the literary and dramatic medium, and thus to erase the transformations operated both by the intertextual

elements—the generic system, cultural traditions, dramatic conventions and the like—and by the immanent formal structure of the individual work.

This remark, however, is not to be taken as an invitation to abandon the historical dimension as a privileged locus for foregrounding textual meaning. It is rather meant to redefine the literary or dramatic work as a creative act and fictional construction in its own right, which on the other hand finds in the historical realities of its age the *complementary* dimension through which it realises its full conditions of intelligibility. The framework for such an interpretative model is most effectively provided by Fredric Jameson's suggestion that the 'traditional notion of "context" familiar in older social or historical criticism' may be more satisfactorily displaced by:

the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being understood that that 'subtext' is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narrative of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. (81)

Re-examined from this angle, the category of mimesis and its correlative image of reflection, as well as the notion of a privileged realist mode of representation, are at once done away with. For the extra-textual history traditionally identified with the notion of context, the material that different texts appropriate in variable quantities is no longer inert, but is instead reconfigured as the very substance that all texts draw and take up into their own linguistic texture. And this applies fully as much to those texts such as, say, Shakespeare's romantic comedies, in which historical reality constitutes a seemingly rarefied and elusive term of reference, as to those canonically 'realist' texts in which, on the contrary, this 'subtext' seems immediately visible. From this perspective, then, the historical dimension from which the literary work emerges becomes the hidden, and yet immanent, side of fictional representation: that which the imaginative projection of the literary or dramatic text, by its very nature, transcends while conserving it as its interpretative key and disguised referential system. This is, if one likes, what in a different theoretical framework Stephen Greenblatt has suggestively called 'the cunning of representation', its 'resiliency, brilliance and resourcefulness' (ix).³

City Comedy and the Ideology of Form

In order to address the critical issues briefly summarised above in terms of actual interpretative practice, I now want to turn to Thomas Middleton's comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, first played by the Lady Elizabeth's Men at the Swan in 1613. Specifically, my aim here is to develop a particular case about the play's satirical treatment of the historically determined interrelation of sex, class and commodity reification.

In terms of narrative structure, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* presents five parallel plots that bring together the Yellowhammers and their daughter and son, Moll and Tim, who are engaged with the suitably named Sir Walter Whorehound and his 'whore', who is disguised for the occasion as a Welsh gentlewoman; Mrs and Mr Allwit, that is Whorehound's other mistress and her husband and pimp; the Touchwoods, a down-at-heel gentleman and his wife, who are forced to separate because of the husband's extraordinary and therefore unaffordable fertility; Touchwood's brother, Touchwood Junior, who is the other, in his case requited, suitor to Moll; and finally, the Kixes, a family related to Whorehound, whose conjugal life is first plagued by Sir Oliver Kix's sterility and then relieved by the purchase of Touchwood Senior's sexual services.

In the opening scene we find Master Yellowhammer, a goldsmith, and his wife, Maudlin, who provide the full measure of the ridicule that separates their ambitions from the means for their fulfilment. As judicious middle class social climbers,⁴ they are intent on providing their daughter and son with a good match for their marriages. And in this enterprise they look for those most traditional marks of social status: land and nobility.⁵ As soon as the play begins, the goldsmith's wife exhorts her daughter Moll, who is anaemic, 'dull' and dances 'like a plumber's daughter' (1.1.17–18), to deal with her complexion and mundane skills in order to improve her appeal to the prospective husband. Through her generous use of double entendre, Maudlin immediately attempts to establish a complicity with the audience, which is invited to recognise the sexual innuendo in the recalling of her own youthful 'delight to learn' from her dance teacher, a 'pretty brown gentleman' (1.1.3, 20). However, as the action develops the Yellowhammers undergo a quick metamorphosis that turns them from the subject to the object of laughter. For their ambition to social promotion in the event materialises in the association with the depraved figure of Sir Walter Whorehound and his 'whore', who is presented as an heiress of nothing less than 'some nineteen mountains' (1.1.132).

When the play moves to the second scene, then, the Yellowhammers leave the stage to the Allwits. One step down from the Yellowhammers in the social hierarchy—they not only lack land and aristocratic titles, but also proper means of subsistence—the Allwits are their symmetrical comic counterpart. The Yellowhammers make a laughing stock of a common contemporary ambition to social promotion by way of mistaking a couple of disreputable individuals for genuine and respectable pieces of landed gentry, whereas the Allwits' household, as one commentator has noted, turns out to be 'a *reductio ad absurdum* of the values of the Yellowhammers and their middle-class world' (Levin 201). As the latter debase the institution of marriage to the meretricious enterprise of trading in Mrs Allwit's sexuality, the veil of public decorum covering up the real drives of the Yellowhammers' middle class world is grotesquely exposed and torn apart. Thus, when Master Allwit introduces himself, he delivers a speech that translates the petty economic pragmatism of the Yellowhammers' domestic conduct into an obscene farce in which he glorifies his own role of pimp as the perfect condition of the *paterfamilias*:

I thank him, h'as maintained my house this ten years,
Not only keeps my wife, but a keeps me,
And all my family; I am at his table,
He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse,
Monthly, or weekly, puts me to nothing,
Rent, nor church duties, not so much as the scavenger:
The happiest state that ever man was born to. (1. 2. 16–22)

The reference here is to the wife's extramarital affair with the astonishingly hideous Sir Walter Whorehound. Not until the final act does the latter seem finally to find himself contrite for his vile conduct:

Sir Walter Whorehound:

Thou know'st me to be wicked, for thy baseness
Kept the eyes open still on all my sins,
None knew the dear account my soul stood charged with
So well as thou, yet like Hell's flattering angel
Would'st never tell me on't, let'st me go on,
And join with death in sleep, that if had not waked
Now by chance, even by a stranger's pity,

I had everlasting slept out all hope
Of grace and mercy.

Allwit:

Now he is worse and worse,
Wife, to him wife, thou wast wont to do good on him. (5.1.26–35)

This is one of the anticlimactic apices characteristic of Middleton's comedy, in which the villain's repentance is bathetically punctuated by the second character's pun on his wife 'doing good', or copulating, 'on him', that obstructs any possibility of true pathos. This is an impossibility that manifests itself first and foremost as a stylistic occlusion. Middleton's comedic language, if turned to express the inward sphere of emotions, can do so only by creating artificially mannered and parodic effects.⁶ His satirical mode converts everything it touches into a farcical transfiguration, which finds its privileged target in the emergent materialist and utilitarian middle class social outlook.

In this respect, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* seems in effect to mirror an early phase of the radical expansion and rise to economic prominence of London's commercial and mercantile estates. For their apparent satirical slandering could be taken as providing us with a point of entry to measure the distance between the increasingly pivotal social and economic role of these social groups and the still immature position that they held in terms of cultural hegemony and affirmation of their own index of values. As Lawrence Stone has indicated, while the development of commerce and mercantilism at home and abroad and the related phenomenon of urbanisation corresponded to the emergence of a brand new stratum of merchant and trading estates, in terms of status active 'personal occupation in a trade or profession was generally thought to be humiliating. The man of business was inferior to the gentleman of leisure who lived off his rent' (24). Therefore, a satire directed against the former figure could no doubt rest on a deeply ingrained, if increasingly residual, social viewpoint that still held him in genuine contempt.

However, the main problem with this line of interpretation arises when we shift from the social attitudes that the play seems to express to its theatrical function. For, as Walter Cohen has pointedly remarked in his notes on Jacobean satirical comedies, 'by definition the critiques they offer are also directed at the very audience whose approbation the playwrights and actors seek' (291). Indeed, it would seem at the very least counterintuitive to suggest that contemporary

playwrights and theatrical companies would have actively antagonised the increasingly powerful, at least in economic terms, urban commercial estates and encouraged their hostility to the public theatre by indulging in their satiric vilification on the stage—although this pattern of explanation could perhaps be corroborated by the observation that city comedy, before being transplanted onto the public stage, saw its emergence in the more secluded and selective environment of private theatres, where its social viewpoint could feed into the upper class, aristocratic position of the audience.⁷

At any rate, Cohen usefully hints at a more articulate interpretation of Jacobean satirical comedy by suggesting that its ‘vigor derives from the disjunction between the social assumptions and resolution of the plot, on the one hand, and the implicit moral judgement by the author, on the other. An audience may, for instance, admire a character’s mastery of society while simultaneously faulting her or his deviation from social norms. The more pronounced the disjunction, the more satiric the work’ (282–83). And if the possible outcome of this ambivalence is on the one hand a totally negative social vision, on the other it can also be seen as bringing into existence the very opposite. If this dramatic form is undoubtedly characterised by a sharp satirical take on contemporary society, it also strives to offer comic entertainment, that is to say a fictional space for releasing the social and moral pressures that it brings into view. If the audience is invited to condemn the characters that are shown on stage, the moral force of this condemnation is to a large extent undermined by the sheer fun and comic pleasure that these same characters offer to the public. And it is this ambivalence, which is built into the dramatic form of Jacobean satirical comedy, that allows the unfolding of the deepest tensions and contradictions that problematise and unfix the meaning of the plays.

Desire and Reification in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*

As we have begun to see, one among the key formal traits of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* is the complexity of its dramatic structure, its intricate set of motifs and montage of interdependent plots. These can perhaps be best rearranged and ordained in terms of the play’s thematic preoccupations. The interaction between the four familial groups that appear in the text, to begin with, could be reinscribed in a thematic grid—sex, marriage, economic exchange and biological reproduction—built around the central narrative line that culminates with the weddings of the young Yellowhammers.

As regards the relations between these overriding themes, we could additionally detect two main structural combinations. The first one—marriage-economic exchange-sex—corresponds to the set of relationships between the Yellowhammers, the Allwits, Whorehound and the fake Welsh Gentlewoman, while the second—(marital)sex-economic exchange-biological reproduction—is centred in the subplot involving the Kixes and the Touchwoods. In both cases economic exchange is inserted between the two opposite elements of the triad as a structural operator that disrupts the socially validated connections marriage-sex and marital sex-biological reproduction.

If we were to follow this interpretative line, then, it could reasonably be expected that the game of symmetries that the play so skilfully creates would lead to a dénouement in which the disruptive element catalogued under the heading ‘economic exchange’ would either triumph—and this would correspond to the negative outcome of the complete dissolution of cohesive social values—or be ultimately expunged—and in this case we could talk of a happy ending that reconciles such values with the moral position of the play. The latter is in fact the resolution of the plot, culminating with the successful conclusion of Moll and Touchwood Junior’s love story. Interestingly, though, at its comic best Middleton’s comedy tends to force its way out of the straitjacket of such binary oppositions.

Let us take as a point in question the punning counterpoint that glosses a good many of Middleton’s comic endings. In *A Mad World, My Masters*, a young gallant, Richard Follywit, attempts to rob his rich and dissolute grandfather, Bounteous Progress, of his fortune before it is legally passed down to him as his inheritance. As an apparent castigation for this, the young gallant is made to fall in love and marry the grandfather’s courtesan. In Middleton’s comedy, this is a conventional motif: men’s socially and morally reproachable conduct—in this case, the attempted violation of the principle of patrilineal transmission of the family patrimony—is typically remunerated with the condemnation of getting a ‘whore’ as a wife. Accordingly, as a gloss on the whole affair, the young gallant dispiritedly notes ‘Tricks are repaid’ (5.2.272). Yet, this remark is delivered only for him to conclude, five lines later, that after all his prospective consort ‘is as good a cup of nectar as any bachelor needs to sip in’ (5.2.277). In the same ostensibly symmetric line relating fault and punishment, in *Michaelmas Term* we have another young gallant in search of social promotion, Lethe, who is remunerated for his amoral endeavours by being forced to marry the country

wench that he had previously drawn into prostitution. Here the initial protest, 'Oh intolerable!' (5.3.109), is immediately reverted into a rejoicing aside, 'Marry a harlot, why not? 'Tis an honest man's fortune, ...Why, well then, if none should be married but those that are honest, where should a man seek a wife after Christmas?' (5.3.122_25). *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, as well, presents a stereotypical gentry prodigal, Witgood, who, after having been spoiled of his inheritance, recovers his fortune by pretending to be courting a rich widow, in reality a 'whore', in order to delude the uncle with the prospect of sharing the future gains from the widow's assets. Here the ending has the prostitute marrying the uncle's arch-enemy, Hoard, and the prodigal marrying Hoard's niece. This resolution is glossed by Witgood's final remark, which facetiously plays with the early modern double entendre 'aunt-whore': 'She's mine aunt now, by my faith, and there's no meddling with my aunt, you know—a sin against my uncle' (5.2.153–54). Finally, in the closing scene of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, when Tim, the Yellowhammers' son, apprehends the real identity of his heiress, the revelation is followed by yet another coarse pun: 'I'll love for her wit, I'll pick out my runts there: and for my mountains, I'll mount upon—' (5.4.201–21). (The dash seems to indicate that the final word was censored).

In all of these finales, the moral underpinning the rationale for the dénouement is punctuated by a comic note that reduces it to much ado about nothing. As moral retribution finally seems to be dispensed, a sudden twist reveals what seemed foul as fair after all. The punitive quality of punishment is undone and the ground under the moral position that the play appeared to have taken is suddenly removed. As the plot comes to resolution, it enacts a final turn in which the satire of the play's life world turns into a liberating, festive celebration that finds its catalyst in the bodily delight incarnated by the woman's sexual prowess, which the recurring figure of the 'whore' is called upon to represent. Thus, in the upside down moral of this resolution, the real object of satire shifts to that most obsessive concern of early modern official public morality, female chastity.

According to Ruth Kelso's account of the *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (1956), this doctrine could be summarised in one epigrammatic sentence: 'let a woman have chastity, she has all. Let her lack chastity and she has nothing' (24). In reality, though, for a woman in Renaissance England to have 'nothing' was still in a way to have something. For this word indicated, among other things, the female genitalia (Wilberns). And it was precisely the use that the woman made of this 'nothing' that decided for the construction of her gendered identity: maid, wife or whore. That is what, in the reified vision of the

individual subject pervading Middleton's comedies, corresponds to the social form in which the value of the woman's 'nothing' is objectified. Just as the commodity realises its value only if put into the circuit of exchange, in Middleton's grotesquely literalised libidinal economy, the value of the woman's sexuality is materialised only in relation to actual or potential male consumption. On her arrival in London the country wench of *Michaelmas Term* is immediately given the advice by her pander that 'Virginity is no city trade' (1.2.42). Then, a few scenes later, her father comments, 'I know the price of ill too well / ...how soon maids are to their ruins won; / One minute, and eternally undone' (2.2.29–32). Taken literally, these remarks are both equally true, for they refer to the two circuits of exchange into which the sexed object 'woman' is alternatively forced: prostitution, in which virginity is 'no trade', and the institution of marriage, in which on the contrary it is. As opposed as they might appear to be, the discourse of the pander and the discourse of the father share a common ground, the exchange of women that sustains the social and cultural system of patriarchal society—an exchange which is acted out by men, among men, and in which the woman's desire is an absent factor. As Luce Irigaray has theorised, the 'economy—in both the narrow and broad sense—that is in place in our societies...requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate' (172).

In these exchanges 'woman' is constituted as a passive object that materialises homosocial relations between men. She is an article for exchange, that is a commodity, an objectified inscription of value whose worth lies outside herself, in men's desires and investments objectified in the woman-as-a-commodity. From the dominant, normative, which is to say male perspective, virginity stands for the promise of permanent possession of the unpossessed. It is an *ad hominem* address to the acquisition of the exclusive. Hence its function, within this context, as the depository figure of the contradiction of the commodity. Despite its universal availability, the commodity addresses the potential buyer with the offer of an absolute right to private, unshared consumption, and is thus invested with an aura of uniqueness that conceals the degraded and scandalous indifference with which it serialises its consumers (see Terry Eagleton's suggestive essay 'Aura and Commodity' 25–42). Virginity is precisely the aura that sustains the fetishistic cult of the commodity-woman to be exclusively possessed *qua* wife. Once this aura is made to wither through prenuptial consummation, the commodity becomes 'nothing' but a debased object for nakedly mercantile and impersonal exchange *qua* whore.

In Middleton's comedies, the rationale that sustains this distinction between 'whore' and 'wife' is turned into the subject of an irreverent scrutiny, in which both women's objectification and men's desire appear to be entirely overdetermined by the process of reification into which they are inserted. For in the social system that constitutes their environment, human relations, and in particular sexual relations, have become subsumed in the all-pervasive sway of the commodity system. Consequently marriage itself, that is the social contract through which the commodity-woman is removed from the sphere of circulation, resolves in most cases into a farcical demystification of the purchaser's exclusive rights over the use of the commodity that he has acquired.

Whereas in Shakespearean comedy marriage is represented as the social sanction for the successful fulfilment of sexual desire or romantic love, in Middleton's satiric comedy it is the sanction itself that is sceptically put under inspection. If we take such an eroticised comedy as *As You Like It* (1599)—which presented to its original public a boy actor disguised as a woman (Rosalind), who is transvestite as a male (Ganymede) pretending to be a woman on whom another man (Orlando) practises his courtship for Rosalind—the multiple marriages in which the plot finds its resolution seem to provide a socially acceptable conduct to channel the transgressive libidinal impulses that threateningly saturate the play. By contrast, in Middleton's comedy the familial institution is undermined at its foundation by the crassly utilitarian interests with which it is associated—that is by the social construction of individual subjects as bearers of wealth to be appropriated through the sealing of the wedding contract. Marriage is thus construed as yet another figure and instrument of an all-pervasive economic logic, which objectifies every human relation into the reified structure of the commodity system.

But if the satire of this system and its crudely utilitarian logic is indeed the manifest content of Middleton's comedy, it must be added that behind its satirical closure flashes a different, if latent, dimension. By the same token as they expose their satirical object in its most ludicrously grotesque expressions, Middleton's comedies offer a leverage to transfigure it into the subject for a releasing, potentially liberating laughter. This is the kind of laughter called for by the endings of *A Mad World, My Masters*, *Michaelmas Term*, *A Trick to Catch the Old One* or *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, in which the releasing comic twist of the dénouement projects us beyond the oppressive environment of the claustrophobically materialistic social dimension in which we had to that point been fully immersed. Only, this final move represents merely a deconstruction

from within of the horizon of a middle class, male, normative heterosexual gaze which, in order to achieve a genuinely inclusive dimension, would need to be opened up to the autonomous perspectives and claims of other, alternative or subaltern, subject positions.

NOTES

A slightly different version of this paper is available on the World Wide Web, in the online journal *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (2003): <http://purl.oclc.org/emls/08-3/fraschas.htm>.

1. T. S. Eliot's description came with the qualification that with the exception of *The Roaring Girl* (1611)—where in Moll we find a truly successful, that is, in line with Eliot's position on the aesthetic, 'dispassionate' representation of a 'perpetually real' figuration of human nature—Middleton's comedy is 'realist' in as much as it is 'photographic' (169).
2. See, for instance, Catherine Belsey's criticism of the 'rereading taking place in English departments', which she describes in terms of 'a neglect of the signifier' (14).
3. It must be noted, however, that this kind of theoretical statement is curiously at odds with the absorption of the literary text into the cultural and social (con)text that characterises Greenblatt's critical practice.
4. I use the term middle class here in a broad sense, to characterise a social attitude. Strictly speaking, in contemporary descriptions the Yellowhammers would have been catalogued as 'citizens' or 'burgesses'. See, for instance, Sir Thomas Smith's *De Republica Anglorum*: 'we in England divide our men commonly into foure sortes, gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen artificiers, and labourers' (65); see also Harrison 115.
5. 'That a "middle-class culture" of educated artisans, small shopkeepers, and merchants grew up in Elizabethan England cannot be doubted, but the dominant value system remained that of the landed gentleman. Except for the yeomen, none of the new men had acquired their fortunes from their profits from land, and yet as soon as the opportunity offered all hastened to turn their wealth into a landed estate' (Stone 23–24); 'In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the purchase of a landed estate continued to be the ultimate aim of every ambitious trader or entrepreneur' (Hill 242).

6. As Middleton has the 'Prologus' saying in *The Roaring Girl*, the play he co-authored with Thomas Dekker: 'Only we entreat you think our scene / Cannot speak high (the subject being but mean); / ... tragic passion, / And such grave stuff, is today out of fashion' (7–12).
7. The opposition between a popular public theatre and an aristocratic coterie private theatre was most emphatically put forward in Alfred Harbage's classic study *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions in the Theatre* (1952). While more recent studies have suggested that Harbage's clear-cut distinction was overemphasised, the perception of social and generic division is usually maintained (see, for instance, Gurr).

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