Marked Angels: Counterfeits, Commodities, and The Roaring Girl*

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This article traces the connections between the circulation of commodities and counterfeit coins in The Roaring Girl. Contextualizing the play's representation of counterfeits within a discussion of the relationship between real and counterfeit money in the early modern period, I argue that the play registers and addresses economic pressures, in part through its commentary on, and revision of, the conventions of stage comedy. In particular, the play offers enhanced forms of realism and the fiction of the "individual" in the title character, Moll, to compensate for the absence of legible material guarantees for value, legitimacy, or status. I conclude with a reading of the play's representation of masterless persons as the necessary shadow side of the plethora of opportunities seemingly offered by the market.

Middleton and Dekker's city comedy, The Roaring Girl, begins with what is perhaps the most familiar concern in English Renaissance comedy — generational conflict over a proposed marriage. In the very first scene, Sebastian explains to his betrothed, Mary, how he will overcome his father's dowry-related objections to their proposed marriage. He will "counterfeit passion" (1.1.102) for the notorious, cross-dressed roaring girl, Moll; for in comparison to Moll, Mary will appear a prize. With what could be a formulaic description of the genre of comedy itself, he reassures Mary: "Though wildly in a labyrinth I go, / My end is to meet thee" (95-96).

Sebastian's plot appears to cite and safely follow comedic convention: as he says, he takes "a path that's safe, though it be far about" (1.1.113). Sebastian plans to substitute Moll for Mary and then exchange them back. In his plan, Moll is simply a tool, the medium through which he will work, but the play turns this arrangement on its head and makes Moll, rather than Sebastian's impending marriage to Mary, its center. It is not just that the play is not about the conventional marriage plot, but that the play is about not being about the marriage plot. Rather than focus on the plight of the young lovers, the play focuses instead on attempts to utilize, obtain, or entrap Moll. At the same time that the marriage plot recedes, the merchant/gallant plots come into the foreground and the play negotiates social relations, and especially relations of desire, through the circulation of money.

* The earliest version of this essay was written for the Shakespeare Association of America seminar on "Early Modern Economies: Theatrical and Dramatic" organized by Theodore Leinwand. I'd like to thank the members of that seminar for their thoughtful comments and suggestions. I am also much indebted to Harry Berger, Jr. for insightful readings of this essay's many versions.
and commodities (tobacco, counterfeit coins, and women, for example) with which Moll is explicitly associated.

In the discussion that follows, I trace the connections between the circulation of commodities and counterfeit coins to explore the relationship between economic pressures, social relations, and literary conventions. I argue that the play registers and addresses economic pressures, in part, by providing a meta-generic commentary on, and revision of, the conventions of stage comedy. In particular, the play offers enhanced forms of realism and the fiction of the “individual” in the title character, Moll, to compensate for the absence of anything authentic or grounded. As “rematerializations” rather than mere frauds, these “counterfeits” compensate for the increasingly abstract and “dematerialized” social relations of the play’s credit and commodity-driven economy.

I

The play’s gallant/merchant plots foreground the spectacle of the commercial streets of London; the action moves from shop to shop, tracking the gallants’ sampling and purchasing of tobacco, feathers, and the latest fashions. While Jack Dapper tries on feathers, Laxton samples tobacco, and Moll fondles a velvet ruff, the scene establishes the play’s subplot of deceptions and potential infidelities in which truth and pretense become almost indistinguishable, and the guarantees for both value and social relations become increasingly uncertain. When one of the gallants says that he will avail himself of an “ounce of pure smoke” (i.e., tobacco), for example, another corrects him and says that he “may take up an ell of pure smock,” replacing the pleasure of a pipe with that of lifting the skirt of the woman who would sell that pipe to him (2.1.22-24). Moreover, within these fantasies of consumer gratification, customers transform into potential lovers who undermine both commercial and conjugal enterprises. When Moll comes into Mistress Openwork’s shop to look at a ruff, Mistress Openwork accuses Moll and Mr. Openwork of “love terms” (225) and complains that her shop’s fine linen only serves to attract customers for her husband’s pleasure: as a result, she neither sells anything nor receives any satisfaction for herself.

These exchanges seemingly provide the foundation for, and motivate, the gallant plot given the most attention in the play. In this plot, Laxton pretends to pursue Mistress Gallipot, who first appears mincing tobacco at her husband’s shop. Not surprisingly, the gallant, Laxton (Lack-stone), is the first to answer Mistress Openwork’s street cries: “Gentlemen, what is’t you lack? What is’t you buy?” (2.1.1-2). As his name punningly suggests, he lacks
both land and sexual potency.¹ His answer is not the goods sold in these shops, nor even Mistress Gallipot herself, but the money that he extorts from her by means of a pretense of desire:

I put her off with opportunity still! . . . I hate her, but for means to keep me in fashion with gallants; for what I take from her I spend upon other wenches . . . She has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money. (2.1.89-93)

A series of exchanges and substitutions produces a continuous deferral of gratification: tobacco is exchanged for money, which is given to Laxton in exchange for the promise of future gratification; Laxton then exchanges that money for gratification by other wenches. At the same time, a series of substitutions takes place: keeping in fashion with other gallants’ substitutes for other wenches, who substitute for money, which substitutes for Mistress Gallipot, who substitutes for tobacco — all as possible means to fill Laxton’s lack. As the passage’s parallel constructions only serve to underscore, this series of exchanges transforms one commodity into another, creating a series of interchangeable equivalences out of not only objects, but desires and social relations themselves.

This creation of equivalences is fundamental to the commodity form itself. In the early modern period, the term “commodity” still had several meanings: “a thing of use or advantage”; “the expedience or advantage of a person”; and finally “anything that one deals or trades in” (OED). In fact, the OED cites Dekker’s phrase, “the whore is called the commodity,” from his rogue pamphlet, The Belman, as the first use of “commodity” to refer to something in which one deals or trades. In the early decades of the seventeenth century this definition became more common as the term began to refer with more frequency to exchangeable goods. With the dramatic increase in domestically produced goods and foreign trade (the East India Co., for example, formed in 1600) and the existence of a full-blown money market, the circulation of commodities was becoming a preoccupation in London.² In Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare, Douglas Bruster suggests that the remarkable rise of domestically manufactured commodities and their circulation in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries produced a fascination with objects and possessions, and “sponsored an interest in commodities in the literature of Renaissance London” (42). Paradoxically, however, the circulation of commodities makes the ob-

¹ For a detailed discussion of the significance of Laxton’s name, see Garber, 224-27.
² For a discussion of the increasing importance of commodities in early modern England, see Thirsk; for an analysis of the importance of objects and the increase in consumption to the development of capitalism, see Mukerji.
jects less significant as objects, not because of excess but because of the way commodities come to be valued. Rather than being valued for their specific qualities, they become exchangeable equivalents, as they do in Laxton’s plan.³

This insight is not unfamiliar. Crucial to Marx’s theory of capitalism is his analysis of both the commodity form and exchange value as inherent to the process by which capital is accumulated. According to Marx, prior to a system of exchange, an object has use value insofar as its properties can satisfy human wants. Once that object is exchanged, that is, enters into a system governed by exchange, its value (i.e., its exchange value) is determined in relation to other commodities. A quantity of one commodity becomes equated with a quantity of another commodity. Exchange value, then, results from a process of abstraction that makes equivalents of distinct entities, effectively “dematerializing” them — evacuating them of their particular properties — and, most importantly, obscuring the labor a society uses to produce them.⁴ Therefore, the commodity’s value comes to appear autonomous, even autochthonous, as if the value is inherent in the object itself. Marx termed this misrecognition commodity fetishism.⁵ On the one hand, the commodity appears to have inherent value. To make the connection to the social relations of the emerging bourgeois subject of capitalism, we can say that the commodity appears individualized and autonomous. Yet, paradoxically, the process of abstraction fundamental to exchange eliminates difference among commodities — they are all created equals — and are subject to substitution. As a result of this process, not only is the object’s materiality threatened with replacement by an abstract notion of value, but also the human relations of both production and exchange become mystified.⁶ In Marx’s famous formulation, “it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (165).

³Though I’ve included Bruster’s observation, his analysis focuses on the objects as objects not as exchangeable equivalents. As Bruster himself acknowledges, his analysis is not primarily Marxist and does not take account of the significance of the commodity form to capitalism.

⁴For a discussion of capitalism as the mode of production defined by dematerialization see Stallybrass, 1996 and 1998. In his analysis of the dematerializations of capitalism, Stallybrass, following Marx, provides a corrective to those who mistake capitalism for a system defined by its attachment to material objects and possessions.


⁶According to Marx, “objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other. . . . Since the producers do not come into social contact until they exchange the products of their labor,
As a result, social relations themselves become increasingly abstract, as Laxton’s very approach to the gratification of his desires suggests. He acquires money by putting Mistress Gallipot off; in other words, he defers her gratification with the promise that it is forthcoming. When asked whether he is “familiarly acquainted” at the tobacco shop, Laxton boasts, “I will not deny but my credit may take up an ounce of pure smoke” (2.1.22-23). In Laxton’s model for accumulation we can see the shift taking place in the meaning of the word “credit.” Though the first meaning of Laxton’s response is that his reputation will get him what he wants, his process of deferral resembles that of the operations of financial credit — the ability to buy something in the present because of another’s confidence in one’s ability and intent to pay at some future time. Rather than allow for an immediate exchange, participation in a credit-dependent exchange economy adds several degrees of mystification, mediation, and ultimately a profit for the “middleman,” Laxton. In contrast to an economy guaranteed by reputations (in which signs appear to correspond directly with referents) in an economy based on money, credit, and commodity circulation, degrees of abstraction separate the object of credit from that which supposedly guarantees it, opening up the possibility for misrepresentation. Not surprisingly, Laxton’s credit-dependent relations produce a seemingly endless proliferation of deceptions. As in exchanges based on financial credit, Laxton’s transactions are no longer immediate, but deferred, and as a result, even the ultimate object of his desire is not clear. His interest is not in the object itself (i.e., Mistress Gallipot), but in a future “profit” — more money with which to purchase Moll’s sexual services. The ultimate conclusion of his plan is not even the gratification of his sexual desires at Moll’s hands; it ends with his establishment of a friendship with Mister Gallipot (who is also the first object in Laxton’s series of deceptions). What would guarantee his “credit” becomes increasingly remote; we never find out Laxton’s “true” motivations and his “worth” is never fully tested.

7Both Agnew and Hall discuss the crises surrounding shifting meanings of credit and credibility. Agnew’s discussion is primarily concerned with the thematizing of credibility in theatrical representation (111-12). Hall explores the relationship between the crisis of identity with economic and semiotic crises and the consequent necessity of recourse to the law (41-45).

8Even when Mister Gallipot confronts Laxton, Laxton denies any wrongdoing and claims instead that he was only testing Mistress Gallipot.
What would guarantee Laxton’s “worth” is at issue even in the conclusion of his plan quoted above: “she has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money.” Though his conclusion does not directly follow from the original premise, the parallel construction and the effect of the series of substitutions (“ways” for “wit,” “consume” for “rob,” and “money” for “husband”) replace the cause-and-effect logic missing from his strategic plan. As a result, the conclusion appears earned, and the combination natural. Yet, in his zeugmatic construction, Laxton’s appropriation of Mistress Gallipot’s verb, “has,” (a verb that indicates possession) mirrors the theft of her money. In this satiric representation of Laxton’s pursuit of his desires, even his self-justifying discourse depends on Mistress Gallipot grammatically. While Laxton’s tone of self-assuredness suggests that he enacts a fantasy of masculine autonomy, he spells out his dependent relation on others. Even his desire is derivative, dependent on keeping in fashion with other gallants.

In this fantasy, Laxton’s autonomy and masculinity are not just linked, but mutually constitutive. Laxton will compensate for his being without land and sexual potency by attempting to acquire both money and women (equated in Laxton’s plan as those things that can be robbed from the husband) through seduction and conquest. In this exchange, the woman (Mistress Gallipot) is transformed from a specific object of desire to another commodity that can be exchanged in the pursuit of profit, that is, more money to consume. Money as profit replaces the possession of women and things as his object of desire. Furthermore, money replaces both affective investment and interdependency and becomes constitutive of his autonomy. Masculinity, thus, comes to depend simultaneously on the exchange of women and on a disavowal of dependent relations. This disavowal finds its ultimate expression in Laxton’s friendship with Mister Gallipot — a friendship based on a claim to equality and thus a denial of the gallant’s dependence on merchants for the satisfaction of his desires in the form of tobacco, credit, and gold.

The link between man and money gets reinforced in the next exchange of which Laxton imagines himself the agent. The seemingly terminal item in Laxton’s chain of substitutions is Moll. After seeing her at the tobacco shop, he decides to use the ten gold coins he receives from Mistress Gallipot as a means to seduce her: “I’ll lay hard siege to her — money is that aquafortis that eats into many a maidenhead: where the walls are flesh and blood, I’ll ever pierce through with a golden auger” (2.1.195-97).

In his mixed and violent metaphor, Laxton imagines that money, like the commercial form of nitric acid, aquafortis, will consume and vanquish a maidenhead. Laxton’s plan and his metaphor are more about the power of
money and his relationship to money, however, than they are about the ob-
ject it will acquire. In this formulation, money becomes the very means for
Laxton to shore himself up, the substance that will fill his lack. We might
take him somewhat more literally when he says that he has “ways enough to
consume the money”; for him, money is not just a medium of exchange but
sustenance. Even more disturbing, money becomes simultaneously his sus-
tenance and his own equivalent. Initially Laxton is the agent of this
undertaking; he asserts, “I’ll lay hard siege to her.” But then that agency is
transferred to his substitute — money that “eats into many a maidenhead.”
That agency is then reembodied in an even stronger Laxton who can
“pierce” through with a “golden auger” — a prosthetic and reinforced exten-
sion of himself. In this formulation, money not only shores up Laxton, it
transforms him into something of an economic cyborg in which the human
and the monetary become somewhat indistinguishable.

Yet, his very metaphor undermines the guarantee that money would
provide for his “integrity” as a subject by raising additional anxieties about
what guarantees the value of money itself. If metaphors require difference,
this one seems to collapse into itself, because the aquafortis whose function is
supposed to be figurative in his formulation also has a literal meaning in re-
lation to money; it was used to produce counterfeit coins. Money is not just
like aquafortis, then. Through this un-metaphor, money is made to resemble
its own counterfeit, a kind of metalepsis in which the (false) copy undergirds
the original. Though the money appears to have a material substance that
guarantees its value — the gold invoked in the final piece of Laxton's meta-
phor — counterfeiting undermines that guarantee and with it the potency
Laxton is trying to claim here.

The difference between authentic money and counterfeit money was
not the same, however, in the early modern period as it is today. Today,
counterfeit money is artificial, completely fabricated; it has no value as soon
as its status is discovered. In the seventeenth century, however, counterfeit
coins were not merely fraudulent imitations; they were often authentic coins
that had been altered or adulterated. What made these coins counterfeit
was that the amount of gold or silver in the coin had been diminished so
that it was less than it was supposed to be for the corresponding face value.

9In Chapman, Jonson, and Marston’s Eastward Ho! Quicksilver’s boasts of his prowess as
a counterfeiter include his facility with aquafortis: “I’ll take you off twelvepence from every
angel, with a kind of aquafortis, and never deface any part of the image” (4.1.217-19). In
1725 an amateur chemist was tried for conducting experiments to diminish guineas using
aquaforis (Gaskill, 150).

10 For discussions of counterfeit coins in the early modern period see, Challis, 1978;
Craig; Feaveryear; Fischer; Gaskill; and Wortham.
The most common form of alteration was “clipping,” in which silver or gold would be cut or shaved off of the coin. Coins could also be placed together in a bag and shaken vigorously to produce metal dust, a process that was called “sweating”; or they could be “washed,” a process that used acid, perhaps aquafortis, to remove some of the precious metal without altering the image on the coin. Acid could also be used to wear away the image on the coin so that it would resemble one of greater value. All of these activities were illegal; in fact, they were considered high treason, a threat to the commonwealth, and were thus technically punishable by death.11

These practices were nonetheless widespread because they were easy to execute and highly profitable at a time of increasing poverty. Furthermore, they often went unpunished because it was difficult to prove that those carrying or spending the coins had deliberately altered them. The latter was the case, in part, because even legitimate coins were not standardized. Coins of the same denomination could be of different material value depending on the minting and how worn they were. The condition of coins varied so much and so many were diminished either by wear or deliberate alteration that even completely artificial coins were sometimes clipped to give them the appearance of authenticity. This variable state of the coinage provided additional opportunities for the making of profit. Those knowledgeable about coins, goldsmiths especially but also merchants, engaged in the practice of culling out the weightier coins and melting them down or selling them abroad — practices that were also illegal.12 These latter practices produced additional anxieties about the emptying of England’s coffers and exacerbated the difficulties of an already specie-scarce economy.

In May 1611, approximately the time of The Roaring Girl’s first performance, James issued a proclamation that prohibited the melting down of weightier gold or silver coins or transporting them out of the country where

11 In actuality, attitudes towards counterfeiters were complicated and varied. On the one hand counterfeiting was considered a threat to the commonwealth and referred to as “the grand evil in coin.” Since the image of the monarch guaranteed the intrinsic value of the coin some argued that clipping compromised the authenticity of the king himself. Moreover, coin was likened to the blood of the nation whose circulation was necessary to sustain life. Counterfeiting could impede healthy circulation and undermine the confidence in money necessary for it to function as a medium of exchange. On the other hand, counterfeiting responded to a shortage of coin that became particularly acute in the early part of the seventeenth century and some thought of counterfeiters as providing a necessary public service. They augmented the coinage and kept trade moving smoothly. See Gaskill, especially chapter 4; see also Challis, 1989.

12 This practice would be profitable if the face value of the coin were below the value of the metal itself.
their value as precious metals exceeded their face value at home. In his discussion of James's monetary policy, Simon Wortham argues that the king's primary concern in this proclamation was to uphold "an essentialist conception of value in which the relation between the object and the sign was held to be immanent, direct and unmediated" (348). Wortham further argues that the identity of monetary value and intrinsic worth undermined the existence of money as an independent determining system of value, and that the role of coins as money "generated a discrepancy between the circulating sign and its original, authentic worth . . . The royal decree of May 1611 represented money, then, as an intrusive force sundering economic and political signs from their stably designated origins" (348, 349). What I want to add to Wortham's insightful analysis is that counterfeit money and real money operate similarly. Money is like counterfeiting; it is already a force that disrupts the relation between sign and referent. Counterfeiting, then, mimics and reproduces a discrepancy that money itself generates. Laxton's use of the metaphor is perhaps more appropriate than I was giving him credit for. Money is like aquafortis, and the monetary system produces anxieties similar to forms of counterfeit in which the outward appearance does not resemble the inner content.

Money, or an independent money economy, therefore, is always already dependent on a form of counterfeit. It should not be surprising then that the volatility and unpredictability of social relations resulting from shifting economic forces manifest themselves in the literature of the period in both literal and figurative forms of counterfeiting. Counterfeiting is ubiquitous in early modern comedy, and especially city comedy, both in its economic form and in its social form — impersonation or deception. That the term "counterfeit" contains both of these resonances (to practice deceit, or even to assume the character of another person, and to create that which is illegitimate, especially for financial gain) suggests that counterfeits would mark connections between crises of identity and social relations, on the one hand, and more explicitly economic crises, on the other. Counterfeiting dominates The Roaring Girl. Literal and figurative forms of counterfeiting appear in

13 In November of the same year James issued a proclamation both raising the price of gold in order to prevent it from being exported abroad where its value was higher and giving subjects license to refuse payment in gold coins that were clipped or lightened in any other way (Larkin and Hughes, 262-63, 272-76).

14 Wortham demonstrates that James's concern was primarily with minting gold and keeping gold in the country. Because gold was of high value and there was a shortage of silver to make change in everyday transactions, James's concern with gold suggests that his primary concern was not with the efficient circulation of money. Instead, "the monarch's preservation of the integrity of English gold coins provided a way to disavow the agency of money" (348).
this play not so much as ways to accumulate money, but as means to other ends — ends that at times are not discernible through all of the layers of pretense. This displacement suggests that “counterfeiting” registers anxieties that are not primarily about the making of profit, but instead address the larger systemic effects of shifting social and economic relations. Counterfeiting, I want to argue, becomes a figure for crises resulting generally from increasingly abstract social relations and, more specifically, from the increasingly unstable relation between “value” and what guarantees it.

These anxieties, or cultural fantasies, become embodied and focalized in Moll. Thus, she is imagined to function in contradictory ways: for example, while Laxton imagines that purchasing Moll will shore up his masculinity and autonomy, Sir Alexander, falling right into the trap Sebastian sets for him, worries that Moll’s notoriety will destroy his family’s reputation. This contradiction is inherent to counterfeiting itself. To counterfeit usually means to imitate or to copy; yet etymologically, “to counterfeit,” means to make in opposition or contrast. Counterfeits inevitably then raise the question of how something that imitates also works against what it imitates. Inherent to counterfeiting then is a pull in opposing directions. In the discussion that follows, I will argue that Moll, who serves both as a reminder of the loss of legible and reliable material guarantees and as a compensatory fiction for it, embodies this tension.

II

The play foregrounds Moll’s significance even before she appears on the stage. The prologue, for example, suggests that a play about Moll Cutpurse has been long anticipated. To build up that anticipation the play defers her appearance until the second act, while in the meantime providing several evocative descriptions of the threat she poses: Moll is imagined to be a thief, a whore, and a smoker. While most of the characters in the play (the father/son pair, the bride-to-be, the gallants, the citizens and their wives) are conventional types within the genre of city comedy, Moll seems to stand out; accordingly, she has been described as unconventional and lifelike. One of

15 I use the term “cultural fantasy” here rather than ideology precisely to emphasize the contradictory and dialectical tensions of phantasmatic investments. While distancing my theoretical model, in part, from the connotations that have gathered around models of ideology — that ideology has a coherent political agenda and that it masks the real state of social relations or conceals the truth — I am building on Althusser’s definition, “a representation of the imaginary relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live” (165). A model of “cultural fantasy” also highlights the ways that the phantasmatic and material conditions of existence are mutually constitutive. For theorizations of fantasy see, LaPlanche and Pontalis; Burgin; and Zizek, 1989, 1997.
the gallants says he has never known "so much flesh and so much nimbleness put together" (2.1.205), and many critics have followed him in their assessments. This trend goes as far back as T.S. Eliot who said, "we read with toil through a mass of cheap, conventional intrigue, and suddenly realize that we are, and have been for some time without knowing it, observing a real and unique human being" (85). In his introduction to the play, Mulholland says she gives "the impression of having a full existence outside the immediate dramatic context" (24). This effect results, in part, from Moll's dependence on, and allusion to, the contemporary historical figure of the same name whose appearance on stage is promised in the play's epilogue and who does exist outside the immediate dramatic context. Mary Frith, known as Moll Cutpurse, was a notorious figure whose most distinguishing feature was her cross-dressing; she was also accused of indecent behavior and exposure, of associating herself with cut purses, "of carrying her selfe lyke a bawde," and of resorting "to alehowses Tavernes Tobacco shops and also to play howses." The play takes this contemporary figure and imports her currency, the intrigue surrounding her. Because so much has been loaded into the fictional Moll — the energy and instability of contemporary London with its new fashions, circulating commodities, and fascination with a new form of criminal underworld — she appears to be larger than life and therefore "real," unnaturally natural.

Paradoxically, though Moll appears more "real," she actually functions within the play as a site of projection that embodies and intensifies cultural fantasies and contradictions. These contradictions have provided much fuel for a critical debate over whether she supports or subverts the play's social or

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16 After dismissing the play as conventional, Leggatt says that "Moll herself springs to life, and lingers in the memory" (110). More recently, Kermode complicates these readings, arguing that Moll exists on two levels: "as both a representative of a type of Londoner, almost machine-like in her public social quest, but also as the antithesis of that: as an individual, a unique and private subject; she is dynamic and powerful, but with human fallibilities that must not (and cannot) be brushed aside (440). While I agree that the representation of Moll is contradictory, I will argue below against readings that take Moll's individuality at face value.

17 "Officium Domini contra Mariam ffrithe," 262-63. In the "autobiographical" The Life and Death of Mistress. Mary Frith, Moll does not admit to being a thief or a whore, though she mediates both activities. She is an accessory to prostitution and a kind of early modern fence of stolen goods; thieves bring stolen goods to her and those who have had goods stolen go to her to retrieve them. Though her cross-dressing is foregrounded in these accounts and in the play, these "offenses" are intricately related. The gender inversion is a sign of Moll's potential to disrupt the proper course of sexual and economic energies.
der — a debate the play itself seems to invite. On the one hand, her transgressiveness is conspicuous; the play and Moll herself flaunts it. Her gender and sexuality are represented as indeterminate and threatening. For example, her cross-dressing serves as a reminder for the possibility of substitution (i.e., one gender for another): as Mistress Gallipot explains, “Some will not stick to say she’s a man, and some, both man and woman” (2.1.209-10). Moreover, this unclassifiability of her gender leads to the imagined transgressiveness of her sexuality. Laxton’s response to Mistress Gallipot’s confusion comically highlights Moll’s fungibility: “that were excellent: she might first cuckold the husband and then make him to as much for the wife!” (2.1.211-12). On the other hand, her actions appear to support, rather than disrupt, social cohesion. Even though she refuses marriage for herself, insisting instead that she occupies both sides of the bed, she assists in the marriage of Sebastian and Mary, promoting the conventional resolution of stage comedy. She is supposed to be a cutpurse, but then insists on the return of stolen property. It is no surprise that critical consensus has not been reached. Reading all of these critics together, however, with their convincing evidence for both sides, suggests that the question of whether or not Moll is subversive is not a particularly useful one, precisely because Moll is not a coherent character who is the source of action, but is instead a locus of cultural fantasies, an embodiment of the culture’s contradictions. It is, however, her embodiment of these specific cultural contradictions, I want to suggest, that makes her appear so unique and lifelike in the first place and thus is also the source of the other critical trend that focuses on, and even champions, Moll as a unique individual.

These contradictions become located, that is, embodied in her body itself. Sir Alexander’s nearly hysterical explanation of his objections to his son’s dotage on Moll reveals that her “bodiliness” itself is at issue:

18See Howard, 1988; Rose; Miller; and Woodbridge. These critics, many of whose insights develop from their analysis of cross-dressing in the play, provide important feminist analysis of the cultural institutions operating in the play. Dollimore partially revises the terms of this debate through his model of “transgressive reinscription,” which he defines as “a mode of transgression which seeks not an escape from existing structures but rather a subversive reinscription within them, and in the process their dislocation or displacement” (285). For a rehearsal of these arguments, see Baston.

19These critics’ conclusions depend, in part, on whether their analysis focuses on Moll’s “assistance” in the marriage of Sebastian and Mary or on her role in the gallant plots — specifically, her denunciation and defeat of Laxton’s attempt to exploit her.

20Howard understands the function of Moll’s character similarly. She stresses “how thoroughly [Moll’s] representation is enmeshed in contradictions, a sure sign it is doing the work of mediating complex social tensions” (1992, 183). Her reading emphasizes the tension between female sexual desire and patriarchal culture.
‘A creature,’ saith he, ‘nature hath brought forth
To mock the sex of woman.’ It is a thing
One knows not how to name: her birth began
Ere she was all made. ‘Tis woman more than man,
Man more than woman, and — which to none can hap —
The sun gives her two shadows to one shape;
Nay, more, let this strange thing walk, stand, or sit,
No blazing star draws more eyes after it.

(1.2.127-34)

His hyperbolic and overdetermined description produces the intended response: “A Monster. Tis some monster” (1.2.135). As embodiment of impossibility and contradiction — both “woman more than man” and “man more than woman,” an unnatural creature of nature — for which there is no name, Moll is a site of much displaced anxiety, invested with considerable power. She is made out of real flesh, but not limited to one recognizable and stable form. What is most threatening about her is that she is an embodiment: this strange thing can “walk, stand, or sit.” In this culture of credit and exchange, she comes to represent embodiment when all else seems abstraction.

As concrete embodiment, Moll serves to assuage the loss of material guarantees the play foregrounds in, for example, its representation of Laxton’s specious claims to masculine autonomy. Moll’s character is thus a “rematerialization” that necessarily pulls in opposing directions. This tension is manifest even in Moll’s name. While Sir Alexander’s initial exhortation against Moll includes the claim that she is a creature one “knows not how to name,” his subsequent condemnation of her insists that her name itself is a sign of the very impropriety she represents. In his attempt to dissuade Sebastian from marrying Moll, Sir Alexander construes her name, the very signifier of her uniqueness, also as a class noun:

Sir Alexander. Methinks her very name should fright thee from her . . .
Sebastian. Why is the name of Moll so fatal, sir?
Sir Alexander. Many one, sir, where suspect is entered,
Foreseek all London from one end to t’other
More whores of that name than of any ten other.

(2.2.150, 152-55)

Sir Alexander’s comment, that constables search London for more whores named Moll than by ten other names, suggests that molls (a slang term for prostitutes) are everywhere in the city. Thus Moll is imagined to be both noteworthy (“no blazing star draw more eyes after it”) and common, indistinguishable from others like her. Paradoxically, Moll’s substitutability for others like her and her membership in the quintessential category of ex-
change (i.e., the prostitute) serve only to enhance the appearance of her uniqueness. Her very multiplicity, the multiplicity of molls, makes her appear not fractured but more coherent and even legible. These equivalent molls serve as reinforcements that resubstantiate her, giving her an appearance of individuality signified by her name, on the one hand, and guaranteed by her body on the other. It is this appearance to which critics, like some of the play’s characters, have responded in identifying Moll as a lifelike individual and thus insisting on the coherence of her character even as, or especially as, her body (like her actions) is represented as multiple and volatile. The body, thus, becomes the privileged (though also unreliable) ground of meaning and serves as a sign that there is such a thing as an “individual” (etymologically, that which cannot be divided). The body becomes the guarantor of individuality and, hence, a locus of further anxieties about it; for her embodiment is itself a rematerialization of the abstractions that, like the counterfeit coin, provides an unstable foundation for the play’s nascent capitalist economy.

This dual function of Moll’s body becomes clear in Sir Alexander’s fantasies of Moll as the person who thwarts his desires for a secure household and, by extension, a stable social order. These fantasies are represented in a voyeuristic scene in which he secretly watches Moll being fitted for a new fashion in men’s clothing — the Dutch Slop, or wide baggy breeches. Through the voyeuristic frame the scene stages Sir Alexander’s fantasies of Moll’s unconventional, even uncategorizable, morphology and her corresponding unlocateable place within the social order; Sir Alexander refers to her as “a monster with two trinkets” and as “a codpiece daughter” (2.2.77, 93).

The scene simultaneously represents the concrete materiality of Moll’s body and the impossibility of that body to provide a stable guarantee. Sir Alexander’s anxious fantasies about the uncertainty of what is beneath her clothing — the two trinkets — gets represented paradoxically through what would appear to be the opposite of uncertainty — the measurement of Moll. Depending on how this scene is performed, both the quantifiability and the indeterminacy could be represented simultaneously. The tailor could very meticulously measure her body; at the same time, he could linger over her body parts, performing and exacerbating Sir Alexander’s fantasy of what might (or might not) be underneath this new fashion for which she is being fitted. The scene’s relentless punning about the need for a specific amount of excess material — a yard more of cloth — makes the tension between these positions all the more palpable. For example, the tailor tells Moll that the breeches will “take up a yard more.” When Moll replies, “look it be put in then” the tailor says that the yard will “stand round and full” (2.2. 84-86).
We could say that the tailor gives Sir Alexander exactly what he is asking for through puns that work to fetishize Moll. The double meaning and linguistic substitution (of the perverse for the normal) are, in part, what make the bawdy pun titillating; like a fetish, the pun invests the object with a secondary symbolic meaning, even animating it. This doubly voyeuristic scene demonstrates how the framework of Sir Alexander’s fantasy transforms what are initially perceived as a set of empirical characteristics, Moll’s literal measurements, into an overdetermined object of anxiety. It is, ironically, Sir Alexander’s fantasies that give Moll substance here.

While the tailor’s labor to produce the accouterments of masculinity are represented to Sir Alexander and to the audience, he sees a “monster with two trinkets.” In her discussion of this scene, Marjorie Garber suggests that Sir Alexander “realizes that the design is not only for a pair of breeches, but, in effect, for a phallus” (223). While I agree that the tailor’s puns suggests that Moll is being fitted for a phallus — one that will necessarily rob the husband of the privilege of gender difference (Sir Alexander laments, “if the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool” [2.2.77-78]) — what surfaces repeatedly in this scene is Sir Alexander’s anxiety about her hermaphroditic quality. She has “two trinkets” and is a “codpiece daughter.” He worries about the interchangeability of the trinkets, that the distinction between them is not entirely clear. Even to refer to sexual organs as trinkets at all is to exacerbate the joke: by definition, a trinket is either an ornament, or the tools or accoutrements of an occupation. Furthering the levels of irony in this scene is the etymological link of trinket with “trenchier” which means to cut, as in to castrate; “cut” was also slang for female genitals. A trinket was initially a small knife; is it a prosthetic phallus, or instrument of castration? Trinkets in this scene, then, can refer simultaneously to an excess, that is, a proliferation of material substance and to its absence — the classic fetishist position. It is not clear to me that Sir Alexander realizes what is being designed here. Her body’s doubleness makes her appear very embodied and thus grounded, secured by something material; yet the doubling also suggests that the body is volatile, indeterminate, and thus an unstable guarantee for Sir Alexander’s reputation and the social order in which he is invested.

Interestingly, the word “trinket” was also used to refer disparagingly to the excess of trivial things produced as a result of the fascination with chang-

21 “Trenkets” or “trynkets” was the old English word for a small knife. It might have acquired the sense of small ornaments from being confused with the old French, triquenisques, which meant trifles or things of no value (Palmer, 656).
The relationship between Sir Alexander’s fetishism of Moll and the play’s representation of commodity fetishism with which I began is not merely analogical; these fetishisms are intertwined in the context and substance of the scene itself. In addition to highlighting gender instabilities, this fitting also parodies the swiftness of changing fashion, a target of both moralistic pamphlet writers and sumptuary legislation that worried about fashion as a source of economic and social instability, in general, and as a cause of the undoing of gender and economic hierarchies, in particular.23

Moll is not only the object of Sir Alexander’s fantasy, but also a consumer being fitted for a new fashion; that fashion, in turn, necessitates a different pattern. When Moll queries the tailor’s need to measure her, he replies, “you change the fashion.” His comment points to the excessiveness of changing fashion, to the constant substitution of one commodity for another in a never-ending attempt to produce something or someone of real and enduring substance. The irony here is that the very substitutability is what effectively dematerializes the object of its specific content. Moll’s interest in a fashion that requires ever more material—“a yard more” of cloth—reinforces that irony. In his discussion of the proliferation of fashion in the Renaissance, Richard Halpern emphasizes that while the excess of choices provided by the fashion system appears to produce genuinely original subjects, it nonetheless depends on and produces, in Dekker’s satiric words, “apishness” and nothing “but counterfetting or imitation.”24 On the one hand, this fitting invokes the acquisition of material, even excess material, that would serve as an expression of unique, individual identity, what Moll seems to accumulate throughout the play. At the same time, the proliferation of changing fashion invokes imitation and counterfeiting and points to the unreliability of this “rematerialization” to effectively resurrect a material guarantee. The “put[ting] in” of more material only serves to register the very absence for which it attempts to compensate. Moll’s fitting for the Dutch slop thus functions like her body’s two trinkets: as a reminder of the absence of any reliable guarantee that it also supplies. Rather than provide stability, this representation of the body’s measurability demonstrates how the nexus of cultural concerns (about gender, sexuality, and changing economic relations) becomes manifest in a necessarily unstable body.

22The OED provides the following example for the use of “trinket” as a “small ornament or fancy article”: “to receive some other trinket newlie devised by the fickle headed tailors” (1577).

23For example, see Stubbes. On sumptuary laws see Harte, who argues that sumptuary laws at this time were intended to regulate class status more than expenditure.

This body, however, is not just any unstable body, but the one that comes to signify, at least in critical discussions of the play, the unconventional individual. Through this resignification Moll does not serve only as a threat or manifestation of the possibilities afforded by the market. She also serves to assuage the loss of material guarantees inherent to that threat. Perhaps it is not just that this nexus of cultural concerns get manifested in the unconventional individual, but that this nexus of pressures constitutes the “individual.”

The play produces Moll as an “individual” whose seeming embodiedness belies the series of substitutions through which that very individuality is produced. As rematerialization, then, Moll’s characterization is not primarily nostalgic even though it is still compensatory. In other words, the play offers not a straightforward resurrection of that which is lost, but the compensatory fiction of something that claims to be new even though it is the product of transmutation and adulteration. Moll thus serves as a site of disavowal that both registers and denies the loss of material guarantees. The individual is not just the necessary counterpart to capitalism; nor is it simply a mystification. It is a compensatory mystification.

Sir Alexander’s attempts to entrap Moll in order to prevent her from marrying his son and contaminating his household proceed from this fantasy of her as a consumer and, moreover, depend on the link between consumption and the constitution of the individual. In order to entrap Moll within the law, Sir Alexander will “cast out a line hung full of silver hooks,” to tempt her and then “find law to hang her up” (1.2. 218, 233). In the plan Sir Alexander discusses with Trapdoor, he imagines that the precious objects he offers Moll will appeal to her consumer sensibility:

Sir Alexander. Here, take my German watch, hang’t up in sight
That I may see her hang in English for’t.

Trapdoor. This watch will bring her in better than a hundred constables. . .

Sir Alexander. My gold chain, too: Here, take a hundred marks in yellow links.

Trapdoor. That will do well to bring the watch to light, sir,
And worth a thousand of your headborough’s lanterns.

Sir Alexander. Hang up my ruff band with the diamond at it: It may be she’ll like that best.

Trapdoor. It’s well for her that she must have her choice.

(4.1. 7-8, 10, 12-15, 28, 30)

This scene of consumer possibility mirrors those of the earlier scenes in which Jack Dapper tries on feathers, Laxton samples tobacco, and Moll fon-
dles a velvet ruff. But now the objects of temptation have a particular function; they substitute for the processes and officers of the law. In fact, some of these objects of temptation are also objects that represent the operations of the law. The watch, for example, is not only a timepiece but also officers guarding a town, and the chain might well be Sir Alexander's chain of office. These objects not only substitute for the law, however, they improve upon it. The watch is better than a hundred constables because, rather than using force, it relies on the subject's own desires that then work in conjunction with the law. This scene of entrapment makes visible how the law produces the very desires it sets out to regulate. What Sir Alexander imagines (and this scene parodies) is a precursor of the self-regulating — that is, autonomous bourgeois — individual constituted by a proliferation of choices. Thus, Sir Alexander uses the defining characteristics of the market to transform the individual into a constrained subject of the law. What Sir Alexander's strategy suggests is that the individual, defined as the agent of his or her own choices, (like Laxton at the moment he gilds himself with gold coins in order to seduce Moll) is simultaneously constituted as subjected. In an inversion of the threat of the individual imagined when Moll is fitted by the tailor, this scene imagines the possibility of constraining the individual via a metaphoric consumerism in which the law seduces its subjects to internalize it. In the play's opposing fantasies of Moll we can see the oscillation between the individual as that which cannot be divided and that which is self-regulating and thus can stand alone.

Sir Alexander's final attempt to apprehend Moll works according to a similar logic. When she pretends to be Sebastian's music teacher in order to avoid Sir Alexander's recognition, he uses her pretense as an opportunity to finally apprehend her:

since my art fails,  
I'll make her policy the art to trap her.  
Here are four angels marked with holes in them,  
Fit for his cracked companions: gold he will give her;  
These will I make induction to her ruin,  
And rid shame from my house, grief from my heart.

(4.1.202-07)

In payment for her services, Sir Alexander gives her coins, four angels, whose value, or currency, is in question. While in the scene above, Sir Alexander attempts to lure her with items that collapse the distinction between the law

25 On the contradictory self-regulating autonomous subject, see Althusser; on the shifting definition of the individual, see Stallybrass, 1992.

26 An “angel” was a gold coin with the figure of the archangel Michael stamped on it. If a coin were “cracked” beyond the ring — the inmost round which circumscribed the inscrip-
and the economy, in this scene he tries to offer her "currency" significant for its lack of legal guarantee — coins marked by their very illegitimacy. Like Laxton, he attempts to purchase and prostitute Moll with a form of counterfeit to satisfy his own desires. It is not only the case, however, that he attempts to entrap her with counterfeit; he also attempts to use her against herself, that is, as a counterfeit ("to make in opposition or contrast"). By making her own "policy" the very means for entrapping her, Sir Alexander attempts to transform her agency into a restriction that would restore the social order, provide a house without shame and a heart without grief and thus make himself whole again.

Throughout the play, and particularly in Sir Alexander's imagination, Moll and the counterfeit coin are collapsed into each other. Prostitutes were often referred to ironically and punningly as "angels" — what they would receive in payment for their services — what Sir Alexander uses to entrap Moll here. Furthermore, to entrap her through her own policy is like inviting her to accept that she is what is offered to her; to entrap her is to ask her to identify with the content of that offer — in this case, a counterfeit coin. Ironically, Sir Alexander's attempt to entrap Moll by giving her counterfeit coins is an attempt to mark her and to make her legible, to show that Moll is really a moll and thus to ensure that a stable relation exists between sign and referent. Sir Alexander, then, labors, as James himself did, to produce the conditions under which referentiality and thus the social order would be stable and under which the very reasons for producing counterfeit coins would cease to exist — the power of an authority figure to "compel outward signs to reflect inner truth." In other words, he tries to produce a comedy (or at least write its "induction"), ironically, by circulating a counterfeit coin.

Sir Alexander, however, is not permitted to write the plot's resolution. In the play's final scene, Sir Alexander's fantasies (both the reassuring one of a stable social order, in which signs are fixed to referents, and the horrifying one, in which outward signs do not reflect inner content) are staged for him. Three consecutive wedding tableaux literally make his fantasies visible. In the genre of comedy, especially those whose plots rely on cross-dressing, the
resolution of the marriage plot often requires the production or revelation of a properly gendered body in an attempt to quell the play’s anxieties and complete its fantasies.  

The Roaring Girl represents this convention ironically in the final act’s parody of the comedic conclusion in which the proper body is supplied to make the social relations cohere.  

The Roaring Girl plays with this convention by presenting not one, but three resolutions to the marriage plot. The first two are false endings staged for Sir Alexander’s benefit. In both Moll herself is presented to Sir Alexander as that extra body, a bride for Sebastian: in the first, she is in male clothing; in the second, she is dressed in women’s clothing and masked. Sir Alexander responds as expected: with horror at Moll’s improper body when she is dressed as a man, with relief at the appearance of a woman masked, and with horror again when she unmaskst herself. Endings are represented until one occurs that Sir Alexander finds satisfying. Finally, much to his relief, Mary is revealed to be Sebastian’s true bride. It is, Sir Alexander says, an “eternity of boundless comforts” (5.2.176). He concludes his acceptance of Mary by claiming, “I see the brightness of thy worth appear” (5.2.195). She appears to him like a shiny, as yet, uncirculated coin; rather than undermine the relation between sign and referent, she appears to stabilize it.

With Mary’s appearance and the consequential passing of Sir Alexander’s lands, the marriage plot is concluded. Sir Alexander’s hyperbolic relief and the series of parodies of the comedic convention preceding Mary’s appearance, however, undermine the force of this resolution and demonstrate its inadequacy as a convention to resolve the play’s conflicts. But the problem is not simply that the conventional marriage ending does not resolve the generational issues the play raises; marriage is represented as an inadequate resolution throughout early modern comedy. The issue here is that the marriage plot itself is not the issue. As a result, the play turns its attention back to Moll who reinforces this point by claiming that she will never marry until a number of conditions are met: when gallants do not fear “seargants” and when “honesty and truth [are] unslandered,” for example (5.2.218-19). She makes the supposed effects of marriage, her preconditions for it; thereby eliciting the response, “this sounds like doomsday” (5.2.224). This interchange suggests that the work of resolution must be conducted elsewhere.

29 For example, Lyly’s Gallathea, Shakespeare’s As You Like It, and even Twelfth Night (in its “revelation” of Sebastian) rely on this convention. My understanding of this convention is much indebted to conversations with Catherine Newman.

30 This scene serves as a parallel to, and revision of, the scene in which Sir Alexander watches Moll’s fitting for the Dutch slop. Sir Alexander’s fantasies are again staged, but instead of Moll getting fitted for the latest in men’s fashion she is dressed as a bride.
The play continues for sixty lines after the marriage plot is concluded to focus on Sir Alexander’s attempt to reintegrate Moll. In contrast to his earlier attempts to exclude Moll, his final attempt to produce a stable social order depends on incorporating her by making her a subject of his forgiveness, an act that would nonetheless keep his position of authority relatively intact. But Moll undermines his attempt to make her the subject of his authority. When he says that he should condemn her but will not because of the service she has performed: she simply replies: “Condemn me? . . . / I’d make you seek out one to hang in my room: / I’d give you the slip at gallows” (5.2.209-11). She imagines eluding his grasp by substituting herself, thereby using the uncertainties of abstract and alienated social relations to her advantage. Significantly, a “slip” is also slang in the period for a counterfeit coin.31 What Moll suggests is eluding Sir Alexander by giving him back the very counterfeit coin intended to entrap her in the first place. Inverting his plan, Moll takes up the very identification with the coins marked with holes he offers, but then imagines using that identification to elude his grasp not to fall into it.

The “economy” of this play is driven not by romantic desire and its deferrals, but by the circulation of commodities and particularly the counterfeits with which that circulation is associated. This substitution is clear even in the language Sebastian uses to describe his initial plan. He says he will employ Moll in his plot because she is a creature:

So strange in quality, a whole city takes
Note of her name and person. — All that affection
I owe to thee [Mary], on her, in counterfeit passion,
I spend to mad my father. . . .

(1.1.99-103, emphasis mine)

It is not only the case that (like the play as a whole) Sebastian replaces Mary with Moll; his language also adumbrates the way that the marriage plot will give way to an economic plot. Moreover, Sebastian’s plot, like Laxton’s, assumes that the counterfeit will guarantee the real.

If this comedy and its economic conflicts are “resolved” it is not through the marriage (about which the audience is made to care little) or even through the resolution of the deceptions which occupy the citizen/gallant plots, but through “realistic” representation itself. Critics have noted that the genre of city comedy provides realistic representations of London and

31 In Middleton’s A Mad World My Masters, Follywit, who justifies stealing from his uncle Sir Bounteous as “credit” he intends to repay when he inherits from this same uncle, puts on a play entitled, The Slip. This play within a play particularly emphasizes the connection between substitutions and counterfeits.
the contemporary social order. The conventions of _The Roaring Girl_ could be seen as precursors to those of realism with its attention to details of everyday, material life and its representation of characters who are not allegorical figures but current cultural types: gallants, merchants, merchants’ wives. As social relations rely more on abstractions (like credit), literary representation becomes more realistic and seemingly based on the concrete. Referentiality itself, that is, pointing outside the immediate dramatic context, serves to compensate for the very loss of material guarantees that the play itself foregrounds. Like the individual, this enhanced realism attempts to compensate for the gaps between signs and referents inherent to the play’s counterfeit economies. These conventions, however, enact a kind of disavowal, registering the very absences they seek to deny. This contradiction brings us back to the logic of commodity fetishism. We see and invest in the circulation of these commodities and the transactions that occur at the merchants’ shops so that it appears that social relations are concrete and materially grounded, but they are dependent, instead, on substitution and deception. On the one hand, the play promises gratification — it will represent reality — but it does so only to show that the promise is elusive.

The play takes its dependence on referentiality one step further by ending with an epilogue that explicitly points outside of the immediate dramatic context. The epilogue offers the “real,” extra-theatrical Moll Cutpurse herself as compensation:

If what [writers and actors] have done
Cannot full pay your expectation
The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence,
Shall on this stage give larger recompense.

(33-36)

That Mary Frith is disciplined by the law for her appearance on the stage in man’s apparel, however, suggests that her “real” presence creates at least as much anxiety as it allays. Like the slip with which Moll defies Sir Alexander, the appearance of Mary Frith suggests that even the “real” body is not a concrete, self-evident sign that can guarantee the individual.

III

As a conclusion, I want to consider one more thread of the plot and with it the play’s representation of one more potential commodity — masterless persons. The fourth act concludes with the resolution of the merchant plots,

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32 For a discussion of cultural types in city comedy, see Leinwand.
33 “Officium Domini contra Mariam ffrithe.”
and the fifth act begins with what appear to be events isolated from the main action of the play. This final act opens with a representation of the villainous underworld, of cutpurses and rogues pretending to be maimed ex-soldiers — masterless men with a license to beg. I want to argue, however, that what seems to be the intrusion of a new thread at the moment the play is on the verge of resolution is actually the remains of those plots — the previously unrepresented shadow side of the proto-capitalist social order and its fantasy of the possibilities of consumption. The shadow side of commodity circulation, social mobility, and sovereign individuals is the production, even the necessity, of placelessness.

Placelessness is the condition of masterless persons who both have no attached subject position and are exterior to the circulation of labor and production of wealth. While, technically, all people between the ages of fifteen and forty-five who were unmarried and without their own estates were required to be in service, there was actually an explosion in the size of the vagrant population in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In part, this increase in vagrancy may be explained as the result of “primitive accumulation,” Marx’s term for the transitional process, which creates the capital relation by divorcing the worker from the ownership of the conditions of labor — that is, by divorcing the producer from the means of production. The presence of this increase of masterless persons did not go unnoticed. Richard Halpern argues that the increase in numbers of vagrants seemed even greater than it was because they tended to come to towns, markets and public events to beg. They were necessarily highly visible and attitudes toward them, as a result, began to change. In the sixteenth century the notion that the idle poor were dangerous came into prominence, and by the late sixteenth century condemnation of the poor was becoming respectable (Slack, 18-24). Building on A.L. Beier’s insights that the poor were “desanctified,” Halpern explains that while the poor had been considered worthy of charity in their own villages, the increase in numbers and their presence in larger towns made them the objects of suspicion or fear and they were more persecuted than aided: “they became in a sense the quintessential other of English soci-

34 See Amussen, 48. For a discussion of the increase of vagrant poor and changing attitudes toward them see Beier, Halpern, and Slack. Beier and Halpern cite several contributing factors to the increase in masterless persons: enclosures and dispossession of peasantry by other means, the dissolution of monasteries and hospitals, and an increasing restrictiveness by craft guilds. Slack blames the increase of masterless persons less on monastic closures and more on the increase in population.

35 The increase in population with no place to go and the shift of populations to cities was so great that in 1611 James issued a proclamation forbidding the construction of any building on a new foundation in London or Westminster (Larkin and Hughes, 267-68).
For whereas late feudal ideology tended to bind the poor to a corporative social or religious body, early modern ideology worked to expel them as alien and threatening” (73-74). A proliferation of rogue pamphlets (in which Dekker himself participated) warning against the possible villainies to which one could fall victim and also attempting to classify aspects of rogue society illuminates the extent to which the masterless person played a significant role (both practical and symbolic) in the shift in early modern subjectivity.36

It is this role that the opening scene of the final act of The Roaring Girl explores. Trapdoor, instrumentalized earlier in the play in one of Sir Alexander’s plots against Moll, but now dismissed from service, enters the stage with a patch over one eye, begging along with his mentor, Tearcat. Both of them pretend to be ex-soldiers with maimed legs. Trapdoor and Tearcat are not wounded ex-soldiers, however, but professional rogues and wandering beggars. Significantly, throughout the scene Moll acts as a translator for her upper-class companions, who express fascination with, and desire for information about, the rogues’ ways, and who will only give Trapdoor the money he requests if he cant with Moll, “else not a penny” (5.1.184). The substance of their cant conversation is predictable: Trapdoor suggests that they cut a purse and rob a house, followed by a bit of “fadoodling.” Yet, the issues underlying these threats — the necessity of stealing rather than the act itself — are elided by the appropriation and commodification of the rogues themselves; canting and the speakers of it are made into commodities which can be purchased and exchanged.

Moreover, through this simultaneous appropriation and exclusion, the appropriately named Lord Noland, who pays these men for their performance of cant, invests in the exoticized masterless person and, thereby, attempts to hold his own place within the social order. The pretense of the ex-soldier is crucial here. Though it was literally the case that some of the masterless men were ex-soldiers, Tearcat and Trapdoor continue to describe their position as analogous to that of the soldier even after their deception has been revealed. Tearcat denies Moll’s accusation that he is a thief with an explanation of how he has taught Trapdoor to counterfeit the role of ex-soldier:

I am no such nipping Christian, but a maulderer upon the pad I confess; and meeting with honest Trapdoor here, whom you had cashiered from bearing arms ... I instructed him in the rudiments of roguery, and by my map made

36 For a discussion of the increase in rogue pamphlets, see Agnew, 64-67.
him sail over any country you can name, so that now he can maunder better than myself. (5.1.140-46)\textsuperscript{37}

Jack Dapper responds appropriately, “So then, Trapdoor, thou art turned soldier now” (147). Like the mutilated body of the ex-soldier that would symbolize national identity and the sanctity of the nation’s boundaries in whose defense they were wounded, the burnt hand of the thief Trapdoor, which Sir Alexander had noted with suspicion earlier in the play, marks off the boundaries of the legitimate subject. His marked body and the collapse of the masterless person into the thief defines and protects the boundaries of the nation’s subjects not from without — from the threat of foreign forces — but from the criminal, placeless other within. The wanderings, disfigured bodies, and “foreign” language of masterless persons symbolically mark out the boundaries of the nation. The Englishness of Noland depends on the constitutive exclusion of the masterless person as an internal foreigner.\textsuperscript{38}

As a parallel to these vagrants’ claims to foreign wanderings, one of Noland’s companions describes his own itineration — to the tavern — as a “boon voyage to that nappy land of spice cakes,” and Noland replies that he could find it in his heart to sail “to the World’s End with such company” (5.1.57-60). In both cases, these characters make reference to a specific place within England but infuse it with the idea of a long voyage to an exotic land. Thus they appropriate and internalize the foreign within England and defuse the threat it represents just prior to the appearance of these internal aliens. The “integrity” and coherence of the English subject depends not only on its potential autonomy, but on the production of difference within the very nation these exclusions constitute. The proto-bourgeois subject and the subject of England, then, are constructed simultaneously and laboriously. The class boundaries of the nation are marked out and secured by the exclusion of those “menaces to society” who are feared for their potential to produce no value, but who will ultimately provide the nation’s labor force. Indeed, masterless men are what the play’s economy depends on but cannot contain.\textsuperscript{39}

Even the language of these vagrants marks them as aliens. The geography and the details of where these counterfeit soldiers have been are false, but they do speak a “foreign,” and even counterfeit, language; they speak the

\textsuperscript{37}“Maunding” means “to ask” according to “The Canter’s dictionary” (Dekker, 1968, 194). Citing this passage in The Roaring Girl, the OED defines “to maunder” as to beg.

\textsuperscript{38}For theorizations of the constitutive exclusion of the other, see Bhabha, Butler, Stallybrass and White, and Zizek, 1989.

\textsuperscript{39}Beier argues that vagrancy was the classic crime of status; vagrants were considered “menaces to society,” at odds with the social order itself (6).
thieves' cant, also called "pedlar's french" (5.1.179). In his rogue pamphlet, *English Villainies Discovered by Lantern and Candlelight*, Dekker provides a history of the language called "canting" and an etymology of the term itself. But first he retells and revises the origin story of the Tower of Babel and its production of nations of people who followed others who could speak their same tongue and whom they could understand. In other words, he frames his history of canting with a story about the origins of nations and peoples — how nations and peoples are produced through their dependence on a common language. In addition to common custom and currency, it is common language that constitutes the subjects of a nation. He begins the history of canting itself, with the discovery of those who speak it: "the Belman in his first voyage which he made for discoveries found them to be savages, yet living in an island very temperate, fruitful, full of a noble nation and rarely governed" (189). Borrowing from the imperialist discourse of the travel narrative, the rogues are described as savages within a noble island nation. They are the savage sub-culture against which the civilized subjects of the nations are defined and whose foreign language confirms the legitimacy of proper English and those who speak it.

But this text also makes clear that a "subject that matters" is a productive subject. Dekker refocuses the story of Babel so that it is as much about the disruption of labor as it is about the creation of separate languages. The infusion of so many languages produces chaos among the laborers who no longer work together in harmony and thus leave off the building of the tower. Thus, the anxiety about the idleness of the masterless rogues (who will be the subject of the rest of the text) is adumbrated in the fear that nothing will be produced: "the sound of the noise was nothing," and "thus Babel should have been raised, and by this means Babel fell" (188). To fill the void, I would like to suggest, the narrator offers the dictionary and history of cant that follows directly upon this retelling. While the project of building the Tower is abandoned, the narrator has "builded up a little mint" of words — of "this canting commodity" (195). The appropriated and commodified language of rogues is offered to supply the very lack of (legitimate) productivity that both cant and its speakers signify elsewhere. Their idleness and inability to produce anything of value is thus paradoxically transformed into the very commodification of their labor and its products.

This genealogy highlights the two forms of economic imperialism crucial to the early modern nation's constitutive moment: that of primitive accumulation and that of economic expansion on which the circulation of

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40Babel is thus symbolic of rogue language itself — a falling away from a single originary authenticity and into a lack of productivity.
commodities depends. If the circulation of commodities itself functions according to a fetishistic logic in which the fascination with the possibilities for consumption substitutes for and even masks the actual social relations by which they are produced, those disavowed forces return in the play's final act as a critical prologue, perhaps, to the "resolution" that follows.  

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41 Shershow persuasively extends Marx's analysis of the mystification of social relations under capitalism to the fascination with the market itself: "the glittering subjective allurements of the marketplace, like the apparent equality of buyer and seller, function to conceal the economic relations of capitalism as much as they feed its ever-increasing appetite for consumption" (10).
Bibliography


