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Ram Alley and Female Spectatorship

Several times in Lording Barry's *Ram Alley* (1608),¹ the rich mercer's widow Taffata and her maid Adriana look on, unnoticed, as they inspect another character from afar. Early in the play, for instance, they study Thomas Smallshanks, and Taffata explains that his nose reveals a great deal about Thomas himself: 'A witty woman may with ease distinguish', she explains,

All men by their noses, as thus: your nose
Tuscan is lovely, large and brawde,
Much like a Goose, your valiant generous nose.
A croked smoth and a great puffing nose,
Your schollers nose is very fresh and raw
For want of fire in winter, and quickly smells
His coppes of mutton, in his dish of porrage.
Your Puritan nose is very sharpe and long,
And much like your widows, and with ease can smell
An edefying capon some five streets off.²

This voyeuristic study of Thomas by Taffata and Adriana is remarkable because it inverts early modern gender roles with respect to spectatorship and spectacle by objectifying and sexualizing the male body. When Taffata subjects Thomas to a scrutinizing and knowledgeable gaze, that is, the focus of this gaze contradicts what Jean E. Howard identifies as the gendering of the early modern spectacle. In 'Women as Spectators, Spectacles, and Paying Customers', Howard locates a patriarchal anxiety at the heart of anti-theatrical criticism: when women pay their sixpence to enter the theatre, she argues, it affords them the opportunity to observe and evaluate a spectacle;³ such an opportunity implies an independence of thought that undermines a typically patriarchal conception of blank, effectively eye-less, female objects.⁴ Knowing Thomas by watching Thomas, Taffata draws attention to her own specular agency and to an imagined dearth of depth in the object of her gaze. Taffata seems, as

Elizabeth Hanson points out, ‘to be on permanent holiday from early modern gender ideology’.⁵

Ram Alley is filled with such inspections of the male body that are imagined to somehow reveal the truth regarding the observed character’s insides: Frances, for instance, explains to Beard that his ‘nose stands compas like a bow’ and betrays the truth of his character (*RA* 593), and Lady Somerfield explains to Throat that his ‘habit seemes to turne: / [His] inside outward to me’ (*RA* 2006–7). This conflation of male subjects with their visible forms is most clearly realized in the names of most male characters: Smallshanks, Throat, Foote, Mouth, and Beard may all simply be flat comic types, but the play is sure to yoke this flatness to an expressive corporeality. By yoking names, characters, and bodies, these bodies become semiotic *pastiches* in *Ram Alley*, and they seem built as a spectacle to be inspected and interpreted by a critical observer. If we agree with Jeremy Lopez that much of the play is occupied by attempts to discover the insides of women,⁶ we have to recognize that it has already discovered the insides (or the absence of insides) of men. As Taffata points out with regards to male courtiers, such men are ‘fellows’ that have ‘noe inside’ (*RA* 1650)

While *Ram Alley* situates the male body at the focus of a discerning gaze, the female body is not initially subjected to the same fate. The female body is often concealed from view in the play, or it is disguised rather than exposed for interpretation and evaluation. Constantia, for instance, is concealed behind a ‘cod-peece’ that she worries about filling (*RA* 58–9), and Taffata conceals herself in a home to which she controls entry. Likewise, Frances’s actual body is slowly replaced by false teeth and wigs (*RA* 123), and her noble heart is transformed into a body of metonyms as she becomes, to William Smallshanks, a ‘petti-coate, / A perfum’d smock’, and a bi-weekly bath (*RA* 110–1). The ‘unvertuous’ Lady Taffata’s body is also deceptive – so deceptive, in fact, that it leads Boutcher to exclaim ironically that that the ‘vertue of your nobler mind / Speakes in your lookes’ (*RA* 876–7). While the male body is observed and speaks in *Ram Alley* to expose the absence of a hidden masculine subjectivity, the female body is conspicuously concealed, disguised, and hidden away.

Further confounding the conventions that usually put the female on display for masculine evaluation, most of the gazing in the play is rooted in the eyes of ‘watching-women’: Lady Taffata and Adriana are regularly onstage, watching the dramatic proceedings without participating, and Constantia is in drag for the *sole purpose* of observation – ‘to follow him, / Whose love first caused me to assume this shape’ (*RA* 56). Despite these unconventional beginnings,

however, *Ram Alley* ultimately construes this inversion of gender roles as problematic, and it becomes something that the comedic conclusion resolves. While I don't think that the watching-woman is necessarily the centre of conflict in *Ram Alley*, if we assume that a comedy ends with a return to a 'natural' order, then this watching female subject becomes an aberration for the plot to correct as it concludes its own trajectory; she is the type of unnatural aberration that can only exist in *Ram Alley* – the alley in Whitefriars most notorious for prostitution and gambling – before the plot replaces prostitutes and their clients with wives and husbands. By setting the play and its inverted gender roles in *Ram Alley*, we see that, in early-modern England at least, the rhetoric of normality and identity (and not just, as Jeremy Lopez argues, the rhetoric of sexuality) is tuned to geographical coordinates and vice versa.

In a strange scene built around an odd anecdote, Constantia, dressed as a page, tells a story to Boutcher while Lady Taffata and Adriana look on. That Constantia speaks at length is itself unusual – this is the only substantial piece of dialogue that she speaks between the opening and closing scenes – and the story that she tells is absurd. Despite its absurdity (or, perhaps because of its absurdity) it also describes one of the central problems in the play: the spectatorship of women. The looking of women is the source of much conflict in *Ram Alley*, and the story that Constantia tells opens on a scene of watching-women. Some 'citty dames', she explains, 'Were much desirous to see the Baboones / Doe their newest trickes'; so, they went to the zoo and they watched (*RA* 258–60). That this instance of female spectatorship regards baboons is not surprising – the monstrosity of women spectators requires a monstrous spectacle. And that the women in question were specifically 'citty dames' (my emphasis) is also not surprising; their status as urbanites suggests that they're somehow disarticulated from traditional roles, like Frances, the country girl who remains ideally pure, she claims, until the city and William Smallshanks turn her to prostitution.

When she returns from the zoo, Constantia explains, one of these women retires to her bedroom and sleeps. Here in her closed domestic space, far from the corrupting influence of the city and its zoo, the 'problem' of the watching-woman is resolved. When she wakes in the morning, the woman sends her maid to make for her a 'warne smocke' and 'gins to think on the Babones tricks' (*RA* 562–4). Once she begins to think of these tricks, she decides to practice some of these tricks herself and she eventually ends up naked with her right leg 'Crosse her shoulder: but not withal her power / Could she reduce it'; even with 'much struggling', she can't solve her problem and she 'tumbles quite from the bed upon the flower' (*RA* 268–70).

On the floor, wailing, the woman's cries eventually arouse her maid, who proceeds to call the woman's husband and her neighbours. Once the neighbours arrive, their presence as onlookers turns the dame's chamber into the stage of a freak show. In this painful and revealing position, the woman who was previously watching becomes a spectacle for her neighbours and the object of their knowing and interpreting looks. Upon close observation, the neighbours, 'laughing as none forbear' at the sight of a naked, contorted woman, observe the dame and pass judgement: she's 'bewitched', some believe, and others that 'the Divell had set her face where her rumpe should stand' (*RA* 275–7). That this laughter joins with the horror of devilish possession only reaffirms the status of the woman as spectacle. And even though she dispels the religious implications of the scene – 'she tells them of the fatall accident' – she is still left as a spectacle. Still laughing, one neighbour recommends that the woman's husband 'carry his wife about / To doe this trick in publike' because 'she'd get more gold / Then all the Babones, Calves with two tayles, / Or motions what so ever' (*RA* 285–8). With this observation, then, we see that the woman is reduced to the role of 'Babone', and like the baboon she's figured as an object in search of an audience.

With this summary of Constantia's story in mind, we have to wonder how the story works in *Ram Alley* and what Constantia's telling of the story *does* in the play: the story serves as a thematic model that the play negotiates, a model in which watching-women are to be corrected returned to the status of spectacle. And when Constantia tells this story to Boutcher, Lady Taffata and Adriana, we see a threefold return of the female spectacle: first, the woman in the story is made a spectacle by her neighbours' eyes, then again by Boutcher, Lady Taffata, and Adriana's audience, and last by the audience. With the telling of this story, then, the female body becomes once again something to discuss and describe, something that must be watched, something that audiences might observe.

Just as Constantia's story ends with a watching-woman being made spectacular, so to does that narrative that the play resolves.⁷ Again, I don't want to say that *Ram Alley's* conflict was rooted entirely in watching-women, but I want to draw attention to the correlation between the comic resolution of the play, and the revelation of the female characters as conspicuous spectacles. If the comedic plot ends when a certain condition of naturalness is restored, then this naturalness in *Ram Alley* is coded in the gendered roles of spectator and spectacle. Where previously in the play the female characters had been watchers, overseeing the goings on, the conclusion leaves female characters seeing less and being seen more.

In the final scene the female characters who had previously been watching and concealed become spectacles for both the male characters in the play and the audience to observe. We first see Lady Taffata exposed, forced from her deceptive costume to speak truly about her feelings for her suitors. Boutcher earlier complained about Lady Taffata's dishonest body, and questioned:

Can vowes and oaths, with such protesting action,
As if their hearts were spit forth with their words
As if their soules were darted through their eyes
Be of no more validity with women? (RA 2369–72).

But by the end of the play (and under great duress) Lady Taffata eventually reveals the truth of her insides. More specifically (and using Boutcher's conspicuously corporeal rhetoric) whereas Lady Taffata no longer conceals or disguises her true self – the self that is bound to her heart and revealed through her eyes – this embodied self instead becomes readily visible to all watching, at least metaphorically. Similarly, Frances is doubly revealed at the end of the play, first when exposed to Throat as 'an arrant whore' (RA 2539), and then when she reveals her true, rural purity exclaiming that she 'may prove / A wife that shall deserve your best love' (RA 2604–5). That these, her final lines in the play, situate her as the object of desire ultimately renders her a 'better jewel' and a suitable wife. The most remarkable conversion from watching-woman to spectacle, though, is Constantia's. As the play winds down toward its comedic resolution, Lady Sommerfield laments: 'Yet in this happy close, I still have lost / My onely daughter' (RA 2609–10). Lady Sommerfield identifies the 'close' of the play from within the play, and this apparent request for a comedic conclusion summons Constantia to the stage where she makes a grand entrance. Drawing attention to the spectacular aspects of her exposure on stage, Constantia, like a ringleader, announces: 'Here I present the Page' (RA 2611). Such theatricality is particularly impressive after her mother had already requested that Frances, playing Constantia, be 'unmasked' (RA 2573). Further, the act of presentation gestures precisely toward the body which had been concealed behind a cod-piece through the play: 'and that all doubts / May heere be cleerd, heere in my proper shape' (RA 2612). More remarkable, we may remember that the play opens with Constantia, speaking directly to the audience (she does so twice in the play, and is the only character to do so), but she no longer wields this power to shape the audience's reception; instead, she presents herself to the audience and to Boutcher, and sets herself at Boutcher's mercy.

Notes

- 1 I follow Mary Bly here and presume that the first performance of *Ram Alley* was around 1607 or 1608, rather than around 1610 as R.V. Holdsworth claims. Holdsworth accounts for the play's likeness to Jonson's *Epicoene* (first acted in December 1609 or January 1610) and *The Alchemist* (entered in the Stationers Register in October 1610) in his dating, but, as Bly points out, considering that Barry was wanted for piracy in Ireland by 1609, the later date is unlikely (361 n 6). See Mary Bly, 'John Cooke: A Playwright Connected to the Whitefriars,' *Notes and Queries* 45 (1998), 360–1; R.V. Holdsworth, 'Ben Jonson and the Date of *Ram Alley*', *Notes and Queries* 230 (1985), 482–6.
- 2 Lording Barry, 'Ram-Alley, or Merrie-Trickes', in *Materials for the Study of Old English Drama*, vol 22, Henry De Vocht (ed) (Vaduz, 1963), ll. 232–41. Hereafter cited in the text as *RA*.
- 3 Jean E. Howard, 'Women as Spectators, Spectacles, and Paying Customers', in *Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama*, David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (eds) (New York, 1991), 70.
- 4 Howard, 'Women as Spectators', 72.
- 5 Elizabeth Hanson, 'There's Meat and Money Too: Rich Widows and Allegories of Wealth in Jacobean City Comedies', *ELH* 72 (2005), 209.
- 6 Jeremy Lopez, "'A fellow that hath no inside": Holes and Emptiness in *Ram Alley*'. GEMCS Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, November 15–18, 2001.
- 7 The argument I'm making is at odds with the argument that Elizabeth Hanson makes in 'There's Meat and Money Too' (see n 5), but the opposition is readily reduced by a simple addition to Hanson's argument. Tracing what she calls 'the afterlife of literary forms' and the ideological weight borne by these forms, Hanson argues that it is wrongheaded to presume that Taffata is figured, primarily, as a woman in this play. Instead of immediately recognizing her gender as a primary term through which the play works – as if *Ram Alley*'s conflicts were best understood through the logic of gender – Taffata, claims Hanson, is born of the tradition of Tudor interludes and morality plays, and she signals on the stage not a realistic womanhood but an allegorical 'Lucar' or 'Wealth'. *Ram Alley* is concerned, according to Hanson, not with the inter-sex dynamics that it stages but with renegotiating the logics of the Tudor interlude for a different historical moment. The play renegotiates, that is, 'the pattern exemplified by *The Trial of Treasure*', and it 'reveals ... the writer's considerable investment in the figure of Lust, not as an admonition but as a role model, and his complete lack of concern about the position of women so

that in Taffata, the power of money is signified at the expense of any possible message about the duty of women to submit to male authority. If there is a privileged context within which *Ram-Alley* and the other widow plays should be read, I would suggest, it is the long ideological transformation under capitalism of Lust ... into the “youth, vigor and opportunism” which to a twentieth century historian provides a natural explanation for a well-off widow’s choice of a poor young journeyman’ (233). Before recognizing, however, that the historical vicissitudes of the Tudor interlude serve as the ‘privileged context’ for understanding *Ram Alley* and other widow plays, shouldn’t we also recognize the afterlife of New Comedy that also plays a role in this play’s production of meaning and the ideological work that the plot performs? Taffata certainly inherits, as Hanson deftly points out, the representational weight of ‘Lucar’ or ‘Wealth’, but looking to Sir Oliver Smallshanks clearly makes one imagine formulaic New Comedy. Juxtaposed with Sir Oliver-as-*senex*, Taffata becomes, however briefly, a conspicuously and necessarily gendered New Comedy character too. *Ram Alley*—like so many Jacobean city comedies—is generically muddled. Indeed, as Alexander Leggatt points out in *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto, 1973) before he subsequently identifies the myriad generic traditions in which *Ram Alley* participates, ‘The antecedents of citizen comedy are mixed, to say the least’ (5). See also Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen’s Revels* (New York, 2005), who locates the play in its theatre-historical context and nominates several plays as generic cousins of *Ram Alley*, where ‘genre’ is used productively to mean any plays that are similar to *Ram Alley* in terms of characterization, theme, or plot. Within this diverse group: Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Chapman’s *The Widow’s Tears*, Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, and so on (59, 114, *passim*).