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The 'plentifull Lady-feast' in Brome's *A Madd Couple Well Matcht*

Richard Brome's *A Madd Couple Well Matcht* (Beeston's Boys, 1639) is, both generically and historically, the ultimate city comedy.¹ The play's character types are well-worn and extravagantly overblown, and the plot is so elaborate that some critics have seen it as a decisive link between the renaissance and restoration stages.² More than twenty years after citizen comedy's heyday, *A Madd Couple* inventories its features with a flagrantly bawdy tone that seems to spoof the genre.³ The financially exhausted young gentleman; his patriarchally overbearing uncle; the lusty rich widow; the hardworking and cuckolded merchant citizen; his sexually voracious, shopkeeping wife; the well-meaning prostitute; the conniving servants; the profligate lord: all the city's inhabitants, ranging across class and rank, crowd the stage. Likewise, the play contains a bed trick; not one, but two misdelivered letters; a cross-dressed woman who is not revealed until the conclusion; a lusty woman discovered onstage in bed; and a grab-bag of other comic devices. Long-established parallels between sexual and financial power here become direct and literalized, as every character acts only out of capitalistic self-interest. In short, *A Madd Couple* caricatures, to an even greater extent than the satiric form developed by playwrights like Jonson and Middleton, London life; it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the logic that reduces all affect to commodity.

In virtually all seventeenth-century drama, but most keenly in city comedy, human relationships are fully imbricated in overlapping networks of money and power. 'Commerce', in the sense of business dealings and the exchange of goods, begins to overtake the sense of 'commerce' as interpersonal contact based on familiarity or affection. The London in which the early modern theater flourished was a huge social experiment, combining concentrated populations with the relatively anonymous and mobile status marker of money. People living in the city could not help but adapt to the new demands such a system made on their habits, their livelihoods, and their very sense of sub-

jectivity. As Jean-Christophe Agnew posits, ‘When freed of ritual, religious, or juridical restraints, a money medium can imbue life itself with a pervasive and ongoing sense of risk, a recurrent anticipation of gain and loss that lends to all social intercourse a pointed, transactional quality’.⁴ In city comedy, that ‘transactional quality’, the willingness to speculate in social interaction, extends to physical intimacy and sexual behavior: sex and money, as parallel systems of exchange, become metaphors for one another.

Playwrights attempted to devise interpretive strategies for what must have been a bewildering set of material circumstances, and traditional themes such as love and marriage, themselves fraught with plots of risk and reward, came to express crises of financial volatility. Within dramatic representations of London life, Jonathan Dollimore observes, ‘because of the complex connections between sexuality, gender, and class, and specifically between sexual and economic exploitation, economic and political anxieties can be displaced into the domain of the sexual and, conversely, the sexual comes to possess enormous signifying power’.⁵ The burden of signification was borne disproportionately by female sexuality; with loyalty and rebellion expressed through the emotional register of fidelity and adultery, women’s lives onstage were severely circumscribed by their erotic liaisons with men. Shannon Miller similarly argues that ‘certain playwrights invoked images of the female body and strategies for controlling it as a mechanism for understanding, and assuaging anxieties about, a transitional economy’.⁶ I will argue that they also produced images of women *resisting* male control via their erotic and financial affiliations with one another. In the symbolic economy of city comedy, where playwrights chronicled social transformations, women became more than commodities exchanged between men, or examples of shifts in gender roles and the division of household labor: they became the emblems of social change itself.

City comedy, with contemporary London as its backdrop, is generally defined and understood as staging the often bewildering mobility of status in the burgeoning seventeenth-century economies of cash and credit.⁷ The struggle for domination is a zero-sum game, and those who prevail are the ones who can most quickly adapt to change. Wit, opportunism, and youth typically win out over trust, patient work, and age. Competing gallants, merchants, and usurers populate the plays. The genre’s attempt to capture a degree of urban realism means that women are also prominently represented, just as they were in life as shopkeepers, consumers, and playgoers; overall, city comedy affords a greater number and variety of women than any other

genre. *A Madd Couple Well Matcht* specifically centers on conflicts between women rather than those between men; indeed, the exaggerated characterization allows a focus on female interaction and competition that usually remains subordinate to the male agon in other plays. A great deal of this contact is antagonistic; much of it is homosocial; and it frequently crosses into the homoerotic.

Studies of premodern female homoeroticism have proliferated in the past decade, and they share a number of methodological assumptions. One of the most basic is that representations of women's same-sex desire cannot be treated as documentary evidence; they tell us very little about the lives or desires of real people. Nevertheless, such representations do perform vital ideological work, as the sheer number and variety of them attests.⁸ Dramatic representations in particular contain myriad examples that display both what Denise Walen calls 'rhetorical knowledge' and 'cultural knowledge' of eroticism between women in early modern England. Such knowledge is complicated, but not effaced, by the all-male playing companies that performed women's roles.⁹ If, as Dollimore asserts, dramas of sex encode economic and political anxieties, what anxieties are articulated when women desire one another onstage? *A Madd Couple's* women enter erotic bonds with one another in order to establish a parallel economy to the one that commodifies their sexuality for the benefit of men. The play's satire does not ameliorate that commodification, but depicts women claiming its value fully for themselves.

Just as in the texts Eve Sedgwick analyzes in *Between Men*, her landmark reading of male homosociality in English literature, *A Madd Couple* contains characters locked in triangulated structures of alliance. Sedgwick contributes to the idea of 'erotic triangles' (as delineated by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*) by suggesting that men enact a homosocial relationship with erotic potential when they come together over a woman, either as rivals or as agents perpetuating dynastic patriarchal power. According to Sedgwick, desire permeates all such triangulations, where 'desire' stands 'not for a particular state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, that shapes an important relationship'.¹⁰ Expanding 'desire' to include all sorts of emotional intensity, possessing either a positive or negative valence, incorporates some of the formidable affective discontinuities that structure male interaction: whereas homosociality may be sanctioned and even necessary to social stability, sexual acts are violently disavowed and rejected, and are displaced onto the female point of the triangle. But while tension between

men is present in Brome's play, it is much more acute between women. In several cases, a man serves as the nexus of erotic friction for a female dyad. Even more significantly, the 'man' in the play's most significant triangle is really a woman in disguise, which amplifies and multiplies its female homoerotic resonances. The result is a fully homoerotic closed circuit, three women who use one another for erotic gratification.

Upon first inspection, Lady Thriwell, a gentlewoman, and Alicia Saleware, a mercer's wife, seem to be rivals for the attention of Sir Oliver Thriwell. He admits to his wife that he has slept with Alicia, which Lady Thriwell calls 'faire dealing', since men everywhere share the same vice (B8v).¹¹ She even acknowledges her husband's good taste, saying, 'Troth, she's a handsome one' (C1). Adultery is no great loss in their relationship, she decides, as long as Thriwell breaks even on his deal:

Prithee on what condition?
 Only to bring good custome to her shop,
 And send her husband Venison (flesh for flesh) (B8v-C1)

Unfortunately for Thriwell, his transaction was not that simple. According to the remainder of his confession, he wooed Alicia ardently before she would submit to his advances, and then only for a steep price:

At length shee yeilds for a hundred pieces;
 Had'em, and I enjoy'd her once.
 ...
 But here was the foule dealing, and for which
 I hate her now: I having paid so great a fine, and
 Tane possession thought after to deale Rent-free. (C1)

The resulting misunderstanding illustrates a fundamental difference in the way Sir Oliver and Alicia envision the exchange of money for sex. Oliver believes he has purchased a product, a piece of 'saleware' that entitles him to its unlimited use. However, Alicia sees herself not only as the proprietor of the family shop, but also as the sole proprietor of her own body, giving her the right to sell its sexual services over and over again. Such a claim to ownership could overthrow the entire economy, since women's bodies carry an endlessly renewable resource for which men are willing to pay.

As a wife and therefore her husband's legal property, Lady Thriwell finds this discrepancy in their worth as women absurd: 'Troth, 'tis unreasonable, a hundred pound a time? How rich would Citizens be, if their wives were all so paid, and how poore the Court and Country?' (C1) She refers to the stereotype that all city wives were adulterous and could be had for a price. According to Linda Woodbridge, such a theatrical commonplace arose as a manifestation of upper-class 'resentment' toward the economic success of the merchant class, and probably had little basis in fact. However, she adds,

There is one way, though, in which the satire on citizens' wives may have been more directly provoked by reality — one suspicious element of the citizen wife's behavior that would almost certainly have called her morals into question: she worked outside the home. The drama is full of women who mind the store — shopkeepers' wives who serve customers, often in their husbands' absence. Outside the servant class, the only other city women who worked and brought in money were whores. The inference is obvious.¹²

With ample opportunity to attract sexual partners while at work, Alicia confirms the stereotype. She is a particularly egregious example in a long line of comic city wives, the savvy culmination of every sexually frustrated businesswoman. Since Alicia enjoys so much power as a seller, Lady Thriwell becomes determined to wrest the hundred pounds back from her using her own entitlement as a consumer, and the sum continues to circulate among the female characters (and only the females) as a metonym for sex and sexual prowess.

When Lady Thriwell arrives at the Salewares' shop, she takes a hundred pounds' worth of the best cloth, laces, fringes, and buttons, expressly calculated at the favorable 'rate of ready-money', and then revenges herself upon Alicia by claiming that Thriwell has paid the fee in advance (C2v). She says, 'My husband left with you, or lent you the last Terme a hundred pound, which hee assign'd to me; and now I have it in Commodity' (C3). By claiming to own the debt, the Lady asserts her power over her husband's mistress. When Alicia protests, Lady Thriwell criticizes her ingratitude for what was essentially an interest-free loan — since both know, but neither is willing to admit, that the payment was for sex. She obtains from the other woman's livelihood what is rightfully hers: the value of sex with Thriwell. Unsurprisingly, Alicia sets out to revenge herself by corrupting her rival, and the oppor-

tunity presents itself immediately in the arrival of an attractive ‘beard-lesse’ young man named Bellamie (C4).

Bellamie, who is steward to Lord Lovely, is really Amie in disguise — a secret that Brome withholds from the audience until the final act, but one broadly hinted at in her first appearance, as well as in recurring insinuations throughout the play (mostly in the form of jokes about Bellamie’s genitals). For example, when Lord Lovely presents Bellamie as a suitor to the widow Crostill, he praises the steward’s ‘long, middle finger’, ‘thin Jawes’, and ‘Roman Nose’, all phallic signifiers indicating sexual aptitude (E7). Crostill, however, dismisses him as a ‘stripling’, and wonders about his ‘strange inward hid abilities’ (E7). Since, according to Thomas Laqueur, women were widely believed in this period to contain the same genitals within their bodies that men displayed without, Crostill’s gibe about ‘strange inward hid abilities’ could be an indication that Bellamie is female.¹³ Given the makeup of the company, Beeston’s Boys most likely played to audiences expecting multiple female roles and gender disguise, and by 1639 playgoers had had decades to become accustomed to cross-dressed women masquerading as smooth, young, impossibly good-looking youths; the motif was common, even clichéd.¹⁴ It is likely that they would have predicted Bellamie’s true identity, especially in such a self-reflexive specimen of comedy.

In Bellamie, we may even see the cross-dressed heroine as one of the countless comic devices in this play that Brome both exploits and pushes to its breaking point. Steen H. Spove has noted that Brome ‘included disguises in fourteen of his fifteen plays’, and in *The City Wit* (1629) — just as his former employer Ben Jonson did in *Epicoene* (1609) — he even saved the revelation of gender disguise for the play’s finale. Since, as Spove asserts, ‘*A Mad Couple* is a far better play, more intelligible, and more appealing, if the spectator sees and understands Bellamy’s true purpose’ from the beginning, in performance that transparency was quite possibly the case.¹⁵ I would argue, however, that the play revels in its own ambiguity, inviting the audience to contemplate the character’s diffuse appeal without ruling out any erotic possibilities, including those with female characters, such as the competing wives. When Alicia immediately spots Lady Thrivewell’s attention to Bellamie in the shop, she schemes to use it to her own advantage. With this, the third point on the erotic triangle shifts permanently from Sir Oliver Thrivewell to Bellamie, and the play of erotic attraction and rivalry oscillates between the three women.

Mario DiGangi has suggested that early modern dramatic satire can be characterized by a will to mastery — either 'financial, erotic, social, or intellectual dominance' — marked by a distinctly eroticized hierarchy of submission and control. He develops this premise through the myriad male characters that are 'asses', and the 'wits' that take advantage of them, but also extends the theory to include women who practice a 'female homoerotics of mastery' upon one another.¹⁶ But the formulation of 'mastery' is inadequate for *A Madd Couple*, because when multiple women of various classes vie with one another erotically, hierarchy is unclear and constantly shifting. If Sedgwick's contention that 'the diacritical opposition between the 'homosocial' and the 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men' is also true of the early modern period (and I believe it is), then erotic triangles between women are necessarily more ambiguous.¹⁷ Bellamie, for example, first appears at Alicia Saleware's shop on an errand from her master, and Alicia attempts an aggressive seduction. Michael Shapiro correctly observes that the scene is 'reminiscent of the first meeting between Olivia and Viola' in *Twelfth Night*; however, this rendition is grotesquely exaggerated.¹⁸ To begin with, Lovely is not courting Alicia by proxy; he has regular adulterous sex with her, and sends Bellamie as a pander. Next, Alicia does not declare her devotion to Bellamie, as Olivia does to Cesario, but simply says, "'Tis plaine you would lie with me: deny it if you can' (C6). (Bellamie does not.) Finally, and most radically, Alicia's condition for trysting with Bellamie is that he first have sex with Lady Thriwell, making Alicia as much of a 'Pandaress' as he is a panderer — then, she states, 'I shall be even with you in businesse if you account it so' (C6v). Who is in a position of mastery in this plot? Whose interests are served by this erotic 'businesse'?

Alicia clearly wishes to work upon what she perceives as Lady Thriwell's weakness: if the Lady violates her marital chastity, they will be on level moral footing, and perhaps Alicia will even be able to extort money for her rival's silence. Alicia's desire to take advantage of Lady Thriwell seems to have a distinctly erotic quality, an intimation confirmed later in the play when Bellamie marvels at how Alicia relishes the details of his conquest as he relates them, at her insistence, for the fourth time: 'Can a Woman take so much delight in hearing of another Womans pleasure taken?' (E4v) Alicia not only finds gratification in multiple sexual partners; she also enjoys multiple 'delights'. Bellamie even ascribes credit for Lady Thriwell's 'pleasure' to Alicia herself, saying, 'as shee was amply pleas'd she may thanke you' (E4v).

Much less obvious is how Lady Thrivewell and Bellamie stand to benefit from the plan. In fact, that uncertainty could titillate and fascinate an audience for the duration of the play. If Bellamie is a man, he will get to sleep with both women, and they will each be gratified by him. But if Bellamie is really a woman, then how and why is she performing sexually with two other women? This uncertainty remains as the audience watches the hundred pounds continue to circulate. Bellamie suavely (if unconvincingly) promises Alicia that he was thinking of her during his ‘Acts of Love’, ‘and that enabled mee to be more gratefull to her Ladyship, which wrought her thankfulness to you, exprest in a hundred pieces, sent by me, more then I tould before, which are your own shee sayes, since tother morning shee was here with you’ (E5). Since Alicia knows from experience that Sir Oliver is ‘but a Bungler’ in bed, she easily believes that Lady Thrivewell will pay her — even as a broker’s fee — for sexual satisfaction (E4v). Aroused, probably as much at the thought of reclaiming the sum than at having her own turn with Bellamie, Alicia agrees to meet him at his chamber and collect on their bargain.

Alicia. This Kisse, and Name your time —

...

Bellamie. To morrow night.

Al. Shall you be ready so soone thinke you after your plentifull Lady-feast.

Bel. O with all fulnesse both of Delight and Appetite. (E5)

At this point, an audience is likely to be thoroughly confused. Have Lady Thrivewell and Bellamie really had sex, as he reports? Who has the money?

This confusion is precisely what allows Brome to push the boundaries of decency with regard to female homoeroticism. Unlike most other plays featuring cross-dressed women, audiences aren’t entirely in on the joke; they hear no asides about Bellamie’s essential femininity, no repining for her master’s love. They may suspect such things, but they cannot *know*. Up to this point, the sexual haggling between Alicia and Bellamie is strictly oral, as is the narration of the offstage sexual encounter with Lady Thrivewell. Brome has it both ways: from one angle, the action is a predictable, if complex, city comedy intrigue; from another, it allows an unprecedented view into women’s sexual manipulation of one another. The final revelation that Bellamie is indeed female is unexpected only inasmuch as it seems to bestow a conventional closure upon the free play of circulating same-sex desire. As Nadia Rigaud has noted, female homoeroticism is a topic Brome broached in

earlier plays: an ambassador in *The Queen's Exchange* (1629–30) mentions, 'I have known women oft marry one another. / Their Pictures may perhaps have greater virtue' (2.1), and in *The Antipodes* (1638), Martha recalls, 'I remember / A wanton maid once lay with me, and kiss'd / And clipt, and clapt me strangely, and then wish'd / That I had been a man to have got her with child' (1.1.55–58).¹⁹ Nevertheless, Rigaud also wisely observes that 'there is a great chasm between brief allusions, however audacious, and actual practice', between description and action.²⁰ *A Madd Couple Well Match'd* creates a sustained homoerotic subtext for the audience's contemplation, submerging it from view only at the last possible moment.

What is the signifying force of female homoeroticism in this play? A great deal can be discerned by following the missing hundred pounds. After Alicia arrays herself on the bed in Bellamie's rented chamber, she is dismayed when her husband appears, summoned by the steward himself to witness his wife's adulterous ways and reclaim his marital right, by force if necessary. Rather than expressing dismay at being caught cheating, however, Alicia is more distressed at the prospect of losing the money she was so close to collecting from Lady Thrivewell. She accuses Bellamie, 'But shee has since countermanded you to keepe it, has shee, and to mock my expectation of that, and you? why have you foold me thus?' (F6) Ultimately, the money belongs to the Lady, who finally uses it to provide a dowry for a reformed prostitute named Phebe. Countermanding Sir Oliver's protests, she claims she is within her rights as a wife, since the money is quite literally 'the price of lust' (G7). Thus, Lady Thrivewell has reclaimed what her husband spent on adulterous sex and legitimately rechanneled it to another woman, and has done so without allowing the money to pass through male hands at all. She employs all the wit and scheming of her backbiting peers, and with the final revelation that 'Bellamie' is really 'Amie,' it appears that no sexual act has taken place between them, which makes her morally unimpeachable, as well.²¹ In the world of the play, where sex equals money and all relationships are mercenary, female homoeroticism simply represents the homosocial flow of cash. As for Alicia's part in the affair, Old Bellamie observes, "'Twas a flat bargaine, and but a flat one, but for the non-performance her husband may thanke their party of Sex, not his wifes want of desire' (G8v). Since the play makes no effort to recuperate Alicia's integrity, she need not revert to an unambiguous heteroeroticism; she is a sexual opportunist, and will remain that way.

Alicia Saleware is, in many ways, a harbinger of the kinds of subjects capitalism is bound to produce. Whereas earlier city comedies seem preoccu-

pied with goods that carry personal significance and symbolic capital, such as clothing, the acquisitive urge in *A Madd Couple* is pushed to an extreme, reduced to a flat rate of one hundred pounds. The characters do not fetishize possessions, but liquidity itself. Douglas Bruster has argued, 'Props in Renaissance farce become markers of value and status, encoding identity into worth counters which, passed hand to hand, often acted as reservoirs of erotic potential'.²² If objects are granted the power to create and define erotic identity, as they are in city comedy, then the greatest aphrodisiac of all is the power of the object in its most abstract form: cash. In the play, female homoeroticism is simply another example, extreme for being previously untapped, of the ways people exploit one another for economic advantage. Money tropes sex, just as sex tropes money.

But contradictory forces are at work here. As characters convert property to cash and back again, they assert the *potential* of money to become anything; capital's disconnection from human relationships and from the labor that produced it is precisely what makes it so desirable. Yet it is Alicia Saleware's desire for specific goods — luxurious clothes — that leads her to purchase them with her only 'credit': her body and her sex, which constitute her personal honor.²³ This act sets in motion all the money-swapping action of the play.

The irony that Alicia is a mercer's wife is thus particularly relevant. A merchant in fine textiles such as silks and velvets would be expected to be intimately familiar with, perhaps even unmoved by, extravagant outfits. Such dissociation from the product is actually essential for the success of a business, because a deep attachment to the merchandise could slow profitmaking. The accrued signifying power of an object beyond its market value or use value is what is often thought of as commodity fetishism, but this assumption is a common misconception about Marx's theory. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass make a cogent, corrective observation: '[I]t was a theory of the fetishism of the *commodity*, not of the *object* Only if one empties out the 'objectness' of the object can one make it readily exchangeable on the market... . Capitalism could, indeed, be defined as the mode of production which, in fetishizing the commodity, refuses to fetishize the object.'²⁴ In other words, if Alicia is to be successful selling cloth, how can she possibly become so personally invested as to prostitute herself in order to satisfy her fascination with clothing?

The desire for commodities, specifically clothes, was a commonly depicted failing of women in city comedy. A woman's appetite to have fashionable

attire (and to be seen in it) encoded her failure to stay home, to obey, and to be modest. As Karen Newman argues, 'She is represented in the discourses of Jacobean London as at once consumer and consumed: her supposed desire for goods is linked to her sexual availability.'²⁵ Alicia Saleware is the extreme version of this representation, right down to her name, which marks her as a seller of commodities and as a commodity herself. Lady Thrivewell puns on the name repeatedly, such as when she implores her husband on his way out at night, '[N]ow will I thinke as long as you have good and substantiall Made-worke at home, that you will seeke abroad for any more slight sale-ware' (F3v). She situates herself as the homemade, domestic, legitimate option, and Alicia as the fraudulent, inferior, and foreign one. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent moral criticisms of early modern fashions likewise were that they were too reliant on the novel and the exotic.

The booming London market for clothing was both symptomatic and causative of vast socioeconomic change. That change brought about an epistemological crisis that certainly extended to gender norms. According to Newman, 'At a moment when traditional categories of difference were breaking down, 'femininity' represented an important, perhaps even newly essentialized, category of difference.'²⁶ Many of the criticisms of fashionable women attacked their presumption of (male) agency in the very acts of choosing, buying, and donning clothing, and likewise attacked the implied rejection of traditional 'femininity' inherent in some of the styles, such as wearing a sword or having short hair. The anonymous author of the 1620 *Hic Mulier* pamphlet, for example, rails,

[S]hee that hath pawned her credit to get a Hat, will sell her Smocke to buy a Feather; shee that hath given kisses to have her hayre shorne, will give her honestie to have her upper parts put into a French doublet: To conclude, she that will give her body to have her bodie deformed, will not sticke to give her soule to have her mind satisfied.²⁷

The pamphlet charts a trajectory that links fashion, gender transgression, sexual impudence, and moral corruption, all via the metonym of bodily adornment that 'deforms' what lies within.

In many cases, this trajectory included a specific challenge to marital fidelity. The power dynamic between husband and fashion-hungry wife is encapsulated by one of the speakers in *A Juniper Lecture*, John Taylor's pamphlet first published in 1639, the same year *A Madd Couple* was probably composed.

A woman threatens her husband, 'I will want no apparrell, or any thing else, good man Rascall ... if thou wilt not bestow a new fashioned hat on me, I'll bestow an old fashion'd cap upon thee'.²⁸ While Taylor, who purports to relate 'the description of all sorts of women, good and bad: From the modest to the maddest', includes the wife as a negative example of femininity, his portrayal of a woman who reserves the power to dress her husband in the cuckold's horns is a fulfillment of everything city women, especially citizen wives, were thought to be.

Alicia cuckolds her husband many times over, and repeatedly 'pawns her credit' for the sake of fashion. 'Credit' is one of the many words, like 'commerce', that underwent a radical change in meaning, directly related to the development of a money economy, in the early modern period.²⁹ Its current definition, which is primarily financial, pertains to buying something with the expectation of paying for it later, but it still bears the vestiges of a precapitalist economy. In that time, 'credit' was the personal integrity and trustworthiness a person could offer in social interaction, synonymous with honor or reputation — what we might call credibility. It is this sense, Jean-Christophe Agnew argues, that the stage was particularly suited to explore in an age of social uncertainty and upheaval; the dramatist made 'credibility not just the dream but the theme of his art, a theme explored in countless episodes of mistaken identity, misplaced trust, and misdirected suspicion'.³⁰ In early modern plays both senses of 'credit' regularly overlapped, such as in *The Merchant of Venice* when Antonio urges Bassanio, 'Try what my credit can in Venice do': he wants to raise money, but he is also trading on his good name and social standing (1.2.180).³¹ As a woman, however, Alicia's reputation is completely wrapped up in her sexual virtue. When she trades sex for clothes, she loses one kind of credit in the attempt to gain another.

Her actions are understandable because, despite the capitalist's effort to empty the object of 'objectness', clothes are always much more than the cloth from which they are constructed (however precious that cloth may be). They symbolize power, rank, and wealth. In a very literal sense, they had the ability to create the identity of the wearer. Jones and Stallybrass explain this duality: 'Clothes, in other words, were closer both to a second skin, a skin that names you, and to money than are the clothes that we wear today. The tension between clothes as mnemonics and clothes as cash is one of the most fertile sources of cultural analysis in the Renaissance'.³² Alicia is surrounded by expensive cloth in her shop; if only as a seller, she *has* access to the cash value that clothes have as movables. She is specifically interested, however, in

the way clothing confers status. Alicia is obsessed with upward mobility — appearing 'Lady-like' — which she pursues on credit (C7). By having sex with noblemen and getting paid in clothes that she could never otherwise afford, she gains physical proximity to power, as well as its outward trappings. Her husband both knows about and disavows knowledge of her actions, allowing himself to benefit from them indirectly while maintaining the thinnest veneer of dignity. When Alicia comes home after a night with Lord Lovely, in a new 'Courtly habit, which so long shee has long'd for' (E4) Saleware muses, 'I cannot thinke my Lord and shee both sate up all Night to see the Taylors at worke, and to hasten the finishing of those Cloaths' (E4v). Yet even though he tacitly acknowledges her adultery, it is the tailors' nightly exertion, not his wife's, upon which he chooses to dwell.³³

Saleware imagines the sarcastic ridicule of his neighbors when they see his wife in clothes he could not possibly have bought for her, gossiping, 'shee comes by this Gallantry the Lord knowes how' (E6). He says, '[L]et the Assinogos prate while others shall admire thee, sitting in thy Shop more glorious, then the Maiden-head in the Mercers armes, and say there is the Nonparrell, the Paragon of the Citie, the Flower-de-luce of Cheapside, the Shop Court-ladie, or the Courtshop Mistris' (E6). The comparison to the 'Maiden-head in the Mercers armes' is particularly ironic, partly because Alicia has long lost her maidenhead, but also because the virgin that served as the emblem of the Mercers' company was the very picture of sartorial splendor. In drawings, sculptures, and woodcarvings of the period, she is always shown with long, flowing hair, a crown ringed with flowers atop her head, a jeweled necklace, and an elegant dress with ornately puffed sleeves. Given Alicia's promiscuity, the idea of her surpassing the Mercers' maiden, the very symbol of their profession and livelihood, is absurd. It is a pointed insult to her means.

Yet, as a knowing cuckold, Saleware is not above taking advantage of the situation to satisfy his own dreams of upward mobility. As Jennifer Panek has noted, 'the wittol almost invariably profits financially from [his wife's] affair'.³⁴ Alicia placates her husband's jealousy by appealing to his pride, declaring,

i'lle doe you any honourable offices with my Lord, as by obtaining sutes for you, for which you must looke out, and finde what you may fitly beg out of his power, and by courtly favour. But keepe your Shop still Friend, and my Lord will bring and send you such custome, that your Neighbours shall envy your wealth, and not your Wife; you shall have such commings in abroad and at home, that you shall

be the first head nominated i' the next Sheriffe season, but I with my Lord will keepe you from pricking. (E6v)

'Pricking' here is the literal method of selection: in a custom maintained in the present, the sheriff is chosen from a list of nominees by pricking a hole by his name with a bodkin. Being nominated but not chosen would be the best of both worlds for Tom Saleware: it would increase his social credit while shielding him from the physical and financial hazards of the role. At the same time, being prevented from 'pricking' is also ceding his right to have sex with his wife at the same time that he receives protection and patronage from Lord Lovely.³⁵

The pun on 'pricking' encodes a complex joke about Saleware's aspirations to higher status. The role of sheriff, while ostensibly a prestigious office, was often deemed more trouble than it was worth, because, as Jean Mather notes, the county sheriff 'was personally responsible for the payment of all money due' from tax collection; failure to collect meant that the sheriff had to pay the Crown out of his own pocket. 'For most gentlemen of England a year's tenure as sheriff was an expensive inconvenience'.³⁶ Owing to such likely aggravation, '[a]version to appointment compelled councilors and judges who selected the sheriffs to settle on some occasions for *arriviste* gentry, who were willing to pay this financial and administrative tribute for admission into the county elite'.³⁷ If Saleware subordinates himself to Lovely, Alicia suggests, he can experience vicarious pleasure — not the pleasure of sex, but of being considered a gentleman. The situation illustrates a pattern Douglas Bruster has identified in city comedy: 'the wittol is so often a social-climbing citizen, the cuckold so often an aristocrat; "class", in its modern sense of "prestige", is what seeks and is sought by money'.³⁸ Moreover, Saleware's rise to prominence via 'sutes' and 'custome' — trading sex for social privilege — makes him more like his clotheshorse wife than he would care to admit.

A father counseling his young daughter in *A Juniper Lecture* tells her, 'Matrimony is a matter of money, and without money marriage is a mar-age and not a merry age'.³⁹ As pragmatic as it is pithy, this advice reinforces the idea that a healthy domestic economy is the cornerstone of an ordered society. In order to maintain that, though, a woman was expected to consign her labor power, the 'credit' of her chastity, and her reproductive capability, as well as her own wealth, to her husband. Any larger metaphoric system that mapped other social hierarchies onto marriage had to take into account the material reality of female subjection under patriarchy. In the most basic sense, the

female homoeroticism in a play like *A Madd Couple Well Matchd* imagines an economy, both financial and sexual, outside patriarchal constraints. By shopping for Alicia's wares without paying for them, Lady Thriwell asserts her power and control in a particularly female, homosocial, and eroticized way. (The very act of shopping for consumer luxuries, Newman argues, was both sexualized and gendered feminine.)⁴⁰ By donning male clothing, assuming a male identity, and courting two women, Amie/Bellamie is able to re-create her 'credit' after she has lost her own in an ill-considered affair with Lord Lovely. She is also the instrument for the transmission of sexual and financial energy between her paramours. Alicia makes her only non-mercenary sexual decision when she pursues the beautiful Bellamie. (What, after all, could she gain by sleeping with her benefactor's servant?) All three of them resort to eroticized bonds with other women in order to evade the perilous financial restraints of the marital economy. All three likewise negotiate their desires through unconventional uses of the capital (both literal and symbolic) that inheres in cloth and clothing.

The doubling of sex and money between women is even more evident in the play's final scene. The only climax more shocking than learning the truth of Amie's sex (which, due to generic overkill, could not have been very shocking at all), is learning that she is actually Lady Thriwell's former bed-fellow.⁴¹ The two have been in cahoots all along. Lady Thriwell says to Alicia, 'Yet the young Gentleman (such as you can see he is) has lien with mee of old, before I was married; doe not looke so dismaydly' (H1). Her use of the male pronoun to refer ironically to Amie-as-bedfellow seems to emphasize the potential eroticism of the arrangement in order to taunt her rival, and remind the audience of the earlier tryst between them. Lord Lovely, discovering that his trusty steward and pander is really his discarded mistress, vows to provide for her — not by marriage, as convention dictates, but by giving her two hundred pounds a year. Even this arrangement is facilitated by Lady Thriwell, because earlier in the play, she quietly loaned Lovely five hundred pounds. As her nephew Carelesse observes, she uses her husband's money, 'as forked a fortune, as any of the City' to 'lend out money to hedge in Lordships'; so, she is indirectly responsible for circulating money to Amie (D7). Thus the play, which seems on the surface to be primarily about female transgression via adultery, is also a profound examination of credit, service, and the circulation of wealth and affect between women.

Matthew Steggle has claimed that the radical parodic critique leveled in *A Madd Couple Well Matchd* made it 'impossible for Brome to go back to the

style and conventions of his earlier city comedy'.⁴² Perhaps the greatest break with established practice was the treatment of his heroine. Amie/Bellamie's decision to dress as a young man is the catalyst that incites other female characters to use her as an intermediary in order to act out their desires upon one another. In itself, the theatrical device of the transvestite heroine was neither innovative nor threatening: by the time Brome was writing in 1639, the cross-dressed woman who inspires other women to pursue her was one of the most venerable character types on the early modern stage. What makes Amie exceptional is that no effort is made to recuperate her identity or reputation in the play's finale: she is the rare figure of a young, sexually experienced, financially secure, independent woman who experiences no punishment or censure for her actions.

The overwhelmingly majority of cross-dressed heroines conclude their adventures with a return to female clothing, the metaphorical expression of resuming their subordinate places in society. The happy ending is most often a wedding (or the promise of one). Such a denouement, however, does not neutralize or contain the transgressive energies that circulate throughout the play, most notably those elicited from other women. Jean Howard rejects the 'containment' model outright:

While plays of female crossdressing nearly always end in patriarchal marriages and to that extent place limits on the power and independence of their heroines, they simultaneously instantiate the figure of the speaking, plotting, roving, cross-dressed woman ever more firmly in the period's repertoire of theatrical representations and so in its cultural imaginary'.⁴³

A Madd Couple takes the formula one step further by refusing to discipline the heroine's own behavior according to heterosexual norms.

In a play where sex and money consistently overlap, it is especially significant that, in addition to withholding the usual marriage closure, Brome provides Amie with two hundred pounds a year from Lord Lovely. By granting Amie a steady income rather than a husband, the play's conclusion establishes a heroine who is able to live in such a way that disentangles financial security from sexual obligation. In other words, she reclaims the female identity, but not the inferior position. The logic of city comedy, taken to its limit, debunks the marriage ending — the definition of a 'happy ending' is not love, but money. Valerie Traub has asserted that 'one purpose of comedy is to naturalize the expulsion of undesirable social relationships in order the resecure the

social order. The eradication of the feminine homoerotic position to desire, in other words, is precisely what must be *staged*.⁴⁴ In *A Madd Couple*, the social order exemplified by marriage is hopelessly corrupt, and the eradication never comes.⁴⁵

Critics have long dismissed Brome's play for its excessively broad characterization, obscene language, and prurient sexual situations, but its topics are simply those of city comedy writ large. The exaggerated visibility that *A Madd Couple* gives to female homoeroticism should not be grounds for its dismissal, but for added scrutiny by readers interested in the history of sexuality. It is the last and most extreme variation on a set of themes that gripped playwrights and audiences for nearly half a century.

Notes

- 1 The full name of Beeston's Boys was The King and Queen's Young Company. They played at the Cockpit Theater, also known as the Phoenix, where Brome wrote for them often after his exit from Salisbury Court in 1638/9. G.E. Bentley calls the company 'mixed', consisting of adults who 'made use of an extraordinarily large number of boys'. Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols (Oxford, 1956 (1941) 3:324–5, n1. The composition of the company probably enabled a play such as *A Madd Couple*, which features multiple leads for female characters.
- 2 Clarence Edward Andrews compares Brome's plots to Congreve's: they are 'difficult to follow, and impossible to remember long'. With the play's multiple interdependent intrigues, 'in Brome, English drama reached an extreme of intricacy which has never been equaled, and can never be surpassed without the hopeless entanglement of the wits of the audience'. Clarence Edward Andrews, *Richard Brome: A Study of His Life and Works* (1913. rpt. Hamden, CT, 1972), 58.
- 3 Matthew Steggle, however, cautions against classifying the play according to restoration standards: 'in order to understand the challenge of this play it is necessary to view it in terms of what has preceded it, not what follows it'. Viewed within the city comedy tradition, he contends, 'It is destructive satire by close imitation'; see *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester, 2004), 142. Arthur F. Kinney likewise describes Brome as 'a comic artist who turns to parody nearly every form and character he touches'; cited in Catherine M. Shaw, *Richard Brome* (Boston, 1980), 9.
- 4 Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, 1986), 4.

- 5 Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence; Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford, 1991), 295, specifically references Dekker and Middleton's *The Roaring Girl*, but his insight can be categorically applied to city comedy.
- 6 Shannon Miller, 'Consuming Mothers/Consuming Merchants: The Carnavalesque Economy of Jacobean City Comedy,' *Modern Language Studies* 26:2–3 (1996), 75.
- 7 Jean E. Howard persuasively argues for a broader definition of 'city comedy' than has traditionally been allowed by critics, but acknowledges the general comic pattern developed by Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton. See *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598–1642* (Philadelphia, 2007), especially 14–23.
- 8 For an inventory of examples, see Valerie Traub's magisterial *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2002), especially 1–35.
- 9 Denise Walen, *Constructions of Female Homoeroticism in Early Modern Drama* (New York, 2005), 2.
- 10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985), 2.
- 11 Richard Brome, *Five new playes, (viz.) The madd couple well matcht. Novella. Court begger. City witt. Damoiselle. By Richard Brome* (London, 1653).
- 12 Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Urbana and Chicago, 1984), 174.
- 13 Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).
- 14 Michael Shapiro, *Gender in Play on the Shakespearean Stage: Boy Heroines and Female Pages* (Ann Arbor, 1996), lists roughly seventy extant plays featuring cross-dressed heroines before the production of *A Madd Couple Well Matcht*.
- 15 For the audience to discern that Amie is female, Spove postulates that either Brome wrote primarily to an audience who saw the play more than once (and therefore would bring knowledge from act 5 back to act 1 upon successive viewings), or that the players provided sufficient nonverbal cues to signal her identity. Even so, as I have noted, various traces in the play text convey this information, as well. See Steen H. Spove, 'Critical Introduction'. *A Critical old-Spelling Edition of Richard Brome's A Mad Couple Well Match'd*, Steen H. Spove (ed.) (New York, 1979), xix, xvii, xxii.
- 16 Mario DiGangi, *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*, (Cambridge, 1997), 92.
- 17 Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 2.
- 18 Shapiro, *Gender in Play*, 169.
- 19 *The Queene's Exchange* is cited from the 1873 edition of *The Dramatic Works of Richard Brome*, 3 vols (London, John Pearson, 1873). *The Antipodes* is cited from Ann Haaker's Regents Renaissance Drama edition (Lincoln, NE, 1966).

- 20 'il y a un abîme entre de rapides allusions, même audacieuses, et l'étude d'une situation concrète': Nadia Rigaud, 'L'homosexualité féminine dans *A Mad Couple Well Match'd* (1639) de Richard Brome', *Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* 20 (1985), 24.
- 21 Rigaud suggests, however, that the fact of Amie's female sex need not contradict her earlier claims to sexual prowess with Lady Thrivewell.
- 22 Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1992), xi.
- 23 Bradley D. Ryner locates the hundred-pound debt for sex (repaid in commodity) within the medieval tradition of the 'lover's gift regained' narrative, and suggests that Brome may have been familiar with a similar dynamic in Chaucer's 'Shipman's Tale' or one of its many variations. In the tale, a wife charges 100 francs for sex in order to discharge a debt she has run up buying clothes. Ryner argues, 'Upon being given a value, her body is metaphorically transformed into currency before dissolving into the abstraction of credit'. Chaucer's example of 'the shocking interchangeability of people, commodities, sex, and money', the very shock that Brome takes for granted, is the power that Mistress Saleware, Lady Thrivewell and Bellamy attempt to harness for themselves (8). See 'Commodity Fetishism in Richard Brome's *A Mad Couple Well Matched* and its Sources', *Early Modern Literary Studies*, 13.3 (January 2008) 4.1–26, pars. 8 and 9.
- 24 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2000), 8.
- 25 Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago, 1991), 134.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 120.
- 27 *Hic mulier: or, The man-woman: Being a Medicine to cure the Coltish Disease of the Staggers in the Masculine-Feminines of our times. Express in a briefe Declamation* (London, 1620; STC 2nd ed. 13375.5, B2.
- 28 All quotations are from the pamphlet's unattributed third edition. *A Juniper Lecture. With the description of all sorts of women, good and bad. From the modest, to the maddest, from the most civill, to the Scolde Rampant, their praise and dispraise compendiously related: The third Impression, with many new Additions. Also the authors advice how to tame a Shrew, or vex her.* (London, 1652), 44. The hat, due to the symbolic prominence of the head, is a particularly apt article of clothing to indicate the shifting balance of power in a marriage relationship. In metaphors of government, the head is also consistently imagined as cerebral and male, while the body is associated with that which is somatic and female. Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 79, note: 'To the extent that gender was constructed through visible prostheses, the

head was given particular attention. Moreover, women's regendering of the head, the very symbol of patriarchal authority (the head as emblem of the king, the father, the husband) is appropriated by women'.

- 29 Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, also examines words such as 'deal', 'performance', and 'habit' for a similar shift, linking the development to the influence of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. Castiglione's emphasis on stylizing one's behavior made a man's inner motivations hard to read by his outer gestures, just as capitalism toppled sumptuary rules. 'In its own, albeit, figurative way', Agnew writes, 'the human body had become the newest of England's new draperies' (73–85, 86).
- 30 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 31 Stephen Greenblatt, et al (eds), *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, 1997).
- 32 Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, 32.
- 33 Douglas Bruster explicates this frequent 'association of cuckoldry with labor' (51) in *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare*, 47–62.
- 34 Jennifer Panek, "A Wittal cannot be a cookold": Reading the Contented Cuckold in Early Modern Drama and Culture', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 1:2 (2001), 73.
- 35 The web pages of the High Sheriffs' Association of England and Wales (<<http://highsheriffs.com/SHR02.HTM>>), and the British Privy Council (<<http://www.privy-council.org.uk/output/page29.asp>>) detail pricking traditions and how they are upheld today. The *OED* includes 'the selection or appointment of a sheriff' as one definition of 'pricking' ('pricking, *n.* 6.a. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, OED Online, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50188428>>). Cited uses of 'to prick' as '(of the sovereign) to select (a person) for the office of sheriff from a list by these means' have been in continuous use for nearly five hundred years ('prick, *v.* 21'OED Online, <dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50188418>). Eric Partridge has pointed out that 'pricking' is also a vulgar euphemism for 'copulation regarded as penetration as if by a prick or thorn'; Lord Lovely's intervention with Saleware's wife will prevent that, as well (167). Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (3rd ed, New York, 1994). Many thanks to Suzanne Gossett for suggesting further research into this passage.
- 36 Jean Mather, 'The Civil War Sheriff: His Person and Office', *Albion* 13:3 (1981), 243 and 242.
- 37 Myron C. Noonkester, 'Dissolution of the Monasteries and the Decline of the Sheriff', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23:4 (1992), 697.
- 38 Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, 54–5.
- 39 *A Juniper Lecture*, 46.
- 40 Newman, *Fashioning Femininity*, 123 and 136.

- 41 Many critics have observed the erotic opportunity that sharing beds offered for women and men alike. Theodora A. Jankowski discusses the importance of this domestic, relatively private space for women in particular, because they had far fewer chances to meet outside the home than did men; see '... in the Lesbian Void: Woman-Woman Eroticism in Shakespeare's Plays', *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*. Dympna Callaghan (ed.) (Malden, MA, 2000), 309–14.
- 42 Steggle, *Richard Brome*, 148.
- 43 Jean E. Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London, 1994), 17.
- 44 Traub, *Renaissance*, 181.
- 45 Denise Walen, *Constructions*, makes a similar observation, noting that Amie's status presents 'an alternative to the suspicion, adultery, sexual coercion, and greed that drive the heterosexual relationships in the text' (153).