

# Leaning Too Hard Upon the Pen: Suburb Wenches and City Wives in *Westward Ho*

MICHELLE M. DOWD

NEAR the end of his *Points of Housewifery* (1573), Thomas Tusser offers the following advice to housewives:

Ill housewifery moveth with gossip to spend.  
Good housewifery loveth her household to  
tend.

Ill housewifery wanteth with spending too fast  
Good housewifery canteth the lenger to last.

(SigX2<sup>v</sup>)

Tusser's rhyming couplets wittily capture his attempt to define housewifery. Using the rhetorical technique of antithesis, Tusser separates housewifery into "ill" and "good" varieties. He clearly connects and good housewife with frugality (her ability to "cant" or portion out supplies) and a desire to remain at home. The bad housewife, on the other hand, gossips, strays outside the home, and spends away the family resources. In his attempt to define the good housewife, Tusser exposes his own concerns about the proper enclosure and proper spending habits of wives, topics that garnered attention from numerous early modern conduct writers and moralists.

Writers such as Tusser, Richard Braithwaite, Gervase Markham, and William Gouge set out guidelines for proper housewifery that were tailored to their specific audiences. In *The English Housewife* (1615), Markham directed his eminently practical advice toward wealthier rural wives who would have had households of servants to run. Braithwaite also writes for a wealthy rural audience in *The English Gentlewoman* (1631), though he gives much more attention than does Markham to the socialite woman concerned with fashion and manners. Gouge, perhaps the most popular of the conduct writers, wrote for both the gentry and the literate middling sort, but the key difference between his *Of Domestical Duties* (1622) and the works of Markham and Braithwaite was its specifically urban audience. A minister in London's

Blackfriars district, Gouge aimed his sermons and writings at those living in London's vibrant market economy.

Like Gouge, I wish to turn my attention to London as a specific urban site where "ill" and "good" housewifery could be defined, negotiated, and acted out. Scholars have long been interested in London as central to the political, economic, and cultural life of early modern England. However, recently critics have been focusing more particularly on the urban history of London and its market economy. The essays in A. L. Beier and Roger Finlay's *London 1500–1700: The Making of the Metropolis* (1986) analyze the specific consequences of London's population growth, commercial centralization, and changes in the social landscape. Lena Cowen Orlin's *Material London, ca. 1600* (2000) presents essays that demonstrate the many specific ways in which London became the "English national lodestone" at the turn of the seventeenth century (3).

The same economic changes that made London the "national lodestone" also had dramatic impact on urban housewives and their connections to the market. By 1600, the decline of home production and the increasing presence of a domestic market meant that English families were becoming more dependent on goods produced outside the home.<sup>1</sup> The increased demand that this dependence created, combined with the mercantile expansion of the period, led to a rise in imports, including luxury goods.<sup>2</sup> As Joan Thirsk has demonstrated, the seventeenth century offered English consumers a much wider selection of goods than had the sixteenth century. Although the rise in imports and home markets was a gradual one, English consumers could notice a significant increase in the number of available goods as early as 1600.

This increase in goods altered the nature of the urban housewife's tasks. A wife of the middling sort would have needed to be proficient in housewifery, the performance of basic but labor-intensive household tasks such as baking, managing the household, and making clothes for family members.<sup>3</sup> Of course she would also be having babies and taking care of children. However, wealthier urban wives would also have been expected to be proficient in consumption. Wealthier middling households in London contained an increasingly wide range of household goods, including status items such as fine linens or table cloths.<sup>4</sup> Natasha Korda in her work on women and consumerism in the early modern period emphasizes the increased purchasing power of urban wives:

[w]ith the decline of the family as an economic unit of production . . . the role of the housewife in late sixteenth-century England was beginning to shift from that of skilled producer to savvy consumer . . . The housewife's duties were thus gradually moving away from the production of use-values within and for the home and toward the consumption of market goods, or cates, commodities produced outside the home.<sup>5</sup>

The city housewife in this period thus had more frequent access to money and purchasing power than was previously true.

I am interested in the ways in which the urban housewife as consumer became a fixture not just in London, but on the London stage. Where conduct writers like Tusser and Gouge set out prescriptive guidelines for early modern women to follow, London's flourishing entertainment industry spun new ideas about women and money into dramatic narratives. The London theater presented vivid illustrations of both the pleasures and dangers of "ill housewifery" and the different ways in which "good housewifery" could be acted out. The housewifery that conduct manuals prescribed could come alive with more variety and pleasure on the early modern stage. Of course, some early modern plays were more concerned with women and housewifery than were others. Appearing on London stages first around 1598, city comedies took as their main focus the activities of the urban middling sort and concerns about economics and sexuality in London.<sup>6</sup> Particular attention to urban middling women, including their practice of housewifery, was likewise more sustained in city comedies than it had been in the romantic comedies and history plays common on public stages in the 1590s.<sup>7</sup>

At its inception, city comedy showed concern for the difficulties of regulating female sexual and economic activity in an urban context. William Haughton's *Englishmen For My Money* (1598), perhaps the earliest English city comedy, dramatizes the wayward activities of three daughters of a wealthy Portuguese merchant living in London. The play frequently conflates the sexual desire and transactions of the daughters with economic exchange. Their three English suitors indeed seek marriage with the daughters in part to erase the debt they owe to the girls' father, Pisaro; the sex act does literal economic work in this text. Though the three daughters do take action on their own behalf, the plot is largely driven by the plans of the English male suitors and their friend Anthony, who uses the guise of schoolmaster to serve as pander. And though the daughters participate in sexual and economic machinations throughout the play, the text does not show us their activities once they become wives. Haughton's play is interested in maids, not housewives, and in the manipulations of courtship, not the work of housewifery.

Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599) shifts the focus to a citizen wife, and one, moreover, centrally concerned with both production and consumption. If the women of *Englishmen For My Money* are largely contained in patriarchal exchange, Margery is allowed more scope in her economic activities. Wife to Simon Eyre, Margery both works in her husband's shoemaking shop and buys status items, such as a French hood. But Margery's consumption, her desire for the trappings of the middling wife, is viciously satirized in the play; the servants poke fun at her eagerness to "enlarge her bum" with new fashions (10.35–57). Concerns about the troublesome nature of Eyre's quick rise in status get displaced on to Margery and

her spending habits. Margery is not a site of anxiety about wayward female sexuality in the way that Pisaro's daughters are, but the ridicule that accompanies her economic pretensions introduces to city comedy a new anxiety about women who have money to spend.

By the time Ben Jonson wrote *Volpone* in 1606, city comedies had a more dense focus on a nexus of issues, including urban wives and their spending habits. In Jonson's play, Celia, wife to the merchant Corvino, throws her handkerchief down to Volpone, disguised as a mountebank, in order to "buy" the potion that he is selling. Furious, Corvino locks her up, complains that she is easily distracted by trinkets, and accuses her of being a whore. He even punishes her open sexuality by allowing her only "backwards" pleasure, or anal sex (2.5.61). In this play, the (mute) economic exchange that Celia makes exposes her to direct attacks on her chastity. At least in Corvino's mind, public spending sprees open the doorway for illicit sexual sprees. And though *Volpone* ultimately exonerates Celia, while *Shoemaker* persists in satirizing Margery, it nevertheless holds out to the audience a titillating moment of female economic and sexual self-assertion.

Thomas Dekker and John Webster's *Westward Ho* (1604) takes this titillating moment and shapes an entire plot around it. Like *Volpone* and *Shoemaker*, *Westward Ho* draws attention to spending habits of urban wives. Indeed, unlike many other city plays, including *Shoemaker*, *Westward Ho* presents wives who seems to do nothing but spend; they do not participate in productive labor in their husband's shops or elsewhere. The wives of *Westward Ho* also spend much more time onstage than do city wives in other plays; they are not only the play's main characters, but they are also allowed unusual freedom in the text to roam around London and even beyond its walls. For a female spectator, this freedom could have offered the titillating pleasure of housewifery gone wrong, while at the same time offering male and female spectators alike an anxious caution about female economic control. *Westward Ho* offers both unusual pleasures and an unusually sustained focus on typical city comedy fears about women and money; as such, it is a prime site from which to begin an investigation into the ideological representation of housewives in city comedy.

In what follows I will argue that *Westward Ho* offers the reader or spectator a seductive yet cautionary fantasy about urban women and their purchasing power in early modern England. Such power, within the logic of this play, allows these wives to escape the patriarchal confines of the family and pursue illicit desire in the suburbs. However, the freedom that money allows these wives is ultimately disciplined by the wives' own self-regulation. As I will argue, *Westward Ho*, unlike some other city comedies such as *Every Man in His Humor* (1598), *Volpone*, and *Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613), eschews physical force as a means of restricting its wayward female characters. Drawing on work by Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, by contrast, I will argue

that *Westward Ho* dramatizes the emergence of the self-disciplined middling subject in early modern England. And though Dekker and Webster's text cannot be read as a direct means of access to the real lives of early modern women, it can offer us access at the level of representation to the illicit pleasure associated with female mobility and buying power and to real anxieties about this freedom.<sup>8</sup>

In the main plot of *Westward Ho*, Mistress Honeysuckle, Mistress Wafer and Mistress Tenterhook, three citizen wives, develop elaborate schemes in an effort to escape their husbands and homes in London and to rendezvous with a group of gallants in Brainford. Meanwhile, Justiniano, an Italian merchant, has spread a rumor that he is in dire financial trouble, and he believes that his wife will soon give her sexual services to an old, but wealthy, earl. Justiniano decides to disguise himself as a schoolmaster and assist the wayward wives; by doing so he hopes to force their husbands into the same position that he finds himself. The plots that Justiniano and the three women concoct are often contingent upon the ability of these wives to take control of money and to use it as they wish. For example, in act 2, Justiniano attempts to convince Mistress Honeysuckle to join Mistress Wafer and Mistress Tenterhook and to meet one of the gallants, Sir Gosling Glowworm, in the Steel-yard. When she asks, "What excuse shall I coyne now?", he replies:

Fewh! excuses: You must to the pawne to buy Lawne: to Saint Martins for Lace; to the Garden: to the Glass-house; to your Gossips: to the Powlters: else take out an old ruffle, and go to your Sempsters: excuses? Why, they are more ripe than medlers at Christmas. (2.1.213–18)<sup>9</sup>

Here Justiniano suggests several possible "excuses" that a city wife's normal shopping routine could provide for sexual rendezvous. He includes shopping for luxury items (lawn, lace) alongside more basic items (poultry). These wives clearly have regular access to money, which they use to buy both provisions and status items. However, such access potentially poses a danger to the patriarchal family. As Korda has argued, a wife's consumption and management of household property could become "potentially threatening to the symbolic order of things."<sup>10</sup> That is, a wife's managerial skills could give her partial control over the family economy, which could in turn seem to threaten traditional household order. *Westward Ho* dramatizes such fears about wifely control of money; Justiniano in effect suggests that the wives misuse their purchasing power as shoppers to provide an excuse for sexual misconduct. As we will continue to see, this manipulation of their purchasing power takes the women outside of family structures and, eventually, outside of the city itself.

The wives' purchasing power also allows them to buy sex more directly through the act of writing. Mistress Honeysuckle and Mistress Wafer first

come to Mistress Tenterhook to announce, “we are come to acquaint thee with an excellent secret: we two learne to write” (1.2.120–21). Though reading skills seem to have been shared fairly equally between early modern men and women, women were far less likely to know how to write.<sup>11</sup> As Amy Erickson has demonstrated, the prevalence of reading-only literary in women began with the education of young girls, who often left school to work in the household before age six or seven, when writing was usually taught.<sup>12</sup> Thus, though it is likely that the three wives learned to read in their childhood, it is hardly surprising that they do not know how to write. Learning to write in adulthood could very well have been a common, even desirable activity for the wives of city merchants. As Erickson also notes, the inability to write “may . . . have hindered the ability of marketwomen or shopkeepers to keep track of customer’s debt and credit, and of women in general to transact exchanges which involved written instruments.”<sup>13</sup> Learning to write could allow city wives to participate directly in their husbands’ businesses.

However, women who handled “written instruments” were often accused of handling sexual “instruments.” Eve Sanders notes that the “eroticization of female writing” resulted in the assumption that women who knew how to write were “likely to engage in illicit affairs.”<sup>14</sup> Because they focused attention on the pen/penis pun, dramatic representations of women’s writing held out the possibility of sexual, as well as textual, misconduct. Mistress Honeysuckle underscores this possibility when she describes “Parenthesis,” the writing master: “thou mayest send him of any arrant, and trust him with any secret; nay, to see how demurely he will beare himselfe before our husbands, and how jocund when their backes are turn’d” (1.2.125–28). Like Anthony in *Englishmen for My Money*, who served as both schoolmaster and pander, Parenthesis explicitly links the purchasing of writing as a skill with the sexual deception of husbands “when their backes are turn’d.”

Mistress Honeysuckle is not the only one to recognize this connection. In one of the most memorable and humorous scenes of the play, Justiniano and Master Honeysuckle exchange loaded sexual comments when they discuss Mistress Honeysuckle’s writing abilities:

*Hony.* And how does my wife profit under you sir? hope you to do any good upon her?

*Just. Maister Honisuckle* I am in great hope shee shall fructify: I will do my best for my part: I can do no more than another man can.

*Hony.* Pray sir ply her, for she is capable of any thing.

*Just.* So far as my poore tallent can stretch. It shall not be hidden from her.

*Hony.* Does she hold her pen well yet?

*Just.* She leanes somewhat too hard uppon her pen yet sir, but practise and animadversion will breake her from that.

(2.1.69–79)

Justiniano gloats about his own “poor talent,” but it is clear (perhaps all too clear to Justiniano) that the true sexual prowess belongs to Mistress Honeysuckle. Her writing abilities are here comically rewritten as sexual abilities. Justiniano’s description of Mistress Honeysuckle’s leaning “too hard upon her pen” wryly emphasizes her sexual prowess as well as her developing writing skills. Mistress Honeysuckle herself asks Justiniano, “have you a new pen for mee Maister, for by my troth, my old one is stark naught, and will cast no inck” (2.1.121–22). Fully aware of the pen/penis pun, she uses the language of writing to suggest illicit sexual desire. For the three citizen wives, money and leisure buy writing skills, and writing skills open up sexual possibilities. Women’s writing figuratively represents sexual promiscuity, but Justiniano as Parenthesis also physically enables these wives to leave the city and their husbands’ control. The link between consumer power and illicit sexuality is thus not merely figurative but also clearly instrumental in this play. The city wives’ mastery of language provides the urban audience with a titillating hint of female sexual mastery, but it at the same time literalizes the feared “eroticization of female writing” and reveals an underlying anxiety about women and money in the urban environment.

Writing is only one of the skills that the three wives are able to purchase as they plan their escape from London. While gossiping about their husbands, Mistress Wafer tells the others that her husband would like her to breast-feed her youngest child rather than hire a wet nurse. Mistress Honeysuckle calls this unfortunate request “the policy of husbands to keepe their Wives in” (1.2.116–17). In fact, she gladly provides specific details of the cosmetic effects of breast-feeding on women’s breasts to buttress her claim against Master Wafer: “I doe assure you if a Woman of any markeable face in the Worlde give her Childe sucke, looke how many wrinckles be in the Nipple of her breast, so many will bee in her forheade by that time twelve moneth” (2.1.117–20).

The debate between Wafer and his wife over breast-feeding is a fictional rendition of a very real debate during the early modern period. As Valerie Fildes has demonstrated, religious and humanist discourses encouraged maternal breast-feeding, though in practice, “women with any status in society rarely breastfed their own children”.<sup>15</sup> Wet nursing was an explicitly class-coded choice; only those families “with any status” could afford the luxury.

Though Mistress Wafer disobeys her husband, her refusal to breast-feed simultaneously marks her submission to the dictates of the wealthy patriarchal family. As Dorothy McLaren has demonstrated, the contraceptive effects of lactation and the general taboo against sexual intercourse during lactation meant that lower-class women who *had* to breast-feed reduced their fertility, often resulting in smaller families. Upper-class women who hired wet nurses often found themselves facing more pregnancies and more of the risks associated with pregnancy, including infant and mother mortality.<sup>16</sup> Thus Mistress

Wafer's decision seems to indicate that she will continue to produce babies for the Wafer family, returning herself immediately to sexual relations with her husband and guaranteeing her family's lineage.

But her decision simultaneously indicates that she will be able to maintain a degree of personal freedom. She will be able to travel outside of the home to socialize and to purchase goods at the marketplace. Gail Paster writes: "To make herself [the mother] totally available to nurse an infant on demand—the most common form of breast-feeding in the period—was to remove herself from social circulation, and to risk the premature aging and wrinkling that was commonly associated with suckling."<sup>17</sup> These are the exact same complaints that preoccupy Mistress Wafer and the other wives: the "wrinkles . . . in the nipple of her breast" and the "policy of husbands to keep their wives in." Elizabeth Clinton, in *The Countesse of Lincolnes Nurserie* (1622) specifically describes these complaints as indicative of "unmotherly affection, idlenesse, desire to have liberty to gadd from home, pride, foolish finenesse, lust, wantonnesse, & the like evils" (13). For Clinton, the decision to hire a wet nurse signifies illicit sexual desire and a rejection of traditional family roles. Thomas Tusser's *Points of Housewifery* even makes explicit the link between hiring a wet nurse and being a spendthrift. Tusser writes: "But one thing I warn thee, let housewife be nurse, / least husband do find thee too frank with his purse" (W4). These same fears about illicit sexuality and immoderate spending underscore Webster and Dekker's narrative. By refusing to breast-feed, Mistress Wafer mitigates her own reproductive function in the family. But instead of staying home and producing more babies, she rejects the confines of her home and the licit sexuality of the marriage bed. That is, Mistress Wafer gets to have it both ways; she alienates herself both from breast-feeding and from her reproductive function in the family. Her ability to purchase a wet nurse buys her own freedom from household enclosure, the freedom to pursue illicit pleasure outside of London.

Mistress Wafer also uses her purchasing power to facilitate the trip to Brainford, allowing all of the wives to escape the confines of London. In act 2, scene 3, we learn that the child has been sent out of London to a wet nurse. The wives devise a "cleyly excuse" and decide to pretend that the Wafer child is sick and that they must go and visit it at the nurse's home. They thus gain an excuse to leave London without arousing their husbands' suspicion (2.3.79–111). The nursing child becomes plot device; the "policy of husbands to keepe their Wives in" is dramatically overturned. The women make use of the wet nurse to help themselves get out—both out of London and out of their individual families. Mistress Wafer's decision suggests that consumer power can enable wives to absent themselves from reproductive sexuality, pursue illicit desire, and evade traditional household duties. Anxiety about female control accompanies the sense of joyful escape that the scene provides; the wives are essentially able to buy themselves illicit sexuality,

thereby turning sex into a market commodity seemingly no different from onions or eggs.

Possessing money and wit thus allows the three wives of *Westward Ho* to remove themselves from patriarchal control. Through these characters, Dekker and Webster cautiously acknowledge the dangers posed by urban wives who have control of money. But the three wives are not the only women in the play who involve themselves in economic transactions, nor are they the only ones who control financial resources. Mistress Justiniano contemplates betraying her husband for an explicitly economic reason: she thinks that he is bankrupt. In despair, she asks him:

What would you have me do? all your plate and most part of your Jewels are at pawne, besides I heare you have made over all your estate to men in the Towne heer? What would you have me do? would you have mee turne common sinner, or sell my apparell to my wastcoat and become a Landresse? (1.1.175–79)

Instead of turning “common sinner,” Mistress Justiniano decides to offer her sexual services to a rich earl.<sup>18</sup> In this case, her act of prostitution is driven, in her understanding, by acute financial need. She acts out of a position of financial dependence, while the play’s other city wives act out of positions of consumer control.

The character that links these two positions is Birdlime, the bawd. Birdlime appears throughout the play as the wives’ ally and as their go-between for sexual liaisons; she introduces Mistress Justiniano to the earl, and she helps arrange for Mistress Tenterhook’s rendezvous with Monopoly. She is also fully aware that money buys power. In the first scene, she suggests that city wives’ control of money allows them to trick their husbands. She tells the tailor that city wives “have as pure Linnen, as choyce painting,” as wealthy ladies, but that ladies learn from city wives how to “awe their Husbands, to check their Husbands, to controule their husbands” (1.1.27, 31–32). Birdlime argues that the upward mobility of city wives, their ability to afford the same goods that wealthy ladies buy, informs their ability to manipulate their husbands. This bold claim underscores the play’s anxieties about women and purchasing power; Birdlime verbalizes the implicit threat of the three wives.

In her own right, Birdlime is a threatening figure because she is never enclosed in a patriarchal household. As a bawd, she not only sells sexual transactions, but she works as a brothel keeper, a sexual entrepreneur.<sup>19</sup> When Sir Gosling Glowworm asks her on the way to Brainford, “how many of my name . . . have paid for your gurr’d Gownes, thou Womans broker,” she responds, “No Sir, I scorne to bee beholding to any Glo-worme that lives uppon Earth for my furre: I can keep my selfe warme without Glowormes” (5.3.42–46). Birdlime highlights her financial independence, her ability to keep herself “warme.” As a brothel keeper, Birdlime demonstrates how a woman

could exist as an entrepreneur, a *feme sole* in a market economy. Because of her status, she gets to enjoy the power, mobility, and control over access to female sexuality that accompany the role of entrepreneur, a luxury that a simple prostitute like Luce, who works for Birdlime, does not have. As bawd and brothel keeper, Birdlime explicitly offers sex as a commodity that can be bought and sold.

However, Birdlime is also a midwife. She does not simply sell sex; she is intimately involved with the reproductive consequences of sexual activity, just as the citizen wives are. In act 2, scene 3, we find Mistress Wafer defending Birdlime's reputation to Sir Gosling. When he asks, "Zounds whats she? a Bawd, bith Lord Ist not?" Mistress Wafer replies, "No indeed, Sir *Gozlin*, shees a very honest woman, and a Mid-wife" (2.3.118–20). Later Birdlime herself says that she is "going to a womans labour" (2.3.128). whether or not we take Birdlime's claim at face value, and despite the fact that historians such as Cressy argue that "[M]ost midwives were respectable married women or widows . . .",<sup>20</sup> we should recognize the associations that contemporaries *did* draw between midwives, bawds, and witches, at the level of representation.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of its historical accuracy, the ideological link between bawd and midwife is explicit in *Westward Ho*.

Birdlime as both bawd and midwife links two kinds of women's labor in this play: the sex act that Birdlime sells and the pregnancy and birth that the wives must endure. But she also occupies a precarious space between consumer power and financial powerlessness. She takes control of the activities of Luce and Mistress Justiniano, who finds themselves at the bottom of the financial ladder. However, she also sells sex and midwife services to others, in contrast to the three city wives who are in a position to buy sex and reproductive services (such as wet nursing) from others. The class difference here is crucial; the wives' control of money allows them to buy Birdlime's services, but she does not seem to have reciprocal control over the wives. Though the wives' activities at times come dangerously close to prostitution, they do not actually sell their own sexual services for money. Indeed, when Mistress Tenterhook arranges to have Monopoly arrested by Ambush and leaves "two Diamonds . . . worth two hundred pound" with Ambush so that she can take Monopoly "alittle Way out of Town," she essentially purchases *his* sexual services (3.4.33–35). Here it is Monopoly, the earl's high-ranking but impoverished nephew, who prostitutes himself out of financial need. Monopoly, like Luce and Mistress Justiniano, seeks sex because of need; the three citizen wives seek sex because of desire. Birdlime is able to align herself with both of these positions.

Birdlime does not have the same relationship to sex and money that the wives do, but she nevertheless facilitates their fully funded desires and serves as a reminder that *all* services can be bought and sold. This, I would argue, explains her promiscuity in this text. By promiscuity I mean both her sexual-

ity and her physical pervasiveness in the play. She is the first figure to speak onstage, and she takes part in both of the play's plots, the city wives plot and the Earl/Mistress Justiniano plot. That is, her sexual promiscuity requires her textual promiscuity. By professionalizing sexuality, she fully enacts the commercialization of sex that the city wives merely suggest.

The consumer fantasy that *Birdlime* facilitates and that the three citizen wives initially desire does not actually materialize in the play. Though the wives' control of money has put them in a position to either buy or sell sex, in the end they do neither. Instead, they decide to refuse the gallants in time to humiliate their own husbands by their virtuous behavior. Mistress Tenterhook tells the other wives that "the Jest shall be a stock to maintain us and our pewfellowes in laughing at christnings, cryings out, and upsittings this twelve month" (5.1.171–73). Instead of enjoying sexual pleasure with the gallants, these women plan to store up a "stock" of pleasure in stories that can last the entire year. However, the translation of actual activity into narrative diffuses the danger of Mistress Tenterhook's proposal. Though the women create an idealized female space through storytelling, the threatening potential of this space dwindles with its idealization. The wives have consciously decided to reduce their potentially threatening activities to a more easily contained act of storytelling. Dekker and Webster have converted action into narrative; the wives voluntarily choose to abandon the dangerous consumer fantasy of the play's first four acts.<sup>22</sup>

I would argue that this voluntary abandonment is a symptom of the consumer savvy that brought the wives out of their homes in the first place and a fulfillment of the self-regulation that the play ultimately advocates. These wives have the consumer power to buy themselves sexual services, yet they choose to practice thrift instead. Mistress Tenterhook enjoins the other wives, "tho we are merry, lets not be mad." When Mistress Wafer says, "[w]eele eate and drinke with em," Mistress Tenterhook responds:

O yes: eate with em as hungerly as souldiers: drinke as if we were Froes: talke as freely as Jestors, but does as little as misers. who (like dry Nurses) have great breastes but give no milke . . . tho we lye all night out of the City, they shall not find country wenches of us: but since we ha brought em thus far into a fooles Paradi-  
dice, leave em int. (5.1.164–71)

Tenterhook here compares the rejection of the gallants to the offering of a dry breast, an image that immediately recalls Mistress Wafer and her decision not to breast-feed. However, whereas Mistress Wafer's decision earlier signified her financial wantonness, here the women present themselves as frugal "misers" who control their bodily functions just as they control their finances.

In *The Mothers Counsell* (1630), one of the female-authored advice books

that appeared in the first half of the seventeenth century, M.R. advises her reader to "keepe a narrow watch over your heart, words, and deeds continually," warning also that "[f]rugalitie is the stave of chastitie" (A3r, A4v). M.R.'s advice is very similar to that found in Tusser's *Points of Housewifery*, where he writes, "If thrift by that labor be honestly got, / then is it good housewifery, else it is not." (R4v) Both writers explicitly connect frugality with good and chaste housewifery. The wives in *Westward Ho* choose to follow this advice. They break the link between spending and wantonness by demonstrating that it is possible, at least at the level of representation, to spend money and still be in control of one's sexuality. Partly this involves a recognition on the wives' part that buying sex is indeed very different from buying onions or eggs. It is one thing to hire a wet nurse, it is quite another to buy sex. Mistress Wafer, for one, understands the "ground[s]" that accompany childbirth (3.3.64), and Mistress Tenterhook recognizes the difference between being "merry" and being "mad." In essence, the women prove themselves to be savvy sexual consumers; in the words of Monopoly, they have "save themselves" (5.4.195). They freely choose to abandon their illicit sexual desires, and in so doing they demonstrate thrift and good housewifery, despite the warnings of the conduct manuals. Their self-disciplining is therefore directly related to their class position as citizen wives.

Norbert Elias argues in *The Civilizing Process* that the early modern period saw a gradual but clear change in people's behavior, what he terms the growth of "civilite." He writes that in the centuries following the Middle Ages, "with the structural transformation of society, with the new pattern of human relationships, a change slowly comes about: the compulsion to check one's own behavior increases."<sup>23</sup> Elias further reads the behavioral self-discipline that began to develop in the sixteenth century as a practice of class discipline that worked to distinguish the properly disciplined elite and middle classes from the improperly disciplined vulgar. In the second volume of *The Civilizing Process, Power and Civility*, Elias goes on to argue that individual self-control ultimately becomes an efficient mechanism of social regulation.<sup>24</sup>

Michel Foucault makes a similar argument in his famous section on Panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that the Benthamian Panopticon, a prison in which everything is exposed, creates a situation in which the prisoners become the agents of their own discipline. As he writes, "[h]e who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."<sup>25</sup> Self-discipline once again becomes an effective method of social control.

The self-discipline of the city wives in *Westward Ho* can thus be seen in light of the increasingly self-disciplined middling subject in early modern England. As Elias and Foucault suggest, proper social control in this play is

most dramatically demonstrated by the wives' choice to discipline themselves. And though neither Elias nor Foucault speak at all about the way in which specifically *gendered* bodies are disciplined (see the proliferation of the word "he" in the Foucault passage I cited), *Westward Ho* dramatizes the ways in which self-discipline works to create a properly ordered body that is both citizen class *and* female. Further, as I have been arguing, the female citizen that self-discipline creates is clearly also a consumer. Frugality, as Tusser and M.R. suggest, thus becomes a key component of the self-disciplining of the early modern citizen wife.

The last scene of the play, however, reveals the fragility of this self-discipline. The witty aggressiveness of the wives throughout the play provides the audience with the illicit pleasure of wanton behavior, while simultaneously indicating that the wives could at any time break into new antics of subversiveness. Chastity and frugality are conscious choices; the wives could choose differently another time. Furthermore, their self-disciplining is only secure as long as their own class positions are secure. After the wives are reconciled with their husbands, Justiniano centers his attention on Birdlime and reveals her duplicitous activities. He describes Birdlime's operations within the city of London by saying: "Shee has tricks to keepe a vaulting house under the Lawes nose." Yet his description of these tricks is specifically class-inflected:

For either a cunning woman has a Chamber in her house, or a Phisitian, or a picture maker, or an Attorney, because all these are good Clokes for the raine. And then if the party that's cliented above-Staires, be yong, Shees a Squires daughter of lowe degree. that lies there for phisicke, or comes up to be placed with a Countesse: if of middle age, shees a Widow, and has sutes at the terme or so. (5.4.257–66)

Justiniano's description of Birdlime highlights her ability to disguise whores as more respectable citizens, to use "good Clokes for the raine" to hide her unsavory business. But Justiniano also reveals to the three wives the dual role that Birdlime has been playing all along. That is, she has not only been assisting the wives, but she has been operating in her own right as a bawd on behalf of "female parties" that include Mistress Justiniano. By recognizing Birdlime's position as a *feme sole*, Justiniano confuses the power alignment the three wives assumed was operative. His revelation collapses the economic difference between Mistress Justiniano, who sought Birdlime's services because of financial need, and Mistress Tenterhook, who sought Birdlime's services as a consumer demand.<sup>26</sup> We might also recall that it is Birdlime who ultimately gets the "two Diamondes" that Mistress Tenterhook paid for Monopoly's release; she "save[s] the Gentlewomens credit" by taking possession of the diamonds that represent both sexual and financial control (4.1.229). The wives have less control over Birdlime than they initially

thought, and this loss of control brings their actions dangerously close to prostitution. No wonder Mistress Tenterhook immediately tells Justiniano, "O, fie upon her, burne the witch, out of our company" (5.4.267).

Birdlime's class fluidity, her ability to negotiate between desire and need, threatens the wives' carefully won self-discipline by disrupting their own class positions. At the end of the play, this class fluidity gets physically mapped onto the city itself so that Birdlime can be literally removed from the scene. Justiniano tells Birdlime at the end of the play to "go, saile with the rest of your baudie-traffickers to the place of sixepenny Sinfulnessse the suburbes" (5.4.248–50). While Mistress Tenterhook exclaims, "[l]ets hem her out of *Brainford*, if shee get not the faster to *London*," Mistress Wafer quickly rejoins, "O no, for Gods sake, rather hem her out off *London* and let her keep in *Brainford* still" (5.4.268–71). That is, Justiniano and the wives eventually agree that Birdlime must remain outside the city proper, staying in the areas already acknowledged as sites of sexual vice. The city wives clearly distinguish themselves from "sub-burbe wenches," the term that Mistress Honeysuckle applies to women who dwell immediately outside of London's walls (5.1.114). With the line, "[q]uickly shall wee get to Land," the play's final song adds to the sense of hasty departure, and Justiniano further attempts to resolve the situation swiftly by calling it "but a merriment" and "all but a May-game" (5.4.278). He verbally substitutes the maypole dance, a heterosexual fertility festival, for the female activities that have dominated the play.<sup>27</sup>

But this hasty substitution is ultimately ineffectual. The phallic interference of the maypole can only be described as comically impotent; we are hardly likely to believe that the erotic escapades of the wives have been "all but a May-game." And even if we did take Justiniano at his word, Birdlime refuses the geographical separation that Justiniano and the wives propose. In doing so she brings to the forefront the problematic historical relationship between prostitution and city jurisdiction that existed at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Ruth Karras notes that an ordinance of 1393 attempted to "segregate whores, prohibiting them the city except for one street (Cock's Lane), banishing them to the areas of the stews or bathhouses in Southwark, outside the city proper."<sup>28</sup> Concern about this area and the connection between prostitution and crime led eventually to Henry VIII's closing of the stews in 1546.<sup>29</sup> This did not, of course, end prostitution, (and Edward VI later reinstated the stews), but it arguably intensified the geographic problem and threat that prostitution posed. Further, as Wallace Shugg has noted, the appearance and great popularity of coaches by the early seventeenth century led to an increased mobility of prostitutes, who could now "range easily throughout the City and solicit customers at any public places".<sup>30</sup>

Ian Archer makes this point clear in *The Pursuit of Stability*. In his chapter

on crime, Archer discusses prostitution in early modern London. He includes a map on which he locates bawdy houses in the period and marks their positions relative to the city walls.<sup>31</sup> Writing about this map he notes: "The unsavoury reputation enjoyed by areas like Clerkenwell, St. John's Street, Whitechapel, and Shoreditch is confirmed, but it is also striking just how many establishments operated within the supposedly much better governed areas under the City's jurisdiction."<sup>32</sup> Thus, when Birdlime responds to Justiniano by saying, "I scorne the Sinfulnessse of any suburbes in Christendom; tis well known I have up-rizers and downe-lyers within the Citty, night by night, like a prophane fellow as thou art . . . you cannot hem me out of *London*" (5.4.251–53, 272), she explicitly calls attention to the sexual fluidity of London's boundaries.<sup>33</sup> She refuses an easy geographical mapping of her own sexuality and the class threat that she poses to the wives as a *feme sole*; instead she serves as a living reminder that all services, including sex, can be bought and sold. Birdlime's rewriting of the map of London simultaneously reveals a sexual and a class fluidity that threaten the chastity and the economic stability of the city wives. In doing so it reveals the fragility of their self-discipline, suggesting that their consumer savvy is neither guaranteed nor predictable.

In *Westward Ho*, Dekker and Webster allow female spectators to flirt with the pleasures of "bad housewifery" while simultaneously cautioning those same spectators (and their male counterparts) about the potentially subversive effects of pleasures left unchecked. Though the play's end holds out the promise of female self-discipline and a return to order, the play also demonstrates that women are literally able to buy their way out of patriarchal control and that female self-discipline cannot always be counted on. By 1604, when the play was written, urban wives were increasingly expected to use their skills as consumers to provide goods for their households. The instability of the housewife's consumer role meant that she must use her consumer savvy to manage the household properly. However, Dekker and Webster create a fictional account in which women take this consumer savvy too far and use it to purchase the wrong goods. Though the wives ultimately choose sexual frugality and self-discipline, this containment is superficial and temporary at best. The urban wife may be able to discipline herself, but she nevertheless remains a potential threat to household order because she maintains purchasing power in the urban environment. Later city comedies will continue *Westward Ho*'s focus on economic and sexual self-regulation. In a play like Heywood's *The Fayre Mayde of the Exchange* (1607), the heroine, Phillis, both works in a shop in the Exchange and commissions a handkerchief in her attempt to attract a suitor. Phillis is at once productive, consumptive, and desiring, yet she is ultimately also self-regulating; she adjusts her desires to suit her parents' wishes and social decorum. Similarly, the excessive consumption of characters like Gertrude in *Eastward Ho* (1605) and the gossips

in *Chaste Maid* (1613) are ridiculed, while self-restraint and thrift are championed. These later plays thus continue much of the ideological work done by *Westward Ho*, though Dekker and Webster's play arguably places greater emphasis on the seductive yet dangerous potential of the city wife. Economic resources combined with exceptional wit allow the wives of *Westward Ho* to evade traditional duties in the home and "gadd" about town with other women. And maybe tomorrow they will go ahead and add sex to their shopping lists immediately under butter and cheese.

## Notes

Citations are derived from the following editions:

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1. Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict and London's Overseas Traders, 1550-1653* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 40-41; Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 177.

2. For England's mercantile expansion, see Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 131-32, and Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 39-50. For the increased desire for luxury goods, see Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500-1660*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 42-43.

3. The "middling sort" is perhaps the best term we have to describe a very diverse and continually shifting group of people. For a good description and analysis of this group see Theodore B. Leinwand's, "Shakespeare and the Middling Sort," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44.3 (1993): 284-303, especially 284-95. See also William Harris-

on's *Description of England* book 2, chapter 5, where he divides the English into four groups: "gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen, and artificers, or laborers." William Harrison, *The Description of England*, edited by G. Edelen (New York: Dover, 1994), 94.

4. Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 307.

5. Natasha Korda, "Household Kates: Domesticating Commodities in *The Taming of the Shrew*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47.2 (1996): 109–31 (here cited from 111).

6. Theodore B. Leinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603–1613* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), 51.

7. We should not forget that poorer urban women would have worked as textile producers, domestic servants, or retailers and would have been far less concerned with buying status items. Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, "Women's work, gender conflict, and labour markets in Europe, 1500–1900," *The Economic History Review* 44.4 (1991): 608–28 (cited from p614); Peter Earle, "The female labour market in London in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries," *The Economic History Review* 42.3 (1989): 328–53 (here cited from 339–44). However, city comedy tends to focus on the upper echelons of the urban middling class and thus frequently associates city wives with consumption. Karen Newman's groundbreaking *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (1991) provides an early analysis of the ways in which the relationship between woman and consumption took on new importance in London and in Jonson's city comedy, *Epicoene* (1609).

8. For a similar understanding of the link between history and representation, see Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2, 4, 84.

9. Dekker, Thomas and John Webster, *Westward Ho* (1607), *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, vol. 2, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955). All citations will be from this text.

10. Korda, "Household Kates," 119.

11. Eve Sanders, *Gender and Literacy on Stage in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 169. See also Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), 34–36, and Jonathan Barry, "Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective," in *Popular Culture in England c. 1500–1850*, edited by T. Harris (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 77.

12. Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), 56–57.

13. Erickson, *Women and Property*, 58–59.

14. Sanders, *Gender and Literacy*, 171.

15. Valerie Fildes, *Wet Nursing. A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 83; Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 199.

16. Dorothy McLaren, "Marital Fertility and Lactation 1570–1720," in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, edited by M. Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), 46; Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 201–2.

17. Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 202.

18. In the end, Mistress Justiniano is celebrated by her husband because she escapes the earl's advances "without paying" (4.2.191). The play never holds out the threat of Mistress Justiniano as a consumer. In fact she not only retains her chastity, but she gets the earl's proffered jewels too, in a move that resembles Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday*, scene 18, in which Jane escapes Hammon and gets his money to boot.

19. See Ruth Karras on medieval prostitution and female entrepreneurship in *Common Women. Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 44.

20. David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage & Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 60.

21. For the link between prostitutes, midwives and witches see: Newman, *Fashioning Femininity*, 55–58 and Thomas Rogers Forbes, *The Midwife and the Witch*. (New York: AMS Press, 1966), 112–38. For the very negative (and largely outmoded) view of midwives as incompetent see Forbes and Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800*, abridged edition (New York: Harper, 1979), 59. For the more general connection between women, midwives and occult healing as well as the replacement of midwives by male physicians, see Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500–1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 223–39.

22. For a good account of the subversive female alliances that develop in this play, see Simon Morgan-Russell, "'No Good Thing Even Comes Out of It': Male Expectation and Female Alliance in Dekker and Webster's *Westward Ho*," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, edited by S. Frye and K. Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially 80–83. See also Jean Howard's recent article on the play and her analysis of the wives' commitment to chastity in relation to "definitions of English womanhood", Jean E. Howard, "Women, Foreigners, and the Regulation of Urban Space in *Westward Ho*," in *Material London, ca. 1600*, edited by Lena Cowen Orlin (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 161.

23. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 66.

24. Norbert Elias, *Power and Civility*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 239–42.

25. Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 202–3.

26. The fact that Justiniano is not really impoverished does not alter the situation. What is important is the fact that Mistress Justiniano thought she was acting out of need, and Mistress Tenterhook thought she was acting out of desire *unlike* Mistress Justiniano.

27. For critics who accept Justiniano's rendition of the ending of the play, see Alexander Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy in the Age of Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 132) and Charles R. Forker, "Westward Ho and Northward Ho: A Revaluation," *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 6.2 (1980): 8–9. For the maypole festival as a celebration of the heterosexual norm, see Peter

Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 194. See also Howard, who argues that the play's ending complicates the "ideology of purity" that the play tries to offer ("Women, Foreigners," 163).

28. Karras, *Common Women*, 15.

29. Karras, *Common Women*, 37–43.

30. Wallace Shugg, "Prostitution in Shakespeare's London," *Shakespeare Studies* 10 (1977): 299. See also E. J. Burford, *The Orrible Synne: A Look at London Lechery from Roman to Cromwellian Times* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 217, for the high number of bawdyhouses during James I's reign.

31. Ian W. Archer, *The Pursuit of Stability: Social Relations in Elizabethan London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212.

32. Archer, *Pursuit of Stability*, 211. See also E. J. Burford and Joy Wotton, *Private Vices—Public Virtues: Bawdry in London from Elizabethan Times to the Regency* (London: Robert Hale, 1995), 15, and Karras, *Common Women*, 75–76, where she notes that whores had a good deal of geographical mobility.

33. The men already know that she operates a brothel within the city walls because they have gone to her London brothel in Gunpowder Alley, located about two hundred yards north of Tower Hill (1.1.8; 4.1; see Shugg, "Prostitution in Shakespeare's London," 300).



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