Cuckolds And Codpieces: Early Modern Anxieties In Male Potency

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CUCKOLDS AND CODPIECES: EARLY MODERN ANXIETIES IN MALE POTENCY

BY

DORIS BARKIN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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Abstract

CUCKOLDS AND CODPIECES: EARLY MODERN ANXIETIES IN MALE POTENCY

by

Doris Barkin

Advisor: Professor Clare Carroll

My dissertation is an exploration of male potency through a close examination of the tropes of the cuckold and the codpiece as presented in English dramatic works of the early modern period: I examine codpiece and cuckoldry discourses side by side, to see how one informs the other, and to perceive to what extent masculinity is affected and communicated by these discourses. My purpose here is to explore early modern views of masculinity, marriage, and sexuality through various theoretical frameworks, from Freud to Foucault.

My study argues that while the codpiece may emphasize or articulate sexual power and virility, that is, potency, the specter of cuckoldry undermines this power. It is my contention that in order to maintain mastery, the early modern male appropriates the signification of the codpiece, which is in and of itself charged with ambiguity: on the one hand it may signify concealment; on the other, exhibitionism. A close reading of Middleton and Dekker’s The Roaring Girl and Shakespeare’s Two Gentlemen of Verona reveals how gender is materialized and appropriated through the female codpiece, while Shakespeare’s The Merry Wives of Windsor and Othello establish the tension between masculine identity and jealousy through the topos of cuckoldry, be it comic or tragic. My
emphasis on impotence, as an undercurrent and overt theme, distinguishes my study from other scholarship in the area of gender and cultural critique.

To demonstrate my argument, I apply an eclectic approach: my analysis is formed on the basis of a cultural historicist approach, and is further extended by the deployment of psychoanalytic and gender theories. In addition, the modality of resistance in feminism reaches out to the particular interests of queer theory such as transgressive phenomena, specifically cross-dressing, and, performative aspects of gender construction.

My aim is to illuminate some of the most provocative tensions and possibilities in the study of early modern desire. Tracing as I have an evolution of thought, demonstrates that patriarchy was not monolithic and masculinity was not fixed; in fact, this evolution may have introduced a newer, heterodoxical view of ideal masculinity as tending toward the feminine. My aim, then, is to demonstrate that in early modern English drama, the tension between virility or potency and weakness or impotence as signified by codpiece and cuckoldry discourses betrays an anxious masculinity: masculine desire is represented as complex, fraught with aggression but also with fragility and vulnerability.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This dissertation has been a long time coming. Starting out as a fledgling graduate student many years ago, I faltered, stumbled, fell, but eventually raised myself up, determined to see the project through to its completion. The perseverance and discipline I attribute to experience; the resoluteness I attribute to the reassurance and confidence of believers and supporters.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vi

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 Codpiece Daughter 42

Chapter 2 A Monster with Two Trinkets 76

Chapter 3 Horn Madness: Impotence, Cuckoldry, and Patriarchal Marriage in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 112

Chapter 4 “O most lame and impotent conclusion!” (*Othello* 2. 1. 163) 147

Bibliography 188
LIST OF FIGURES

**Figure 1**: Bronzino, Agnolo, *Guidobaldo II della Rovere*  
Page 10

**Figure 2**: Holbein, Hans, *Whitehall Mural Cartoon*  
Page 11

**Figure 3**: Unknown, after Holbein, *King Henry VIII*  
Page 12

**Figure 4**: Woodcut Illustration, from *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform’d, or The Artificial Changeling*  
Page 13
Cuckolds and Codpieces: Early Modern Anxieties in Male Potency

Introduction

“For the codpiece is the primary item of a fighting man’s armour” (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Trans. M.A. Screech 438).... “… Reflect… how Nature inspired man to arm himself and which part of his body he first protected with armour. It was, by God’s virtue, the balls.” (440).

[“Car la braguette est premiere piece de harnoys pur armer l’home de guerre”] (Rabelais, *Oeuvres completes* 373).... [“…Considerez (dist Panurge) comment nature l’inspira soy armer, et quelle partie de son corps il commença premier armer. Ce feut (par la vertus Dieu) la couille,] (Rabelais *Oeuvres completes* 375).

It is in *Le Tiers Livre*, (“The third book,” 1546) of Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* (1532), which in its entirety is a discourse on marriage, that Rabelais ingeniously brings together the codpiece and the cuckold as foundational in the metaphysics of masculinity. In response to Panurge’s declamation above, avowing and assenting to Panurge’s manly self-protection, Pantagruel advises him categorically not to marry: “You will be cuckolded, you will be beaten and you will be robbed” (463) [“Vous serez coqu: vous serez battu: vous serez desrobbe”] (Rabelais *Oeuvres completes* 394).

As a touchstone for early modern thinking about marriage, cuckoldry, and masculinity, Pantagruel’s judgment seems to have endured late into the sixteenth and seventeenth century in the dramatic work of the period. While Rabelais’ treatment of the topoi is comic, the book, by virtue of its voluminous, extravagant satire of theological, philosophical, social and political ideologies, contains within it the groundwork for
various and fecund conceptions and perspectives, both in literature and in criticism. One such conception is the recognition and attention to masculine anxiety about sexuality as symptomatic of the cultural problems inherent in marriage: this is my undertaking here.

My own study of masculine anxiety in the early modern period first emerged from a reading of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. With a sense of wonder and curiosity, I was -- and continue to be -- struck by the overwhelming, hyperbolic, and, I would venture to say, compulsive attention in the work to the codpiece, the cods, and to other phallic references which function as markers of masculinity and virility. Today, we might quip that Rabelais’ work is, colloquially speaking, *testosterone* – by which we mean, laden with manfulness and machismo and all that that implies: aggression, masculinity, virility, potency, and sexual drive – albeit in Rabelais, rendered in ironic, humorous, comic, satiric fashion. However, underlying the comic attitude in Rabelais, lurks an anxious masculinity. With this reading of Rabelais as a backdrop, and one which acts as a stimulus for my work here, I attempt to push out the boundaries of a fraught masculinity and potency in the early modern period.

While my work here concentrates on English drama in the early modern period, Rabelais’ imaginary brings forth much that I study here. Especially in *Le Tiers Livre*, where the characters engage in a protracted deliberation upon marriage, and in which anxiety about masculinity and man’s ability to control female sexuality is registered, I have found Rabelais’ work to be fundamental. Although the precise historical nature of Rabelais’ writing in England in this period may or may not have a direct connection,¹

¹ See p. 7 of the “Introduction” for further details and remarks about the translation of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* into English and its influence on the study of Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker.
even so, “the list of those who quoted or alluded to Rabelais before he was translated is impressive” (Prescott “England” 67), namely, writers of the English Renaissance such as John Donne, Ben Jonson, John Webster, Francis Bacon, among others (67). We also may most certainly detect a consciousness and a “sense of traffic” of “Frenchness” (Williams, Deanne) upon English culture in Shakespeare’s time, Rabelais’ attitude being one such imprint. For my work here, the skepticism, the carnival materialism, and the verbal play (Prescott “England” 67-8) especially as regards masculine anxiety and the discourse of codpieces and cuckoldry, act almost as a precept, and are discernible in the early modern English dramatic works I pursue in this dissertation.

While much cultural critique and gender study in early modern sexuality, including mine, has centered on classifications of hetero and homoerotic elements, metatheatricality, costuming, and performative elements, it is the purpose of this dissertation to explore early modern views of masculinity, marriage, and sexuality through various theoretical frameworks, from Freud to Foucault. My contribution, which I believe has not been made before, is an exploration of male potency through a close examination of the tropes of the cuckold and the codpiece as presented in English dramatic works of the period, that is, to examine codpiece and cuckoldry discourses side by side, to see how one informs the other, and to perceive to what extent masculinity is affected and communicated by these discourses.

The tropes of the cuckold and codpiece inform various ideologies of gender and also suggest the anxiety and threat that surrounds masculinity. My study argues that while the codpiece may emphasize or articulate sexual power and virility, that is, potency, the specter of cuckoldry undermines this power. It is my contention that in
order to maintain mastery, the early modern male must appropriate the signification of the codpiece, which is in and of itself charged with ambiguity: on the one hand it may signify concealment; on the other, exhibitionism. A close reading of Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl* and Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* reveals how gender is materialized and appropriated through the codpiece, while Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Othello* establish the tension between masculine identity and jealousy through the topos of cuckoldry, be it comic or tragic. Both paradigms contribute to and reflect the anxieties surrounding patriarchal masculinity in the early modern period.

Panurge’s spirited but paradoxical outcry in *Le Tiers Livre* exposes just how agitated the assumption of cuckoldry makes him: “I’m quite fond of cuckold; they seem nice fellows and I enjoy hanging round them, but I would rather die than be one” (Rabelais, Trans. M. A. Screech 443) [J’ayme bien les coquz, et me semblent gens de bien, et les hante volontiers: mais pour mourir je ne le voudroys estre] (Rabelais *Oeuvres completes* 377). Strikingly, the source of his discomposure is a lack of potency:

If I were ill, incapable of fulfilling the marriage debt, my wife might be impatient with my debility and abandon herself to other men, not only never succouring me in my need but mocking my misfortune, and worse still – I’ve often seen it happen! – stealing from me. That would be the last straw. With doublet undone, raving mad through the fields I’d run (444).

[Mais si, dist Panurge, estant malade et impotent au debvoir de marriage, ma femme impatiente de ma langueur, a aultruy se abandonnoit, et non seulement ne me secourust au besoing, mais aussi se mocquast de ma calamite, et (que pis est) me desrobast, comme j’ay veu souvent advenir: ce seroit pour m’achever de paindre, et courir les champs en pourpoint] (Rabelais *Oeuvres completes* 379).

The image of the undone doublet implying an absent codpiece conflates the cuckold and codpiece in a Rabelaisian representation of impotence. The codpiece or the cod is a
preponderant motif in the whole of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, but in *Le Tiers Livre*,

Panurge specifically waxes expansive on the codpiece’s origin:

“That is witnessed by Moses, the Hebrew Captain and philosopher, who affirms that Man protected himself with a glorious and gallant codpiece, made – a most beautiful device! – from fig-leaves, which are in every way suited and naturally appropriate (by their strength, serrations, curl, sheen, size, colour, odour, quality and capacity) to the covering and protecting of balls…. That is what moved the gallant Claudius Galen (in Book One of *On Semen*) boldly to conclude that it would be better to have no heart than no testicles - … for in them consists, as in a sacred promptuary, that seed which conserves the human race” (441).

This speech communicates just how deeply embedded the perception of masculinity was to Panurge: it is in the testicles, not the heart, in which one locates the seat of the passions -- the intelligence, the sensations, the soul, the essence and the life-blood of all human progeny. Notable as a kind of contradiction, while Panurge speaks glancingly of the fig-leaf’s biblical origins, which are rooted in the shame of Adam and Eve’s uncovered genitalia, Rabelais overthrows this by viewing the fig leaf in chiefly physical rather than psychological terms. Rabelais’ joke, inserted in Panurge’s version of events, squelches the early modern period’s expectation of the fig-leaf as a sign of pudeur or sexual shame. This connection is disestablished, and the emphasis is on protecting the penis as an organ
of procreation. The codpiece in Panurge’s version is neither concealing nor showcasing; it is a defensive armor, protecting and insuring procreation, the very continuity of the human species depending upon it. The designation of armature suggests both the masculinity of the warrior, and the exigency of the phallus, prefiguring, to an extent, patriarchal masculinity as it is treated in the works of the later playwrights. As Eugenia Paulicelli explains, in the sixteenth century “Virility was exalted through a constructed physical vigor … by the presence of the codpiece, which also has its origin in military attire” (104). However, in Rabelais, the significance of the cod, another variation on the theme, is more vexed: in Panurge’s cataloguing to Friar John there is high praise:

“O dumpy cod, stumpy cod, famous in birth, hamous in girth; … O cod, rose red; O cod, above all things fair, covered in hair, … cod humoresque, cod arabesque (with styles devices, mottoes).” (qtd. in Bakhtin 417).

The friar responds disparagingly, with epithets which are deflating:

“O mouldy, mildewed, musty cod; O fusty cod; O reasty, rusty cod; cod frigid and numb, … cod pendent and pendulous, … slack, relaxed, and flapping cod….” (417).

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2 I am indebted to Clare Carroll for this insight.
3 Yet in contrast to this evocation of the codpiece as a defensive, procreative device, in Engendering a Nation, Howard and Rackin argue that a “performative masculinity” began to emerge from what had been a masculine identity constituted out of a patrilineal inheritance. There was a transition to “an emergent culture of performative masculinity in which … identity had to be secured by personal achievement”(187), or as Will Fisher articulates it, “masculine identity was secured through the sexual ‘conquest’ of women” (Materializing Gender 69). This indicates an essential difference between Rabelais and the later dramatists.
4 For a full list of epithets in Rabelais’ version, see the list which begins with “Couillon moignon.
c. pate
c. plombe
c. feutre…
c. arabesque
c. trousse a la levresque,” etc. (Rabelais Oeuvres completes 432).
The codpiece’s attributes are more complex than simply procreative. Rather, the tension between potency and impotency is entirely discernible in the contrast.

Rabelais’ florid imagination has activated my interpretation of the topoi as presented by Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker: for the two playwrights, both the cuckold and the codpiece are significations of masculinity, powerful yet simultaneously impotent. My emphasis on male potency distinguishes my study from other scholarship in the area of gender and cultural critique. To demonstrate my argument, I apply an eclectic approach: my analysis is formed on the basis of a cultural historicist approach, and is further extended by the deployment of psychoanalytic and gender theories. It is the performance of the cultural work of both cuckold and codpiece that this dissertation aims to investigate.

Although proof that Shakespeare himself read Rabelais is only “suggestive” (Prescott “Shakespeare” 228), his work having been only partially translated in 1653, long after Shakespeare’s death (229); one finds, however, parallels in Shakespeare’s Erasmian folly and his version of the carnivalesque, which the characterization of Falstaff, especially, conveys (229). Even the poet Swinburne in 1880, apotheosizing Shakespeare, who, in contrast to Rabelais, depicts characters as “unincrusted with any flake of dirt;” Shakespeare, who was “wise and good and sweet and clean and pure” carries on “from the ripe and rich and radiant influence of Rabelais” (Swinburne). What

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5 Another full list from which Bakhtin culls and translates begins with “…diz Couillon flatry, C. moisy. c. rouy. c. poitry d’eau froyede. c. transy… c. dissolu…” c. flacque, “etc. (Rabelais Oeuvres completes 439).
we shall see in the foregoing chapters is how Rabelais’ outlook and construction of a
cultural insight is current in the early modern period. In the bracketing of the codpiece
and cuckold to early modern notions of a threatened masculinity, Rabelais is the forebear.

In his historical critical study, *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, Bruce R. Smith
considers how apparel was a marker of masculinity. Examining portraiture, he
recognizes that clothes made up a "personage"(30) and observes that the eyes are drawn
to the codpiece; in addition to “the head, groin and thighs, rapiers and daggers replaced
the codpiece” as a signifier of masculinity (32). We may observe these in Figs. 1 and 2,
those of Bronzino and Holbein, respectively. The portraits inform on many levels: both
portraits communicate an ideology of masculinity through the rendering of the codpiece.
Bronzino’s portrait of *Guidobaldo II della Rovere*, painted in 1532, 6 with helmet and
mastiff as masculine tokens which supplement the erect, stiff but round, protruding, yet
almost vertical codpiece, a codpiece virtually pulsating virility -- this image is pictorially
one of exhibition. On the other hand, Hans Holbein the Younger creates a mural of the
capacious king (1536 -37),7 and8 although Henry’s stance signifies sexual, manly power,
the codpiece blends in with the ornate costume as an accoutrement, if not concealing,
perhaps protecting. The protective codpiece harkens back to the Rabelaisian or
Panurgian construction of a defensive armor crucial to man’s “seed” or to procreation.
This rendering is also consistent with the scrotal and reproductive (as opposed to the
penetrative/sexual) ideology of the codpiece delineated by Will Fisher. Fisher’s analysis
of the Holbein mural is that it is a “somewhat phallic codpiece, but, at the same time, the

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6 See Fig. 1, Bronzino, Agnolo, *Guidobaldo II della Rovere*, Galleria Palatina, Florence.
7 See Fig. 2, Holbein, Hans. *Whitehall Mural Cartoon*, National Portrait Gallery, London.
8 See Fig. 3, Unknown, after Holbein, *King Henry VIII: 1537-1557*? Petworth House, West Sussex.
portrait emphasizes genealogical concerns” (Fisher \textit{Materializing Gender} 74); this connotes a “‘testicular masculinity’” (74). In the painting, one does not distinguish particularly between Henry’s codpiece and his dagger, fur robes, or extended chest as the sole signifying element of a masterful phallic display. Henry’s ring-fingered hand points in the direction of his codpiece; moreover, his dagger is situated precisely below his codpiece -- both elements move the spectator’s eye to the codpiece, yet this rendering of the codpiece, while centralized, may be read in a variety of ways: testicular, phallic, exhibitionistic, sheltered, or protective. The codpiece is also clearly one among many elements of Henry’s masculine bravura.

Thus, the codpiece, conveying potency or impotency performs certain cultural work; in \textit{Othello} specifically, one must recognize preeminent implications of early modern views of race. In this way, as a cultural signifier, we may regard Figure 4, an illustration from John Bulwer’s \textit{Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform’d, or The Artificial Changeling} (1653).

\footnote{9 Fisher quotes Louis Montrose who explains that the painting commemorates the birth of Henry’s son, Prince Edward, suggesting the dynasty of the Tudor line. (Fisher \textit{Materializing Gender} 74; Montrose 313-14).}

\footnote{10 See Fig. 4, \textit{Woodcut Illustration}, Cardiff Rare Books Collection, Cardiff.}
Fig. 1, Bronzino, Agnolo, *Guidobaldo II della Rovere*, Galleria Palatina, Florence.
Fig. 2, Holbein, Hans. *Whitehall Mural Cartoon*, National Portrait Gallery, London
Fig. 3, Unknown, after Holbein, *King Henry VIII*: 1537-1557? Petworth House, West Sussex
Fig. 4, *Woodcut Illustration*, Cardiff Rare Books Collection, Cardiff.
This work, an early study in comparative cultural anthropology, includes a woodcut illustration of a New World native, derived, Bulwer believes, “from the Indians of the Island la Trinidad” (J. B. [Bulwer] 539), naked except for a trussed codpiece, alongside a more elongated, perhaps more elegant, but certainly more concealed English codpiece. While Bulwer is demonstrating a universality in “fashioning & altering their bodies from the mould intended by nature,” every culture has “particular whimzey as touching corporall fashions of their own invention.” (qtd. in Gibb). Bulwer enunciates difference by remarking upon the dehumanized, bestial attributes of those “filthy and Apish Breeches” which the English, mimicking, “so openly shewed our secret parts… [was] the shadowed imitation of the reall bulke of the great Privy Membered Guineans” (J.B.[Bulwer] 539). Understanding that the perceptions of New World natives and Christian converts like Othello were received quite differently as cultural entities in the proto-colonial early modern era, yet it appears that the myth of lust and carnality believed to be possessed by the racially Other were conflated to some degree. Hence, Bulwer’s “reall bulke… of Privy Membered” primitives are recalled in Iago’s numerous bestial and sexual images in Othello: “… your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.117-18) and “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (1.1. 88-9).

To the Venetians in Othello like Iago, Brabanzio, and Roderigo, Othello’s purported priapic sexuality is bestial and suggestively voracious. As Kim Hall has asserted, “the association of blackness with lechery” was “time-honored” (130). Supporting this is, as Hall notes Gilman’s statement: “…the association of the black with concupiscence reaches back into the Middle Ages” (Gilman 79). Further, Hall maintains that The Tempest, for example, “looking forward to future colonization, offers the greater
threat of the black man as a rapist” (160). The relationship of phallic display and fornication perceived by early moderns in primitive culture and culture of the Other is applicable to the Moor’s sexuality and monstrosity, communicated by the displaced codpiece we encounter in *Othello*.

In art, fashion, and literature, historically speaking, the codpiece signified a self-conscious exaggerated masculinity. In the beginning of the sixteenth century the codpiece drew attention to the difference between the masculine and feminine gender: the exterior of the phallus was emphasized, enhanced, and aggrandized. At the time Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker wrote for the stage, the codpiece circulated an aggressive masculinity. I contend that this hyper-masculinity conveyed a deep anxiety about masculinity and was a reaction to an uneasiness brought about by the cultural tensions over differences in gender. As Howard and Rackin put forth in theorizing two kinds of patriarchy which are both available in Shakespeare, identity based upon the older model of patrilineal inheritance and/or the emerging model of performative masculinity, “exclude female characters or... represent women as dangerous, demonic others” (188).

As for cuckoldry, among the scholars and theorists whose work informs this dissertation, I owe a considerable debt to Mark Breitenberg. In *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, Breitenberg historicizes the conditions that led to cuckoldry anxiety. He reminds us that, growing out of an assumption of suspicion, cuckoldry anxiety precedes the act. Furthermore, woman is unknowable, the Other; as such, the anxiety of jealousy results from the construction of male identity as “dependent on the

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11 For a more detailed description of the codpiece in the 16th century, see page 47 of the chapter, “Codpiece Daughter,” and the quote I include from Persels, page 87.
coercive and symbolic regulation of woman’s sexuality” (175). His work underscores the “dialectic between anxiety and desire in male subjectivity” (i) in the era of Shakespeare. The one work in which his study and mine specifically coincide is in the consideration of Othello. His understanding of the key role of women’s sexuality in relation to male anxiety has animated my own understanding of this relationship. However, where Breitenberg sees in Othello essentially an anxiety of interpretation, where jealousy “depend[s] upon a specular and interpretive economy that situates men in the position of ‘reading’ and interpreting women as ‘texts,’” (200) I speculate instead on the danger and threat of jealousy leading to corporeal and psychological cuckoldry anxiety. Where masculinity is threatened by patriarchal forces, vulnerability leads to violence as it does in Othello.

Coincident to these formulations, as a period characterized by secrecy, spying, and intrigue, sixteenth century courtiers were caught betwixt and between the need to protect themselves “and the equally pressing need to display themselves” (Greenblatt, The Norton Anthology of English Literature 533). The wearing of the codpiece may be a literal and metaphoric enactment of the tension between concealment/protection, and exhibition/display, authorized by a period in which paranoia was current. However, while the signification of the codpiece is overdetermined, the anxiety it suggests, in my view, is principal. In modernity, this is seemingly belied by the notion implied in Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents in which Freud psychoanalyzes culture and man’s role in it: all the omnipotence man has attributed to the gods, he now attributes to himself; Freud “condensed the case in a startling, deeply felt metaphor: man has become a ‘prosthetic god’ ” (Gay 546). One may see in the prosthesis of the codpiece, a concept advanced by
quite a few cultural critics and scholars, Will Fisher in particular, that this prosthesis does not simply ornament the body or enhance it, in significance it has various meanings and purposes -- it renders both subjectivity and gender identity. However, as it pertains to early modern sensibility and to anxious masculinity, Freud’s gloss is apt: man “is quite magnificent when he puts on all his auxiliary organs, but they have not grown onto him and on occasion they still give him a good deal of trouble” (Gay 546).

There may be a touch of irony or tongue in cheek in Freud’s remark. For the “trouble” in Freud’s allusion gives rise to the demonstrative humor in the subject of codpieces and cuckolds. Appropriate to the subject, then, is an undertaking of the genre of comedy. Three of the plays studied in this project are unequivocally comedies, with one, Othello, more uncertain. Both The Roaring Girl and Two Gentlemen of Verona, and The Merry Wives of Windsor, which will be explored in the next chapters, require the elements of comedy in order to treat the subversive themes of their plays. I contend that the anxiety of male potency is the subtext of these plays: via comedy’s distancing mechanism, and in its arousal of laughter through the expression of repressed or unconscious inhibition, it is evidentiary that comedy is the indisputable genre for treating the fraught emotional terrain of male potency.

It is through Aristotle that the essential characteristic and source of comedy is crystalized, and which Shakespeare’s and Middleton and Dekker’s plays reveal. In Chapter 4 of the Poetics Aristotle theorized that the origin of comedy came from “leaders of the phallic songs” (Halliwell 41, 43) “sung to accompany processional carrying of phallic icons in ritual contexts; normally obscene and scurrilous” (42): these processions took place in ancient Greek towns as part of Dionysian celebrations (Aristotle, Poetics,
Trans. Janko 77) and which to this day may be seen in modern Greece and even in Japan (Lee 2088). In Ancient Greece, these processions were characterized by obscenity and verbal insult; moreover, the fetishized phallus represented fertility and potency (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Trans. Janko 77). As a comic feature in Shakespeare’s and Middleton and Dekker’s plays, the female codpiece as phallic display both stabilizes and undermines male potency.

The phallic processions, which Aristotle recognized as the source of comedy, have in latter day become part of events taking place before Lent. Bakhtin seeks to understand the idiom of folk humor in pre-Lenten and other carnival rituals, and in so doing, rediscovers how and what the human body represented in the expression of grotesque realism, which according to Bakhtin, is “of the people,” (291) and is a degradation of all that is high culture.

Bakhtin’s formulation of “uncrowning” is the Renaissance conceit of the world upside down, and, for Bakhtin, Shakespeare is the artist par excellence of this convention. Bakhtin enunciates three themes of carnival: food, sex, and violence. To a degree, food and sex are conflated in the notion of meat as the carne of carnival, and in the meaning of carne as flesh. The phallic symbolization of sausages [and pancakes], the exaggeratedly long-nosed mask, and the codpiece, all of which figure prominently in festive rituals, are suggestive of aggression, destruction, and desecration – these are sublimated into ritual. Along with this, the symbolization of misrule, disorder, and chaos, such as those festivals in which the clergy dressed in women’s clothes, are the kinds of motifs and devices of transgression constructed in Shakespeare’s comedy.

For Bakhtin, carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new
world. Bakhtin’s codification of metaphors and images of debasement, or of lower body stratum indicates renewal. An example from Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, is an episode in which Panurge warms Epistomon’s head by placing it on his codpiece: herein there is debasement, but, more importantly, for Rabelais, contact with the genitals is also curative. These lower body or genital images become the symbol of the defeat of fear by laughter (Bakhtin 91). They are necessary because they liberate from “false seriousness;” (141) and so, find their place in comic forms. Similarly, images of inside/out such as men transvested as women and vice/versa, or underwear replacing outer garments, are analogous to Bakhtin’s notion of “bottoms up,” (411) such as exposing one’s backside.

The early modern codpiece opposes the phallus which is concealed on the inside; instead, it protrudes, and thereby is *outside*, all of which is apprehended in Bakhtin’s chronicling of festive forms.

Associated with the Bakhtinian thought on the subject of carnivalesque motifs of reversal such as transvestism is the acknowledgement that many rituals involving transvestism register misogyny. Although Bakhtin denies misogyny in Rabelais and in popular culture, maintaining that “The popular tradition is in no way hostile to woman … She is ambivalent…(240), even current Pre-Lenten rituals prove otherwise. In David Gilmore’s anthropological study, *Misogyny: The Male Malady*, he documents many instances in present day Europe of transvestite clowns mocking females, or particularly in Sardinia, men costumed as women, portraying the source of “sexual pollution and contagion”; (3) of carnival clowns wearing “ugly bloodstains” in the genital area, and in Spain, of masquerades of transvested men with “grotesquely enlarged breasts and vulvas as weapons, … denouncing women as lewd, destructive, and dangerous” (3).
Gilmore refers to the medieval scholar R. Howard Bloch when emphasizing how pervasive the topos of misogyny is. Bloch says the endurance of “the discourse of misogyny” demonstrates “that the conformity of its terms furnishes an important link between the Middle Ages and the present… and still “govern[s] (consciously or not) the ways in which the question of woman is conceived (qtd. in Gilmore 6). While the transvestism in Shakespeare’s and Middleton and Dekker’s plays is multilayered, it is important to recognize that if masculinity may be defined through its opposites, female characters wearing codpieces provide an apt visual and theatrical representation of how threatened and unstable a notion masculinity is in early modern drama.

Cuckoldry, too, undermines masculinity in the comic works. The early modern ritual of the “skimmington” in which cuckolds were made to wear their wives’ clothing has a strong connection with the concept of transvestism. In the next chapters, particularly the chapter on The Merry Wives of Windsor, I draw conclusions about the enactment of the ritual onstage, its theatricality, the ritual cleansing of the community through the expulsion of the horned, castrated cuckold/scapegoat Falstaff, and also emphasize the shaming that is materialized in the clothing of the opposite sex. An analogy may be drawn between men in women’s clothes and the ostentatious, manly dress of the codpiece as an excessive, exaggerated and thereby nullified sign of masculinity. In addition, the codpiece may be analogized with the horn, perhaps as an inverted symbol. All these point to anxieties about gender and potency/power.

More likely, if viewed from a Bakhtinian perspective, it brings the comedy into the carnivalesque, subversive register, especially when one decodes the horn as the powerful signifier. This inquiry leads directly to Bakhtin’s study of festive forms,
Rabelais and His World, for other sources and for the theoretical underpinnings of such signs as the horn or the codpiece. While Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque may not represent a social reality, it does illuminate early modern texts such as Shakespeare’s comedy. In Bakhtin’s work, carnival, thought to be subversive, served in the middle ages and Renaissance as a function of social control, but for Bakhtin, carnival was a celebration of the birth of a new world out of the destruction of the old.

The madness of the carnival or of folly might represent, in Freudian terms, Id, or a lack of control. However, in terms of the many meanings of the codpiece as presented in Shakespeare’s Two Gentlemen of Verona, the Id is not the preeminent idea. Rather, Freudian and post-Freudian theories on fetishism and castration speak much more to the point in a reading of Shakespearean text. While the codpiece in general, and in Shakespeare as well, may or may not be recognized as a fetish, it is instructive to locate Freud’s theory in the reading of masculinity represented by the codpiece in Shakespeare’s and Middleton and Dekker’s comedies.

In 1927, in “Fetishism,” Freud famously illustrated his ideas about the fetish in the visual image of the athletic supporter as a substitute for the mother’s penis and the mother’s castration. The parallel between a codpiece and an athletic supporter is quite obvious. Freud says, “There is both a disavowal and an affirmation of castration” in the “construction of the fetish” (156) as in the athletic supporter, as bathing suit: it covers up the genitals and conceals “the distinction between them” (156). This “signified that women were” and were not castrated (156). These are concealed under the supporter (156). For the fetishist there is a repugnance of actual female genitals. Further, the fetish, as a symbol of castration, is strongly identified with the father (who is the agent of
Freud’s conclusion is that the “normal prototype of inferior organs is the woman’s real small penis, the clitoris” (157). Lacan, after Freud, insists that the maternal is phallic for the boy and she thereby has power over him. She is the phallus as opposed to the man having the phallus. Precisely because she has no penis, she obtains phallic power. For Lacan, fetishism is a function of language. Feminists have argued against the Freudian and Lacanian theory of lack, --that women’s genitals are defined by the masculine subject as lack, -- a reductive, negative reflection of masculine presence. As Judith Butler has stated so forcefully in opposition: “the literalization of anatomy” (the penis) proves nothing; it is a “literalizing restriction of pleasure in the very organ that is championed as a sign of masculine identity (by rejecting the imaginary, such as fantasy, as a constituting of what is sexual.)” (Butler, Gender Trouble 91).

The essential theoretical frameworks that inform this study are in the areas of performativity and gender, feminist studies, psychoanalysis, Freudian and Lacanian theory, formalism, and post-structuralism. These underlying theories impel the scholarship done in the areas of historiography, cultural studies and cultural critique that have been useful in the development of my argument. The connections between fluid sexuality, gender roles and identity, heteronormative and homosocial relations, the homoerotic, and especially the emphasis here on male potency invites Freudian and post-Freudian theories on fetishism, castration, impotence, and genitalia sublimated in the codpiece; these compel my interpretation of the Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker plays pursued here.

Performativity is related to performance of gender, potency, and performance anxiety in sexuality. Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble is a fundamental text, an inquiry
into the construction, production and reproduction of the possibilities of gender. In this
text and in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in
Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” she challenges phallogocentrism, critiques the
Lacanian signifier of the Phallus, disagrees with Freud about the consequences of the
formation of the Id and resultant homosexuality, and disagrees, as well, with feminist
theories which privilege maternal identification. To Butler, the transvestite’s gender, a
subject absolutely germane to Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker, contains as much
truth as any performance which obeys social convention. A study of masculinity must
rely upon her assertion, again, that “the literalization of anatomy” (the penis) “…proves
nothing…” (Butler, Gender Trouble 91); to Butler this construction ignores and rejects
the component of the imaginary as it contributes to sexuality. The result is a privileging
of masculine identity, a false and destructive legitimization.

Freud’s works, “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life,”
“The Signification of the Phallus,” bring psychoanalytic theory to the dramas of the
period in terms of castration complex, in which maleness exists, and femaleness does not,
coupled with Lacan’s theory of lack (lack of the phallus,) which clarifies and defines the
difference between “being” and “having” the phallus; once more, women may be the
phallus; men have the phallus; it is this symbolism of the phallus which denotes the
categorical man.

Freud’s “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” is about
psychical impotence. As such it provides important groundwork for the undertaking of
impotence in the foregoing dramatic works of the early modern period. Freud’s theory
depends upon the idea that sensual feelings are attached to incestuous objects, thereby resulting in “total impotence” (51). Significant to my study is his further conception that men lower the sexual object in their estimation, and that the emphasis the mind puts on the erotic “sinks as soon as satisfaction is obtained”(i).

In *The Uncanny*, which may be defined as the fear of the familiar, Freud correlates Oedipus’ self-inflicted blindness with castration; “unintended repetition” of the castration complex turns the “frightening into the uncanny” (149). Female genitals are also uncanny, but really relate to a return to the womb. For men, castration and thoughts of the female genitals arouse threatening feelings: “From now on he will tremble for his masculinity …” (70). In addition to theorizing castration and genitalia here, Freud’s psychoanalytic ideology is further enunciated in “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” wherein he conceptualizes, what he terms “self-love,” -- normal narcissism as a “libidinal complement” to the “instinct of self-preservation” (74). However, castration complex and the boy’s anxiety concerning his penis (in the girl penis envy) (*Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction”*) both result in disturbance of original or primary narcissism.

Feminism and gender study, in examining the forces that shape femininity, is also useful to articulations of the topoi of cuckoldry and codpieces. Feminist theory, by questioning sexualities and privileging bisexuality and androgyny, and queer theory as a corollary modality, by emphasizing the socially constructed character of sexualities and resisting compulsory heterosexuality, contribute to this study in particular ways. In *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, Jacqueline Rose develops her ideas out of the notions that male and female are not complementary but a fantasy
whose source is sexual drive, which “always goes beyond the relationships on which it turns” (34). The modality of resistance in feminism reaches out to the particular interests of queer theory such as transgressive phenomena, specifically cross-dressing, and, again, performative aspects of gender construction. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Roaring Girl*, whether it be via images of the codpiece or the cuckold, the transgressive is enacted.

These aforementioned theories inform my point of view and are accompanied by the theories of Foucault. The Foucauldian approach historicizes sexuality and masculinity by linking a type of object to modalities of the subject by which sexuality is analyzed as a singular mode of experience. Foucault takes Freud as a starting point, but his analysis differs from Freud’s in that he does not posit that repression accounts for the problematized role of sexuality to civilization. In recognizing, however, that the seventeenth century was the beginning of a continuous age of repression, which we have still not fully left behind, (Foucault 1:17) he emphasizes that the post-Reformation emergence of self provided “a technology of sex” (1:123). The seventeenth century, according to Foucault, cultivated sexuality with both “fear” and “excitement,” conceiving of the body as constituting “the soul's most secret and determinant part” (1:124). The sexual discourse which Foucault undertakes in *The History of Sexuality* brings him to an understanding that this discourse, from the time of the classical age, brought about a “modification of desire itself” and that the phallus, or as Foucault refers to it “the penis,” signifies “self-mastery” (34). It is through Foucault’s critical history of thought, specifically of sexuality and masculinity, by which I arrive at my thinking about mastery and the tension between impotence and potency, signified through the sixteenth and
seventeenth century technology and cultural artifact of the codpiece.

For the historiographic area of study, Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Bodies and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, gives a precise account, from ancients to moderns, with particular interest to early modern thinking and Shakespeare’s works, of the one-sex model of sexuality. In his study of humoral theory and of anatomy and physiology, he postulates that sex is based not on biology but on “rhetorical, cultural, political exigencies of the moment. These processes are not linear”(60). His argument is that “… all but the most circumscribed statements about sex are, from their inception, burdened with the cultural work done by these propositions” (153).

In the one-sex theory, which dominated early modern thinking about sexuality and gender, understanding of women was based on anatomical and physiological studies in which the vagina and uterus were only inversions of the penis, testicles, and scrotum; in other words, where the location of the ‘penis’ is in the interior of a female’s organs, woman is therefore an imperfect man, so to speak, and gender is a representation of a social construct. For Laqueur, destiny is anatomy rather than the other way around: his theory is fundamental to my study of masculinity as socially and culturally constructed, and to my undertaking of the artifice of sexuality engendered in the codpiece and the cuckold. Particular examples illuminate this dissertation by locating femininity in masculinity, such as the phenomenon of women wearing codpieces on their breast (269) or lactating men (106) and most particularly by examining the codpiece as “decidedly unphallic; ” it is “womblike,” or a “swaddled child” (94). These are unquestionably instructive in the chapters on the “female codpiece” in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and
The Roaring Girl, but also reveal the ambiguity of masculinity as represented in all of the plays in my work.

My project, by exploring the cultural and psychological meanings of the codpiece, and by examining cuckoldry as a discourse, builds on early modern scholarship by prying open issues surrounding not only masculine desire, but human desire in the Renaissance. My aim is not to present one particular historio-cultural calculus, but to illuminate some of the most provocative tensions and possibilities in the study of early modern desire. To this end, I have adopted, as an analytical point of departure, Susan Zimmerman’s judgment that “any interpretive strategy for reading the Renaissance depends first on the reader’s familiarization -- however imperfect or partial -- with what seems alien in that culture” (7). As she indicates in her work on transvestism in the Renaissance theater -- and my work accords with this -- she explores the “distinctively Renaissance fascination with indeterminacy…” (8).

Zimmerman asks, it seems to me apologetically, whether Renaissance eroticism or sexuality can be historicized or anatomized without psychoanalysis (3). From a materialist standpoint, it is clear why the question is relevant. However, from my theoretical stance, the answer is that psychoanalysis is requisite, and along with materialist and other cultural determinants, is essential to an exploration of sexuality, masculinity, and early modern desire. The realms of experience such as unconscious desire within female and male sexual desire, sexual repression, the problematic role of women and their sexuality, and a disturbed or troubled eroticism subsumed in what we might call dysfunction (which in Renaissance terminology might be referred to as disease or plague) cannot be accounted for otherwise. The connections between fluid sexuality,
gender roles and identity, homosocial relations, the homoerotic, and especially the emphasis here on male potency invite a psychoanalytic treatment in order to extract psychosocial mechanisms in human sexuality. In general, the subjectivity of characters, their inward selves (imagination, memory, and reason), the tension between control and desire, and the subject of madness, for example in *Othello*, demand, to my mind, a psychoanalytic probing. This kind of probing or reading affords a robust rather than a reductive way of thinking about early modern texts. As Coppelia Kahn so succinctly puts it: “Shakespeare and Freud deal with the same subject: the expressed and hidden feelings in the human heart” (*Man’s Estate* 1). Kahn’s perspective helps to explain my process: like her, I do not psychoanalyze characters, but attempt to “discover dilemmas of masculine selfhood revealed in the design of the works…” (2).

My contribution progresses from an exceedingly rich area of scholarship in early modern sexuality and gender study. Among the works that are central to my own work and which give it shape is Will Fisher’s *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture*, a text which is essential in its exploration of early modern masculinity, and especially, for the purposes of this dissertation, in its examination of the codpiece in particular. In it, he argues against the codpiece as a representation of male power. He investigates the disappearance of the codpiece, a subject which must be addressed in any study of the codpiece, but perhaps most importantly, he terms and delineates codpiece ideologies into the scrotal or reproductive, and the phallic, or sexual and/or penetrative. This ideology derives from Howard and Rackin’s scholarship in *Engendering a Nation* in which they trace an emergent performative masculine identity
out of an identity that had been previously constructed out of patrilineal inheritance.¹²

This codification is necessary in order to understand how we think about the male body, consequently, about masculinity in early modern literary works.

Fisher’s work, a starting point here, understands that prostheses like the codpiece perform a function in which the “gendered body is quite literally reformed or reconstituted” (24). This has been enormously influential in my interrogation of subjectivity and gender identity, and has led me in a slightly different direction. While Fisher concentrates on ideologies of masculinity, and claims that the transferability of the codpiece “disarticulates it further from masculinity” in Shakespeare’s The Two Gentlemen of Verona, I concentrate on what happens when female characters wear the prosthetic and fuse the boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

Fisher organizes his thought around the prosthetic nature of the codpiece, which he believes establishes not only masculinity as culturally constructed, but eventually “helped to divorce” (75) it [the codpiece] from masculinity. Female characters appropriating the codpiece lend credibility to his argument; however, as I inquire into what kind of masculinity is constituted or made into an ideology, I ask how the authors appropriate the prosthetic codpiece to instantiate masculine symbolic or semiotic meaning, rather than materialist meaning, through a feminized masculinity. I want to underscore that what emerges from my thinking is that masculinity and femininity are on a continuum. Therefore the fusion of masculine and feminine at times helps to construct female agency as it does in Two Gentlemen of Verona and The Roaring Girl: the female characters require the maleness that the codpiece delivers to them. Fisher focuses on the

¹² See note on page 5 of this introduction for further detail about Howard and Rackin’s observations on performative masculinity.
codpiece forming ideas about the “male body”\textsuperscript{13}, not the body in general (62). In so doing, he does not make conclusions about female agency or power as I do. I also emphasize that in both concealing and revealing or exaggerating maleness in male identity, the codpiece as a masculine signifier registers ambivalence and anxiety. Fisher, on the other hand, disagrees with my dichotomy: “In reality of course, the codpiece did not ‘show’ anything; on the contrary, its purpose … was to conceal” (68). Furthermore, where my work departs from Fisher’s is in my consideration of the plays and the codpiece’s function in them as part of a nexus of relations between cuckoldry and the codpiece, in which masculinity is aggrandized and/or deflated.

In attempting to arrive at answers to the questions I have about which masculine ideology the dramatists represent, my project emphasizes masculine inadequacy as a theme and a construct. Fisher’s statement that “the codpiece became a failed means of establishing masculinity” is suggestive of my emphasis on what I might call phallic failure. It is mainly a question of approach and emphasis: I look closely here at male impotence in these dramatic works. Following Fisher’s delineation of a phallic/penetrative ideology and Rackin and Howard’s observations on performative masculinity, I emphasize and argue that the subtext of these plays is potency or lack of potency, and although threatening, feminized masculinity continues to establish male potency [or its nullification] as a signifier.

Another important aspect of this dissertation has to do with costume and or fashion. As Fisher points out "if feminists like Butler have... done much to reconceptualize sex and the body, less theoretical work has been done with regard to

\textsuperscript{13} Italics are Fisher’s. See page 62 in \textit{Materializing Gender}
thinking about the ways in which elements of gender (like clothing) might materialize masculinity and femininity” (19). I agree that much work remains to be done in this area. Eugenia Paulicelli, concentrating on fashion in Italy in *Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire* has done much to fill the void. According to her, “Literally and symbolically, dress has close links with embodiment, connecting it both to the outer world and the most hidden and intimate spaces of the wearer” (4). In the foregoing pages, I hope to elaborate on embodiment and those intimate spaces to which she refers. I attempt to bring more consideration to the subject of clothing by incorporating, especially, Marjorie Garber’s work on cross-dressing, in which she brings to bear a Freudian analysis of castration and fetish, ultimately illustrating that the figure of the cross-dresser disrupts and challenges gender identity and destabilizes it. Garber’s work, and my own study of the transvestism in the works concerns not only clothing, but interrogates heteronormativity, accessing as I do a queer reading of the text[s]. Among others, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass’s *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, theorizes about the currency of clothing, and “how gender, class, and memory are materialized through worn habits” (13). Jones and Stallybrass assert that “If the Renaissance stage demands that we 'see' particular body parts” such as “the penis, it also reveals that such fixations are inevitably unstable. Indeed, all attempts to fix gender are necessarily prosthetic...” (217).

Another important historical critical study, Bruce R. Smith’s *Shakespeare and Masculinity*, makes important contributions by not only delineating the theoretical underpinnings of masculinity, but by considering issues of economic and political exigencies, including government control of apparel, and how apparel was an index of
masculinity. For example, he makes the point that boys at age seven in Shakespeare’s
day were “breeched,” that is, put into doublets and hose. Before that, boys and girls were
dressed the same, in aprons and gowns (76). Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F.
McManus, in Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in
England, 1540-1640 include the important documents of Hic Mulier and Haec Vir
(1620) in their anthology, explaining that “medieval repugnance for the female body”
(15) was by no means eradicated in the Renaissance. King James in 1620 (before Hic
Mulier was printed), inveighed “against the insolence of women wearing men’s clothes
(stilettos or poniards and other accessories)” (17). In this context, both Shakespeare’s
Elizabethan plays and, particularly, I argue, Middleton and Dekker’s characterization of
Moll Cutpurse may be seen as socially and politically subversive.

Ancillary to these researches are the works of David D. Gilmore Misogyny: The
Male Malady, on the transcultural and transhistorical pervasiveness of misogyny; and
Alexandra Shepard’s historicist study, Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England,
which is essentially a taxonomy of various groups of men and the patriarchal ideologies
that conflicted with the practices of these groups.

The scholarship in early modern masculinity touches upon potency and impotency
but does not delve as deeply as it should. Increasingly, as I began to study this subject,
impotence emerged first as an undercurrent, then as an overt theme. In this way, my
emphasis on male potency distinguishes my study from other scholarship in the area of
gender and cultural critique. Two historiographic works on impotence are important to
my findings on masculinity and potency in the early modern period: Ian Frederick
Moulton’s Before Pornography: Erotic Writing in Early Modern England and Pierre
Darmon’s *A History of the Impotent in Pre-Revolutionary France*. Moulton’s work is especially informative in its highlighting the fluidity of erotic representation, which included, in the early modern period, relationships of friendship and patronage, and in its characterizing of female desire and agency, which often leads to male anxiety and impotence. Darmon’s work sheds light on the legal, social, and political ramifications of impotence in Europe, detailing public trials of impotence which were a consequence of the institution of marriage breaking down at the end of the sixteenth century: "public demonstrations of 'erection', 'elastic tension', 'proof of ejaculation' were conducted (5).

A close reading of the dramatic works I study here reveals a profound masculine anxiety about the patriarchal power and control over women’s sexuality, but also over men’s own sexuality. The particular vulnerability of men to women, the fear of female desire leading to an engrossment with potency is in large measure what I treat and conclude upon in this dissertation. While the preoccupation with impotence in history is a constant, patriarchal culture, in its stringency and its abuses, poses a threat, again, not just to women but to men. Male feelings of impotency, whether literal or metaphorical, are associated with tremendous shame. In the plays studied here, the perceived betrayals of women are enough to “…humiliate and thus feminize men.” (Kahn and Schwartz xix).

The studies that have to do with early modern marriage demonstrate that marriage in this period was particularly fraught for men, hence the obsession with cuckoldry which has been well documented. For this study, the relationship between castration and cuckoldry enunciated by Coppelia Kahn in *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* is foundational. In it she argues that Shakespeare critiques marriage as virtually synonymous with cuckoldry (119). Cuckoldry results from three phenomena:
misogyny, the double standard, and patriarchal marriage. While I will address all three in the chapter on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, it is the last, patriarchal marriage, to which I will devote much of my thesis. In patriarchal marriage the husband’s honor is defined and dependent upon the wife’s chastity. In support of my argument, as Kahn maintains, if the husband’s wife remains chaste and faithful, “she … certifies his virility” (121). The cuckold, conflated with the castrated man, is “womanish” (132). To Kahn, cuckoldry in the works of Shakespeare such as *Hamlet*, where Hamlet’s father, the ghost, is cuckolded, functions on the psychosocial level of castration (132). Even in death in Shakespeare’s universe, one may be subject to the terror of cuckoldry, and thereby, rendered impotent for time everlasting.

For Shakespeare, cuckoldry is both comic and tragic, as we shall see in my chapter on *Othello*. In this way, we may come to understand that Shakespeare does not privilege patriarchal marriage; he does not argue for any particular ideology in marriage (Kahn). What he appears to do is underscore the idea that cuckoldry, “like rape”, is “an affair between men…. Marriage subjugates all men” by mocking virility (150). In the comic character of Falstaff, Kahn recognizes Falstaff as the embodiment of all men; “every husband [is] a potential cuckold, ” (150) and further, those who commit the act of cuckoldry, cuckold their brothers (150).

While *The Merry Wives of Windsor* illustrates Kahn’s premise, my study looks into an ironic brotherhood, one I would term an impotent brotherhood. Connell in *Masculinities* reminds us that there is gender politics within masculinity -- alliances, domination, subjection (37). In opposition to the collaborative relationship of the wives in the play, the relationship between Falstaff and Ford is adversarial. In contrast, the
wives collaborate to uphold their chastity against the “greasy knight,” but their chief weapon is emasculation. The play is essentially about masculinity and shame.

Interestingly, the definition of the word *impotence* in the early modern period suggests the ambivalent and perhaps paradoxical nature of the condition. The definition, “*Pathol. Complete absence of power usually said of the male:*” the first instance the *Oxford English Dictionary* records is well after the age of Shakespeare in 1655, from “T. Fuller *Church-hist. Brit.* ii. 142 “Whilst Papists crie up this his incredible Continency: others easily unwonder the same, by imputing it partly to his Impotence, afflicted with an Infirmitie.” This case denotes a medical meaning, a pathology. In contrast, the next definition and usage is virtually the opposite: “lack of self-restraint, violent passion” with an example from Massinger and Fletcher in 1640 from *Very Woman* ii. i. 52 in P. Massinger *3 New Playes* (1655) “The being your Sister would anew inflame me With much more impotence to dote upon her.” These usages alone support the indeterminate and contradictory attitudes associated with male performance and male subjectivity that emerge in the age.

My analysis of the crisis in masculinity with regard to masculine ideologies addresses the role gender plays in figuring sexual subjectivities; furthermore, it explores as of yet unplumbed territory in gender and sexuality studies by investigating the representation of potency and impotency in constructing early modern sensibilities. An important question my thesis raises is what is the relation between the construction of gender on the Renaissance stage with the societal attitudes towards sexuality in the early modern age, and perhaps in any age, and how and why is it singular and problematic? Further, what is the relationship between masculinity, anxiety, vulnerability, and violence
in the early modern period and beyond? While raising the questions presupposes an answer; more accurately, it admits that there are many possible answers and opportunities to examine, investigate, and challenge the ambiguous cultural landscape of early modern desire.

Accordingly, my first chapter traces sexuality and desire in Shakespeare’s first play, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which was, if not a naïve attempt, a play which demonstrates Shakespeare’s evolving attitude towards masculinity and human relationships. Shakespeare’s comedy enacts serious cultural conflicts over the bonds of friendship, love, and marriage in the unconventional donning of the female codpiece.

Within the chapter, I explain in detail the female codpiece as a contrivance of fashion and a semiotic device. As a “figure for castration,” (Garber, *Vested Interests* 122) Julia, in donning the codpiece, reveals that the figure of the “phallic woman” is “the ultimate fantasy of male transvestite scenarios…” (122). The clothing reconceptualizes subjectivity and the body, thereby, gender and voice. The problematic rape in this play, which is a manifestly masculine signifier, is multivalent in meaning, especially as an unconsummated rape, and registers the violence necessary in the making of a man. The impression one is left with at the end of the play is a mitigation of harmony and order by the equivocal union of Proteus and Julia. At the end of the play Julia establishes her agency, but singularly as a female wearing a codpiece: the codpiece announces and pronounces her mastery. One apprehends in this character the masculinization of the feminine. In Shakespeare’s rendering, Julia becomes the third gentleman of the play.

It is the purpose of the next chapter, “A Monster with Two Trinkets,” to further explore early modern anxieties which surround masculinity, sexuality, and desire in
Middleton and Dekker’s *The Roaring Girl*. In this chapter I concentrate upon Moll’s gender fluidity, demonstrating how her character, in performing masculinity, points up ambivalences in the reception of gender in both the period and in the play. While many of the male characters in the play consider her monstrous, Middleton and Dekker build on this by saturating the text with sexual desire, but challenge the notion by foregrounding male lack. Taking off from Garber’s enunciation that the signifier of the codpiece is "undecidable" ("Fetish Envy” 50), I offer a subtle caveat or qualification: I discern a difference, which I will designate as a bifurcation of the female codpiece and the male codpiece. I argue that Moll Cutpurse’s codpiece, because it is worn by an undisguised female character, is *decidable* in that it is metonymic of potency, but, in contrast, when associated or connected to masculinity, it corresponds with impotence. Ultimately, this chapter explores Moll “as the man she really is” (Orgel, “Nobody’s Perfect” 17) and inquires into Moll’s transgression, which is apprehended as monstrous, and accounts for the play’s subversion of emerging middle class social, political, and institutional values.

In contrast to *The Roaring Girl*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is ambivalent about the status quo of sex, gender, and marriage. In a word, Shakespeare’s view is nuanced: this ambiguity may serve, suggestively though never definitively, to dismantle the power relations of patriarchal marriage, particularly as evidenced by the anxiety which troubles the men in this comedy. The far-reaching change that some scholars have observed in early modern marriage reveals that some early modern wives such as the Mistresses Page and Ford, begin to have strong and/or disobedient voices: these wives confirm that their husbands are “not ‘man’ enough to control” them. (Panek 70).

Synthesizing cuckoldry with aging and desire in this comedy, Shakespeare
continually opposes youth with old age: an examination of Falstaff’s character as a
cuckolding senex reveals the vulnerability of his condition, and of Shakespeare inducing
pathos while ridiculing him. Cuckoldry releases a communal shaming and ridiculing of
male powerlessness, which, as I have termed it in my own discourse, is the lack of
potency. I note the horn as the predominant but multivalent symbol of the play, and
deriving therein a displacement of the absent codpiece in the play, which, connected as it
is with the horn, is paradoxically joined with virility, sexual desire, masculinity, and
simultaneously with weakness and failure.

Out of the four plays treated in this project, *Othello* is the last. As the one tragedy
in this collection, it is, in a sense, privileged. I emphasize the tragic dimension of a
disturbed, threatened, anxious masculinity, and how a lack of potency and mastery in the
play is harrowing. The last chapter also continues to examine the connection between
cuckoldry, jealousy, sexuality, and masculinity, and how their attendant anxieties result
in a psychic and corporeal impotence represented in the tragedy. In *Othello*, inasmuch as
Othello’s tragic self-regard is manifested in his vulnerable masculinity, it is brought
about directly out of a fetishized, pathological, disordered cuckoldry anxiety. Similarly,
the topos of the codpiece in this work is present as a displacement (manifested in the
prosthetic handkerchief and the bed), and thereby frames the play and suggests the
psychologically fraught crisis of masculinity this play enacts. In *Othello*, one must
recognize, too, the preeminent implications of early modern views of Otherness and race.
Writing against type, in *Othello* Shakespeare eschews Renaissance stereotypes of the
over-eroticized, lustful potency in black or Moorish males, and paints Othello’s sexual
vulnerability and impotence as unequivocal. Shakespeare plays with convention:
Othello’s impotence is more marked when contrasted with the dominant culture’s assumptions about race, representations of the Other, and of Moors in particular.

My chapter on Othello, in emphasizing Othello’s tragic impotence, both literal and figurative, discloses a kind of myopia in the critical literature. In Othello, impotence is not a sideshow; it is the main event. Othello’s impotence is revealed throughout, and perhaps most especially in his psychological deflation to the unmitigated threat of his wife’s sexuality. Finally, the chapter suggests Othello’s de-masculinization in his violent self-castration. In juxtaposing female agency and desire in the female characterizations with Othello’s loss of sexual potency, Shakespeare communicates the loss of control, the loss of masculine rationality -- the social and emotional disorder of Othello’s tragic trajectory.

Tracing as I have, a kind of loose chronology, not linear, but an evolution of thought, a certain genealogy, demonstrates not only that patriarchy was not monolithic, but that the ideology about masculinity in the early modern era was not fixed. In fact, it may have introduced a newer, heterodoxical view of ideal masculinity as tending toward the feminine. As I have attempted to demonstrate in early modern culture, and as gender identities are structured and understood by language, by what a text says and fails to say, masculinity is exposed by its contradictions, anxieties, and uncertainties.

I have also suggested here that the questions this study raises involve not just problems of early modern culture, but those beyond it. In a fairly recent article in The New York Times, one respondent, explaining how gender roles have now crossed the binary of male/female observes: “… being bi-gender is like manifesting both masculine and feminine personas, almost as if one had a ‘detachable penis’”(Schulman E8). The
continuing difficulties involved in defining and demarcating gender have not disappeared; in point of fact, they are becoming more and more complicated. It is not that studying Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker will resolve or provide answers to these questions, or that these playwrights were wrestling with similar struggles, but that studying the plays opens up the debates, and contemplates the implications of a world of evolving gender identity. Perhaps feminized masculinity (or masculinized femininity) as a signification may supersede rigid notions of the binary and the non-binary of gender identity. One thing that is certain and has come out of my research in this area is that masculinity and, therefore, male potency as a concept or notion, can be parochial and obdurate, even in non-heteronormative relations.

In addition to a study like this opening up questions about gender identity in the early modern era and beyond, today’s problems with rape and sexual violence, relevant and urgent, are addressed by the question of why virility or potency has been so constant and important in different constructions and conceptions of manhood. A very dangerous ideology of virility often has as its consequence a regarding of sex acts as performances: the result can be an alarming ultra-masculinity, aggression, and a culture of rape.

The works explored in this dissertation clearly serve to enlarge our vision of masculinity. They offer ways of finding perspective not only in early modern culture but also in the present moment. Fears and anxieties about sexual practices and sexuality, and consequently about gender, marriage, fidelity, and adultery are certainly not simply the province of early modern texts. These fears are embodied in humiliation, violence, assault, the fear of performance, and the fear of failure. I have been most concerned with
the fear of loss of connection, and the tolerating of shame engendered by the anxiety of masculinity. My aim, then, is to demonstrate that in early modern drama, the tension between virility or potency and weakness or impotence as signified by codpiece and cuckoldry discourses betrays an anxious masculinity: masculine desire is represented as complex, fraught with aggression but also with fragility and vulnerability.

Masculine power may be restabilized or it may be undermined. How can a study like this provide the terms for a reconciliation between desire and control? The fundamental question remains: what does early modern thinking about masculinity reveal about vulnerability, loss, and desire? The consideration of these questions opens up another space in which to locate what forces shape and limit human relationships, and offers yet another important path into the many meanings of human desire and human connectedness.
Chapter 1

Codpiece Daughter

There has been some speculation that lovers in the early modern period might have “carried about in codpieces” (Moulton 104) thin, miniature-like volumes of erotic writing such as Marlowe’s Amores or Petrarchan sonnets “to be produced at an opportune moment to serenade one's beloved” (104). As an example of assignations of this sort, Ian Moulton refers us to a character in Jonson’s Every Man in His Humor who totes Samuel Daniel's Delia in his hose (104). Fanciful or not, there is no more apt conjuring in the literary imagination for the yoking together of literature, sexuality, and phallic power than this vision of the adroit, talismanic codpiece. It is only fitting that dramatists would employ the suggestive codpiece as a representation of the vexed themes of sexuality materialized in early modern culture. This chapter refers to the topos of the codpiece in Two Gentlemen of Verona, which stands as a striking example of, particularly, the female codpiece, appearing as it does well before Middleton and Dekker’s The Roaring Girl. In both plays, the female characters, unconventionally, don a codpiece. This chapter attempts to address performance features, transvestism, cross-dressing, gender switching, gender fluidity, masculinity, and related theoretical issues as they are represented by the female codpiece in Two Gentlemen of Verona. In essence, the question treated here is what can female cross-dressing and especially the displaying of the female codpiece tell
us about how *Two Gentlemen of Verona* represents relationships between sex, gender, desire, and power.

*The Roaring Girl*, probably written in around 1607, almost twenty years after *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, likely drew from the earlier play in various ways. While Moll Cutpurse, the “codpiece daughter” of the Middleton and Dekker play was based off of the real personage of Mary Frith, the employment of male accoutrement on a female character would have its forebear in plays such as the well-known *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. While many other plays of the period, especially those of Shakespeare such as *Twelfth Night, As You Like It*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, employ cross-dressing, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, by virtue of being considered the earliest play in the Shakespeare canon, and thereby representing Shakespeare’s evolving reflection on the subject, is also the only play in which cross-dressing is materialized by the female actually wearing the codpiece; this makes the play fertile ground for the interrogation of notions of sexuality, gender, power and desire.

*The Roaring Girl*, in its subject and tenor, reflects a bolder, more pronounced expression of the emblematic female in male attire than the Shakespeare play does, yet Shakespeare’s foray in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* indicates an interest which was ahead of his time. The references to the phenomenon of women dressing in men’s clothing in the 1500’s “are largely parenthetical.” (Rose, Mary Beth, “Women in Men’s Clothing” 230): “In the early part of the sixteenth century, the idea of women wearing men’s clothes apparently seemed too appalling even to be feared” (Rose 230). By the 1570’s, objections to women dressing in men’s attire were just beginning to be “more pointed and vociferous” (231). George Gascoigne’s *The Steele Glas*, (1576) is a case in point:
What be they? women? masking in mens weedes?
With dutchkin doublets,… and with Ierkins iaggde?
With high copt hattes, and fethers flaunt a flaunt?
They be so sure even Wo to Men in dede. (Gascoigne).

The circumstance for the creation of a female character wearing a codpiece, while objectionable in the 1590’s, was an occurrence not widely seen or written about; however, it was a trend that was becoming more and more offensive by the time Middleton and Dekker undertook to write *The Roaring Girl*. Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* would have been in the forefront of the current. Evident from the proliferation of pamphlets against the transgression, pamphlets such as *Hic Mulier; or The Man-Woman; Haec Vir; or the Womanish Man; and Mulled Sack; or The Apology of Hic Mulier to the late Declamation against her* is that there was a concurrent development in the phenomena as represented on the stage. Remarking upon this progression in later plays, one critic’s remarks about female to male disguise in *As You Like It* point to what is different about Shakespeare. Park asserts that “The temporary nature of the male disguise is of course essential, since the very nature of Shakespearean comedy is to affirm that disruption is temporary, that what has been turned topsy-turvy will be restored” (Park 108). While this is one among other differences between the two codpieced female characters, it is to be noted that Middleton and Dekker’s Moll Cutpurse remains permanently male featured.

Because the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods began to experience an anxiety with regard to such characterizations, it is valuable and methodical to first study the
earlier representation of Two Gentlemen of Verona, probably written as early as 1590-1 (Howard, Introduction, 109), while observing its influence. As such, it is essential to consider the codpiece and cuckold in relation to features and concerns of genre. Both The Roaring Girl, Two Gentlemen of Verona, and also The Merry Wives of Windsor, which will be explored in the next chapters, require the elements of comedy in order to treat the subversive themes of their plays. One may contend that the anxiety of male potency is the subtext of these plays: via comedy’s distancing mechanism, and in its arousal of laughter through the expression of repressed or unconscious inhibition, comedy is the indisputable genre for treating the fraught emotional terrain of male potency. Comedy is a defensive posturing in which discomposure about masculinity may be easily veiled.

To understand the ambivalent role of the cross-dressed female character in Two Gentlemen of Verona and in The Roaring Girl, one must absorb the psycho-social substructure of the codpiece as a signifying element. According to Marjorie Garber, it is a sign of “gender undecidability,” of seeming, “interposed … between ‘having’ and ‘being’ the phallus…. The codpiece is the thinking man’s (or woman’s) bauble, the ultimate detachable part” (Garber, Vested Interests, 122). Garber draws an analogy, as well, between the introduction, after the Restoration, of the curtain in the theater, to the veiling of the codpiece—it also functions as a veil. “The curtain is a veil that marks off the ‘not real’ from the ‘real’…. The phallus only does its work when veiled: veiled by the difference of not knowing…” (126). Garber designates the codpiece as “artifactual” (122) in both The Roaring Girl and Two Gentlemen of Verona, calling attention in costume to what Julia, in Two Gentlemen lacks, “The codpiece is therefore a theatrical
figure for castration” (122). Garber, in deconstructing the codpiece as a female fetish, makes reference to Freud’s “undecidable underpants,” (122) and goes further still, by pronouncing wryly, that the figure of the “phallic woman” is “the ultimate fantasy of male transvestite scenarios (if the psychoanalysts are to be believed)” evoking “fear and titillation” in men (122).

Viewing early modern drama and comedy from a psychoanalytic standpoint draws attention to the anxiety with which a man perceives and experiences a woman in these works. Because one never loses the apprehension that the characters are performed by boys playing girls, one fixes attention on how the male, in female guise, by appending a codpiece to her lack, both appropriates masculinity, and at the same time diminishes female threat. The pivotal scene in Two Gentlemen where Julia and Lucetta, Julia’s waiting-woman, arrange to transvest Julia in order to disguise her as a young page, reminds us of the danger of the enterprise:

Lucetta: But in what habit will you go along?
Julia: Not like a woman, for I would prevent The loose encounters of lascivious men. (2.7.39-41)

The irony inherent in this passage implies that the danger is less of men to women, as it is of its opposite, of women to men. Shakespeare makes the most of the double nature of the danger and threat of a cross-dressed female by applying the sensuous language of love and sex into the details of dress:

Julia: Gentle Lucetta, fit me with such weeds As may beseem some well-reputed page.
Lucetta: Why then, your ladyship must cut your hair.
Julia: No, girl, I’ll knit it up in silken strings With twenty odd-conceited true-love knots. To be fantastic may become a youth Of greater time than I shall show to be. (2.7.42-48)
Shakespeare clearly needs to affix feminine appurtenances such as a “farthingale” and love knots in order to overstate the femaleness of the male. At the same time, the gendering of male/female is brought side by side; there is almost a merging of the two. However, whatever is suggested as female to male is undercut by the suggestion of castration. The ornaments that were widely used to decorate codpieces in this scene allude to piercing and symbolic castration. The codpieced breeches Lucetta suggests are, for Julia, “ill-favoured,” and with good reason. Lucetta tells her, “A round hose, madam, now’s not worth a pin / Unless you have a codpiece to stick pins on” (2.7.55-6). As an early modern female, cross-dressing and most specifically, donning the codpiece, will make her “scandalized” (2.7.61). From the male point of view and sensibility, it is characterized as “fear” (2.7.61).

As more than one critic has maintained, the codpiece, historically speaking, signified a self-conscious exaggerated masculinity:

At the opening of the sixteenth century, the entire structure and substance of stylish masculine dress commanded attention … and moved in the direction of cultivating a historically unparalleled gender-specific silhouette, one that emphasized the exterior form of the male as it was then consciously conceived of as distinct from the female: an embellishment, and enhancement, and aggrandizement of what it meant physically to be a man… (Persels 87).

Persels quotes Aileen Ribeiro to emphasize the point that the codpiece became more and more prominent, and as such a pronounced masculine signifier: “… the modest codpiece of the late fifteenth century… now assumed the shape of a permanent erection, sometimes decorated in tassels and embroidery…. The ideal male image was of a somewhat exaggerated and overwhelming virility” (qtd. in Persels 89). Already by
Shakespeare’s day, the codpiece telegraphed a hyper-masculinity. This can at least in part be seen as a reaction to a disquietude and to cultural tensions about differences in gender.

The important documents of the seventeenth century, *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir,* (1620) which fiercely remonstrate against women dressing as men, and more broadly raise an alarm against women’s rights and roles, demonstrate that “medieval repugnance for the female body” (Henderson and McManus 15) was by no means eradicated in the Renaissance. King James himself in 1620 (before *Hic Mulier* was printed) inveighed “against the insolence of women wearing men’s clothes (stilettos or poniards and other accessories)” (17). Yet, some critics challenge the notion that cross-dressing was a formidable or threatening phenomenon. As a reaction against critics and scholars whose claims he believes are disproportionate, such as Jean Howard’s “materialist-feminist analysis” which declares that “Renaissance cross-dressing … ‘participated in the historical process eventuating in the English Revolution’ (439), David Cressy takes issue with criticism which paints transvestism as “so transgressive” or “symptomatic of a sex-gender system in distress” (439). While Cressy concedes that “There may have been an erotic charge for some transvestite women, just as there was for some men, but more commonly their transvestism was limited, temporary, pragmatic, addressing the needs of a particular situation” (460). Reinforcing his argument, he asserts that “The evidence points not to homoerotic ambivalence and subversive androgyny but to problems of social discipline” (460). Examining church records in addition to London comedies such as *The Roaring Girl,* Cressy maintains that these do not reveal “a sex-gender system in crisis” (464).
At variance with this view is Mark Breitenberg’s *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. In agreement with Cressy that the vehemence expressed in the pamphlets of the period were much in excess of the actual phenomenon of real cross-dressing women in the early sixteen hundreds, Breitenberg, however, suggests that this fact indicates that the controversy itself is not about the threat of cross-dressing women, but these are “catalytic signs of a set of prior fears and anxieties” (150). What is at the core of the controversy, for Breitenberg is “an anxiety about ambivalence itself” (150). The controversy “exposes the instability and agitation of sex and gender-based identity in the early modern period” (150). Citing Thomas Laqueur’s work on the one-sex model of anatomy and sexual difference in the Renaissance to support his argument, Breitenberg illustrates how the codpiece worn by men “calls attention to an insecurity toward its anatomical signified, a fear that the penis is less ‘guaranteed’ than its symbol.” Women who cross-dress appropriate the symbol and highlight the “referential ambiguity” revealing the “symbol as merely symbolic”, not “naturally given” (151). What is underscored here, as well, is that apparel takes on enormous significance in the early modern period, and is a threat to the social order.

Historicizing sexuality and masculinity from a related but different space is the Foucauldian approach. Foucault takes Freud as his point of departure, but disagrees with the Freudian premise that repression is the locus of the problematic relationship of sexuality to civilization. He does recognize that the seventeenth century was the beginning of an ongoing age of repression of which we "still have not completely left behind” (Foucault 1:17). Yet he emphasizes that the post-Reformation emergence of self and its affirmation “provided itself with a body to be cared for, protected, cultivated, and
preserved from the many dangers and contacts, to be isolated from others so that it would retain its differential value; and this, by equipping itself with -- among other resources -- a technology of sex” (1:123). In the seventeenth century one sees the beginnings of what came to fruition in the eighteenth, not a nullification of sex, but a cultivation “with a mixture of fear, curiosity, delight, and excitement... by attributing” to the body... “a mysterious and undefined power... conceiving of it as what constituted the soul's most secret and determinant part” (1:124).

In recognizing the increased valorization of sexual discourse from the classical age until now, Foucault asserts that this analytical discourse was meant to bring forth the “effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself” (1: 23). To study these effects, Foucault in Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality begins by explicating Artemidorous’ The Interpretation of Dreams. Foucault’s understanding of the phallus through Artemidorous has much resonance with what we see in the plays of the early modern period, and in the dramatists’ assigning signification to the codpiece: “The penis corresponds to one’s parents, on the one hand, because it is itself the cause of children” (3: 34). It also signifies one’s mistress, brothers, relatives, wealth and possessions, education, strength and “physical vigor,” – ‘one’s manhood’ (3: 34). In contrast it corresponds to poverty and slavery; “it is called reverence” (34). The penis signifies the tension between potency and impotency. In short, Foucault’s relevance to my argument about male potency inheres in that the penis appears at “the intersection of all these games of mastery” -- as Foucault terms it -- “self-mastery” (34).

In the early modern era, mastery is directly connected to potency. Manhood was defined and constrained by all the vagaries of control: control over others, and self-
control. Comedy provides fertile ground for challenges to mastery and the deflation of male potency, not only as social commentary, but in the relief afforded by laughing at problems or conditions of human concern. According to Ian McLaren aristocrats were made foolish by insinuations of lack of potency, “the impotency implied was patriarchal as much as corporeal” (70). In the following dialogue between Proteus and Speed, Valentine’s servant, we have an instance of the Aristotelian comic precept of the lower types, but we also recognize the message of male insecurity produced by female power. Speed reports on bringing a letter from Proteus to Julia, and takes the opportunity to mock Proteus’ manhood:

Sir, I could perceive nothing at all from her, no, not so much as a ducat for delivering your letter. And being so hard to me, that brought your mind, I fear she’ll prove as hard to you in telling your mind. Give her no token but stones, for she’s as hard as steel. (1.1.126-130)

Proteus is emasculated by Julia’s being “hard,” read erect, a condition only to be remedied by Proteus giving her stones or testicles, in other words, showing his testicles as a token of his potency. Speed’s admonition is adumbrated in Julia pinning on the codpiece.

Proteus admits as much about himself. He has lost all vestige of potency and self-mastery in his love-sickness. This is in contrast to Valentine’s manhood, which is intact, and who, at the moment is not in love, and so able to engage in manly pursuits abroad.

Proteus laments:

He after honour hunts, I after love.
He leaves his friends to dignify them more,
I leave myself, my friend, and all, for love.
Thou, Julia, thou hast metamorphosed me,
Made me neglect my studies, lose my time,
War with good counsel, set the world at naught;
Made wit with musing weak, heart sick with thought. (1.1.63-69)
The play is essentially a dramatic narrative of initiation: both Proteus and Valentine are boys who become men, specifically gentlemen. They do so by journeying away from their boyhood home and their boyhood relationship in Verona, to Milan, a space in which they can make their transition, and assume their passage.

The play begins with the journeying of Valentine, followed by Proteus, to apprentice the Duke of Milan, a process which would ostensibly masculinize him. In Act 1, Panthino explains to Proteus’ father, Anthonio, the importance of sending Proteus to Milan. He explains that Anthonio’s brother wonders why Proteus is not made to leave Verona, underscoring the rite of initiation into manhood:

He wondered that your lordship
Would suffer him to spend his youth at home,
While other men, of slender reputation
Put forth their sons to seek preferment out
Some to the wars to try their fortune there,
Some to discover islands far away,
Some to the studious universities.
For any and all of these exercises
He said that Proteus your son was meet…(1.3.5-11)

However, in contrast to this, we must take note that Roger Ascham, in 1570, in the Scholemaster, an education manual, warns English families not to send their sons to Italy for fear they will be made effeminate (Moulton 28). Coupled with the differences between Shakespeare’s text and those of his sources, we may ascertain a Shakespearean attitude and emphasis. In variance to the prose romance Diana Enamorada, by Jorge de Montemayor (1542), translated into English from a French translation in the 1580’s, is Shakespeare’s addition of the plot involving Valentine: we may infer from this that Shakespeare’s interest, perhaps, is the male to male relationship rather than the love
triangle between two females and a male lover. Another important source underscoring the homosocial aspect of Shakespeare’s play is Boccaccio’s story of the friends Titus and Gisippus, from the *Decameron*, retold by Thomas Elyot in *The Boke named the Governour* (1531). In this source, Gissipus gives his woman over to his friend Titus: this story “unabashedly advances the claims of heroic male friendship over … male/female love” (Howard, Introduction, 104).

*Two Gentlemen of Verona* treats masculinity through the exploration of homosocial bonds. It presents cultural conflicts over male friendship, heterosexual love, marriage, and class, hence the “gentlemen” of the title. The tradition of male friendship had been a longstanding one, and as compared with that of male-female relationships, much less dangerous (Howard, Introduction, 104). In *The Governour*, Elyot, one among others who authored early modern texts, extols male friendship: “Verily it is a blessed and stable connection of sundry wills, making of two persons one in having and suffering” (qtd. in Howard 105). Early in the play, the bond established between Valentine and Proteus is threatened by the heterosexual yearnings of Proteus, and again, in the triangular conflict between Proteus, Silvia, and Valentine, on which the plot unfolds. At the very beginning of the play, Shakespeare connects the threat to the homosocial bond, and thereby the threat to male potency, by heterosexual love. Valentine expresses his jealousy over Proteus’ feelings for Julia, warning him of his love disease, painting the female as a canker, and taunting him through the use of the double-entendre of phallic potency:
And writers say\textsuperscript{14} “As the most forward bud
Is eaten by the canker ere it blow
Even so by love the young and tender wit
Is turned to folly, blasting in the bud,
Losing his verdure even in the prime … (1.1.45-50)

The canker’s phallic associations to the caterpillar who attacks the bud (also phallic, but not yet blossomed into full turgidity), withers the plant, or enervates male potency; this clearly sets the tone for the thematic urgency of sustaining male potency by guarding against heterosexual relations. Again, the adumbration is present, as Valentine, too, will undergo a similar draining of male strength through love, whereby his homosocial relation with Proteus will be challenged.

The friendship between Proteus and Valentine is privileged in the play. We can see this in the play’s resolution where even though Proteus has been double-dealing, and has tried to make Valentine into a would-be cuckold, the friendship supersedes all betrayal. In many Shakespeare plays, we encounter the homosocial bond, and as Shakespeare depicts it, it is often threatened by the triangular nature of relationships. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains: “…as Shakespeare’s Sonnets showed, the male path through heterosexuality to homosocial satisfaction is a slippery and threatened one -- …” (50). Sedgwick sees woman as the vehicle through which the homosocial bond is accomplished. The homosociality in Two Gentlemen of Verona prefigures the strong, complex homosocial relationship between Leontes and Polixenes in The Winter’s Tale. In both plays, the triangular schematic is brought about by seemingly unconscious sabotage. Just as Leontes insists upon Hermione’s convincing his boyhood and best

\textsuperscript{14} A metapoetic and self-referential instance, perhaps, of Shakespeare’s poking fun at writers who devote poetry to romantic love.
companion Polixenes to stay in Sicily, whereupon he becomes obsessed and overcome with jealousy, so, too, does Valentine encourage Silvia to “love” Proteus. First, Valentine renders a loving description to Silvia and the Duke, her father, of the bond between himself and Proteus in which he catalogues Proteus’ manly qualities of experience, judgment, physical completeness, intelligence, and grace:

I knew him as myself, for from our infancy
We have conversed, and spent our hours together.
Yet hath Sir Proteus —…
Made use and fair advantage of his days:
His years but young, but his experience old;
His head unmellowed, but his judgement ripe.
And in a word – for far behind his worth
Comes all the praises that I now bestow –
He is complete, in feature and in mind,
With good grace to grace a gentleman. (2.4.55-67)

In both *The Winter’s Tale* and *Two Gentlemen*, the female characters are blameless though they might be easily entrapped in succumbing to temptation. The fantasy of the threesome and its inherent betrayal is tantalizing to imagine, for both the audience and the characters. Valentine entreats Silvia: “Sweet lady, entertain him / To be my fellow-servant to your ladyship” (2.4. 97-98). Although Silvia protests, the triangle is set up.

In the ensuing lines in the Act Two, we see that the homosocial relationship is disrupted by heterosexual love. Valentine apologizes to Proteus: “Forgive me that I do not dream on thee/ Because thou seest me dote upon my love” (165-6): the homoerotic attitude in the language is unmistakable. Yet, just as in the opening scenes of the play between Proteus and Valentine, where Julia comes between them, now the tables are turned: the triangle is between Proteus, Valentine, and Silvia. The only way out, it would seem, is for Proteus and Valentine to share the bounty: Proteus says to Silvia, “We’ll both
attend upon your ladyship” (2.4. 114). It is not long before this cooperative interchange becomes insidious swapping.

As Valentine reveals his own heartsickness now, Proteus is induced to manly competition. He wonders at his own competitiveness, treachery, and the reasons behind it. Subtextually, the implication, -- through the images of hammering and heat, associated as heat is with Renaissance presuppositions of male humoral anatomy and biology,-- is that the chief relationship is the one which exists between the two men, that it is homoerotically charged, yet infiltrated by woman:

Even as one heat another heat expels,
Or as one nail by strength drives out another,
So the remembrance of my former love
Is by a newer object quite forgotten.
Is it mine eye, or Valentine’s praise,
Her true perfection, or my false transgression
That makes me, reasonless, to reason thus? (2.4.185-191)

Proteus, perhaps unconsciously unable to sustain or tolerate homoerotic desire for Valentine, must resort, through a complicated nexus of jealousy, bravado, concealed wish, and subliminal sexual inclination, to the next best thing: the procuring of the object of Valentine’s ardor, Silvia.

Proteus questions himself about his seeming loss of reason, which speaks to his manhood and unsettles him. Hamlet’s speech, “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty,… (2.2.293-295) is consonant with the conception of reason in manly identification. The loss of reason or control is equated with the loss of masculinity. However, reason, as a faculty which distinguishes men from women in the Renaissance, proves to be overvalued and indicates men’s vulnerability to charges of effeminacy.
In early modern England the notion of effeminacy was complex, ambiguous and contradictory. Lisa Jardine makes note that effeminacy, often thought of as hermaphroditism, had affinities with pederasty. The “submissiveness, coyness, dependence” of the “androgyne.... create a figure vibrant with erotic interest for men" (Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters 18). Moreover, engagement in heterosexual relations often proved the opposite of manliness. To be with a woman would weaken a man; on the other hand, to be with a man would make one womanly (Moulton 28). Men were open to the accusation of effeminacy for either reason: they were damned if they did, and damned if they didn’t. Even exclusive homosociality was no guarantee against the charge of effeminacy (29). Shakespeare’s phrasing in Proteus’ speech gives utterance to this:

I cannot leave to love, and yet I do.
But there I leave to love where I should love.
Julia I lose, and Valentine I lose.
If I keep them I needs must lose myself. (2.5.17-20)

The contradictory nature of masculinity in the early modern period indicates the vulnerability men might feel. With regard to male desire, according to humoral theory, having sexual relations with a woman’s “cold, moist body could be seen as debasing and wind up in weakness, loss of rational control, loss of physical strength,” (16) in a word, loss of potency. Moulton says effeminacy was taken literally; a man "would lose body hair, his muscles would soften, and he might become impotent" (16). This loss is also a loss of social identity-- sexual activity in this period is tied to gender (16). Speed’s comic description of Valentine in love taints both Proteus and Valentine with effeminacy. Valentine asks how Speed knows Valentine is in love. Speed can recognize it by these “special marks:”
... first, you have learned, like Sir Proteus, to wreathe your arms, like a malcontent; to relish a love-song, like a robin redbreast; to walk alone, like one that had pestilence; to sigh, like a schoolboy that had lost his ABC; to weep, like a young wench that had buried her grandma; to fast, like one that takes diet; to watch, like one that fears robbing; to speak puling, like a beggar at Hallowmas. You were wont, when you laughed, to crow like a cock; when you walked, to walk like one of the lions. When you fasted, it was presently after dinner; when you looked sadly, it was for want of money. And now you are metamorphosed with a mistress, that when I look on you I can hardly think you my master. (2.1.17-28)

Valentine is, in our modern parlance, transgendered.

However, the subtext of homosociality and/or homoeroticism is not limited to the male characters. The intimacy between Julia and Lucetta communicates a relationship that reaches beyond the parameters of servant to lady. After assessing a veritable inventory of men to reject, a scene reminiscent of a similar one between Portia and Nerissa over Portia’s suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*, Julia and Lucetta argue in a discernibly coquettish manner over the delivery of a letter from Proteus. Julia, attempting to take the letter from Lucetta begins the provocative dialogue:

Julia: Let’s see your song.
    How now minion!
Lucetta: Keep tune there still. So you will sing it out.
    And yet methinks I do not like this tune.
Julia: You do not?
Lucetta: No, madam, ‘tis too sharp.
Julia: You, minion, are too saucy.
Lucetta: Nay, now you are too flat.
    And mar the concord with too harsh a descant.
    There wanteth but a mean to fill your song. (1.2.89-96)

Coupled with the bawdy reference to filling Julia’s ‘song’, --which may be read as private parts--, with a man, there is an undertone here which is punctuated with the liaison, petulant as it is, between the women. Theatrically speaking, this instance of the women having words, or engaging in a catfight or a vocalized lesbian tussle seems to be
perennially tantalizing, especially to a male audience. Again, the audience is quite aware of the pretense in the enactment by boy actors, which makes the quarrel all the more enticing and sexually ambiguous. Additionally, as Valerie Traub indicates, both feminine chastity and penetrative ideologies act as a veil, concealing the female body, but are also a means to cover female same-sex eroticism; she asserts that “The ideology of chastity not only attempts to construct and maintain women's ‘purity,’ but defines such an ideal state through the phallocentric conflation of desire and reproduction” (Traub, “Perversion of ‘Lesbian’ Desire” 35). Further, and perhaps more directly to the point, Lucetta’s veiled reference to penetration and female anatomy, may be explained by Traub’s argument that “both the bawdy representations of Renaissance drama and the descriptions of erotic activities in anatomies and midwiferies belie such a singular focus: outside of the boundary embodied by the hymen existed desires beyond the purview of reproduction” (35).

Traub historicizes lesbianism in early modern patriarchal culture, though the term lesbian was not used until centuries later: “In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the ideology of chastity rendered same-gender female eroticism between conventionally ‘feminine’ women as culturally insignificant…. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, chaste femme love became the object of cultural anxiety” (25). We may locate Shakespeare’s representation of the homoeroticism between Silvia and Julia, prefigured as it is in the scene above with Lucetta and Julia, as residing somewhere across this cultural, historical divide.
Just as Proteus and Valentine merge as twins, as fellow servants to and rivals over Silvia, and as fellow journeyers to manhood, so too do Julia and Silvia merge as doubles.

Silvia suggests as much with rancor to Proteus:

When Proteus cannot love where he’s beloved
Read over Julia’s heart, thy first, best love,
For whose dear sake thou didst then rend thy faith…
Descended into perjury to love me.
Thou hast no faith left now, unless thou’dst two,
And that’s far worse than none…. (5.4.45-51)

The scene in which Julia, disguised as a codpieced page, meets Silvia and engages in a dialogue on Proteus’ betrayal, conveys more than a compassionate empathy within female homosociality. As Valeric Traub points out, "establishment of female ‘heterosexuality' depends upon its abjected other. The inverse is equally the case in the period I have been examining: women's desire for women generally did not take place separate from-- indeed, was almost inconceivable without-- reproductive sexuality with men” (35). As such, we may interrogate the resultant heterosexuality of the couples as adjacent to female homosexuality or homoeroticism. In *Suffocating Mothers*, Janet Adelman deconstructs Edgar’s “bizarre metaphor” of his father’s “bleeding rings” in *King Lear*, and establishes “the frequent association of rings with the female genitals” (107); so, too, may we construe the same of the ring which Proteus proffers as a symbol of his love for Silvia. Though it is procured through his love or lovemaking of Julia, it is repudiated by Silvia, but demonstrates her ardent feelings for the girl:

The more shame that he sends it me;
For I have heard him say a thousand times
His Julia gave it him at his departure.
Though his false finger have profaned the ring,
Mine shall not do Julia so much wrong. (4.4.125 -129)
“Ring-play,” (Adelman 283) is not only a Renaissance commonplace for sexuality, but the ring is also established as a symbol of female power. Again, we may see Shakespeare’s use of rings in *The Merchant of Venice* when rings are given to the disguised Portia and Nerissa who, in turn, use the rings to establish their power over the men: rings are not only, at times, a commodity of sexual exchange, but in the case of the Shakespeare plays, associated with female power and sexuality.

The scene between Julia and Silvia is substantive in many ways and accomplishes much thematically in the play. First, it hints at the same-sex eroticism between the two women; next, it achieves the gender fluidity which marks the play as a whole, and thirdly, it treats the rivalry/attraction theme allegorized by the conceit of beauty, a familiar Petrarchan conception adapted by Shakespeare in his *Sonnets*. Appended to these is an important instance of metatheatricality and ekphrasis. Silvia speaks to Julia/Sebastian about Julia’s beauty, asking, “Is she not passing fair?” (4. 4. 141). Julia responds by examining her own beauty in comparison to Silvia’s beauty, bringing to mind Shakespeare’s Dark Lady sonnets:

She hath been fairer, madam, than she is.  
When she did think my master loved her well  
She, in my judgement, was as fair as you.  
But since she did neglect her looking-glass,  
And threw her sun-expelling mask away,  
The air hath starved the roses in her cheeks  
And pinched the lily tincture of her face,  
That now she is become as black as I.  (4.4.142-148)

The reference to “black as I” is an allusion to her otherness, but also to her manliness in her present guise. To underscore the gender ambiguity in the scene, and as a reminder to the audience, Shakespeare infuses the moment with metatheatricality: To Silvia’s
question about Julia’s height, she recalls an enactment in Greek mythology and says Julia (herself) is:

About my stature; for at Pentecost,
When all our pageants of delight were played,
Our youth got me to play the woman’s part,
And I was timed in Madam Julia’s gown,
Which served me as fit, by all men’s judgements,
As if the garment had been made for me;
Therefore I know she is about my height. (4.4.150-156)

The featuring of clothing or costuming serves to emphasize, and to make ironic, as well, Julia/Sebastian’s fashioning the codpiece. The attention is drawn from the absent gown and instead to the striking codpiece. Julia continues, recounting “the woman’s part,” that is, girl playing boy playing girl, played by boy:

And at that time I made her weep agood,
For I did play a lamentable part.
Madam, ’twas Ariadne, passioning
For Theseus’ perjury and unjust flight;
Which I so lively acted with my tears
That my poor mistress, moved therewithal,
Wept bitterly; and would I might be dead
If I in thought felt not her very sorrow. (4.4.157-164)

Psychologically, Julia is split in two: imagining herself as Sebastian playing Ariadne, she feels Julia’s pain, as if Julia is no longer herself, but outside, detached from her codpiece, male body.

Shakespeare, too, in this scene, makes remarkable and comic use of metatheatricality to highlight the self-critical irony of his project. In the metatheatrical moment, Shakespeare is also able to capitalize on the double aspect of consciousness, the act of Julia looking at herself through the eyes of another; in this case both the audience and Silvia take on the role of the mirroring other. Shakespeare’s employment of sexual
innuendo in the pun “purse” (Williams 1117) announced in Silvia’s empathic response to Julia/Sebastian’s melancholy, underscores the female homoeroticism of the moment:

She is beholden to thee, gentle youth.
Alas, poor lady, desolate and left.
I weep myself to think upon thy words.
Here, youth. There is my purse. I give thee this
For thy sweet mistress’ sake, because thou lov’st her. (4.4.165 – 169)

For Shakespeare, this is comic relief; it also serves to construct the fluidity of sexuality and gendering. One ventures to look upon the overall metatheatricality in this scene as another instance in the recognition of gender fluidity as an enactment of destabilizing the real or “truth.”

Building upon this confusion, Shakespeare continues in the vein of challenging notions of beauty, rivalry, and self-consciousness in Julia’s character. She/he looks upon Silvia’s picture, in an instance of Renaissance ekphrasis, contemplating the ‘difference’ between herself and Silvia, describing her wistfully as “A virtuous gentlewoman, mild, and beautiful. / … Since she respects ‘my mistress’ love so much” (4. 4. 171-173). To be noted are the quotes around ‘my mistress,’ meaningful especially since Julia soliloquizes: even alone, by and unto herself, she is no longer Julia; she is Sebastian. She gazes at the picture:

… Let me see, I think
If I had such a tire, this face of mine
Were full as lovely as is this of hers.
And yet the painter flattered her a little,
Unless I flatter with myself too much.
Her hair is auburn, mine is perfect yellow.
If that be all the difference in his love,
I’ll get me such a coloured periwig.
Her eyes are grey as glass, and so are mine.
Ay, but her forehead’s low, and mine’s as high. (4.4.176-185)
Is she contemplative about their beauty in the role of Sebastian or of Julia? It is not quite pinned down. Nonetheless, the soliloquy soon slips into a darker mood, and recalls the ‘catfight’ that was heralded earlier by Julia and Lucetta. Speaking directly to the painting, Julia/Sebastian says, “Come, shadow, come, and take this shadow up,/ For ‘tis thy rival…. /I should have scratched out your unseeing eyes,…” (4.4.188-9 and 196).

 Perhaps the darker mood foreshadows the darkness of the last scene in the play in which Proteus attempts the rape of Silvia. Proteus’ attempted rape of Silvia is the axial moment in the play. It is complex, transmuting the comedy into something much darker, typical of Shakespeare’s ouevre. Not only is it violent, it is misogynistic; further, in cultural materialist terms, it offers an instance of an economy of exchange, which might signify a project of “cultural nostalgia” (Carroll, William C. 15-16). Rape itself is a manifestly masculine signifier, in its most incipient form. That the unconsummated rape in Two Gentlemen speaks to a thwarted manhood is multivalent in meaning. Proteus’ pretext for attempting the rape of Silvia, he says, is that violence is now called for since “gentleness” has been rejected:

Nay, if gentle spirit of moving words
Can no way change you to a milder form
I’ll woo you like a soldier, at arm’s end
And love you ‘gainst the nature of love: force ye (5.4.55-58)

Proteus’ utterance of “gentle” pronounces him as one of the gentlemen in the title; however, it must be seen as ironic, at best. He reverses the discourse of victim/aggressor and makes Silvia out to be the violent adversary who must be transformed, by rape, “to a milder form.” So, too, does Proteus opposing these two, make the contradiction of rape and love palpable; his identification of rape as unnatural coincides with his identification
of rape as a form of love, where “love you” means “rape you.” In essence, Proteus constructs rape as a natural form of sex within a male domain.

Whether rape is libidinal or not in this scene, raped bodies are sites of discursive and cultural construction. Critics are at variance on the subject of violence or rape in Shakespeare. For Bernice Harris, Silvia would be, just as the raped, mutilated Lavinia is in *Titus Andronicus*, “a means by which power is marked as masculine and transferred and circulated” (Harris). Silvia, too, is literally transferred, exchanged, and circulated as a commodity by Valentine to Proteus. Foakes, on the other hand, sees violence in Shakespeare as a critique of manliness and the heroic. Proteus, the character whose name and actions portend his shapelessness, inconstancy, instability, unreliability, and downright treachery, would be one such character in which a critique of masculinity might be observed. Jonas Barish, who provides a taxonomy of Shakespeare’s violence, terms his own view as “oldfashioned” (120). Chronologically, he sees a progression in the plays, a gradual evolution away from violence, indicating that there is a “morality of violence,… a bourgeois morality” (120). Violence interferes with life -- Shakespeare is “civilized and civilizing” (121). Shakespeare believes in “valor, manly readiness, and military prowess” (121). However, Barish’s chronologically based argument would not apply to *Two Gentleman*, as it is perhaps one of the earliest, if not the earliest of Shakespeare’s plays.

In this early play, Shakespeare seems to be working out his representation of rape as a most effective dramatic device. It would be a mistake to disregard how powerful the vehicle of rape was, theatrically speaking, in fact, how pornographic, and as such, how
appealing, titillating, or sensational it was to the audience. In the early modern period, there was less distinction between sex and violence. Marshall cites as an example of this, images of martyrs in the early modern period where mutilation was “conjoined” (109) with the erotic. Saint Sebastian, according to one critic, could almost be a “male pin-up” (Marshall 116). While the stage directions of the rape scene suggest the onstage physical assault, “Proteus [assailing her]: I’ll force thee yield to my desire” (5. 4. 59), the language is explicit in exposing the act as carnal.

However, what is most surprising, and perhaps most meaningful about the nascent and never accomplished rape, is that it is dismissed by the characters, and the playwright, but, not, to my mind, by the audience. It is what makes the play problematic. The overarching male friendship supersedes what was potentially a brutal act of cruelty by Proteus. Valentine’s Christian forgiveness of Proteus hardly holds together in terms of the resolution of the plot. For one thing, the resolution is too precipitous; there is no sense of a contemplative forgiveness which characterizes the later romances or tragedies.

14 Laura Levine’s “Rape, Repetition, and the Politics of Closure in A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” she reads “rape as the condition of existence itself” (in Traub et al, Feminist Readings, 225). Levine argues that Theseus resorts to the theater to “transform sexual violence” in order to “show the way that theater exactly fails to accomplish such a transformation” (210). Further, “Theseus … is something like the disturbing figure of a double negative. He turns to what is culturally understood itself as a kind of rape in order to conceal and manage his own sexual violence” (222). Her argument is actually foregrounded in the early modern documents of Gosson and Prynne (School of Abuse and Histrio-mastix respectively). She claims that her argument is exactly what the anti-theatricalists promulgated: Stephen Gosson, thought “theater whetted ‘desire to inordinate lust’ and reduced women who watched it to prostitutes and … men… to braying colts” (222). Prynne, too, thought the theater was “founded on rape;” in Prynne’s pamphlet soldiers “ ‘might take where hee like a snatch for share’ ” (222).

16 Interestingly, Shakespeare gives Julia the name of Sebastian when she is transvested as a boy. Lisa Jardine informs readers that the name Sebastian was commonplace in early modern parlance as “another name for a homosexual prototype” (Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters 19).
Proteus’ mea culpa (“My shame and guilt confounds me…. I do as truly suffer/ As e’er I did commit” (5. 4. 73 and 76-7), rings hollow. Both Proteus and Valentine hardly come off as romantic, or platonic, in the sense of ideal friends. The play reflects the cultural conflict about friendship in the early modern period. In fact, by privileging male friendship over heterosexual love, or heterosexual jealousy and betrayal, Shakespeare seems to portray heterosexual union or marriage as utilitarian.

While in the early modern period patriarchal marriage was a passage to manhood, heterosexual love was a “potential hazard” to it (Shepard 77). Shepherd establishes that as a result of the Protestant Reformation, patriarchal marriage was undergoing change: there was an urgency to protect against fornication and insure procreation. Although marriage was the “gateway” (74) to becoming a man, between 1604 and 1628 one-fifth of English men never married. Marriage became a “privilege rather than a right” (252), and patriarchal manhood became “increasingly class related” (251). Shakespeare’s uncertain and problematic representation of the marriage of the two gentlemen in this play may point to impending changes in social attitudes and practices.

The gift of Silvia to Proteus is decidedly excessive, just as much as the gift of Silvia to Valentine by her father is disproportionate. It clearly presents a world of values based on a gift economy of individual personal relations among various classes of males. The final “boon” Valentine asks for from the Duke, underscores the primacy of male to male relations; Valentine begs clemency for the band of outlaws, --prefiguring, of course, _Twelfth Night_, --whom he has exiled himself with in the forest. The liminal, masculinized male utopia of the forest, the green world inhabited only by men can be reimagined and materialized in this play in the court of Milan. The weddings of
Valentine and Silvia, and Proteus and Julia, are deliberately usurped by the fantasy of male friendship, camaraderie, and intimacy. The play culminates in the idealism of a masculinized, potent, Arcadian universe.

However, the anxiety of masculinity is betrayed by the insistence of masculinity by the characters, and in the very outcome of the play. If masculinity were secure or fully anchored, there would be no need for a resolution of such male priority. As much is suggested by the wordlessness of the women at the end of the play. As Jean Howard states, “Especially for the women, the ‘happy’ ending comes at a cost” (Howard, Introduction 109). The silence, disappearance, and the total erasure of Silvia after she is offered in exchange by Valentine to Proteus is exceptional in a comic structure. Much more conventional would be the marriage of Silvia and Valentine to convey harmony and social order. What we are left with at the end of this comedy is a festive, playful, yet suggestive surveying, perhaps ogling, of the boy, Sebastian, by the Duke and Valentine:

Valentine: … I dare be bold
With our discourse to make your grace to smile.
What think you of this page, my lord?
Duke: I think the boy hath grace in him. He blushes.
Valentine: I warrant you, my lord, more grace than boy. (5.4.160-164)

Although the very last lines of the play do reinstate the conventional ending of comedy in marriage, it is more a device, more rhetorical. The impression one is left with is not quite a seamless order out of disorder, or the harmony one expects, but the mitigation of those by the equivocal union of Proteus and Julia, which follows too closely behind a betrayal, an attempted cuckolding, and a desired rape. After Silvia has ceased speaking, Julia as the codpiece Sebastian is a presence and an image that remains.
It is for the playwright to wrangle a happy union out of the tangle of deceptions that hang so heavy in the air. All Shakespeare can muster is a weak discourse on masculinity and inconstancy. Inconstancy is designated as essentialist, or natural to the masculine. Proteus, apologetically, perhaps pragmatically, seeing that the end (theatrically) and characterologically, is near, says: “Inconstancy falls off ere it begins” (5.4.111). Is it a whitewash, an expedient, an evasion? Or is this Shakespeare’s supposition about the inevitable (and defensible) capriciousness of men? Proteus’ formulation of masculinity begs a challenge to its verity, especially since his character has proven disingenuous. Perhaps an analysis of the ring-play featured in the last scene, a fuller recapitulation of the ring-play already enacted in Act Four, may provide more clarity on the thorny issue of masculinity in the play.

As stated before, the ring is a symbol of both female genitalia and female sexuality and power. There are two rings Julia brings forth. As Julia reveals her own ring to Proteus, she is metaphorically exposing her female genitalia to Proteus, as either inadvertent or intentional error. Her words suggest the confusion of her gender. To Proteus’ bafflement “How, let me see! / Why, this is the ring I gave to Julia;” (5.4.90-1) she responds, “O, cry you mercy, sir I have mistook” (92). Through the tangle of contradictory sexualities and presentation of genders, the “mistook” takes on greater meaning. Does she now find herself perplexed about her own place, her own state of being, her own sex? Finally, she seems to have found herself in the ensuing dialogue:

Proteus: But how cam’st thou by this ring…
Julia: And Julia herself did give it to me,
And Julia herself hath brought it hither. (5.4.94, 96-7)
If we follow the notion of ring as slang for female genitalia, Julia may be taking back ownership of her own sexuality. Julia has two selves; referring to herself in the third person suggests as much. Julia’s two selves coincide, too, with the motif of doubles in the play. In this case, she is a double of herself, in the representation of male and female.

If the ring-play advances female power, Julia/Sebastian takes control, asserting her/his agency. It is the contention of this chapter that in order for Julia to assert her personhood, she must claim mastery as a boy or man. The codpiece, as prosthetic appendage, as badge, as accessory, reifies masculinity. Julia brandishes her codpiece, consecrating it as “immodest raiment” (5.4.104). While she expresses the impropriety or even obscenity of the codpiece, both her actions and her words belie the opposite meaning for her: the codpiece announces and pronounces her mastery. As the girl, Julia, she has been betrayed, abandoned, humiliated; as the boy wearing the codpiece, she is emancipated, autonomous, and can speak with authority. The clothes embody and embolden the body. Again, in third person, Julia claims sovereignty:

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Behold her that gave aim to all thy oaths
And entertained 'em deeply in her heart.
How oft hast thou with perjury cleft the root?
O, Proteus, let this habit make thee blush.
Be thou ashamed that I have took upon me
Such an immodest raiment, … (5.4.99-104)
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It is ambiguous whether or not Julia removes her codpiece when putting Proteus’ feet to the fire. If in stage direction, Julia removes her codpiece, it is a brazen and tantalizing sexual gesture. Just as disrobing is seductive, nudity as a precursor to sexual intercourse or foreplay is sexually stimulating. If Julia takes off the codpiece to reveal her femaleness, Proteus would be even more aroused.
While Julia is saying that Proteus should be ashamed, there is also the possibility that he is aroused by the bisexuality or sexual ambiguity that the homoerotic identification the codpiece assigns to Julia. Will he be making love to a boy, a girl, or a man or woman? And, mainly as a consequence of performance, the question must be asked, which character has acquired manliness now? How is masculinity to be determined in the early modern period? What ideology of masculinity is constructed? Is it Proteus’ fear of or his fascination with sexual ambiguity which is thrilling?

Breitenberg explains that in Sonnet 20, Shakespeare himself writes of the “androgyne as an object of desire”(155). Breitenberg also argues that since the anti-theatricalists and others such as the author of Hic Mulier considered cross dressed women as wanton, men like these authors might have been afraid to be seduced by those of their own gender (164). Masculinity is thereby threatened if one fears one’s own desire for the transgressive, transvested woman, which has been condemned. If Julia remains in the codpiece, it may be less sexually driven as a motif, and more aligned with female reticence and vulnerability, as Jean Howard indicates: “… while Julia’s male disguise, which she never removes, continues to remind the audience of the dangers she has faced because of Proteus’ fickleness” (Introduction 109). However, unlike Silvia’s silence at the end of the play, Julia’s reference to the codpiece could also be read as her outspoken self-assertion in the face of those dangers. The codpiece sustains potency and mastery.

As Foucault has declared, the penis emblematizes “self-mastery:” while “its demands are likely to enslave us if we allow ourselves to be coerced by it …”(3:34); on the other hand, it displays “… superiority over sexual partners, since it is by means of the penis that the penetration is carried out; status and privileges, since it signifies the whole
field of kinship and social activity” (34). Valerie Traub reminds us that one of the predominant insights of “feminist inquiry… is that gender serves not only as a sign of bodily difference, but in the words of Joan Scott, as a ‘primary way of signifying relations of power’ ” (Feminist Readings 44).

In Traub’s essay entitled “Gendering Mortality in Early Modern Anatomies,” she studies early modern plates illustrating male and female bodies. She notices that Catoptrum microcosmicum (1619) displays both male and female bodies symmetrically; however, “the male has two layers that the female figure lacks…” (90); the female’s buttocks are revealed. Both genitals are covered by drapery “although the male genitals, in danger of exposure because of the frontal view, are additionally clothed with a non-removable fig-leaf” (90). Two conjoined points are important here: on the one hand, in the iconography of the period, the male genitals are vulnerable and need further protection, and/or are so valorized as to require permanent concealment and safeguarding, or shrouding in additional mystery, signifying almost talismanic dimensions.

One may ascertain, through the iconography of the covering of the penis, or the amplification or exaltation of the phallus, which is a convention in early modern art, that Julia’s codpiece would signify the opposite of “modest;” hence, “immodest raiment” is a felicitous locution. While Julia has embodied masculinity and can thereby assert herself, she also takes the opportunity to shame Proteus. As we will see in later chapters, shame is a most relevant central theme in representations of both cuckoldry and the codpiece. Again, underscoring shame as perhaps a correlative of castration or emasculation, Julia admonishes Proteus:
O Proteus, let this habit make thee blush.
Be thou ashamed that I have took upon me
Such an immodest raiment, if shame live
In a disguise of love (5.4.102-105)

By her recognition, from the patriarchal male point of view, that she is supposed to feel
shame for disguising herself in such a way, she, quite to the contrary, is confident in her
 guise, and demonstrates that Proteus is the one who should be ashamed to pretend love,
as he has done. If such an interpretation of Julia’s newfound audaciousness is to be
upheld, manifested by her donning the codpiece, one might understand the
masculinization of the feminine in Shakespeare’s characters.

However, the play’s sensibility is maintained in a masculinized, and homosocial
or homoerotic domain. As has already been illustrated, the ending in which it is
suggested that the Duke and Valentine may be looking salaciously at the transvested boy
Sebastian is privileged as the culmination of the action revolving around this spectacle. It
is a wink to the audience: Valentine’s moniker of “wag” to Julia, earlier, says as much.
Wag is a term of endearment, translated as “sweet boy.”

More to the point, and more illustrative of the masculinized universe that the play
embodies, is the notion of gentlemen. After all, this play is a journeying, a dramatic
bildungsroman of sorts, in which two young boys become men, in particular, gentlemen.
So it is class as much as gender, which lies at bottom of this comedy. As the Duke says
to Valentine, “Sir Valentine, / Thou art a gentleman, and well derived. Take thou thy
Silvia, for thou hast deserved her” (5.4.142-144). Even the reuniting of Julia with

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17 Glossary in (Stephen Greenblatt, ed., Two Gentlemen of Verona. The Norton
1997) 156.
Proteus is couched in a masculinized discourse of friendship. Valentine’s terms are unusual for heterosexual marriage:

    Come, come a hand from either.  
    Let me be blessed to make this happy close. 
    ‘Twere pity two such friends should be long foes. (5.4.114-116)

In his rendering, Julia becomes the third gentleman of the play.

Shakespeare constructs the ambiguity of the sexual relations in the play by thematizing male friendship and underscoring the relations of men of a certain class. In doing so, the play, in addition to treating psychological and cultural exigencies, treats social and political ones as well. However, the most salient attitude, one might posit, is the sexual ambiguity the play dramatizes. As if to underscore this, and again, coming in the final moments of the play, as if in a brief epilogue, Shakespeare frames the play within the parameters of a male ordered system, but emphasizes the polymorphous perverse. While the final lines of the play portend the harmonious, unified social stratum of heterosexual love and union, “One feast, one house, one mutual happiness” (5.4.170), Valentine first taunts Proteus, which flies in the face, by the way, of his Christian forgiveness, by insisting that Proteus undergo “penance” for his transgressions, by hearing the narrative Valentine will retell the Duke of Proteus’ “loves.” As Valentine points specularly to the beautiful boy, and says to the Duke, “I warrant you, my lord, more grace than boy.” the Duke, wonderingly asks, “What mean you by that saying?” (5.4.163,164). Ensuing, Valentine responds:

    Please you, I’ll tell you as we pass along,  
    That you will wonder what hath fortuned.  
    Come, Proteus, ‘tis your penance but to hear  
    The story of your loves discovered.  
    That done, our day of marriage shall be yours,… (5.4.165-169)
As a referent, the plural “loves” sums it up. Although Proteus will marry Julia, and Valentine will marry Silvia, Valentine alludes to Proteus’ polymorphous sexuality, while at the same time experiencing his own polymorphous yearnings through voyeuristic pleasure. The heterosexual marriages are mentioned dismissively, and this last twinkle undermines those heterosexual unions, and thereby undermines patriarchal marriage as such. Julia’s words seem to disclose the intelligence, the outlook, and the prevailing attitude of this comedy: “’Tis pity love should be so contrary,…” (4.4.76).

Although contrary, complicated and perplexing, the masculinity represented by Shakespeare admits vulnerability. While the transvested characters proclaim a feminized masculinity, and as such, one which is threatening to patriarchal masculinity, the codpiece is appropriated for its masculine meaning, to reestablish potency—even feminized masculinity establishes male potency as a signifier. As an early performance of the kind more acutely developed in later characters such as Rosalind, Viola, Imogen, or Portia, to name a few, the codpiece daughter Julia, stands for, albeit most threatening, an emerging, self-possessed, and, one might venture, a cocksure heroine.
Chapter 2
A Monster with Two Trinkets

Approximately half a century after Shakespeare wrote *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and Middleton and Dekker penned *The Roaring Girl*, Robert Herrick, in 1648, included in *Hesperides* an epigram which captures the fertile, comic, yet unpredictable associations the codpiece had come to designate:

Shark, when he goes to any public feast,  
Eats to one's thinking, of all there, the least.  
What saves the master of the house thereby  
When if the servants search, they may descry  
In his wide codpiece, dinner being done,  
Two napkins cramm'd up, and a silver spoon? (383)

Herrick’s epigram indeed calls to mind the mirthful nicking and petty thievery of the codpiece-wearing pickpocket made famous by Middleton and Dekker, the eponymous Moll Cutpurse. More contemporaneous to both Shakespeare and Middleton and Dekker, is the reference in the *OED* to Marston’s usage in *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalion’s Image* and *Certaine Satyres*, (1598):

Ha, ha! Nay, then, Ile never raile at those  
That weare a codpis, thereby to disclose  
What sexe they are, since strumpets breeches use,  
.... I shall stand in doubt  
What sexe thou art, since hermaphrodites,  
Such Protean shadowes so delude our sights. (221)

The suggestion of “sexe,” that is, gender, prostitution, disguise, and hermaphroditism that were either conventional or influenced by the dramatists of the period, brings us closer to an understanding of the discourses laid out by Middleton and Dekker in *The Roaring Girl*. It is the purpose of this chapter to explore early modern anxieties which surround masculinity, sexuality, and desire through the lens of various theoretical constructions,
and most specifically through a close examination of the trope of the codpiece as presented in Middleton and Dekker’s play. A close reading of *The Roaring Girl* reveals how gender is materialized and appropriated through the codpiece. Additionally, the play establishes the tension between masculine identity and jealousy through the topos of cuckoldry. While the codpiece may emphasize or articulate sexual power and virility, that is, potency, as it does in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the specter of cuckoldry undermines this power. Both paradigms contribute to and reflect the anxieties surrounding patriarchal masculinity in the early modern period.

My argument in this chapter coincides with Garber's enunciation that the signifier of the codpiece is "undecidable"("Fetish Envy" 50), but with a slight caveat: I discern a difference which I will designate as a bifurcation of the female codpiece and the male codpiece. I argue that Moll's codpiece, because it is worn by an undisguised female character, is metonymic of potency, but, in contrast, when associated or connected to masculinity, it corresponds with impotence. Additionally, I speculate that Middleton, insofar as it can be established that he collaborated with Shakespeare even in Shakespeare's middle period--around the years that Middleton and Dekker conceived of and wrote *The Roaring Girl*, around the year 1601 through 1607, that the character of Julia, from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* was inspirational and perhaps a source for the codpiece wearing Moll, another codpiece daughter. Furthermore, the play communicates a satirizing or ridiculing of the whole notion of masculinity. Masculinity, although depicted as threatened and anxious, is demonstrated to be a false paradigm, joined to a corrupt and decaying social order.

*The Roaring Girl* is an essential, yet difficult text in which to extract the many
issues surrounding patriarchal attitudes in this period. For one thing, the debates around authorship continue to preoccupy critics. As a collaborative text, scholars have not resolved fully the question of which parts of the play were written by Middleton and which by Dekker. Critics, for the moment, appear to agree with Paul Mulholland who has studied the play’s style, grammar, and linguistical forms, and has come to the conclusion that “None of the evidence so far adduced persuasively tips the balance in either direction” (Middleton, Thomas and Thomas Dekker. *The Roaring Girl*, ed. Paul A. Mullholland 12). For the purposes of this dissertation, the further question of Middleton’s relationship to Shakespeare is of interest. Laurie Maguire maintains, through an examination of style, tone, and stage direction, among other features, that Shakespeare’s collaboration with Middleton can be firmly established not just in the beginning of his [Shakespeare’s] career, but in the middle and end as well: “It now looks like collaboration was a palatable and practical activity for him throughout, successful enough for him to want to work with … Middleton… again” (116). *The Roaring Girl* was written during the early/middle period of this collaboration, 1607. Although it is unlikely Middleton had a hand in the invention of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, perhaps Middleton mused upon and was intrigued by Shakespeare’s codpiece-wearing, self-assured female character, Julia, and by the success of Shakespeare’s comedy in the theater. However, the foreign, and in many ways fantastical locale of Italy may not have aroused Middleton’s imagination: Middleton’s city comedies are unidealized. In part, the evidence for collaboration in a play like *All’s Well That Ends Well* lies in the “un-Shakespearean urban grittiness of tone” (116) one associates with Middleton. It is here that we recognize the significance of the connection between Shakespeare and Middleton,
but discern the marked variations upon the topoi of codpieces and cuckold as well.

Both the setting of *The Roaring Girl* -- the rough and tumble streets of London --, and the language or cant employed in the play diverge from formal aspects of Shakespeare’s work, but do however resonate with a modern audience. This accounts in part for its current critical reception. It is in the unique characterization of Moll Cutpurse, based upon the personage of the actual Mary Frith (1584 – 1659) with which feminist, materialist, and cultural critics are engaged on a variety of issues related to patriarchy: performance, gender construction, metatheater, fashion, and social and political exigencies such as economy, labor, and commerce. Among the many critics who have written extensively about the play, Marjorie Garber’s psychoanalytic reading, both Freudian and Lacanian, takes in the notion of theater as fetishistic, “the theater represents an enactment of the fetishistic scenario” (“Fetish Envy” 47), the phallus being a “reliteralized” (47) stage prop. In outlining the signification of the said phallus in some of Shakespeare’s plays, she takes the position that “the codpiece confounds the question of gender;” “the woman with the codpiece is the onstage simulacrum of the female transvestite, a crossover figure;” “the codpiece is therefore a theatrical figure for castration” (50). Further, she contends that the “codpiece daughter” of Middleton and Dekker is called so with “fear and titillation” (50). While this may be true, and while it does suggest the anxiety surrounding masculinity apparent in much of early modern literature, my argument diverges slightly from this one. Correlative to the castration Garber and others see as foundational in Middleton and Dekker’s play, I argue, once again, that Moll’s codpiece, because it is worn by the principal female character not as a disguise as many critics have noted, when associated with femininity, the codpiece is
metonymic of potency, but when connected to masculinity, with impotence; thereby it both threatens and empowers – in this way, as Garber demonstrates, it is “undecidable” (50). Yet, while Garber’s locution is undecidable, I advance that the codpiece suggests impotence when associated with the masculine. Within the pervasive early modern discourses on masculinity, the dramatists of the period, Middleton and Dekker, specifically in The Roaring Girl, appear to have upped the ante on sexuality and masculinity; in Garber’s words, and I agree, there are high stakes: “What is at stake is the ownership of desire” (47).

The extent to which the stage was the locus of representations of sexuality and desire cannot be overemphasized. Eroticism and desire “within the acceptable limits of public occasion” (Forker 5) was presented in the theater, notwithstanding the prohibition against enacting any kind of undress. We may absorb the hysteria (5) evident in the Puritan polemics of Prynne, Stubbes, and Rainoldes, among others against the theater: in Charles Forker’s words these men considered the “institutionalized stage as the very sink of sexual depravity” (5). Yet, “the theatre often came close to breaching these limits” (5). It is not only sexual desire, but an “aversion” (5) to it which the stage projected. It provided audiences “with a means of focusing, defining, or ‘processing’ (as deconstructionist critics might say) the fundamentally ambivalent nature of their own erotic attitudes and feelings” (3). Stephen Orgel captures the Puritan message, clarifying how desire functions in relation to early modern theater:

The growth of desire through the experience of theater is a sinister progression: the play excites the spectator and sends him home to “perform” himself; the result is sexual abandon with one’s wife, or more often with any available woman (all women at the playhouse being considered available), or worst of all… the spectator begins by lusting
after a female character, but ends by having sex with the man she really is. Philip Stubbes gives a particularly clear statement of this anxiety: “… everyone brings another homeward of their way very friendly, and in their secret conclaves they play sodomite or worse.” (‘Nobody’s Perfect’ 17)

*The Roaring Girl* would be a case in point. To borrow Orgel’s phrase, Moll Cutpurse, the female character becomes “the man she really is.” Additionally, the cross-dressing of the dramatic character Moll, coupled with the sometime appearance of the “real” Mary Frith, a presence addressed in the epilogue of the play – “The Roaring Girl herself, some few days hence, / Shall on the stage give larger recompense; / Which mirth that you may share in, herself does woo you,” (Epilogus 35-37)—such that her presence hovers over the play at the very least in expectation -- complicates the confines between theater and real life, and between fact and fiction. The danger, moreover, and anxiety for early moderns, was the eroticizing of human experience that the theater afforded.

Middleton and Dekker succeed in crossing the boundaries, literally and metaphorically, especially through the transvestism of Moll. As Anthony Dawson points out, the play constructs “a network whereby fashion in clothing (including Moll’s choice of male attire), fashion in playwriting, sexual attractiveness, reading, and playgoing are all seen as culturally constrained activities, matters of convention and mutability rather than fixed and stable” (397). The fluidity and instability gives rise to the attraction/repulsion of the audience and to the ensuing anxieties and hazards the theater produces.

Another enduring controversy which the play brings about is whether or not the figure of Moll is subversive or revisionist. Stephen Orgel argues that Moll’s character upholds middle-class values: “Her underworld credentials are clearly established; …
But she serves as an interpreter of that world to the middle-class world of drama; she is an honourable, comic, sentimental peacemaker, who does not take purses, but recovers them” (Orgel, “Subtexts” 22). To foreground his argument he reminds us that “we have seen that neither Elizabethan nor Jacobean society finds the most visible symbol of female masculinity, the transvestite woman, sufficiently threatening to enact any law enjoining her behavior” (15). Further, the well-known image of Queen Elizabeth rallying the troops at Tilbury, dressed in manly armor “indicates the degree to which the masculine woman could actually serve as an ideal” (15). In fact, according to Orgel, Renaissance notions of transvestism differ from ours: it is not “normatively” (16) female to male, but male to female. As such, transvestism conveys virtue: texts like The Golden Legend, “includes a number of transvestite saints’ lives, in which female transvestism becomes the path to sanctity, a denial at once of both feminine frailty and masculine libido” (19). An ancillary, although counterintuitive view, in a similar vein, whereby Moll’s character is seen as rather conservative, is Dawson’s assertion that Middleton and Dekker “maintain the depoliticization of their rendering of social life. They make Moll theatrically rather than politically (or morally) transgressive (401). On the other hand, while Jean E. Howard admits that we cannot, in audience participation or in readership in our own time map the exact contours of Renaissance eros, Moll Cutpurse is “a figure who not only provokes erotic desire and sexualized aggression in others, but who also remains an erotic subject in her own right. As such, she threatens her culture’s conventions for managing female desire” (“Sex and Social Conflict” 170). Howard believes that Moll “lodges a critique of the specific material institutions and circumstances which oppressed women in early modern
England” (180). Moll’s actions suggest that “One’s ability to transform one’s appearance by the sartorial possibilities afforded by the market place thus becomes a potentially liberating phenomenon…. Moll’s actions point to a utopian future where oppressive hierarchies and binarisms have been undone... she functions in this text as erotic object and subject” (180). The point to be made here, is that Moll’s character, as a theatrical or cultural representation, is complex and multivalent. While the critics may disagree about the play’s politics or whether or not Moll Cutpurse is subversive or traditionalist and conservative, they all view her as an eroticized figure. The question which remains is what sort of erotic desire is represented in the play, and how does this desire correspond to early modern cultural imperatives?

As the play provokes questions about masculinity, the design of the play -- portraying and reflecting as it does early modern sensibilities -- clearly interrogates potency as an underlying theme. The play’s anxiety about sexuality, however, as Marjorie Garber says, “…is not so much based upon women’s emancipatory strategies as upon the sexual inadequacies of men” (Garber, “The Logic of the Transvestite” 221). One might go further to say that women’s emancipatory strategies cause, determine, and contribute to the male sexual inadequacy present in the play. Certainly, the plot involving the citizen wives, but more particularly, the characterization of the ambiguously gendered, uninhibited Moll induces the impotency suspended over the play.

To begin with, in the *OED*, the usage and invention of the word *moll* is first attributed to Middleton in 1604 in *The Nightingale and the Ant* as simply a girl or woman and in subsequent usage became a gangster or female pickpocket. More
overlooked is the fact that *molles* or *moll* is an adjective for soft, but also a noun denoting a soft or weak person, specifically, and this derives from as early as 1425, “an effeminate man.” This usage is connotatively significant, for, as affixed to the other meanings of prostitution, crime, and hermaphroditism associated with moll or Moll, it amplifies both the gender fluidity, and the lack of masculinity in the male characters which the play subtends. The stage performance of a masculinized female character by a male actor further obscures the gender boundaries, resulting in a kind of mise en abyme. Also, not to be diminished are the “pervasive anxieties of effeminacy” in the period, in particular the “effeminization of the courtier and humanist” (Parker 362).

A brief look back at Montaigne’s *Essais* in an oft-cited reference to his own impotence is instructive for an understanding of the pervasiveness of anxiety which Parker attributes to the early modern period, this from the 1580 version of the *Essais*:

> For I know by experience that one man, whom I can answer for as for myself [que tel, de qui je puis répondre comme de moy mesme], on whom there could fall no suspicion whatsoever of impotence[foiblesse]and just as little as being enchanted, having heard a friend of his tell the story of an extraordinary impotence [defaillance] into which he had fallen at the moment when he needed it least, and finding himself in a similar situation, was all at once struck in his imagination by the horror of this story that he incurred the same fate. (qtd. in Parker 343-344)

Interesting and most revealing, is Montaigne’s experiencing of horror simply upon hearing this narrative: through the force of his imagination, he believed that his own performance was transformed and weakened. Parker studies Montaigne’s inclusion in the *Essais* the case of Marie Germain and its impact on Montaigne’s thinking: it is the “story of a woman hanged for using ‘devices’ to supplement her ‘defect’ with a second one of the transformation from female to male” (338). However, it is not just
Montaigne who is fascinated, unnerved, or unmanned by this story and the purported phenomenon. As Parker states: “Preoccupation with male impotence in late sixteenth century France is registered in an extraordinary range of texts, from collections of contes and witchcraft manuals to legal and polemical treatises” (345). Also citing the “uncertainty of male gender identity” as a “major topos of French literature throughout the century… the threat of impotence both as a ‘castrative gesture’ and as a ‘sign of lack’ ” (346) informs the literature. In England in the same period, the anxiety of impotence was figured in “gender boundaries so fluid that boys dressed in female clothes could ‘preposterously’ turn into women,” (363) and also “the anxieties of effeminization particular to subjects of what John Knox termed the ‘monstrous regiment of women,’ men subjected to female rule” (363).

In early modern England, sexual difference was becoming more and more pronounced as threatening. As such, effeminization took on greater and greater significance whereby blurring the boundaries between the sexes might engender the collapse of the entire social organization. William Prynne’s caricature in “The Unloveliness of Lovelocks” (1628) casts the accoutrement of long hair in men as absurd and a danger to what is essential in nature: those who wore long hair were “effeminate, degenerate, unnatural, unmanly”; …they are “in dayly thraldome, and perpetuall bondage to their curling Irons” (Newman 121). The threat of effeminization was often conjoined with the monstrousness of hermaphroditism: this threat extended from danger in and of the theater to political or imperial peril. Todd Reeser explains how the fear of hermaphroditism resulted in not only the fear of cultural otherness, but also the fear of an enfeebled monarch. Queen Elizabeth herself was represented as a “hermaphroditic ruler”
According to Reeser, "Sexual impotency, or an unstable reproductive sexuality on the part of the king, becomes a potential way in which royal masculinity cannot be taken for granted and must be earned" (240). One may recognize that the threat of hermaphroditism and its by-product, impotency, might result in social disorder and pose an enormous risk to the stability of the entire state.

Jean E. Howard looks at impotency in *The Roaring Girl* but almost exclusively as a threat to patriarchal marriage specifically in regard to the plot involving the citizen wives: “These marriages of sexual lack seem to indict the merchant-class man for impotency and the merchant-class woman for insatiability” (Howard, “Sex and Social Conflict” 177). However, we may infer from her materialist reading that much of what she says about the wives in the play may be attributed as well to the eroticized, destabilizing influence of the female/male character, Moll: “… economically useful urban wives were experienced by men as threatening figures: sexually demanding, potentially unchaste, and probably more interested, as a daily matter, in riding the stone horse from on top than in submissively ‘ingling’ with their husbands… such wives, if uncontrolled, emasculate men and cause them to lose their proper masculine dominance” (178). However, Howard considers that the potency or lack thereof in *The Roaring Girl* is incorporated into the theme of power relations in general, not simply to the subject of heterosexual marriage; more to the point, she maintains that female sexual desire is the crux of the matter in the play. In so doing, she notes the difference between

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18 “Middleton, Micro-Cynicon applies the word “ingling” in this sense to ‘INGLING PYANDER’ who ‘Is a pale checquer’d black hermaphrodite. Sometimes he jets it like a gentleman, Other whiles much like a wanton courtesan’. But frequently it is women who debilitate their lovers” (Williams 661).
Shakespeare’s rendering of desire with Middleton and Dekker’s, enunciating that the problematic of female desire is posed explicitly in the play: “Much more starkly than in Shakespeare’s comedies, for example, the idealizations of the heterosexual romance plot clash with the competing investments of male homoeroticism and the negative, satirical conventions …. The result is no green world of laughter and fulfilled desire, but the rough inequalities of an urban landscape of friction and of difference, in which desire, especially woman’s desire, finds no easy fulfillment” (186-187).

While Howard’s emphasis may be on female sexual desire, all manner of sexual desire -- female, male, heterosexual, homoerotic, as she admits, is the terrain of The Roaring Girl. While I do agree with Howard that Shakespeare’s representation of desire is different from Middleton and Dekker’s as demonstrated previously in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, that is, that homoeroticism is represented in contrast to explicit idealized heteronormative relationships, desire is certainly fraught in Shakespeare as well, with obstructions, challenges, and resistances: what we may understand about the characterizing of rape, female power, male potency, and sexual transgression may reinforce similar constructions in The Roaring Girl.

From the very beginning of The Roaring Girl in “The Epistle,” we are invited by Middleton to interpret the codpiece: “For Venus, being a woman, passes through the play in doublet and breeches – a brave disguise and a safe one, if the statute untie not her codpiece point!” (12-14). The epistle itself is intriguing, as it is addressed to the “Comic Play Readers,” rather than playgoers, and has as its subject “Venery and Laughter.” While it may not oblige a hermeneutic reading, it demands textual attention. Atypically for the era, this dramatist is writing to be read; the controversy of the stage or the page
seems to have escaped Middleton. Moll is personified as Venus, passing in male attire, a “brave” yet “safe” disguise: these adjacent qualities are conveyed here as oppositional. The codpiece itself pivots between bravery, that is, exhibitionism, and safety, or concealment: the ambiguity of the codpiece is communicated early and demonstrably. Further, Middleton prepares us for a comedy about venery, that is, sexual desire, and in ridiculing hypocrisy, employs phallic or rather, innuendo concerning impotence: “... we rather wish in such discoveries, where reputation lies bleeding, a slackness of truth than a fullness of slander” (25-26). This chapter aspires to take Middleton at his word, finding that inside this play, there is much truth in and about slackness.

In fact the play is over-laden with double-entendre, which, if not for the complicated form and diction, and the complex rendering of threatening and anxious cultural codes, might be considered tiresome for the modern reader. Quite the contrary, the sexual innuendo is not simply comic, the plurality of language itself is embedded in the message: in addition to stagecraft, characterization, theme, and subtext, the play is inherently about language as well. A brief glance at the dramatis personae (Sir Adam Appleton, Sir Davy Dapper, Sir Beauteous Ganymede, Sir Thomas Long, Laxton, Tiltyard, and Openwork) reveals how sexual innuendo, or language, is imbricated with sexual content. While conventional, these names inform: this is a comedy about human sexual relations and erotic desire within the realm of unsettled gender roles.

The play is most assuredly about masculinity, but where masculinity is anxious in Shakespeare, Middleton and Dekker take anxiety a step further. Masculinity, while constantly threatened by multiple forces, is a false paradigm. The creation of a principal character named Laxton, a gallant who lacks stone, or testicles, makes this eminently
clear. The dialogue itself, at the outset, makes certain the audience comprehends: Sir Alexander Wengrave tells his servants to “Furnish/ Master Laxton / With what he wants: a stone. – A stool, I would say, a stool. (1.2.54-56), to which Laxton replies, “I had rather stand, sir” (57). The obviousness of the slapstick dialogue suggests mockery or parody. In point of fact, I argue that this play ridicules masculinity; however, the jesting does not obviate the anxiety: it is simply another way to negotiate the anxiety of masculinity.

Middleton and Dekker couple the prevailing cultural notions of transvestite monstrosity expressed in the polemical pamphlets with a more indeterminate, perhaps established conceit of androgyny. Wengrave’s description of Moll, however, suggests the former:

A scurvy woman,
On whom the passionate old man swore he doted.
“A creature,” saith he, “nature hath brought forth
To mock the sex of woman.” It is a thing
One knows not how to name; her birth began
Ere she was all made, ‘Tis woman more than man,
Man more than woman, and – which to none can hap—
The sun gives her two shadows to one shape.
Nay, more, let this strange thing walk, stand, or sit,
No blazing star draws more eyes after it. (1.2.126-135)

To which Sir Davy replies, “A monster. ‘Tis some monster.” (1.2.136). However, even in Wengrave’s estimation, the “monster” is beguiling – mesmerizing. The “blazing star” is figuratively brilliant, dazzling. Moll’s monstrosity is already suggested as seductive. As Wengrave hatches his plan to ensnare Moll by setting Trapdoor on her, he says: “…they say sometimes she goes in breeches, follow her as her man.” (1.2.225-6) Trapdoor agrees, remarking salaciously, “And when her breeches are off, she shall follow me” (1.2.227). The sexual conquest is manifest: “Moll, if you budge, you’re gone. This me shall crown; / A roaring boy the roaring girl puts down” (1.2.248-249).
It is Laxton, mainly, who is desirous of intercourse with the ambigendered Moll. Ironically, Laxton’s arousal derives from his assumption that Moll’s morals are loose; in point of fact, she is chaste. He flirts with her, tries to woo her, and finally appoints a time for a sexual rendezvous with her. Laxton, the scheming gallant, gives voice to his sexual craving for Moll in an aside. The speech is replete with irony, since Laxton, the impotent, lacks stone, lacks potency:

Heart, I would give but too much money to be nibbling with that wench. Life, sh’ has the spirit of four great parishes, and a voice that will drown all the city! Methinks a brave captain might get all his soldiers upon her, and ne’er be beholding to a company of Mile End milksops, if he could come on and come off quick enough. Such a Moll were a marrowbone before an Italian; …. I’ll lay hard siege to her …. Where the walls are flesh and blood, I’ll ever pierce through with a golden augur. (2.1.176-185)

So, the play adopts titillating allusions to sexuality: a glorious personified phallus is rendered alongside the rhetoric of monstrosity. The tailor who fits Moll with breeches employs language brimming over with sexual innuendo, double-entendre, and pun: the breeches will “stand round and full” (2.2.88), “take up a yard [slang for penis] more” (2.2.86), “open” unlike the others made for her which were “somewhat stiff between the legs” (2.2.90-91). This “codpiece daughter” (2.2.94) so named by Wengrave, is “a monster with two trinkets” (2.2.79). The particular locution yokes together monstrosity and androgyne. For the two trinkets stand for genitalia, vagina and penis. A bewildered Wengrave articulates the logic of cross-dressing in the culture: “What age is this! If the wife go in breeches, the man must wear long coats like a fool” (2.2.79-80).

Middleton and Dekker appear to interrogate gender constructions currently undergoing change. Their social sphere is in flux; social disorder may be underlying the anxiety the characters express. As Marjorie Garber indicates in “The Logic of the
Transvestite:” Moll is a double figure, a “sign of the double division of female/male, as in roaring (male) girl. “Not either/or but both/and” (229). She goes further to say that the story of Moll “makes literary sense, interpretive sense, not only sense as a historical reminder of shifting class and gender roles and their attendant anxieties. The anxiety here is not—or not only—about the rising power of women and the middle class, the breakdown of legible cultural distinctions as signified in dress codes governing class and gender decorum, but about something that underlies those specific cultural anxieties” (231). For Garber, the play is ultimately about desire, and for her, “The system of desire is organized around the phallus, which is neither a phantasy nor an organ but a ‘signifier…’ ” (226).

For Middleton and Dekker, the signifier of the phallus is manifested in a multiform manner. Though often tongue in cheek in this comedy, the references to impotence abound: Sebastian, although a dubious figure for heterosexual masculinity, just as Proteus in Two Gentlemen of Verona has been shown to be, speaks to himself about the condition of impotency:

I have examined the best part of man –
Reason and judgment -- and in love, they tell me,
They leave me uncontrolled. He that swayed
By an unfeeling blood, past heat of love,
His springtime must needs err; his watch ne’er goes right
That sets his dial by a rusty clock. (2.2.103-8)

This short disquisition on masculinity, reason, desire, and impotency, spoken aloud to himself, but overheard by his father, confuses even Sir Alexander: “So, and which is that rusty clock, sir? You?” (2.2.109-111) Both father and son unconsciously collude in and are anxious about their own potency. As well, the play treats the theme of father and son, generational conflict, old age and youth, which is often subsumed in the
tropology of impotence. Stephen Orgel reminds us that: “Early Modern moralists continually reminded their charges that manhood was not a natural condition but a quality to be striven for and maintained only through constant vigilance, and even then with the utmost difficulty” (Impersonations 19). Sir Alexander and his son are fearful about loss and lack. Moll’s character, in its maleness, threatens the fragility of masculinity. As such, Orgel contends, “Moll is surrounded by men who are less than men; the play is full of references to impotence, castration, false phalluses, countertenors; it even includes a character named Sir Beauteous Ganymede, whose function in the plot is negligible, but who is, in the semiotic structure of the play, all but essential” (152).

It is eminently clear that, just as Garber has rendered it, The Roaring Girl “is a play about the circulation of parts, about women with penises and testicles and men who lack them” (223). The subplot involving the citizen wives, their husbands, and the gallants who surround and pursue them acts as a counterpoint, which gives the play its texture. Much of this plot has to do with the wives’ complaints about their husbands’ inadequacy. Much materialist criticism has been written about the city comedy as fertile ground for discussions about the emerging merchant class, class transgressions and hostilities and their attendant anxieties, and portrayals of shifting attitudes towards marriage. Not only is the merchant a threat to the gentry but “the clever gallant represents the gentry’s will to sexual mastery at a time when its social and financial potency was uncertain” (Leinwand 123). The connection between class, money, and potency is made evident by a close look at dialogues in which the wives “conflate the gallants’ financial inadequacy with male sexual inadequacy” (Panek, The Roaring Girl,
The following dialogue between Mrs. Gallipot and Mrs. Openwork exemplifies this:

Mrs. Gallipot: Such another lame gelding offered to carry me through thick and thin – Laxton, sirrah – but I am rid of him now.
Mrs. Openwork: Happy is the woman can be rid of ‘em all. ‘Las, what are your whisking gallants to our husbands, weigh ‘em rightly man for man? … we shopkeepers, when all’s done, are sure to have ‘em in our purse-nets at length, and when they are in, Lord, what simple animals they are! Then they hang the head.
Mrs. Gallipot: Then they droop. (4.2.42-52).

The joke is made richer by the suggestions of purse for the female genitalia, and drooping head for penile impotence. Between the citizen wives, the gallants are emasculated; however, the lack of potency is not reserved simply for the aristocratic class. The wives ridicule, with utter contempt, their own husbands. Casting suspicion on the transaction between her husband and Moll, Mrs. Openwork cries foul upon her husband’s lack of sexual mastery: She accuses her husband of flirting with Moll, while at the same time being incapacitated sexually in their own marital relations:

How now, greetings? Love terms, with a pox, between you? Have I found one of your haunts? I send you For hollands, and you’re i’ th’ Low Countries, with a mischief. I’m served with good ware by th’ shift that makes it lie dead so long upon my hands I were as good shut up shop, for when I open it I take nothing. (2.1.211-216)

Again Middleton and Dekker play raucously with thinly veiled sexual language:

“hollands” are linens but are also one of the “Low Countries”, (“attending to matters below the waist” (Panek, The Roaring Girl 28); “countries” is also an early modern pun on cunt; “ware” suggests merchandise and male genitals (Panek 28).

In the early modern period, marriage was under enormous pressure. The vast majority of dramatic works of the period deal with cuckoldry in one form or another.
As Katherine Crawford delineates in a summary of the critical literature on early modern sexuality, “Marriage as a structure has enormous institutional weight even as it is subject to resistance from within and without. One of the most common forms of resistance from within the institution is adultery” (Crawford, “Privilege, Possibility, and Perversion” 9). Middleton and Dekker, in writing a play in which male corporeality and sexual performance are lampooned so unremittingly, are in effect, calling into question not just marriage, but all patriarchal social institutions. Every segment of the society is a target for their satire: gallants, citizens, knights, merchants, and thieves alike. In *The Roaring Girl* accusations against male sexual prowess by wives illuminate just how threatened patriarchal marriage and masculinity were. Further, as Crawford points out, “The discursive structures of domestic sexuality were intertwined with political identity in early modernity: a threat to one was a threat to both (11). The threat of female power was such that it extended from the exclusive private domain to the state: plays such as *The Roaring Girl* which characterize women regulating men is a “reversal of the usual prosecution of disorderliness by an ordering state” (Helgerson 71).

However, Garber disagrees with a reductive criticism of this sort. For her, if the play represents impotence, the trajectory is towards the ultimate impotence, that is, castration: “In short, *The Roaring Girl’s* omnipresent references to castration, emasculation, penises and testicles worn (like clothing; extra “yards,” “codpieces,” “trinkets”) by women rather than men tell a story – a story somewhat different from the progressivist narrative of economic and cultural reconfiguration urged by both modern British editors and modern American feminists” (“Logic” 225). For Garber, this kind of criticism reinforces a hegemonic structure. Again, Garber maintains that the theater
is a fetishization, and that this play in particular “discloses a dangerous, carnivalized fantasia of dislocation, in which the fetishization of commodities is the cover for the fetishization of body parts” (224). The tailor who makes Moll breeches, according to Garber, makes the man --and the tail--, but also “wields the shears” (224).

Women who wear the pants --and the codpieces-- in patriarchal societies are, literally and figuratively, castrating figures. One way to detect Middleton and Dekker’s fascination with castration in the play is to, again, examine the puns in the names: although a purse is an early modern symbol for female genitalia, when seen in light of castration, it may be ambisexual and may refer also to the bag, the male scrotal sac. Hence Cutpurse is the verb for the castrating gesture, which Moll’s character suggests.

In addition, addressing the minor character Curtalax, meaning cutlass, Sir Davy calls attention to this name:

An excellent name for a sergeant, Curtalax.
Sergeants indeed are weapons of the law.
When prodigal ruffians far in debt are grown,
Should not you cut them, citizens were o’erthrown. (3.3.126-129)

As Sir Davy implies, the message is as much psychosexual as it is economic. To maintain the citizens’ financial solvency, debtors must be “cut.” It is no coincidence, and should not be dismissed as unmeaningful or as evidence of slipshod writing to apprehend that the name and character Curtalax conflates the idea of cutting with “lack” and Laxton. To underscore the point, Middleton and Dekker, in a later scene, have Mrs. Gallipot tauntingly emasculate Laxton: “ ‘Las, poor Laxton! I think thy tail’s cut already. Your worst!” (4.2. 95-96)

19 “cutpurse” may apply to castration in the economic sense as well, just as Garber indicates: “equating castration with loss of economic power.” (“Logic” 225).
Gary Taylor in *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood*, seeks to understand, through a historical and cultural framework, the many meanings of castration. Middleton’s work has prominence in this study. As Taylor says, “Middleton sexed language, and languaged sex, better than any writer in English (27).” Taylor observes that at the end of Middleton’s career in *A Game of Chess* “he concentrated his attention on the mutilation of male genitals” (28), and that Middleton was one among many writers and artists for whom “Castrations of one sort or another particularly fascinated humanist Europe” (30). According to Taylor, although Middleton, like St. Augustine, found the idea of castration appalling, he allegorized it and fixated upon it. Since, as Taylor notes, Middleton was “exceptionally dedicated to representing women (87) we may inquire into the meaning behind Moll’s codpiece and its relation to castration in *The Roaring Girl*. Is it a symbol of empowerment? Taylor’s disquisition on the codpiece, which, he tells us, in the mid-1600’s became a “filthy habit,” (60) illustrates how in Middleton’s work the codpiece, emphasizing as it did the scrotum, was “the banner of masculinity” (60). In *A Game of Chess*, there is a religio-political message of the castrated White Bishop’s Pawn who needs “no codpiece because he has no cods” (60). According to Taylor, castration for Middleton allegorized censorship, expurgation, and further, that the book itself is “an allegorical scrotum” (83).

Castration as censorship may apply to *The Roaring Girl* as well; indeed the political themes and undercurrents in the play are always present. However, castration as a signifier of sexuality or anxious masculinity is probably more relevant. The references to castration may be a way of further and finally effeminating both the male
characters and the masculinity they fail to support or confirm. The instability of patriarchal masculinity in the early modern period is suggested by both castration and its would-be prosthetic substitution, the codpiece. In “‘Had it a codpiece, ‘twere a man indeed’” William Fisher discusses the transferability of the codpiece, and the mutability of gendered categories, relating William Gamage’s poem “On the feminine Supremacie” (1613) where women wear the codpiece in the “Isles”, and men “bow” to them (122). Fisher claims that Gamage’s implication is that “materializing masculinity through this part threatens to destabilize patriarchal gendered relations on account of its transferability” (122).

We see much the same in Middleton and Dekker’s materializing masculinity through the signification of Moll’s codpiece, and its consequent destabilizing of gendered roles. The codpiece, when brandished by Moll as a symbol of female/male mastery, is apprehended as so threatening by the male characters as to be monstrous. We have seen that Sir Alexander’s belief that his son has been bewitched by Moll, and his dubbing of Moll as “a monster with two trinkets” alerts us to the connection between witchcraft, monstrosity, and castration in this period. Perceived as such, in light of a subtext of castration, Moll, a monster wearing the codpiece, expressing mastery, is unspeakable, abominable. Moll is not simply the Other, but a monstrous Other. As Gary Taylor confirms in his concluding remarks on castration in Middletonian text, citing Diderot’s Dream of D’Alembert, “Maybe man … is just the monster to a woman, and woman the monster to man” (229). If this is so, heterosexual practices are monstrous in and of themselves, yet Taylor suggests that for Middleton, and I would say, Freud as well, the variety of human sexuality is Other. Articulating
how this figures in *The Roaring Girl* with regard to the existing patriarchal order, Taylor’s comment informs: “A monster embodies a conflict between one time and another; consequently, what is monstrous in one age, or one place, will not be monstrous in another.” (227). The sexuality that is represented in this play communicates a culture and society in flux: the nature of sexual difference, transgression, and gendered bodies are all represented as unstable. The castration motif in the satire exposes a society in which the weakness of men is ridiculed, but it may also portend the looming danger of a disordered system. If ultimately, this comedy is more about what men lack than what men possess, thereby, the social order is indeed precarious.

In plumbing the depths of early modern desire and sexuality, Middleton and Dekker repeatedly convey the complexity of eroticism. On the surface, the play privileges heterosexual, patriarchal marriage, but in the unfolding of the plot and characters, marriage of this kind is continually undermined by homoeroticism, transvestism, and the conundrum of what constitutes female sexual desire. Along with the concerns about castration, lack of potency, and female emasculation of men is the recurrence of shame as a kind of leitmotif. Sir Alexander, suggesting that Moll has bewitched his son, aims to destroy her for the shame she has brought on: “There will I make induction to her ruin, / And rid shame from my house, grief from my heart” (4.2. 212-213). This follows his and Trapdoor’s plot to trick Moll into pilfering Alexander’s jewels, a temptation to which she does not succumb. This scene is distinguished by Moll pretending to be a musician with a viol, disguised as a man, aiding Sebastian and Mary Fitzallard in their plan to wed. Mary Fitzallard, too, is disguised as a male page.
Suggesting female power, Moll verbalizes in provocative double entendre throughout the scene; in contrast, Mary is largely mute. The “real” female does not have the authority to discourse in the same way the embodied female/male Moll does.

The visible tableau on stage of a female transvested male character with a viol between her legs is both titillating and taboo for the male characters. The viol da gamba, as the name suggests, played between Moll’s legs, engenders all manner of teasing and fascination by the male characters. Much hay is made by Middleton and Dekker, capitalizing on the sexuality of the scene, especially in the homoerotic vein.

As a prelude to more homoerotic allusion, Sir Alexander and Trapdoor, conspiring against Moll, evoke the innuendo of sodomy:

Sir Alexander:  What she leaves,
Thou shalt come closely in and filch away,
And all the weight upon her back I’ll lay…
Trapdoor: Being a stout girl, perhaps she’ll desire pressing; then all the weight must lie upon her belly.
Sir Alexander: Belly or back I care not so I’ve one.
Trapdoor: You’re of my mind for that, sir. (4.1.21-23; 26-29)

Likewise, Sebastian, himself, though purportedly heterosexual, is tantalized by Moll, and makes clear in a pun that as a “man” with the viol between her legs, Moll is the object of sexual desire: “A gentleman, a musician, sir, one of excellent fingering” (4.2.173-174). At the same time as he deceives his father, both father and son are of one mind about Moll: they are aroused by the sexuality she exudes. The language -- “stroke,” “puts down,” “mounts, “stands upon the whole,” is transparently erotic – both simultaneously homo and heteroerotically charged. Underscoring the homoerotic moment and all that it excites, upon watching Sebastian kiss the male disguised Mary, Moll remarks improbably, and perhaps ironically: “How strange this shows, one man
to kiss another!” (4.1.47). To which Sebastian responds saucily: “I’d kiss such men to choose, Moll / Methinks a woman’s lip tastes well in a doublet” (4.1.48-49).

The viola that “hangs” upon the wall, referred to by the characters as an “instrument” is a thinly veiled allusion to the penis. As such, the viola is another incarnation or analogue in the tropology of the codpiece. This accords with Jean Howard’s observation that “… on the stage when Moll actually plays her instrument what the spectator sees is a woman whose strokes and clever fingering occur in the space between her own legs. Her viol suggests her own sexual instrument and her masturbatory playing of it a final defiance of patriarchal, phallus-oriented, sexuality” (“Sex and Social Conflict” 185). While Howard’s emphasis on the viol as a kind of stand-in for female genitalia underpins an analysis of Moll’s character as an “erotic object and subject” (180), her recognition of phallic resonances in the scene gives weight to the viol as a male signifier as well. Sir Alexander Wengrave’s insinuation that Moll, “a whoremaster,” (4.1.194) might find a ready client in his son, the music scholar, “especially for prick-song” marks further the phallic metaphor.

Contradicting the erotic presentation, Moll herself, insists upon the audience and characters recognizing her as categorically chaste. However, the suggestiveness of the metatheatrical display reads sexually: recalling Julia in Two Gentlemen of Verona who plays “the woman’s part,” she too, will play the role, but in Moll’s case, the role’s quintessence is ambiguity: “I’ll play my part as well as I can. I t shall ne’er be said I came into a gentleman’s chamber and let his instrument hang by the walls!” (4.1.86-87).

The fascination with Moll’s character and the part she plays is manifested in the
act of transvestism. She comes on and off the stage, sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man, and sometimes as a manly woman. All of this is braided with the inquiry of fashion on which the play revolves. For what is a codpiece but a device which is thoroughly connected with the fashion of the times? As many have noted, the codpiece was already going out of fashion, so its conspicuousness in the play must be accounted for and must be considered with regard to fashion as a theme. As Garber maintains, “…the play’s anxiety about clothing and fashion, which is omnipresent, is indeed conjoined with a related anxiety about sexuality (“Logic” 221). Middleton tells the readership of the play outright in “The Epistle” that the play is about fashion, and that fashion is analogous to theater: “The fashion of playmaking I can properly compare to nothing so naturally as the alteration in apparel. For in the time of the great-crop doublet, your huge bombasted plays, quilted with mighty words to lean purposes, was only then in fashion; as the doublet fell, neater inventions began to set up” (1-5). Referring to Moll as Venus20 Middleton extends the conceit: “For Venus, being a woman, passes through the play in doublet and breeches – a brave disguise and a safe one, if the statute untie not her codpiece point!” (12-14). Middleton is referring here to sumptuary laws which had forbidden transvestism. As Kastan and Stallybrass inform us in their introduction to Staging the Renaissance, “At least eight proclamations were issued in Tudor England in order to prevent ‘the confusion … of degrees’ “: not only was gender identity threatened, but so too “class status” (9). Cross-dressing would bring about social disorder, as the anti-theatrical tracts warned. “But the transgressive cross-dressing on the streets of London was of course the very essence of the English

20 A reference, perhaps, to The Aeneid, where Venus appears cross-dressed (Garber, “Logic” 222).
Renaissance theater” (9). In *The Roaring Girl*, as Garber so succinctly states, there is a “pervasive, indeed obsessive concern with clothing” (“Logic” 223).

Critics have been of many minds on the subject of fashion in the early modern period. Karen Newman’s argument is gender-based: “In early modern England, men dressed up, and often more elaborately than women; but increasingly when they did, they were feminized, even demonized as effeminate. At a moment when traditional categories of difference were breaking down, ‘femininity’ represented an important, perhaps even newly essentialized, category of difference” (120). Newman points out that the enforcement of the laws was against men “only” (121); for her, the blurring of genders is most significant: "Even the pamphlet debates and the furor over cross-dressing may owe more to an objection to women's sharing in male privilege of *excess* in dress than to specifically masculine attire: farthingales and the voluminous breeches of the 1590s and first decade of the seventeenth century have more in common than they do differences " (121). On the other hand, Natasha Korda applies a materialist analysis to fashion in *The Roaring Girl*, emphasizing Moll Frith’s performance as the representation of a worker:

I am proposing that Moll's sexualized and gendered attire takes on new significance when viewed within the larger context of the "alteration in apparel" -- the fabrication and re-fabrication, sale and re-sale, botching and badging, of apparel that fuelled the clothing and entertainment industries, and in so doing, gave employment to so many "distressed needlewomen and trade-fallen wives" (3. 1. 95). That is, the "alteration" in question may be read in very material terms as pointing simultaneously to the work necessary to produce the latest trends in fashion (including the fashion of cross-dressing) and to the incessant change of fashion that created the demand for such work… Moll Frith's economic ingenuity is crucial to an understanding of her cross-dressed persona, and vice versa, for the two are inextricably intertwined. (Korda)
Korda’s point of view is relevant not just for its relation to cross-dressing, but also to the play’s plot involving the merchant wives, husbands, tailors who are members of the emerging middle-class, who are making, buying, selling clothing: labor and the circulation of commodities is becoming an omnipresent fact of life in the early modern city.

The fin de siècle of the sixteenth century was a time of social upheaval and conflict: “clothing – its production, marketing, and wearing – served as a concrete manifestation of the cultural confusion” (Finch 515). Finch details a controversy within a separatist Puritan congregation in 1594 in London, between two brothers, Francis and George Johnson over Francis’ wife Thomasine’s wearing of “‘the long white bre[a]st after the fashion of yo[u]ng dames, and so low she wore it, as the world call them koepeece brests’” (495). As Finch explains: “Thomasine’s apparel placed her body at the center of communal life, where it served as a prism for church members, constellating and reflecting competing interpretations of such critical public issues as moral godliness, gender relations, church discipline, and social class…” (506). It was in this social, political, religious milieu in which Middleton and Dekker’s discourse on fashion may be seen as subversive, Moll’s character in particular blurring the boundaries of class and gender, manifested in the clothing she wears. The significance of Moll’s fashion is testified by Sir Alexander who reifies her clothing in an aside lamenting his son’s appalling choice for a bride: “Here’s good gear towards! I have brought my son to marry a Dutch slop and a French doublet – a codpiece daughter” (2.2. 92-94).

Middleton and Dekker employ all the meanings of fashion in this play, but one must not overlook the comic material it provides. The comedy exploits the sexualized
meanings inherent in the transvesting of Moll’s character: the stage direction in Act 5, scene 2 indicates: “Enter Moll [dressed as a man]. Sir Alexander gazes upon her male attire and says, “Is this your wedding gown?” (5. 2. 103). This provides the provocative amusement in Goshawk’s rejoinder:

Why, sir, take comfort now, there’s no such matter:
No priest will marry her, sir, for a woman
While that shape’s on; and it was never known
Two men were married and conjoined in one. (5.2.107-110)

Homosexuality here, while providing an opportunity for mirth, is also a site for the transgression of socially acceptable boundaries within the safety of comic convention.
Banter between the characters of Trapdoor and Alexander affords laughter; however, the rhetorical language and word play suggest deeper meaning:

Trapdoor: She comes in a shirt of mail
Sir Alexander: How, shirt of mail?
Trapdoor: Yes, sir, or a male shirt, that’s to say in man’s apparel.
Sir Alexander: To my son.
Trapdoor: Close to your son; your son and her moon will be in conjunction, if all almanacs lie not. Her black safeguard is turned into a deep slop, the holes of her upper body to buttonholes, her waistcoat to a doublet, her placket to the ancient seat of a codpiece, and you shall take ‘em both with standing collars (3.3. 19-27).

The suggestiveness of intercourse through the punning of son/sun, mail/male, holes for nipples, and standing for erection fuses the language of fashion with sexual idiom.
Finally, then, one must inquire into the codpiece itself as a semiotic device. Although it signifies as an attribute of masculinity, one must ponder its function when it is worn by a female character whose gender throughout the course of the play defies strict determinacy. In analyzing seventeenth century texts including The Roaring Girl, William Fisher posits that “the codpiece eventually became a failed means of establishing
masculinity” (Fisher “Had it a codpiece” 116).

As has already been demonstrated, Middleton and Dekker appear to have been stimulated by the notion of failed masculinity. Cuckoldry anxiety is yet another ground in which they expose inadequate masculinity. While the cuckoldry theme is played out mainly amongst the married Gallipots, Openworks, and Tiltyards, Laxton brings up cuckoldry early on in relation to Moll as a kind of male fantasy. To Mrs. Gallipot’s contemptuous characterization of Moll as a hermaphrodite, “Some will not stick to say she’s a man, and some, both man and woman” (2.1.196-197), Laxton, leeringly, says, “That were excellent. She might first cuckold the husband and then make him do as much for the wife” (2.1. 198-199). This suggests that “Moll’s male persona implies a universal sexual prowess” (Orgel, Impersonations 152); moreover, although paradoxical, it may be the enunciation of a wish-fulfillment for cuckoldry. Jennifer Panek puts forth the idea that cuckoldry might have deeper interest than what one sees on the surface. Interpreting the wittol Allwit in Middleton’s A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, this figure “paradoxically taps into a current of male, anti-patriarchal discontent” (Panek, “‘A Wittol Cannot Be Cookold’” 68). In Allwit Middleton invents a character who “promises all the privileges of patriarchal domestic order with none of their attendant anxieties” (68). This may be true for the potential cuckolds in The Roaring Girl as well. Panek holds that cuckoldry “precisely due to its lack of symmetry between male privilege and responsibility, holds considerable subversive potential” (68).

The threat of cuckoldry runs through The Roaring Girl as a device in which to deride marriage. Gallipot, if not a wittol, is depicted as a timorous, unmanly, too forgiving, and too loving, uxorious husband. His wife’s contempt for him is palpable: “I
cannot abide a man that’s too fond over me – so cookish! Thou dost not know how to handle a woman in her kind … Now fie, how you vex me! I cannot abide these apron husbands. Such cotqueans!” (3. 2. 25-27, 32-33). All the while she is scheming with Laxton to cheat him out of his money. Middleton and Dekker exploit the generally held assumptions about cuckoldry – that a wife will bankrupt her husband to make her lover wealthy, and/or that her “adultery goes hand in hand with her disobedience, for her husband is not ‘man’ enough to control her” (Panek, “‘A Wittol Cannot Be Cookold’” 70). Panek’s view is that potential cuckolds such as Gallipot had already lost much in early modern marriage: The paradox in patriarchal marriage was such that

… while legally, and in the eyes of moralists, marriage granted a husband near-complete authority over his wife, it simultaneously depleted him of a large part of his previously independent authority over his own reputation, which was now tied to his wife’s behavior. (71)

As Panek claims, while it may seem alien to us, the husband’s control in early modern marriage was more of an illusion; the relationship ended up as “one which inherently obliged him to relinquish control” (71).

Another enduring myth in the Renaissance was that cuckoldry was inevitable.

This is Laxton’s insinuation to Gallipot as he damns with faint praise:

The first hour that your wife was in my eye,
Myself with other gentlemen sitting by
In your shop tasting smoke, and speech being used
That men who have fairest wives are most abused
And hardly scaped the horn,… (4. 2.320-324)

Laxton’s compliment to Gallipot about his wife’s tempting beauty reinforces the aforementioned assumptions about cuckoldry and its inevitable threat to marriage.

Moll’s insistence that she will never marry serves as an antithesis to these beliefs.
While a thread of misogyny does run through the play, Moll, an empowered, outspoken, anti-heroic figure seems to speak for women’s agency. Battling against Laxton’s overtures, her speech protests men’s tarnishing of women’s reputations:

In thee I defy all men, their worst hates
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts
With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools.
Distressed needlewomen and trade-fall’n wives.
Fish that must needs bite or themselves be bitten,
Such hungry things as these may soon be took
With a worm fast’ned on a golden hook;
Those are the lecher’s food, his prey….

While the ambivalent figure of Moll never quite fits neatly into polemical arguments about gender, it may be because Middleton and Dekker’s project aims at all societal scourges. As Jean Howard maintains: “Middleton and Dekker have attempted to decriminalize Moll, to present her as neither thief nor whore, to make her an exception to society’s rules concerning women’s behavior but not a fundamental threat to the sex-gender system. But her portrayal is not entirely innocuous or sanitized” (“Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle” 438). In the final analysis Howard asserts that these attempts are in vain. In fact, Middleton and Dekker “… use the image of the cross-dressed woman to defy expectations about woman’s nature and to protest the injustices caused by the sex-gender system” (438). Moll’s persistence in remaining unmarried seems to be a sober challenge against the institution as a whole. Her self-fashioning as bisexual does not attenuate her forthright position on marriage:

I have no humour to marry. I love to lie o’ both sides o’ th’bed myself; and again, o’th’other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey; therefore I’ll ne’er go about it…. I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman. Marriage is but a chopping and a changing, where the maiden loses
one head and has a worse i’th’place. (2.2.37-45)

The pervasiveness of cuckoldry in Renaissance texts has been explored and given substantial attention in the critical literature. An accurate summing up of its cultural determinants has been rendered by Stephen Cohen:

… as a form of competition between men in a patriarchal culture, cuckoldry was a threat to social status and even masculinity: … . in a culture in which the status of women was an increasingly contentious subject, the specter of the unfaithful wife was an affront to patriarchal social order itself, as suggested by cuckoldry’s frequent association in the popular imagination with other forms of female insubordination, including financial profligacy, sartorial ostentation, shrewishness and husband-beating (Cohen 6).

Cohen’s remarks upon sartorial ostentation and cuckoldry have particular implications for this study. Middleton and Dekker’s attention to fashion has been pointed out: fashion as a metaphor seems to be inexhaustible to them, and with good reason. The following dialogue between Gallipot and Laxton bears out Cohen’s assertion that cuckoldry results in another threat: the one brought about by male competition resulting in a threat to social standing and social order. Middleton and Dekker employ the sartorial trope: When Gallipot engages with Laxton in a defense of his wife and of marriage itself, he asks the parasitic Laxton how he could take away his leftovers or hand-me-downs: “Would not you scorn to wear my clothes, sir?” (3.3.250). Furthermore, he extends the metaphor: “Then pray, sir, wear not her, for she’s a garment/ so fitting for my body I’m loath / Another should put it on; you will undo both” (3.3.252-254). Middleton and Dekker’s metaphoric use of fashion instantiates a materialist understanding of clothing; that clothing (such as the codpiece) is not simply semiotic, it aids in “mold[ing] the body and make[ing] the man” (Fisher, “Had it a codpiece” 103).

One cannot help but remark upon the similarities in the would-be cuckoldry of the
citizen plot in *The Roaring Girl* with that of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. One is tempted even to speculate that the collaboration between Middleton and Shakespeare gave rise to a borrowing or an anxiety of influence or, perhaps more to the point, a parodic rendering of the Shakespeare play. The references to Laxton and Moll’s assignation, in, of all places, Brentford, invite comparisons. After all, in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Falstaff is cross-dressed as the Witch of Brentford. Laxton’s scheming to engage in an adulterous liaison with Mrs. Gallipot in order to swindle her husband out of his money must recall Falstaff’s same cuckolding strategy in *The Merry Wives*. Laxton’s aside makes this plain:

> Why, ’tis but for want of opportunity, thou know’st. I put her off with opportunity still. By this light, I hate her, but for means to keep me in fashion with gallants; for what I take from her I spend upon other wenches, bear her in hand still. She has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money. (2.1.79-84)

The differences are evident. Falstaff, a buffoon, a kind of fool, profligate yet charming, older as opposed to the youthful libertine, debauched, and shameless gallant Laxton are both, however, fallen aristocrats leeching off the middle-class wives of London or Windsor. In both plays the husbands are ridiculed as weaklings. Gallipot is oddly reminiscent of Master Ford, and, just as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the forgiveness and friendship in which the play culminates, and which Mr. Gallipot secures from Laxton, seems particularly implausible in *The Roaring Girl*.

In the next chapter I will explore this forgiveness and how it is yoked with the Shakespearean attitude, especially in light of the unique rendering of cuckoldry which animates Shakespeare’s comedy. For now, as a conclusion to both cuckoldry and codpiece discourses represented by Middleton and Dekker in *The Roaring Girl*, in
applying a general contrast to what we obtain in Shakespeare, these playwrights,
Middleton and Dekker, write their comedy with a worldly-wise voice. Just about every
class is offensive: gallants, citizens, knights, fathers, sons, thieves. Everyone has a
game to play, a strategy to plan, an intrigue to weave. No one’s motives are pure.
Sebastian’s game is as mean-spirited as Laxton’s; in point of fact, Sebastian and Laxton
are foils. Moll, the most morally righteous character, the one who wears the codpiece, is
an outlaw. Yet she is manly in her morality. However, she stands for nothing solidly,
not the law, not patriarchy, not social institutions, and not their oppositions --
lawlessness, anarchy, or absolute freedom. The play appears to interrogate among many
other things, the question of who is truly outlaw and who is just and law abiding.

Ultimately, the play appears to comment upon the rigidity of false paradigms.
The gender fluidity which Moll’s character emblematizes calls attention to all the shams
and travesties present within the society of London and the culture of early modern
England. If one rigidly adheres to fixed gender roles and codes of masculinity,
Middleton and Dekker seem to say, one remains ignorantly obdurate and inexorably
joined to a corrupt, inflexible, unyielding, and eventually decaying social order. Owing
to, among other developments, shifting class distinctions, alteration in the status of
women, and the promulgation of Puritan dogma, the social climate was undergoing
change. Middleton and Dekker’s play does, in fact, paint a picture of a society, if not in
decline, certainly in transition.

The theme of appearance versus reality, a Renaissance commonplace, is treated
here within the signification of androgyny. Moll, the cutpurse, is both manly and
womanly, both “bad” and good, “a monster with two trinkets.” The play ends in
conventional marriage, yet Moll is outside this frame. Her character cannot be contained in the status quo. Middleton and Dekker portray a witty, sophisticated, urbane view of the grittiness of city life and profit making, the failures of marriage and masculinity, and the vagaries of love, sexuality, and desire. It is, or so it seems, that it is female desire upon which the play rests, and as Jean Howard concludes, “The play, moreover, while raising quite explicitly the problem of female sexual desire, provides schizophrenic solutions to its satisfaction (“Sex and Social Conflict” 186). Middleton and Dekker implicitly agree: in the “Epilogous” they create an ekphrastic vision of a woman, “Limned to the life” (3); some they say, have “dispraised” (5) her hair, her brows, her lips, her cheeks. The woman –Moll-- and also as a metaphor for the play itself, is controversial. The playwrights cannot constrict, constrain or explain her; they can only ask “your pardons” (33). As for deciphering the mystery of female or male desire, they admit, “In striving to please all,” they, happily or regrettably, “please none at all” (30).
Chapter 3

Horn Madness: Impotence, Cuckoldry, and Patriarchal Marriage in The Merry Wives of Windsor

"All the argument is a whore and a cuckold" – Troilus and Cressida

Printed in 1697, a work entitled The Art of Cuckoldom, or The Intrigues of the City-Wives, tells, among other such stories, a tale of Phillis and her young lover Strephon. Although Phillis, seventeen years old, is married to a fifty-eight year old prosperous Lime-Street Merchant, she spends her nights with the -- albeit of little fortune--young gallant, Strephon, who, disguised as a woman, is able to bed her in the merchant’s own home. This and other tales in this anonymously penned collection recount trysts between young lovers, and intrigues against cuckolded old husbands. A recurrent theme among them is the derision aimed at the old husband’s ill-suited match with the young wife, due to his lack of sexual competence -- in a word, his lack of potency. The cuckold in this tale, “This superannuated Inamorato” (3), “so antiquated a Pretender to so young a Bed-fellow” (4), marries but must bring off a consummation. In this endeavor he has a little help from Strephon:

His Addresses are favourably heard, his Suit received, and the Preliminaries soon settled for the great, and now easy, Work of Consummation; easy indeed, for the happy Strephon has opened the Blooming-Rose, done his aged Rival that Favour, that the Bridal Night Drudgery, is not like to be too hard a tug for his Fifty-eight (4).
Though written in a period after Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-98), this collection of narratives points to the enduring power of cuckoldry over the English literary imagination from at least the late sixteenth into the late seventeenth century. The tale of Phillis and Strephon, in this collection, indicates that at the turn of the century, the cultural threat of cuckoldry still held commanding sway. While the theme of cuckoldry is pervasive in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, it is my contention that *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, like the tale of Phillis and Strephon, betrays an anxious masculinity, and has at its center an anxiety about male potency, in particular about aging and potency. The central question, which remains open, is whether this anxiety surrounding aging, potency, and cuckoldry reinforces the prevailing view of fixed gender roles in patriarchal marriages, or whether it subverts them. It is my view that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is decidedly ambivalent in its representation of men and women, and husbands and wives within patriarchal marriages; one might say that it is radically ambivalent, and as such invites a critical reading of gender roles and of the institution of marriage in the Elizabethan age. On the one hand, there appears to be a destabilization of gender roles, on the other, a reaffirmation of patriarchal control. However, the conclusion of this play leaves no terra firma on which to stand as it applies to marriage.

This may account for its critical invisibility until recent years in feminist scholarship. While none other than the co-originator of Marxist theory, Friedrich Engels, commented that the first act of the play contained “more life and reality than all German literature” (Rackin 65), throughout the twentieth century *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was “dismissed and ignored in virtually every study of Shakespeare’s comedies” (64). As Phyllis Rackin forcefully demonstrates, the merry wives are central and recognizable
figures in contemporary Windsor and wield exceptional power in their marriages and their domestic arenas, much like, perhaps, the women in the Shakespeare’s audience: “It may very well be that the oppression and constraints that define the roles of women in the plays we have come to assume as normative were actually counterfactual fantasies rather than reflections of the lives that the majority of Shakespeare’s original audience knew outside the theater” (71). *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, unlike other Shakespeare plays, would be a case in point; however, wherever one turns in the play, one finds Shakespeare’s perspective complicated, obscure, or indeterminate. My own point of view is that this play is more ambivalent than others written in the period -- especially a play such as *The Roaring Girl* -- about the status quo of sex, gender, and marriage. In a word, Shakespeare’s view is nuanced: one might venture to say that this ambiguity serves, suggestively though never definitively, to dismantle the power relations of patriarchal marriage, particularly as evidenced by the anxiety which troubles the men in this comedy.

As already noted, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Roaring Girl* have much affinity with each other, whether owing to the eventual collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton or not. Both plays have farcical, satirical, and even parodic elements. Both plays employ common tropes such as cross-dressing, disguise; cutpurses and rogues; citizen wives, plots and subplots, stratagems and tricks. Both plays employ language as a register of class, and, in Shakespeare’s play, of ethno-national identity, resulting in comic deployment of dialects, accents, and malapropisms. And both comedies share, purportedly as a driving force, but in actuality, as a secondary plot, the forbidden love-match and sought after marriage of the youthful lovers Fenton and Ann
Page in *The Merry Wives*, and of Sebastian and Mary Fitzallard in *The Roaring Girl*; these minor plots allow for other characters and plots to come to the fore. The most durable of these plots in the Shakespeare play, with both audiences and literary critics, is the plot of the merry wives, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, who cunningly trick the would-be, aging cuckold, Falstaff. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in Middleton and Dekker’s play, Laxton’s scheming to engage in an adulterous liaison with Mrs. Gallipot in order to cozen her husband out of his money recalls the same strategy as Falstaff’s.

For the purposes of this chapter, the coincidental or conscious play on names of these two characters is suggestive of the pivotal role Laxton and Falstaff play in illuminating the theme of impotence and its attendant anxiety, not only demonstrated in the impotence of Laxton (who lacks stone) and Falstaff (whose staff falls), but in the impotence of virtually every male character in the plays. In both plays the husbands are ridiculed for their pusillanimity; in *The Merry Wives* there is an especially sharp pungency to the humiliation of the “cuckolded” Master Ford and Falstaff. Reinforcing and resolving this, just as in the ending of *The Roaring Girl*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* culminates in forgiveness and friendship where Falstaff, after suffering abominable humiliation, obtains pardon from Ford, the wives, and all the citizens of Windsor.

In *The Roaring Girl*, the cuckold, Laxton, is conventional: he is a young, strapping, but corrupt, gallant. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the cuckold is unorthodox: the cuckold is older than the husband. This reversal is the decisive point: for it is in the declining constitution and capacity of Falstaff that the comedy derives, not only its humor, but also its barbed inflection of humiliation and shame. In *The Merry Wives of*
Windsor, while Falstaff is the most distinctive character, the main characters are all middle aged and older. In fact, one might say this is a play about grumpy old men who are anxious about their potency and shamed by their inadequacy. The employment of cuckoldry and its shameful emblem, the horn, makes this evident in The Merry Wives of Windsor.

It cannot be overstated that cuckoldry was pervasive in early modern literature. Why should this be so? Scholars have debated the nature of marriage in the early modern period with some maintaining that the institution was undergoing far-reaching change “… marriage moved from a sacrament to a contract, from a practical arrangement to regulate sexuality and to provide for children to a loving bond between companions” (Dolan 621); while others emphasize continuity and change simultaneously, a fluctuating process in which motives for marriage were “mixed” (Dolan 621). However, a sound marriage was an index of “manhood;” it represented “… an appropriate, mature balance between opposed masculine requirements for aggressive strength with self-assertion on the one side, and reason in self-restraint with physical and social control on the other” (Clark 18). In the changing landscape of marriage, interestingly, church records show that women appear to have proceeded against men for marital separation more often than men did against women. While men accused women of adultery, women accused men of cruelty (Dolan 621).

As far as cuckoldry is concerned, the conventional view in the early modern period was that “cuckoldry is a condition inherent to marriage,” and that a wife’s infidelity is “all but inevitable” (Panek 69). Or put another way, Coppelia Kahn in Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare argues specifically that Shakespeare critiques
marriage as “tantamount” to cuckoldry (119). Kahn delineates the condition of
cuckoldry: according to her it results from three phenomena: misogyny, the double
standard, and patriarchal marriage. Further, the assumption that a wife’s “disobedience”
reveals that her husband “is not ‘man’ enough to control her” (Panek 70) unleashes the
ridicule of the community upon the cuckold. He is assumed unable to govern his wife
nor to satisfy her sexually (Panek 71, Kahn 121). According to Panek, this results in a
duality: the dilemma of the cuckold in patriarchal marriage is one in which the husband
has authority over his wife; however, he, sometimes willingly, as in the wittol,
relinquishes control, thereby unburdening himself to the inevitable: “Strange as it may
seem to us, accustomed to viewing early modern marriage as a mechanism for imposing
patriarchal control, it was possible for a man to see the marital relationship as one which
inherently obliged him to relinquish control… becoming a cuckold was merely the
eventual, inevitable manifestation of a loss the husband had already suffered” (Panek 71).
Master Ford’s frustrated exclamation here exemplifies the point:

See the hell of
having a false woman! My bed shall be abused, my coffers ran-
sacked, my reputation gnawn at, and I shall not only receive this
villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms,
…. But ‘cuckold’, ‘wittol’!…. ‘Cuckold’…” (2.2.256- 60; 262-3).

The ingenuity of the cuckolding plot in The Merry Wives of Windsor is that it is a
cuckolding within a cuckolding: that is, Falstaff schemes to cuckold Ford, Ford as
Brooke schemes to cuckold Falstaff, but, most unreasonably, Ford plots to cuckold
himself. This labyrinth renders a humorous jest, but at the same time leaves more than a
trace of disorder as it exposes perhaps a repressed wish on the part of Master Ford.
Ford/Brooke fantasizes his own role as cuckolder of himself: He reveals the imaginary
scene to Falstaff:

I have long loved her, and, I protest to you bestowed much on her, followed her with a doting observance, engrossed opportunities to meet her, fee’d every slight occasion that could but niggardly give me sight of her; not only bought many presents to give her, …. Briefly, I have pursued her as love hath pursued me, which hath been on the wing of all occasions. (2.2.174-8, 179-81)

Merging with his invented self, he draws a picture of his own cuckolding: “Like a fair house built on another man’s ground, so that I have lost my edifice by mistaking the place where I erected it” (2.2. 193- 4). There is more than a touch of masochism in this fantasy and this trick against Falstaff (and himself). Falstaff is rightly bewildered by Brooke/Ford’s proposition to seduce Mistress Ford: “Methinks you prescribe to yourself very preposterously” (2. 2. 212-3). Wendy Wall makes note of the psychological and social disarray inversions like these in the play suggest. Arguing against criticism which highlights the play’s interest in ordering domestic management, she asserts: “What this reading leaves unaddressed are the passions within Windsor that drive and confuse the play’s didacticism, mainly by undercutting pragmatism, civility, and moderation.” (382-3). A case in point for Wall is just this ludic proposition to Falstaff by Ford: “… that Brook[e] should want his beloved seduced by another unmasks riven desires within Ford; instead of merely testing his wife, he courts her sullying and his confirmation as failed husband” (383). Just as Ford doubles for himself, --as Wall contends, his “multiple identities allow for illicit sexualities,” (386) -- Falstaff doubles for Ford “as paranoid husband and seducer collapse into one image of flawed masculinity” (385).

The social disorder Wall puts forth in her argument is a result of failed masculinity, and more to the point, impotence. Critics have long recognized impotence
as a controlling marker in the play. Ann Parten explores the relationship between the skimmington and impotence, citing various early modern sources, such as numerous ballads and one in Heywood and Brome’s play, *The Late Lancashire Witches* (1633) as evidence of this early modern thematic preoccupation: “In that play the emphasis is on the victim’s sexual impotence, for which his wife beats him mercilessly (186). In a word “… masculine ineffectuality is equated with cuckoldom…” (187). So powerful is the threat of a woman’s falseness that it makes the man “psychologically like a castrated man…. To defend against the fear of such castration, men anticipate it in fantasy, and turn it against women by calling them whores” (Kahn 132). Nancy Cotton, citing Coppelia Kahn’s and others’ interpretations, states that “The main plot of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* turns on Ford’s fear of being cuckolded, which according to psychoanalytically oriented criticism, is equivalent to ‘psychosocial castration’”(320). In drawing the relationship between witchcraft and impotence in the play, Cotton makes note that “Ford is not the only male in *Merry Wives* to experience impotence in the face of magical female power. Falstaff is symbolically castrated by ‘witches’ in the finale…” of the play. (323).

Again, the commonplace of women’s insatiability must be understood in order to absorb the breadth and scope of masculinity and impotence in the early modern era. Anthony Fletcher studies patriarchal attitudes in England from 1500-1800, a period, which, he claims, discloses “features of crisis in men’s control over women” (xvi). Fletcher remarks that parallels between *Arabian Nights* and early modern English tales show “how a woman’s insistence on equal sexual enjoyment can reduce the boldest lover to impotence” (11). Famous among the poetry of the period and contemporary to
Shakespeare is Thomas Nashe’s “The Choice of Valentines,” where the prostitute cries, “Oh not so fast!.../Lest my content, that on my life relies, / Be brought too soon from his delightful seat,...” and John Taylor’s Juniper Lecture where an old male lover is taunted by a widow for not being able to satisfy her sexual needs: “ ‘I will have a husband that shall be upright and ready to do execution, not like a dormouse, always sleeping’ ” (11). It is just this milieu, which gives rise to the particular anxiety of castration, humiliation, and impotence that the aging male citizens so vividly described in The Merry Wives of Windsor experience. In particular it is Falstaff who suffers the most; however, the characterizations of Caius, Shallow, Evans, indeed the middle-aged Ford and Page, as well, confirm the underlying theme of aging and impotence.

Fletcher sees that the problem of sexual potency “ surely underlies much of the male jealousy … the sheer terror of being cuckolded…” (10). In clarifying his view, he interrogates cross-dressing in dramas of the period such as The Roaring Girl:

...its crux is the sexual inadequacy of men: strip away the clothing in which men prance, its message goes, and you are left with bodies; examine the bodies and you reach the source of male insecurity at a time when men are not quite sure how penises and testicles entitle them to the patriarchal power they claim. (10)

Naturally, Fletcher points to the codpiece worn by Moll in order to sustain his assertion: “If a woman claimed these things, even if only symbolically, might she not be as manly as most men?” (10).

Writing about early modern subjectivity, otherness, and the destabilizing nature of dress, Lyndal Roper warns that “early modern people can threaten to become dancing marionettes, tricked out in ruffs and codpieces…” (11). Roper’s comments allude to the performativity of clothing and gender, which has its place in Shakespeare’s comedy.
While cross-dressing does occur in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* -- Falstaff is cross-dressed by the wives as the Witch of Brentford, and Ann Page and the young boys are cross-dressed in the masque which ends the play -- these blurrings have a variety of meanings.

Fletcher’s theorizing on the meaning of the codpiece and its association with manhood reveals the aforementioned contradictory nature of it: on the one hand, it constitutes male lust and libido, on the other, effeminacy or insufficiency -- always with a concomitant anxiety: “From boyhood to manhood, from mother’s milk, to the youthful parade in public as a codpiece wearer, was a fraught journey…[the codpiece] casts the male in the role of sexual quarry. But this journey ended, if the moralists had their way, with the sober manhood of the little patriarch ordering his household of wife, children, and servants” (98). One must make note of Fletcher’s belittling language, indicating the toll early modern marriage took on the patriarchal husband. The characterization of Ford conveys the psychic cost of maintaining patriarchy/potency in the face of the imagined (in Ford’s case) encroachments against marriage and fidelity. Relevant to this is Fletcher’s identification of the codpiece as a signifier appertaining to impotence, which figures in *The Merry Wives*, although its semblance is transposed to the horn, which I will address later in this chapter. While the codpiece as physical object, or what may be termed the literal codpiece is largely left out of Shakespeare’s play, Fletcher’s analysis of the phallus and the body in early modern writing have much to do with the theme of impotence in the play.

Interestingly, almost at the very beginning of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a reference is made to the cod; the pun is directed at Falstaff’s aristocratic lineage, and to
old age: Evans says of Falstaff: “The dozen white louses do become an old coad well. It agrees well passant: it is a familiar beast to man, and signifies love. Shallow responds: “The luce is the fresh fish; the salt fish is an old cod” (1.1. 16-19). Cod and coad are glossed as scrotum. This repartee sets the tone of the comedy as one in which obscene references, jokes, double-entendre, and sexual innuendo play upon the theme of masculinity, aging, and impotence.

At the outset of the play, Falstaff seems oblivious to his age and his flagging sexual powers, boasting to Nim that Mistress Page “who even now gave me good eyes too, examined my parts with most judicious oeillades;…” (1.3. 50-1). An awareness of his “portly belly” notwithstanding, he is all confidence. Mistress Page, who soberly admits to her own middle-age, and derides Falstaff’s braggadocio, shortly thereafter undercuts his self-satisfaction. As she reads his seduction letter, she remarks to herself: “What, have I scaped love-letters in the holiday time of my beauty; and am I now a subject for them?” (2.1. 147-8), and furious at Falstaff’s impudence, she declaims: “What a Herod of Jewry is this! O, wicked, wicked world! One that is well-nigh worn to pieces with age, to show himself a young gallant!” (2.1. 18-20). As Falstaff comes nearer to the assignation, he begins to admit his age and his anxiety. He speaks to himself, addressing his body as separate from himself: “I’ll make more of thy old body than I

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21 The editors’ note explains:”Coat; cod, scrotum. Evans, in what is meant to be a stereotypical Welsh accent, often pronounces ‘t’ for ‘d,’” etc. (Shakespeare, William. The Merry Wives of Windsor. The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition Stephen Greenblatt et al. 1266.)

have done. Will they look after thee? Wilt thou, after the expense of so much money, be now a gainer? Good body, I thank thee. Let them say ‘tis grossly done; so be it fairly done, no matter” (2.2.125-9).

Falstaff hints at the prospect of sexual failure, but he indulges in wish-fulfillment, hoping he can will his body to youthful vigor. The contrast of youth and old age is not limited to the characterization of Falstaff in the play. The characters of Shallow, Evans, and Caius, serve in a minor key to underscore the idea of impotence and old age. Shallow, like Falstaff, engages in wish-fulfillment when speaking to Master Page:

“Bodykins, Master Page, though I now be old and of the peace, if I see a sword out my finger itches to make one. Though we are justices and doctors and churchmen, Master Page, we have some salt of our youth in us. We are the sons of women, Master Page” (2.3.38-42). To which the Host of the Garter Inn teases, addressing Doctor Caius, “A word, Monsieur Mockwater” (49-50), indicating “that Caius is sterile (water being semen”).

The allusion to probable impotence is connected as well to early modern humoral theories on aging and sexual activity, which advocated prohibition: Gabriele Zerbi, a Veronese physician in the 1500’s, cautions, “‘Sex should simply be avoided by old men’ because every emission of semen represents an irretrievable diminution of heat and moisture” (Ellis 1). Ellis discusses the character type of “desiring” (3) aging characters, _senes amantes_ (old men in love) (3) in early modern drama as harkening back to Plautus and Terence: “The foolish old man in love, after all, serves as a stock character…. the

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laughter this figure provokes has a timeless quality” (3). In the Renaissance, old age in
Thomas Elyot’s *Castel of helth* (1541) “for one defines ‘Senctute’ as beginning at 40;
Erasmus agreed with him.” (Ellis 4-5). Synthesizing cuckoldry with aging and desire,
Shakespeare capitalizes on the comedy of *senes amantes* in constructing his old and
middle-aged characters, continually opposing youth with old age: Hiding Slender’s
servant Simple in a closet, Mistress Quickly worries that her master Doctor Caius will
discover him: “If he had found the young man, he would have been horn-mad” (1.4.42-
3). Caius, another aging dotard, drawn as a malapropian old buffoon pursuing marriage
with the nubile Ann Page, is conflated with the self-proclaimed (“I’ll be horn-mad)” (3.
5.130) cuckold, Ford.

However, the cuckoldry motif as a device to illuminate the desires of aging men
and their consequent failures, is only one layer of meaning in Shakespeare’s comedy.
What we appreciate about Shakespeare is his nuanced view of these tropes, and of
masculinity in general. An examination of Falstaff’s character as a cuckolding senex
reveals the vulnerability of his condition, Shakespeare inducing pathos while poking fun.
Mistress Quickly, acting as pander to Falstaff, explains Mistress Ford’s “misdirection” of
her servants’ dunking of Falstaff in the Thames, but unconsciously suggests sex: “Alas
the day, good heart, that was not her fault. She does so take on with her men; they
mistook their erection,” (3.4.33-35), to which Falstaff quips, meaningfully and
impotently, “So did I mine, to build upon a foolish woman’s promise” (3.4.36-7). He
admits to a mis-take in his erection, but pathetically blames the woman. The fine point in
Falstaff’s reaction may be easily lost, but speaks to his and all men’s injured masculinity:
“… bid her think what a man is; let her consider his frailty, and then judge of my merit.”
In his would-be seduction of Mistress Ford, Falstaff contradicts the conventional wisdom of seduction as being only the province of young lovers; Falstaff resentfully mocks youth to Mistress Ford, but at the same time, Shakespeare hints at Falstaff’s own effeminacy:

What made me love thee? Let that persuade thee there’s something extraordinary in thee. Come, I cannot cog and say thou art this and that, like a-many of these lisping hawthorn-buds that come like women in men’s apparel and smell like Buckersbury in simple time; I cannot (3.3.57-61).

Comparing Richard in Richard III to Falstaff, Ian Moulton asserts that “If Richard is a parody of masculine aggression, then Falstaff is a parody of effeminate passivity. … Falstaff is impotence itself, and the punishments he suffers in Merry Wives are those generally meted out in early modern England to impotent men or unruly women: he is ducked in a stream, dressed as an old woman, beaten, and crowned with a cuckold’s horns” (“Fat Knight” 239).

While Moulton reminds us that Falstaff’s body has been “repeatedly described in feminine terms… Falstaff’s body is almost maternal in its swollen plenitude” (238), he also maintains that Falstaff “has also been relatively neglected by the recent boom in gender studies.” Continued inquiry into what Moulton terms “Falstaff’s lack of sexual energy” will go some way towards filling the void. Perhaps the privileging of tragedy over comedy is responsible for this inattention to Falstaff with regard to gender; that is, the “greasy knight” whose “guts are made of puddings (2.1.27) is so comic a figure, as critically, not to be taken seriously. However, Falstaff may well stand for anti-masculinity or for the complexity of the masculinity of a certain age in early modern
writing; in fact, as Moulton indicates, there is even a political aspect to it: “Falstaff embodies a particular cultural anxiety: the weakening of aristocratic English manhood in the face of foreign military threats” (237).

While Wendy Wall admits to an indeterminateness by recognizing Falstaff’s “unreadability” (377), her understanding of Falstaff’s “obvious delight in being adorned”[as the horned Herne the Hunter] is “an emblem of both male virility and impotence:” this sums up the paradox of Falstaff in Merry Wives, and epitomizes his significance in a gender-based study of masculinity in the period. Marjorie Garber sees Falstaff’s trajectory “From buck-basket to buck to cuckold to deer to ass” as a “lively devolution” (Shakespeare After All 368). The devolution may perhaps be stated another way, in psychosocial terms, as castration. Falstaff himself concedes his castration. He tells Ford/Brooke what he has suffered on Brooke’s behalf at the hands of Mistress Ford:

I have suffered the pangs of three several deaths. First, an intolerable fright, to be detected with a jealous rotten bell-wether. Next to be compassed like a good Bilbo in the circumference of a peck, hilt to point, heel to head. And then, to be stopped in, like a strong distillation, with stinking clothes that fretted in their own grease. Think of that – a man of my kidney – think of that – am as subject to heat as butter, a man of continual dissolution and thaw. (3.5.94-100)

First, he names Ford as the castrato -- a bell-wether is the castrated ram with a bell and a cuckold-like horn on its head24, -- identifying at the same time one of his three “deaths,” which is rendered metaphorically as a melting and dissolving in the shameful drowning at Datchet Lane. Although Ford is the apparent cuckold, Falstaff, too, takes on the humiliation and castration of the cuckold. As Kahn points out, citing critics such as

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Madeline Gohlke who have written on the subject, the hero in Shakespeare is “humiliated or dishonored and thus placed in a position of vulnerability that makes him psychologically like a castrated man, and thus womanish” (132). As Falstaff concedes to Brooke: “I went to her, Master Brooke, as you see, like a poor old man; but I came from her, Master Brooke, like a poor old woman” (5.1.14-16).

Besides Shakespeare, early modern writing upholds the utter shame of the castrated man. Pamela Brown quotes verse from 1606, in *Choice, Chance, and Change* in which the scandal of such a man is one to keep one’s silence about: “If a woman be married to a Eunuche, / to do something to save his shame from knowledge” (39). Another tale recounted by Brown from 1604, about a doctor seducing the wife of a mealman, who then reveals it to her husband: “After the wife tells her husband, they recruit their neighbors to assist in a plot in which the husband pretends to be mad when the doctor arrives. He manages to trick and tie down the doctor, whom his neighbors beat and harr. Finally, a surgeon ‘cuts both his stones’” (52). In this anecdote, it is the cuckold, like Falstaff, not the cuckold, who is castrated. Addison Roberts also sees Falstaff as “symbolically castrated” (76) but it is for the “uncontrolled sex” he represents (75) which disrupts the middle class community of Windsor, and therefore he is scapegoated. Claire McEachern goes further by looking into the etymology of cuckold in German to tease out resonances with castration. The term comes, according to the *OED* “from the word for capon, and derives ‘from the practice formerly prevalent of planting or engrafting the spurs of a castrated cock on the root of the excised comb, where they grew and became horns, sometimes several inches long”’ (615).

Owing to the symbolic castration of Falstaff, and also to the confusion around
why it is Falstaff, rather than the husband, who wears the horns of the cuckold during the final ritual in Windsor Forest, one loses sight of how emasculated Ford, the conventionally “cuckolded” husband is. To re-establish this, first, it is essential to locate the emotional terrain of jealousy within the discourse of cuckoldry in this comedy. Mistress Quickly, in her comic abuse of the language, acts as a kind of bungling mouthpiece for the citizenry of Windsor, describing Master Ford: “He’s a very jealousy man” (2.2.83), which functions as a comic leitmotif in the play. We apprehend that although Shakespeare treats jealousy in Merry Wives as an important theme, there is silliness about it. However, the underlying subtext of seriousness regarding jealousy is such that even in a comedy such as this, jealousy is treated clearly as a disease, a “distemper” (3.4. 183) which may set the stage for the tragedies of A Winter’s Tale, Cymbeline, and Othello which will be forthcoming. The Merry Wives can treat this malady with laughter because comedy is blissfully distancing.

In the first act of the play we are given the hint that jealousy is linked with the humors and is so torturing as to be a physical as well as emotional condition. Nim says: “My humour shall not cool. I will incense Ford to deal with poison; I will possess him with yellowness;…” (1.3.87-8). Even the horns are envisioned as literal, thereby physical. Ford externalizes the threat to his masculinity by Falstaff when telling Page: “I do not misdoubt my wife, but I would be loath to turn them together. A man may be too confident. I would have nothing lie on my head” (2.1.163-5). The joke of the play, which, moreover, contributes to Ford’s foolishness, is that Ford is threatened by old, impotent Falstaff, seemingly imperceptive of Falstaff’s age and probable waning sexual prowess. Instead, he fearsomely tells Pistol, “Why, sir, my wife is not young” (2.1.99).
To which Pistol warns, “Prevent, / Or go thou like Sir Actaeon, he, / With Ringwood at thy heels. / O, odious is the name! … The horn, I say” (2.1.104–9). Falstaff’s mocking of Ford becomes, later in the play, a case of Falstaff being hoisted by his own petard: “They say the jealous wittolly knave hath masses of money…. I will awe him with my cudgel; it shall hang like a meteor o’er the cuckold’s horns” (2.2.241; 247-8). The phallic metaphor notwithstanding, Ford soliloquizes: “Who says this is improvident jealousy?... God be praised for my jealousy!.... God’s my life: cuckold, cuckold, cuckold!” (2.2.255-6; 271; 274). Ford rationalizes his irrationality and perversely invites cuckoldry upon himself.

Page indicates just how unhinged Ford has become, and how close to sickness Ford’s ravings have become: “What spirit, what devil suggests this imagination? I would not ha’ your distemper in this kind for the wealth of Windsor Castle” (3.4.181-3). Ford, in front of the wives and the Windsor men, publicly rants, in a virtual airing of dirty laundry when he is told by his wife to stop meddling into the buckbasket in which the wives have hidden Falstaff: “Buck? I would I could wash myself of that buck! Buck, buck, buck? Ay, buck, I warrant you, buck. And of the season, too, it shall appear” (3.3.133-5). Conflating buck with stag and cuckold’s horns, it truly demonstrates Ford as “horn mad.”

Anthony Ellis has argued that there is a melancholic contagion in Merry Wives, which is due to Falstaff causing Ford to “fall prey to jealousy, one of the disease’s most celebrated symptoms” (57). Falstaff, an ineffectual male “assumes feminine characteristics” (57). “Falstaff’s acting like a woman threatens to rob other men of their masculine reason and self-control, …. In this way Merry Wives projects the cause of
bodily disorder onto the senex,…” (57). Ellis asserts that Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* “comes close to gendering jealousy itself as feminine” (59). Further, “… if we assume that Burton alludes to self-castration as the unmentionable cure, its enactment, too would leave Ford little altered: intact, he would still believe himself symbolically unmanned by his ‘revolted’ wife (3.2.34), or mutilated, he would literalize his already symbolic condition. In this way, Burton reveals the disease of jealousy and its cure as functional equivalents, both robbing men of their masculinity” (59). Defensively, however, Ford insists upon his masculinity and contradicts his heretofore self-proclaimed horn madness: “Master Page, as I am a man… my jealousy is reasonable” (4.2.125; 129).

As the comedy draws to a close, after Falstaff’s beating as the disguised woman, an old witch, and as Evans recognizes the androgyny, “I like not when a ‘oman has a great peard. I spy a great peard under his muffler” (4.2.167-9), Ford is ostensibly reformed:

Pardon me, wife. Henceforth do what thou wilt.  
I rather will suspect the sun with cold  
Than thee with wantonness. Now doth thy honour stand,  
In him that was of late an heretic,  
As firm as faith. (4.4.5-9)

Shakespeare’s use of religious metaphor adumbrates the harmony and reconciliation which the ritual cuckolding and skimmington will soon provide to the community. The problematic ending still leaves open the question of whether the play renders order or disorder. One must perhaps believe in Mistress Page’s words as revelatory of Shakespeare’s own message, that the ritualistic ending of Falstaff disguised as Herne the hunter
In the ritual hazing of Falstaff as Herne the hunter, does Shakespeare “tell” us the superstition reveals “a truth?” Perhaps the superstition and Shakespeare’s performance of it is pure nostalgia, a bit of stagecraft appealing to the audience, or perhaps it is an instance of the green world, so recognized by archetypal critics as the idealized environs in which resolution and renewal can be attained. More likely, if viewed from a Bakhtinian perspective, it brings the comedy into the carnivalesque, subversive register, especially when one decodes the horn as the powerful signifier it is.

The horns Falstaff wears as Herne the hunter confuse even Falstaff as he struggles to interpret them. He draws on mythology to disentangle their meaning:

… Remember, Jove, thou wast a bull for thy Europa; love set on thy horns. O powerful love, that in some respects makes a beast a man; in some other, a man a beast! … For me, I am here a Windsor stag, and the fattest, I think i’th’forest. (5.5.2-5;10-11)

The horns are at times horns of a bull, at times a deer, a stag, a cow, a roe. Critics have sorted out the difference between these different horns and what meaning they have in relation to Falstaff’s symbology. What is evident is that the horns are the dominating symbol of the play, and they are multivalent. Coppelia Kahn, among the first critics to look into the signification of the horns, carefully probes the definition of cuckold in the OED: it is ‘a derisive name for the husband of an unfaithful wife”’ dating from 1250, getting its name from the cuckoo, a bird who lays eggs into the nest of the other bird (120). As Kahn and others have recognized as the obvious inversion in colloquial usage, it is the husband, the victim, not the perpetrator, the “cuckoo” laying eggs, who is tagged
with the derisive title, cuckold. Often overlooked, however, is the feminization in this inversion. Shakespeare, to be noted again, and especially in Falstaff’s guise as Herne the hunter, goes back to the implication in the etymology, making Falstaff the central cuckold who wears the horns.

“Dictionaries of slang list many expressions clearly implying that the horn is a phallic symbol, for it is colloquially” the physical embodiment of sexual “excitement” (Kahn 122). According to Kahn, ‘… horns are a defense formed through denial, compensation, and upward displacement. They say, “It’s not that I can’t keep my wife because I don’t have enough of a penis. I have two of them” (122). It is through this deconstruction which I derive a further displacement, that, in fact, the absence of the codpiece in Shakespeare’s play, (and simultaneously its disappearance in the sartorial realm around the time the play was written and produced), may be connected to the horn, which itself is paradoxically connected with virility, sexual desire, masculinity, on one hand, and weakness, failure, impotence, and shame on the other.

Evidence for this signification may be found in psychoanalytic readings or studies of the carnivalesque or ritual. When Ford calls Page a “secure ass,” (2.2.264) who is not jealous as he himself is, Kahn ascertains a meaning in this upon which asses’ ears are known as another emblem of “the cuckold in addition to horns, and specifically denoting the stupidity of trusting a wife” (129). Animal symbolism tells us that the ass, in addition to stupidity, is recognized as having an outsize penis; this contributes to its appropriation as a symbol for a man whose sexual power is ridiculed. Kahn, in her notes, remarks upon the Christian Feast of Fools, derived from the saturnalian Feast of Asses, which engendered “licentiousness and priapic rites” (129).
This inquiry leads directly to Bakhtin’s study of festive forms, *Rabelais and His World*, for other sources and for the theoretical underpinnings of such signs as the horn or the codpiece. While Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque may not represent a social reality, it does illuminate early modern texts such as Shakespeare’s comedy. Applying Bakhtin’s theory to *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, one recognizes that festivals in which aggression like the pinching and burning of Falstaff in the guise of the horned Herne the Hunter, or cuckoldings being beaten by their wives, or the public mocking of Charivari – that is, old men who married young women, were instances of the upside-down world. Symbols such as horns, the long-nosed mask, and similarly, the codpiece, in works like *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, or Shakespeare’s plays, emblematize chaos, disorder or misrule. In Bakhtin’s work, carnival, thought to be subversive, served in the middle ages and Renaissance as a function of social control, but for Bakhtin, carnival was a celebration of the birth of a new world out of the destruction of the old.

While this may be a valid interpretation of the carnival atmosphere in the last act of *Merry Wives*, the element which speaks to the gendered conflict in the play, where the the wives get revenge, not only on their husbands but on their seducer, is the priapic rite of Falstaff wearing the horns. The wives’ response to attacks on their chastity and their “mirth” is to perform a displacement of male desire and male aggression: the ritual is a displaced phallic humiliation.

Mistress Page divulges the plot to the citizenry of Windsor, where Falstaff will don “great ragg’d horns” (4.4.29), as Herne, “with huge horns on his head” (4.4.41).

Then let them all encircle him about,
And, fairy-like, to pinch the unclean knight,
And ask him why, that hour of fairy revel,
In their so sacred paths he dares to tread
In shape profane (4.4.55-9).

Her reference to the sacred and the profane, and to uncleanness, refer back not only to Falstaff’s bleaching in the buckbasket, but suggest Falstaff’s sexual transgression, which must be punished. In another inversion, which suggests the emasculation or castration so germane to the play, the wives’ aim is not to horn, but to “dis-horn,” “And mock him home to Windsor” (4.4.63).

Falstaff, after suffering several humiliations already, does not give up in his attempt to cuckold, but worries about his sexual performance; he calls upon the gods to assist: “Send me a cool rut-time, Jove, or who can blame me to piss my tallow? (5.5.12-13). As the wives trick him with punning endearments (“Sir John! Art thou there, my deer, my male deer?”) and encouragements, Falstaff feels his ardor return, swaggering that he can take two wives at the same time, so potent is he:

Divide me like a bribed buck, each a haunch. I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk, and my horns I bequeath to your husbands (5.5.21-3).

Later in the scene Ford will get the last laugh: “Now, sir, who’s a cuckold now?” (106).

Mistress Quickly, in her role as the Fairy Queen -- perhaps an homage to Queen Elizabeth – leads the community in its ritual victimage - a skimmington of Falstaff. He must be punished, for he is “Corrupt, corrupt, and tainted in desire” (86), and she directs the little boys dressed as fairies to sing, pinch, and burn him. Their song signals Falstaff’s transgressive lust and lechery:

Fie on sinful fantasy!
Fie on lust and luxury
Lust is but a bloody fire,
Kindled with unchaste desire,…
Pinch him fairies, mutually.
Pinch him for his villainy (90-3; 96-7).
Critical understanding of this skimmington is somewhat divided, with some critics in the past like Bullough and especially Steadman\textsuperscript{25} equating Falstaff with Actaeon, who, glimpsing the naked Diana, is transformed into a stag and subsequently ravaged and killed by his own dogs (Parten 194). This application of the myth holds that Falstaff’s horns “denote threatening libido;” the skimmington is designed to cleanse the community of the disruptive, dangerous element. Parten sees it another way; for her “the folk ceremony is associated with feminine ascendancy and masculine subjugation” (185). Falstaff is Everyman (196): “To provide Falstaff with a kind of skimmington is to draw attention to the vain old knight’s condition as a diminished male” (199).

To add to the complicated valences of the horn is McEachern’s view: she argues that cuckoldry resonates with the Reformation:

> To laugh at a cuckold is to enjoy a fantasy of transcending our usual earthly ignorance. Such laughter has its scornful aspect, but is also, potentially, a laughter of delight and unity. In this, more than any other aspect, they [audiences] reveal their Reformation character (620)... the virtues of the cuckold – patience, long-sufferance, endurance, even foolishness – are the core Protestant virtues.... (630).

The cleansing of the community may have a religious tenor, supported by references to religion, the devil, and hell, especially in the last act of Falstaff’s ritual shaming.

Mistress Page admonishes Falstaff by claiming the wives’ purity and chastity:

> Why, Sir John, do you think, though we would have thrust virtue out of our hearts by the head and shoulders, and have given ourselves

without scruple to hell, that ever the devil could have made you our delight? (5.5.138-141)

However, this is undermined to some degree by the churchman Evans’ maundering litany against Falstaff: “And given to fornications, and to taverns, and sack, and wine, and metheglins, and to drinkings, and swearings, and starings, pribbles and prabbles?” (148-150). Shakespeare injects so much quackery and false piety here that an overly religious reading is improbable.

Another reading is Francisco Vaz da Silva’s who studies the mythic representation of the horn and cuckoldry as a life-force. He asks a vital question, which is contained in the entire discourse of cuckoldry and most categorically in The Merry Wives of Windsor: “why would the specifically phallic symbol fall upon the head of a man unable to keep his wife?” (398). To address the overly literal countercharge that Falstaff is not the husband, Vaz da Silva makes the point, which is important to his argument, that both Falstaff and Ford pass the horn back and forth to each other, “bequeathing” them: “the transfer of virility supposedly takes place between the two men” (399); specifically, “one reason why the wronged husband gets on his head the unmistakable attribute of masculinity even while being feminized is that the passing of horns symbolizes a transfer of substance between two men” (399). Vaz da Silva explains in detail how horns are sexually transmitted, “horns pass from one man to another through a woman” (402); further, milk, identified metaphorically as semen – the connection to horns is goat milk or sheep milk--; hence, “Shakespeare conveys the essence of the matter in having Falstaff” complain that he has a “belly full of ford,” and, “pathetically refuse to ingest eggs so as not to absorb sperm; ‘pullet-sperm’” (3.5.27-8; 5.5.109-11) (404). “In a nutshell, the European goatish triangle involves the transmission
of male ‘milk’ between two men, via the shared woman’s womb blood” (410).

Claiming that horns are therefore symbols of fertility, Vaz da Silva develops a ritualistic application, commenting that “weak husbands along with newlyweds” – those that were childless as yet – “were paraded on donkeys and made to wear horns” (413), (interestingly, Mistress and Master Ford are childless: this reading would advance the cuckoldry and ritualistic scapegoating of the horned Falstaff as a rite of fertility); further, Vaz da Silva notes that Carnival “falls under the aegis of a horned moon in transition between wintertime and springtime…” (413) the tradition of parading “senile” or beaten-up cuckolds in villages would take place at Carnival. “The life-force symbolism of horns on these occasions is striking” (413).

Something akin to this analysis is evident in much of the perception of Shakespeare’s plays as emphasizing an affirmation of life and a restoring of order. What is more pertinent to my work here is Vaz da Silva’s reiteration of an idea found in Coppelia Kahn and others, but put another way, that “the situation of metaphysical cuckoldry afflict[s] all husbands… (414). “The bottom line again, is that all husbands are essentially cuckolds on the face of the horned source of supernatural life force” (415).

Viewed in terms of what Vaz da Silva terms the metaphysical, the masque in *Merry Wives*, whether taking place during Carnival or between winter and spring, is connected to the final wedding of Fenton and Ann Page, and thereby it may indeed be a fertility rite. While it may not be proven that the ritual horning of Falstaff is a seasonal rite, the ritual does have as a concomitant goal, premeditated by the young couple -- the tricking of the Pages into believing that Ann will marry one of the old and ill-matched suitors when instead, through a ruse of cross-dressing, she marries the young gallant.
The fertility rite notwithstanding, the theme of marriage for love dovetails with the thematic contrast of youth and old age, or virile masculinity with impotent masculinity.

In fact, the Host is convinced that there is no contest between young and old. He tells Page that youth has everything to recommend itself, and alludes to the seasons in a metaphoric display of the implied contrast between the ages:

> What say you to young Master Fenton? He capers, he dances, he has Eyes of youth; he writes verses, he speaks holiday, and he smells of April and May. He will carry’t, he will carry’t; ‘tis in his buttons he Will carry’t. (3.2.56-59)

For Master Page, however, Fenton’s youth is a liability. In one of the few references to Shakespeare’s earlier play, *I Henry IV*, in which Falstaff has a considerably different role, Page names Fenton as a companion to the ne’er do well personages “the wild Prince and Poins” (3.2.61) of the history play. This communicates the class conflict Fenton’s character represents in the middle class society of Windsor: “He is of too high a region; he knows too much. No, he shall not knit a knot in his fortunes with the finger of my substance” (62-3). Page rejects unequivocally Fenton’s proposal, which must read ironically, by contrast with Ann’s other suitors, to an audience: “She is no match for you” (3.4.69). Ann’s own description of Slender to Fenton declares the incongruity: “This is my father’s choice. / O, what a world of vile ill-favoured faults/ Looks handsome in three hundred pounds a year” (3.4.30-3). The handsomeness and youth of Fenton is illumined in contrast with Slender’s womanish demeanor: Even Slender’s uncle, Shallow, chides him for his lack of masculinity: “To her coz! O, boy, thou hadst a father” (3.4.35-6). Youth and masculinity are underscored in the play even by off-hand comments like those by Page, who needles Evans for his age and his rheumatism: “And youthful still: in your doublet and hose this raw, rheumatic day!” (3.1.40-1).
While Page’s deflation of Evans has to do with his age, his comment about clothing brings out another kind of critique: while youth is lauded, it is also deemed suspect. Another kind of effeminacy is indicated, one which threatened early modern men, especially men of a certain age. Page’s unmitigated disapproval of Fenton betrays a cultural suspicion of young men which emerges out of early modern documents about aristocratic men such as Hoby’s translation of Castiglione’s *Book of the Courtier*.

Effeminacy represented, in fact, the present and the future of the aristocratic male …. The ideal courtier embarked on a new heroic task of appropriating behaviors once thought soft, luxurious, and nonuseful – singing, dancing, painting, trading witticisms, and composing love-letters – and practicing them within a heterosocial space, producing a courtly body marked by an aesthetic difference (King, “Displacing Masculinity” 121).

It is this effeminacy “these lisping hawthorn-buds that come like women in men’s apparel” (3. 3.59-60) that Falstaff scorns when playing the gallant himself to Mistress Ford. In this taunting remark Shakespeare may be intentionally romanticizing the manliness of a foregone era, the era of I Henry IV, where Falstaff, as a foil to Hal, though an exceedingly undisciplined aristocrat himself, highlights ironically, the noble, manly attributes the Prince will eventually demonstrate in the play. Fenton, seemingly acknowledging and anticipating the effeminate critique lodged against himself and his class enunciates his manliness by alluding to his military “colours”:

> Good Mistress Page, for that I love your daughter  
> In such a righteous fashion as I do,  
> Perforce against all checks, rebukes, and manners  
> I must advance the colours of my love …. (3.4.75-8)

Thomas King observes a political/materialist basis in seventeenth-century critique “… of courtly aristocracy. The dependence of sovereign and court power on spectacularity, and the conspicuous circulation and consumption of commodities and labor became
‘effeminate’ against the development of the utilitarian, rationalist, and critical looks enabling the explosion of technological and bureaucratic power” (122).

Another view evincing how suspect Fenton’s youth and class would have been perceived by early moderns is put forward by Kirsten C. Uszkalo: “… the fairy plot and confidence game does not end with Falstaff brushing dirt off of his blushing face. All of the cozeners are duped by a final pair of confidence artists: Fenton and Ann Page” (31). This may represent a heterodoxical point of view against the established theme of love conquering all, which the Fenton and Ann Page marriage purportedly enacts. However, it does suggest the disorder which pervades the play, and indirectly interrogates the violence in the attack against Falstaff, all of which undermines the comic happy ending.

By all intents and purposes, on the surface, at least, the love-marriage plot must be acknowledged. In seventeenth-century Europe, some social historians conclude, cultural, political and economic factors began to break down earlier systems of marriage, promoting individuals to choose spouses based on emotional affect and love (Coontz). How else are we to take Fenton’s speech admitting the deception perpetrated by him and Ann in the final act, defending their love match?

Hear the truth of it.
You would have married her, most shamefully,
Where there was no proportion held in love.
The truth is, she and I, long since contracted,
Are now so sure that nothing can dissolve us. (5.5.197-201)

He goes further by denouncing any other way as religious heresy. He defends their conspiracy against Ann’s parents:

The offence is holy that she hath committed,
And this deceit loses the name of craft,
Of disobedience, or unduteous title,
Since therein she doth evitate and shun
A thousand irreligious cursed hours
Which forced marriage would have brought upon her. (5.5.202-7)

The denouement of the play, resulting from the chicanery all the characters take part in, that of the marriage of the young lovers Ann and Fenton, is echoed in *The Roaring Girl*, with the marriage of Sebastian and Mary Fitzallard; both endings are replete with a cross-dressing display as well, and both comedies intimate the dubiousness and even the transgression of such an event. This begs the question of whether or not there is a happy ending in Shakespeare’s comedy, or as Dolan queries: “The merry wives allow us to think into the future of marriage, so often the terrain of tragedy, in order to imagine a comic act six so to speak. For me, this raises the question of whether marriage is a happy ending, and if so, for whom and by what standard” (628).

The cross-dressing of the young Windsor boys as fairies, turns them into spouses: Slender cries out that he has married “a great lubberly boy” (5.5.170), and irritably grumbles to Page, “What need you tell me that? … when I took a boy for a girl. If I had been married to him, for all he was in woman’s apparel, I would not have had him” (5.5.175-77). And more comically, if not ribaldly, Caius is perplexed: “Ver is Mistress Page: By Gar, I am cozened! I ha’ married *un garcon*, a boy, *un paysan*, by Gar. A boy!” (5.5.186-187). Uszkalo emphasizes the feminine and feminist nature of the cross-dressed masque: “This artifice allowed for the temporary inversions of normative expectations and social hierarchies which define the imagined and feminized realm of the fairy” (30); the woods of Windsor are a liminal space but a woman’s space, “a space where matriarchal power can exist and a space where normative male power is frustrated” (30). Dolan acknowledges same-sex implications in the female marriage of true minds of the Mistresses Ford and Page, “the readiest balance might be achieved
between members of the same sex … Mistress Page and Mistress Ford confer and act with one another more than with their husbands…” (628). Moreover, the cross-dressed masque engages and does not “always or successfully erase those queer possibilities” (628).

Marjorie Garber in *Vested Interests* goes the furthest into the territory of transvestism in the play, threading together the history of the Garter ceremony, which has been conjectured as perhaps the originating source for the production of the play. The play’s first performance was probably in April 1597, according to Walter Cohen, staged in the presence of Elizabeth at the Garter Feast in London, where those elected would be inducted to the Order, shortly thereafter (Cohen, Walter 1257). As Garber indicates “the cultural production” is “linked to” a famous “‘historical’ incident of cross-dressing, the founding of the Order of the Garter, when supposedly, King Edward III picked up a garter dropped by the Countess of Salisbury at a dance” (124). While critics have emphasized the cultural links to the Order, to the Queen and the court, stressing “a female ruler’s association with a male order, critics have occluded – or repressed – the fantasy of the founding scenario, which imagines a transvestism of the opposite (gender) kind, the king wearing the countess’ garter” (124). Most demonstrative of the findings of this study of *The Merry Wives* is Garber’s delving into the psychoanalytic and linguistic area of Falstaff’s transvestism in the play. Garber contends that Falstaff’s cross-dressing by the wives into an old woman is seen by critics as “something of an embarrassment, not even a glamorous drag queen like Antony in Cleopatra’s tires and mantle, but rather the quintessence of what is known in transvestite circles as cod drag… cod as in codpiece … means both scrotum and testicles, hoax, fool, pretence, or mock. The anxiety of male
artifactuality is summed up, as it were, in a nutshell” (124). Garber goes on to interrogate a complicated conundrum: as the artifice of transvestism has been established mainly on “women’s bodies,… What if it should turn out that female fetishism is invisible, or untheorizable, because it coincides with what has been established as natural or normal – for women to fetishize the phallus on men? Lacan, in fact, says as much…” (124). For Garber, because female fetishism is heteronormative, it is precisely the reason it is “invisible” (125).

While this brings us back to the codpiece as signifier, and to cross-dressing in Shakespeare as a complex enterprise, the cross-dressing finale of the *Merry Wives*, may in fact, ultimately, be a coup de grace delivered towards marriage. Dolan expresses that Shakespeare’s “plays tend to explore … the emotional logic of joining or putting asunder, of choosing or being subject to the vagaries of fate, whether spousal jealousy or shipwrecks” (624). The emotional logic may call into question heteronormative marriage in *Merry Wives* where “we see the possibility that same-sex attachments survive and coexist with – perhaps even animate and exist within – marriage and aren’t necessarily supplanted by it” (631).

While Fenton’s speech on the irreligiousness of “forced marriage” (5.5.207) is purportedly a defense of marriage for love, he, like Bassanio in *Merchant of Venice*, who also originally wishes to wed Portia because she is wealthy, is a dubious figure, especially in championing love in marriage. The anxiety of masculinity finds its apogee, perhaps, in early modern patriarchal marriage. Historicizing, Clark explains the effect of marriage on the early modern man:

> In maturing to this stage, the young man had to demonstrate the physical strength in activities, assertiveness in manner, dress, and
sexuality, the physiological heat and the biblical superiority that founded his masculinity during a time when gender was frequently feared to be unstable. Then in marriage, the young husband had to establish control over his wife, her propriety in sexuality, obedience in activities, humility in dress, manner and language in order for him to be considered a proper householder. (18)

Even in the youthful man, the anxiety of masculinity in patriarchal marriage is underscored. Further, as Uszkalo argues, the result of the love-marriage between Fenton and Ann finishes with Page being “cheated out of his authority over his household and his valuables; he loses control of his assets by losing control of his daughter (31). Uszkalo echoes what many critics have found in this Shakespearean comedy—an ominous, anarchic, somewhat disordered ending: “The return to order at the end of the play is hardly a return to order at all—the women were in control all the way through—and the only one able to trick the women is Ann. Power, is simply passed to the next generation of cunning women, cozening women, and imagined fairy queens” (31).

For many critics, the assertive role of women as represented mainly by the merry but honest wives is consonant with the much discredited but enduring myth of Queen Elizabeth, who was purportedly so enamored with the characterization of Falstaff in Henry IV, that she “commissioned” Shakespeare to put pen to paper to write a play showing Falstaff in love. To this day, critics pronounce the myth as apocryphal, but continue to make reference to it. What may be a fantasy of Shakespeare ingratiating himself to his monarch by creating strong women characters is more likely a nod to the universality and colossal reputation of Falstaff in the English popular imagination. Much more to the point for this study, is the politico-sexual anxiety of Stephen Cohen’s claim that the cuckoldry theme in *Merry Wives* resonates with, in a sense, Elizabeth’s cuckolding of her subjects. Cohen examines Elizabeth’s “gendered political self-
representation – the queen as spouse of her kingdom – and its situation of Elizabeth precisely at the intersection of marriage, sex, and power that defined the cultural logic of cuckoldry” (7). Cohen explains that poems written both by Essex and Ralegh to Elizabeth suggest and enunciate jealousy and cuckoldry. Elizabeth, however, using the trope to her advantage, suggested at times that she was husband, at times wife, at times “Prince” (8-9). Cohen maintains that Elizabeth’s male subjects are emasculated and that Shakespeare’s plays participate in the logic of the queen’s exploitation of her two bodies, the body politic and the body female. The figure of cuckoldry informs the anxiety about marriages in the plays; to Cohen it is an anxiety not about female independence, but represents a patriarchal fantasy.

The debate about whether this play about cuckoldry instantiates female independence or whether it exposes masculine anxiety may forever remain unresolved. Coppelia Kahn sums up the problematic uncertainties with the final assertion that “The horned Falstaff, then, is an emblem of Everyman as both cuckold and cuckolder, victim and offender; ‘the savage yoke’ of marriage subjugates all men” (Man’s Estate 150). In the play, however, Ford has the last word and, seemingly, gets the last laugh:

Let it be so, Sir John.
To Master Brooke you yet shall hold your word,
For he tonight shall lie with Mistress Ford. (5.5.220-222).

With a wink to the audience, Shakespeare’s doubling character, Ford/Brooke, and bawdy word play reinforces the notion that Ford has regained his faltering manhood, and has reestablished his sexual potency. However, Ford’s avowal to the linguistically challenged Evans that “I will never mistrust my wife again till thou art able to woo her in good English” (5.5. 128-129) is indeed unconvincing, especially in light of the fact that
the character of Ford, in his fear of cuckoldry, in many ways anticipates Othello’s obsessive and murderous jealousy. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the play ends in laughter, “let us everyone go home, /And laugh this sport o’er by a country fire, / Sir John and all” (5.5. 218-220): jealousy is supplanted by mirth. In contrast, in *Othello*, as we shall see, cuckoldry and jealousy reach spectacular heights of tragic proportion.
Chapter 4

“O most lame and impotent conclusion!” (Othello 2. 1. 163)

Published in 1615, Benedetto Varchi’s (1503-1565) *The blazon of iealousie* pronounces the condition of jealousy as a dialectics of health and gender in “The Epistle Dedicatorie”: “Sir, I present unto your audacious view, the Plague of Men, and the auncient Disease of Women: a Subject known, but too-too well, to many….“ In the ensuing pages, I hope to demonstrate that cuckoldry anxiety and jealousy were indeed a plague to men and a disease, not expressly to women, as Varchi so floridly puts it, but a dysfunction endured, suffered, and promulgated by an inordinate fear and loathing in early modern masculinity, and represented as leading to ferociously deadly consequences in Shakespeare’s Othello.

This chapter examines the connection between cuckoldry, jealousy, sexuality, and masculinity, and how their attendant anxieties result in a psychic and corporeal impotence represented in the tragedy of Othello. Early modern preoccupation with cuckoldry figures heavily in Shakespeare’s work, and as I attempt to show, culminates in the dramatic cataclysm and collapse of masculinity in Othello. Briefly drawing the parallels between *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, discussed in my previous chapter, with Othello, I remark upon how the difference in genre climaxes in a thematic shift in Shakespeare’s work. An area which surrounds my work here but which is treated in a more ancillary way is the question of race and its connection to cuckoldry and monstrosity. While *The Merry Wives of Windsor* establishes the multivalent symbology
of the horns, Othello’s cuckoldry reinforces his monstrosity, his association with cannibals and Anthropophagi whose heads hang below their shoulders, or with the witchcraft Branbanzio believes has enchanted his daughter. Brabanzio’s disbelief that Desdemona would run “to the sooty bosom of a thing such as thou – to fear…” (1.2.71-72) yokes together monstrosity, sexuality, miscegenation, and racism. I maintain that the monstrosity of Othello is opposed to masculinity and thereby opposed to humanness as well. A more revelatory discussion of masculinity and impotence in this chapter is the problem of genre in Othello: I underscore how cuckoldry, as a condition inherent to patriarchy, leads to impotence and results in tragedy, but also note how the codpiece as a displaced signifier is used in the service of comedy.

In demonstrating how impotence and cuckoldry is a way of theorizing subjectivity and the self, I turn my attention to a wide body of criticism, ranging from psychoanalytic critics such as those initiated by Edgar Snow and advanced by Harry Berger and Arthur Kirsch, who underscore the phallic nature of love and eroticism, and the revulsion of sex and sexuality in Othello, to cultural materialist critics such William Fisher, Cynthia Marshall, and Mark Breitenberg, to Freudian and Oedipal readings such as those of Coppelia Kahn’s which mark castration, emasculation, and loss of virility. I move to questions of gender: that is, how female agency in Desdemona’s character contributes to the loss of masculinity. In order to analyze these topics, I emphasize first, the signifier of the handkerchief, which, taking my view from Fisher, I perceive as prosthetic and thereby related to the displaced codpiece, and second, to Othello and Desdemona’s bed as the site of a failed sexuality or impotence, as explained by Michael Neil. My own reading of the play is situated between these treatments, and is distinct
from them by deepening the problem and subject of just how threatened masculinity is in
the early modern period. Othello’s tragic self-regard culminates in the play’s violence:
Othello’s vulnerable masculinity and the literal and figurative impotence in the play is
brought about directly out of a fetishized, pathological, disordered cuckoldry anxiety. In
summary, given the centrality of cuckoldry anxiety to the treatment of impotence, and
underpinned by Iago’s reference to the “cod,” I maintain that the play is ultimately about
the stripping away of masculinity from its hero, Othello, which is wrought by his shame
and compulsion over cuckoldry, his fixation on the handkerchief, and his distorted view
of sexuality as repugnant. In all, driven by the colossal shame of cuckoldry, Othello’s
suicide is self-castrative, an act which represents the absolute loss of any and all
masculinity.

Cuckoldry, in early modern works, is firmly established as a most serious threat to
masculinity; however, nowhere is cuckoldry more threatening or dangerous and desperate
than it is in Othello. As problematic as this drama is, it continues to intrigue, and its
appeal over the centuries is indisputable. Bothersome from a critical perspective is the
generic confusion registered by the play: both comic and tragic elements alternate
throughout. It is just this generic instability drawn over the theme of cuckoldry which
makes Othello remarkably close to the comedy of The Merry Wives of Windsor, and most
specifically the characterization of Master Ford to that of Othello. Doomed to horn-
madness, both imagine their own cuckoldry. The correspondence of these two characters
lies in the torment and rage they experience through the anxiety of cuckoldry. While the
symmetry between The Merry Wives of Windsor and Othello is undeniable, Othello, the
later play, expresses a thematic shift, owing obviously to the difference between tragedy
and comedy, but also as a result of, perhaps, an evolution in Shakespeare’s ideation. The change is dramatic – it is cuckoldry drawn on an exponential curve.

Just as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, cuckoldry drives the plot in *Othello*. However, just as in the former play, the signification of the codpiece presents itself—perhaps as another displacement—by the symbolic horns of the cuckold, and intriguingly, by the signal handkerchief. The handkerchief has been interpreted by various critics as a prosthetic device: this construction demands further exploration. As a displacement, the phallic codpiece acts as a metaphor and also frames the play subliminally: it provides a corridor by which to understand the comic, sometimes absurd yet psychologically fraught crisis in masculinity the play represents. This play too, is ultimately about masculinity and impotence. *Othello*, with its emphasis on cuckoldry and its mixing of genres represents a hero whose masculinity is in decline – Othello undergoes a tragic trajectory from virility to impotence and back again. Once potency is restored, the play and its hero spin unrelentingly downward, relapsing further and further into the impotent abyss of madness and self-destruction.

*Othello* is a play, like *The Merry Wives of Windsor* laden with ambiguity. Just as in the latter, Shakespeare takes a measure of marriage. The conventional understanding of the tragedy is that the problem emanates from a miscegenated marriage. To make certain of this, one must first, however, parse out the generic ambiguity of the play: what distinguishes this play as a tragedy? Stephen Orgel’s provocatively titled essay, “*Othello*

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and the End of Comedy” puts forth the supposition that “Othello begins at the moment when comedies end, with a happy marriage” (105). He argues that in Othello and other Shakespeare plays “patriarchy is an issue that often provides both the principal motivation of comedy and a strong tragic element within it” (105). As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and Love’s Labour’s Lost conclude with uncertain marriages “implying thereby that perhaps marriage is not such a happy ending after all” (105).

Thomas Rymer in 1693 was perhaps the first critic to cast doubt on the tragic in Othello. In his famously scathing commentary, he concludes that the play is “none other than a Bloody Farce, without salt or savour” (47). According to him the play has “some burlesk, some humour, and ramble of Comic Wit; some shew, and some Mimicry to divert spectators…” (47). He ridicules the “Moral” of the play, belittling it in the following way:

1. First, This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors […] Secondly, This may be a warning to all good Wives that they look well to their Linnen. Thirdly, This may be a lesson to Husbands, that before their Jealousie be Tragical the proofs may be Mathematical. (45)

It is interesting to note that Rymer’s own criticism may be termed farcical. Even so, while latter day critics treat Rymer’s criticism with scorn, Orgel takes an opposing view, explaining that the play’s indebtedness to the commedia dell’arte is not the only reason to recognize comedy or farce in Othello. Summing up Rymer’s swiping of the play, Orgel enacts a modern translation:

Othello is a fool, Desdemona is a slattern and largely responsible for what happens to her, everyone is insufficiently dignified, the plot is crazy, but Iago’s scheming is not a major factor in the tragedy or farce (Orgel “Othello and the End of Comedy”110).
To enlarge upon Rymer’s judgment of Othello not measuring up to the classically “sacred” (107) label of tragedy, Orgel recounts the well known apocryphal anecdote in which a man in the audience, at the climactic moment during a performance, leapt up to the stage shouting, “You fool, can’t you see she’s innocent?” (115). However, Orgel asserts that the improbabilities and the irrationality of Shakespeare’s plot, character, and motives which Rymer disparages, in fact, heighten the powerfulness of this play.

In other critics’ remarks upon the indeterminateness of the genre, again, there is the admission that much in it is comic. The scenes of Iago manipulating the conventional gull Roderigo, which were coincident with the jestbooks and prose tales of the period (Bruster 106); Iago’s and Cassio’s bawdy references to the “strumpet” and “bauble” Bianca; the comic dialogues of courtesy between Desdemona and Iago; and the drunken songs which accompany the play’s action (Bruster 106) all add up to the comic character of the play.

However, as Bruster notes, the tragedy of this play emerges from its comic plot, which in its very essence recalls aspects of the comic plot already discussed in The Merry Wives of Windsor. In The Merry Wives, Falstaff serves as the aging, seducing Everyman; in this play, Othello is the older husband who marries a woman too young for himself, thereby opening himself up to cuckoldry, or to the overarching terror of cuckoldry. Fundamentally, Othello may be seen as comic because it treats erotic energy and appetites, even in its linguistic and imagistic expressions e.g. “the beast with two backs” (1. 1. 118); “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1. 88-9). Bruster characterizes the January – May relationship of Othello and Desdemona and its connection to comic forms like the charivari.
The framing device of the codpiece, latent as it is, and the prominent signifier, the handkerchief, may be illuminated by the following description from a work contemporaneous to Shakespeare’s lifetime. Vecellio, in the 1613 *Treasvrie of Avncient and Moderne Times*, brings the two objects together in an arresting conflation: In their hose, he says, men

hadde a large and ample Cod-piece, which came vppe with two wings, and so were fastened to eyther side with two Pointes. In this wide roome, they had Linnen bagges, tied with like Points to the inside, betweene the Shirte and Cod-piece. This serued as the receipt for Pursse, Hand-kerchers, Apples, Plummes, Peares, Orenge, and other fruits (371).

Comic as it appears to modern sensibilities, the codpiece, described in its amplitude, reveals something germane to an understanding of the sexual and literary devices in *Othello*; that is, both the handkerchief and the codpiece were “made close to their limbes,” (371) and these contents in the genital area were, implicitly, also close to men’s hearts and minds.

Complicating the generic problem of Othello’s tragic and comic elements, an image directly from the play which puts into focus the codpiece as a framing apparatus, although perhaps a veiled one, is Iago’s use of “cod” in a sexualized and disparaging [to women] expression in a dialogue with Desdemona. In Act 2, Desdemona, Iago, Emilia, Cassio and others anxiously await Othello’s arrival to Cyprus. Desdemona nervously distracts herself by engaging in a polite, playful repartee with Iago, asking him what praise he would bestow on a deserving woman. In a longer description of a faithful, pure, chaste woman, he inserts the indelicate “She that in wisdom never was so frail/To change the cod’s head for the salmon’s tail;” (2.1.156-7). The note glosses the expression as “To make an unworthy exchange…. Suggesting sexual infidelity ‘cod’ means ‘penis,’ and
‘tail’ equals ‘vulva.’” 27 As we can infer, the cod motif here conjoins cuckoldry with it. This particular expression has impelled an extended explication by Balz Engler, recognizing as he does the importance of the image and the passage to Shakespeare’s play. He cites Partridge, an earlier critic who assumes “that cod’s head refers to codpiece and therefore probably to ‘penis (the head of the cod or scrotum)’” (Partridge 77-78) (Engler 202). Engler’s understanding is that the passage serves several dramatic purposes, but also advances characterization: “it brings out Desdemona’s anxiety; it shows how she copes with her new role as a general’s wife, and it emphasizes the contrast between Cassio’s and Iago’s attitudes to women” (202). Engler finally concludes that Iago “sees human beings solely in terms of their sexual drives. In other words, Iago praises the woman who is wise enough to choose a partner becoming to her” (203). Engler’s grasp of the passage settles on the theme of the Other, and by implication, on the racial undercurrent of the play. My own understanding is that this passage is not offhand or insubstantial, but, rather, that the signification of the cod or codpiece suggests and frames for the reader the misogyny, the sexualized latent and manifest content of the play as a whole, and the phallic nature of the sexual drives represented in the entirety of the work.

Bruster recapitulates the terms of tragedy and comedy: “The two genres differ in the disposition of characters’ bodies: comedy typically ends with safe and satisfied (or soon to be satisfied) bodies, tragedy with dead, maimed, and grieving bodies” (Bruster 105). In Othello, it is within the signification of bodies that we may contemplate a

melding of comic and tragic forms, which derives from the tropes of the codpiece (and its substitutions) and the cuckold, culminating in an impotency of disturbed masculinity. Impotence, as we have seen, is shameful, yet it is a source of laughter. At the same time, it is deeply troubling.

While *Othello* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* have much affinity in both comic effects and characterization, there are also decided differences in the two works. The main difference in *Othello* is in the outcome of the suspicion of cuckoldry – a brutal, violent murder is committed. But how does the play result in this consequence? Or, rather, what is it in Othello’s response to cuckoldry that prompts the violence of his action? As explored in the preceding chapter, many factors contribute to cuckoldry anxiety in the early modern period. To recapitulate, the commonplace view is that cuckoldry is inherent to marriage, and according to Coppelia Kahn’s theorizing masculinity, the three phenomena which result in the condition of cuckoldry in marriage are misogyny, the double standard, and patriarchal marriage.

To develop this view further with regard to *Othello*, and to take into account the relationship of the body and impotence to cuckoldry anxiety, Breitenberg’s analysis is illuminating. His argument coalesces around an interpretation of Montaigne and

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Petrarch, and through these he establishes that there is a decidedly phallic element in cuckoldry anxiety, which is dismemberment and impotency:

Like Petrarchan idealizations of chaste women as dangerously powerful and unattainable, cuckoldry anxiety employs the opposite yet complementary representation of women as dangerously powerful due to their supposedly unbridled sexuality. Indeed the tradition of placing horns on the head of the cuckolded husband duplicates the same displacement of male fears of dismemberment through the use of a phallic symbol of male potency. (“The Anatomy of Masculine Desire” 447)

Othello, whose suspicion of Desdemona has been aroused and cruelly manipulated by Iago, soliloquizes on marriage, ravenous female sexuality, cuckoldry, and horns:

O curse of marriage,  
That we can call these delicate creatures ours  
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad  
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon  
Than keep a corner in the thing I love  
For others’ uses. Yet ‘tis a plague of great ones;  
Prerogatived are they less than the base.  
‘Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.  
Even then this forked plague is fated to us  
When we do quicken. (3.3.272-281)

Othello speaks of the inevitability of men to suffer the “plague” of the cuckold’s horns which grow out of their foreheads – a fate man must suffer as long as he lives. The horns, coupled with the pestilential and bestial imagery of vapours and toads begin to cast in Othello’s mind a monstrous self-fashioning. Speculating also upon the patriarchal expression of female desire as unquenchable, Breitenberg sees in cuckoldry anxiety a coincidence with Petrarchism: “… in both cases men are led by their fear of emasculation to construct women as the objects of their specularization; …. The wife’s or the beloved’s sexuality is fetishized…” (“Anatomy” 448). Breitenberg breaks down patriarchal male imperatives also by looking at Montaigne’s Essays, and underscores the volatility (431) of male desire: “… the economy that fetishizes female chastity constructs
and sustains men as desiring subjects whose identities depend upon an anxious, 
sometimes volatile relation to ‘objects’ of knowledge and interpretation that are forever 
outside their mastery” (431). He quotes Montaigne: “it is against the nature of love, not 
to be violent, and against the condition of violence to be constant” 30 (Montaigne Book 
III, Chapter V) (Breitenberg “Anatomy” 431-432). Breitenberg makes clear that while 
Montaigne is speaking of female desire, the distinct violence is, to Breitenberg, “the 
projection of a masculine model of sexual desire and dissatisfaction onto women” (432). 
The arousal of violence is precisely represented in Othello “… Conquest, jealousy, and 
violece, it would seem, are not aberrations of male heterosexual love; they are its very 
conditions” (433).

Relevant, as well, and instructive to the male and female sexuality discussed in 
my argument, is Breitenberg’s referral in his article to Montaigne’s thoughts on female 
sexual desire regarding male impotence, and how dangerous it is to exaggerate men’s 
penis size to women (“Anatomy” 432). Montaigne’s admonition compels us to see how 
pervasive and complicated a fear of impotence was to masculine self-fashioning. With 
regard to marriage, the danger of impotence is threatening. As such, Montaigne warns: 
“It is not sufficient that will keepe a lively course: weakenesse and incapacity may 
lawfully breake wedlock” (Montaigne Book III, Chapter V). As he says of the 
“operation” of sex, “Surely it is an argument not onely of our original corruption, but a 
badge of our vanity and deformity” (Montaigne Book III, Chapter V). The impotence

30 Italics are Florio’s in Montaigne, Michel Eyquem De. 1603. Montaigne’s Essays. 
Trans. by John Florio. 29 Oct 2014 
brought about by jealousy and cuckoldry anxiety is both corporeal, as Montaigne professes, and psychic.

Arthur Kirsch also relies upon a reading of Montaigne to foreground an analysis of tragic guilt and desire in *Othello*. Like Freud many centuries later, Montaigne finds degradation in love and sex. Referring to the procreative sex act, Montaigne says:

> On the one side nature urgeth us unto it; having thereunto combined, yea fastned the most noble, the most profitable, and the most sensually-pleasing of all her functions; and on the other suffereth us to accuse, to condemne and to shunne it, as insolent, as dishonest and as lewde, to blush at it, and allow, yea and to commend abstinence. *Are not we most brutish to terme that worke beastly which begets and which maketh us?* (Book III, Chapter V)

Psychoanalytic criticism of the play focuses often on the Freudian notions expressed in “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” where Freud delineates psychical impotence, deriving as it does from the degradation of the sexual object, and, further, that there is something in the nature of the sexual instinct which is unfavorable to achievement of sexual satisfaction. The sexual repulsion both Montaigne and Freud allude to leads Kirsch to understand that Othello’s psychical impotence may be due to his being convinced that “Desdemona’s manifest attraction to him is itself perverse, a ‘proof’ of her corruption” (Kirsch 735). However, in the final analysis, Kirsch believes that Othello’s impotence is a convergence of the psychical and the corporeal, and goes to the very core of his self-definition: “The tragedy of Othello is that finally he fails to love his own body, to love himself, and it is this despairing self-hatred which spawns the enormous savagery and degradation and destructiveness of his jealousy” (735).

Put another way, the connection between impotence and cuckoldry is a way of theorizing the self (Pulling ii). “Cuckoldry is inherently corporeal and discursive. The body is often the motor of cuckoldry through unbridled lust or lost virility …. Thus
attempts to avoid cuckoldry often focus on controlling discourse rather than controlling one’s wife” (Pulling 4). This is precisely what Othello cannot do, and what Iago can do with agility.

From the outset of the play, Iago reveals his determination to use cuckoldry as a means to satisfy his revenge against Othello, and reveals that it is a trick, a sport, a diversion for him: He foments the plot with Roderigo: “If thou canst cuckold him, thou dost thyself a pleasure, me a sport” (1.3. 367-8). As the stratagem begins to take hold, Iago, though persistently an unreliable speaker, reveals his motive in a soliloquy. He will cuckold Othello, for Othello has cuckolded him: an eye for an eye, or a horn for a horn:

For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
Hath leapt into my seat, the thought whereof
Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
And nothing can or shall content my soul
Till I am evened with him, wife for wife –
Or failing, so, yet that I put the Moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure…. (2.3.282-289)

Iago, in drawing jealousy as pestilential and visceral, confirms that he is given to the male, rather than female disease laid out in Varchi’s blazon. However, Iago’s adroitness in deceit and trickery, and in discoursing, give him an edge Othello does not have and against which he cannot defend himself. As Terry Eagelton explains: “Jealousy is a tyrannical language which manipulates the world to suit its own ends, an absolutist law which bends the evidence in its own interests” (72). Iago can succeed in his invention of

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31 Coleridge famously noted that Iago was driven by a “motiveless malignity”:
cuckoldry because Othello “conforms himself to Iago’s empty signifiers, filling them
with the imaginary signifieds of Desdemona’s infidelity” (72). Iago knows his own
powers of discoursing with empty signifiers. Watching Cassio and Desdemona speak off
to the side, he intones to himself: “Ay, well said – whisper. With as little a web as this
will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio” (2.1. 168-9). To Othello, with as flimsy and
insubstantial phraseology as one can utter, he throws suspicion upon Cassio and
Desdemona and insinuates cuckoldry:

Iago: Ha! I like not that.
Othello: What dost thou say?
Iago: Nothing, my lord. Or if, I know not what. (3.3.33-35)

The dexterity of Iago’s discourse is that he exploits omission in language to ascribe guilt,
and while Othello is infuriated by this, the nightmare vision has been etched in his mind.

Casting doubt upon Cassio, Iago literally says nothing:

Iago: Honest, my lord?
Othello: Honest? Ay, honest.
Iago: My lord, for aught I know.
Othello: What dost thou think?
Iago: Think, my lord?
Othello: ‘Think, my lord?’ By heaven, thou echo’st me
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown! (3.3.106-112)

As we shall see, in the concluding act, Iago goes one step further: he stubbornly
maintains silence rather than impeach himself. However, in this earlier act, he beguiles
Othello by limning the condition of cuckoldry as torture, by using Othello’s own
language and self-regard as monstrous. In one of the most famous passages of the play,
Iago warns:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy.
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger.  
But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er  
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects yet fondly loves! (3.3.169-174)

Othello’s reply, “O misery” (3.3. 175) indicates that Iago has touched a raw nerve. In Act 4, the execrable word is finally uttered by Othello. The defiant “Cuckold me!” (4.1. 190) may be read as an inversion of “me, cuckold,” in which Othello assumes not only the designation, but the identity of a cuckold; this marks both the frenzy and violence that will explode forth: “I will chop her into messes (4.1.190).

Heretofore in the play, Othello sustains the patriarchal principle of the inevitability of cuckoldry and its loss. He laments knowing the infidelity and assumes the predicament of the wittol: “What sense had I of her stol’n hours of lust? / I saw’t not, thought it not; it harmed not me….  He that is robbed, not wanting what is stol’n /Let him not know’t and he’s not robbed at all” (3.3.343-4; 347-8). The loss of the sexual object in Othello’s imaginary enables him to conjure up a vision so foul and threatening to him of multiple sexual partners – the partners even from a lowly class -- fornicating with Desdemona; he again appropriates the psychology of the wittol:

I had been happy if the general camp,  
Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
So I had nothing known. (3.3.350-2)

The image is so unbearable as to last only a moment. He immediately laments the loss of his tranquility, his reputation, his honor, and implicitly, his sexual potency: “Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content, / Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars/ That makes ambition virtue!...  Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone” (3.3.353-5; 362). It is at this moment he demands Iago to “… prove my love a whore/… Give me the ocular proof…” (3.3.364-5).
The ocular proof is the handkerchief, a symbol so loaded as to ultimately accomplish the rich ambiguity of this tragedy. For one thing, the handkerchief acts as a catalyst to vivify the horns of the cuckold. To Desdemona’s concern that Othello is unwell, he responds, “I have a pain upon my forehead here” (3. 3. 286), indicating that the imaginary horns have grown on his head. Othello, -- despite his own claims of self-government, is already losing control: Desdemona’s attempts to “bind it hard [with the handkerchief], within this hour/It will be well” (3.3. 290-1) add insult to injury. It is as if with the handkerchief she drives the horns in further. Othello returns, “Your napkin is too little” (3.3. 292). The stage directions [“He puts the napkin from him. It drops”] indicates not so much an accident occurring, but Othello’s complicity with Desdemona in losing the handkerchief which cannot cure him of his horns, no matter how richly a symbol of their love the handkerchief has been.

Othello describes the handkerchief as magical, an object which marries love, death, witchcraft, and chastity all within it:

There’s magic in the web of it.  
A sibyl that had numbered in the world  
The sun to course two hundred compasses  
In her prophetic fury sewed the work.  
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk,  
And it was dyed in mummy, which the skillful  
Conserved of maidens’ hearts. (3.4.67-73).

He warns Desdemona never to lose the handkerchief, reifying it and imputing to it a symbol of her chastity and fidelity; at the same time the loss of the handkerchief prefigures the loss of sanity and manhood Othello will eventually undergo: “Make it a darling, like your precious eye. / To lose’t or give’t away were such perdition / As nothing else could match” (3.4.64 - 66). The handkerchief, a seeming trifle as Iago
suggests, is anything but: “Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ” (3.3.326-328).

Harry Berger discloses the handkerchief’s significance to Othello’s masculinity. The handkerchief is evidence of Desdemona’s betrayal “which he interprets as misuse of the generous gift of power he has bestowed upon her, the apotropaic power to ward off the contamination of their coupling by moderating the sexuality she arouses…. It is to insure against … the risk (let us say it now) of castration – that Othello reifies gift and power together ….” (238). Curiously, in Berger’s telling parenthesis, it is as if this castrating power is something Berger himself shrinks from. The risk, as he names it, is so fearful as to result in male impotency. Other critics have followed the sexual traces of the handkerchief “spotted with strawberries” (3.3. 440) from a sign of “an originary sexual moment” (Little 80), to the “ritual origins of marital blood” (Boose 367) and, as well, to “some sort of displaced genital symbol of Desdemona,” (Boose 371) as Kenneth Burke has appended it.

Further, the cloth of the handkerchief is a symbol of “‘all the displacements of affect’” in the whole play (Rudnytsky 184), that is, “the thing that replaces what the audience is not allowed to see; …. The displaced cloth comes to represent the displaced bed, which represents the displaced couple; and these objects and the couple of Othello and Desdemona are significant because they are displaced” (Little 81). Further evidence of the handkerchief as a displaced phallic signifier related to the trope of the codpiece is the application of queer theory to its symbolization. One scholar posits, through theorizing gender as fetish, with Desdemona’s handkerchief as her fetish object, that the handkerchief may be reimagined as a dildo, binding it with its masculine phallic
signification. Desdemona, in this reimagination is queer, incorporating masculine and feminine qualities; the stage prop of the handkerchief may be said to embody a transgressive performance (Guevara).

Historians identify the handkerchief as coming into popular use in Europe in the Renaissance, and in England its appearance as a “cultural artifact[s]” (Fisher “Handkerchiefs and Early Modern Ideologies of Gender” 201) came during the Elizabethan era. Recognized as a token of love and sexuality, it is nonetheless a contradictory item. For example, in this time, courtesans were compelled to wear yellow handkerchiefs (Mirabella). While in Renaissance drama or in paintings or portraits, handkerchiefs are often associated with the female gender, in Othello the signification of the handkerchief assigns both male and female to it. In fact, as a displaced signifier of the cuckold’s horns as discussed above, in this play the handkerchief appears to be very much associated with male sexual constructions such as the displaced phallic codpiece.

Critical understanding of both the transferability of the handkerchief and the handkerchief as a prosthetic device discloses its relation to these displaced sexual signifiers. Cynthia Marshall, in undertaking a Freudian and Lacanian analysis of the levels of fantasy in Othello asserts that “Iago cunningly introduces Desdemona’s handkerchief as a prop or prosthesis to aid Othello’s imagination ….” (Marshall “Orders of Fantasy in Othello” 84). As such, “masculine power rests on ideological fantasy, the play undercuts male autonomy and self-determinism”(88). Fisher, too, recognizes the handkerchief as “… an instrument of self-fashioning,… an artifact that helped to produce the patriarchal ideology…” (“Handkerchiefs” 203) but it was “necessarily complicated by its prosthetic nature” (203). Just as the codpiece is a prosthesis, the handkerchief is also
imbued with many of the same complex associations of sexuality and masculinity. Iago, in conjuring up for Othello an ostensibly pornographic image of Desdemona, “naked with her friend in bed” (4.1.3) insidiously denies her culpability in giving the handkerchief to Cassio: “Why, then, ‘tis hers, my lord, and being hers, / She may, I think, bestow’st on any man” (4.1. 12-13). Othello must read this as Desdemona, through the object of the handkerchief, transferring his sexual potency from one man to another. Shakespeare encourages a sexual, if not phallic interpretation. Othello, about to succumb to an agitated rapture vociferates frantically:

“Lie with her? Lie on her? We say ‘lie on her’ when they belie her. Lie with her? ‘Swounds, that’s fulsome! Handkerchief – confessions – handkerchief…. It is not words that shakes me thus. Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? Confess? Handkerchief? O devil!” (4.1.34-40)

The origins of the handkerchief itself, for Othello, intimate the elaborate associations of superstition, exoticism, sexuality, infidelity, cuckoldry, and desire which are held within it. Othello tells Desdemona:

That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
‘Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it,
Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye
Should hold her loathed, and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies. (3.4.54-61)

The handkerchief suggests not only the complex sexual texture of its power in Othello’s personal mythologizing, but also suggests something of an Oedipal nature within it. Its provenance is confused, as is Othello’s perception. After the murder of Desdemona, the
handkerchief’s source has become paternal, not maternal, yet it continues to be a magical instrument transmitting imagined potency:

That she with Cassio hath the act of shame
A thousand times committed. Cassio confessed it,
And she did gratify his amorous works
With that recognizance and pledge of love
Which I first gave her. I saw it in his hand.
It was a handkerchief, an antique token
My father gave my mother. (5.2.218-224)

The repugnance with which Othello imagines his own cuckoldry, that is, Desdemona’s sexual betrayal with Cassio, reveals more about his repugnance of the sexual act in and of itself. This may be why psychoanalytic criticism of this play has been so influential. Arthur Kirsch finds that the Oedipal drama has centrality in Othello’s frame of mind. He contends that Shakespeare gives Othello “much of the primal character of a child” and “endows him with many of the emotional responses and much of the peculiar vision of a very young boy” (730), and that Othello retains a “child-like wonder and reverence” (730) especially in his love for Desdemona. As already noted, the significance of the handkerchief suggests Oedipal resonances, both maternal and paternal, which occupy the play. As such, these resonances are not limited to Othello, but to the Oedipal conflict between Desdemona and her father Brabanzio, which provides a substructure for Oedipal concerns throughout. Iago’s all too easy Oedipal accusation against Desdemona “She did deceive her father, marrying you” (3.3.210) harkens directly back to the first act in which Brabanzio and Desdemona both reveal the Oedipal subtext.

The first act has a shadowy, ghostly quality to it, set in the dark in front of Brabanzio’s home in Venice, where Iago and Roderigo wake Brabanzio with allegations and taunts of Desdemona’s elopement with the bestial, “gross,” and “lascivious Moor”
(1.1.127). Brabanzio’s bewilderment that this “accident is not unlike my dream” (1.1.142) almost cries out for Freudian interpretation. Brabanzio’s horror, “Who would be a father?” (1.1.165) and “I had rather adopt a child than get it” (1.3.190) point to more than mere disobedience but to the psychosexual, Oedipal conflicts which involve the primal relationships between father and daughter, and, as is often the case in Shakespeare, absent or hidden mothers. Desdemona does invoke her mother in the triangular interrelationship, and articulates the resolution of the Oedipal conflict:

My noble father,
I do perceive a divided duty.
To you I am bound for life and education….
   You are the lord of duty,
I am hitherto your daughter. But here’s my husband,
And so much duty as my mother showed
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.179-181; 182-188)

As one critic has pointed out, “For Freud, the woman’s incestuous attachment to her father never completely disappears; ” (Feher-Gurewich 63) it can become transformed by finding a man who can give her what her father would not, “the phallic attribute: a baby and / or penis” (63). However, Desdemona is not a conventional Freudian female; Shakespeare, by contrast, shows us that he comprehends the complexity of female desire. According to Feher-Gurewich, one may see in Shakespeare a way to “resolve the difference between Lacan and Freud on the question of women” (63). Desdemona’s “divided duty” demonstrates her ability “to accept lack and thus to desire” (64).

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In fact, her love for the Moor provides tangible evidence that she has left the harbor of the oedipal situation in so far as she has severed her fantasmatic bond to her father. Othello is neither an epigone of Brabantio—a father substitute—nor his anti-figure, that is, a sign of defiance against him. Othello bears insignia of both alterity and virtue: he is the noble Moor (64).

However, Brabanzio’s warning to Othello, yoking together the Oedipal betrayal, marital deception, and castrative blindness, has an ominous ring: “Look to her Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived a father, and may thee” (1.3.291-2).

The nature of Desdemona’s Oedipal conflicts does reveal a complex and vital desire: we may ascertain that it is due to her power as a female and as a desiring female that Othello is vulnerable. While Freudians maintain that the threat to masculinity is castration, it is also engulfment by the mother, or by the feminine. As Coppelia Kahn explains, “While the boy’s sense of self begins in union with the feminine, his sense of masculinity arises against it” (Kahn 10).

Othello’s threatened masculinity is bound up with his troubled response to his own sexuality and Desdemona’s desire. Shakespeare has so aptly recognized the strained and singular problem of masculinity in many of his plays, but in Othello, masculinity as an overt theme is unequivocal. We have only to mark Iago’s almost constant derisive provocations which act as a leitmotif and which serve to emasculate Othello: “O grace, O heaven forgive me! / Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?” (3.3.378-8). And, as he instructs Othello to watch from afar the dumb-show he mounts with Cassio, jesting about Bianca’s infatuation, Iago jabs at Othello: “Marry patience, / Or I shall say you’re all-in-all in spleen / And nothing of a man” (4. 1.85-88). The humiliation bears fruit, or as Iago utters to himself with irony: “… my medicine works” (4.1.42).
These exertions and the “proofs” of Desdemona’s infidelity literally shake Othello to the core. He succumbs to an epileptic fit which Shakespeare describes as orgasmic -- the Renaissance notion of “little death,” -- or, as Iago calls it, his “ecstasy” (4.1.77). Iago retells Othello’s “fall” as a sexual discharge, but inversely, as an anti-climax:

The lethargy must have his quiet course.
If not, he foams at mouth, and by and by
Breaks out to savage madness… Have you not hurt your head?” (4.1.50-52; 56)

Othello hears the castrative taunt: “Dost thou mock me?” (4.1.57).

As Othello comes to, the dialogue between Iago and Othello suggests the horns of the cuckold and their referent to monstrosity. The dialogue informs the discourse of cuckoldry and impotence, resulting not only in monstrosity and its allusion to racial Otherness, but to madness. Iago exploits the moment by denying that he is shaming Othello, but then, insidiously, shames him, by unmanning him:

Iago: I mock you not, by heaven.
    Would you bear your fortune like a man.
Othello: A horned man’s a monster and a beast.
Iago: There’s many a beast then in a populous city,
    And many a civil monster.
Othello: Did he confess it?
Iago: Good sir, be a man. (4.1.58-63)

Cuckoldry has been emblematized by monstrosity in the comedies, but in Othello, it is schematized in terms of its opposition to manhood, and thereby, in the case of racial representation, to humanness. Othello names himself a monster and a cuckold; Iago, however, capitalizes on this self-definition through provocation and innuendo. Throughout the play, Iago articulates the racism of the white male characters and perhaps of the early modern audience’s racism as well, especially that racism which surrounds black men’s perceived sexual power. According to Karen Newman, the “preoccupation
with black sexuality is an eruption not of a normally repressed animal sexuality in the
‘civilized’ white male but of the feared power and potency of a different and monstrous
sexuality that threatens the white sexual norm represented in the play most emphatically
by Iago” (Essaying Shakespeare 74). Othello himself colludes with Iago and the
European white audience’s view of him as a monster. He does so specifically when his
own manhood is threatened; it is as if by imagining Desdemona’s infidelity, his
cuckoldry yields the cultural identification he has escaped, relatively speaking, in his own
self-fashioning as military general, as honorable and noble warrior, and as husband to the
pure, inviolate Desdemona.

… in Othello, the iconic center of the spectacle is shifted from the woman to the
monstrous Othello, whose blackness charms and threatens but ultimately fulfills
the cultural prejudices it represents…. Othello is a monster in the Renaissance
sense of the word, a deformed creature like the hermaphrodites and other strange
spectacles that so fascinated the early modern period. (Newman, Essaying 76)

As already observed, the “savage madness” of Othello’s epileptic fit is metonymic
with orgasm and with a sapping of his sexual strength. Ian Moulton establishes that in
early modern culture, impotence was dangerous to the society and that “waste of seed”
could be devastating not only due to effeminacy but because of the inability to procreate
(185). While procreation may hardly be relevant to Othello, the danger of impotence is.

Edward A. Snow, perhaps the first critic to scrupulously study sexuality from a
psychoanalytic perspective, in his highly influential “Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order
of Things in Othello” has curiously used the word impotent and its variants more than a
few times to make his assertions about Othello, e.g. “the directions … reconstitute society
in terms of the same impotent dialectic of violence” (385); the play “taking as it does a
certain self-consciously impotent pleasure in demonstrating the moral corruption of its
audience” (387). I believe these constitute more than slips; rather, they reflect how compelling the condition of impotency is, critically, to the masculine sexual anxiety Shakespeare characterizes in his work.

Snow is aware that a psychoanalytic interpretation foregrounds the patriarchal prerogatives Shakespeare observes in *Othello*. The imagined sexual betrayal of Desdemona is the lynchpin for the play’s expression of male anxiety: “The stability of the male world – its certainties, its prerogatives, and its precious sense of honor – depends on the suppression of what has emerged in and through Desdemona” (Snow 393). Put another way, this is also Coppelia Kahn’s argument, which we have seen demonstrated in all the plays in this study: the idea, specifically regarding cuckoldry as “an affair between men…. Marriage subjugates all men” by mocking virility (Kahn 150), and “every husband [is] a potential cuckold; ” (150) those who commit the act of cuckoldry cuckold their brothers. Snow illuminates for us, as well, how, within this male brotherhood of cuckoldry even Brabanzio, “cuckolded father” (399) from an Oedipal standpoint, is cuckolded by Othello. Snow makes eminently clear, however, that Othello’s violence emanates from both cuckoldry and the sexual anxiety Desdemona arouses in him. When Othello speaks of Iago’s abiding honesty, (the predominant irony of the play) “An honest man he is, and hates the slime / That sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2. 155-6), Snow’s emphasis is on Othello’s language betraying his unconscious thoughts: “What his words express, however, is a post-coital male disgust with the ‘filthy deed’ of sexuality itself” (389). Othello’s conscious articulation of repugnance is exceptionally clear after the murder of Desdemona. To Emilia, he expresses his revulsion at not just cuckoldry, but also the sex act: “Cassio did top her” (5.2. 145); he condemns her to hell
as a “liar” (5.2. 137) and a “whore” (5.2. 141). As Snow maintains, “This pathological male animus toward sexuality… Shakespeare pursues relentlessly… Time and time again in *Othello* language condemning adultery both masks and draws authority from an underlying guilt and disgust about sexuality itself” (388).

Stephen Greenblatt explains the theological antecedents of sexual revulsion, fear, and guilt in the early modern period, a revulsion that releases the pathology Snow talks about. Greenblatt cites Saint Jerome’s decree “An adulterer is he who is too ardent a lover of his wife,” and Jerome quoting Seneca, “Nothing is fouler than to love a wife like an adultress” (248). Both Snow and Greenblatt discern the proximity of violence to this fraught psychological landscape in *Othello*. Greenblatt adduces: “… Othello transforms his complicity in erotic excess and his fear of engulfment into a ‘purifying’ saving violence” (250).

Snow makes use of Freudian apparatus to highlight the violence in the tragedy as a result of Othello’s repulsion about sexual fantasies surrounding blood, which he terms as “a lustful orgasmic discharge, the female equivalent of his semen” (392). Snow recognizes in the language of *Othello* a decidedly phallic framework. Othello, according to Snow, perceives the blood of the sheets – “Thy blood, lust-stain’d, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” (5. 1. 37) as a focus and a threat, a threat which Othello, physically and sexually “… entering Desdemona poses for him…” (392). Snow delineates the threat which “…the phallic violence [of] the act arouses in him” (392). Further, Snow asserts: “The language of *Othello* consistently links submerged references to sexual initiation and phallic virility with imagery of castration and unmanning” (392).

Summarizing the attitude of “how phallic Othello’s idea of sex is” (391), Snow
acknowledges that literary psychoanalytic criticism understands Desdemona as a
“‘masculine’ woman engaged in a ‘phallic rivalry’ with a ‘castrative’ need to prevail over
him (405). Yet he concludes that Desdemona’s tragedy is not one of sexual tyranny, but
quite the opposite, she is not able to “escape or triumph over the restraints and Oedipal
prohibitions that domesticate woman to the conventional male order of things” (407).

The significance of Snow’s contribution to the critical reception of Othello from a
psycho-sexual frame of reference is, for this study, his underscoring of the phallic, the
castrative, and in a word, the impotent nature of Othello’s tragic portrait of love,
manhood, and sexuality. Physical impotence in early modern marriages posed a legal,
thological, and doctrinal problem. During the Reformation, the debate over the
relationship between the will and the flesh resulted in the idea that marriage should not be
considered a sacrament (Roper 94). Martin Luther’s regulations regarding sexuality and
procreation led to the proposition that “if a woman could not have children by an
impotent husband she was then entitled to have intercourse with a surrogate who could
produce children and give her sexual satisfaction” (95). Although Desdemona and
Othello, owing to, first, the brevity of their marriage, and also to the difference in their
ages and Othello’s waning virility, have not and would probably never have children.
Interestingly and perhaps ironically, Shakespeare utilizes the metaphor of childbirth,
breeding, and pregnancy throughout the drama. One such example is when Othello
accuses Desdemona of being “false as hell” (4.2.41): he weeps over the love which gives
him life, gives life itself, and which he believes he has lost. Wrenchingly he says:

But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The fountain from which my current runs
Or else dries up – to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads
To knot and gender in! (4.2.59-64)

The Lutheran view would oppress and weigh heavily upon Othello, especially as a Christian convert, but would arouse the violence that was in fact socially sanctioned. Greenblatt cites George Joyce, a collaborator of Tyndale, “who called for a return to the Old Testament penalty for adulterers. ‘God’s law,’ he writes is to punish adultery with death for the tranquility and commonwealth of His church’” (247). Shakespeare, however, dramatizing the wife-beating and eventual murder of Desdemona in the register of tragedy does not appear to sanction this violence. Instead, he highlights Othello’s shame and madness, his lost honor and misguided sense of justice. What lingers, though, is Othello’s tragic self-regard, generated by both corporeal and psychical impotence.

An interesting analogue to the psycho-sexual schema of Othello and its relationship to impotence and castration is the play’s topos of circumcision. One author’s view on this subject casts the topos as an articulation of “Othello’s religious rather than racial traits; they are more “intractable in the Christian vision staged by Shakespeare’s play” (Lupton 84). My own view is that the circumcision that Othello refers to and identifies with in his final self-narrative is a marker of an internal struggle between castration and masculinization, impotence and potency:

Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, 33 threw a pearl away

---

Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’throat the circumcised dog
And smote him thus. (5.2.352 -365)

As Lupton concludes, “Othello has become “literally ‘circumcised in the heart’” (84).

Othello’s identification with a pagan, if not phallically maimed or marked enemy,
signifies a final unmanning which he cannot bear. The struggle arcs around his own
suicide as one of self-castration. Feher-Gurewich reminds us of the role of Desdemona’s
desire in Othello’s self-laceration: “Desdemona’s recognition that desire stems from lack
forces Othello to confront his own castration anxiety, which the fragility of his masculine
ego cannot bear” (65).

Almost from the beginning, Shakespeare makes perfectly clear to his audience
that Othello is, or, at the very least, thinks of himself as impotent. Upon Desdemona’s
appeal to the Duke to accompany Othello to Cyprus, Othello beckons the Duke to give
audience to her request. In defense of it he claims, most self-effacingly:

Let her have your voice.
Vouch with me heaven, I therefor beg it not
To please the palate of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heat -- the young affects
In me defunct….” (1.3.259-263)

As unequivocal as this seems, it remains obscure, however, to the reader or spectator. If
true, how is the sexual/love relationship of Othello and Desdemona sustained? Why is
Othello’s sexual jealousy so readily aroused by Iago? These questions arise not just
carerologically, or structurally in terms of plot, but from the performative
perspective, how is the audience meant to absorb Othello’s and Desdemona’s marriage
and their all consuming love as viable? Can the audience suspend disbelief in the arena of erotic feelings?

Shakespeare may be playing against the Renaissance stereotype of sexual potency in black or Moorish males. His rendering of the over eroticized, cruel and lustful Moor Aaron, in *Titus Andronicus* is a case in point. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries maps were illustrated “with representations of naked black men bearing enormous sexual organs” who, in the words of John Pory were “prone to Venery” (Newman, *Essaying* 70). Othello’s sexual prowess is indeed based upon assumptions about race, representations of the Other, and of Moors in particular. Janet Adelman, in “Iago’s Alter-Ego: Race as Projection in *Othello*,” understands the racial/sexual element in the play as largely the projection of Iago. According to Adelman, “If Cassio,” as representative of white Venetians and the white English audience who have absorbed a racist fantasy of black potency, “needs to make Othello into an exotic super-phallus, capable of restoring Italian potency, Iago needs to make him into a black monster, invading the citadel of whiteness” (129). In Adelman’s principally Kleinian psychoanalytic reading, Iago is the impotent: he imagines sexual union in all the couples of the play, “that everywhere exclude and diminish him. And in response he effectively neutralizes the erotic potency that mocks his own lack” (129). Inciting Othello’s splitting from himself, Iago renders Othello impotent: “To shatter the illusion of Othello’s fullness and presence is also to shatter the illusion of his erotic power” (129). Adelman’s provocative reading of Othello as Iago’s “faecal baby” (144) is achieved through Iago’s “projective identification” (144). Othello’s blackness is contaminating: “Othello … becomes the bearer of the fantasy of inner filth” (144).
Karen Newman agrees to some extent with Adelman’s characterization of Iago. Iago represents the fear embodied in the “white” reception of Othello’s sexuality: the “preoccupation with black sexuality is an eruption not of a normally repressed animal sexuality in the ‘civilized’ white male but of the feared power and potency of a different and monstrous sexuality that threatens the white sexual norm represented in the play most emphatically by Iago” (Essaying Shakespeare 74). In addition, historicizing adultery in terms of race, Michael Neill notes that medieval religious understanding defined marriage with the other (Jews, Mahamotens, pagans, and blacks) as “interpretative adultery” (408). Neill’s work on race, sexuality, and adultery is coincident with my own investigation of cuckoldry in Othello. As he says, “even the green eyed monster…serves to mark Othello’s resemblance to yet another Plinian race, the Horned Men (Gegetones or Cornuti)” (409). Similarly, Neill locates the Oedipal in early modern constructions. Available, he tells us, in Leo Africanus and Hakluyt, and “widely circulated” was the source of blackness as “originally visited upon the offspring of Noah’s son Cham as a punishment for adulterate disobedience of the father”; (409) as such, the transgression against Brabanzio by the elopement of Desdemona and Othello “resemble[s] a repetition of the ancestral crime” (409).

This is connected with the topos of witchcraft, superstition, magic and sorcery, which opposes Christianity, and is apparently the source of Othello’s potency: Brabanzio’s indignation that his gentle daughter would consent to marriage with a Moor: “That thou hast practiced on her with foul charms, / Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals/ That weakens motion. I’ll have it disputed on.” (1.2.74-6). Rather, explains Othello, Desdemona fell in love with his narrative of manly potency, such that she begs
to be engulfed in it, to be made into a man: “… yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man.” All this contradicts Othello’s own characterization of his sexual prowess as “defunct.” Just as the text vacillates between potency and impotence, Othello’s sexuality shifts in the course of the play. As a warning and a prefiguring of Othello’s impending sexual and psychological decline, Cassio prays for Othello’s potency in the consummation of the marriage (significantly, the consummation is a point of contention among critics) in an extended metaphor: “Great Jove, Othello guard, /And swell his sail with thine own powerful breath, /That he may bless this bay with his tall ship, / Make love’s quick pants in Desdemona’s arms, Give renewed fire to our extincted spirits…” (2.1.78-82). The ambiguity expressed in a prayer for potency suggests Cassio’s unconscious fear that Othello is not potent. Cassio, enacting the audience’s misgivings [“our extincted spirits”], articulates the anxieties surrounding Othello and patriarchal masculinity in the early modern period.

Cassio’s appeal for Othello’s potency and coition with Desdemona generate in the audience’s imagination a vision of the bed in which this intimacy will take place. The bed, like the handkerchief, is a preeminent symbol in the play. It carries with it the hallmarks of sexuality and desire. In this play, the bed signifies the tragedy as well; the last scene enacted is the tragic tableau of the bed with both Desdemona and Othello lying upon it as if engaged in the act of intercourse though they are dead. Othello himself signifies the bed as the site of sex, violence, and death: Again, “Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust’s blood be spotted” (5.1.37). The bed as the locus of murder and sex, may effectuate a second wedding for Desdemona and Othello, a kind of blood-wedding, a

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wedding after death. On the bed, the consummation, which may or may not have been
achieved in life, may be enacted in death. In this regard, the genre of the play has a
gothic sensibility, and the sex act may be perceived as necrophilic. The sado-masochistic
display is very much in keeping with Othello’s final lapse into tragic impotence.

As already indicated, because it was perceived as emasculating and effeminizing,
pornography or erotic writing in the early modern period, and representations of
eroticism in the theater were especially dangerous. The rendering of the sexuality in
*Othello*, awash with the taboo of race-mixing, bestiality, and explicit violence may be
recognized as stimulating, but also as alarming. One has only to recall the censorship of
the final bed scene in later ages to grasp how fearsome the images were: “late eighteenth
and nineteenth-century editors sought to restrict the curiosity that the final scene gratifies
and to obscure its most threatening meanings by progressively excising from the text
every explicit reference to the bed … even more anxious censorship operated in the
theater itself” (Neill 385). Yet, the fascination, for audiences, is marked as well by the
number of illustrations of it, “registered in the quasi-pornographic explicitness of the
graphic tradition. The illustrators’ voyeuristic manipulation of the parted curtains and
their invariable focus upon the unconscious invitation of Desdemona’s gracefully
exposed body serve to foreground not merely the perverse eroticism of the scene but its
aspect of forbidden disclosure” (385).

To achieve fully the dramatic dimensions of the debauched act, Shakespeare
injects a decidedly necrophilic suggestiveness. Othello kisses Desdemona and says, “Be
thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee / And love thee thereafter” (5.2.18-19),
whereupon he kisses her again. Desdemona, masochistically, invites the necrophilic
sexual act, “Will you come to bed, my lord? (5.2.25). Through her supplications and urging to Emilia, “Prithee tonight/ Lay on my bed my wedding sheets” (4.2.107-8) and “If I do die before thee, prithee shroud me / In one of those same sheets (4.3.23-24), we find her complicit. She conveys the apprehension and sexual fervor she encounters in Othello’s aggression:

… I fear you, for you’re fatal then
When your eyes roll so…. That death’s unnatural that kills for loving
Alas, why gnaw you so your nether lip?
Some bloody passion shakes your very frame. (5.2.39-40; 45-47)

In the contemplation of coupling sex with murder, the pleasure for Othello is palpable:

“This sorrow’s heavenly/ It strikes where it doth love,” (5.2.21-22) yet the melancholy is utterly tragic as well.

A full study of necrophilia in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, among them Othello, has been undertaken by Linda Neiberg in Exquisite Corpses: Fantasies of Necrophelia in Early Modern English Drama. In it she interrogates the connections between cultural determinants, desire, and early modern rituals, beliefs and practices about death and the dead (10). In unpacking the following scene and passage where Othello kisses Desdemona as she sleeps in her bed, uttering “O balmy breath, that dost almost persuade / Justice to break her sword! One more, one more. / Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee after. One more, and that’s the last. / So sweet was ne’er so fatal.” (5.2.15-20), Neiberg draws a parallel between “the popular (and titillating)” story of Herod entering his wife’s tomb for seven years, in which the corpse was “honey embalmed” (146). In Shakespeare’s scene Othello “envisions having sex with Desdemona’s corpse” (146). Neiberg tells us the Herod legend was included in several early modern dramas, such as Middleton’s The Second Maid’s Tragedy and Massinger’s
The Duke of Milan and asserts that “the explicit reference to necrophilia is clear” (146).

This necrophilic scene leading up to Desdemona’s murder and the murder itself maintain a sexual charge through employment of gothic features. The Renaissance did adopt gothic elements in dramatic works and paintings, which were prefigured in medievalism. One may bring to mind Spanish dramas of honor killing (implied in Othello claiming to murder Desdemona as a sacrifice, “for naught I did in hate, but all in honour” (5.2.301), and also the Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies of Webster, Kyd, or Middleton. Shakespeare employs the gothic in Hamlet as well as in Othello, using effects such as the grotesque, ghosts, storms, mystery, blood, and violent murder. Particularly gothic are the murder scenes in Othello which employ chiaroscuro and the audial performance of Othello’s moaning and weeping. The darkness of the opening scenes in front of Brabanzio’s palace on the secluded streets of Venice adumbrate the chiaroscuro of the last scene of the play in particular. The last scene is illumined: its central element is the bed, hidden behind a curtain. Before the scene opens, Iago’s final words in the first scene of the last act set the stage and mood: “This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite” (5.1.130-1).

Similarly, the stage directions in scene two, “Enter Othello with a light. [He draws back a curtain, revealing] Desdemona [asleep] in her bed” (Shakespeare. Othello. The Norton Shakespeare 2182) employ light and dark. Othello’s exaltation of Desdemona, bordering on awe, is fused with murderous intention. He laments her lost chastity in a description which parallels the chiaroscuro stage elements:

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35 See Daniel J. Vitkus, “The ‘O’ in Othello: Tropes of Damnation and Nothingness” whose extended discussion of the meanings behind the repetition “O” in the play takes into account the shape and sound of “O” as signifying bodily “horror and emptiness” (358).
It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she’ll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light. (5.2.1-7)

The “chaste stars” against an imagined black expanse, the scar Othello would inflict which would darken Desdemona’s skin whiter than snow, and Othello’s intention to hide his murder in the darkness provides the contrast and shadowy quality of chiaroscuro; additionally, all this mirrors the contrast, literal and metaphoric, of Othello’s blackness with Desdemona’s whiteness, making the scene all the more tense and tremulous.

Desdemona’s complexion “smooth as monumental alabaster,” according to Neiberg, invokes a clear reference to funerary monuments”(144); Neiberg’s analysis accords with my own observation that Othello’s potency is restored momentarily through a kind of a sexual mastery of a necrophilic impulse: “Her ‘alabaster’ surface also restores to him or [he] believes it does, his former abilities to organize cleanly and methodically carry out a task. In effect he turns her body into a sepulcher” (Neiberg 145).

Yet, this restoration of potency cannot last. In the following passage Othello anthropomorphizes the light:

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore
Should I repent me; but once put out the light,
Thou cunning’st pattern of excelling nature
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. (5.2.8-13)

The light is a metaphoric loss of Othello’s own potency. If he kills Desdemona he puts out the light that illuminates his world and his strength: “When I have plucked thy rose /
I cannot give it vital growth again. / It needs must wither” (5.2.13-15). Greenblatt finds
that Othello’s “necrophilic fantasy” (252) culminates in a “saving violence” (250). The
gothic, necrophilic, chiaroscuro effects, as Greenblatt maintains, may not, in fact,
coincide with “the unfathomable darkness of human motives but their terrible
transparency, and the horror of the revelation is its utter inability to deflect violence”
(251). Neil synthesizes the personal with the cultural in his analysis of Othello’s
classic and the centrality of the violence on the bed:

Othello as both stranger and husband can be both the violator of these
tabooes and the seeming victim of their violation – adulterer and cuckold –
as his is both black and “fair,” a Christian general and erring barbarian,
insider and outsider, the author of a “monstrous act” and Desdemona’s
“kind lord” As the most intimate site of these contradictions, it was inevitable
that the bed should become the imaginative center of the play--…. (411-412).

It is, of course, fitting that this play about sexual jealousy and its attendant
anxieties should have all its implications subsumed in the signifier of the bed. In
addition, the transgressive sexuality of the play is achieved by the homoeroticism
suggested by all the principal characters: we see it in the relationship of Iago and Othello,
who, in a symbolic wedding in which both men kneel and consecrate their marriage oaths
and their everlasting fidelity to one another, enunciate their bond in a “sacred vow” (3.3.
463). As Othello says, “Now art thou my lieutenant; Iago responds: “I am your own for
ever” (3.3. 481-482). Iago’s provocative re-telling to Othello Cassio’s dream of
Desdemona is a most graphic, sexualized, homoerotic coupling of Cassio and Iago:

I lay with Cassio lately,
... I could not sleep....
In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves,
And then sir, would he grip and wring my hand,
Cry, O, sweet creature!, then kiss me hard,
As if plucked up kisses by the roots,
That grew upon my lips, lay his leg o’er my thigh,
An sigh, and kiss, and then cry ‘Cursed fate,
That gave thee to the Moor!’ (3.3.418-420; 423-430)

Moreover, in the eyes of another psychoanalytic critic, it is Othello who loves Cassio. Cassio is “rather weak, irresolute, naïve, effeminate. Certainly this Phoebus is attractive: young, handsome, well-bred, educated, a good talker…” (Green 103). Othello reveals that in his courtship with Desdemona Cassio “went between us very oft” (3.3. 102). The more clandestine feelings of Othello for Cassio may reveal the multi-dimensional and multi-layered sexual jealousy Eve Sedgewick has explored in her work on the triangular relationship between two men and a woman. Furthermore, the relationship of Emilia and Desdemona is also noted as homosocial if not as outright lesbianism, and this relationship also supports a focus on the bed as a sexual signifier. As Iago stabs his wife, she cries, “Ay, ay. O, lay me by my mistress’ side” (5.2. 244). And so, the bed, in a penultimate moment, has the three figures entwined upon it: Emilia, Desdemona, and Othello.

Desdemona, an ambiguous character, (who for some possesses an idealized innocence but for others is a figure to be reviled) and Emilia, --if I may posit here— are perhaps among the strongest female characters Shakespeare has drawn. In a play in which the men are not men, but are de-masculinized, these characters’ demonstration of female agency opposes the conventional, obsequious femininity of the period and borders rather on an idealized masculinity. If masculinity encompasses fortitude and dauntlessness, Emilia’s pluck emerges as masculine: she is the one character, who, forcefully, without deception, has the courage to stand up to Othello, naming him “O gull, O dolt, As ignorant as dirt!” (5.2.170-171). Emilia’s realism, some would say cynicism, regarding men and cuckoldry, in which she assertively condemns the double standard, speaks in a way which accords with modern feminism: “What is it that they do /
When they change us for others? Is it sport? … And have not we affections, desires for sport, and frailty as men have? / Then let them use us well, else let them know / The ills we do, their ills instruct us so” (5.1. 94 -95; 98-101). As for cuckoldry, her pragmatism about class and power show her to have a clear-headedness her own husband lacks: “Ud’s pity, who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch?” (5.1.74-75).

However, Shakespeare’s characterization of Desdemona truly imprints a kind of idealized ‘masculinity’ upon her. Perhaps we may term it a feminine masculinity, one which encompasses Desdemona’s sexual confidence, desire, and agency; her willingness to go against her father; her eagerness, almost zeal to accompany her husband in war; and her boldness to transgress station and hierarchy. Karen Newman suggests much the same in putting forth the argument that femininity in the play is identified with monstrosity: “The union of Desdemona and Othello represents a sympathetic identification between femininity and the monstrous that offers a potentially subversive recognition of sexual and racial difference” (74). In so doing, Newman asserts that Desdemona’s sexual appetites, by both the male-dominated universe of the play and by critics, are perceived as “voracious,” as devouring (74) that the language betrays “a masculine fear of a cultural femininity that is envisioned as a greedy mouth, never satisfied…” (74). Desdemona is represented as a “sexual subject who hears and desires, and that desire is punished because the nonspecular or nonphallic sexuality it displays is frightening and dangerous” (74). As Othello so pointedly says of her, “My story being done, … she wished / That heaven had made her such a man” (1.3.157; 161-162). She, self-assuredly, in full view of the Duke and all the men at court, demonstrates her fearlessness in joining her husband in

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36 Italics are mine
war: “if... he go to war, / The rites for why I love him are bereft me, / And I a heavy interim shall support / By his dear absence. Let me go with him” (1.3.255-258). She is, according to Cassio “our great captain’s captain” (2.1.75).

However, nowhere is her fortitude more practiced than her exculpation of the man she loves. Instead, she succumbs to her own death while refusing to incriminate or betray Othello: To Emilia’s “O who hath done this deed?” she replies with a salutation: “Nobody, I myself. Farewell! / Commend me to my kind lord. O farewell!” (5. 2.133-135). Desdemona’s feminine masculinity, albeit metaphorically, ranks among the most resolute, stalwart cross-dressed heroines we encounter in early modern drama.

In juxtaposing female agency and desire in the characterization of Desdemona and Emilia with Othello’s loss of sexual potency, coupled with the palpable homoeroticism of the male relationships, Shakespeare communicates the loss of control, the loss of masculine rationality -- the social and emotional disorder of the tragic trajectory of Othello: “… when I love thee not, /Chaos is come again.” (3.3.92-3). However, what we see in Othello’s decline is particularly stirring because he is at the height of his military prowess, but finds himself in a world where he no longer has mastery. His potency throughout the tragedy flags, then towers up again through a “marriage” to Iago; driven by the colossal shame of cuckoldry, he murders not only his "pearl” “richer than all his tribe” (5.2.366-367), but commits his own suicide, winding down in a final cataclysmic sapping of whatever military or masculine might he had possessed. It is no wonder that in the most recent cinematic performance of Othello, in Oliver Parker’s 1995 film, Laurence Fishburne has chosen to interpret the role as one of impotence. His role has been described in contrast to earlier performances in “erectile
language of ‘surging,’ ‘swelling,’ ‘mounting, and ‘exploding,’ …” to one which
“suggests phallic deflation: Fishburne’s Othello is ‘more drooping than rousing’; it ‘lacks
size’ and ‘begins to dwindle….” (Marks 115).

Othello’s final act “marks the disintegration of the iron discipline he tried to
efforce upon his own desires, his own sense of himself as a soldier, general, diplomat,
Venetian hero, and husband.” (Garber, Shakespeare 612). Furthermore, it may be said
that desire transforms Othello from a man to the beast he so abhors, a devolution he has
worked his whole life to repel, from slave to Christian convert. As he declaims, “A
horned man’s a monster and a beast” (4.1.59): he bears his own self-condemnation.
Iago’s derision of Othello becomes an unfortunate tragic truth: Othello, in the final
analysis, is “nothing of a man” (4.1.87).
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