

INTRODUCTION

*Maid, wife, and widow:
 (dis) ordering early modern women*

Early modern marriage manuals organized women into three categories: maid, wife, and widow, of which wife was considered the ideal. In early modern drama, the reformation of defective maids and independent widows into orderly wives inside the household proved a popular theme but mostly this theme worked as inspiration for comic tales of incompetent husbands, feminine misconduct, and chaotic disruptions of the household. With Petruchio's successful husbanding of his unruly new wife, Kate, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare ostensibly offers a story about household ordering. Petruchio demonstrates the tenets of capable husbandry offered by conduct books on marriage and household management by transforming an unruly maid into a wife who recognizes him as her "lord," "king," and "governor" (5.2.136).¹ His reordering of Kate into the household, however, turns out to be a mere "fiction of wife-training."² Petruchio's triumph is a fabricated stage show of feminine reformation. His expert mastery over a disorderly maid is only a stage-play performed for a vagrant found lying in the street before an alehouse.

In the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, a lord and his servants returning from the hunt find the beggar Christopher Sly asleep on the road (Induction 1.16). For fun, they take him home, dress him up as a lord, and stage a play for his entertainment. That play is the drama of Petruchio and Kate. They tell the beggar the play is about "household stuffe," a subject more familiar to a lord and his servants than to a homeless person (140). Sly terms himself "a poor and loathsome beggar" who has gone through several jobs at the bottom of the social scale (122–23). He is "by birth a pedlar, by education a card-maker, by transmutation a bear-herd, and now by present profession a tinker" (Induction 2.19–21). Christopher Sly's presence as a spectator in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* makes the entire drama of wife-taming into a mere science fiction spectacle of household order.

Sly's brief drama stages the much more unresolved relationship of the working poor to the household. The only household he knows is the alehouse, from which he is repeatedly expelled. The only kind of wife he can name is "Marian Hacket, the fat alewife of Wincot" (21–2). The only maid he knows is the alewife's "maid of the house," Cicely Hacket, for whom he calls out in his sleep. Cicely is no chaste maid, it seems, but rather a serving maid who shares Sly's bed (89–90). Sly knows only the kind of maid and wife who practice housewifery in an alehouse – not a respectable occupation, but one associated with prostitution.³ He is not even sure how to call a woman wife. When the nobleman's servants trick him into believing he has one, they must teach him how to call her "Madam." Confused, he queries, "Al'ce madam, or Joan madam?" (110). This vagrant can only imagine a wife of the kind of proverbial name assigned in the drama to poor women. Taken as the frame play that it is, *The Taming of the Shrew* foregrounds the fictionality of the conduct book or marriage manual wife by framing the domestication of a maid inside the larger narrative of a poor man being beaten by a poor woman whose very occupation makes her an imperfect wife. Sly is a "masterless man," a legal term for the criminally unemployed in early modern England – those men who were literally without masters and, therefore, also without a household. Masterless men, in modern terms, were the homeless poor. Living below the economic level necessary for marriageability, and not legally bound to a master or marital household, masterless men like Sly slipped sometimes not so easily from household to household, employment to employment, ending up as Sly has done in the opening scene, on the street. More interesting – and hidden from view – than Sly's own drama, the drama of the beggar and masterless man, are the dramas of Marian and Cicely Hacket, women who are apparently masterless themselves.

Marian and Cicely Hacket exceed the subject positions of maid, wife, and widow. Marian is a wife, but she is an *alewife*, a term for an occupational, not a marital, status: she sells ale. Cicely is the "maid of the house," also an occupational term. Not a marriage manual virgin, she is instead the kind of maid whom Sly calls out for in his sleep. Neither woman fits easily into the marriage and husbandry manual ideal of the mastered household. Both live in a house, but it is an *alehouse*. Marian seems to master her own house without the help of a husband. The women do perform housewifery, as in household management, financial transactions, baking, and brewing – the kinds of activities that conduct books instructed orderly housewives to do. But this household is disorderly.

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If Sly's account is anything to go by, this household is crosscut by drinking, sexual activity outside of marriage, overnight lodgers, arguments over bar bills, and criminal enterprise, such as selling ale in short measure. In the opening moments of the play, an alewife ejects Sly from her alehouse, threatening to fetch the constable. In this Induction to the play, Shakespeare writes a miniature drama in which poor women cannot be tamed into orderly wives but rather remain fiercely untamed shrews. The wandering players in the Induction put on a play about "household stuffe," but the entire drama that Shakespeare's company performs begins with a masterless man being expelled from a disorderly household by a masterless woman. In this book, I reevaluate the effectiveness of early modern marriage manuals that discursively positioned the ideal wife at the center of an orderly household. I locate instead those places in early modern culture where this discourse was subverted: in playhouse depictions of disorderly maids, wives, and widows who were not confined to the household.

Poor women do not fit easily into the household in early modern drama. They shift in and out of marriages, households, and employments. Although some women in early modern England did work as domestic servants in an ideal household with a master and mistress at its center, others, as depicted by Marian and Cicely Hackett, made a living in streets, fields, markets, taverns, and alehouses. Poor women often remained economically unmarriageable, occupying a profusion of identities at the bottom of the social scale and outside the mastered household entirely. Poor women both did and did not fit into the household and marriage market. They were both essential to and excluded from the formal economy. The representational traces of these real-life poor women can be found in abundance in early modern drama, where they can be seen moving in and out of illegitimate employment, marriages, and households, and in and out of the precarious identities of alewife, maidservant, spinster, bonelace-maker, laundress, cutpurse, vagrant, and tobaccowife. In early modern drama, they circulate between plots, essential because they are so mobile, but largely unnoticed because of their mobility. My larger argument here is that the drama provides a living document of the changing economic conditions of what I call "early capitalism," which forced poor women to shift into the limited freedom of provisional labor and then shifted them back into bondage in the workhouse and plantation.

If there were no women on the early modern stage, and few poor women in the playhouse, where indeed were the poor women in early

modern drama? In *Shakespeare Without Women*, Dympna Callaghan reminds us that the women on stage were, in fact, men. There is, she reminds us, no room for women in the realm of representation – at least as agents of representation – something that must make us think carefully about what “women” on the stage do represent. Callaghan usefully distinguishes between the lack of “presence” of women on the stage and the ubiquitous “representation” of women on the stage: “I am arguing that *presence cannot be equated with representation any more than representation can be equated with inclusion.*” There were indeed, for the most part, no women on the early modern stage – with notable exceptions in the case of acrobats, tumblers, and the notorious cutpurse Moll Frith, the real-life source for Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker’s play *The Roaring Girl*, for whom records exist of her performing on stage at the Fortune. But women have been showing up in playhouses in different ways, thanks to recent scholarship, as widows of players, owners of leases, and even, in the case of the wife of one playhouse-builder, John Brayne, as a laborer building playhouses. Yet to take up Callaghan’s term of presence, the disparity between women’s absence on the stage and their presence as characters in the drama is even more pronounced when we realize that the playhouse was by no means an all-male space. Shakespeare was not without women. They were everywhere – in the audience. As Jean Howard has said, women were in playhouses in their numbers as paying customers, even while they were excluded from performing and writing plays. Women were there in the playhouse, but they had to leave their representation to the men. With such a large female presence in the playhouse, however, a company of players could not risk misrepresenting women too grossly.⁴

This question of mere presence versus prolific and sometimes hyperbolic representation becomes even more acutely divergent when it comes to poor women. Few poor women, it might safely be assumed, could or would afford themselves entertainment at even the price of a penny a time. A poor woman spinning wool earned only six pence a week, with room and board. Yet poor women were there in the playhouse, not as paying customers, but as paid workers. Scratch the surface and suddenly they are there in the playhouse economy as boxkeepers, food sellers, and prostitutes. They are there selling food, their “cries” so familiar that they sparked a whole genre of literary publication mimicking these songs, as Natasha Korda has shown. It was poor women who walked the streets – and playhouse – selling food. References to apples and applewenches remind us that poor women sold food in playhouses. Archeological

excavations reveal that the groundling circle was littered with nutshells, so apples were not the only snacks on sale. If we look for poor women as players, we do not find them. If we look for them as paying playgoers, we will still not find them. But if we look for them as workers, they are everywhere in the playhouses – and not just selling food. Plays make frequent humorous note of their wage-earning customers. In 1634, *The Actors Remonstrance* lamented the closing of the theaters, avowing that “we shall for the future promise, never to admit into our six-penny roomes those unwholesome inticing Harlots, that sit there merely to be taken up by Prentizes or Lawyers Clerks.” Prostitutes were another kind of poor women who frequented playhouses not as playgoers but as workers. Evidence throughout the period indicates, according to Andrew Gurr, that “women from every section of society went to plays, from Queen Henrietta Maria to the most harlotry of vagrants.” The majority of women playgoers, he notes, were prostitutes and vagrants. Players themselves were also technically vagrants according to the proclamations, and their playhouses were located in the brothel suburbs, side by side with brothel tenements. James Burbage, leader of Shakespeare’s company at the time, leased the Theater playhouse from one Giles Allen, who owned both the playhouse and its surrounding brothels. Thus, the “womens cries, and shouts of boyes” that Edmund Spenser notes disrupting the theater, were the cries of the working poor – apprentices, boy actors, and women hawking their wares and doing business in the informal economy of the early modern playhouse. Thus women of every social class went to playhouses, including those at the bottom – whores and applewenches, women who would be defined as vagrant under the royal proclamations. The playhouse was a new economic sphere in early modern England that attracted an entrepreneurial class of working poor who survived in this new informal economy of playing. Although the playhouse was a predominantly male economic structure, as were guilds and joint-stock companies, women were always active in that playhouse economy, as its more informal – by which I mean not legally defined or attached – members.⁵

If poor women were present in playhouses in large numbers, representations of them were everywhere in the plays. When you start to look for poor women, they are there all over the plays. Clearly these are not real women, but characters, and what is more, characters represented by male actors. Drama is stylized, conventional, formulaic, and prone to extravagance. Scholars have long warned against the oversimplification of using the drama to tell ourselves anything about the larger culture.

In 1944, E. M. W. Tillyard proposed that “[t]hose (and they are at present the majority) who take their notion of the Elizabethan age principally from the drama will find it difficult to agree that its world picture was ruled by a general conception of order, for the drama is anything but orderly.” This statement proved deeply influential in Shakespeare studies, even into new historicism, which went on to explore the relative order and disorder, subversion and containment, promotion and prohibition – depending on the terminologies – of various ideologies in Renaissance drama. The basic question that such discussions revolve around was this: was early modern drama supportive or critical of dominant ruling ideas? This “either/or” model reduces all analysis to a choice or a refinement of that choice. I choose to ask another question entirely: what were players and poets doing when they represented poor women on the stage? I would argue that they were using representations of poor women to reflect on and even comprehend their own changing fates as economic subjects in a social order that was increasingly ruled not by government but by capital. As agents of an informal economy as well as subjects bound by proclamations, corporate rules, and church laws, they were both making culture and were defined by it. In a burgeoning capitalist economy, to talk of subversion or containment is reductionist in the extreme and far too general to be useful to do anything than reinforce a theory of the status quo, as Stephen Greenblatt discovered when he famously claimed that “there is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us.”⁶ It does not account for a theory of historical change, especially for those at the bottom, other than a top-down system of domination. Players were not revolutionaries. They were entrepreneurs. But as entrepreneurs in the new economy selling entertainment, they traded in emotion. What they were doing, I believe, was staging the new emotional dilemmas created by new social and economic predicaments – allowing audiences not to experience a kind of cathartic sublimation but a kind of identification and recognition of the commonness of their new experiences as early modern subjects. By staging poor women’s dilemmas, early modern players are staging the new archetypes of dilemmas created by the complex economic shifts toward capitalism and entrepreneurial imperialism in early modern England.

To paraphrase Dymphna Callaghan, theatrical representation is dependent upon female absence. Likewise, the formation of early capitalism in England became dependent upon female absence – women were working everywhere in the new economy, but they were not legally or formally noticeable in its structures. The textual production of capitalism – that is

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the rise in bureaucratic record-keeping – was dependent upon *creating* the absence of women – pushing them to the margins of the text, exiling them from the formal agreements of traditional industries, banning them from guild membership, writing them out of the household and nunneries. But it is only the illusion of their absence that those records – guild ordinances, joint-stock company records, proclamations, and court records – achieved. It is in the *bureaucracy* of early capitalism and empire where poor women are hard to find. In the actual workshops, guild households, plantations, markets, and streets, poor women provided the underpinnings of this shift to a money economy. Here they are the agents of cultural change just as much as are the lawmakers or guild masters.

The discrediting of poor women's work extended beyond the playhouse to the representational lexicon of the larger culture of early modern England – to the very currency itself. Poor women soon became so routinely associated with small change that their likenesses appeared on the lowest denomination coins of early modern England: farthings. In the seventeenth century, farthings began to bear the images of poor women, their tools, and their products – a stocking, a piece of bonelace, two women at a washtub, a spinning wheel, or women spinning. At a quarter of a penny, farthings were the lowest denomination coin in England (see Table 0.1). Until 1613, they were, in fact, illegal. However, with the increasing reliance of economic transactions on the exchange of money – in taverns, fairs, markets, and shops, to name just a few – coining farthing “tokens” was a common practice, particularly in the cities.⁷ Taverns, bakers, vintners, and tradesmen minted their own farthing tokens out of copper, tin, lead, or even leather, prompting King James to issue a proclamation in 1613 authorizing a patent to coin “His Majesties Copper Farthings,” and prohibiting the “passing of Farthing Tokens, of Lead, Brasse, Copper, and other Mettal, betweene Vintners, Tapsters, Chandlers, Bakers, and other the like Tradesmen, and their Customers.”⁸

Table 0.1. *English coins and their equivalents*

Pound	Crown	Shilling	Groat	Pence	Farthing
1	4	20		240	960
	1	5		60	240
		1	3	12	48
			1	4	16
				1	4

A dizzying array of coins circulated in the period, from the mints of earlier historical monarchs to geographically distant currencies: the angel, the silver crown, the gold crown, the double noble, the farthing, the George noble, the groat, the half-angel, the half-crown, the half-groat, the halfpenny, the half-ryal, the half-sovereign, the penny, the quarter-angel, the quarter-ryal, the ryal, the shilling, sixpence, sovereign, testoon, three-farthings, three halfpence, threepence, and the comically named dandy-prat, not to mention the array of foreign coins in circulation in England.⁹ Made of gold and silver, these more valuable coins were known as “white money.” What contemporaries termed “small money,” on the other hand, was nevertheless increasingly essential to the early modern economy. Bills and wages had to be paid and small items bought and sold. For these transactions, there was the groat (a fourpenny piece), the silver penny, the three halfpence, and the halfpenny. For an increasingly urban population that relied heavily on money wages and retail trade, small money was essential.¹⁰ City corporations set prices that could be paid in round numbers of pennies. In late fourteenth-century London, for example, bakers were ordered to bake farthing loaves and the brewers to sell ale by farthing measures.¹¹ The problem was that groats, pennies, and halfpennies were not small enough change. Thus began the coining of farthings.

Although farthings were technically illegal, throughout the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries, taverns and shopkeepers selling small-value items coined their own farthing “tokens” to be used again in the store. In the mid-seventeenth century, city corporations followed suit and started coining farthing tokens to be given out to the poor as poor relief instead of real money. They coined their own “poor relief” farthings and halfpennies in base metals, thus avoiding giving out their precious metals to the poor at a time when bullionist tracts like Thomas Mun’s *England’s Treasure by Foreign Trade* in the late 1620s predicted an impending crisis over the shortage of bullion in England if the precious metals were not hoarded diligently. It may be hard for us to remember, in our era of paper money, but while Spain was literally coining money with all the gold it had found in the New World, England had a set amount of precious metals in the country and no mines out of which to dig more. The increase in foreign trade and the increasing reliance on monetary – that is, coin – transactions in urban centers threatened to create an actual shortage of coin. Coining small money to hand out as alms to the poor thus preserved the more valuable gold and silver currency for guild circulation, whereas ensuring that base coins circulated primarily amongst the poor.¹²



Figure 0.1. The overseers of farthing of st.Ives, 1669, in Thomas Snelling, *A View of the Copper Coin and Coinage of England, Including the Leader, Tin and Laton Tokens Made by Tradesmen during the Reigns of Elizabeth and James I; the Farthing Tokens of James I and Charles I; those of Towns and Corporations under the Commonwealth and Charles II; and Tin Farthings and Halfpence. With Copper Plates*. London, printed for T. Snelling 1766. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

The simultaneous presence of poor women as the underpinning of early capitalism and their bureaucratic re-marginalization can be summed up no better than by the farthing coined by the Overseers of the Poor of St. Ives in 1669 (see figure 0.1). This brass farthing, coined by the Overseers of the Poor of St. Ives in 1669, bears on one face the image of two laundresses with their hands in a washtub. “Laundress” was invariably synonymous with “whore” in early modern drama. Thomas Middleton claimed that “the habit of the laundress shadows the abomination of a strumpet,” the rebels in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI* see their leader’s wife as a base woman who has shifted from peddling into laundering, both occupations they understand as prostitution, and Thomas Dekker accomplishes the metonymic collapse of poor women’s work into that of whore when he claims in *Westward Ho!* that a woman is “as stale as a Country Ostes, an Exchange Sempster, or court Landresse.”¹³ In the poetic imaginary, the semantic distinction between cloth work and sex work was negligible.

Thus, putting two laundresses – women who were routinely associated with prostitution – on the face of a coin thus confers a minimal value on that coin, reinforcing the status of the farthing, at a quarter of a penny, as the lowest denomination currency. The placing of two laundresses on a farthing likewise confers a minimal value on the work of laundering clothes, and on the women themselves. As if to reinforce the metonymous

association of poor women with low value, the coin bears the legend “POOR WOMEN.” Made of a base metal, even, the coin’s substance communicates the low valuation of poor women’s work. Intended by the Overseers of the Poor as alms for the poor, such coins not only circulated as powerful symbols of the devaluation of women’s work. They also literally did things in early modern England: they kept the poor women they defined within the range of the town where this particular farthing was current, thus preventing them from shifting into vagrancy. Poor women were, as Alice Clark has claimed, central to the success of early capitalism everywhere in early modern culture. But everywhere the documents of early capitalism – coins, contracts, court records, guild ordinances – exclude and exile those women to the margins, defining them as the least valuable members of society. The drama, too, often pushes them to the margins. They are everywhere, but more present at the margins than at the center, inviting us, even as late modern readers, to skip over them.

Rather than deducing from a reading of the drama that poor women are everywhere in early modern drama, I do the converse: I deduce from a reading of extensive documentary evidence in the larger culture that poor women were everywhere in early modern England. Having found them in the culture, I deduced that their dilemmas, labors, vices, tools, names, and occupations would be everywhere in early modern drama, if I only knew how to look for them. Thus, I set out to look for representations of them in the drama. As Tillyard said, once we begin to look in the drama for something that is everywhere in the larger culture, we start to notice it everywhere, and “to be ignorant of it makes us less able to understand.” Even in the drama, poor women often do not get to talk for themselves. They are, like Jane Smile in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, mentioned in passing, as in Touchstone’s colorful recollection:

I remember when I was in love, I broke my sword upon a stone, and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile; and I remember the kissing of her batler and the cow’s dugs that her pretty chopp’d hands had milk’d; and I remember the wooing of a peascod instead of her, from whom I took two cods, and giving her them again, said with weeping tears, ‘Wear these for my sake.’ (2.4.46–54)

Poor women often do not get to speak for themselves, even as boy actors. They are recollected and remembered from somewhere offstage. Yet they are persistent in their presence in the minds of the characters, present in the conversation although not always participant. As Callaghan argues, women in general in the drama “have been historically its objects